



## 2008 Theatre Studies GA 2: Performance examination

### GENERAL COMMENTS

As teachers and students are becoming more experienced with the guidelines of the monologue performance examination, they are increasingly making better and more-informed choices. The number of students making ill-considered use of furniture and props has diminished considerably. In recent years students have been advised to consider all items as enhancements to the performance rather than as wholly essential to the playing. In the vast majority of cases, these guidelines are being followed.

Very few students ignored or were not aware of the limitations placed on the use of weapons and hazardous materials, as stipulated in the guidelines. Students should be aware that assessors, just as any audience, use their imagination and do not need to see actual objects. Imagination is an integral aspect of the Theatre Studies monologue performance task. The use of breaking glass, stage blood, other liquids or anything that may damage carpet or furniture is often not necessary, can be hazardous and is generally not advised. Liquids are not forbidden, but there is a high expectation that the use of liquids will be limited, highly controlled and very well-rehearsed. If in any doubt whatsoever, liquids should be avoided.

Some students planned to stand or jump on furniture or, in some instances, to throw furniture. Students should be aware that venues are hired spaces. When in doubt, or if there are particular requirements, students should bring their own furniture. In some instances, the furniture is not designed to be stood upon and in no circumstances should the furniture or the floor be damaged.

Teachers should note that it is not appropriate to ask for a room change if the student is using furniture that is too heavy or there are too many individual pieces. Such choices are generally considered to be poor stagecraft choices. The monologue task is based on creative, expressive and imaginative theatrical choices. It is not a task that demands the reconstruction of the real-world in its entirety.

#### Areas of strength and weakness

Stronger performances were generally characterised by:

- a thorough knowledge of the text – its meaning(s), possibilities and implications
- a thorough understanding of the scene and the world of the play as a whole
- clear and consistent application of a theatrical style(s)
- mastery of the language, in whatever idiom, style, accent or structure that was required or suggested by the chosen interpretation
- willingness to interpret the monologue in an original, interesting and appropriate manner
- a strong and clear awareness of implied time, place and person(s)
- an awareness of the levels of meaning, or subtexts, that underpinned the text and the contexts within which the monologue existed
- an awareness of the actor/audience relationship and an ability to use this understanding
- an understanding of, and an ability to manipulate, the focus of attention of the audience and the performer
- an awareness of the physicality of the character and the theatrical use of space
- direct and indirect evidence of extensive research, rehearsal and preparation
- practised and detailed use of costumes and props, and settings where appropriate
- an ability to address and use the limitations of monologue conventions to maximum effect
- a strong sense of belief
- an understanding of, and an ability to manipulate, theatrical tension and timing
- an ability to engage the assessors through the metaphorical transformation of time, place and situation.

Weaker performances were generally characterised by:

- an incomplete, limited or poor knowledge of the text – its meaning(s), possibilities and implications
- a poor perception of the world of the character within the greater context of the play as a whole
- an inability to offer a clear and specific interpretation, grounded in an appropriate theatrical style(s)
- an inability to master the rhythms and nuances of the language
- little direct or indirect evidence of research or preparation



- concentration on text and literal meaning, with minimal reference to subtext, context or the intended meaning of the playwright
- concentration on the verbal rather than the physical
- wasted time and effort in the construction of peripheral or irrelevant details of aspects of props, setting, costume, hair or make-up
- a lack of awareness of implied time, place or person(s)
- poor or inappropriate contextual choices
- a lack of awareness of the audience, the actor/audience interrelationship or the manipulation of the performance space in consideration of the audience
- a poor understanding of, and inability to manipulate, the focus of attention of the audience and the performer
- an inability to come to terms with or transcend the limitations of monologue conventions
- a poor understanding of, and inability to manipulate, theatrical tension and timing
- an inability to engage the assessors through the transformation of time or place.

## **SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

This was the second year of the revised *VCE Theatre Studies Study Design*, and there were strong indications that teachers and students were familiar with the new criteria. To achieve full marks for criterion 1, as well as performing the text, students were required to make directorial choices, select and apply a theatrical style(s), choose and apply stagecraft other than acting and present the piece within an appropriate context. This first criterion is quantitative rather than qualitative. That is, it asks the question whether, and to what extent, the student performed the monologue, rather than considering how well the monologue was performed. With 94 per cent of students receiving full marks and 99 per cent of students receiving full marks or one less than full marks, it is obvious that teachers and students understand and have come to terms with this first criterion.

It is worth noting that a possible source of confusion was the combination of ‘focus’ and ‘space’ into one criterion. Teachers and students should note that the term ‘focus’ is used differently here to the way it is generally applied in the Drama solo performance assessment. In the Theatre Studies monologue performance, focus relates to the ability of a performer to portray and maintain a characterisation, plus the ability to focus an audience on aspects of a performance. One way of focusing the audience’s attention is by manipulating the performance space.

