

Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition: Representative Papers

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An action caucus to seek common criteria for the presentation and judging of oral interpretation in forensic competition was held during the 1982 Speech Communication Association convention at Louisville, Kentucky. Its findings were reported in the *National Forensic Journal*, and a summary was printed in the *Journal of the American Forensic Association*.¹ In 1983, at the Washington, D.C. SCA convention, a second caucus was held on the same topic. The participants were John F. Skinner, San Antonio College; Beverly Whitaker Long, University of North Carolina; John J. Allen, Wayne State University; Carolyn Keefe, West Chester University; Harold Drake, Millersville University; and Hal Holloway, Mont Alto Campus, The Pennsylvania State University. At the same convention, Task Force III of the Interpretation Division of the SCA, under the chairmanship of Jerry W. Mathis, Sauk Valley College, also presented its findings on the nature and value of oral interpretation in forensics. James A. Pearse, Baylor University, and Hal Holloway, both of whom participated in the first action caucus, contributed to those findings. Dr. Mathis, in turn, participated as a discussant in the second action caucus and with Joan

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¹See Hal H. Holloway, John Allen, Jeanine Rice Barr, Thomas Colley, Carolyn Keefe, James A. Pearse, and James M. St. Clair, "Report on the Action Caucus on Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition," *The National Forensic Journal*, I (Spring 1983), pp. 43-58; and Hal Holloway, "Oral Interpretation — Action Caucus Report," *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, XIX (Spring 1983), pp. 273-4.

Olsen Donavan, St. Lawrence University, presented a paper at yet another presentation on oral interpretation at the 1984 SCA Convention in Chicago, Illinois. This was a panel symposium under the auspices of the National Forensic Association which reported, discussed, and offered further considerations beyond the 1982 and 1983 action caucuses. Fellow participants were Hal Holloway, John F. Skinner, Carolyn Keefe, John J. Allen, and Harold L. Drake. The purpose of this report is to present representative papers from the 1983 action caucus and the 1984 panel symposium. The papers review ideas presented at the 1982 and 1983 action caucuses and the Task Force III symposium, indicate areas of disagreement concerning the presentation and evaluation of oral interpretation, and offer new suggestions for consideration.

"Performing and Judging Contest Oral Interpretation Events: Freedoms and Constraints": John F. Skinner

At the 1983 Action Caucus on the Presentation and Judging of Oral Interpretation in Forensic Tournaments, I tried to examine some of the similarities and differences between performances of literature in classroom and contest situations. Those who choose to align themselves with either the "academic" or the "forensic" camp in this continuing dialogue or debate would do well to remember that we *all* share a history that dates back to at least the pre-Homeric "singer of tales," and that the competitive or agonistic aspect was *strong in* those early performances. The competent and stylish performer attracted large, appreciative audiences in preliterate societies; the bungling or inept performer would be ignored, if the audience was benevolent. The Greeks and others later formalized competition in their performance contests. The focus of these early contests, however, was the literature; in preliterate societies, performances was the only way of publishing new "texts" and preserving old ones.¹

In spite of this shared heritage, we all know that contest oral interpretation and classroom performances are two different animals today if only because they frequently look different. In a

¹Alfred Lord, *Singer Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 16. For additional sources on composition and performances in preliterate societies, see Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), and Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1967).

recent article, Ron Pelias isolates four distinct schools of interpretation theory and criticism from current and recent textbooks.² Educators in these various schools, he notes, view interpretation as either 1) a *communicative act*, 2) a *performing art*, 3) an *instrument of self-discovery*, or 4) a *mode of literary study*. Though people may juggle more than one of these views simultaneously, the training and criticism they provide students will typically emphasize one basic concept of oral interpretation. Common sense dictates that those who view interpretation as communication or as a performing art would probably endorse or have no objection to contest oral interpretation as currently practiced. Those viewing oral interpretation as therapy or as a form of literary criticism might reject or at least have trouble accepting the rules and restrictions typical of forensic competition.

I am caught in the middle of this debate, and I know that I am not alone. As a result of both my graduate training and my own convictions, I regard performance as a particularly rich form of literary study. Yet I also now have six years of experience coaching and judging forensic activities. In my classroom the rules for performance are dictated by the texts selected. I expect students to be well-prepared, but I would never *require* an introduction or use of a manuscript. Moreover, I would never set minimum or maximum time limits for performance or limit movement or the use of props. In short, I will not adopt the extrinsic rules of the contest and apply them to classroom work. On the other hand, I know the values of much forensic competition, and I'm not about to banish contestants from the republic. In what follows, I want to consider briefly some of the stated and unstated rules of *contest* performance and judging, and the freedoms and constraints they imply for contestants and judges. These are *personal* reflections on excesses I've witnessed in tournament settings, and if my opinions appear dogmatic, it is only to spur discussion.

Freedoms of/Constraints on the Contest Performer

Freedoms

1. The contestant may choose any material that fits the genre of the contest category—poetry, prose, drama.

Constraints

1. Some literature is inappropriate to or unworthy of contest performance,

Selecting literature in the classroom may be limited somewhat by the anthology in the textbook, or by the instructor's suggestions.

²Ronald J. Pelias, "Schools of Interpretation Thought and Performance Criticism," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 50 (Summer 1985), pp. 348-365.

