

2015 VCE Drama solo performance examination report

General comments

The Drama Solo performance examination is an acting task. Students need to demonstrate the performance and expressive skills described in the study design and their application in the non-naturalistic performance style designated for the selected structure.

In 2015, students generally demonstrated a good understanding of and skill in devising and presenting non-naturalistic solo performances; however, many performances contained too much talking, and consisted of students narrating a storyline with limited or no dramatic action. The power of non-naturalistic performance is that an incredible amount of meaning can be conveyed to an audience without any words being spoken. Being a ‘talking head’ dilutes this power and potentially turns the performance into a naturalistic ‘talk-fest’. This directly impacts on Criterion 4, Use of performance style(s), including the performance style prescribed in the structure.

When constructing the solo performance, teachers and students need to remember that the named character in the prescribed structure must clearly be the central character and occupy more of the solo performance time than any other character. No secondary character should have primary focus.

Assessors noted that work often demonstrated an uncontrolled use of space. This had a potential impact on Criteria 7, 8 and 9. The use of space should be carefully considered. The use of space is political because an actor can demonstrate both status and power without speaking a word. It also allows for considered engagement with the assessors, which is an important aspect of the actor-audience relationship.

Teachers and students need to remember that choosing only to wear ‘theatre blacks’ as a costume is a poor choice because they are neutral and offer no symbolic value or enhanced meaning to the character(s) being portrayed. This directly impacts upon Criterion 10, Application of stagecraft.

Assessors look for references to the prescribed stimulus and how they are used in the development of the character. The prescribed stimulus must be evident throughout the performance. The same applies to references to the stem of the performance focus. Students presenting work that ignores the stem miss out on such things as context and insights into the character. This directly impacts on Criterion 2, Development of a performance from the prescribed structure.

When choosing a prop to demonstrate transformation of object, students need to ensure that the prop enhances the performance and does not detract from it. Props that are overused or clumsily manipulated, and therefore pull focus from the dramatic action, are to be avoided. High-scoring work demonstrated skilfully used props that were from ‘the world’ of the character and contained a symbolic value.

Work at the highest level demonstrated extensive research and sophisticated editing to allow an appropriate consideration of each of the three dot points described in the structure in performance. While there is no requirement to evenly divide the performance time across these points, it is

important to remember that each must be addressed adequately. This year, many students made poor choices in the balance of performance time and content between the dot points, with the resulting impact being on Criterion 3, Research, scripting and editing.

Teachers and students should also ensure that advice they receive in relation to this examination is correct. For example, some students seemed to have relied on information about a structure from a social media site rather than spending time reading or reviewing the stimulus material. Information about expressive skills, performance skills and non-naturalism is provided on pages 10–12 of the *VCE Drama Study Design*. Information about specific performance styles is provided in the examination paper.

While the Drama solo performance examination is an acting task, in the development of the character from the prescribed structure each student takes on the role of researcher, playwright, editor and designer. The structures require considerable information to be digested, refined and communicated, but students are reminded that they are required to bring to the examination a performance, not a speech or an oration. Students must act, not narrate, their performance. Standing in front of the assessors and telling a story or describing action does not earn marks.

Specific information

The characters

Diana

High-scoring performances successfully portrayed Diana as a caricature of herself, demonstrating the foolishness and self-delusion of ‘mutton dressed as lamb’. Work at this level understood the world of the play and referenced it with judicious selections of text. Sophisticated and highly appropriate musical theatre choices enhanced the performances. Students who were able to ridicule the self-indulgence of the amateur Shakespearean actor with both exaggeration and subtlety scored highly, particularly on Criterion 5.

Low-scoring performances demonstrated a limited grasp of musical theatre and, on occasion, launched into contemporary and inappropriate song. Work at this level showed minimal understanding of the irony of Diana’s circumstance, often choosing to play her as a gorgeous Broadway ‘wannabe’ rather than a middle-aged ‘has-been’; Diana was played too young and too agile. A lack of research was evident in the response to dot-point three and was reflected in students’ scores, particularly for Criterion 3.

The Spy

High-scoring work was exemplified by thorough research, skilful editing and nuanced performances where the personality traits of the character were fully developed and explored. Work at this level was adept at integrating fatal flaw into the performance and succeeded in portraying the anguish of the Cambridge men as their hopes and dreams came crashing down around them. Students who were able to reflect a strong sense of period through both language and stagecraft tended to score highly on Criterion 10.

