

The Metacritical Model for Judging Interpretation Events

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Oral interpretation as a forensic event has been the target of substantial criticism both from those within and outside of forensics. Two major criticisms frequently arise: 1) inferior literature is too often chosen by the interpreters and 2) the performances are too often an empty display of technical facility with little or no regard for the integrity of the literature.¹ Suggested solutions include designating specific literature to be used in competition both to insure that quality literature is used and to give the judges an opportunity to become familiar with the literature they will hear. To improve the performances, some suggest we abandon tournaments and perform literature only in a festival format.

The way oral interpretation is presented in forensics is important because so many students have their first or only exposure to the art in forensics. If the tournament experience is not true to the art, too many students will arrive at a false impression of what is supposed to be. While the suggestions mentioned above have their strengths and weaknesses, there is little doubt they will be slow in finding widespread acceptance. Oral interpretation is a popular part of forensic contests and will be with us for the foreseeable future. Since forensic practices are generally a response to what contestants and coaches believe will win, another approach to improvement is to alter the way the events are judged. This essay will suggest a metacritical judging model that is intended to address the criticism of oral interpretation in forensic contests.

A forensic contest is a situation quite different than either a classroom or public performance. Like the classroom instructor, the forensic judge's purpose is instructional; however, since the

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¹Hal H. Holloway, et al. "Report on the Action Caucus on Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition," *National Forensic Journal* 1 (Spring 1983): 43-58. Hal Holloway, et al. "Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition: Representative Papers," *National Forensic Journal* 4 (Spring 1986): 53-73. Todd V. Lewis, David A. Williams, Madeline M. Keaveney, Michael G. Leigh, "Evaluating Oral Interpretation Events: A Contest and Festival Perspectives Symposium," *National Forensic Journal* 2 (Spring 1984): 19-32. Elighie Wilson, "Has Technique Replaced Interpretation?" Unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, November 15, 1986.

judge does not know what the student has been told about oral interpretation, the judge cannot tell the student if he/she is following the principles being taught. Conversely, the student does not know what the judge believes about oral interpretation. As Ronald Pelias points out, there are different schools of thought regarding oral interpretation and those differences affect the critic's response to the performance whether it is a public performance, festival, or tournament.² Unlike either the teacher or the public performance critic, the forensics judges must rank each performer in comparison to the others. The contestant, on the other hand, faces an audience that has not gathered primarily to be entertained; instead, the audience has gathered to compete against the performance and compare it to others. Thus, a judging model must address not only the problems generally associated with the performer-critic relationship, but also those that arise due to the tournament situation.

The metacritical model acknowledges that oral interpretation is an art requiring critical decisions from inception to the final performance. A critical decision is made when the performer decides a particular piece of literature is worthy of presentation and suitable for the particular audience for whom it will be performed. Critical decisions are made when the performer analyzes the literature to determine the author's intent and to discover the relationship between the style and the meaning. Critical decisions are made when the performer adapts the written material for performance, choosing which parts are necessary and which may be suitably omitted. Finally, critical decisions are made when the performer makes performance choices; for example, the performer decides how best to use voice and body to communicate "to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety."³

When oral interpretation is performed as a forensic event, the critical decisions leading to the final product are often ignored by the judge as a means for reaching a decision. Thomas Colley's observation, commenting on his experiences judging forensics tournaments, identifies what appears to be the predominant judging model. He said, "Judging was reduced to a matter of technique, degree of slickness."⁴ Many who have

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

³Charlotte Lee and Frank Galati, *Oral Interpretation*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 3.

⁴Thomas Colley, "Oral Interpretation in Forensics," *National Forensic Journal* 1 (Spring 1983) 44.

judged oral interpretation at forensic contests share his "feeling of having heard a series of contrived readings. The aim of the readers seems to be to display facility."⁵ The emphasis on the performance by oral interpretation judges is documented by Pelias who found that 55% of judges' comments emphasize performance techniques and only 14% reflected a concern with the literature.⁸

Although the proper degree of emphasis on performance technique is a matter of dispute among interpretation scholars, they agree that the basis of a performance is an analysis of the text. The proper aim of the reader should be to render a performance that reflects the critical thinking that went into the preparation. If successful, the audience will share common meaning with the interpreter as well as participate in an aesthetic experience. The proper role of the judge of oral interpretation in forensic contests is to be a metacritic—a critic of the interpreter's critical thinking.

