



2006 Theatre Studies GA 2: Performance examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

Many students presented exciting performances, clearly demonstrating perceptive understanding of their selected monologue and revealing knowledge of the scene and the play. However, aspects of other performances raised issues of some concern.

Some students did not seem to be aware of the limitations placed on weapons and hazardous materials, as stipulated in the guidelines. These limitations are not optional and all hazardous materials need to be checked by the venue coordinator. A number of students were disadvantaged through having to change their plans at the last minute. Students should be aware that assessors, just as any audience, use imagination and do not need to see actual objects. Imagination is an integral aspect of the Theatre Studies monologue performance task.

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 and furniture is limited to that provided by the venue. 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. This includes damage through liquids which might be spilled onto a carpet. Liquids are not forbidden, but there is a high expectation that the use of liquids will be limited, highly controlled and very well-rehearsed.

Breaking mirrors or glass, while highly dramatic, is often considered a poor substitute for a carefully constructed theatrical moment. Too often, breakages and spillages are the sign of poorly considered and conceived ideas – more indicative of poor planning, desperation and melodramatics than complexity and depth. Students and teachers are encouraged to carefully read the instructions at the front of the examination paper for information regarding what may and may not be taken into the examination.

Some students required assistance from their peers to carry equipment to and from the performing space. Many of these students spent a considerable amount of time and effort entering the venue, setting up and leaving the space. The purpose of asking students to carry their own prop items was to encourage a smarter use of stagecraft. Assessors reward theatrical quality, not quantity. In other words, assessors look for smart theatrical ideas, not photographic representations of the real world. It was often the case that the higher the number and the larger the size of props, the lesser the quality of the work. This was simply because a poor choice of stagecraft was often indicative of a poor standard of performing. Some students still did not bring in their own CD players and extension cord. Students should not share such equipment, even if the scheduled performance times do not seem to coincide. It is not uncommon for rooms not to run to the timetable.

If concerned about the specifics of a venue, teachers might consider arranging a visit to a known venue to check stairs, door size, floor covering, lighting and such.

A number of schools seemed to take the approach that it would be better or easier if all students attempted the same monologue. The practical benefits seem obvious, but the net result was often disadvantageous, and sometimes disastrous, for the students themselves. This is a VCE examination and it is not appropriate for students to be automatically allocated the same monologue. Students being schooled with the same directorial choices and blocking, or offering similar interpretations, distorts the aims and purposes of the examination and the stipulations of the study design. Although one interpretation for an entire class might serve the short-term needs of the monologue, ultimately, the limitations of such an approach severely disadvantage the students in both the performance and written examinations. Interpretation of the scene and the monologue are personal matters which must be dealt with in great detail in the written examination.

Each year there are monologues which deal with difficult or adult themes, such as seduction, or that may seem to suggest that characters are dressed in a provocative or less-than-conservative manner. As with the use of weapons, settings or any other matter which requires theatrical interpretation, students should ensure that their intention is theatrical rather than purely literal or realistic. If a monologue suggests that a character is peering out of a window, emptying the contents of a filing cabinet, holding a sword or a machine gun or standing over a dead body, the assessors look for theatrical interpretation rather than realistic exactitude. Similarly, with the suggestion that a character is dressed in a slip, nightwear or any similar state of undress, the intention should be to evoke rather than to literally interpret the instruction. Assessors expect to see students appropriately dressed, regardless of the demands of the monologue. Teachers need to feel comfortable that their students are rehearsing in an appropriate manner and assessors need to feel



similar comfort when assessing. These are difficult guidelines to frame, but crossing the invisible line should be obvious.

Areas of Strength and Weakness

Students are assessed on an eight-point scale (0–7) for each of the five criteria. Assessors strive to ask the question, ‘Did the student work?’ rather than, ‘Did the performance work?’ There is no specific criterion to assess whether the monologue succeeds as a piece of theatre or whether the student is ‘talented’. Such considerations are beyond the scope of the criteria. It is possible to receive an exemplary grade for a performance that is far from theatrically perfect. Theatrical perfection presupposes that there is a right or best response to a monologue, which is a fallacy.

Stronger performances were generally characterised by:

- a thorough understanding of the scene and the world of the play as a whole (the context)
- clear knowledge of the intended period and the application of a style and appropriate conventions to create this period
- 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 person and place
- an awareness of levels of meaning, the 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 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 utilise the limitations of monologue conventions to maximum effect
- a strong sense of belief
- an ability to engage the assessors through the metaphorical transformation of time, place and situation.

Weaker performances were generally characterised by:

- 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 style and convention
- 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
- concentration on the immediate, the here and now, rather than the before, after and beyond
- 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 person or place
- a lack of awareness of audience, actor/audience interrelationship or the manipulation of the performance space in consideration of audience
- an inability to come to terms with or transcend the limitations of monologue conventions
- an inability to engage the assessors through the transformation of time or place.

