

CATERPILLARS AND BLOSSOMS

by

Don Crabtree

Jean Paul Richter once defined criticism as “A practice, which strips the tree of both caterpillars and blossoms.” Criticism is most certainly an integral part of student competition. Constructive, open-minded criticism allows our students to grow, to learn and to refine the skills that this activity encompasses. However, myopic, narrow-minded criticism can destroy a student and devour the essential skill that this activity has fed them.

One of the most frustrating types of such myopic criticism comes from the interjudge who loves to comment and berate the student in the area of “choice of selection.” I have often read on ballots such statements as:

← Inappropriate choice of literature for a high school student.

← High school students should not be presenting material dealing with this subject matter.

← This subject matter shouldn’t be discussed in an open forum, let alone by a high school student.

← This topic insults me.

← This issue just makes me sick. I don’t want to listen to it. I hear it on the news every night.

It is crucial to understand that these comments did not appear on the ballots of a deranged student who said, “let’s just shock them, freak them out. I don’t care how I do.” On the contrary, they appeared on the ballots of seasoned competitors who take great pride in their art form. Competitors who work very hard to analyze their materials in great detail. Competitors who edit their selections incisively, removing profanity and overly graphic details of any kind.

Given this background, allow me to suggest some guidelines that do not stifle creativity, allow for germane topics to be used in literature presentations and hopefully will not send the judge into apoplexy. All of the guidelines come under the general caveat of *No Subject Matter Is Automatically Taboo!!*

Initially the instructor will need to consider the physical and emotional maturity of the contestant. Please note that I said “physical” maturity not “physical charac-

teristics.” Students are portraying a character or characters from a play, novel, short story or essay. Their job is to make the printed page come alive. Their actual physical characteristics should have little to do with making the decision on what selection to perform. The instructor then must discuss the various subject matters in detail with the student. The student must understand that many times the literature has far broader implications, such as in a parody. Many times further analysis and additional readings in the subject area are required.

The **second step** involves a detailed analysis of the selection. This must include a complete reading of the text and if possible one or two reviews of the material from an outside professional source. Students must give consideration as to when was this material written? Why was this material written? How did the public originally receive the material? Is this material/message still timely today? Does the audience need to hear this message? How strongly does the student feel about the impact of the selection? There must be a sense of commitment.

The **third step** is to dialog with the student regarding the entire selection. If a student demonstrates any hesitation toward the selection, other materials need to be pursued. The interpretation selection is much like your favorite pair of shoes:

They fit you perfectly. You are comfortable in them. They wear well. And finally, you hope they look okay in public.

The **fourth step** is to make the parent aware of any possibly controversial issues in the selection. I simply send the script home and ask the parent to read it and let me know if they have any objections to their son or daughter performing this piece. It is important to stress to your classes and parents if needed that just because a person portrays a gay, he or she isn’t automatically gay. Just because a person portrays a Nazi, he or she isn’t automatically a Nazi. Just because a person portrays a child abuser, he or she isn’t automatically an abuser. We encourage students to dig deeply into the characters they portray. From this, one hopes they emerge with a more global sense of the world. They emerge with statements such as, “How could anyone have done that to a

child,” or “I can’t believe that he was killed because of his behavior was different.” Interpretation of literature can truly help promote real diversity in our world.

The **fifth step** is one of the most difficult. This step involves the removal of objectionable language that is truly never appropriate. It simply must be removed. Students have often asked me to give them a list of these “inappropriate” words so they know what to cut. My answer is always, “If you have to ask, it must go.” I would never ask a student to use any word or perform any subject matter that they were not totally comfortable with. Further coach/student editing is often needed to insure author intent and plot continuity remains true.

The **sixth step** involves a detailed analysis of an appropriate introduction to your scene. Far too often, students are writing their introductions while on the bus on the way to the tournament. A great deal of time and effort must be spent on this part of the presentation. A well-worded disclaimer or insightful quotation will often go along way to justify that this material needs to be heard and is worthy of this student’s time and talent.

The **final step** is to “test-market the package. Have the student perform the piece of literature for other students, other teachers and other classes. See how the scene plays and revisit this feedback often. This is what I call “revision” time. Once this is done, you are now ready to make a final commitment to the selection.

Students deserve a chance to be exposed to a vast genre of literature. Students deserve an opportunity to practice the “diversity” that is constantly being targeted at them and judges need to be open to the fact that these talented young people can tackle the “tough” topics.

With a true increase in the practice of diversity in oral interpretation, there may once come a day when there will be no more tragedies such as Martin Luther King, Tina Brandon or Matthew Shepard and the thousands of others who are daily victims of hate crimes and discrimination.

Don’t be afraid to venture into tough, timely and topical arenas of literature. All judges have every right to express an informed opinion but as John Milton once said, “In good men opinions are knowl-

edge in the making.” Please don’t strip the caterpillars and blossoms from our students.

(Don Crabtree who coaches at Park Hill High School, Kansas City, (MO) is also an NFL Executive Council member.)