

KEYS TO INTERP

Breathing Life into Literature

Travis Herche

Dedicated to N.W.



Keys to Interp

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C H A P T E R 1

Understanding Interp

Defining Forensic Interpretation

Speech and debate leagues define Dramatic Interpretation as follows:

"A Dramatic Interpretation (DI) creatively explores and develops the intellectual, emotional, and artistic embodiment of a work of literature for performance."

Concise, but unhelpful. "Creatively explores and develops"? What does that mean? Suppose we put the work of literature in a pot of stew. That'd be creative. Suppose we added three original chapters at the end. That would "develop" it.

It's a short definition - but it is, perhaps, a bit too lengthy. I like Paul Campbell's better:

"[Oral Interpretation is] the oralization of literature."¹

From this one simple sentence, everything else about interpretation can be inferred. At the same time, this definition recognizes the creative flexibility in the exciting and varied world of interpretation.

Oralizing (or, converting to spoken form) a work of literature, in its most basic form, means reading aloud. We choose to memorize our literature so we can present it more smoothly. We act like the characters in the literature to creatively bring it to life, thereby making the literature more understandable and compelling. Oral Interpers avoid the use of props,

¹ (The Speaking and Speakers of Literature; Dickinson, 1967)

costumes, and any stage devices to center our focus on nothing but the literature itself.

Interpretation is oralization. Great literature—the timeless kind that is rich with character development—begs for vocal, acted interpretation. It isn't enough to simply read the literature; it must be brought to life. This is what interpers do.

Interpers work hard to make the literature come alive, and they are awarded in the competitive atmosphere of Oral Interpretation (or “interp” for short).

In this competitive atmosphere, we place limits on our speeches to make life easier for judges, like time limits and restrictions on how many words can be added to a piece. To make things more understandable, we have conventions about focal points, character transitions, and use of physical space. There are rules about choosing your piece and writing your script. Each piece is unique and requires a different approach to perform. Every judge is looking for something special, and only a tiny handful of competitors will walk away champions.

Forensic interpretation is a complicated business. An interper must find a great piece, but also perform it in a way that will move his or her audience. It takes hard work and conscious dedication to utilizing God-given talent. A good coach who understands how to bring the best out of you is worth his weight in gold. This coach needs experience, and that's where I come in.

You and I

As a wee lad, I took seven interps to the national tournament and picked up numerous titles, including 3rd place Dramatic Interp (DI) in 2004 and DI National Champion in 2006.

After graduation, I coached forensic speech and debate across the nation and worked part-time as a film and stage actor. I've learned things that can save you a lot of trouble and make you a much better interper.

This book is a set of keys. You can use each of the keys to open a door to something new in your study of interp. There's a door to finding pieces, a door to dynamic intensity – there's even a door to enunciating clearly

when you have an accent. Not all these doors are guaranteed to take you where you want to go.

You're about to receive a set of keys needed to unlock the champion interper within you. As you read it, be thinking about how you want to apply it. Consider which doors you want to unlock. With the right set of keys, you will open the doors to interpretation, impress your judges, and gain winning ballots. These keys will spur you to grow, to get better, and to improve your performance every time you compete. You'll examine your ballots and self-assess your hard work (we'll talk about that more in Chapter 11). Then grab your next set of keys and walk into some new opportunities.

To quote one of my favorite musical artists:

"It's not about how fast you get there, it's the climb." –Miley Cyrus, The Climb

You may not be a great interper right now, and you may not think you can ever become one. But that's about to change. The days of beating yourself up over interp are over. The only barriers between you and your potential are knowledge (gained from this book) and experience (gained from tournaments).

With the right keys, you can and *will* grow to be great. This book is full of techniques – both basic and advanced – that will make you a competitor with a reputation for excellence.

No matter where you are in your journey, keep climbing. Oralizing literature is as complicated as the scope of its subjects: human dignity, betrayal, love, crime, and courage, to name a few. Interp is a struggle, but it's not about how fast you get there. Just keep growing, and allow me help you reach the top.

Why Compete? The Four Motivations

There are four basic reasons that forensic speech events (like interp) have been made competitive:

1. **Social Life.** You love hanging with your friends between rounds, watching your friends compete, hanging out at the hotel, etc. You don't mind competition, but you're here for your friends.

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2. **Applause.** You think Miley Cyrus is full of baloney: it's not about the climb, it's about winning! You'll scale sheer cliffs as long as it means getting to the top first, to the deafening roar of the crowd.
3. **Love of the Game.** You love what you do: the logic and evidence battles of debate; the thoughtful analysis of a topic you're passionate about in a platform; the rush of adrenaline when you draw a new topic in a limited prep; the thrill of telling a story to a captive audience in interp. You don't care about the trophies, the people, or even the particular event – you just want to play the game.
4. **Self-Improvement.** You see the potential of forensic competition to mold you into someone better: someone who thinks faster, communicates clearer, exudes leadership, and so on.

If you are like most competitors, you identify with all of these motivations to some extent. When I started competing, I was in it for the social life. Having learned the ropes and tasted the gratification of a few wins, I learned to love the game and focused on more rigorous self-improvement. Now, I'm consumed with the game, which is what gives me the oomph to keep coaching and writing years after graduating.

All interpers will enjoy all these motivations at one time or another, but I encourage you to make self-improvement a major pillar of your competitive strategy. If you don't naturally feel the need to constantly improve, you'll have to make yourself want to. It may not be easy, but it's important. Let me explain why.

Friends are great. Close friends are wonderful. Socialization can be a valuable and enjoyable part of your competitive life. But it has little to do with the actual competition. You may as well just show up at the tournaments and not enter in any events. Your high school and college years of competition carry this unique opportunity: to compete and grow your communication skills. The rest of your life is spent utilizing those communication skills for career development and, well, socializing. In your early years, make the most of your competition to become a better communicator, not a better socializer.

Winning is great, too. The desire to win often motivates you to grow and improve your communication skills. You will challenge yourself, but your improvement will naturally reach a ceiling. Once you're the best, why improve? "Don't mess with perfection" is the motto of the competitor who needs not improve their winning streak. You won't push

yourself to diversify and try new things – things you could improve at – because it may risk the win, and you're here to win.

Interp is a lot of fun. But if it's your top priority, you will experience results much like those who compete just to win. You'll get really good at what you already loved to do, but you won't stretch yourself and try things—perhaps things that aren't so fun yet – that challenge you. Your development may become stunted.

Interp – like any forensic competition – is an academic exercise for a reason. We may choose pieces that entertain and enlighten, but the literature could do that with or without our help. Academic interpers strive to improve by communicating what the literature already has within it. Forensics education is about self-improvement. It is an academic activity.

A several-year tenure in forensic competition can have two results:

- **The First Three Result.** You experience significant improvements in communication. You have a lot of fun, make some great friends, travel all over, read things worth reading, and generally have a blast. When you're done, your room is littered with trophies and medals that you don't know what to do with.
- **The Self-Improvement Result.** You experience massive improvements in communication, storytelling, critical thinking, adaptiveness, time management, etc. You have a lot of fun, make some great friends, travel all over, read things worth reading, and generally have a blast. When you're done, your room is littered with trophies and medals that you don't know what to do with.

No matter what your motivation is, you're going to make friends. You're going to win trophies. And you'll probably find something you really love doing. That all happens quite naturally. You don't have to force it.

But self-improvement is a decision. You'll get better just by competing, but if you really go after it – if you actively seek to be the best you can be in everything you do, and you challenge yourself to learn and grow – you'll get the most out of your time in forensics and walk away a completely different person.

Speech can be fun and positive for you, but it can even be better than that: it can be *life-changing*. The choice is yours, and I encourage you ever so strongly to choose self-improvement.

Why Interp?

The Importance of Acting

Time for a thought experiment! No safety goggles required.

Take a quick look around the room.

Seriously now. Look around. Note people in the room with you (if any), and any really noticeable objects (like a refrigerator, a couch, a bed).

You are simply reading this book. Not much acting going on, right?

Think again. Imagine yourself reading this book in another situation.

Sitting on your living room recliner, you behave a certain way. If you were sitting on a bench in the middle of an airport, you'd behave differently. In the comfort of your own home, you don't care that your family can see you. But before strangers in an airport, you sit up a little more and act like you're reading something really interesting, or act like you're ignoring the people around you.

The truth is that you're acting right now, even when doing something as simple as reading a book. You have an audience, and that naturally alters your behavior. When you're not directly interacting with someone sitting across the room, you're still going to cover your mouth when you cough because you want to be polite and present yourself appropriately. No matter how sad you are, you don't drop to your knees weeping in an airport. No matter how happy you are, you don't bust into hysterics while reading a funny book at the library. Even when you're alone in the house, it seems disrespectful to run around screaming and shouting, no matter how badly you may want to.

Every moment of every day, you're acting. A good interpreter gets this and honestly embraces it.

Acting is communicating a role to an audience.

Even when you're completely alone, you're still acting. You're performing for yourself. You want to see yourself in a certain light so you do things consistent with your self-image. Some people even act in front of the omniscient God.

Except in awkward social situations, most of us don't even realize that we're acting. The roles we play are so ingrained in us that we can play them without thinking.

When I meet someone new and I want to be friends, I don't think: "What does friendly Travis do to make this person at ease? Hmm ... I think I'll go for a warm handshake and a hearty smile. That should do the trick." Instead, I greet the person naturally. I've learned how to act from years of meeting new people.

There is a common misconception that acting is pretending, or even lying, because it involves pretending to be someone you're not. Quite the contrary. Acting is a form of communication, and a most honest form at that. Even those who claim they don't act but are truly "themselves" at all times are acting. Everyone chooses to be consistent with who they want to be, and they constantly make choices in their behavior to reflect that. For instance, when you're happy to see someone and you want him to know it, you smile at him. This doesn't mean you're being fake. You're communicating. You're playing the role of yourself when you're happy to see this person.

Of course, acting can also be used to lie. Whether it's communicating truth or falsehood, acting is simply a tool.

Acting is one of the most important skills you can learn because it is fundamental to human interaction. There is really no professional aspiration that does not involve acting. They all require being around other people. Heart doctors, factory workers, contract lawyers, beet farmers, country singers – they all require good acting. If you want to have a family, you'll certainly need to be a good actor.

Sadly, practicing acting in a formal setting is no easy feat. If you want to be on stage or in front of a camera, you'll have to audition for a role. If you don't have experience acting, you probably won't get cast, and if you never get cast you won't get experience. That makes acting a hard business to break into – and very intimidating for folks who just want to learn.