Low-scoring performances struggled with creating tension and this was reflected in scores for Criterion 6. Some focused on a comedic approach, which did not work well. Work at this level tended to simply show a traditional spy story, often falling into the trap of relying on ‘James Bond’ style moments of action. Students also presented work largely as a talking head, letting the words drive their performance rather than dramatic action. Criterion 4 makes it clear that students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of non-naturalistic performance styles and apply aspects of the prescribed performance style consistently throughout the performance. There was also a lack of research, with the inclusion of anachronistic and inappropriate technology.

The White Rabbit or the Queen of Hearts

High-scoring performances interwove, at times quite scathing, political comment throughout the performance, cleverly manipulating satire and symbol. Work at this level skilfully incorporated selections from the stimulus that demonstrated a strong understanding of Carroll's idiosyncratic language and connected this with the language of political campaigning and propaganda. Careful manipulation and control of climax particularly in relation to Criterion 6 and the sophisticated application of dramatic metaphor (Criterion 5) were defining features of high-scoring work.

Low-scoring performances often contained material derived from the Tim Burton film, *Alice in Wonderland*, rather than the prescribed novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, therefore impacting on Criterion 2. Work at this level often included repetitive screaming of 'Off with his head!' and would have benefitted from careful editing to maximise the score for Criterion 3. The work also failed to create tension or climax, leading to low scores for Criterion 6, and often demonstrated a lack of sophistication in the choice and subsequent transformation of prop.

Tally Youngblood

High-scoring performances demonstrated strong physical work that created a world where the physics of hoverboards and bungee jumping from buildings were recreated very effectively. These choices allowed students to access high scores for Criteria 5, 7 and 9. Work at this level contained sophisticated choices of stagecraft as well as the skilful manipulation of object; objects had both practical and symbolic application. The use of sound was also blended seamlessly throughout the performance, reflecting sophisticated understanding of the requirements for Criterion 6.

Low-scoring performances simply recreated scenes from the novel. Work at this level tended to present stereotyped characters and focused on the partying and adventure sequences. It also contained limited use of expressive skills (voice, facial expression, gesture and movement) to express and realise the character(s), thus limiting students' scores for Criterion 8. Work at this level often demonstrated limited research, scripting and editing skills, yet other students performed as a 'talking head' rather than acting in the moment. Students who took this approach usually scored low marks for Criterion 4 because they did not create opportunities to apply the prescribed performance style(s).

The Panto-Dame

High-scoring performances demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the world of the pantomime as well as the perfect or archetypal Dame: maternal, whimsical and funny, flawed yet likeable and with suitable humour, demonstrating sophisticated understanding of the requirements of Criterion 3. Work at this level cleverly explored dot-point two, contrasting the Dame's enthusiasm with the executives' impatience. Ideas explored in response to dot-point three were rich in research and presented with subtlety and intelligent humour. There were also considered choices in the use of stagecraft.

Low-scoring performances confused the traditions of pantomime with the traditions of drag. Crass and bawdy humour was often inappropriately used, and double entendres were played without subtlety. These choices limited students' scores for Criterion 4. In those performances stagecraft, generally, was poor. Costume choices tended to be restrictive and students often looked very uncomfortable. Students are advised to trial and seek feedback about their use and manipulation of stagecraft to maximise their score for Criterion 10. Work at this level showed little understanding of the stimulus and struggled to address dot-point one. This lack of imagination in choices made to shape the performance text suggested that students had spent limited time researching, scripting and editing their performance and did not allow them to score highly for Criteria 2 and 3.

The Detective

High-scoring performances clearly rose to the challenge set in dot-point one: how to ‘out-detect’ Agatha Christie. Students found sophisticated ways of including a significant amount of dense information and presenting highly effective caricature. These choices allowed them to score highly for Criteria 3 and 5 in particular. Work at this level presented clever, consistent and creative use of well-chosen props. It also contained selective and often witty reference to ‘whodunnit’, and skilfully manipulated this style to effectively resolve dot-points one and two, demonstrating sophisticated understanding of the requirements for Criterion 4.

