

ORAL INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE: PROSE AND POETRY READING

by Tony Figliola

The Introduction

Each student should have an introduction to his/her presentation. The intro should include a combination of the following:

— It should provide necessary background info such as character, situation, setting.

— It should set up expectations that are then fulfilled in the presentation. The result is listener satisfaction, because if the student performed the material correctly, s/he delivered what was promised. Consider a segment of an intro for the play *The Foreigner*: "Although initially shy and reticent, Charlie finds that he has what it takes to be the life of the party and the hero he'd always wished he were."

— It should advance the argument—the moral, social, philosophical point—of the literature, justifying its importance/significance. Consider a segment of an intro for the play *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*: "By employing their vivid imaginations to help them cope with their imprisonment, the two political captives demonstrate how the human spirit can triumph over the most insurmountable odds." Note: this approach places the interp within a rhetorical mode, justifying it as a "forensic" demonstration.

— It must name author and title.

It is not uncommon for students to begin with a part of the selection before they offer the audience the intro they composed. The use of such a "TEASER" is appropriate but not necessary.

Type of Literature

Decide if the literature is meant to be humorous—witty, slapstick, sarcastic, ribald, nice—or serious—melancholy, angry, mysterious, bitter, unpleasant—or a mixture of both. Then lis-

ten to the literature and decide if the performer is accurately capturing its tone and mood. DO THE PERFORMER'S TONE, ATTITUDE AND VOCAL VARIETY ELICIT THE EMOTIONS AND IDEAS SUGGESTED BY THE MATERIAL?

The Prose Narrator

1. The PN should have a distinct personality that remains constant and consistent throughout the performance. The PN should not be wooden or aloof, but should have genuine feelings and opinions.

2. The PN should be played as the script requires: loud-mouthed or soft, effusive or reticent, friendly or obnoxious, clever or dim-witted, articulate or inarticulate, educated or uneducated, easy-going or hyper, sincere or sinister, and so on.

3. The PN should employ vocal variety whenever possible, but only if changes in pitch, volume, rate, stress, quality, phrasing, and the like are appropriate to and consistent with the narrator's personality and probable development.

— A third person narrator (a PN who is not identified by name and who is telling about the lives of others) can be given the most expressive vocal range because we do not know anything about his/her background. (Still, however, remember that the reader must endow this narrator with a personality and with the ability to express, in a personal and conversational way, the events that transpire in the script.)

4. The PN should have an opinion or "ATTITUDE" about characters, actions, situations, places, things. This attitude or "SUBTEXT" should color or underpin the words the PN uses. For example, if the PN is telling the tale of how a very nice fellow (Jim) is ruined by a devious acquaintance (Bob,) the PN

would likely favor Jim and dislike Bob. Therefore, the PN would probably

— say Bob's name with distaste (because Bob is bad);

— describe the unfortunate event that befalls Jim with a great deal of compassion (because Jim is a good guy);

— describe Bob's gloating over his nefarious deed with a certain anger or regret (because Bob deserves to be punished for what he did);

— describe Jim's attempt to bounce back from his defeat with hope and pride (because Jim is a good man who deserves a second chance and who should right a wrong).

To use another example: if the PN is relaying Hal's fascination with guns, the PN might sound enthusiastic (if Hal is rightly fascinated,) disdainful (if Hal's obsession is foolish,) or ironic (if Hal will accidentally blow his brains out.)

5. The PN should communicate, in a very personal way, with the audience, taking them by the hand through the story, making sure they understand all the subtle clues that point to the personalities of characters and the development of plot. The PN gives the audience an "up front and personal insider's view."

6. Eye contact with each audience member should be meaningful and somewhat lengthy. Eye interest and expression should be used to send messages from the performer to the listener.

— One emotional phrase should be said to one person only. Careless bobbing of the head from script to audience as well as the bouncing of the head from person to person only undercuts the direct potent effect that each emotional statement can have. Consider this analogy: when a boxer throws a punch he winds up and follows through;

were his fist to veer, the punch would not be fully felt by anyone. So to maximize the "punch" of an emotional phrase, play each to one person's eyes, and let it lie for a second; then, either drop eyes to the script and immediately read or move eyes to another and immediately talk. This technique allows lines to be felt to the max.