Forensic interp is something special. You don't have to audition to get a role; you just pay a registration fee to get into the tournament. It doesn't matter how good or bad you are. When you walk into the room, there will be at least three people ready to give you their undivided attention

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and then record their impressions on a ballot that you can read later. Interp gives you a captive audience.

Professional actors sometimes work for years seeking to be “discovered,” but not so with interpers. You can be completely unlearned one month, and the next you could be one of the strongest interp competitors in the nation. You're not limited by name recognition or experience. You just have to impress three judges for ten minutes.

It's not a professional gig, but you're a high schooler. You're not looking for that. You just want to learn, so interp is perfect.

The Importance of Storytelling

Interp is also invaluable for studying stories. The process of finding, cutting, and performing a piece requires that you understand the fundamentals of good storytelling.

Stories have always been of the utmost importance to humanity. Entire civilizations have risen and fallen based on stories. Most world religions are based on them. Jesus Christ taught in parables. His followers were put to death because they would not deny the story that he was God and he rose from the dead. The life story of Mohammed is sacred to Muslims; it has inspired some of the bloodiest conquests in history. Every part of the globe has its own unique mythology and folklore. America celebrates more than a month of holidays each year commemorating important stories, from the behavior of a certain groundhog to the life of George Washington.

The Jewish, Christian, and Mormon scriptures are primarily books of stories. Most influential ancient Greek texts (like the Iliad and the works of Herodotus) are stories. Consider the influence of Don Quixote, The Divine Comedy, Pilgrim's Progress, Candide and Nineteen Eighty-Four. Darwin's Origin of the Species was, fundamentally, a storybook. Hitler's Mein Kampf was an autobiography. Granted, many of these books have profound truths and falsehoods that have influenced the world in good and bad ways. The key here is that the tool of storytelling brought these messages to the masses and had incalculable impacts.

The average American, asked about his ten favorite works of non-fiction, will sit back and try to remember if he has even read that many. Ask him

about his favorite works of fiction, and he'll say it's impossible to decide; there are so many good ones.

The film *Titanic* has accumulated nearly two billion dollars in sales. Well over a billion individual movie tickets were sold in America last year. Books, TV, Film, and Gaming are the conversation starters of modern western civilization – something everyone has in common. For this reason, this book will be rife with illustrations from popular movies.

The mighty Aztec civilization wavered before the invading conquistador Cortez because of belief in a story of the serpent-god Quetzalcoatl. The complex mythology of the Egyptians inspired massive pyramids visible from space today.

Propaganda machines control the political situation by telling stories. The Soviet Union, for instance, taught its children that their poverty, oppression, and massive military operations were the fault of capitalist nations. Soviet leaders were portrayed as infallible and benevolent. All news was bent and spun to fit this story. Thus, no matter how low communism plunged the country, its people still blamed America.

Stories are the lifeblood of companies. Coca-Cola sells caffeinated, carbonated brown sugar water with a story of unity and happiness. "I'd like to buy the world a Coke." We drink because we like to connect with the Coke story. We want to identify. Apple, Pringles, Budweiser, Southwest Airlines, GEICO, and Tide have all built strong brands through the use of stories. The public wants to be part of a story.

We tell stories constantly to communicate with others. We tell stories about ourselves to let people know who we are and why we're here. We tell stories about the future: what we want and where we want to go. We tell stories to help people understand what we're saying. Sometimes we "vent" our stories to close friends. We offer plans in story form, and question them in story form. When we want to persuade people, we tell them stories about how happy they will be when they agree with us.

Kevin: "Mommy, Billy hit me!"

Billy: "No, he hit me!"

It's up to Mommy to make sure the true story is found. Criminal juries face an even weightier problem. They spend weeks evaluating evidence

and hearing testimonies that may ultimately send someone to their death: all because of a story.

The last time you visited a new doctor, you had to fill out a form telling a story about your medical history. Without that information, your doctor has a very hard time helping you, and could prescribe something that can make you sicker.

There are tens of thousands of museums all over the world and billions of pages written to preserve human history. Deep within us, we feel a source of identity in our country and our lineage. This history is carried on not by dry memorizing of data or facts; they are passed on with story.

Stories are key. Because they are so ubiquitous, there are many ways to study them. But few ways are as efficient as interp. Extracting a ten-minute selection out of the vast library of human literature will take every ounce of storytelling knowhow you possess (don't worry – I'll walk you through it). Communicating it to the audience will be its own unique struggle. Just as you learn to ride a bike by falling off over and over, you'll conquer your poor interp choices and grow to become a master storyteller. And if you can tell a good story, you can do anything.

A Brief History of Interp

Oral Interpretation has a long and rich history worthy of its own book. Let's review the highlights.

Literature is very, very old. In fact, it's older than writing. In humanity's earliest days, history was communicated as an oral tradition. Parents told their children, who told their children. Lengthy songs were composed commemorating important events. Musicians were held in the highest esteem because they not only entertained, but provided a link to the past. They were interpers: they were oralizing literature (which, at the time, was the only way to present it).

When a system of reading and writing was invented, oral interpretation became less important. Literature could be preserved in lasting written form and distributed with greater ease. But reading was still largely inaccessible to the poor, who didn't have the luxury of study. Writing was a status icon, used most prolifically by rulers and religious officials. Everyone else stuck with oral interp.

These two forms of literature progressed and developed alongside each other. Interp branched off into theater, a completely different medium that emphasizes the performer over the literature (more on this in just a moment). Writing shaped and altered history as it grew in importance while theater provided a worthy diversion.

In ancient Greece, poetic recitation – a form of oral interp – became highly appreciated. Poets would appear before kings and commoners alike to read their works and discuss them.

In the medieval ages, literature was written on paper but distributed to the common man by clergy and bards who orally interpreted it. Theater came into its own as a separate art form, produced by traveling acting troupes that wrote and acted their own material (or improvised it).

The Renaissance brought a revived interest in the techniques of the ancients, including a systematic effort to teach reading aloud. Rhetoric, pronunciation, and other public speaking skills were associated with interp. It became studied as its own unique art form rather than simply a medium for communicating literature.

Then came industrialization, and an explosion of ideas. Paper replaced oral traditions in most parts of the world. Speech and debate, a byproduct of democracy and free speech, came into its own. With it came the idea that self-improvement could be a reason to interp, and the understanding memorizing the literature was preferable to physically reading it.

By the time the modern age had rolled around, interp had scattered into dozens of different forms. Poets and authors read their works aloud; audio books saw popularity; forensic competition was fully refined. I've seen a wide variety of interp formats, including a man who travels America doing interpretive readings from the NIV Bible with nothing but a headset and a red scarf. Chamber Theater, which uses as much of the author's original text as possible, and Reader's Theater, in which actors hold their scripts on stage instead of memorizing, both avoid complex blocking and fancy sets. They are actually both forms of performance interp.

Today, interp has a strong emphasis on the dramatic. Interp isn't necessary to communicate; it's a luxury that's intended to add something to what could be read just as easily. Performances are expected to be dynamic, highly entertaining, and immersive. Selections are rarely

associated with the performer anymore. While authors still interp their own works, the author, work, and performer are all clearly separated.

The Difference Between Theater and Interp

First, a preface: as you read this, there is a fierce debate raging between well-respected minds. In one camp, people argue that theater and interp are basically different forms of the same thing. From the other camp comes the belief that there is a fundamental semantic difference. Both camps have a lot going for them, so I'll just tell you what I think and let you decide for yourself.

Interp is the oralization of literature. It's a medium of communication. In a certain sense, the literature you're interping *exists* in spoken form when you speak it – much in the same way that it existed in spoken form before writing was even invented, and much in the same way that it exists in written form while you're memorizing it.

In interp, the primary focus is on the literature. The interper's talent and hard work combine for an effect much like good handwriting: they communicate the literature clearly and effortlessly to the audience. Thus, it is the responsibility of the interper to "get out of the way" and not distract from the literature.

Theater, on the other hand, emphasizes the performer. Scripts and plays are written to give performers something to do while they're on stage.

Theater companies have to produce; they find something to put on stage. In theater, the audience is always primarily focused on the performer. In contrast, interpers find a piece of literature and then present it, and the audience is always primarily focused on the literature.

This is why interp tends to be so minimalist. It has little or no use of props or costumes (often forbidden altogether in rules of competition), usually has a cast of one person playing all the characters, and stays in a fairly confined space. Imagination is the life blood of interp. Theater leans toward the extravagant, with magnificent sets and costumes and a swarm of actors, singers, and dancers. Production value is the lifeblood of theater.

It's a semantic difference, so don't beat yourself up trying to understand it if you don't.

Understanding Competition

Competition does a few important things. First, it creates a flexible standard of excellence for everyone to strive toward. If everyone were trying to be as good as the national champions, most of us would get discouraged and quit. If the standard for success were just showing up, we wouldn't have anything to work toward. Commercial actors can say: "I'm being paid twice as much as I was four years ago for my work. I think they like me." Stage producers can say: "I sold every seat in the house. I think they like me."

But academic interpers don't have unique audiences. That is, their audience doesn't come just for them, but for all the competitors.

Academic interpers don't get paid and it's difficult to gauge their success just by looking around the room. We add judges and organize interps into panels to create something to strive toward. You don't have to be the best interper who ever lived; you just have to be better than the other seven in your room. This is a challenge, but it's doable. It's something to work toward. When you fail, you can learn from your mistakes and come back better at the next tournament.

Without competition, academic forensics would be stuffy and meaningless. No matter how noncompetitive you are you can appreciate how pointless it would be to give everyone in your event a gold star and a pat on the back. There must be winners, so there must be losers.

It's important not to attach too much to competition. Some of us can pursue victory at too great a cost. A first place doesn't increase your self worth. A pile of ballots reading "5th and Below" doesn't decrease it. These things are simply tools and rewards to help you succeed. Harness that. Be competitive. Go for the gold; celebrate when you win and be disappointed when you lose. But don't sacrifice yourself for a win.

Remember that self-improvement is more important than a victory even if no one receives an award for getting better. Competition is a tool, a key to open doors to success.

A Time for Art?

Think back to the first picture you ever drew. You don't remember it? That's fine. It was probably just a bunch of scribbles with the first crayon you didn't put in your mouth. Your mom got really excited about it at first, but by now everyone appreciates the fact that it's not worth much.

What about your second drawing? Your third? Your fiftieth? Even then, you were probably still making senseless doodles with crayons; only just starting to get a grasp of what you were doing.

Picasso, da Vinci, van Gogh, and Rembrandt all started their painting careers by grabbing a brush and producing something truly horrible. If they had presented it to the world as a work of genius, they would have been laughed back into their studios – and rightfully so. If they had thrown up their hands and cried: "I'm a terrible painter!" and then become plumbers, the world would have been denied some of its most treasured artistic creations.

