2022 VCE Drama solo performance external assessment report

General comments

In 2022, the Drama solo performance examination comprised 10 prescribed structures. Students could choose from any of these structures, with three having additional choices (Structure 1: the Hero, the Heroine and the Villain; Structure 6: one of three female magicians; and Structure 10: Sweeney Todd or Mrs Lovett).

All structures begin with opening sentences that give additional information. Higher-scoring performances took note of the adjectives used to describe the character in these sentences and clearly demonstrated them, resulting in higher marks for Criterion 2.

As part of the examination students chose one convention and one dramatic element from the list provided. Students should choose a convention and a dramatic element that best support their work. Choosing a convention that is not on the list results in non-compliance (Criterion 1).

Students are reminded that there are four expressive skills (Criterion 8) when creating and realising a character: voice, movement, gesture and facial expressions. All four are assessed equally, therefore a focus on voice alone is not beneficial. Students should find ways to show rather than tell. This also supports the eclectic performance style, which is required for this examination (Criterion 5). Many performances were overly reliant on speech.

The production area of costume is a great way to support characterisation and demonstrate an understanding of the era in which the work is set. Wearing theatre blacks, branded white socks or runners is a poor choice for a character from the 19th century.

Many students chose to use soundtrack. When it is used well, soundtrack can contribute to the dramatic element~~s~~ of mood and control timing. If students choose to use a soundtrack, they are advised to think about where the speaker is placed in the examination room and be aware of the sound from the perspective of the assessors. Sometimes the speaker may be best placed behind the performer or to the side rather than in front of them. Students should test their soundtrack in various spaces prior to the examination. Assessors are not able to advise on volume, placement or balance (Criterion 10).

Students have up to seven minutes to present their performance and are asked to stop when they reach the seven-minute mark. Accordingly, it would be wise for students to use the play-making techniques of rehearsal and editing to ensure they finish some time before the seven-minute mark. Being required to stop at the seven-minute mark before completing the performance affects marks for Criterion 9.

There is no need to rewrite the prescribed structure on the statement of intention. This is a poor use of the 180 words, as assessors are familiar with all aspects of each prescribed structure. Instead, the statement of intention should be used to guide assessors towards specific aspects of performances that may not otherwise be clear.

Specific information

The characters

The Hero (the Great Leslie) and/or the Heroine (Miss DuBois) and/or the Villain (Professor Fate)

Most students who selected this structure chose the Villain or the Heroine.

Higher-scoring performances demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the melodrama style and incorporated it well, including understanding of the stock melodrama characters and how they were conveyed in the film that was the stimulus material for this structure. Higher-scoring performances often included soundtracks, (Criterion 10) often with music from the film, and made strong creative and imaginative choices.

Lower-scoring performances didn’t express the exaggeration and stylisations needed for melodrama (see examples of the style in the 2022 performance examination). There was confusion about the time periods between the time of the film and dot point 3 (making a comparison to another film or television show that could be considered melodramatic). These performances also included lots of telling rather than showing.

Hetty Green

High-scoring work was well researched (Criterion 3) and had a sense of the age of the character and the Gilded Age. There was a good sense of editing, and in these performances students chose moments from Hetty’s life that enabled dramatic potential. There were some creative and imaginative ideas about how she would spend her money and dot point 3 (showing an example of a real woman who has used her money to better the lives of others), was connected well through a common purpose or motivation for the character.

Lower-scoring performances demonstrated a lack of research (Criterion 3) through language that did not fit the era. Some students made Hetty into a caricature, which was not convincing. Again, research is critical when developing a performance from the stimulus material.

The Country Singer

High-scoring performances demonstrated a contrast between the singer and the rest of the characters. Songs were cleverly woven into the narrative and there were intelligent interpretations of what it was to be ‘true blue’. In these performances students often used soundtrack (Criterion 10) to evoke the world of country music. Although not a requirement of the task, this resulted in performances rich in symbolism. Higher-scoring work was linked to the idea of country and history and expressed poignancy using the convention of pathos (as a convention choice in the 2022 examination).

Lower-scoring performances demonstrated little research (Criterion 3), with no clear understanding of the music industry, and created the stylist only superficially. Soundtracks, when used, lacked timing and coordination with the actor.

The Kookaburra

This was the least popular structure.

A number of students included an Acknowledgement of Country in this structure to acknowledge the origins of the stimulus.

