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PREPARING STUDENTS FOR COMPETITION IN DUO INTREPRETATION

By

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Duo interpretation is relatively new on the tournament circuit. Consequently, there is little literature available in books and journals describing its nature or providing guidelines for preparing students for competition in this event. It seems appropriate, therefore, to attempt to determine the environment of this increasingly popular competitive event by assimilating material pertinent to this particular tournament genre as well as to give a brief overview of its beginning and subsequent development.

The thoughts which will be presented in no way represent original thinking. They have come from a variety of sources. Some of them have been gleaned from the great wealth of literature, ranging from the classical studies of Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian¹ to the modern thinking of such persons as Wallace A. Bacon, Charlotte I. Lee, Frank Galati, Timothy Gura, Leslie Irene Coger, Melvin R. White, Carolyn A. Gilbert, Beverly Whitaker Long, Mary Frances Hopkins, and Francine Merritt.² The dramatic concepts of Konstantin S. Stanislavsky permeate these thoughts.³ Other ideas have been contributed by fellow forensic coaches such as Anthony B. Schroeder whose article in the Spring, 1983, issue of *The Forensic* should be required reading for all who

train students in any type of interpretative reading event. Some techniques have been acquired from discussions with colleagues in the forensics community such as Margaret Greynolds, Penny Swisher, and Rita Willock, staff members at the 1982 National Pi Kappi Delta Individual Events and Debate Workshop held in Granby, Colorado. Finally, many of the ideas are the direct results of personal experience in coaching forensics and directing plays and readers' theatre productions.

In delineating the characteristics of duo interpretation the term *environment* must be defined. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* dictionary suggests that the word means "whatever encompasses." The dictionary further points out that biological environment is the "aggregate of all external and internal conditions affecting the existence, growth, and welfare of organisms." Organism is defined as "anything that is analogous in structure and form to a living thing."⁵

Since duo interpretation, like it or not, is indeed a "living thing", it seems appropriate to structure its discussion around three main points. First, duo interpretation exists. Second duo interpretation has grown. Third, duo interpretation's welfare is dependent on how well students are prepared to perform in this particular event. The

first two points will be dealt with only briefly. The third point will be the emphasis of the study.

In establishing when duo interpretation came into existence, Jack H. Howe, editor of *Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results* for fifteen consecutive years, suggests that it was probably Professor Grace M. Walsh who included duo interpretation of poetry in her tournament at the University of Wisconsin in Eau Claire in the late sixties.⁶ By 1973, as reported by Professor Robert Lyon of Rocky Mountain College in the March, 1975, issue of *The Forensics*, duo interpretation was introduced at the WyMoDak Speech Tournament where students were allowed to perform "poetry, prose or dramatic material." As it evolved, it went through many changes. Thus, in 1984 it was described by the National Forensic Association as "a cutting (scene) from a play, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two characters presented by two individuals." Further, the event was not to be considered "acting;" therefore, "no costumes, props, lighting, etc. [could] be used." In addition, the "presentation [should be] from the manuscript and the focus should be off-stage and not to each other."⁸ The American Forensic Association expanded the rules, indicating that the material could involve "the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals [and] could be drawn from stage, screen or radio."⁹ The 23rd Annual UCLA National College Forensics

tournament added a dimension to the rules by allowing students to use "cutting(s) from a play or screen play involving *any format* or number of characters."¹⁰

The growth of duo interpretation can best be characterized by an observation made by Topsy in Harriet Beacher Stower's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It just "grow'd."¹¹ Howe made only a "reference in passing" to duo interpretation in the 1969-70 edition of his publication.¹² In 1973 it was still considered a "rare event,"¹³ but by 1981-82, the last year for which records are available, it was the fifth most proffered event in college forensics. It was included in six tournaments in 1970-71. Eleven years later it was offered in 145 tournaments.¹⁴

Obviously, duo interpretation exists and, obviously, it has experienced phenomenal growth. But what about its welfare? Is it an event that the forensic community considers worthwhile and wishes to continue? Yes seems to be an appropriate answer to this question. The next question, then is what can be done to insure that it continues to be a meaningful competitive event. The answer would appear to be the manner in which students are trained by forensic coaches. The following guidelines, therefore, seem pertinent for effective preparation and performance of duo interpretation.

One, read as many plays and movie, radio, and television scripts as possible. Join the Fireside Theatre and other similar groups to receive the best and most re-

cent Broadway offerings, but do not neglect the great literature of the past.