The forensic contestant has greater freedom of choice but also bears greater responsibility for choosing appropriate literature. Teachers viewing oral interpretation as literary study frequently require that all students read the selections to be performed. The forensic contestant has *no* such guarantee that the audience knows the literature and must remember that since performance is transitory, some materials may be too difficult for an audience (judge) to comprehend at first hearing. Novel or experimental literary forms that may bewilder judges are probably inappropriate for competition. Equally important, literature that is not of college anthology quality is inappropriate for collegiate competition.

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| 2. Performers are free to choose well-known literary selections or to opt for obscure texts. | 2. Both familiar and obscure selections carry risks in contest situations, |
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Though judges may find security in judging familiar selections, they may also be predisposed to one particular interpretation of it. I know of one particular performance of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" against which I am sure I still gauge all others. This is more a testament to the power of that previous performance than a negative comment on the subsequent ones, to be sure, but the impression remains. Coaches have an obligation to expand materials in their files and to force students to select their material by themselves. If their initial selections are inappropriate for the event or the audience, *then* we lend guidance. A major contribution of forensic competition to the education of students can be forcing them to read more widely than they would otherwise. If we routinely hand students selections we deem appropriate, we discourage their reading and their analysis of the audience and the occasion.

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| 3. Male and female contestants are free to choose literature with narrators or personae of the opposite sex. | 3. Neither instructors nor performers are free to change a text to match the performer's sex. |
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If we are training people to achieve "effects," we can, of course, handle and manhandle literary texts any way we choose. If we purport to be studying literature, however, we will respect the intentions and the integrity of the text. You cannot change Diane Wakoski's poem "The Pink Dress" to "The Pink Overalls" and expect a judge who knows the poem to listen objectively! I want literature to serve students—by teaching them, providing pleasure,

and even winning them awards—but I bridle whenever I see poems, stories, and plays treated only as means to an end. I can learn a good deal by hearing a woman perform Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." If she performed "My Last Duke," however, I would either laugh or cry, or both.

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| <p>4. Performers are free to disregard or test the limits of contest rules and conventions.</p> | <p>4. Judges may enforce the rules rigidly, thus penalizing the superior performance that violates stated rules.</p> |
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Why put the integrity of your performance in question by exceeding time limits or performing from memory when rules prescribe the use of a manuscript? Though I don't want those rules enforced in my classroom, I have no objection to them in the oral interpretation contest. Either play by the rules or work to have the rules changed. Teachers and students also need to be aware of unstated contest conventions because they may be important and may vary in different parts of the country.

Summary: Contest oral interpretation places a premium on the *performer* (who is expected to be not just competent, but skilled, poised, informed) and on the *audience* (whose main member, the judge, is evaluating and comparing the performances that occur). This is not to suggest that textual analysis is ignored; in fact, Carolyn Keefe's fine study suggests quite the opposite. What I *am* suggesting is that contest interpretation draws performer and judge together in an admittedly artificial, rule-bound situation and places a heavy responsibility on both of them. In a classroom students may perform selections that not everyone will "like." Winning the favor of the audience/judge becomes much more important in contests. Performers need to be aware of the necessary constraints of the contest, and in addition to analyzing their chosen literature they must analyze their potential audiences and judges.

Freedoms of/Constraints on the Judge

A major topic at both the 1982 and 1983 action caucuses was the need for qualified judges for contest oral interpretation events. But if we agree on the need for "qualified" adjudicators, we differ on what their qualifications should be.

Of course we expect judges to know basic contest rules and conventions. Yet we occasionally find hired, lay judges who telegraph their ignorance to contestants by asking (and sometimes interrupting performances to ask) simple questions about rules or

procedures. Tournament directors must assume responsibility for informing judges they hire (or conscript) of tournament rules and conventions. That alone would go a long way toward assuring that lay judges are more than warm bodies propped up with stopwatches and ballots.

Past action caucuses have discussed the idea of promoting the "theme tournament"—a wonderful concept that seems to me to combine the best of the forensic tournament and the interpretation festival. Limiting the literature to a theme or a group of writers might not only "stretch" the students to study and prepare new literature, but by limiting the range of selections would also better the odds that judges know the texts they will hear performed.

Far less workable, I believe, is the idea of having contestants submit copies of their selections before a tournament so that judges can read them. I have three practical objections and one theoretical objection to this practice: 1) Not every judge will read the material and prepare adequately for tournament rounds. Surely it is naive to assume that people who may not even read their mail or their professional journals will read and study five to eight manuscripts for a single tournament round. 2) Do students submit adaptations of the story/poem/play they are performing, or do they submit the entire work? Whatever our answer to that question, I believe that we further *complicate* contest judging if we invite overemphasis on the adaptation itself. 3) Can we arrange tournament schedules so that judges for semi-final and final rounds have time to read all the scripts they will hear performed? These are but three of the practical problems posed by this suggestion.

