



## GENERAL COMMENTS

Students and teachers have commented positively about the range and depth of characters provided for the monologue examination, which was deemed to be suitable for teaching, performing and assessing. This year, the distribution between the monologues chosen by students was more even, which is a very positive outcome for the setting panel. There will always be more and less popular choices, but the panel attempts to maintain a reasonably even spread across the range. The length of the monologues generally tended to be shorter this year and teachers, students and assessors responded positively to this change.

There is no perfect way to approach or perform a monologue. Two important concepts to consider are 'balance' and 'appropriateness'. The following information deals with some of the practical implications of these notions.

### **The actor/audience relationship**

Students should be aware that the assessors are their sole audience. Focus points may vary throughout the performance and there is no perfect focus or definitively right method of establishing focus. The better students tended to place a strong emphasis on the choices related to focus and their choices usually enhanced the performance significantly. The actor/audience relationship is at the heart of all theatrical experiences. Performers ignore this or misuse it at their peril.

Students should be aware that if they choose to engage an assessor directly, the assessor cannot look away even for an instant. This can be uncomfortable for the assessor and may create a positive or negative response which could influence how the assessor experiences the performance. Students should remember strict rules, such as the fact that students cannot touch or go behind assessors.

Seeming to engage both the implied person(s) and the assessors in a meaningful manner is one of the arts of the monologue challenge. There are many subtle, inventive and interesting ways of using or addressing the assessors as audience members without overstepping the bounds of the relationship, which draws the focus away from the performer. That is, it is actually possible to 'upstage' yourself while performing. Standing an implied person upstage, or even stage right or left, may work against assessor engagement. Even if there are no specific, overt audience-focused aspects to a performance, the actor/audience relationship must still be considered. Perhaps the two most important questions in the creation of a monologue are, 'Who am I?' and 'Who am I addressing?' Some students never seem to think past the first question and their results reflect this.

### **Naturalistic stagecraft**

As always, there were some exceptionally creative stagecraft choices, but also some poor theatrical choices where students attempted to create what they perceived as naturalism or, in their terms, reality or realism. Students should remember that in the theatre nothing is real. Everything is artifice, artificial, constructed and perceived by an audience which is just as artificial as the performance itself. It is impractical to attempt to perfectly construct the reality of the real world in an artificial arena such as a stage. Theatre demands more than reality. If this is difficult for some students to understand, then this very statement might make a good starting point for discussion when considering monologue interpretation. It is at the very heart of the Theatre Studies Victorian Certificate of Education Study Design and particularly the requirements of the monologue examination. Brecht perhaps described it best when he said that theatre attempts to show 'not merely real things, but how things really are'. All students should understand the practical implications of this statement and how it might impact on their choices.

Students should be encouraged to see the assessors as intelligent and experienced theatre goers who have a strong sense of imagination. Assessors do not need to see a real gun to appreciate that a gun is implied. They do not need to see a mannequin or model to understand that an implied person is standing in the space, to see a park bench to understand that the scene is a park, or a bed to understand that the scene is a bedroom. Each monologue requires a balance of choices between evocation and illustration. Students who strike the right balance between these two tend to achieve better results.

Stagecraft can be rich and complex without being entirely physical, obvious or literal. The poetic, evocative, metaphoric and symbolic aspects of the text can just as readily apply to the physical aspects of stagecraft. In purely pragmatic terms, a student might ask him/herself the simple question 'Do I believe that I will address the criteria better and receive more credit for bringing in an item such as an actual park bench, bed or hair brush, or for coming up with a more practical, symbolic or theatrical solution?' The answer, in most cases, should be evident. Another important question is, 'Do I really need or use this object?' Less is more can be a strong mantra in many cases. A very basic question that



could be asked is, 'What might a Year 9 or 10 Drama student choose to do in this circumstance, and how can I, as a VCE student, advance that idea onto the next step of the conceptual ladder?'

### **Non-naturalism**

Both in previous Assessment Reports and above, it has been stated that students might, where appropriate, choose to consider non-naturalistic techniques rather than seek to simply illustrate reality. Non-naturalistic techniques might include the use of theatre blacks and nondescript settings, transformation of costume, object or setting (though, in a monologue, not generally time, place or character) and the creation of implied persons. Students studying both VCE Drama and Theatre Studies should inherently understand and be practised in this approach.

In many cases, a non-naturalistic approach can work very successfully, but the approach comes with a caveat: at the heart of non-naturalism is alienation. That is, all such techniques are a constant reminder to the audience that they are watching a theatrical presentation. Non-naturalism deliberately interferes with the 'willing suspension of disbelief'. 'Belief' is one of the primary aims of monologue presentation and some non-naturalism simply works against this.

Context is central to the monologue task and non-naturalism may do more to destroy than reinforce the context. If a student is attempting to have the assessors respond to a character, rather than an actor, then continually transforming an object might not be the best way to reinforce this belief. In fact, each transformation can work directly against the belief the student is working so hard to achieve.