In order to perform the role of the metacritic, the judge must evaluate the fit between the literature, the performance, and the performer's critical judgments. To accomplish that goal, the forensic interpretation may be conceived as an argument. During the introduction, the interpreter makes a critical claim about the literature and supports that claim through the performance of the literature. The judge evaluates both the introduction and the performance to determine if (a) the literature supports the claim, (b) the performance supports the claim, and (c) the literature supports the performance. The literature supports the claim if the written text provides sufficient grounds for accepting what was said in the introduction. The performance supports the claim if the behavioral choices of the interpreter provides sufficient grounds to accept the introduction. The literature supports the performance if the text legitimately calls for the interpreter to behave as he/she does when presenting the literature. The superior performance meets all three requirements.

The metacritic also evaluates the claim made in the introduction to determine if the thinking behind the performance is really interpretation or merely description. Interpretive claims are those that explain why the literature is particularly noteworthy; they critically examine the writer's style, or thoughts, or

⁵Colley, p. 45.

⁶Ronald J. Pelias, "Evaluating Interpretation Events on the Forensic Circuit," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 20 (Spring 1984): 224-230.

ability to capture universal themes in a unique manner. Interpretive claims may explain what the literature has to say about people, about life, or about particular universal events. There is a wide range of choices for worthwhile claims which could be used in an introduction. A contestant could, for example, argue why a work is unique, how it is universal, or what it suggests.⁷ The work could be defended as articulating a particular philosophy in a work of fiction. The nuances of a literary school of thought could be illuminated. Classic works could be used as a means to provide insights to contemporary conditions. An alternative to making a claim in the introduction about the literature is to make a claim about some aspect of life and use the literature as support for that claim. In such an instance, the contestant will use the literature to support the contestant's ideas rather than use the introduction to illuminate what the author did; either choice could be critically valid. There are certainly other types of interpretive claims that all share the quality of probing beneath the surface of the literature both to show an understanding beyond the superficial and to help the listener better appreciate the literature.

Descriptive claims are more superficial and are not at all critical. They are often merely plot summaries; sometimes they are as simple as a description of the action that will take place "in the following selection." Descriptive claims neither demonstrate the performer's appreciation for the subtleties of the literature nor provide insightful foreshadowing for the listener; they merely describe what should be apparent to anyone listening to the performance. There is no argument because the support is only a restatement of the claim. While the performance may be entertaining, the critical thinking behind the performance is not clear and the judge has no way of telling if the performer is accomplishing what was intended.

There are also times when the introduction presents no claim at all. When the introduction consists of rhetorical questions of the "What if" variety and the judge is expected to discern the author's answer or if the author really meant to answer that question at all, there is no claim presented by the performer. For the metacritic, no claim is even less valuable than descriptive claims.

When using the metacritical model, the judge's response to the interpretation must be related to the contestant's critical judgments. The judge asks such questions as the following: Were

⁷See Lee and Galati, pp. 8-10.

the performance choices justified by the literature? Is the contestant's claim justified by the literature? The metacritic judges the performance in light of the interpretation and the performance rather than the performance alone.

Adopting the metacritical model increases the importance of the introduction in forensics competition. Presumably because it wins, the current practice is to present an introduction indistinguishable from the literature. With the exception of setting the scene or establishing the characters, the introduction is usually unnecessary to the appreciation of either the performance or the literature as it is currently presented. Since an introduction is expected, all contestants who want to do well dutifully present one even if it is only two sentences. The metacritic wants the introduction to set the scene, establish the mood, and highlight aspects of the interpretation that are not obvious in the performance.

For the metacritic, the introduction must be used to present the claim(s) about the literature; the purpose is to explain the performer's critical judgments. The introduction creates the basis for the decision by both telling the judges for what to listen and by establishing why the literature was chosen. After hearing the introduction, the judge may then listen for how well the literature and performance support the claim. In the process of making the claim about the literature, the performer is explaining why the literature is something worthwhile for an interpreter to use and for the audience to listen.⁸

The importance of the introduction in the metacritical model is also of practical importance to the competitors. No judge can fairly evaluate what a performer is attempting without first knowing what the performer is attempting. By requiring the contestant to articulate the claim in the introduction, the judge can fairly evaluate if the performer failed or succeeded as well as if that approach is justified. Currently, if a judge wants to evaluate such success, he/she is forced either to assume the contestant's interpretation matches the judge's interpretation, guess what the interpreter is trying to accomplish, or infer the intent after most of the performance is completed. Well-established claims in the introduction can make the judging process more