My theoretical objection to providing judges with copies of contestant manuscripts says something about my view of performance. Though I'd like to help assure that people are uniformly qualified to judge contest events, I am more than a little wary of talk of "uniform judging criteria." People look for different qualities in contest performances—clear diction, vocal variety, emotional development, sincerity, physical involvement—and I am hesitant to try to standardize those priorities. Why should we specify "fluency" as a judging criteria, for example, when not all of the speakers in literature are fluent? That same question could be asked of most physical and vocal elements of performance. If critics of contest oral interpretation sometimes claim that all the performances look and sound alike, won't uniform judging criteria encourage them to be even more clone-like?

In an article entitled "Cognition and Audience in a Performance Class," Beverly Whitaker Long suggests that there are at least four different types of audience members: the *target*, the *player*, the

critic, and the *performer*.³ She arranges them from least desirable to most desirable, and from passive to active. The *target* is the audience member you either "hit" or "miss," as the name suggests. This person need know nothing about literature or the practice of oral interpretation. The *player* knows the rules of the oral interpretation "game" and is willing to play along: paying attention (or pretending to), applauding at the ends of performances, and so forth. The *critic*, in contrast to these first two audience types, is a person who *knows* the literature being performed and is in a position to comment on specific aspects of the text and performance. The ideal audience member, and by far the most actively involved, is the *performer*: the person who has studied the selection and also performed it. This person is in a position to know what a selection "feels" like, and to share those impressions with the performer. I mention Long's typology because it illuminates the types of judges we may encounter in interpretation contests. We can hope that our judges are critics and performers, though we sometimes encounter those who are merely targets or players. Long's model also points us toward those qualities we should try to foster in adjudicators: receptivity, critical acumen, and a knowledge of the performance phenomenon.

To my thinking, the one unforgivable sin for a contest judge is to render a ballot with nothing but a ranking and a rating. At least a venial sin is the ballot with only judgments on it: "I liked it" or "Good job!" As nice as those pats on the back are, they teach nothing. The best ballots *educate* performers by specifying *reasons* for judgments, and if we could constrain judges to do one thing, it should be that. When you tell us your reasons, we can infer your norms or values.⁴ We may disagree about the importance of the things you value (and that disagreement is *healthy*, as far as I'm concerned), but unless forensic judges teach, contestants learn little or nothing about themselves, their performances, or the literature they perform.

My arguments with aspects of contest oral interpretation are not new, and I have deliberately overstated the case. Months after the most recent action caucuses and task forces were over, poet Donald Hall made an observation that both forensic competitors and

³Beverly Whitaker, "Cognition and Audience in a Performance Class," *Speech Teacher*, 23 (January 1974), pp. 63-6.

⁴Arnold Isenberg uses the terms "verdicts," "reasons," and "norms" in his essay, "Critical Communication," *The Philosophical Review*, 58 (July 1949), pp. 330-344. For a fuller application of these terms to the interpretation classroom, see Beverly Whitaker, "Critical Reasons and Literature in Performance," *Speech Teacher*, 18 (September 1969), pp. 191-3.

academic oral interpreters can claim as support for their endeavors. In an important editorial, he says:

When we put away childish things we tend to despise what we leave behind. Among educators it has been progressive or forward-looking to deplore learning by rote and to oppose it to thinking. Maybe this is true for mathematics. But when we stopped memorizing and reciting literature, our ability to read started its famous decline. It was the loss of recitation—not its replacements (radio, film, television)—that diminished our literacy . . . As children speak poems and stories aloud, by the pitch and muscle of their voices they will discover drama, humor, passion and intelligence in print. In order to become a nation of readers, we need again to become a nation of reciters.⁵

In spite of its artificial context, the competitive oral interpretation event can teach the student about literature and performance if judges are willing and able to write concise, normative ballots. We must continue to expect close textual study and analysis from our student competitors, and we should encourage common sense about the knowledge, likes, and interests of the audience as students select literature for contest performance. For if oral interpretation is a "communicative art," students in contests should be able to communicate with any reasonably sensitive person, and not just with that rare, expert, "performer" judge.

⁵Donald Hall, "Bring Back the Out-Loud Culture," *Newsweek*, April 15, 1985, p. 12.

"The Interpretation Division and Contest Rules and Judging: The Task Force Report Revisited": Jerry W. Mathis

Prior to the preconvention conference sponsored by the SCA Interpretation Division in 1983, a task force was established to consider the matter of contest rules and judging from the perspective of the Interpretation Division. This project was motivated by a perception that there was a difference between what was identified as interpretation in the contest setting and what was similarly labeled in ID convention programs in *Literature in Performance* (the ID Journal), and at festivals. Further motivation was a concern about the effect of that difference, if it exists, upon the health and welfare of the interpretation field. The Task Force was composed of those who had had experience in interpretation in its various settings and manifestations.

The consensus of those who considered these issues was that contests did, indeed, not reflect the discipline as otherwise academically constituted. It was felt that contest rules and judging showed limited evidence of current performance theory and that, with respect to this theory, the resulting contest performances too often unsatisfactorily brought text and performer together. Furthermore, because forensic practitioners were infrequently at festivals or ID convention programs, and because ID members were increasingly divorcing themselves from contest participation, the interpretation practices at contests and those evidenced through the field of Performance Studies did in fact constitute separate fields to a significant degree.

Since many in the communication and theatre fields know interpretation through its contest manifestations, and since both versions operate under the same label, there was a concern among Task Force members about misunderstanding of the field of Performance Studies, misunderstanding that may be adversely affecting the academic support for the area within the communication and theatre disciplines.

