

Theatre Studies GA 2: Monologue Performance examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

A broad and satisfactory range of interpretations was presented this year. Student performances were strong and a sound understanding of the demands of the revised task was evident.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

The Monologues

Billy

This was a challenging monologue; with timing a particular challenge because of the specified actions and length of the monologue. With the inclusion of the pauses, students would have little time for additional stage 'business'. Students tended to respond well to a piece which was both poetic and contemporary. Because it was a self-contained monologue, it tended to be somewhat of a trap for some students. Some students, although understanding the monologue, missed the context of the scene and play – and played the monologue out of context as if it could have come from any play.

Chorus – Antigone

This monologue allowed an intellectual as well as emotional approach. Many students displayed strong qualities of analysis and the emotional levels allowed considerable variation in interpretation and approaches. Contexts were rich, varied and seldom predictable. Students responded well to the lack of naturalistic detail. Generally, students used the freedom of 'absurdity' to explore the many emotional and intellectual possibilities that lie beneath the surface of the text. Virtually all students made a specific choice of interpretation and used this to contextualise the monologue. Although choices tended to be brave and inventive, they also reflected a strong grounding in the actual scene and the play as a whole, indicating that the monologues would work within the context of a play interpretation as well as being stand-alone.

This is a vital aspect of interpretation. It does little good to create a brave monologue interpretation, no matter how inventive, that does not hold its integrity for the entire duration of a play. The performance of the monologue presentation is assessed as if it is performed within the context of the specified scene and the play – not as a series of disparate lines, with little relation to the contexts beyond the monologue itself.

Michael

This was a short, though generally beautifully presented, monologue. Many students enjoyed the poetry and the nuances of the language. The emotive language was lyrical and challenging. The nuances were best captured with the use of an accent, but much strong work was created without the use of an accent. Accents will not create powerful work, just as lack of an accent is no indication of poor work. Accents do, however, tend to favour the lilting nuances of language, setting a piece in time and place. A poor accent is not generally one which is factually 'wrong'; for example, offering a north, middle or east rather than a southern Irish accent, or offering an accent from the wrong county, city or township. Such details are appreciated and rewarded when considered. More important, however, is the quality of the language, maintaining consistency and the voice in relation to the accent.

Playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Brian Friel, Tartuffe, Lorca and David Williamson write in a vernacular which is immersed in time and place. They write with a specific rhythm and expectation that the actor will be immersed in the universe of the language. It is sometimes difficult, though not impossible, to capture this universe without the use of an appropriate accent. Students should consider that the accent is not being assessed. What is most important is the meaning and context that the accent brings to the monologue.

This particular monologue offered a challenge with the specified time-shift. Most students handled this very well, providing scope for variation and a break in the flow of the monologue to offer students an opportunity to display range and some complex thought processes. The monologue was not attempted by a great number of students.

Doolittle

Doolittle attracted many of the less successful students. Subtlety was important in this monologue, as was the context. Less successful students tended to read the surface text and miss the subtleties and complexities of Doolittle as a character. Some students also tended to play the scene as a stand-alone monologue rather than an integral part of the broader context of the scene and the play.

More successful students had researched comedy and style. They understood Shaw, his world and his intention in writing the play and creating the characters. These are subtle and complex areas, but it can be obvious when a student has no understanding of a monologue beyond the basic monologue text.

For this scene, the relationship with Higgins was important. It was important to incorporate other characters and to establish Doolittle's character through his interaction with those around him. Doolittle's status and position in the world, and the room, was much dependent on how others saw him and how he saw himself through their and his own eyes. Less successful work tended to ignore this interaction and interrelationship between characters. Doolittle is much more than a working class yobbo.

Eliza

Eliza was a very popular choice. Some of the better students used well-considered and researched accents – both cockney or/and more refined. Because Eliza represented this combination of refinement with a rough diamond beneath the surface itching to escape, accents could be used to reflect Eliza's complex emotional states.

Where the non-naturalism of the Chorus freed many students to produce inventive and complex interpretations, grounded in extraordinary and creative imaginary universes, the naturalism of both Doolittle and Eliza proved to be a considerable limiting factor to many students. Period offered scope for costume, props and setting, but did little to help some students bring the character to life. Being a slave to detail can lift a character off the page. Detail can also be tedious, irrelevant, unnecessary and a hindrance to creativity. Doolittle or Eliza's emotional self is not created through teacups, petticoats or handkerchiefs. Ignoring the detail can leave the characters looking naked. Adding detail after detail, to the detriment of portrayal, can leave the presentation lacking dramatic intention, intensity and direction.

Naturalistic pieces offer a significant challenge to some students. Perhaps one of the most significant challenges for student performers is the portrayal of the 'ordinary' or 'normal'. In such cases, imagination can be stifled and creativity muted in a futile search for the seemingly 'natural' and 'real'.

The Player

This monologue offered significant scope for physicality. Less successful students tended to recite the complex lines with little recourse to theatrical or physical business. This was the first time that only one Shakespeare had been set; a gender-neutral role rather than a male and female. The positive aspect of this choice was that students were offered four gender-neutral characters and four males and females – offering every student at least eight choices without recourse to cross-gender playing. The Player was a complex monologue, with significant levels of meaning. Most students who attempted the piece realised its difficulties and complexities, and work tended to be of a high standard. Shakespeare is frequently represented in the monologue list; usually, though perhaps, not always, with at least one, and sometimes more, male and female choices.