⁸Some may say that any literature is worth using. Even if I were to agree with such a position, (which I do not) the point here is that our purpose is to encourage the contestant to think about why literature is worthwhile. Thus, even if the contestant performs literature that is universally acclaimed, the work's unique worth, in the mind of the contestant, should still be communicated to and evaluated by the judge.

fair for every contestant. No claim in the introduction almost forces the judge to use a performance model that tends to reward the spectacular performance while overlooking those that are more subdued, even if the subdued performance is more true to the text.

Developing the introduction as a claim can also serve to overcome the judge's ignorance of, or bias towards, particular literature. No judge is familiar with all the literature that can possibly be used in contests, and that unfamiliarity may result in bias towards some literature or to misperceptions of the literature. Familiarity may also lead to bias or a limited perception of a work. For example, a critic who has encountered a piece of literature performed in the past may have a restricted notion of how it should be interpreted or may believe it is not worth performing. Perhaps, on a first encounter, the critic may not realize the work's quality or may completely miss a nuance important for a valid interpretation. An introduction that serves as a claim as well as setting the scene calls on the metacritic to consider the literature in terms of what is claimed at that time, keeping an open mind to discover if the claim is justified. This consideration may result in an interpretation that is very different from that which the judge might have originally thought possible, but an interpretation that is valid nonetheless.

Well-developed claims in the introduction also promote the use of more unusual literature in contests. As Colley writes, much of what is heard at contests sounds very much alike.⁹ This phenomenon is due in part to similarities in delivery styles, but also in part to contestants who use very similar literature. When all contestants are required to defend their choices of literature, and when judges listen to those defenses with an open mind, students will be freer to explore unusual forms. The metacritical model does not suggest that any literature should be acceptable simply because it is different; instead, it does allow for critical examination of literature not typically used in competition.

Almost all literature used in college tournaments is dramatic in form. Prose is chosen because one character is delivering a monologue or two (or more) characters are engaged in dialogue; much of the poetry that is interpreted is either a dramatic monologue or dialogue. Most of what we see at contests is also contemporary literature. While there is a case to be made for the use of new literature, the current practice leaves a wealth of literature unexplored. Our students and our activity would bene-

⁹Colley, p. 44.

fit from exposure to folk literature, to classic literature, to descriptive literature, to impressionist, expressionist, surrealist, and absurdist literature. When the introduction is developed as a claim, the judge does not have to be an expert in all forms of literature; instead, he/she can rely on his/her ability to listen to claims, listen to support, and evaluate according to what is said and done.

The following example is an introduction containing a critical claim for a prose interpretation presented by Kelly Swenson in 1983:

A reader of horror fiction has to first be able to believe in the characters in order to later believe in the rather extraordinary circumstances those characters will be placed in. Therefore, one of the skills an author of this genre must possess is the ability to make his or her characters believable. Stephen King, a rather well-known author, fortunately, has the ability to give the reader credible characters, such as two characters found in a rather painful and delicate scenario in "Cujo," by Stephen King.

While the introduction was not developed with the metacritical model in mind, it did anticipate the perspective. By stating the critical claims (King's ability to create credible characters which horror fictions writers must do, and the two characters are in a painful and delicate scenario), she asks the judge to base a decision on her support for the claims (her ability to suggest believable characters and her ability to suggest their pain). She also provides a basis for judgment that isn't dependent on the judge's initial acceptance of the value of Stephen King's works.

While the metacritical model calls for changes in the contestant's performance, it also calls for judging that is specifically related to the interpretation. The comments on the ballot should relate to what was attempted by the contestant rather than the judge's idea of how the piece should be interpreted. Comments should include statements about the clarity of the claim, the support for the claim in the literature and in the performance, the validity of the performance choices, and the success of the performance choices. Such comments are more helpful because they respond to what the performer is trying to accomplish. The judge is still free to disagree with the interpretation, but this disagreement is justified by pointing out flaws in the contestant's ideas and explaining how they do not fit the text.

