

# THE CUTTING IN INTERPRETATION

## (THE 3 STEP METHOD)

by Bill Gibron

There are several questions that haunt a forensics coach: "why didn't I break?", "what do you mean they changed the topic?", "what again, exactly, is this event all about?". But few have the ability to strike the fear of frustration and angst quicker than "how exactly do I cut this piece?" Students that compete in interpretation tend to have this mistaken belief that coaches spend their off hours reading every work by every author who ever put pen to paper and then, naturally and perfectly cut them into a manageable ten minute performance. The truth is, and I speak for myself when I say this, the hand me down method of interpretation cutting seems to be the norm. Find a work that has done well in the past (or maybe that was just 'done') and re-read the cutting to make sure it is still a viable piece, worthy of doing. Then turn it over to the student and 'Viola', from zero to hero in one brilliant copying job.

But what about those times when the piece is unknown, or hasn't been done in several years? What if you can't, God forbid, get a decent cutting? What if you are stuck trying to cut the piece yourself? Well, for most of us, this daunting task has become second nature, since years of trial and error have resulted in a formulaic and simplistic approach to the dilemma. But what about the new coach? What can they do if the closest they have come to cutting something was the throat of that irritating student who keeps begging for a piece to perform? Well, I have come up with a three step method that, hopefully, creates an easy and functional way to take a full play, script or other bit of appropriately published material and turn it into a working interpretation.

Before we begin, though, there are a couple of caveats. First, I would suggest leading the students to material, not the other way around. Just because *South Park*, or *The Tom Green Show* is the funniest thing ever to hit television (in the minds of students) does not mean it can be transformed into a high school forensics piece. Also, certain issues, while needing to be discussed and analyzed in a fictional setting, do not sit well with Mommy or Daddy as they judge, in the back of the round,

mouth agape, at the graphic depictions of rape and sexual torture. Finally, do not forget the setting and the talent of the student. Little Jamie may be the next DeNiro, but giving him an over the top cross dressing female drag queen character is perhaps asking a bit much of a middle schooler.

After all these considerations have been taken, let the student drift into a bookstore or the school library and look over potential material. It is always better to find something they are interested in, than trying to sell them on your view of drama/humor. Once they have found something, or a couple of things, you should have a conversation with them, asking why they chose the piece, the author, etc. Ask them for the insights, the wisdom, the comedy as they see it in the piece. Try and discover the underlying reasons for their selection. They should be well founded and based in the material. They should never be 'because I think this can win'. You are a long way from making that determination.

The three steps can be performed by students, coaches or both. I tend to enjoy the act of reading, and as such, do not mind helping novices with their first go round at putting an interp together. However, after a piece or two, they should be well on their way to following the method themselves. Remind them, this will take time. A good interpretation is not magically created. It takes hard work and dedication. So begin with:

### Step 1

#### Read the material for literary/interpretive MERIT:

Some things lend themselves to easy interpretation. Others still hold their mysteries in the head of the author, or in the imagination of the reader, and no matter how hard you try, how talented you are, or how much you think you or your student may be able to bring to it, sometimes, a piece just cannot be an interp. For example, John Cleese left *Monthly Python* in the early 70's and created his own television show, *Fawlty Towers*, one of the best comedic creations in the history of broadcasting....Witty, satirical and staunchly character and situation driven, it was and is a joy to watch. A

veritable laugh riot. But it is a near impossibility to interpret. Why? The reasons are as obvious as they are complex.

Cleese, when asked why he thought the show was so well regarded, made it clear that, as he wrote a script, he was intertwining several things; character, setting, cliches, subplot, previous episodes, outside influences and main story line. And this is apparent in the work. The episodes are dense and play like, with time taken away from the main narrative string to add a tangent, only to have it reappear minutes later as a payoff to a joke, or the insight into character. At 30 minutes plus, each show crammed novels worth of detail into the location, actors, settings and costumes. All this combines to make a wonderful entertainment.

But it also creates a mountain the size of Everest to pare down into a molehill called Humorous Interpretation. Cut a line here, and you risk losing the joke at the end. Remove a section here and a character becomes ill defined and pointless. Plots are too complex to streamline and most coaches would simply give up, since the stories play out for 20 or 30 minutes, and ten minute snippets are few and far between, if they are there at all. So this is why you read the piece. You need to determine if it indeed can work in a ten minute hunk. Also, you need to determine if the piece is more than a stand-up comedy routine, or the tearful ranting of a melodramatic mind. You want the material to be well received, not protested. This first step, then, is crucial to the overall effectiveness of the next two steps.