## **The Monologues**

| <b>Number</b> | <b>Monologue Chosen</b>  | <b>% of students</b> |
|---------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1             | <b>Portia</b>            | 5                    |
| 2             | <b>Bassanio</b>          | 2                    |
| 3             | <b>Mary Tyrone</b>       | 9                    |
| 4             | <b>James Tyrone</b>      | 5                    |
| 5             | <b>Chorus</b>            | 5                    |
| 6             | <b>Bill</b>              | 9                    |
| 7             | <b>Alice</b>             | 13                   |
| 8             | <b>John</b>              | 5                    |
| 9             | <b>Carol</b>             | 11                   |
| 10            | <b>Moon/Beggar Woman</b> | 10                   |
| 11            | <b>Paulina</b>           | 12                   |
| 12            | <b>Willy</b>             | 8                    |
| 13            | <b>Messenger</b>         | 7                    |



Most of the monologues attracted approximately the expected number of students. The least popular choice was Bassanio. In recent years, the Shakespeare and the Ancients monologues have been less popular. In future, the setting panel will consider the possible reasons for this. Alice, Paulina, Carol and Moon/Beggar Woman were the most popular choices for girls and Bill and Willy were the most popular choices for boys. Contemporary pieces tended to be more popular than historic choices.

Few monologues take seven minutes to perform. More students tend to add business and action before, after and during their monologue. This is to be encouraged as it assists students to establish and maintain a context even before the text has begun. Another interesting choice was made by students who continued with action and business even after they had concluded their prescribed text.

As noted in previous Assessment Reports, monologues from previous years will be re-used. Teachers often comment supportively about this practice, saying it assists them to be familiar with the plays and characters. There is also continuing support for cutting and pasting passages, allowing students to approach the challenge of shifts that might appear from the cutting and pasting. However, this can add levels of complexity and confusion.

Some students this year performed sections that were designated as omitted. The prescribed task is always set out with omissions clearly stipulated. Students and teachers should be careful of depending on conduits such as professional development and student workshop programs for information and such things as copies of the monologues. Although these organisations do an excellent job and work very hard to be as exact as possible, they are not, and do not claim to be, infallible, nor do they offer information for and on behalf of the VCAA. It is the teachers' responsibility to ensure that the information and monologues studied by their students are the officially sanctioned monologues. Monologues should always be sourced directly from the plays and should never be a secondary source, which will always be subject to some error.

### **Portia**

Portia was not a popular choice. The weaker students tended to dress in what they thought were appropriate costumes and merely recited the lines. This was a piece where the sense of implied person was very important. Stronger students created and maintained a strong sense of Portia's audience and her relationship to them. As is common with Shakespeare, there were some very inventive and creative recontextualisations, such as referencing the 1980s money market.

### **Bassanio**

Very few students attempted Bassanio, which is a shame because it offered considerable scope for action and change of dynamics. Bassanio thinks out loud and follows a very clear narrative line of thought. He wavers and postulates theories and possibilities. It is surprising that such a clear monologue did not appeal to more students. Better students captured Bassanio's agonising choices and the sense of feared loss if he failed. As with Portia, it was also important to capture the sense of the room and the implied persons within it.

### **Mary**

This was a difficult speech but many students mastered its nuances and rhythms. A number of students understood and captured the complexity of the situation but missed the sense of age. Others captured the sense of age but could not extend beyond the immediate to fully embrace other aspects of Mary's challenging life. In some cases, understatement worked more successfully than overt emotion. This was a difficult speech where what was being said in the text was subsumed by the import of what lay underneath in the emotional undercurrents beneath the lines. In other words, the subtext was as, if not more, important than the actual text.

### **James**

James' speech was much more about the specific text than Mary's speech. Here, James reminisces and unfolds a clear narrative. His age is important, as is his situation, but in comparison to Mary's speech, this is much more about what he is specifically saying, the tale that he is relating, rather than its broader context. Of course it was still important to capture the full complexity of his world and emotional universe. His sense of loss and regret are vital, but they are intrinsically captured in the lines – and certainly more so than in Mary's speech.

A sense of drinking or being drunk is difficult for any actor, especially a young actor. It can be difficult for a young actor to fully comprehend and embrace the notion of the long-term drinker – the drinker entering a ripe old age who has known little else other than constant drinking. This is not a person who takes a sip from one glass and begins to slur their speech and totter around. Drinking becomes as much a part of their movements, gestures and inflections as breathing. The suggestion for students when confronted with such a challenge would be similar to students being



challenged to create an accent. When in doubt, students should play the lines and not the accent or, similarly, play the lines rather than the drinking/being drunk. Ultimately accents and such things as drunkenness are secondary to the creation of the actual character.

Finding the climax of this speech was important as James unfolds a complex and detailed narrative. The better students captured a sense of dynamics through the speech that embraced climax and anti-climax.