Producing art is easy.

"Art is the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions." - Wikipedia

One could stack two pennies directly on top of each other and call it art. But would it be *good* art? Good art resonates deep within us by reflecting a fundamental truth or goodness. Good art is very hard to produce.

It would be unfair to ask you as a beginning interper to produce good art. You're just getting your feet wet; just beginning to scribble purple crayon markings across the page. You must learn *how* before you concern yourself too seriously with *what*.

Good art happens in interp rooms all the time – thanks in large part to selections of quality literature. With practice, you'll be able to produce good art as well. But never lose sight of the fact that you're in an academic setting. You're learning how to do something. Academic interp is a means, not an end. Just as you do math problems to develop your skill in math (and not because that particular problem really needs to be solved), you compete to develop your skills in interp.

Of course, this doesn't mean you should pay no heed to the quality of your piece. You should seek to be as excellent as possible; starting with a good selection and improving at every step. You'll may fail at first, but that's part of the learning process.

So, while good art is a fantastic side product of advancement in interp, it should not be your focus. Go learn. Produce horrible paintings, laugh at yourself, and start over. Later, when you master your craft, you can be the next Picasso.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your natural motivations for forensic competition?
2. What would modern society be like without writing?
3. How important is interp as an art form today? Contrast with its importance five thousand years ago.
4. What are some other historical influences as important as stories?
5. How do different people react to competition?
6. How do you rank your skill as an interper right now?
7. What is your potential skill as an interper?
8. What is keeping you from reaching your potential?

CHAPTER 2

Finding a Piece

The Most Important Meal of the Day

A good piece is the basis of a successful foray into the world of interp. Even a bad actor can compell an audience if the story is strong enough. A great actor, on the other hand, is almost powerless to improve a bad selection.

Remember, literature is the existence of interp. Interp does not focus on how you choose to cut and perform the piece; it's about the piece itself. You absolutely, positively must have a strong piece before you take one step toward a tournament.

Most interpers make the mistake of hunting for a piece after registering for a tournament. This means the search ensues under a tense deadline. When they find something suitable, they cut it and refine it until about a week before the competition. Then they frantically memorize it and perform it. Based on the feedback they received and their own hunches, they tweak their performance and go at it again. Less than half of interpers significantly change their scripts after the first tournament – they just change the performance.

Consider this: you're probably choosing a piece with which you're going to spend an entire competitive season. By the time you're done, you'll know this piece inside and out. It'll be a part of you; burned into your existence. You'll never forget it as long as you live. You may end up winning the national tournament with it.

Because of this, choose a piece that is already a big part of you. Turn the table on your "hunt" for your piece and make it something you already love. What is your favorite book? And your favorite story within that

book? Many champion interpers started this way: selecting a piece they already loved, and setting out to make it the interp they would perfect throughout the year. This will help kick you off to the right start. You want to find something great, something you can be proud of finding, a piece that won't stop you. This is the first key to successful interp: finding the best piece for you. Like breakfast, it is the most important meal of the day.

Stories Worth Telling

It may seem obvious, but your piece must be worth telling. In fact, it has to be good enough to repeat over and over again. You may be practicing, but that's not an excuse to waste your audience's time. Pieces that are mindless but somewhat entertaining – goofy slapstick, senseless tragedy, gag reels, or childish nonsense – are easy to do and may get some laughs from your audience. But why squander an entire competitive year on such drivel when you can invest yourself in a truly great story that will resonate deep within the souls of your audience?

Human history is filled with enough good literature to carpet North America. It's also filled with enough bad literature to build a bridge to Mars. You *can* find good literature. It's as simple as that. There is no excuse for not finding a good piece. It can be hard work, having perhaps to weed through twenty pieces you can't possibly use before you find one worth considering. Depending on your unique needs this can be an incredibly difficult but rewarding task.

This is why interpers need to be avid readers. For that matter, *everyone* should be avid readers. There is so much to experience in the written word that waits to be discovered. Interpers gravitate to the pieces that fit them, and they work to interpret these pieces to communicate that value to a wider audience, even a panel of judges in a competition.

It takes hard work to find the kind of piece that fits you and challenges you. Don't settle for a mediocre piece, or one that appeals to basic human instincts. Rise above. Spend your year with a story worth telling.

The 7 Keys to a Good Piece

Because academic interp is such a unique medium, it is ill suited to some works of literature. You must be very selective about which pieces you choose. The following criteria should come into play.

1) Conciseness

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a great story, but it's physically impossible to cram into a ten-minute interp. On the other hand, *War and Peace* is full of short stories and subplots that can be told well within your allotted time.

A good piece has enough plot to last for ten minutes without dragging, but not so much that it feels forced, crammed, or rushed. You should have a clear beginning, middle, and end – each communicated in about three minutes.

A good piece has no subplots. It has a manageable number of scenes (usually about 1-5) showing approximately the same cast of characters working through a single conflict.

Back when I competed, my fellow interpers and I had a running joke about the fictional “Shakespeare in 10 minutes” interp. In it, the interper would take a deep breath at the beginning of the piece, and then machine-gun the audience with the complete works of Shakespeare communicated so quickly that whole sentences blurred together.

Interpers often bite off more than they can chew. I remember one interper who chose to interp *Hamlet*. It was great literature, but he took on the entire play and attempted to sum it up in ten minutes. The result was a frantic barrage of heavy narration, and the interper leapt around the room playing two-dozen characters. It was like watching a train wreck.

It is much better to just take a single part or a scene that you can control, elaborate and emphasize for a solid performance. *Hamlet* has several treasured scenes that could have easily been cut into one piece. Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” line is part of a beautiful soliloquy, for instance, that I’ve seen performed eloquently by interpers. This kind of interper—the one that chooses the concise piece—has made the right move.

2) Discovery

Many interps begin with lengthy, complicated, confusing introductions that sound something like:

"King Hamlet of Denmark is dead, and his brother Claudius has taken the throne. The dead king's ghost has appeared to his son Hamlet, accusing Claudius of murdering him. To test the ghost's claim, Hamlet stages a reenactment of the murder with an acting troupe. When his uncle leaves abruptly, Hamlet decides Claudius is guilty. But Hamlet's mother Gertrude – now the wife of Claudius – is furious. We join the story as Hamlet enters her closet to explain himself."

It takes about four seconds for a judge's mind to turn off when listening to a dense introduction like this. They wait patiently for the poor interpreter to stop talking and start interping, and then they begin the process of discovering what the story is about.

Wall-E is a favorite movie of mine. One of the many things that makes *Wall-E* so genius is the delightful process of discovery. (Spoiler warning!) The story doesn't start with a long, scrolling blob of text that says:

"After eons of neglect, the earth has become an uninhabitable trash-infested wasteland. Humanity lives an easy but meaningless existence among the stars, leaving small robots behind to clean the planet in their absence. We now join the last robot left on earth. Centuries of solitude have created a host of adorable personality quirks in this robot, preparing it for the wild adventure about to unfold."

That would take half the fun out of the movie, even if we did concentrate hard enough to understand what it said. Instead, we are simply thrust into a polluted world by watching what has happened and what *Wall-E* is up to. Discovery draws viewers in. It delights them. It satisfies them when they realize something new.

I apologize if this offends you, but it needs to be said: that text floating off into space at the beginning of *Star Wars* was a mistake. Remember the first time you watched the movies? Did those opening chunks of text impact you at all? Or were you listening to the brilliant musical score, just waiting for the movie to start? That text, along with everything else about the movie, is now classic, but the text itself wasn't necessary. You were about to find out what would happen as soon as the action began. All that the text did was deprive you of some of the joy of discovery.

If your piece is concise, it shouldn't need an introduction. Some introduction is acceptable, but if it you feel it needs an introduction of more than, say, 15 seconds, it's probably an indication of a deeper problem with the cut.

A good piece gives the audience something to discover over the first few minutes.

3) **Cast**

Your story must have good characters. Characters are one of the two elements of a story (the other one – called “Shelving” – comes next). You may still have plenty to *say*, but without characters you have little to *show*.

Characters are complex beings, and that makes interp'ing them challenging, but sometimes difficult. Bad literature is full of flat, unrealistic characters. If you have an interp' with such characters, you'll find the process of acting them to be difficult. Worse, your audience won't care what happens to them.

Let me try to compensate for my Star Wars sacrilege with this example: when Luke is confronting Darth Vader in Return of the Jedi, the fate of the far-away galaxy lies in the balance. Billions of lives depend on what happens next. But that's not what concerns us. Our worries are much narrower.

We're not worried about the fate of the galaxy; we're just compelled by the strength of a few main characters. Will Luke die? Or worse, will he join the Dark Side? Can such avillain as evil as Darth Vader be turned? What's going to happen to Leia?

If the characters in Star Wars weren't compelling, all the good elements of the movies would be hidden, while the flaws would be glaringly obvious. When we believe in and care for the characters, the larger story makes sense to us. We make a mistake when we start interp'ing from the view of the audience. Instead, start interp'ing from the view of the characters. In the end, your audience will find your interp' more believable and visceral.

Sympathetic characters have a number of characteristics.

First, they want something badly. Sure, there are many stories where the main characters are confused and don't know what they want. Audiences don't care what happens to them. Audiences are moved by characters that want something badly and fight (not always violently) for it. When they succeed, the audience rejoices. When they fail, the audience weeps.

Take Will Smith's movie, *Pursuit of Happyness*. It is based in the true rags-to-riches story of Christopher Gardner, who struggles with extreme poverty in his attempts to take care of himself and his son. He aspires to be a successful stock broker. He spends every day working alongside other stock brokers who, walking with him every day, are so caught up in their business life that they don't appreciate what they have. At the end of the movie, when he finally gets the job he wanted after a barrage of discouraging setbacks, he moves into the crowd and walks among them. He's sobbing in "happyness" (sic). The world rolls on around him, but the audience doesn't care so much about the world. They care about the main character and the victory he just encountered.

Your characters must want something. They must struggle for it. Then your audience will be interested.

Second, your main characters should have unselfish motivations. That's not to say they shouldn't want some things for themselves, but if this is their sole motivation, the audience won't appreciate the character.

Gone with the Wind was a wildly successful movie when it came out in 1939 because of its cinematic achievement. The characters, however, were terribly weak. The movie is nothing compared to later, flashier movies with similarly weak stories.

The characters want something and fight for it, but they're caught up in selfish ambitions. The audience isn't compelled by a girl who marries to make her friend jealous or to get money. At the end of part one, Scarlett says: "As God is my witness, I will never be hungry again." The audience isn't thinking: "You go, girl!" They're thinking: "Um ... yay for you. There's a second part to this movie? I'm going to need more popcorn."