Teachers should note that some of the criteria have changed for 2007 in line with the revised study design.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

There is no necessity for a Theatre Studies monologue to approach seven minutes, as is the case in the Drama performance examination, where most students’ performances are between six and seven minutes. Some of the monologues this year were quite brief. In most cases, this gave students a good opportunity to add business or action. The effective inclusion of business and action are areas for consideration for future professional development for teachers. Some monologues lend themselves to action; however, some of the shorter monologues were limited as to how they might be extended and explored. Lady Macbeth, for instance, was basically dialogue and therefore there was little scope for reflection. In contrast, Hamlet, although short, is a reflective piece that allowed much more scope for exploration and theatrical business.



Teachers were supportive of the fact that some of the monologues from previous years were re-used, particularly as they were familiar with the plays and the task. There was definite support for the fact that monologues should be repeated. There was also support for cutting and pasting passages – allowing students to approach the challenge of shifts that might appear from the cutting and pasting. This also increases the challenge of scene analysis.

Monologues

Wang the Waterseller

There were some very strong interpretations for this monologue, and the singing added to the variation of interpretations. Students seemed to enjoy the challenge of Brecht and the possibilities of the music. The piece was multi-layered, but still very accessible to the majority of students. On the whole, Brechtian conventions were well used, indicating that students had been exposed to Brecht as a major force in theatre.

First Voice

Some of the poorer students did not fully understand the language or the notion of the poetry of the language in this monologue. The poorer work was often a literal presentation of the town, lacking the appropriate mood and subtext. There were some extremely strong interpretations that were true to the language idiom of the piece.

Messenger

This piece proved to be very popular and provided some powerful interpretations. Many students performed in classical Greek style without recontextualisation. A number of students attempted novel recontextualisations, such as TV reporters.

Hamlet

This was arguably the most difficult piece that has ever been set for a Theatre Studies monologue; however, students generally did not seem to be intimidated by it. Weaker students played the surface language, while better students captured the inner turmoil and the broader contexts, as well as the literal intended meaning. A number of girls attempted the piece; most successfully. Students and teachers should note that it is **not** acceptable to actually change the gender of a character. This is generally regarded as rewriting the play and in virtually all circumstances could not be accomplished without a complete rewrite of the text. Rewriting the text is not the same as recontextualising. However, males may take on female roles and females may take on male roles.

Lady Macbeth

This was one of the shorter pieces, providing many students with an opportunity to take their time and to include significant theatrical busyness. As the piece is not written with significant inherent action, it was perfectly acceptable for a student to merely play the language without additional busyness. This was a very popular piece, despite the difficulty. The length may have attracted some of the weaker students. English students who had studied the text may also have been attracted to the piece.

An

This was not a popular choice, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that it had been set before. Some students may have found the task of playing an Asian character to be a significant challenge. There were some exceptional efforts from strong students. Most of the work went into trying to construct An's world. There was a lot of consideration and work put into symbol and imagery, especially from the stronger students.

Mariana

Again, this was not popular. There were some exceptional complex characterisations that incorporated Mariana as the freedom fighter as well as the mother. This piece required a high degree of skill to capture the shifts and the implied persons and place. This piece was more accessible and physical than An, which tended to be more cerebral and less concrete.

Cyrano

This piece had a very high degree of difficulty, with students required to move through specified shifts, while still maintaining a dramatic through line. The fun and the bravado were missing from many attempts. For many students, the difficulty of the emotional shifts dominated the overall concept that the piece was basically a physical challenge. The best work never lost sight of the implied person who was the subject of the challenge, while poorer work struggled to capture the emotional shifts, or merely listed them one after another.



Mabel Chiltern

This piece proved to be very popular. The weaker students struggled with the demands of the language and world of the piece. The language idioms were inaccessible to many students who could not envisage or enter the world of the piece. Some recontextualised the piece to a comparative universe such as, for example, the world of Paris Hilton. On the whole, these recontextualisations worked well because they allowed for an identification of, and comment on, contemporary manners and mannerisms – a device in keeping with Wilde’s intentions. A few boys tried cross-gender playing, which worked well for this character.

Salieri

This difficult monologue was very popular. A number of girls chose this piece. It attracted many of the better students and the general standard of performance was high. The piece lent itself to stronger students pushing themselves to their limits.

Solange

When the students understood this piece, there was great scope for exceptional work. The better students produced a multi-layered and complex, troubled universe; however, some of the weaker students simply did not understand the complete context. The piece almost demanded students to take risks and explore the contexts to their limits. A number of boys attempted the piece, which is exactly in keeping with Genet’s original production and intention.

Maggie

This piece was based on its language and lyricism. The better students captured the sense of longing, poignancy and pathos and there were some strong naturalistic portrayals. Accent assisted many students to capture the world of the piece. Some students had many props; some used the props to better effect than others. As with An and Mabel Chiltern, it was critical for students to enter and embrace the world of the piece – a very different world to the one which we inhabit. Recontextualising was not a good decision for this piece – recontextualising for its own sake does not work and there is a danger of losing so much that the original play intended.

Michael

This was a beautiful speech, very well handled by many students. There were many outstanding and exceptional attempts. The best work captured the language and the poetry of the piece.