The Messenger

The monologue was long and offered considerable scope for interpretation and exploration of intended meaning. Students should be aware that longer monologues containing more text limit the physicality and theatrical business that may be included within the time limitation. Conversely, where less text is offered, students have the opportunity to experiment with timing, physicality and business. The monologue offered opportunities to take risks and for students to challenge and stretch themselves. Most students who attempted this monologue understood the scope of the task that they were undertaking. As with the Chorus, many students appreciated the freedom and scope of a more open-ended interpretation rather than being locked into a naturalistic approach.

Shakespeare, the Greeks, period pieces generally and some contemporary writers offer works that are amenable to experimenting with contexts, interpretation and even intended meaning. Some works simply do not offer this freedom of opportunity. Students should be aware of the possible scope of interpretation of a monologue when searching for an appropriate and suitable choice. Students who consider themselves imaginative and inventive might be drawn to works offering a freer interpretation than the more factually demanding naturalistic pieces which might require a more logical and well-researched approach.

Martha

Students should note the difficulties of playing a character who is drunk – especially one who is middle-aged and probably used to consuming alcohol on a regular basis over a number of years. In such a situation, the character will be more than simply silly or stupid. The playing of such a character requires considerable empathy and depth of understanding of not only the immediate drinking, but to possible levels of unhappiness related to the cause as well as the effect.

The most successful work from students displayed a good knowledge of the play, not simply the monologue or the specified scene. The stronger work also offered high levels of risk-taking and experimentation with characterisation and intended meaning. In such cases, the Statement of Intention is important. Students are encouraged to give extensive consideration to their Statement of Intention whenever they make brave or unusual choices that might not be immediately obvious to the assessors.

More successful work tended to be characterised by a solid accent, although this was not a prerequisite for better work. Increasingly, with the filmed adaptation of plays becoming so popular, students might find monologues and plays in screen versions. There are many dangers to copying an interpretation of a character. Film versions are seldom definitive and sometimes, as in this case, the players and director take considerable liberties with the piece as written. Also, actors generally search for what is inside them when constructing a character. Each person will construct a different reality from the same text, depending on perspective and previous experience. Copying another person's interpretation of role misses the developmental processes of role-play and negates the individual and personal aspects. Students should be neither copying what they see on film nor other students in their own class. Each role, like a painting for art students, should be unique and personal.

George

The character of George worked best when underplayed with subtlety rather than concentrating on the character being intoxicated. As with Martha, this was a character with considerable drinking experience and an attitude reflecting a history of response to drinking situations.

Statements of Intention tended to be important for this character, with many being very supportive on the difficult and riskier choices made by students. Some choices are less reliant on a Statement of Intention. Other aspects of the portrayal, brave and risky choices and the developmental processes of creating character, might not be so obvious without recourse to a Statement of Intention.

Chorus – Murder in the Cathedral

As with the Chorus from *Antigone*, the monologue lent itself to considerable scope in choice of settings and context. This freedom tended to be very supportive of students who were willing to take risks and to explore inventive interpretations. Less successful students tended to play one emotion, and remain on one emotional level rather than capturing the full range of possibilities. The better work captured the poetic aspects of the language as well as clearly unfolding the narrative.

Monika

In contrast to the Messenger and the longer monologues, students had the option to use the shorter length of this monologue as an opportunity to explore timing, pauses, theatrical and comic business and physicality. Reciting the piece as a slab of text with little recourse to pauses or response to the situation created a very short and superficial interpretation by some students. As a rule of thumb, students should consider that the less actual text that is set, the more opportunity there is for students to inject non-textual theatrical business. Where in 2000, it was considered acceptable to concentrate almost solely on the language of *Under Milkwood*, with minimal consideration of additional action, the same did not apply to the Monika monologue. The monologue itself could be read flat in barely a couple of minutes; clearly indicative of a monologue requiring more than a purely verbal approach.

The monologue was treated very slightly by a number of students. A number of students ignored the possible complexity of the context. They recited the lines literally and did not understand that the intended meaning was complex and worked on at least two levels – the tragic and the comic. The humour was created from the contrast between the text and sub-text, and those students who failed to grasp the sub-text missed the humour altogether. Those students who thought the scene merely tragic not only displayed a superficial understanding of the monologue, but of the specified scene and the play as a whole. The placement of all characters was important for the humour and the drama of the scene. Some students situated themselves in one place, without moving. In some cases, this place was not advantageous to viewing by all three assessors. Monika had to communicate with multiple characters, but equally to be communicating with the assessors, who formed the actual audience. This was not an easy or obvious choice.

Mother Courage

Students interpreted music and song in various ways in this monologue – from the expected and traditional German cabaret-style to more contemporary folk and popular traditions.

This was not a popular choice, but tended to attract a number of stronger students. Most who attempted this monologue had some understanding of Brecht, epic theatre and conventions such as alienation. Where a monologue such as this is steeped so heavily in a particular style such as Brecht, it is recommended that students spend time and effort to research and explore this style and its associated conventions. In such a case, reading the monologue, the specified scene or even the entire play may simply not be enough to fully contextualise the monologue.

The world of Brecht is much more vast than a single work. It would not be inappropriate to view Brecht's body of work as indivisible. It may not be important to read the full body of works, but it would certainly be advantageous to some students to understand Brecht as a writer and director, and have at least one other work with which to compare the specified monologue.