But what if Scarlett had said: "As God is my witness, my friend Melanie will never be hungry again." The audience would be intrigued by this selfless ambition. They wouldn't go get popcorn, because they might miss what happened next. The same goes for *Pursuit of Happyness*. If Chris

Gardner only wanted the job to get rich, no one would care. But he's fighting for his son, so we're deeply moved.

Your villains, on the other hand, can be incredibly selfish. Selfishness is just as compelling in terms of motivation. Your audience will despise it. Let your villains worship themselves all day. But your heroes should want something that transcends their personal desires.

4) *Shelving*

Shelving is the recycling of elements at different chronological points. Without it, there is no story. Compare the following two extremely-short and bizarre stories. Can you identify why the second succeeds and the first fails?

"Peter was a boy who had a big red scooter. His sister Jane wanted to become a circus performer. So she ran away from home. She got onto a train. There was a man on the train selling candy. The man was from India. India has many elephants. A man riding an elephant took out his cell phone and called his mother in Morocco. His mother was sick with the flu. Some people thought she might die. There was medicine in a nearby village so her husband went to go get some. On the way, he met a talking camel. The end."

"Peter was a boy who had a big red scooter. His sister Jane wanted to become a circus performer, so she ran away from home. When she joined the circus, she met a man from India. He was an elephant trainer. He taught Jane how to ride elephants. Jane went into the big tent and rode the elephant. The crowd loved it! Jane saw many amazing things at the circus. She saw a man being fired out of a cannon, and she met a talking camel. Then Jane looked up and saw a boy riding a big red scooter across a tightrope. It was her brother Peter. The End."

The first sample is just a senseless chain of facts and events; little more than free association. The audience will tolerate this for only a short while, but not for very long. At some point, they expect the elements of the story to come together and make sense. There has to be some overarching connection of the elements, even elements that are bizarre (like a talking camel). The fact that Peter has a big red scooter is irrelevant until he rides it across a tightrope later in the story. The same goes for every other element.

The second sample was still not a very good story, but it illustrates a point. If you keep “shelving” (bringing in elements from earlier in the piece) the audience will have the patience to continue listening. They will trust that in the end, it will all make sense.

Let's go back to *Wall-E*, a great example of shelving. From the start of the movie to the moment Wall-E leaves earth, almost every single element is brought back in some way. The fire extinguisher, Wall-E rolling over the bug, Wall-E charging himself up with solar cells, Wall-E self-repairing, the shoe, Eve's scanner, and so on. I've counted only two elements in that movie (up to the end of Act I, when Wall-E leaves earth) that aren't shelved: the talking trout and the spork.

This is masterful shelving. Every time something is brought back, the audience's faith in the story grows. They're delighted to see elements of the story come full circle and return to the screen in some significant way. They probably couldn't explain it exactly, but they sit in their seats and think, delighted, “Ah, that's the fire extinguisher that I noticed earlier.” And so *Wall-E* unfolds to connect everything together in the end.

In *Castaway*, we are shown Chuck Noland in the “real world” before being stranded alone on an island for years. When our hero finally returns, the shelving is incredibly powerful. We're filled with exhausted relief. The story works for us now, because the beginning has been brought back in. The story began in civilization, and it ends there as well. If the movie began with Noland washed up on the beach, returning to civilization wouldn't be so potent.

In contrast, stories that meander or have a great deal of irrelevant material are weak. Shelving is not fully utilized. They test the patience of the audience and are not compelling. Find a piece of literature that is rife with shelving. This is what interpers mean by a piece being “tight”: it brings back elements of the story as often as introducing new ones. It should explain the captain's odd behavior from the beginning. It should resolve with the puppy coming back and saving the day. Bad stories present something new without ever resolving the old.

The audience wants Peter's red scooter, not the man's sick mother's neighboring village that nobody has heard of. Give us the scooter!

5) Relevance

Find a story that will touch your audience, and know how it does so. Most stories have at least a chance to be relevant to the audience in some way, but they need to be executed correctly. Let's consider these three stories.

My grandpa sure is crazy. He sat in his room all day yesterday. A long time ago, he fought in a war. I think that's what made him crazy. I went up and talked to him for a while.

This story is just some facts about an old guy in his room. Who cares? Even if the characters are sympathetic, we're not going to get sucked in unless we also have a crazy grandpa upstairs.

My grandpa sure is crazy. A long time ago, he fought in a war. He saw a lot of sad things. His best friend died. Now he sits up in his room all day, feeling sad. I can't cheer him up.

The second story is slightly more relevant. Grandpa's best friend died. We may not identify with the dying part, but we all have a best friend we wouldn't want to lose. We're now marginally interested to hear about how Grandpa is dealing with a situation that's slightly like ours.

My grandpa sure is crazy. He keeps talking about his best friend that died in the war. Yesterday, he never even left his room. I went up to talk to him. He said: "Son, I lost my friends for freedom, and now my mind is going. But it was worth it. Maybe my grandpa is not so crazy after all.

In the third story, we have layers of relevant elements. Grandpa may not be as crazy as he first seemed. We all know what it's like to be judged unfairly. Grandpa sacrificed a lot, but he doesn't regret it. Many of us admire such sacrifice, but we also fear it. Would we be willing to sacrifice like Grandpa? Do we value freedom as much as he did? Grandpa is very lonely and sad, and things are probably not going to improve soon. We've all felt that way.

Good stories have elements that appeal to the understanding of most of the audience (i.e. peace, poverty). Great stories have elements that appeal to the fundamental basis of everyone in the audience. Themes like hope, death, and contentment are universal. Everyone relates to them, and that makes them relevant.

Find a relevant story that speaks to the audience. Don't settle for the overdone story about a boy who wants a dog. Find one about a terminally sick boy whose older brother wants him to have a dog before he dies – but the only dogs around are wild and have to be tamed. Now you're talking. Now you have a story worth watching.

6) Uniqueness

There are countless stories perfect for interp. The interper may find one, lovingly cut and prepare it, and present it to the audience. But instead of rapt attention, the audience sighs and sits back. Eyes are rolled. Someone whispers: "Here we go again."

It's not fair, but it's the truth. If you run a cliché piece – one that's been done over and over already – your audience will not be able to approach it objectively. The best you can do is present it better than it has already been done, which won't excite anyone. Coaches and parents who go to every tournament are sick of seeing the same pieces over and over. No matter how well you do them, you'll fail.

The only way to spot clichéd pieces is to watch panels (which you should be doing anyway – more on that later). See what people are doing. Ask other competitors. They'll usually be happy to talk with you about their piece. Talk to folks who have judged a lot. Ask them directly: "What pieces are you sick of?"

A few pieces that were huge in my day: The Importance of Being Ernest, Romeo and Juliet (, The Hiding Place, Cheaper by the Dozen, The Portrait of Dorian Gray, various fairy tales (especially Little Red Riding Hood) and Antigone. Interpers who took these pieces when I was competing inevitably got yawns from the judges.

Note that there is nothing necessarily wrong with these pieces. They can be wonderful. Perhaps you've not seen these pieces done in your state, and they may be good for you. What I'm addressing here is the temptation to take a piece others have done successfully and attempt to do it again. It's not worth it. You will turn off your audience and the judges. There are thousands of other fantastic pieces that no one has ever done yet. Go find one and give your audience something fresh.

7) **Passion**

Even if you have a concise, relevant, unique story with strong cast, brilliant shelving, and well-paced discovery, it's worth nothing unless you love it. You need to find a piece that speaks to you, and that you love so much that you want to spend a competitive season telling it.

You should have few doubts about your piece. Your passion for your piece is the most important aspect of your selection. If you like a few things about a piece and think it might be *okay* but you suspect you'll get sick of it, keep looking. Find one that keeps you interested, one that you desire to share with others. You have to feel the characters in your soul. If you don't have that fire, you won't be able to pass it on the judges.

"A sale is the transfer of enthusiasm from one person to another." - Bill Gates

The interper is selling their piece to the judge panel. You need to first love your piece so you can transfer your enthusiasm. This is critical. You won't be able to fool your judges for long. They must feel your love of the piece. When they do, they'll find it irresistible. When they get excited about it, it's pure dynamite.

The 13 Keys to Finding a Piece

Here comes the rewarding part, albeit time-consuming and somewhat frustrating. One in a hundred interpers is able to think of a great piece off the top of the head. The vast majority of us have to do it the hard way. That means reading many, many possible pieces, sometimes ending with something seriously wrong with each one. What do you do to speed up the search, short of throwing a sleeping bag in the corner of the nearest library and reading everything?

1) **Start early**

The vast majority of interpers don't start looking for an interp until they're registered for a tournament. With competition looking just weeks away, they're forced to cut corners in the search, often settling for a piece they're not really satisfied with. I don't recommend this strategy. People who do this typically only have time to memorize their piece and end up

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doing poorly. Give yourself plenty of time to find your piece, cut it, memorize it, characterize and block it.

Forcing yourself into a time limit is not worth it. Competition season comes fast, so get a leg up on it by starting your search as early as possible – preferably before the previous season has ended so you can work at your own pace.

How early? I recommend thinking *now* of pieces for *next year*. Even if you are in the midst of competitive season, continue to read and consider pieces for the following competitive year. As long as you're an interper, you should always be searching for pieces.

2) Start a list

Every time you find a possible piece, put it on a list. When the list is sufficiently populated, you'll choose your favorite from among them. The list will help you make sure you don't forget anything – and it'll help you make a final choice objectively. Don't assume your list will stay in your head. Writing or typing things down helps. Have a notebook or a Google Doc specifically assigned to this list, and let the list grow all year long. Update the list constantly with new entries, notes, and thoughts. You want to be exhaustive so you don't miss or forget something.

3) Think function, not form

Don't start reading with an event in mind. Don't say: "I want to do a Duo this year. So let's look for Duos!" Such an approach has three consequences. First, it puts you at serious risk of running a piece in the wrong event. I've seen many Duos that really should have been Dramatics. I've seen many pieces run in Humorous that should have been Open. It's hard to objectively evaluate your piece if you're basing your evaluation on the event form. Second, you're likely to miss some really great pieces that clearly wouldn't fit into the event you had in mind. All the events are worthwhile. You should try them all. Third, if you end up choosing a Duo, you want the liberty to cast for the piece, rather than trying to force something to fit two already-matched partners.

Look for a good piece first; then decide what event is best for it.

4) Check your favorite books

Break out your list and jot down the names of ten works of fiction that you really love. Then write ten more names. They don't have to be the absolute greatest books of all time – just twenty that move you or inspire you. These books are likely to have worthy selections.