Two, see as many plays, movies, and television productions as possible. Attend college, community, and professional productions of plays and readers' theatre productions. Take advantage of the excellent cable productions of movies and plays offered by Cinemax, Home Box Office, and Showtime as well as dramatic series such as "Masterpiece Theatre" available on public television.

Three, select the material to be performed. Some of the primary considerations should be as follows:

First, students must understand the literature. One of the biggest criticisms of competitive oral interpretation is the abundance of technique and the absence of analysis.¹⁵ Failure to understand and to convey the meaning of a selection is sophistry of the worst kind.

Second, students should enjoy the literature. Many times a coach encourages students to read his or her favorite pieces of literature. Some of the time the coach is successful. However, a coach should always advise the students that if they do not like the literature, an alternative source of material should be found. Sometimes it is difficult for performers to hold the attention of a weary judge even though they are reading material they enjoy. It is almost impossible to hold the attention of a judge when the readers have little or no interest in the material. Further-

more, when performers are not excited about a selection it is unlikely that they will sufficiently prepare the reading.

Third, students should select literature which fits the tournament rules. Each tournament director has the right to use whatever rules he or she sees fit. It is important, therefore, to read each tournament invitation carefully and select literature accordingly. If the director subscribes to the National Forensic Association's rules, for example, only *plays* involving the portrayal of *two* characters may be used." The time limit set for the event is also crucial. In most instances a performance can be no longer than ten minutes. Cutting some literature so drastically takes away too much of its dramatic impact. Literature such as this which defies cutting should be used in environments where time is not so restrictive.

Fourth, students should select a scene which stands on its own or can be adapted to stand on its own. In performing dramatic literature plot development is crucial. A scene which has definite rising action, climax, and falling action is not only easier to prepare, but allows the performers to build to a climax with more intensity.

Fifth, students should select a scene which has three dimensional characters and well defined character relationships. Neil Simon, Woody Allen, and Monty Python's characters, for the most part, do not meet this criterion. Performers who work with poorly delineated

characters waste their time, their coach's time, and their judges' time. Further, the performance of mediocre literature has little impact in the competitive environment.

Sixth, students should select a scene which fits the physical, mental, and emotional personalities of the performers. While the interpreter has more freedom with this facet of performance than the actor, duo teams who use this criterion usually are more effective than those teams who ignore the suggestion. For example, a 300 pound man will have difficulty in conveying the essence of Tennessee Williams' Brick Pollitt or Chance Wayne. A boisterous, masculine female will have similar problems with Williams' Blanche Dubois or Agnes in *The Shadow Box* by Michael Cristofer.

Seventh, students should select a scene with balanced dialogue. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is a classic piece of contemporary literature, but in the "Deception, deception" scene there is a limit to the amount of reacting that Laura can handle. Some of the scenes in Samm-Art Williams' *Home* pose similar problems.

Eighth, students should select a scene which does not depend heavily on scenery, costumes, make-up, lighting, sound, or physical action for dramatic impact. Holding a glass of liquor and gulping a handful of pills, requirements of Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, and holding a script, a requirement of duo interpretation, constitute more

action than many performers are capable of dealing with successfully. The climax in *The Diviners* by Jim Leonard, Jr. loses much of its effectiveness by the absence of scenic devices necessary for suggesting the river.

Ninth, students should select literature which is not overdone. In an environment other than competitive forensics, this should not be a factor. To reject great literature because it has been performed excessively would be as ridiculously tragic as to refuse to play a Beethoven symphony because it has been heard many times. However, for the coach who has judged since eight o'clock in the morning, students should perhaps avoid *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Shadow Box*, *The Lion in Winter*, and other frequently heard plays.

Four, analyze the literature. Anthony B. Schroeder in his article in the Spring, 1983, issue of *The Forensic*,¹⁶ as well as other scholars in oral interpretation,¹⁷ have repeatedly pointed out that the most serious problem faced by performers is that of insufficient analysis of material. Certainly if duo interpretation is to flourish, thorough and sound analysis of literature is crucial. Some significant aspects of literary analysis follow.

First, students should read the entire play, not just a plot summary or the scene which is to be performed. Even though the play has been read before, it should be re-read to refresh the memory. Other plays which relate to the one being performed, such as Lillian

Hellman's *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest* or Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, should be studied as well.

Second, students should determine the overall mood of the play as well as the particular scene being used. Is the play basically humorous, serious, or both? How does the setting suggest its mood? What role does exposition play in determining its mood? How does the dialogue create mood? What do the personalities of the characters indicate about the mood. These and other questions should be answered.