In light of the conclusion drawn by the Task Force, it is worthwhile to examine in more detail some of the differences between the two versions of that which goes by one name.

Gauged by its rules and by judges' comments, the contest version of interpretation calls for a mode of performing which demands a difference, largely indefinable, between "interpretation" and "acting." Contest interpretation is constituted of negative limitations and positive proscriptions: this performance mode does not allow costumes, props, on-stage focus, movement, characterization, etc., and it demands the presence of script, off-stage focus, an emphasis on literary "theme," and a rhetorical framework for the performed program.

On the other hand, the field of Performance Studies is informed by aesthetic theories that apply as well to the actor in traditional dramatic productions as to solo or group performers of poetry, fiction, drama, etc. As Wallace Bacon points out in *Literature in Performance*, "What goes on in the solo event is a matching of the poem and performer. The poem as text remains unchanged; the performer remains the performer we recognize. The body *act* for the two becomes one, becomes visible and audible, becomes *flesh*."¹ This view of performance as art resists rules, holding that each text to be performed sets up its individual demands for performance elements, and that performers are free to draw on or violate the

¹Wallace A. Bacon, "An Aesthetics of Performance," *Literature in Performance*, 1 (November 1980), p. 1.

complete range of performance techniques and conventions in their efforts to achieve unity of form and experience with the text. Bacon points out in the introduction of his own textbook in the field. "We shall be wary of rules, though not of suggestions. It is better to say 'Let's see whether' than to say 'You must never.' We are not so much interested in confining as in defining possibilities."² And he further explains in his article in the debut issue of *Literature in Performance*:

In the past, there have been heated arguments over such questions as whether or not to use manuscripts, lecterns, or props in interpretation; whether or not an interpreter may move; whether or not the interpreter should use an introduction. Many of the arguments began at the wrong end, with a definition which confined, hampered, emasculated the poem itself. . . It is probably better to feel free to try what the poem asks, whether or not that act fits within definitions of interpretation, than to deny the trial, although, as we all know, trials may produce errors, and one must come to know when any particular trial must end.³

Certainly, there is little evidence of rules—either for or against—in what is seen at ID convention programs or at festivals around the country.

The identity of this field is determined not by a particular mode of performance, but by the unique endeavors in inquiry afforded to those who approach either the various concerns of communication through performed literature or the varied projects of theatre through applying theories of text and performance. This field of performance studies can make unique contributions to the various disciplines it touches—communication, theatre, literary study—contributions that distinguish the Performance Studies area from forensic interpretation and depart from the rules and judging practices operating in contests. For example investigations in the phenomenology of performance lead the investigator to understandings of acts of embodied consciousness, acts which the rules—since they proscribe against gestures and movement—would deprive of body. Studies in semiotics and the phenomenology of language lead to an awareness of represented acts whose actions would be forbidden by rules (which forbid "acting") and whose contexts of space and time could not be explored in restricted performance modes. Relations of verbal and nonverbal discourse set up in literary works of art would lead to performances that would be disqualified by judges adhering to current contest practice. Those who would heed the call of deconstruction to approach

²Wallace A. Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. xii.

³Bacon, "An Aesthetics of Performance," p. 5.

literary texts free of predetermined sets of expectations and strategies would operate about as far from forensic regulations as one could possibly get. Indeed, the fundamental project of the performer of prose fiction—that of tracing the shifting perspective of narration, often into and out of the point of view of multiple characters and narrators, thereby necessitating extensive characterization and embodying of these various perspectives—is something that seems totally overlooked in the guidance for judging that current rules establish.

Since the matters of concern in the two brands of interpretation seem currently so divergent, one is led to ask what the prospects for future reconciliation might be. For forensic interpretation to change its structures of contest rules and judging to coincide with the Performance Studies view would necessitate a freeing of restrictions and the dissemination of a different perspective upon the activity among the practitioners at contests. Is it realistic to think such a change would come about? Is any plan to accomplish this change either practicable or even desirable? For those who view "interpretation" from the alternate perspective, to hold to current contest rules and practices would necessitate the cancelling of decades of involvement in the field. Surely such a move is impossible for these academics.

It may be that the two areas will further dissociate. (This dissociation was, in fact, a possibility identified in the discussion of the Task Force report at the 1983 preconvention conference.) There is not extensive evidence of change in the rules in recent tournament invitations. (On the other hand, new guidelines for judging at the Bradley University tournament in 1984 did include the statements that "The interpreter's program should be delivered using appropriate vocal and physical presentational skills which enhance rather than detract from the literature." Furthermore, at the fall 1984 convention of the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association, coaches and students from Bradley presented a program which explored forensic performance freed of rules.)

Perhaps the most significant evidence of a continuing divergence of the two areas is the increasing movement to change the names of interpretation departments, abandoning the term *interpretation*. Northwestern University's department has now become the Department of Performance Studies, and other institutions are either using or moving toward the adoption of the "Performance Studies" designation for their programs. These designations reflect both the title and the terminology used extensively in the ID journal, *Literature in Performance*. One is prompted to ask whether the term interpretation, as rigidly maintained in contest rules and

practices, might be destined for a fate similar to the earlier *elocution* and *declamation*. Even now, can anywhere outside of the contest setting be found where this brand of performance is practiced?