5) Read smart

If you've already read a book, you probably don't have to read it again. You've got a lot of literature to get through. Take a few minutes to scan through the book, looking for a concise story with contained plot and a minimal number of scenes and characters. Use your familiarity with the book to speed up the process. You don't have to reread the whole book, just search places that you know may have promise. If you find any, read those scenes to make sure you know what you're looking at. Then add them to the list.

If you haven't read a book before and you're reading it just to check for a piece, don't be afraid to skip ahead. If the book isn't showing any promise, jump forward and see if things have changed. If you give up hope on it, toss it and start with the next one. Be ruthless, or your search will take months. You need to go through a great deal of literature to find a good piece, and if you read each book cover to cover you won't cover much ground – particularly if you're short on time. For now, skim. Later, when you've found the piece and have the luxury of reading for leisure, you're free to return and do justice to the books you smarted reading earlier.

6) Read what you know you should

You've probably heard of all kinds of interesting books or authors that you haven't gotten around to reading. If you're unacquainted with some of the classics (e.g. Mark Twain, Victor Hugo, Homer, or Robert Louis Stevenson) now is the time to see what the fuss is all about. I went to the national final round twice with pieces from great literature (*Moby Dick*

and Les Miserables). You've heard about the classics. Now go read them and find out for yourself.

7) *Expand your book list*

While you're reading, other ideas are going to come to you. Think of books with memorable characters, or with scenes that stuck with you. Keep track of the books that made you cry or laugh out loud. Track them down, and keep reading relentlessly.

8) *Browse*

If you're struggling for ideas, go to a library or bookstore and browse the fiction section. There's also a fantastic website with 30,000 free books (and counting) called the Gutenberg Project (www.gutenberg.org). It's worth a look.

Don't rush through the aisles. Read each title. If it interests you, open it and smart read it. Be ready to spend many hours in this step. It's well worth your time.

9) *Give short stories a chance*

Short stories are great. They tend to be much easier to cut because they start off with a concise plot and manageable cast. Louis L'Amour has written hundreds and hundreds of fantastic western short stories, many of them perfect for interp. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and P.G. Wodehouse have produced their share of short stories, too.

Short story compilations are worth looking into (which have odd titles like "The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy: and Other Stories by Tim Burton"). You can blast through twenty possible pieces in the time it would take you to read a single novel. There are many periodicals that publish short stories. Consider a subscription to a publication like Glimmer Train, a quarterly journal consisting solely of short stories.

10) Read plays

Don't worry about crossing a sacred line between theater and interp. There's a difference, but it's fine to blur it a little by choosing a script written for theater and interping it instead (treating it like literature).

If it's not a musical, and it's not written by Shakespeare or Oscar Wilde, American audiences are probably fairly unfamiliar with it. They'll be fascinated by a Greek tragedy or an early industrial romantic comedy. The Enlightenment and onward is rife with the works of playwrights who traveled from town to town with their troupes. There's also a wealth of skits associated with American comedy and radio theater. You may find some wonderful pieces.

11) Read movie sources

Many great movies are based on books. Check to see if there's a corresponding book to your favorite movies. If you use a spawned book (one inspired by the movie), be sure to say so in the title so no one goes running to the tournament coordinator to get you kicked out. For example: "From the book, *Transformers: Rise of the Fallen*."

And in case I need to actually say so, don't use *Transformers*. It is unlikely to bring great awards.

12) Keep at it

The search for a piece is hard work. It takes time. There will be moments when you're ready to give up or settle for second-rate material. Your determination to endure will set you apart from your opponents. You probably won't find a piece your first day of searching, or even your first week. Keep with it. The rewards will be well worth it.

13) Do it yourself

If all else fails, and your league allows original works, write a piece of your own. This is no easy task, but it can be rewarding. Find friends who will give you honest opinions about your piece. Write and rewrite aggressively. Don't allow yourself to be emotionally attached to any

aspect of it. Cut and reorganize and throw out if you must. Keep asking for advice from honest friends and family.

Whatever you choose to write, be sure it is unique. I once ran an original piece about my grandfather. Not many on the planet (perhaps only my brothers) could have written it. My original interp was unique. If the story was going to get told, it was up to me.

On the other hand, a funny story you have in your head about a clown chasing a hot dog stand is best left unwritten. If anyone can write it, it has probably already been written. You'd be better off searching for a piece.

Keys to Interp is about interping, not writing, literary works. However, if you do choose to go the original interp route, there are some hints waiting for you later in this book.

Discussion Questions

1. Select a well-known book or movie. Analyze it in terms of the Seven Keys to a Good Piece.
2. Are there any qualities of a good piece unique to interp? What are they?
3. What are your favorite kinds of stories (romance, adventure...)? Why do they attract you?
4. Are most stories well-suited to interp? Why or why not?
5. Find a book or movie with relevance. What gives this story universal appeal?
6. What makes some stories last while others fade into obscurity?

CHAPTER 3

Cutting a Piece

So you've found the perfect interp. Now what? You have to edit it down to be as close to ten minutes as possible. You're now ready to start "cutting," and it is almost as much of an art form as writing the piece yourself.

Cutting a piece involves a special blend of proper technique, artistic inclination, and gut instincts. You face the challenge of condensing a literary masterpiece, told in the beloved original words of the author, into a ten-minute selection. You must remain faithful to the original intent of the author while still creating a suitable interp.

Your cut is the beginning of your process of interpreting the piece according to your own unique artistic vision. No one cuts exactly the same way, but there are many guidelines and conventions that can help you produce an excellent script.

Getting Set Up

Put all the content you want in your piece in chronological order in a single document. This may require typing it up from a hard copy, which isn't a bad idea. When typing, you are able to visualize yourself interping the piece. Then count the number of words. Most word processors (even Google Docs) have a "word count" function.

You'll have to keep something in mind: most leagues have submission guidelines that must be adhered to. Read these rules carefully before you start cutting. It isn't fun getting disqualified from a tournament just because you cut something incorrectly or failed to comply with formatting guidelines; nor is it fun to finish a cut and then check the rules

and be forced to start over. I suggest you use a word processor that allows you to save versions as you go along. Google Docs is one such tool. You are always able to rewind time and pull up the document all the way from the first time you typed it out.

You'll probably have to submit a script when you check in at the tournament. When you do so, you'll have to follow the formatting guidelines set forth by the league. But when you're cutting, don't worry about the format. Think in terms of creating two script formats. The first will be the memorization format, which will be read only by you. It's the script you'll read over and over again as you memorize your piece. Because the memorization script is only for you, you can format it in the easiest and most convenient way for you. You can add comments, notes, directions, diagrams, colors – whatever helps you.

When you're ready to go to a tournament, double-check the league rules on submissions (if relevant) and then convert your memorization script into a submission script. The purpose of a submission script is to ensure fairness and integrity, so the formatting needs are very different. You don't ever need to read the submission version (beyond proof reading); you can keep using the memorization version for your own convenience.

Remember to keep the memorization and submission versions in sync – you don't want to have memorized a piece one way and be submitting it another way. If you update one, update the other accordingly.

If you like to use Microsoft Word, try utilizing the “track editable changes” function. As you cut, every single change you make is tracked. Making sure you stay within the guidelines of the rules is easy to do when every change is there for you and your coach to review.

Also in Word are keyboard shortcuts that can be very useful. Getting used to a few of them can make editing your piece quick and easy.

The most important keyboard shortcut is the one that saves your document. Control-S or Command-S should be a frequent habit as you cut. Nothing is more frustrating than a computer freeze after hours of work. Save your work often.

Proper Cutting Procedure

Let's put things in perspective:

A novel has more than 50,000 words.

A novella has 20,000-50,000 words.

A short story has less than 20,000 words.

A 10-minute interp has approximately 1300 words.

It's fine to start with thousands and thousands of words. My first Dramatic Interp started with a 90,000 word cut of a massive novel.

Make a full pass through the story, removing and editing where appropriate. Then check the word count again and see what's changed.

When you're under 15,000 words, convert your piece to script format. That means you'll change it from:

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

To:

MRS BENNET: My dear Mr. Bennet, have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?

[Mr Bennet shakes his head no]

MRS BENNET: But it is, for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it. Do you not want to know who has taken it?

MR BENNET: You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.

Do another word count. A normal interp delivery runs about 130 words per minute. A 2000 word dialog piece will probably take a little over fifteen minutes to deliver.

Don't be afraid of cutting too much. You can always put something back later. A good motto: "When in doubt, cut it." You often don't realize how

little you needed something until you cut it. It is not uncommon to cut something and realize, "Wow, it really works now."

Work in passes, not bit by bit. "Pass" all the way through your script, rather than focusing on one section here, one section there. There will be a temptation to keep working the first scene or the first page over and over to get it right. It is better to go all the way through over and over, knowing that your twentieth draft will still be a ways from perfect.

When you're starting to get close (less than 2000 words or so), go ahead and time yourself. Don't read aloud. Don't worry about characterization. Just read it quietly, moving your lips over each word. Keep cutting and refining. When you've got it down to approximately ten minutes (should be about 1300 words) the first step of your cutting is done.

But you won't stop! Keep making passes over your piece, ruthlessly slicing out dead wood or confusing elements. Keep focusing and refining. If you end up with a little time left over, consider throwing something back in that you had really wished you had time to keep.

Start visualizing yourself interping the piece, but do not start memorizing. As soon as you start memorizing, it will be almost impossible to go back to the cutting room. Do your cutting right the first time around so you won't have to worry about it later when you memorize and interp.

Actually, cutting the piece well is *more* important than memorizing. A champion interper will literally spend hours on cutting. It is like art; an interper will never feel like the piece is quite finished. There are certain things an interper cuts for: story, conciseness, action, character, and purpose. Each are incredibly important and will help lead you to award-winning interps.

Cutting for Story

Know the story you want to tell, and cut the rest. If unsure what the "rest" is, try writing a simple plot summary of your piece. Here's an example:

"The hen wants to make bread, so she asks the animals to help her. They all say no. She makes it herself, and suddenly, all the animals want some. She doesn't share, because they did not help her make it."

From your summary, you'll be able to see what's important and what isn't. There are several great scenes, like when the hen is sowing grain and asks the animals for help. That scene isn't in the summary, so perhaps we won't need it. We need two scenes: 1) The hen asks for help and is refused. 2) The hen finishes the bread, then the animals are disappointed.

Everything that isn't part of those scenes is probably nonessential to the story. Consider deleting the extra scenes to see how the story unfolds without it. Don't assume that your audience won't catch on without them. Your audience is intelligent. If your piece is interesting and you've got a rewarding path of discovery, members of your audience will pay attention. They'll fill in the blanks. You may even consider cutting out direct plot explanations. Cut, "So the Hen grew the grain all by herself, and ground the flour by herself, and mixed the dough by herself, and baked it by herself." The story shows this already; reminding the audience of this is talking down to them.