High-scoring performances used the performance style of physical theatre to demonstrate the movement of the kookaburra and other animals, which resulted in these performers showing rather than telling. Such performances generated a strong sense of fledglings, and other birds were used in the performance in a poetic way. Costumes were creative and there was evidence of strong research.

Lower-scoring performances tended to rely on speech instead of demonstration. These students were unable to differentiate between the wise old kookaburra and the fledglings and dot point 3 (highlighting an example of another Australian animal that has been misrepresented and/or misunderstood by the public) was added on in a way that did not enhance the narrative.

Ned Kelly

High-scoring performances contextualised the era through language and accent with clear evidence of research. The stimulus material of the Jerilderie Letter was clearly drawn on. Application of symbol was often well highlighted (Criterion 6), especially through gesture and the production area of props.

Lower-scoring performances had no clear sense of place or time and did not draw on the stimulus material well (Criterion 2). This work was very segmented and tended to be a general stereotype. Some students portrayed Ned Kelly as aggressive and masculine with no variation in expressive skills to provide light and shade.

The Female Magician: Esme Levante and/or Myrtle Roberts and/or Moi-Yo Miller

High-scoring performances demonstrated a clear understanding of the performance style of vaudeville rather than musical theatre, often through appropriate set pieces and costuming. There was often a highly effective actor–audience relationship created with measured energy and considered physicality. Dramatic metaphor was often used, including the feminist fight, ties to suffragettes and a demonstration of how far women’s rights have come.

Lower-scoring performances were difficult to follow, not distinguishing between the three women. There was insufficient depth of research – giving wrong facts to characters and not addressing the performance focus, especially the Magic Circle. Lower-scoring performances did not attempt magic, perceived or otherwise.

The Emcee

High-scoring performances integrated various aspects of production areas well (Criterion 10) including set pieces, curtaining, costumes and soundtracks. There was strong research for each dot point and linkage to politics and social commentary. Satire was a popular convention, commenting on the Weimar Republic and modern-day social and political issues. High-scoring performances also developed a strong actor–audience relationship as suggested in the stimulus material and style.

Lower-scoring performances relied too heavily on production areas (Criterion 10) that did not enhance or necessarily add meaning to the performance. Some students used the wrong stimulus, referencing the musical rather than the film, or used examples from the film that did not enhance the structure (for example, singing as Sally Bowles). In some performances, the Emcee was too generic and not ‘mysterious and charismatic’ as stated in the performance focus.

Yuki-Onna (the Snow Bride)

High-scoring performances demonstrated an understanding of physical storytelling, with a strong sense of the conventions of Kabuki theatre as required in this structure. There was skillful mask work, and the dramatic element of mood (Criterion 7) was created well through the expressive skill of movement, and the production areas of costume and make-up. Colour as symbol was strongly expressed and chosen props supported the Kabuki style.

Lower-scoring performances often told the stimulus story and missed the Kabuki style, or relied too much on Kabuki conventions and characters were underdeveloped. Production areas hindered performances, showing a lack of rehearsal (for example, long, drapey fabric and chimes). These performances tended to be shorter, finishing between four and five minutes (Criteria 2 and 9).

The Detective

This was the most popular structure.

High-scoring performances created the world and the era indicated in the stimulus material and used the conventions of the performance style of film noir throughout. Well-chosen and crafted sound design (Criterion 10) enhanced the creation of mood (Criteria 7 and 10) as did moments of silence. Different caricatures were used for each main character, often with their own costume piece or production area. Highly skilled and careful scripting (Criterion 4) and timing (Criterion 10) further supported these works.

Lower-scoring performances missed the cynicism of the detective as stated in the performance focus and demonstrated little or no research into the Cuckoo restaurant, evidenced by inappropriate menu items (Criterion 3). These students tended to narrate rather than show, with poor distinction between characters. Dot point 3 (presenting an example of his previous case, involving another real or fictional celebrity chef) tended to be missed completely (Criteria 1 and 2).

Sweeney Todd and/or Mrs Lovett

This was the second most popular structure.

High-scoring performances expressed knowledge and a depth of understanding of the scripts of each musical (Criterion 3). There was skilled application of production areas (Criterion 10) that were rehearsed well, and skillful and careful scripting (Criterion 4). Performance energy choices were strong (Criterion 9), with students understanding where to be manic and where to use silence.

Lower-scoring performances re-created moments from the films rather than the musical theatre versions. There seemed to be no particular choices made and as a result the performances were muddled, especially between the students acting as the characters of Sweeney Todd and Mrs Lovett. These students also tended to choose to perform both characters rather than one and had an overly complex narrative as a result.