Finally, if it is true that a continued separating of the fields will come about, one is moved to speculate whether each or either of the fields will be enriched by the split and to wonder what might be lost in the course of making gains in such a direction.

"Topical Concerns in the Poetry Coaching Dyad": Carolyn Keefe

Criticism of Forensic Oral Interpretation

Oral interpretation specialists, particularly those outside the forensic community, seem to believe that forensic oral interpretation is beset with serious problems.¹ Task Force III of the Pre-SCA 1983 Convention Conference on "Interpretation: Issues for the '80s" identified these problems as: 1) the failure of contests to bring together satisfactorily the text and the performer, 2) the inadequacy of contest rules to reflect contemporary interpretation theory, 3) forensic instructors' lack of interpretation knowledge, 4) the failure of judges to consider the literature, 5) judging incompetence, 6) the inferiority of contests as compared to festivals, 7) emphasis on winning as an end in itself, and 8) the influence of forensics on the depreciation of academic respect for oral interpretation.²

The only evidence to support these charges is the personal opinion of the task force members and a few recollected quotations from forensic coaches. In the task force worksheet exchange, the innuendos against forensics and its practitioners were frequent. One participant, in commenting on delivery techniques, claims, "It [the perceived focus on delivery] smacks dangerously to me of the old mechanical school of elocution. It's simply dressed up in modern language."³ Another person calls forensics a "wasteland."⁴

¹For a look at what some forensic educators perceive as problems, see Hal H. Holloway, et al., "Report on the Action Caucus on Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition," *National Forensic Journal* 1 (Spring 1983); pp. 43-58.

²Jerry Mathis, chairperson, Worksheet of Task Force III of the Pre-SCA 1983 Convention Conference on "Interpretation: Issues for the '80s," Sauk Valley College, Dixon, Illinois.

³Mathis, p. 5.

⁴Mathis, p. 13.

Merely pointing out that the person who attacks the status quo has a responsibility to present a well-supported case is weak refutation against the detractors of forensics. But currently the forensic community has no strong argumentative recourse and must fall back on such an injunction and in trading opinion for opinion, example for example. Forensic oral interpretation lacks the descriptive research that could ascertain its status and the empirical research that could determine its effects. Without these studies, forensic educators do not know if defense of the status quo, minor repairs, or rigorous reform should be the response to criticism.

If the forensic community follows its teaching that contentions should be supported by sufficient, recent, varied, and trustworthy evidence, then it will realize that its immediate task is to develop hypotheses and conduct useful research on its own activities. Every area of forensic oral interpretation has been neglected.⁵ Thus, many starting points are needed in order to build theory and establish connections between the various components of interpretation.

A Study of Forensic Coaching

Procedure. In a recent study,⁶ this author focused upon the coaching of oral interpretation of poetry. Eight coaches from across the country⁷ (four senior coaches and four graduate student coaches⁸), who were associated with "consistent" forensic programs,⁹ tape recorded their coaching sessions that brought eight

⁵This statement is based upon a review from 1950 on of all the national and regional speech communication journals, those of Pi Kappa Delta, Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha, and the American Forensic Association, the new journal *Literature in Performance*, as well as computer searches of ERIC and the dissertation data base.

⁶Carolyn Keefe, "The Process of Coaching for Intercollegiate Forensic Competition in Oral Interpretation of Poetry" (Ed.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

⁷One coach came from Oregon but coached in Pennsylvania, one from California, two from Missouri, one from Florida, and three from Pennsylvania, one of whom coached in New York.

⁸A senior coach was defined as a person who has had at least five years postcollege experience as a forensic coach and is a member of the faculty at a college or university or has been hired as an adjunct to direct the forensic program at a college or university. A graduate student coach was defined as an individual who has had less than five years postcollege experience as a forensic coach and is enrolled in a graduate program.

⁹A consistent program was defined as one that appears for at least the previous five years among the winners in *Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results*.

novices¹⁰ to tournament-readiness.¹¹ All the students used the same three-poem poetry program on the general theme of animals and children, but each student was required to write the introduction and transitions. After tapescripts had been prepared, the researcher analyzed the verbal interactions, identified the oral interpretation topics covered¹² in each session, and specified patterns in using types of verbal interactions and in presenting the topics.

It is only with the matter of oral interpretation topics that the author is concerned in this paper. If it can be shown that the eight coaching dyads dealt with the topics widely recognized as important in analyzing literature and preparing for delivery, then the charges that forensics does not bring together satisfactorily the text and the performer and that forensic instructors lack interpretation knowledge will be proven false for at least the persons involved in this study.

Finding out the topical content of the coaching sessions took several steps. On the basis that multiple edition oral interpretation textbook authors could be rightly considered experts in the field, the researcher first made an inductive study of three textbooks: Bacon's *The Art of Interpretation*, Bowen, Aggertt, and Rickert's *Communicative Reading*, and Lee and Gura's *Oral Interpretation*.¹³ The purpose was to identify the topics that these authors treat in reference to poetry. Inasmuch as coaches also need to discuss with novices the various aspects of tournament competition, the researcher also included forensic topics drawn from her eighteen-year experience in coaching and from two forensic textbooks.¹⁴ The sixty-eight topics that emerged were then grouped into five foci: 1) Focus on Literary Analysis, 2) Focus on Delivery, 3) Focus on

¹⁰An undergraduate student in his or her first year of intercollegiate forensic competition was considered as a novice.