If you cut it right, the audience will know what has happened when they see the Hen taking the fresh bread out of the oven with a mix of anticipation and resentment on her face. Cut the flab! Tell the story.

Cutting for Conciseness

Conciseness is a virtue. Don't keep anything that doesn't move the story forward. You can't afford to muddle your piece with subplots, side characters, redundant scenes, or tedious monologues. It is conventional writing wisdom to start your story *as late as possible*, and end it *as early as possible*. As Polonius said in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "Brevity is the soul of wit."

If you can tell your story in ten minutes, fine. If you can tell it in five, great! That means you have the luxury of choosing what you'll do with the remaining five minutes. Now you can consider finer points like pacing, character development, and humor. If you must, you can put that amazing monologue back in.

If you end up reading quickly to fit your story into the ten minutes, you have no wiggle room. That's fine, but not optimal. Cut your piece down to the skeleton, and then reconstruct.

"Complexity is simple. Simplicity is difficult." - Shinsei, Legend of the Five Rings

Having a lengthy or complicated script is not a claim to fame. The mark of true genius is an interper who can make a simple, fluid script out of anything. An easy test of an element's necessity is to delete it. If your piece still makes sense, you most likely did the right thing.

Cutting for Action

Whenever possible, keep the action in a scene. There are plenty of interps that involve A talking to B, B talking to C, C talking to A, and then a grand finale with all three talking at once. Audiences rarely see A shooting at B, B fleeing to C on a snowmobile, C exacting revenge by burning A's house, and a grand finale where they decide they're still friends in spite of it all, and go hang gliding to celebrate. The former is boring, the latter exciting.

If your interp is nothing but dialog or narration, fine. It's not necessarily a weakness, but it means you'll have to work harder to compete. If your piece has lots of action, awesome! Nothing is too absurd to illustrate through action. The zanier it is, the more the audience will be delighted by a sincere effort to show it.

Audiences know it's just pretend when you're jumping off a cliff. A cowardly interper will cut away from it, narrate, or switch to the person still on top, watching the man fall. Audiences will shrug at this. But a courageous interper will show his character free falling, screaming as he goes, his body whipping wildly around in the wind. This will compel audiences. They'll feel swept up in the action. They'll love it! They'll respect and remember you.

One of the strong points in my Moby Dick piece was interping Captain Ahab. Ahab had a wooden peg leg, which I showed by turning my foot on its end like a ballet dancer and limping along on it (more on characterization in Chapter 5). Ahab was always pacing around, making sudden violent gestures. In one scene, he picked up his peg leg and threw it back to the deck in a rage. Audiences didn't think for a second that I was actually missing a leg below the left knee. But they were impressed watching me honestly interpret the piece, lifting my leg and balancing as if I were missing a leg just like Ahab.

This is why the improvisational TV show “Whose Line Is it Anyway?” was so successful. People loved watching actors pretend to do outrageous things without costumes or props. It required great imagination to pull it off, and it's usually more interesting than watching people talk.

Whenever possible, leave action in your script.

Cutting for Character

Though it's a luxury that is often cut for the sake of time, you should accommodate the development of your characters as much as possible. If you have a piece with great characters, you'll want to show them off.

More is shown in dialogue than diction. If you've cut down to safely below ten minutes and want to add a little material in without adding an extraneous scene, return lines of dialogue that help the audience understand the character better. Consider:

RAW CUT (301 words, 1:26)

"Cheshire Puss," she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. "Come, it's pleased so far," thought Alice, and she went on. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where——" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"—— so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question.

"What sort of people live about here?"

"In that direction," the Cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter: and in that direction," waving the other paw, "lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you ca'n't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

Alice didn't think that proved it at all; however, she went on. "And how do you know that you're mad?"

"To begin with," said the Cat, "a dog's not mad. You grant that?"

"I suppose so," said Alice.

"Well, then," the Cat went on, "you see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad."

"I call it purring, not growling," said Alice.

"Call it what you like," said the Cat.

FORMATTED AND GENTLY EDITED (206 words, 0:52)

ALICE: Cheshire Puss, would you tell me which way I ought to go from here?

CAT: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

ALICE: I don't much care where ...

CAT: Then it doesn't matter which way you go.

ALICE: So long as I get somewhere.

CAT: Oh, you're sure to do that, if you only walk long enough.

ALICE: What sort of people live about here?

CAT: In that direction lives a Hatter: And in that direction lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad.

ALICE: But I don't want to go among mad people.

CAT: Oh, you ca'n't help that. We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.

ALICE: How do you know I'm mad?

CAT: You must be, or you wouldn't have come here.

ALICE: And how do you know that you're mad?

CAT: To begin with, a dog's not mad. You grant that?

ALICE: I suppose so.

CAT: Well, then, you see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad.

ALICE: I call it purring, not growling.

CAT: Call it what you like.

CUT FOR STORY (35 words, 0:11)

ALICE: Would you tell me which way I ought to go from here?

CAT: In that direction lives a Hatter: And in that direction lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad.

CUT FOR CHARACTER (110 words, 0:25)

ALICE: Cheshire Puss, would you tell me which way I ought to go from here?

CAT: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

ALICE: So long as I get somewhere.

CAT: Oh, you're sure to do that, if you only walk long enough. In that direction lives a Hatter: And in that direction lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad.

ALICE: But I don't want to go among mad people.

CAT: Oh, you can't help that. We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.

ALICE: How do you know I'm mad?

CAT: You must be, or you wouldn't have come here.

The raw cut was rife with unnecessary narration, like body language and explanations of what Alice was thinking. Formatting took care of that, and knocked out a third of the words. Ultimately, it should be your interp that shows Alice's thoughts, not the narration.

Then it was time to cut for story. It's a ruthless cut. We kept about 10 percent of the original material. But in those two lines, the entire plot of the scene is communicated. Alice asks the Cat where she should go. The Cat gives her directions, but advises that it's not really important which direction she chooses.

The Story cut is perfectly fine, but it doesn't tell us much about the characters. While the plot keeps moving, the scene has lost its sense of feeling. Because we have time, we added in another 14 seconds of character. Now the scene is much more fun to watch, while still moving the plot along satisfactorily.

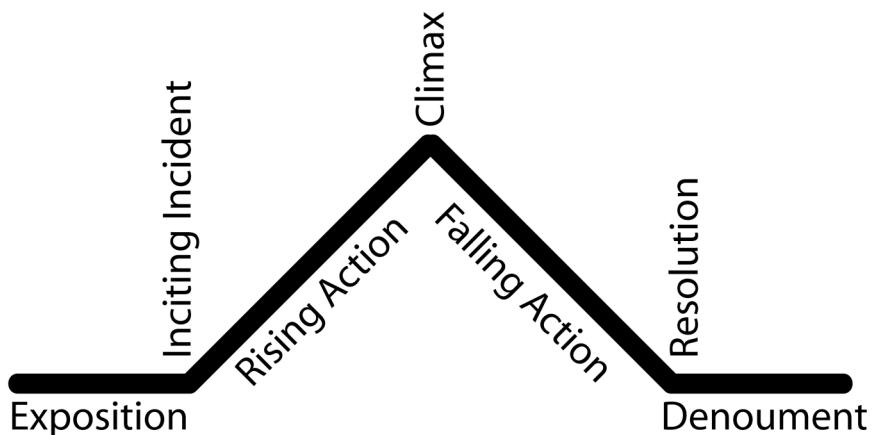
Putting lines back in for the sake of character is an important part of the cutting process, but it's also very risky. It's easy to get carried away and put too much back. After all, everything a character does or says tells us something about him. If you love a character (and you should), you'll have the temptation to deluge the audience with him. Resist this urge!

Here are three helpful rules of thumb. First, be certain you've cut the piece down as much as possible. Second, when adding for character, don't increase the length of the scene much more than half what you cut. From Story cut to Character cut, we went from 11 seconds to 25 seconds. That's fine. Going all the way back to 52 seconds would have made the scene tedious. The audience can only indulge character development for so long.

The third rule of thumb: never add a scene just for character development. Just extend the character development already in your piece. Every scene must be motivated by plot, which is what our next key to cutting is all about.

Cutting for Purpose

The German writer Gustav Freytag is widely regarded as the father of modern dramatic structure. He is responsible for giving us Freytag's Pyramid, illustrated in the following:



Freytag's Pyramid

with Inciting Incident and Resolution

Don't be intimidated. The Pyramid won't hurt you, and we won't go into it in too much depth. Just a quick overview is all you need.

Exposition

Before a story starts, your audience knows nothing about it. It could be a story about two Roman soldiers fighting over a woman, or it could be about a dog who builds a space ship. No one knows. It needs exposition.

Exposition is a time the storyteller lays the groundwork for the story by letting the audience know what it will be about. They don't need to know what's about to happen, but they need to know the basic cast and setting. The storyteller gives just enough information to prepare the audience for the rest of the story.

Inciting Incident

Typically, the exposition involves some measure of equilibrium. The story hasn't quite started yet; we're just getting to know what we need to know. Then the Inciting Incident comes along. This is the moment when the story "gets interesting." Something happens to upset the equilibrium, and it's up to the heroes to set things right again. In *Fellowship of the Ring*, the ring falls into the hands of Frodo. In *Armageddon*, humanity discovers that a world-ending meteor is racing toward earth. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice falls down a rabbit hole. In *Wall-E*, a mysterious robot lands on earth. The inciting incident usually happens within the first ten minutes of a feature film, or the first two chapters of a novel, or the first 30-60 seconds of an interp.

Rising Action

Now that the balance is upset, the characters are cast into unfamiliar terrain. The routine is broken. The Princess needs to get back to her own world, and the audience gets to find out how she tries to do so (and whether she succeeds). The plot progresses with increasing intensity. A fellowship is formed. A bunch of oil drillers agree to destroy the meteor. Alice tries to find her bearings. Wall-E falls in love.

The moment Rising Action begins, shelving becomes important. You're still introducing new elements, but you're also building on the Exposition. The pacing tends to get faster and faster during Rising Action as all the elements in the story are shelved and reshelfed. Eventually the story reaches a high point.

Climax

This is the final showdown, where the Rising Action finally hits a pinnacle and everything gets shelved all at once. It happens because the

Rising Action is unable to restore equilibrium. The Climax marks a significant turn of fortune for the protagonist.

Climaxes are easy to find in most stories. Gandalf is killed. Someone stays behind to set off the nuke. The Queen of Hearts orders Alice's execution. The Captain and Auto battle for the control room. After the Climax, everything has changed.