Comments that are not specific to the student's interpretation become meaningless. For example, ballots that have "git"

or "jist" with no explanation for the comment respond neither to the worth of the literature nor the attempts of the interpreter. The metacritical model calls for the judge to consider and explain why "git" and "jist" are inappropriate performance choices—sometimes they are and sometimes they are not. Also, the metacritic is called upon to explain the meaning of such comments as, "This piece is overused." Such comments should explain how frequency of use relates to the reasons the performer chose the piece and to the validity of the interpretation. For the metacritic, all comments must relate to the contestant's interpretation. The judge, however, cannot adequately respond to the contestant's interpretation unless the contestant has articulated that interpretation.

Widespread adoption of the metacritical model might also lead to greater intellectual depth by the performers. Forensic contestants do not presently need to express the thoughts that are behind their performances, but the metacritical perspective demands that they explain at least some of their thinking. Since one of the beliefs of the speech communication discipline is that ideas are clarified and tested when they are communicated, the educational value of the metacritical model should be clear.

The presentation of the contestant's thoughts may also lead to the use of higher quality literature in tournaments. Since the contestant only has to perform the piece, the burden of defending its worth or objecting to the lack of it currently falls on the judge. If poor literature is used, the judge is forced to explain why it should not be used. If contestants must support the merits of their literature to achieve the rewards of participation, they are more likely to choose defensible material. While many of our students do choose high-quality literature, many do not and will not until they are asked to explain what makes their piece worthwhile, and until that explanation becomes part of the basis on which they are judged.

The metacritical judging model may also help students recognize the rhetoricity in inherent in poetics. As Helmut Geissner argues, works of literature are intended to influence others rhetorically.¹⁰ The judging model that fails to ask performers to

¹⁰Helmut Geissner, "On Rhetoricity and Literarity," *Communication Education* 32 (July 1983): 275-284. See also Elizabeth P. Lance, "Report on the 8th International Colloquium on Communication: The Relations Between Rhetoric and Oral Interpretation," unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, November 5, 1982, and Michael Osborn, "The Rhetoric of Theatre," unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, November 5, 1982.

discuss the meaning of the literature that focuses attention solely on the performance without investigating the thoughts that influenced the creation of the literature and the performance, is bound to ignore the rhetoricity of the literature and the rhetorical possibilities of the performance. Since forensics is often housed in departments devoted to the study of the meaning of communication and the effect of behavior on that meaning, it seems reasonable to expect that meaning and intended influence are suitable for investigation in all forensics events.

The metacritical model is not intended to make oral interpretation of literature sound like debate or persuasive speaking. The claims and, evidence discussed: above do not come in the form of testimony, statistics, or empirical studies. The evidence is in the literature and in the performance. If the performance substantiates what is claimed in the introduction, and if the claim in the introduction is supported by the literature, then the argument is made in a manner relevant to the forum in which it is presented.

In calling for a greater emphasis on the introduction, the metacritical model is not intended to eschew the traditional basis of oral interpretation by focusing attention in a way that is different from the requirements of a public performance; in fact, just the opposite is intended. The metacritical model is intended to promote performances that are not easily identifiable as "forensic" interpretations by altering the current basis of decisions, encouraging the use of different literature, and promoting standards that encourage analysis of the material.

Further, this model does not favor sloppy performances over well-prepared performances. There is nothing inherently wrong with a polished performance, but in current practice a high gloss is apparently the primary standard for which to strive. This model advocates that the slickness of the performance should match the literature as well as the intent as developed in the introduction and exemplified in the literature. If, for example, the literature is noteworthy because it captures natural conversation then a perfectly smooth delivery is out of place because natural conversation is characterized by hesitations, false starts, and other conversational characteristics. If the literature is said to exemplify the superficiality of relationships then the slick delivery could be very appropriate. The point is that the judge should make the decision based on how well the performance fits the intent of both the author and the performer. The judge should not simply accept any performance choices as correct

because everyone else has chosen them nor incorrect
because no one else has chosen them.

The metacritical model calls for the performer to present critical claims about the literature and use the performance to support those claims. The judge is called on to listen to the claims with an open mind and evaluate how well the performance matches the claim. By emphasizing the critical decisions reduce the emphasis on purely technical proficiency as a basis for decision and to increase the emphasis on the text. The ultimate intent is to reduce the distinctions that separate oral interpretation as practiced in forensics from oral interpretation as conceived by experts in performance studies.