¹¹Each coach was instructed to work with his or her novice until that student, in the opinion of the coach, was prepared to enter competition with the particular program. The students, however, were not required to use the material, although at least one student did perform it.

¹²The term *covered* has a flexible meaning in the study. In some cases a topic is dealt with at considerable length, yet in other instances only mention is made. Neither the length nor the frequency of treatment was studied.

¹³Wallace A. Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979); Elbert R. Bowen, Otis J. Aggertt, and William E. Rickers, *Communicative Reading*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978); and Charlotte I. Lee and Timothy Gura, *Oral Interpretation*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982).

¹⁴Don F. Faules, Richard D. Rieke, and Jack Rhodes, *Directing Forensics*, 2nd ed. (Denver: Morton Publishing Company, 1978) and Donald W. Klopff, *Coaching & Directing Forensics* (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1982).

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Audience, 4) Focus on Manuscript, and 5) Focus on Forensics. Next the tapescripts were examined to determine which of these topics were covered by each dyad. In order to ascertain if there was a pattern to this coverage, note was made of the particular session(s) in which the topic occurred. The last step was to categorize the topics according to the number of coaching sessions—the coaches held a total of thirty-five—in which a given topic appeared. With a range of coverage running from one session to twenty-seven, these designations were made: primary topics, nineteen to twenty-seven sessions; secondary topics, ten to eighteen sessions; and tertiary topics, one to nine sessions.

Results of the Study

Because of time limitations, the researcher is not able to discuss the patterns of coverage but will concentrate on the topics themselves. They will be presented under omitted, covered, and stressed topics.

Omitted Topics

The eight dyads touched on all but four of the sixty-eight topics. Those omitted were repetition, muscle tone/tension, audience context, and functioning of tournaments.

Covered Topics

The topics varied widely in the number of sessions in which they were found. The list below shows the primary, secondary, and tertiary classification with the topics arranged according to descending numbers of sessions.

Primary topics: mood/feeling, 27; persona, 25; time/rate/pausing, 24; theme, 22; point of view/attitude(s)/message/truth, 22; figures of speech/images/sensory appeals/visualization, 20; storyline/plot, 19; intensity/force/stress, 19; and introduction/transitions, 19.

Secondary topics: pronunciation/reader's dialect, 17; facial expression, 17; listener understanding, 15; time elements, 14; pitch/inflection, 14; allusion, 13; contrast, 13; order of selections, 13; setting/scene, 11; meaning of words, 11; characterization (vocal), 11; time limit/timing of program, 11; volume, 10; eye contact, 10; and character focus/placement, 10.

Tertiary topics: articulation, 9; audience's response/empathy/feedback, 9; binder/manuscript specifications or description, 9; breath control, 8; gesture, 8; handling of manuscript/binder, 8; attention factors, 8; marking/not marking manuscript, 8; climax, 7; quality /resonance, 7; symbolism/allegory, 6; dialect (in poem), 6;

punctuation, 6; posture, 6; movement (whole body as opposed to gesture), 6; audience's visualization of poem(s), 6; characterization (physical), 5; empathy, 5; memorization, 5; critic role; 5; choice of material, 4; forensics as learning experience, 4; biographical study of author, 3; stanzas/parts, 3; line run-ons, 3; rhythm, 3; vocal difference between introduction/transitions and poetry, 3; audience analysis, 3; type of poetry, 2; sound devices, 2; rhyme, 2; parts of speech, 2; emotion-laden words, 2; physical energy, 2; comparison, 1; difference between acting and interpretation, 1; personal appearance, 1; gender of reader, 1; cutting/editing poetry, 1; and attitude toward competition, 1.

Stressed Topics

Earlier in this paper the author explained that the sixty-eight topics were divided into five focus areas. The areas with the largest number of topics were Focus on Literary Analysis with twenty-seven and Focus on Delivery with twenty-five. Inasmuch as there is only a two-topic difference between the two areas, numerical comparisons can be made without undue concern over disproportion. Examination of the coaching transcripts revealed that on the primary topic level six of the nine topics came from Focus on Literary Analysis and only two from Focus on Delivery. On the secondary topic level, however, seven of the fifteen came from Focus on Delivery and five from Focus on Literary Analysis. The two focus areas were balanced on the tertiary topic level with fifteen from each.

Discussion of Results

It is obvious that the eight coaching dyads as a whole dealt with the topics considered by oral interpretation experts as important in the study of poetry for performance. Only four of the sixty-eight topics were omitted, and plausible explanations can be made for each omission. Repetition was not a concern in the poetry selections; muscle tone/tension is a topic that is usually linked with the notion of suggestion as opposed to acting, and that concern was virtually ignored by the coaches; and audience context and the functioning of tournaments are matters most pertinent to first-time competitors, and of the eight novices only one student fell into that category.