### **Chorus**

There were many innovative interpretations of this speech. Stylistically, it contained elements of contemporary and ancient drama, of poetry as well as prose. Music helped to establish the mood for some students and many students captured the concept of a chorus or group of people, rather than an individual. There were many creative references to the conventions of the ancient Greeks and the Greek Chorus.

### **Bill**

Bill was the most popular choice for boys. Unfortunately, this may have been because many students believed that, at first reading, it seemed simple and straightforward. Poorer work tended to miss the overriding menace that permeated the piece. After all, the piece was about the end of the world. Poorer work also lacked the sense of humour that was present with the menace and the sense of the Australian context. A number of students spent time with pre and post-text business, assisting them to better establish a strong sense of context and the belief that the passage was an ongoing slice of life, rather than a moment that commences with the first line and concludes with the last line – with no further life possible.

### **Alice**

Alice was the most popular choice for girls. This was surprising as there were some obvious challenges inherent in this monologue. The sense of implied person and place was intrinsic to the success of the piece, as was the ability to transform place. Poorer students tended to continue with their lines with little or no sense that a change of location had occurred. For many students, this was a lost opportunity. A transformation of place is an excellent opportunity to display skills and understanding. Poorer students missed the sense that this was a busy and foreign airport. A number of the poorer students appeared to have only read of the monologue, rather than the entire play.

### **John**

As with most contemporary pieces, the context here was clear and specific. There is a vast difference between a Shakespearean or ancient Greek play, which might be recontextualised into almost any era, and a contemporary play written about a very specific theme and set in a specific time and place. The time, place and circumstance of a contemporary play are generally carefully chosen to fully illuminate and allow exploration of the major themes. Context cannot be changed without risking losing so much that is intrinsic to the original. Students who tried recontextualising this piece risked losing much of the meaning and world of the original.

Better work tended to be detailed, to incorporate pauses, stillness and silence and to capture the sense of the character thinking as well as speaking.

### **Carol**

For those students pursuing further research, they would have discovered that the world of David Mamet is rich with complexity and nuance, especially in relation to his use of language. The repeated line, 'Do you see' is very much within what many would regard as an idiosyncratic Mamet idiom. Mamet has a very specific relationship with language and the use and delivery of language. Some students mastered his language with aplomb. Others struggled to find a suitable inflection, accent or clear method of delivery which truly reflected Carol as an individual and specific personality. Rather than capture the truth of the passage as written, a number of students attempted to overlay additional meanings and contexts not related to the original text, leaving the impression that, rather than responding through interpretation, they were taking the first steps towards writing their own play.

### **Moon/Beggar Woman**

This piece was a gift to students with a creative soul and with a love of the poetic possibilities of language – for the lovers of the imagery of words and the language of imagery. As expected, there were some extraordinary interpretations based on complex and evocative imaginings. With such a poetic piece, symbol was at the fore. Those who took risks with this piece were generally well rewarded. Although it was the first time it was set on the examination, asking for two distinct characters worked well for virtually all students. It was a degree of difficulty that was easily surmounted and offered numerous opportunities for the more creative students with innovative ideas to shine. Many boys were attracted to this piece and, for the most part, they succeeded equally as well as the girls.



### **Paulina**

The key to this piece was capturing the intrinsic menace that lay, not so much within the lines, as beyond and underneath them. This piece, unfolding so much in the here-and-now, depended almost wholly on a knowledge and acknowledgement of the past. Students who failed to appreciate or capture that past were left with little more than a woman who seemed to have lost her senses. This was a piece based so much on motivation. Paulina's specific actions and words were less important than the motivations that were driving her to those actions. Better students captured this sense of the past and offered a clear rationalisation for Paulina's apparent loss of rational decision-making.

### **Willy**

Most students who attempted this monologue did so successfully. The piece was challenging, but there were few hidden difficulties or unforeseen pitfalls. The main challenge for most students was adequately capturing Willy's age and his world-weariness borne of years on the road. Students generally understood and coped adequately with the requirements of the challenge. The addition of Frank at the end was an interesting and non-naturalistic challenge. Some students failed to understand that a shift had taken place but those who had read the play understood the requirements of the final moments.

### **Messenger**

As with most pieces from antiquity, the challenge was to find contemporary resonance and meaning from lines written so long ago and referring to such an alien context. Finding this resonance is not necessarily a matter of recontextualising. Meaning, nuance and resonance can be achieved from the most traditional of interpretations. It is always interesting with ancient Greek passages to witness how students interpret and adapt Greek conventions such as masks, chorus, costume and acting style, as well as whether or not they perform the monologue within its original context or choose to create another appropriate one. In this piece, as with most pieces from a Greek Chorus or Messenger, the implied audience, and the effect the words might have on this audience, is paramount. In general, students who took the time to study ancient Greek theatre and to seek a contemporary response to it, were well rewarded.