

Editor's Forum: The Use of Original Materials in Interpretive Forensics Events—Point/Counterpoint

The Performance of Literature at Forensics Tournaments: A Case for the Use of Original Material**

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The primary commitment of forensics educators who coach the performance of literature should always be to the analysis of literary intent and the integrity of a text. Proponents and opponents of the use of original material in interpretive events find they are in agreement on that issue. I believe coaches and participants should first seek to perform works of literary merit, designated as "meritorious" by virtue of critical acclaim, legacy of greatness, publication, or broadcast. But I also believe that "original literary material" should not be excluded from competition merely because it is original or unpublished.

To present a position which endorses the allowance of original literary materials in competition, I would like to counter-argue many of the charges leveled at original literature performance and subsequently offer supportive consideration for the use of original oral interpretation material at forensic tournaments.

Many opponents argue that the *analysis* of literature which is an essential preparatory factor in the performance of a literary text suffers or is excluded when the literature presented is original. Endres contends that a simultaneous creative and analytical process "shortcut(s) the pedagogical experience."¹ There is, however, no real evidence to suggest that original material cannot also be analyzed in the same systematic manner as published literature. The "twenty questions" of literary analysis espoused by professors K. B. and D. E. Valentine are equally applicable to all literature.² These questions generate the basis for virtually all critical commentary expressed by forensics judges on ballots and would not change much (if at all) with published or unpublished material. Neither the Valentines nor Lee and Gura,³ Skinner,⁴ Yordon⁵ categorically state that original interpretive material is outside the purview of

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performance or literary analysis. To argue that original literature cannot undergo the same rigorous literary analysis is, at best, an argument from silence.

Mary Frances HopKins, noted performance of literature author and professor, has indicated that the use of original material can be an integral part of the study of literary performance as long as the text itself is made available to the critic.⁶ In the Spring Semester of 1988, Louisiana State University offered a guest lecture series on the use of original material in the performance of literature, taught by Dr. James VanOosting of Southern Illinois University. Many performance of literature specialists find fault with the forensic tournament format for the presentation of literature, but the primary criticisms rest with the unavailability of texts for critics, not the issue of original or published material.

Opponents of the use of original material in oral interpretive events have also argued that critics seem hampered in making commentary about the author of a text. This argument becomes moot if critics will take heed to the principles of hermeneutics and oral interpretation as discussed by Deborah M. Geisler.⁷ Geisler mentions her own experience with the presentation of original poetry at a tournament and builds a case for applying an understanding of hermeneutic text to forensic critics' evaluations. She suggests that "what a given author/speaker intended is not as important as what the text itself says."⁸ I would echo Geisler's premise and amplify it. Questions of author's intent should be more appropriately focused on the presented text. Critics need to generate commentary by asking the question, "What does the literary selection say, and what can it mean?"⁹

A related issue concerns the use of pseudonyms or "pen names" for an author. Endres argues that the use of pseudonyms by student competitors is unethical.¹⁰ I choose to differ with that opinion. I do not think that competition with original material, introduced with a pen name, is an issue of integrity at all. No code of ethics specifically prohibits the presentation of material by a concealed author. How could it? Oral interpreters have for years presented the works of Mark Twain, Richard Bachman, John LeCarre, George Sand, and others who have chosen to compose literary pieces under these pseudonyms. Since critics may ignore the hermeneutic challenge to focus on the text, a performer should feel no remorse or guilt over using a pseudonym to provide an opportunity for an unbiased critical evaluation of the text and the performance. No one criticizes the integrity of Stephen King for occasionally writing as Richard Bachman. The minimum expectation in forensic competition for a performer of literature is to state

a title and author. Claims that an interpreter lacks integrity or is deceptive because he/she does not provide the identical amount of source citation as a debater or persuader seem unreasonable. Forensic literary performers do not have to state qualifications of an author, the date of publication, and the page numbers, because literature is not being *argued*, but rather is being *performed*.

The argument that original material is more successful in interpretive competition assumes that a student or coach knows how to write so as to win trophies, and that all regions of the country vote for only one kind of literary performance. Forensics is such a subjective activity that no student or coach could write the one piece of literature guaranteed to win every round of every tournament. No evidence or research suggests that original material fares better in competition. Green's survey of forensic coach perceptions leans toward the opinion that coaches disagree that a student using original material has a competitive advantage.¹¹ At best, Green's survey shows coaches average a "no opinion" response on the matter.