Third, students should make a plot diagram of the entire play and the specific scene being used. This diagram should indicate clearly the rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. A visual diagram is probably the best method of illustrating where the "peaks and valleys" occur.

Fourth, students should study the sub-text. What underlying moods, emotions, and meanings are inherent in the literature? For example, when Blanche DuBoise laments, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," what agony is she experiencing? Who are these strangers? What impact have they had on her life? What is the nature of their kindness?

Fifth, students should study the characters and their relations to others in the script. The student needs, first, to determine the physical, mental, and emotional traits of the character being portrayed. An "imaginative autobiography" or

"background of details"¹⁸ which make the individual character come alive for the performer should be prepared. The performer also needs to determine the salient attitudes which motivate his or her character. Next, the performers need to determine relations between the two characters. How does one character feel about the other and why does the individual feel this way are questions which should be asked. A written analysis of the character and his or her relationship with the other character might prove beneficial.

Sixth, students should cut and/or adapt the literature for performance. The primary objective in this process is to preserve as closely as possible the original intent of the author. Specifically, the student might consider changing dialogue to take care of action as in murder scene in Langston Hughes' *Mulatto*, incorporating dialogue of several characters as in Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures*, or combining scenes such as the two tack room scenes between Lizzie and Starbuck in N. Richard Nash's *The Rainmaker*.

Seventh, students should read what others have written about the literature. Locate reviews of the production by drama critics in the *New York Times*, and other newspapers, as well as those magazines such as *Nation*, *Commonwealth*, and *The New Yorker*, and the *Saturday Review*. Read what literary critics have said about the literature. Look for comments the auth-

or may have written about the play.

Eighth, students should have a conference with their coach to discuss the above guidelines as well as how the performers feel about the scene, what questions they have, what problems they have encountered, what are the best foci, how the body can best suggest the character(s) in the scene, how the voice can best suggest the character(s) in the scene, what type of introduction should be used, and what transitions, if any, are necessary.

Five, rehearse the scene. Rehearsal is a particularly crucial aspect of the preparation process. The following guidelines seem appropriate.

First, students should memorize the material. Some may disagree with this, but performers who are shackled with lines cannot concentrate on the more important elements of rehearsal. Rote memory is not condoned. However, if students have worked sufficiently on the interpretation of the material, memorization will be a natural by-product.

Second, students should be totally involved in the scene—physically, vocally, mentally, and emotionally. They should start the rehearsal with physical and vocal warm-up exercises. They should then be encouraged to overact, exaggerate, and do seemingly wild things with the material.

Third, students should experiment with the scene. Performers should have complete freedom to

do whatever motivates them. Have them switch roles. Have them do numerous improvisations with the material. They should not worry about the acting versus interpretation dilemma. Much has been said about this controversial fine line. For some of the most recent commentary read Thomas Colley's remarks condemning interpretative readers for invading the domain reserved specifically for actors.¹⁸ If performers holding manuscripts, performing in a conventional classroom, wearing ordinary clothes, without the benefit of stage make-up, lighting, or sound is not sufficient to let an audience know that *presentation*, not *representation*, is taking place, what is? It seems ridiculous to deny the performers full use of body and voice—the only tools available to them for evoking the intensity demanded by good dramatic literature.

Fourth, students should work on creating the proper mood demanded by the selection. Attention should be given to dialogue and stage directions which are designed to create the mood of the selection. The performers should determine what physical and vocal techniques will best convey this mood. The introduction to the scene is sometimes designed to enhance the mood and should be an integral part of the rehearsal process.

Fifth, students should work on characterization through foci. After they have determined in the analysis phase the most desirable foci for the material, time should

be devoted to making characters come alive—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Individuals do not speak to a spot on the wall. They talk to real human beings. Therefore, each performer should determine the location of the character being addressed and the exact physical details of the character, as well as the possible reason for the physical location and appearance of each character. In addition, the mental and emotional conditions of the characters and the factors motivating these conditions should be given considerable emphasis. Further, the reactions of one character to the other should be determined. When this is done, an environment for meaningful interaction will have been established.

Sixth, students should work on developing the action in the selection. Having determined in the analysis phase the events in the material, they should now concentrate on conveying the elements of the plot to the audience. The performers must work to indicate clearly the exposition in the play, the initial action which ushers in the dramatic conflict and leads the audience to the crisis or climax, the falling action, and the final resolution of the conflict. One of the most common problems in the interpretation of dramatic literature is that of starting the level of performance so high that the performers have little, if anywhere, to go. Performers need to build the overall climax with gradual intensity. They should also apply this principle to sub-plots which make up

the entire scene.