Not only did the dyads treat most of the oral interpretation topics but they gave supremacy on the primary topic level to literary analysis. Only on the secondary topic level did delivery become a greater concern. Thus it appears that the dyads as a whole reaffirmed the prevailing notion among oral interpretation scholars that literary analysis is vital to unlocking the meaning of a

selection and that delivery grows from this study.¹⁵

Although this paper examines only a portion of the data generated by the eight coaching dyads, it provides evidence that these coaches dealt with the crucial oral interpretation topics. The study casts doubt on the validity of the accusations that forensic contests are not concerned about bringing together the literature and the performer and that coaches lack knowledge of oral interpretation. Had this research shown that the coaches were deficient in these respects, however, then impetus for reform would have been provided. Either way forensic research serves a vital function for the activity that must begin to defend itself cogently and at the same time to review itself critically.

¹⁵See, for example, Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, pp. 5-6.

"Judging Forensic Oral Interpretation: Hit or 'Miss'": John J. Allen

Anytime one is asked to pass judgment on a public act, such as the performance of literature, he must, to be comprehensive and fair, have the time and means to ascertain the norms, standards, and intentions of the one engaged in the public act. Only by doing so can the judge justify scrupulously his/her reasoning and provide complete and defensible expression of his convictions and sentiments *in light of a particular performance*. Evaluators-judges¹ of competitive oral interpretation are not exceptions, and without reasonable knowledge of the literature and the performers' intentions they often offer only personal expressions of liking or disliking and conjecture about the reasons for the degree of success. I even question whether evaluators of forensic interpretation typically have sufficient time and wherewithal to reflect accurately and fully the entire scope of their reaction to a performance, *even if* they do know the literature and have (perhaps because of the performer's introduction) ascertained something of the performer's intentions and "where he/she is coming from."

¹In competitive oral interpretation evaluators use their conclusions about a performance to act as *judge*: they assign a rank—one through six, for example—and a rating—65% through 100%. Thus evaluator-judges make a determination of rank and rating for each performance, based on an evaluation of whatever analysis and performance options and behaviors they consider important to the particular category and the rules governing that category.

At the 1982 Action Caucus, "Oral Interpretation: Developing Common Criteria for Presentation and Judging,"² I advanced the premise that an evaluator must know the literature to render a fair and defensible criticism.³ Two other premises are equally important: namely, (1) the evaluator of an art form must know thoroughly the materials of the techniques that comprise the art; and, (2) oral interpretation is a transitory art form which, in competition, makes an aesthetic experience unlikely or at least not wholly satisfactory.

Concerning the first premise—knowing the "materials" of an art form—we should consider two important principles. According to many aestheticians, we can observe a performance without knowing thoroughly the materials and techniques of that performance, but truly understanding these materials and techniques sensitizes us to the peculiar qualities of the end result.⁴ D. W. Prall says:

Without full and familiar acquaintance with the techniques of an art, it is the merest pretense that pronounces any judgment whatever on the work of that art; for such judgment is meaningless except as a record of genuine experience, and one actually does not experience any work of art unless one is sufficiently practiced in its techniques to discriminate its structural and sensuous surface as of the specific nature embodied by that technique in a given application of it.⁵

A second concern about the materials of the art form is that "critique is the *evaluation of the facts in the light of a norm.*"⁶ Since we acknowledge disagreement about norms and definitions of oral interpretation,⁷ it is understandable that some judges fail to substantiate adequately their evaluations and rankings/ratings because "if the norm itself is put in doubt, a critical judgment becomes impossible."⁸ Even if the judge's and the performer's respective norms are clear to each and to each other, these norms may not be shared, further compounding the problem by causing points of contention.

²Action Caucus of the annual convention of the Speech Communication Association, Louisville, Kentucky, November 4-7.

³For a shortened version of these comments see Hal H. Holloway, John Allen, et al, "Instructional Practices: Report on the Action Caucus on Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition," *The National Forensic Journal*, 1 (Spring 1983), pp.43-58.

⁴Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1970), pp. 62-63.

⁵D. W. Prall, *Aesthetic Judgment*, with an introduction by Ralph Ross, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), p. 210.

⁶Remy Kwant, *Critique: Its Nature and Function*, translated by Henry J. Koren (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1967), p. 18. Also see Craig R. Smith, "Actuality and Potentiality: The Essence of Criticism," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 3 (Summer 1970), p. 136.

⁷See, for example, Holloway et al, particularly pp. 43-49.

⁸Kwant, p. 33.

How can we evaluate and judge in good conscience if our norms cause us to adhere rigidly to but one set of rules and standards? If students violate our norms will we be capable of legitimate approval or disapproval of their efforts? For "[the] essence of [criticism] consists in the comparison of an object or act with an implicit set of norms,"⁹ and "approbation arises when we observe in an object or act the exemplification of certain principles, certain rules, certain standards."¹⁰

Regarding the second premise—that the transitory nature of oral interpretation is frustrating because it makes having an aesthetic experience difficult—we must recognize that if oral interpretation is indeed, at least in part, an art form, we cannot have rigid predetermined goals for evaluating it.¹¹ Rigid norms and predetermined goals encourage evaluations which, in part at least, are completed before the performance itself is completed. Arnold Berleant suggests that "the most important prerequisite [in judging art] is a receptivity to what actually transpires in our encounter with the arts and not to what one thinks should occur or wants to occur."¹²