7. The PN should VISUALIZE salient imagery. In order for the audience to appreciate an image or anything that has sensory appeal (a breathtaking mountain-top, a horrendous car crash, a blinding sun,) the PN must verbalize it (of course) and visualize it, that is, SEE what is described or remembered. For example, if the PN is describing the blinding sun that caused the glare that caused his accident, the PN should SEE the glaring sun (locate it again in our presence) and REACT to it with eyes and face (the way the PN reacted to it in the past when the accident happened or the way the PN would react, perhaps, if time has created an emotional distance—in the second case, the PN would relive it less); then, the PN should attempt to BRING THE AUDIENCE TO IT, directing their eyes to the image, checking to see if they are experiencing it. If the PN sees, the audience also sees, and will therefore have a more immediately richer experience. Some visualization, however, should not be so laid out. During intense moments of recall, a performer's face may freeze as his past run through his/her mind's eyes. In this case, the visualized truth is created through the use of subtle eye movement that sees, perhaps again, a tragic event that only the mind and not the body can display.

In Summary

The Prose Narrator Should:

1. Be a real person;
2. Have a definite and appropriate personality that is consistently maintained throughout the performance;

3. Make use of appropriate vocal variety.

4. Have consistent sub-textual attitudes about what happens to whom;

5. Communicate meaningfully and intimately with the audience, highlighting, for listener benefit, all important details and developments;

6. Utilize direct and intense eye contact with individual audience members, sending out messages with subtle eye expressions;

7. Visualize imagery, reliving with eyes and face the experiences that have left indelible impressions or painting new ones that are vibrant and ever-present.

8. BE THINKING. Something is going on inside the PN's head as s/he tells the tale. Subtle movement of eyes and face and coloring of voice should indicate this.

Characters in a Prose Reading

Characters within a story should be VOCALLY DISTINCT from each other and from the narrator. More specifically, each should have a unique and distinguishable

- PERSONALITY
- ATTITUDE
- SOUND
- LOOK

all of which are CONSISTENTLY RENDERED throughout the performance. Be sure that the traits assigned to a character are JUSTIFIED in the text: if the author paints the character as shy, then play her shy, but do not play her loud simply to distinguish her from a vulgar-acting character who needs to be portrayed.

SWITCHES from character to character or from character to narrator SHOULD BE CLEAN AND CRISP. For example, Joe is talking to Jane. Joe has a distinct personality, attitude, sound and look. When Jane responds to him, the interpreter must instantly switch into Jane's personality, attitude, sound and

look. The change must be total and immediate.

Eye Contact and Character Focus/Locus

The interpreter should use the script, but more importantly s/he must CONVEY THE SCRIPT, BRING IT TO LIFE; to this end, eye contact with the audience is most important. Thus, expect that the performer will look at the audience than at the script.

When reading, the interpreter must continue to employ facial expression, must SEE THE STORY COME TO LIFE ON THE PAGE. The bottom line is this: the interpreter's face must always react and respond—express—whether it be looking at the text, looking at the audience, or visualizing an event.

When rendering characters, the interpreter is expected to employ "focal points" or "focal frames." How?

—BY ESTABLISHING FOCAL POINTS. When portraying the character Joe, the interpreter will look at a definite point either just above the listeners' heads or at one particular audience member—the first choice is by far the better one.

--BY KEEPING FOCUS CONSISTENT. Whenever rendering Joe, the interpreter will always look at the same point/person.

—BY ESTABLISHING LOCATION. Joe is talking to someone. The interpreter must convince the audience that Joe SEES the person with whom he is conversing. Joe should be able to see Jane's eyes, hair, shoes, belt, briefcase. In this sense, the interpreter, while portraying Joe seeing the totality of another person, is establishing a location within a FOCAL FRAME.

