

Drama GA 2: Solo performance examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

This was the second year in which the prescribed structures for the Drama solo performance examination were set out with introductory sentence/s and a series of bullet points. This style of presentation clearly supports the students and enables them to check off each aspect of their chosen structure as they prepare for the examination.

It was also the second year in which the first assessment criterion required that students address every aspect of their chosen prescribed structure in order to gain the maximum points. Seventy-three per cent of students scored maximum points in Criterion 1 in 2002, whereas 68 per cent did so in 2001. In any performance where it is not completely clear that the student has included every aspect of their chosen prescribed structure, the assessors always mark in favour of the student. For example, if one of the prescribed dramatic elements is **rhythm**, the student could choose to incorporate this element in a number of ways (e.g. vocally, physically, symbolically) and the assessors take this range into account. The student's Statement of Intention is also used as a check when looking for an aspect of the prescribed structure which is not immediately apparent during the performance.

In 2002, a new instruction was added at the beginning of the examination paper, which read as follows:

*When a prescribed structure includes the word **recreates** students are required to re-enact situations and conversations for an audience. The emphasis in the recreation must be on action rather than narration, doing rather than telling.*

Nevertheless, the most frequently occurring weakness in students' performances was the way they failed to recreate situations and conversations. A solo performance where re-creation is lacking is characterised by a student narrating a situation, often in a static position (standing or sitting); telling the story rather than acting it out; relying on words which are not supported by physical action. More successful performances, where re-creation is clearly evident, are characterised by dramatic action, words which may not necessarily be complete sentences (i.e. symbolic language); gesture and mime.

The relative presence or absence of re-creation in a performance will cause the student to gain or lose points in the assessment of use of expressive skills (Criterion 8), where assessors are looking for a student's use of voice, body movement and gesture to create character/s. It can also affect the marking of development of the dramatic potential of the subject matter (Criterion 2) and use of the prescribed performance style (Criterion 4). Since the prescribed performance style for all the characters in 2002 was non-naturalistic, the use of story telling would have been more naturalistic than non-naturalistic. Clearly, it is important for teachers and students to read all sections of the examination paper, not just the prescribed structures, if they are to benefit from the advice and instructions given.

In each prescribed structure there is an **implied audience** to whom the character is performing. This is given in the opening sentence/s before the bullet points. Students are required to create this implied 'audience' and they may establish this audience either as imaginary people or use the assessors. If the implied audience is not evident, the student cannot gain full points for Criterion 1. Examples of the implied audience in the 2002 paper include:

The Boaster – Bottom's fellow players; The Survivor – other escapees; The Olympic Spirit – the International Olympic Committee.

In each prescribed structure a **timeframe** is given for the performance. Often the timeframe sets the 'world' of the character. In the student's performance this can be implied rather than demonstrated, a mere reference (verbal or symbolic) being sufficient to establish it. If the timeframe is missing, points are deducted for the assessment of development of the dramatic potential of the subject matter (Criterion 2) and textual coherence and development (Criterion 3). An example of this would be if a student performed the Writer in modern dress and used completely contemporary language, instead of using period dress (albeit minimal and symbolic), suitable language and gesture to establish that the piece is set in nineteenth-century England and in the drawing rooms of middle-class society as described in Jane Austen's novel. The world of the character is made up of atmosphere, mood, tone and energy. It is characterised by a particular language and physicality. It is possible for a student to include references outside the time frame where they consider it appropriate to the dramatic development of the piece, provided that they are minimal and the timeframe evident in the performance is consistent with that identified in the prescribed structure.

The characters

The number of students scoring full points in every criterion (continuing to rise dramatically) is partly due to the introduction of Criterion 1, which rewards students for including every aspect of the structure in their performance. It also demonstrates that teachers and students are working with the study design to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to develop a solo performance.

In all the prescribed structures, some of the bullet points could be described as fiction and some as non-fiction. For example, in The Last Pharaoh, students could use research to find out the tactics that Cleopatra used to gain Roman protection and to maintain Egypt's political influence. In their reading and research they might not so easily find examples of dangerous situations she experienced as a young woman during her father's reign. In this second instance (fictional), assessors accept any example that could plausibly have happened to Cleopatra as a child. Therefore, research for each character is vital but the task is a creative one and students will use their imagination as well as their research to develop their character.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

The characters

The Boaster

Less successful students relied too heavily on Shakespeare's text from the play, whereas the more successful students carefully edited the lines and added their own text to move beyond Shakespeare. This character could be performed successfully by relying only on the appropriate scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but many students moved beyond these parameters and developed their own background or story material, while still fulfilling the requirements of the task. The Boaster supported the physicality of students who were skilled in this way.