The critic's job qua critic is intellectual and cognitive, while the performer's job qua performer is more nearly artistic, whether his principles label him a creative or re-creative artist, or somewhere in between. Judges participate in an event with mixed emotions: we want to be engaged totally by the performance—an aesthetic demand; we want to appreciate the skills exhibited—an aesthetic and intellectual demand; and we *need* to evaluate by rational reactions based on an understanding of the phenomenon of oral interpretation and the skills necessary to achieve excellence—an intellectual and academic demand. Though an evaluator may believe that literature-in-performance should be accepted for the direct experience it can afford, for what Berleant calls the "indiscriminate fullness of immediate experience,"¹³ he is, particularly in competitive situations, called on to divide his attention between the direct experience of art and the cognitive, self-conscious process of "selection of those data that will serve as evidence for sound and rational judgment . . . [in order to] construct arguments and

⁹Walter R. Fisher, "Rhetorical Criticism as Criticism," *Western Speech*, 38 (Spring 1974), p. 75.

¹⁰George Boas, *Wingless Pegasus: A Handbook for Critics* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1950), p. 119.

¹¹For a discussion of the concept that a critic cannot judge art by predetermined goals, see Francis Edward Sparshott, *The Concept of Criticism* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1967), *passim*.

¹²Berleant, p. 96.

¹³p. 119.

perform inferences."¹⁴

Francis Sparschott wrote that "a critic may . . . enjoy a performance less than most of the public, not because he is less appreciative. . .but because he is more acutely aware of what he is missing."¹⁵ A liberal interpretation of this sentiment suggests at least two things: (1) a critic often knows or at least senses that there could be more, that there might be a fuller experience to be had, and (2) a critic enjoys a performance less than others because he must "miss," i.e., forego, something of the aesthetic experience by assuming an intellectual role. In assuming an intellectual role—by being an academic observer—it is difficult to at once have an original aesthetic experience and to function in a practical sense—to have the facility to enjoy the direct, unmediated experience of art while maintaining the distance necessary to make cognitive, intellectual judgments of the success of a presentation. We ask a great deal of our sensibilities and sensitivities if we expect to experience art and evaluate art *at the same time*. Unlike a critic who can view a painting leisurely, note his initial responses and then return to the canvas to determine why he had particular responses, the evaluator of forensic interpretive performance has but one encounter with the art object.

Evaluators of forensic interpretation "miss" a lot; most important, they miss the opportunity to be truly helpful to the performers they judge. Evaluator-judges will be frustrated—and limited—until we find a way that they can evaluate particular performances as the unique experiences which they are.

¹⁴p. 119. Also see M. Weitz, "Reason in Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20 (Summer 1962), p. 434.

¹⁵Sparshott, p. 114.

Conclusion

These four essays reflect the search for and examination of ideas which took place during the two action caucuses and symposium on oral interpretation in forensic tournaments.

As a teacher and director of forensics, Skinner saw common ground between "classroom" and "contest" interpretation. He claimed that the freedoms and restraints of the tournament environment offer opportunities for the student to cope with various, possible exigencies of a performing situation. He recognized the difficulty in finding enough qualified judges and dis-

cussed various suggestions to make the adjudicators' job easier. Skinner argued that the student in forensics should be perceived as a performer in a communicative art. His or her job is to communicate with any reasonably sensitive, intelligent person and not only the rare expert.

In contrast, Mathis saw possible divergence between oral interpretation as practiced in forensic tournaments and the theory and practice among those working in the performance of literature. Contests require proscriptions and negative limitations. This runs counter to the freedom desired to more fully realize the potentialities of literature in performance.

Keefe assumed a different position. She considered the objections of Task Force III as mainly unsubstantiated opinions and often merely innuendo. Her study of eight dyads in forensic interpretation instruction indicated that at least those eight forensic instructors seek after the basic goals so-called "academic" interpretation scholars value. Like Skinner, she could see differences due to the contest environment, but saw no basic difference in ultimate goals by at least some teachers in forensic oral interpretation.

Allen added another dimension to the exploration and dialectic. He, of course, referred to the forensic environment, but went beyond that to examine underlying tensions experienced in observing, appreciating, and adjudicating a public act such as the oral interpretation of literature. Observers or critics may not need to know the raw materials of an art, but such knowledge sensitizes them to its unique end product. There need be norms, whatever those norms should be in oral interpretation, but rigidity of norms or in following norms contradicts the nature of the interpretive art. That art is transitory making its evaluation—especially in the forensic tournament situation—difficult, and the forensic adjudicator perhaps more than another evaluator of this transitory, aesthetic experience is torn between appreciating and being part of the experience and judging it.

Allen's analysis laid bare basic problems in being part of the co-creative art of oral interpretation in that the listener is also a participant, and as a participant, a forensic judge must evaluate not a particular performance or interpretation on its merit based on the interpreter and literature involved, but in relationship to another interpreter and his or her choice of prose or poetry. He hoped that ways could be found to make the forensic oral interpretation adjudicator's job easier. He thus expressed the spirit and intent of the search in three meetings, that is to seek after that which would be helpful, more conducive for better interpretation and a more humanizing experience for those involved in forensic oral interpretation contests.