Finally, students should perform the scene for the entire squad and for others knowledgeable in oral interpretation and acting. Encourage listener feedback. Incorporate suggestions where applicable, remembering the ultimate performance is primarily an ensemble product of the two performers and their coach.

Seven, perform the scene at the tournament. Students should keep in mind the following factors:

First, students should adapt their performance to the physical environment of the tournament. They should consider the size of the room, the acoustics, and the arrangement of the furniture, making adjustments as necessary.

Second, students should observe and adapt to the response of the audience. Direct eye contact is not advised, but peripheral vision can be used to the performers advantage.

Third, students should play to the audience as any well trained performer should. They should use audience presence and feedback to stimulate the best possible performance.

Fourth, students should consider the possibility of having more than one selection in their repertoire. Thorough preparation of several selections is not only educationally sound, but can result in competitive advantages when other team(s) in a panel reach the same selection.

Eight, stay with the same selection long enough for it to have time to become fully developed. It takes

time for a scene to mature. Do not discard material simply because it does not make the finals or place at the first or second tournament.

Nine, weigh carefully written and oral comments made by judges. Take advantage of the criticism of these professionals, using their expertise, whenever appropriate, to improve the quality of performance.

It is obvious that duo interpretation is firmly entrenched in competitive forensics. It is obvious that the addition of duo interpretation as a forensic event was a wise choice in that it helped to balance public speaking dominated tournaments. And it is obvious that the welfare of duo interpretation is secure and will continue to be secure as long as forensic coaches conscientiously prepare and inspire their students to perform effectively.

END NOTES

¹Plato, *Ion*; Aristotle, *Poetics*; Quintilian, *Institution Oratoria*.

²Wallace A. Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979); Leslie Irene Cooper and Melvin R. White, *Readers Theatre Handbook: a Dramatic Approach to Literature*, 3rd ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982); Carolyn A. Gilbert, *Communicative Performance of Literature* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc.); Charlotte I. Lee and Frank Galati, *Oral Interpretation*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977); Charlotte I. Lee and Timothy Gura, *Oral Interpretation*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company); Beverly Whitaker Long and Mary Frances Hopkins, *Performing Literature: an Introduction to Oral Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982); Francine Merritt, Professor, Department of Speech, Louisiana State University-Baton Rouge, was one of my teachers who added significantly to my knowledge of oral interpretation.

lavsky (New York: Theatre Arts, 1936); *Building a Character* by Konstantin S. Stanislavsky (New York: Theatre Arts, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, trans *An Actor Prepares* by Konstantin S. Stanislavsky (New York: Theatre Arts, 1948).

⁴Anthony B. Schroeder, "Interpretation of Literature Begins Before the Performance: Hints on How to Improve Prose Performance," *The Forensic*, 68, no. 3 (Spring 1983), 6-8.

⁵"Environment," "Biological Environment," "Organism," *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language* combine with *Britannica World Language Dictionary*.

⁶Telephone interview with Jack H. Howe, former editor, *Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results*, 7 November 1983.

⁷Robert Lyon, "Duo Interpretation as a Forensic Event," *The Forensic*, 60, no. 3 (March 1975), 7.

⁸Tournament Invitation, 14th Annual National Championships in Individual Speaking Events, National Forensic Association, April 26-30, 1984.

⁹Tournament Invitation, 7th Annual National Individual Events Tournament, American Forensic Association, April 13-16, 1984.

¹⁰Tournament Invitation, 23rd Annual UCLA National College Forensics Tournament, University of California at Los Angeles, January 2-4, 1984.

¹¹Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Philip an Doren Stern (New York: Bramhall House, 1964), p. 319.

¹²Telephone interview with Jack H. Howe, former editor, *Interscholastic Speech Tournament Results*, 7 November 1983.

¹³Lyon, p. 7.

¹⁴Telephone interview with Jack H. Howe, former editor, *Interscholastic Speech Tournament Results*, 7 November, 1983. In a telephone interview with George Armstrong, Bradley University, current editor of *Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results*, 23 May 1984, he stated that there was no publication during the year 1982-83 and that the 1983-84 publication was presently being compiled.

¹⁵Schroeder, p. 6 and Hal H. Holloway et al., "Report on the Action Caucus on Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition," *National Forensic Journal*, 1, no. 1 (Spring 1983), 43-58.

¹⁶Schroeder, p. 6.

¹⁷Holloway et al., p. 47.

¹⁸Long and Hopkins, pp. 54-55.

¹⁹Holloway et al., pp. 44-45.