Falling Action

After the climax, it still takes awhile for things to go back to normal. The Climax has shaken all the puzzle pieces, and now the characters get to put them back together in a new way.

The Fellowship struggles on without Gandalf, losing hope with every step. The surviving space ship returns to earth, having left several heroic drillers on the meteor. Alice awakens from her dream. The Axiom's hyperdrive is activated. The intensity of the story steadily decreases as the characters approach a new equilibrium (or, in some stories like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the same equilibrium).

Resolution

This is the moment the story technically ends. Most of the loose ends are tied up in such a way that a new equilibrium is created. There are no longer questions about how this plot will resolve. The conflict has concluded. Resolution marks the end of Falling Action, and is usually the second-to-last scene in a movie.

Denouement

This is a French word meaning "settlement." The Denouement gives the audience a chance to see what the new equilibrium looks like. It's when they settle in to the new order of things. Many books present the Denouement as an Epilogue.

A pure Denouement contains no new material and no serious conflict. It just shows the characters in their newly balanced lives, establishing that the audience won't be left wondering what happens next or feeling unsatisfied.

In modern stories, a pure Denouement is rare. It's unfashionable to tie up all the loose ends and leave with no questions. Most thriller/action movies end with something hinting to a sequel. At the very least, they leave the hero in a position ready to do some serious damage, which, of course, everyone will want to see in the next movie.

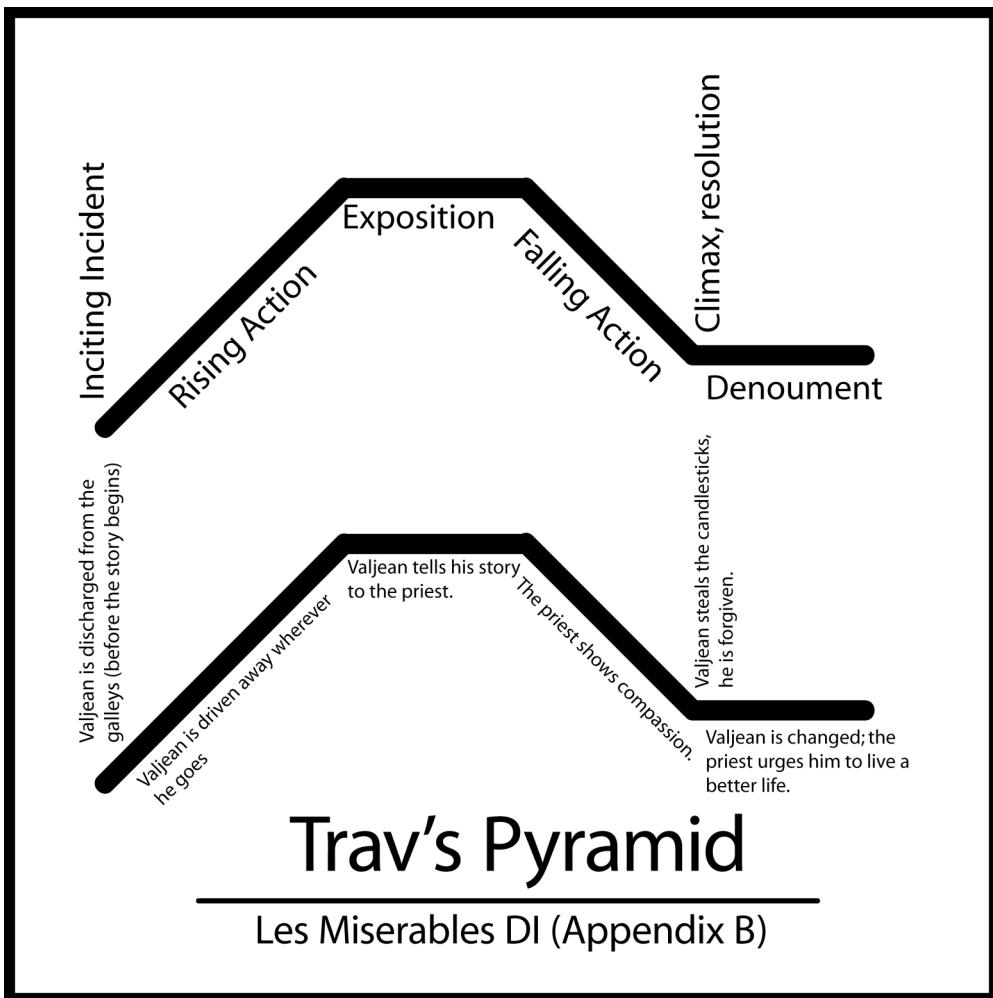
Alternatively, modern stories will both begin and end with comparable, unstable equilibriums. The Harry Potter books are good examples of this. Hogwarts, the fictional school for wizards and witches, is such an eventful place that leaving our hero there, even with no direct hint to a new Inciting Incident next semester, leaves us eager to read the next book.

How to use Freytag's Pyramid

Basically, don't. There are no hard and fast rules about story structure, and many stories (like *The Dark Knight* or *Walk the Line*) simply do not fit into the pyramid at all. Understanding Freytag helps you understand stories. But don't bend your story to fit the pyramid.

So why did you just read through three pages of something you're not supposed to apply? Because understanding Freytag's Pyramid will help you understand the elements in your own story. Don't be overly legalistic about this. These elements help when you're cutting because they help you focus on the purpose of your piece. Use them as tools, not rules.

There have been variations of Freytag's Pyramid. Sometimes building your own pyramid works better with your interp. Consider the following pyramid, which follows the script I used to win nationals:



The Inciting Incident - Valjean's sentence and release - happens before the piece begins. But that doesn't make it any less pivotal. It's discussed extensively all through the story. Valjean's basic struggle is getting over his resentment about how he was treated and becoming someone who deserves respect. He can't do that until he comes to terms with the Inciting Incident.

All through the Rising Action, the audience is wondering what the Inciting Incident was. He's being kicked out of a tavern. A homeowner drives him away at gunpoint. He's sleeping on a bench in the cold after

56 Keys to Interp

knocking late in the night on doors. Why? We're still not sure, because we haven't had an exposition to explain how Valjean was doing at the start of the story.

When Valjean steps into the priest's house, he monologues about the Inciting Incident for a bit. This is the Exposition. Now we understand the entire conflict, but not how it will resolve.

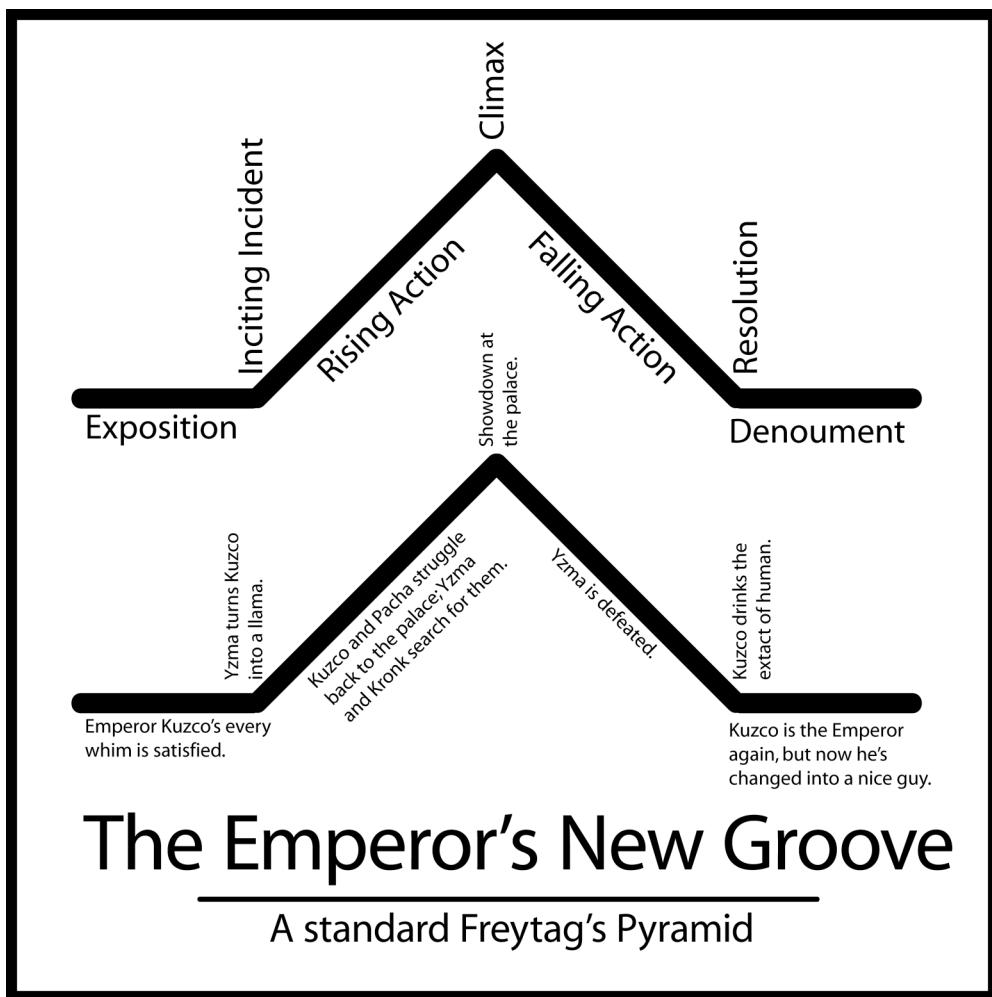
When the priest invites Valjean into his home and feeds him, the action begins winding down. Valjean no longer lives in a cold world of abandonment. There are some who are willing to help out of charity.

The next morning dawns. Valjean has disappeared, and the silverware with him. When he is brought back to face the man he robbed, we reach the climax. The priest holds Valjean's fate in the palm of his hand. If he reclaims the silverware, he dooms Valjean to a life of despair. Instead, he gives the silverware away (and the candlesticks to boot). Valjean is deeply moved by this act of grace. The story has been resolved.

But to just to make sure there are no doubts, we need a twenty-second denouement. The priest's closing monologue helps everyone visualize what the future will be like for our characters.

This piece follows a different path from the one laid out by Freytag, but it still pieces together the elements of a good story. Everything has a purpose and keeps the plot moving forward.

Every story is a chain of elements. Cutting for purpose makes sure none of the links on the chain are missing. Let's take another example from another one of my favorite movies: *The Emperor's New Groove*.



