

2018 VCE Drama solo performance examination report

General comments

In 2018, the Drama Solo performance examination comprised 10 prescribed structures. Students could choose from female (two), male (two) or neutral (four) characters. For two structures students could select from one of 44 characters (The Regrettable Superhero) or one of 4 characters (The Parent). Students were asked to choose one character and research, create and ultimately perform their response to the structure.

This examination is an acting task where students must create a non-naturalistic performance. All performances were very heavily reliant on words and required more prudent editing. Students who scored well found more theatrical ways to present their interpretation and avoided exposition and narration, where they 'showed' instead of 'told'. Many scripts were overwritten and students rushed to complete their performance within seven minutes. This meant that there was minimal time for assessors to understand that a character transformation had taken place, affecting Criterion 7. Students are reminded that during the examination assessors are seeing and hearing their work for the first time, so timing, pacing and vocal quality must be considered. In addition, many students needed to undertake much deeper research.

Quality work was defined by an excellent understanding of non-naturalism, with seamless transformations a key feature. Students who achieved high scores had obviously rehearsed and edited their work (Criterion 3). The highest-scoring work integrated all aspects of the structure and performance styles, with relevant stagecraft, into the allotted time.

There were some outstanding stagecraft choices made, where students had added symbolic elements to their costume, or had built structures and decorated them with symbolic materials related to their performance (Criterion 10). Props should be chosen carefully and be integral to the performance. Many students brought in large props and used them once or not at all. Students who performed in minimal costume and with a small handheld prop seemed to present work that was not overly well considered. Students are advised to consider costume choices, including shoes and jewellery, carefully. Students who performed in either theatre blacks or their own clothing did so to the detriment of marks.

The decision to use sound design needs to be carefully considered. In some instances, it enhanced the solo performance by setting mood, generating structure and timing, locating sections and providing music. However, at times, an overreliance on the soundtrack tended to diminish the performance, especially the opportunity to show multiple characters. Some students used voiceovers that were not their own and just stood in the space reacting; however, this was a poor choice.

The use of voice as an expressive skill was not done well this year (Criterion 8). Students who scored highly utilised voice well and used a range of vocal qualities and voices, but generally this expressive skill was under-developed. It was often difficult to understand what was being said due to a lack of volume/power, the size of the room or external noises. Many students lacked energy

and focus in their performance, which made it difficult to create and maintain an effective actor–audience relationship (Criterion 9).

In some cases, students were clearly stating that they were changing the performance focus/stem to fit what they wanted to do. This resulted in not being compliant (Criterion 1). All aspects of the prescribed structure, including the opening sentences and all three dot points, must be addressed to reach compliance. Students without objects to transform, not portraying the actual primary character and/or missing dot points cannot achieve full marks even if they are extremely strong performers.

Work that scored highly was accompanied by Statements of Intention that clearly segmented the work into each criterion.

Specific information

The characters

The Detective

This was the second most popular structure.

High-scoring performances highlighted a clear understanding of film noir, with effective manipulation of soundscapes and soundtracks to create mood. Stock characters were used as inspiration to enhance story through climax, big reveals or twists in the story. There was thoughtful and skilful use of stillness and silence to create meaning/mood and enhance the actor–audience relationship.

Low-scoring performances relied too heavily on spoken text, especially when it came to recreating moments from the heist. Often the second and third dot points were combined, affecting clarity and depth. There were some clumsy character transformations – stepping from side to side, on and off chairs, putting a hat on and taking it off – trying to recreate dialogue. Some performances interpreted the ‘brooding and world-weary investigator’ as being tired, and therefore the characterisation lacked energy.

Lizzie Borden

This was the most popular structure.

High-scoring performances understood the conventions of cabaret, which melded perfectly in some cases with a political and social message. A strong sense of time and place, of the congregation in the church and of Lizzie’s intention was established. There was clear evidence of research and a dramatic mood was created through heightened language and rhythm.

Low-scoring performances often confused the style of cabaret with musical theatre, resulting in unfortunate musicals about an axe murder. Many often missed the opening sentences and the era was not reflected, with unsuitable stagecraft choices. Many students relied too heavily on the musical ‘Chicago’. Although the parallels between the Borden case and the ‘Merry Murderesses’ are obvious, too much of this song allowed little movement between moments of comedy and pathos, and students also seemed to be controlled by the timing of the soundtrack.