Low-scoring performances presented work in a ‘film noir’ rather than ‘whodunnit’ style, using Sam Spade from *The Maltese Falcon* and American accents, at the expense of establishing a sense of England in 1926. Work at this level had difficulty exploring the variety of character archetypes depicted in the stimulus and played most characters naturalistically. These types of decisions limited students’ opportunity to score highly on Criteria 2 and 4. Work at this level often demonstrated limited use of space and scored low marks on Criterion 3 due to limited evidence of the application of research.

The Wife of Henry VIII

High-scoring performances clearly identified the chosen wife through skilful and detailed non-naturalistic performance with outstanding shaping of the montage of dramatic images. Typically this work scored highly for Criteria 4, 8 and 9. Students who demonstrated sophisticated understanding of both the dramatic and comic power of contrast scored highly on Criterion 6, often using this understanding to satirise Harry and the modern monarchy, or in moments of pathos. Work at this level skilfully manipulated well-chosen Elizabethan conventions such as asides, gesture, rhythm and rhyme. The material students included in their performance was both clever and funny, demonstrating sophisticated scripting and editing choices.

Low-scoring performances lacked research and were, at times, incoherent, thus limiting students’ scores for Criterion 3. There was little or no reference to the formality that was, and is, required of British royalty. Work at this level demonstrated a poor choice in the use of a hired costume and often seemed to have been prepared with limited rehearsal time. This type of costume often restricted transformation between characters, limiting scores for Criterion 10. Dot-point three was handled superficially, demonstrating a lack of understanding of the role of royalty both now and in Tudor times.

The Performer

High-scoring performances demonstrated extensive research into the differences between yakshagana and Bollywood, as well as carefully selected moments from the Ramayana. Work at this level contained clever integration of humour for the Australian performer contrasted respectfully against the ritual aspects of the Indian culture. Work here was focused and energetic, and effectively manipulated thoughtfully chosen costume, puppetry and mask and allowed students to score highly in relation to Criteria 5, 9 and 10.

Low-scoring performances focused more on either the dance aspects of Bollywood, or the retelling of the Ramayana, both at the expense of addressing the rest of the structure. Work at this level lacked sophistication and contained limited or no use of mask or puppetry, demonstrating limited understanding of the requirements of Criterion 5. Some costume choices were particularly limiting and restricted movement. These choices often contributed to low scores for Criterion 10.

Charlie Feehan

High-scoring performances successfully integrated the non-naturalistic performance style with aspects of biomechanics theatre. Performances were often very physical, and allowed students to capture a strong sense of place (Melbourne in the 1920s), skilfully using language, phrasing and controlled vocal delivery. Work with these characteristics allowed students to maximise their scores for Criteria 7, 8 and 9. Excellent use of stagecraft was also a key feature; costume and prop choice helped create era, thus demonstrating sophisticated application of stagecraft as required by Criterion 10. Stillness and silence, both required at the same time, demanded good scripting as well as careful scene choices to allow the space and time to do both effectively, and the highest-scoring work captured this well, reflecting high-level understanding of the use of conventions as outlined in Criterion 5.

Low-scoring performances lacked research and were not able to use the language of the stimulus to create a sense of character or place that communicated the coherent and refined response to the prescribed structure required by Criterion 3. These performances contained moments of silence or stillness, but not both at the same time, and so were not able to score highly on Criterion 5. Dot-point two was often dealt with superficially, with performances that lacked the substance required to evoke pathos in scenes depicting poverty, and contrast not being effectively created to explore socioeconomic circumstances in the 1920s.

The Backup Singer

High-scoring performances subtly satirised the unrealistic expectations of many aspiring performers through well-rounded character development and excellent scripting that had been clearly developed using the stimulus material. Work of this quality demonstrated a sophisticated response to Criteria 2 and 3 and cleverly used song to establish era and the evolution within the music industry. The songs were interwoven seamlessly throughout the performance, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of context and the key figures involved, and this was reflected in high scores for Criterion 5. Another defining feature of work at this level was the appropriate choice and skilful manipulation of stagecraft that gave students access to the highest band of scores for Criterion 10.

Low-scoring performances were characterised by far too much singing at the expense of acting. Work at this level did not address the stem of the performance focus, nor did it recreate material from the stimulus. These shortcomings were reflected in scores for Criterion 2. Performances at this level included many talking heads and little or no conflict; sometimes just a lot of shouting, which limited students' opportunity to score highly on Criterion 6. A lack of research was also evident in the clichéd and superficial references made in response to dot-point three and suggested that students had not spent an appropriate amount of time developing the coherent response required by Criterion 3.