When rendering Jane, the interpreter will look at another definite point, either just above the listeners' heads or at another particular audience member. Whenever rendering Jane, the interpreter will always look at the same point/person. Finally, remember that when Jane

speaks, she sees the person with whom she is conversing; she is not looking at an empty point in space. (If the interpreter envisions what each character looks like and is wearing, it is easier for him/her to have the characters PICTURE each other during dialogue.)

CAUTIONS: (1) The switching of focus and locus also involves the switching of a character body, look, attitude, and voice. Simply looking at a different point will not create the "reality" of each distinct person. (2) When employing focal points, the actor should not have a character stare incessantly and blankly at a designated spot. As in a real conversation, the character must respond facially to the dynamics of the exchange and must address another realistically—staring unflinchingly at the eyes of another when directness is called for; averting direct contact while thinking or when emotions make a face-to-face encounter difficult.

Regarding Poetry

All the Prose Techniques also apply to the Poetry Performance. So what's the difference: Well, consider these items.

— A poem brimming with imagery must be read with special attention to every single detail, even if it means coloring—varying, emphasizing—every word in some way. The interpreter must carefully paint the images in the minds of the listeners; s/he must give them time to picture and think about what the poet has written. THE BEST POETRY READER ALLOWS THE AUDIENCE TO UNDERSTAND AND EXPERIENCE EVERYTHING—EVERY MEANING, EVERY SOUND, EVERY FEELING, EVERY RHYTHM, EVERY IMAGE.

—Contemporary poetry employs variety of RHYTHMS. If you took one musical line from The Tango, a Swing Song, Acid Rock, and Madonna Music, respectively,

and shaped these lines into a poetic stanza, there would be a multiplicity of rhythms—musical beat formations—that need to be surfaced. Remember, however, that rhythmic changes must be justified by the ideas and emotions in the literature. Don't arbitrarily endow a funeral dirge with a chitty chitty bang bang beat.

—Much quality contemporary poetry is written in conversational, narrative free-verse form. A close analysis of such poetry would reveal many poetic techniques that may escape the listener on first hearing; therefore, the listener should accept this form as poetry and not dismiss it as prose.

—Most traditional poetry employs rhyme and predictable rhythm patterns. This is a valid type to interpret in competition. Note, however, that the performance of this poetry should exhibit on the interpreter's part the ability to accentuate the rhyme when appropriate (usually in humorous literature) and to avoid it when not (most often in serious literature.)

—Remember: poetry programs will many times consist of several poems that are thematically related (see the example program entitled "Speak Like Rain") and will many times consist of one longer poem. Both types are legitimate, and one should not be preferred over the other.

Transitions in the Poetry Program

If a student has a multiple selection program, s/he must provide internal segues that show how each poem is logically linked to the next. Suppose, for example, that someone wants to present a poetry program on LOVE—specifically, how love has evolved from romance to finance to free-lance lust.

S/he might begin with a teaser—a portion of the well-known "How Do I Love Thee".

S/he then would name the title and author of the teaser verse, and begin to establish the argument of the program: how love has evolved, if not dissolved, throughout the ages.

S/he then would introduce the concept of ROMANCE, leading the description into the title and author of the poem about old-fashioned romance.

S/he then will READ the ROMANCE poem.

S/he then will provide an internal transition—a segue—connecting ROMANCE to the next stage, FINANCE, explaining that this stage entails arranged marriages and relationships based on convenience and fiscal security, and introducing the title and author of the FINANCE poem.

S/he then will READ the FINANCE poem.

S/he then will provide an internal transition—a segue—connecting FINANCE to the next stage of FREE-LANCE LUST, explaining that this stage entails sexual relations both free and bought and introducing the title and author of the FREE-LANCE LUST poem.

S/he then will READ the FREE-LANCE LUST poem.

S/he may close his binder after s/he finishes this last poem, or may conclude with a final comment on the theme that points to the degeneration of love into lust.

Use of Binders

It is customary for students to have their binders closed during all introductory and transitional comments, and to open them only during the performances of the poems. It is also preferable to use small binders, as large, floppy ones call attention to themselves and inhibit the audience's view of the performance as well as the performer's ability to communicate physically and flexibly.

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