The Regrettable Superhero

High-scoring performances demonstrated strong physical work with clever and engaging exaggerated movement to create changes in time and character. The comic-book mood was evoked through clever use of freeze-frame. This work linked dot point 3 (DP3) with themes relating to the character created in the stem.

Low-scoring performances tended to focus on the main character in dot point 1 (DP1) and did not reference the other superheroes (Criterion 2). Students who did not score well talked through action rather than showing it and struggled to use freeze-frame to capture a comic-book style. Climax and 'heroic actions' were not shown.

The Raven

High-scoring performances were exemplified by strong physical work – clever and engaging physicalisations of the bird and shifts in character. There was a sophisticated use of language as symbol. Dot points were clearly defined, and there were cleverly integrated references to other historical superstitions. Considered costume choices and excellent research characterised the students' work.

Low-scoring performances had limited reference to the stimulus, superficial creation of symbol and lacked the conventions of physical theatre. Many students added superfluous movements to their performances, including jetés and splits for the sake of compliance. Students who did not score well also focused on the character(s) of the ill-informed monarchists rather than the Raven. DP3 was not integrated throughout the text.

The Red Baron

This was the least popular structure.

High-scoring work was extremely physical, with thoughtful use of levels and space (Criterion 6) and with the fatal flaw embedded throughout the performance.

Low-scoring performances tended to focus on retelling the Baron's life story. Dot point 2 (DP2) was not created but instead spoken about, and space was poorly used. In some cases it was difficult to see where the student had referenced the original stimulus, and there were some factual discrepancies.

The Phone

High-scoring performances understood the comedy in the caricatures of the phones and created clever, fast-paced scripts that allowed for highly physical performances. Sound was used humorously and exaggerated movement pushed the characterisation. Simple, transformational objects assisted.

Low-scoring performances created basic caricatures and did not fully explore DP3. There was little utilisation of sound, which relied too heavily on verbal comedy (rather than physical comedy as suggested by the convention and element). Some work was under-rehearsed and felt improvised.

The Eurovision Song Contestant

High-scoring performances understood the epic theatre style and conventions (Criterion 4). There was sophisticated use of language as symbol and use of puns/clever phrasing without relying on rhyming. Social commentary through song and appropriate lyrics was another highlight.

Low-scoring performances played the piece comedically and did not necessarily understand the 'strong political message' that needed to be conveyed. They focused on recreating the performances from previous years shown in the documentary and used song inappropriately (more a demonstration of singing abilities).

Santa Claus

High-scoring performances demonstrated high energy and a clever use of satire in DP3. Symbol was built on and referenced throughout the performance. There was a strong sense of GRINCH and the story unfolding from Santa's intention to convince them of the need for Christmas magic.

There were some excellent, cleverly scripted pieces that explored Santa's situation with pathos, passion and satirical social commentary.

Low-scoring performances were exemplified by limited reference to the stimulus, focusing instead on modern Santa and relying on the student's own experience of Christmas. Many students tried to make the piece far too politicised and satire was not shown (Criterion 5). Symbol was also a struggle despite the many choices available.

Tokyo Rose

High-scoring performances demonstrated rich caricature and great contrasts between characters. Clear research was demonstrated in the interpretation of the character of Iva and the character of Tokyo Rose. There was some very clever use of props and sets, and a strong sense of pathos was created.

Low-scoring performances did not show a distinction between Iva and Tokyo Rose. Pathos relied on yelling and screaming or with her being played as someone who saw themselves as a victim from the outset. Dot Point 2 did not refer to the 'morale on both sides' – rather just told Iva's story. Tension was also not manipulated well.

The Parent

High-scoring performances made it clear that they were 'blinded by bitterness' and confronted Charlie in the opening moments. They tended to make interesting and creative choices about the parenting styles of the characters chosen (DP2), which shaped the performance (Criterion 2). Their work was highly physical and comic, with a creative and inventive use of prop that suited the stimulus and allowed for transformations suitable to space and character.

Low-scoring performances either left the conflict with Charlie to the very end or did not show it at all. Some work only recreated the film. Many students performed their pieces at a loud volume and fast pace, not allowing for successful contrast to be shown between characters, moods, time and place – especially the transformation of time between DP1 and DP2. DP3 was also often poorly developed.