Both naturalism and non-naturalism can be a poor or excellent choice, depending on the circumstance. A real park bench may be an all too heavy reminder of the irrelevance of the bench itself. A student feigning a mimed sitting motion, with no actual bench, may merely reinforce the audience's belief (or lack of) that there is no actual bench. There are better and worse, and more and less appropriate, solutions to every theatrical conundrum. These are at the heart of the monologue task. Students should not go in search of, or expect to find, the one right solution or perfect answer. The search should be for what is most appropriate in each circumstance to achieve the aims of the monologue.

### **Over-illustration**

Previous Assessment Reports noted that exemplary work tended to indicate that students were making decisions with each line, rather than just playing out a general mood or effect for the entire duration of the monologue. It is important to point out that this should not be interpreted as suggesting that a specific decision and action should be associated with each word, phrase or even sentence. 'I love you' only requires three gestures at the most basic level of interpretation. Over-enunciation, especially that associated with physicality (particularly literal physicality), can destroy belief. To 'act out' an entire text literally is not a human response. Life simply does not play out this way, and neither does theatre.

Technically, a passage of theatre text is divided into a series of beats or discrete meanings. These are closely associated with what is termed 'intended meaning'. Each of these beats requires consideration, but may not require separate and distinct physical illustration. Some teachers have a tendency to encourage students to consider and illustrate every word. This manner of work will not generally achieve an exemplary mark because ultimately belief is destroyed and there is no room for the audience to respond in anything but a predetermined and literal manner. The best theatre does not rely on such predictable exactitude and surety. Theatre can work at many deep and complex levels: physical and literal illustration is the most basic, and generally the most simple and artificial.

### **Professional acting techniques**

The monologue task is not a performance per se, nor is it an audition; it is an examination, based on very specific criteria. These criteria can be viewed at [www.vcaa.vic.edu.au](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au) and should be an integral point of discussion in preparation for this task. The criteria that govern the complete performance of a play or an audition are different to those of this examination. Success is described in different terms. The Theatre Studies performance examination criteria are guidelines which provide the means to compare like with like and to allow an objective response to subjective artistic endeavour. Without them, fair and equitable VCE study and assessment would not be possible.

The fact that this is not a performance, with success governed by the criteria of a professional performance, means that there are certain practical implications for the preparation and presentation of the monologue. Theatre techniques such as impulse work, working from the breath, method acting, emotional recall, objective and super-objective, deep psychological energies, subconscious response, becoming, being, living out and through, psyching up, and playing what-ifs are all valid techniques for the development and exploration of character and situations. They are not, however, the complete solution to performing well in the Theatre Studies monologue task.



Performing as if driven by hidden demons or a deep psychological force can be very moving and disturbing for an audience and the performer, but this is an examination, and each of the five criteria must be addressed in detail, not just character motivation. Impulse or method acting does not make up for a lack of research or understanding of the play as a whole, regardless of how heartfelt the actual emoting may appear.

Students must give adequate consideration to the broader contexts beyond the character, the specific interpretation which is being attempted, the style and conventions that govern the interpretation and the intended meaning which unfolds with each separate line. Although seeking deep layers of emotion and understanding may add humanity and belief to the character, the depth of the emotion may be offered in a theatrical void which renders it virtually meaningless. That is, commitment and heartfelt emotion may be necessary prerequisites for exploring the monologue, but they do not provide the entire solution to the monologue conundrum. Exemplary Theatre Studies work tends to be controlled and to work on many levels, rather than be based on hysteria and histrionics.

Students should ensure that they develop their own interpretation, rather than copying the interpretation of another – whether that be another student, a live performance or a film. Copying can never offer as rich an interpretation as one developed through a number of individual and personal stages, and it will almost never produce more than one level of experience.

## SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Monologue chosen	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
% of students	3	6	6	1	9	7	8	9	8	7	13	9	13

### TARTUFFE

Tartuffe was not a popular choice. The greatest difficulty for students was a misunderstanding or lack of understanding of the style – French comedy of manners, exemplified most strongly by Moliere. Many students tended to accept the stated context rather than explore the potential for recontextualising. Assessments tended to be high or low rather than middling. Students who understood the play and used the styles and conventions tended to do well.

### ELMIRE

The comments for Tartuffe apply equally to Elmire. Students had difficulty achieving a specific and appropriate style with associated conventions. This monologue required a very strong sense of implied character and the students who achieved this tended to do well.

### PHAEDRA

Again, style and conventions proved to be the stumbling block for many students, and work tended to achieve high or low rather than middling results. There was a lot of scope for interpretation and recontextualisation, which many students chose to ignore in favour of a basic, literal translation. Students should note that interpretation and context are two of the criteria, and both require extensive consideration. A literal translation may well be the best and most appropriate, but this conclusion should be drawn after many stages of experimentation and development.