### Step 2

#### Determine the FOCUS of the Cutting

Once you have found a work with merit, it is now time to narrow the focus of the piece. There are several ways this can be done with a few examples being the following?

#### Character Driven:

Not following a plotline, per se, but instead the focus will be on lines and interchanges that capture the nature and nuance

of the character(s) center to the piece.

### ***Plot Driven:***

Getting the story across, with the barest bones of characterization, tone development and subtext.

### ***Tone Driven:***

Not following the plotline or the characters, specifically, but using the material as a means to channel a point, or a mindset, or an overall theme for the performance.

### ***Drama Intense:***

Picking out those parts, and those parts only that explain, heighten and express the drama of the piece.

### ***Humor Intense:***

Picking out those parts, and those parts only, that explain, heighten and express the humor of a piece.

### ***Subplotting:***

Removing minor characters or scenes from a piece and using them as the main focus of the interpretation.

### ***Twisting:***

Viewing a piece in light of the twist one can bring to it. For example, taking a piece done exclusively by men, and imagining and working through it as envisioned by an all female cast. Or a children's tale as performed by adults.

## **Step 3**

### **READ AND CUT**

#### **the piece in light of the focus.**

It is now time to enter the most work intensive part of the cutting process, the actual cutting. What I recommend is, first, make two copies of the piece, either in its entirety, or just the portion you will be working with. Next, save one copy and work with the other. Grab a highlighter and, in the margin, make a small dot near every line of dialogue, every character and every action you will be using in the interpretation, always keeping in mind the focus, or what you are trying to accomplish with the piece. Once you are done, go back and highlight everything you have marked. Now read through it. Does it get your point across? Does it stay within your focus? Does it capture what you wanted it to? It does? Great. Now, to recut.

Time the first run through. Unless you are near God-like in your abilities, you should be NOWHERE near ten minutes and probably have too much material, too many characters, and too many ideas to handle. So recut. Grab a RED pen and work through the first cutting, removing material here and

there. Remember the focus. Concentrate on what you (or your student) can and cannot handle. Look at the number of characters. Actions that will have to be visualized. Moments that, while moving and fascinating, really add nothing to your main focus. Now, review the cutting. Again, time will probably be a factor. Now recut a third time.

This time, grab a BLACK pen and mark through additional material. But be careful. This is also the point at which you can actually KILL your interp. You need ten minutes, but if the ten minutes you end up with destroys the focus you have worked so hard to maintain, perhaps it is time to reexamine the focus. Or even the work. Just because you went through Steps 1 and 2 does not mean that the piece will end up working as an interpretation. After all, those were cursory decisions. You have now had time to work with the material, and if it does not want to cooperate, then step back and refocus the piece. Find something else in it that may work. Or, better yet, rethink the material, and perhaps scrap it for something a little more manageable.

There is one last step in all this, and that is the actual practice of the piece. However, it is stupid to list it here, since, after all, why would you be spending all this time shaping material just to have it sit on a shelf, or in a desk drawer. Through the actual interpretation process, you can see how successful you have been, or where the written word and your imagination run up against talent and the way it actually plays. Once all the kinks have been worked out of it, and you will see it coming together, take the second copy and create a master cutting. Save it for District and National Tournaments. File it away for the future. Maybe even include some notes from your overall review of the material (you DID take notes, didn't you?) Begin to build an interpretation library, a resource for students to use in a pinch, or for you as a coach to remind you of pieces past.

By the way, this system works well with all interpretation, from Oral Interp to Duo. Just take into consideration the additional requirements those events demand. You may need more than one poem in Oral Interp to get the point across. Or perhaps the two characters you love the best for a Duo do not have ten minutes of mutual material. Once those factors are taken into consideration, you should have no problem using the methods proscribed herein. Shakespeare once wrote that, "the plays the thing!" Unfortunately, he was speaking of

using it to capture his Uncle in the act of treason. Hopefully, by using these hints and ideas, you will no longer worry about the material capturing your flaws as a coach. After all, in a successful interp, the "cutting" is the thing.

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