One final argument offered is that if original material is to find a place in interpretive events, it should be in a separate category labeled as "original." I find this suggestion appealing, if you grant the same criticism of literary analysis, author commentary, pseudonyms, "writing for trophies," and competitive advantage, a separate event would not solve the alleged infractions; it seems an inconsistent substitute. Also, how would a tournament host police interpretive events to prevent the use of original material? I am not sure how a tournament director would go about proving that a particular piece was original and unpublished during the course of a tournament.

I believe the national forensic organizations such as NFA and AFA have appropriately addressed the issue of original oral interpretive material; they neither endorse nor decry its use. National organizations do not question the integrity or ethics of a competitor who chooses to present original material in the performance of literature.

I also believe oral interpretation events utilize audience adaptation in performance at every tournament. It is not a violation of the principles of audience adaptation to avoid hand gestures and body movement for a conservative critic. It is not a violation of audience adaptation to "cut" or edit scenes after a critic's commentary. (Wholesale rewrites of a published author's text would certainly be an unethical "adaptive" measure, however.) Writing for an audience or critic happens in the prepared events; I see no

inconsistency in allowing original literature to undergo the same adaptability if the original author chooses to do re-writes.

Writing original literary material for performance can enhance the education and insights of our students. Pedagogically, the criticism and commentary from judges will benefit our students on two levels: writing and performing. I still believe that critics should decide placings with a sensitivity to "depth and quality of literature." Noteworthy writers such as Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, Emily Dickinson, and Arthur Miller have demonstrated stronger literary skills than the average college sophomore. If the "successful" material at tournaments periodically tends to be salacious, pulpish, or juvenile, the judge/critic may need further training to gain deeper analytical skills. I argue that as coaches and critics we need to be fostering opportunities to transform our gifted performer/writers into the next generation of literary giants.

I have established a working relationship with a company that has published several of my own original dramatic pieces. These "pieces" were first "tested" in competition by my students. But were they any less "meritorious" in their pre-publication state? They are in print form in precisely the same format they appeared at forensic competitions. Were the students "unethical" because they introduced the piece by my pen name? No, they were not. As I have done, I believe all students should have the opportunity to "test" their own works of literature, modifying them with useful critical commentary and experience.

Should "original material" be composed *first* to the exclusion of researching and performing acclaimed literature? No. But neither should such creativity be discouraged. The performance of literature is broad enough to encompass published as well as original material. A Mark Twain, J. R. R. Tolkien, or Sam Shepherd reading his own "original" work is just as much a *performer* of literature as he is an *author* of literature. I believe we need to let our students know that integrity is not exclusively assigned to those who read published works. There can be an uplifting and valuable feeling of pride in the performance of one's own literary work as well.

Endnotes

¹Thomas G. Endres, "Maintaining Integrity in Forensics Interpretation: Arguments Against Original Literature." Unpublished paper given at the Speech Communication Association, November 8, 1987: 3.

²K. B. Valentine and D. E. Valentine, *Interlocking Pieces: Twenty Questions for Understanding Literature*. 2nd Ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt Publishing Company, 1980).

³Charlotte I. Lee and Timothy Gura, *Oral Interpretation*. 7th Ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

⁴John F. Skinner, "Performing and Judging Contest Oral Interpretation Events: Freedoms and Constraints," *National Forensic Journal* 4 (1986): 54-60.

⁵Judy E. Yordon, *Roles In Interpretation*. (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown Publishers, 1982).

⁶Interview with Mary Frances Hopkins, Louisiana State University, February 25, 1988.

⁷Deborah M. Geisler, "Modern Interpretation Theory and Competitive Forensics: Understanding Hermeneutic Text," *National Forensic Journal* 3 (1985): 71-79.

⁸Geisler 73.

⁹Geisler 76.

¹⁰Endres 9.

¹¹Keith D. Green and S.D. Ford, "Perceived Attitudes Toward the Use of Original Material In Forensics Oral Interpretation: A Survey." Unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, November 8, 1987.