### HIPPOLYTUS

This proved to be the least popular of the choices. Students found it difficult to move in different directions and to explore inventive interpretations. Many students appeared to struggle so much with the intended meaning and style that further development was beyond them. This was a difficult text and those who succeeded tended to achieve a very high result.

### CHORUS

This choice produced some of the best results, and most students who selected this monologue generally presented a solid performance. The choice worked equally well for males and females. The key to achieving a strong result was establishing a clear context that allowed for further interpretation and exploration. The language was poetic, and this supported students who considered that the delivery of text was an important part of their monologue.

### HERALD

The better students achieved some extraordinary interpretations of this monologue. The main challenges of the piece were the establishment of character and implied persons, and the placement of objects in the space. There was some very inventive costume and prop work and some very brave, creative risk-taking. The piece tended to be strong because it could work on so many levels and offered the potential to explore many accessible styles. Theatre of Cruelty is a legitimate theatrical style to explore, especially when it is so closely associated with a particular text; however, students



should be warned that not all of the aspects and conventions of a style like Theatre of Cruelty are suitable or appropriate for an examination situation. The fact that no student crossed the mark by pushing inappropriate boundaries augurs well for future setting possibilities. That is, the panel need not limit choices to those that are very safe.

### **MESSENGER**

This choice allowed for some very strong work and offered up the full range of marks, from very low to very high. It was important in this monologue for the student to establish their own individual version of the Messenger. The Messenger was portrayed in such guises as a courier, a forensic scientist on CSI, a reporter with laptop and screen, and in many other imaginative contexts. Strong work tended to offer a specific attitude to the crime, rather than retell a tale in an objective manner. There were a number of relationships offered towards Medea, such as that of an ex-friend. There were many variations of the conventions of Classical Greek theatre. Students should remember that even straight Classical Greek theatre can have light and shade, and doesn't necessarily need to be purely declamatory.

### **HELENA**

This monologue offered strong comic potential, but was generally not well handled. Although the piece is clearly comedic, some students played it very straight, as if they were delivering a dramatic monologue. Some students missed the opportunity to play with the frumpy and unattractive nature of Helena, who is awkward and self-conscious. To play her as young and pretty goes against Shakespeare's intentions and against the comic potential. The strongest work provided a strong sense of implied persons, and the relationship between Helena and the others present.

### **QUINCE**

Some of the attempts at this monologue, both from male and female students, were quite outstanding. There was some inventive and imaginative recontextualising; ideas which saw Quince in all manner of theatre and plays, mostly bad. The poorer works missed the opportunity to use the extra time for physical comic business. Students should note that where time is available, it is perfectly acceptable, and can sometimes be a positive decision, to add physical business before, and perhaps even after, the text. Non-verbal acting can be a powerful technique and can offer a strong contrast to the purely verbal.

### **DOCTOR FAUSTUS**

There was a tendency for some students to shout and to emote hysteria during this monologue. Light and shade separated the better students from the poorer students, who tended to play on one level. A sense of dynamics and an increasing intensity towards a climax was what was required for this monologue. It appealed to students interested in exploring poetic language and textual complexity. Stagecraft was a strong aspect of the better performances.

### **LA MARQUISE DE MERTEUIL**

There were many contemporary interpretations which worked strongly to establish the character and the context; however, it was difficult, especially for younger students, to capture the Marquise's worldly life experiences. She is a woman who has obviously packed much into her years and the monologue only worked if the student captured her sense of worldliness, broad experience, aristocracy and knowing. The piece also trapped some students who missed the full complexity of the context.

Props and set items were popular with this monologue; however, some students overused props, with relatively useless doilies and table items playing no other role than superficial set dressing. As a general guideline, students should not choose a prop item unless it is going to be theatrically endowed in some way. Mere set dressing often looks superficial and smacks of poor stagecraft.

### **SID**

This was a very popular, albeit complex and difficult, choice. Non-naturalism was a strong feature of many of the interpretations. This is a complex play and students who had not read the play carefully missed the complexities in the context. Some students struggled with the omitted lines and how to deal with them. Omitted lines are a common feature of the monologue, and it is important for students to make specific decisions regarding their approach to them. Some students captured a sense of surreal that went beyond the purely naturalistic. Some students chose to use a lot of props and extraneous stagecraft, which in many cases did not support the monologue.

### **SYLVIE**

This piece could be played on many levels. A number of students saw only the most obvious level and played the piece as a simple drama or murder mystery with a foregone conclusion. There was also a danger in students making a decision which affected their entire performance, such as that the character is mad or obviously guilty, because this diminished the possibilities of the play and the character. By the end of the play, most of the dots have been joined.

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Throughout the piece, however, the audience is left guessing. This is the intention of the playwright. To take the end of the play and apply it to all previous scenes is to significantly diminish the playwright's intention. Many students worked on the character transformations and this provided a significant challenge.