The Survivor

This character was typified by extremes in standard. A strong student performance was characterised by good research accompanied by the non-naturalistic performance style. Less successful students often overplayed the melodramatic potential of the situation. This was one prescribed structure where the implied audience of the other escapees was often not evident. The power of the stimulus (Picasso's painting *Guernica*) combined with current events in the news made this a popular choice among students.

The Olympic Spirit

This structure allowed students to explore a wide range of interpretations of the character. They ranged from corporate images to sporting and spiritual ones. There was more use of singing and musical instruments in this character than in others as well as the use of gymnastics and acrobatics. More successful performers demonstrated a clear purpose for the Spirit while less successful ones tended to get bogged down in the use of fact or showed little evidence of research. When students chose this character because they enjoyed sport, they did not always understand the greater depths of research that were required to develop the character.

The Pesky Ghost

This prescribed structure was very accessible to students and there was a broad range of interpretations. The use of exaggerated movement (prescribed theatrical convention) made for high energy performances which supported some of the weaker performers whose language did not reflect the world of the Pesky Ghost at Hogwarts. The least successful students had obviously relied on the film rather than reading the novel. As with all the characters, some of the bullet points required use of imagination because they were not taken directly from the stimulus. In this case the demonstration of the terrifying power of the Bloody Baron required students to use their imagination; some did this more successfully than others.

The Last Pharaoh

This prescribed structure attracted a wide range of costume choices among students who chose to perform the character of Cleopatra. Those who chose elaborate dress and/or make-up were less able to transform into the other characters than the students who used minimal stagecraft, especially as the other characters were predominantly male (e.g. Anthony, Caesar). Although there was no mention of Cleopatra dying in the prescribed structure, many students chose to incorporate this into their performance, wishing to act out the dramatic circumstances of her death. This was perfectly acceptable provided they had time to include all the material expected from the three bullet points as well. There was a lot of information to be conveyed and, unfortunately, sometimes the inclusion of her death prevented students fulfilling the prescribed task.

The Innkeeper

The emphasis of the task was to create the world of M. and Mme Thenardier, a world where revolution affected people of all classes and these innkeepers had to manipulate and extort others in order to stay alive. With the stimulus being the song rather than the film or the novel, it was important for students to recreate the light-hearted, flirty atmosphere of the song rather than the darker atmosphere of the book. The prescribed dramatic element of rhythm was mostly achieved through the use of song, the less successful students relying too heavily on the actual song, more successful ones incorporating it in snatches or rewriting lines and words to the same tune. More successful students also achieved good comic action through physicality and caricature.

The Aussie Bloke

More successful performers captured the essence of C J Dennis' poem, particularly through their use of language. It was clear that some students had not read the whole poem or indeed researched more of *The Complete Sentimental Bloke*, and so had not prepared a more comprehensive background for the prescribed section of the work. Some students made inappropriate choices when commenting on Australian society of the time, demonstrating a lack of research. In general the theatrical convention of Black Comedy was poorly applied.

The Aussie Sheila

More successful students demonstrated their understanding of Australian society of the time and made good use of C J Dennis' language in their performances. Less successful students often played up the sentimentality of Rose's situation and/or they demonstrated a lack of understanding of the relationship between the characters. This reflected a lack of research and of reading the whole poem. Less successful students often sat on a chair (i.e. in Bill and Doreen's house)

and retold the events to Doreen (imagined) without incorporating much dramatic action. These students were not recreating the information in the bullet points for Doreen; they were retelling it to Doreen.

The Cartoon Character

This character was typified by extremes in standard. More successful students' performances were characterised by good research accompanied by the non-naturalistic performance style. The strength of the performance was often characterised by the understanding, or lack of understanding, of the animation process and of the use of fact. Some students who chose to use Donald Duck's voice throughout the performance disadvantaged themselves in that it was not always clear what they were saying. More successful performers used the voice sporadically and also used non-naturalistic performance techniques to transform into other characters. It was evident that some students had worked hard on developing the character of Donald Duck and spent less time incorporating the bullet points into their characterisations.

The Writer

This character was one where lack of recreation was most frequently observed. Less successful performers used the story telling device to tell Cassandra (and the assessors as audience) about the book she was writing. More successful students developed the world of Jane Austen, used the space well, incorporated symbolism and conveyed the information in the bullet points through non-naturalistic performance and recreation. The least successful students used two chairs and moved from one to the other to become either Jane or Cassandra. The challenge here was to create other, imagined characters on stage without just swapping roles. The first bullet point in this structure provided students with the opportunity to create a fictional (i.e. not found in *Pride and Prejudice*) history for Mr and Mrs Bennett; some students did so very imaginatively.