This movie follows standard story structure *to a tee*. Notice, though, that while the pyramid follows the story chronologically, it is not drawn to scale. Roughly 80 percent of the movie is handled just in Rising Action. This is common practice. Watching the action wind down for half an hour would get uninteresting, forcing the story to “drag on” longer than it should. This was a popular criticism of *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, which approximately 30 minutes of Falling Action, and a comparably lengthy Denouement.

I hope you get the idea. Examine your own piece the same way. Find a purpose behind every moment in your piece. If you can't, bring out the scissors.

Cutting for Intensity

A strong understanding of intensity is crucial to every aspect of your interp, from cutting to acting. Let us study it here.

Intensity is the level of emotional investment required from an audience by a piece. Intensity varies every moment, dynamically adjusting to the plot and performance. A man mowing his lawn has a low level of intensity because we don't need to connect deeply with such a scene to be compelled by it. On the other hand, a man learning that his long-lost son has returned can only be properly consumed if the audience is willing to get swept up in the emotion of the moment.

Intensity is all about trust. When you raise the intensity in a piece, you are asking the audience to join you at the higher level by investing more in the piece emotionally. If they trust you and think you will reward this investment, they will follow along. If they don't trust you, there will be an emotional disconnect.

The theater company with which I performed West Side Story opted to do a few shows exclusively for school field trips. These shows were a lot of fun – we streamlined the production and cut out intermission to accommodate younger audiences. The energy from performing in front of hundreds of grade schoolers was incredible.

I'll never forget the first field trip show we did. At the climax of the story, the main character was shot by his lover's boyfriend. A real gunshot flashed across the stage, along with a deafening boom. Tony fell to the stage in Maria's arms, and the rest of the cast watched in tearful shame the tragedy their hatred had caused. My fellow cast members expected the usual reaction from the audience: a shocked hush, and perhaps a few tears. Instead, they were greeted with laughter!

Later in the green room, many of the performers lamented this aloud. They wondered what had gone wrong – if their performance hadn't been good enough, if the kids hadn't been paying attention.

West Side Story touches on themes vastly more mature than kids can grasp. Our young audience was able to follow the story, and trusted us enough to invest in the story as we gradually raised the intensity. But seeing a young man shot down in the arms of his lover is something a six-year-old mind cannot comprehend. Six-year-olds don't have the maturity or life experience to grasp tragedy. The moment the shot rang out, we raised the intensity beyond what our audience was able to handle. There was an emotional disconnect, and the kids released the tension they had the only way they knew how: by laughing.

While more mature audiences will be more subtle about their loss of interest, the effect of an emotional disconnect is just as devastating as if they all burst out laughing in the heat of your climax. When you're watching a movie and you suddenly roll your eyes and announce: "That is so unrealistic," you're unconsciously distancing yourself from an emotional disconnect. If you pay close attention when watching movies with groups, you'll notice that such comments only occur immediately after a large increase in intensity.

How do you avoid this? How do you escort your audience to a high level of intensity without losing them along the way? By moving gradually, and building trust.

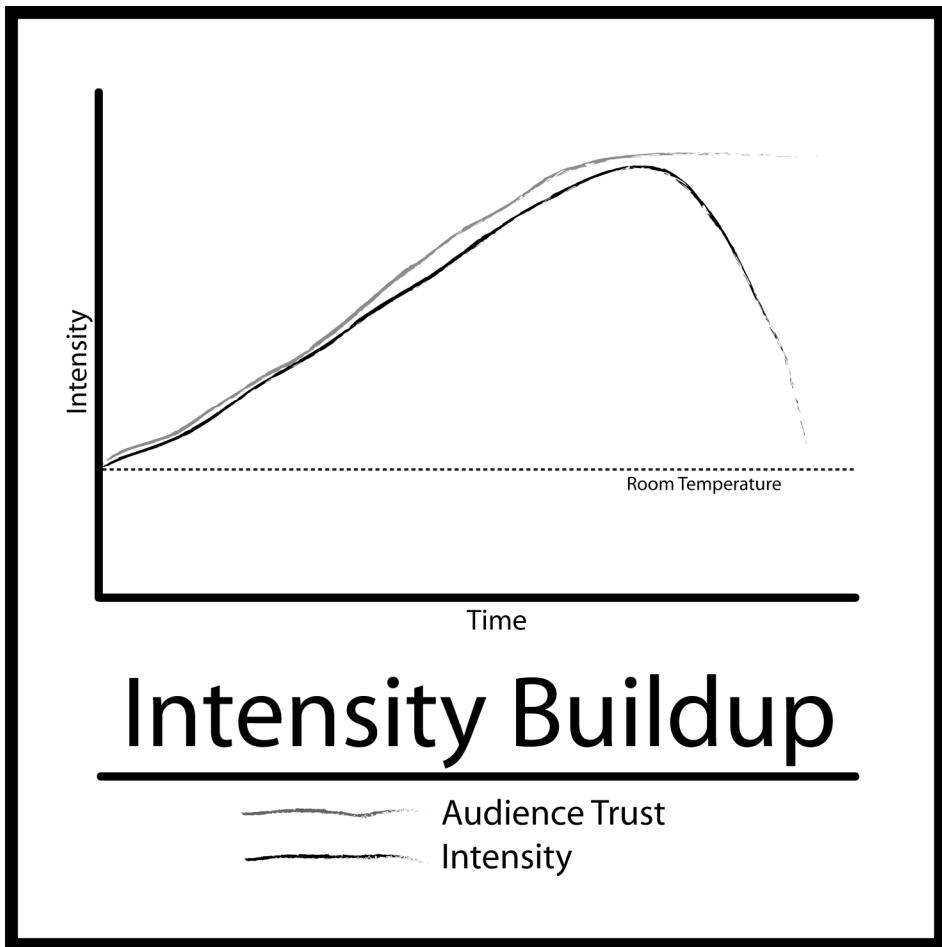
Before you begin your piece, your audience has zero emotional investment in you. That means an intensity level of zero (conversational, room temperature) will not threaten your audience. On the other hand, screaming and wailing pushes into a higher intensity level that your audience doesn't trust you enough for. Your audience can react to this spike two ways: by deciding to trust you (a very unlikely reaction) or by disconnecting.

But if you start a piece at zero, your audience members will quickly begin to trust. They will find that you are "safe" for their emotions. You don't threaten them. You identify because you are on the same emotional plane. The trust level goes up; they are willing to follow you up to intensity level one (some mild conflict) if you choose to go there. And of course, you do.

Many interpers make the mistake of starting a piece with a high level of intensity. Because they haven't built up trust first, they push the audience away – and having disconnected emotionally, it is very difficult to reconnect.

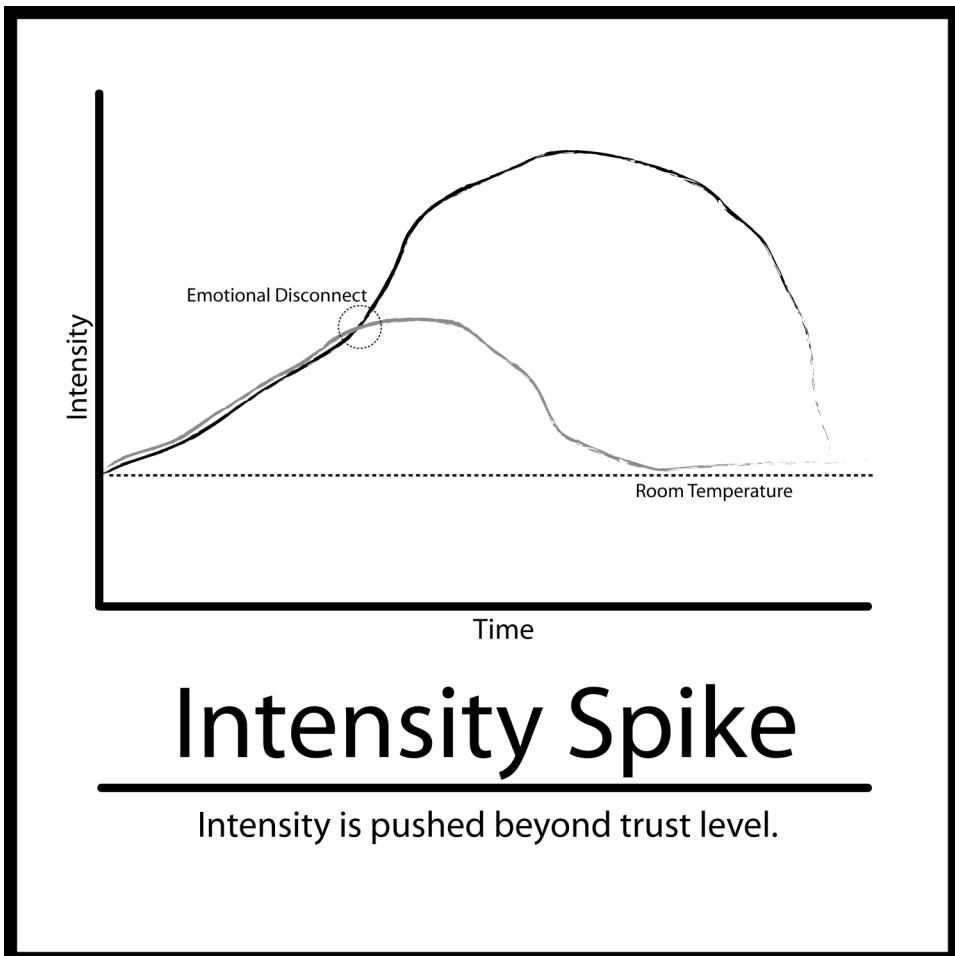
The better choice is to start at the “room temperature” of the audience and slowly build your intensity, never pushing it higher than your trust level.

If you raise your intensity gradually and effectively, your audience will continue to follow you. If you reward the investment along the way, there is no limit to how far you can take your audience. Consider the intensity buildup diagram below. Intensity starts just below trust. As trust increases, the interpreter has more room to play in terms of the intensity level, and can increase it at will.



As you probably guessed, intensity buildup goes hand in hand with Freytag's pyramid. Exposition has a low level of intensity, and rising action slowly builds intensity as trust increases. The climax is usually the intensity high water mark. And, just as we need a resolution to show us the new equilibrium of the characters, we need a drop in intensity to be able to let go of the story when it finishes. Stories that end with a high intensity level are tremendously unsatisfying.

The key to this process is to move gradually, rather than risk pushing outside the audience's trust level. Such a mistake has an effect like the diagram below:



When the intensity exceeds trust, an emotional disconnect occurs. The audience withdraws from the performance and the trust level free-falls. The only way to get it back is to drop intensity back down to the trust level and slowly work it back up (but more carefully this time, as the audience has already jumped ship and won't hesitate to do it again).

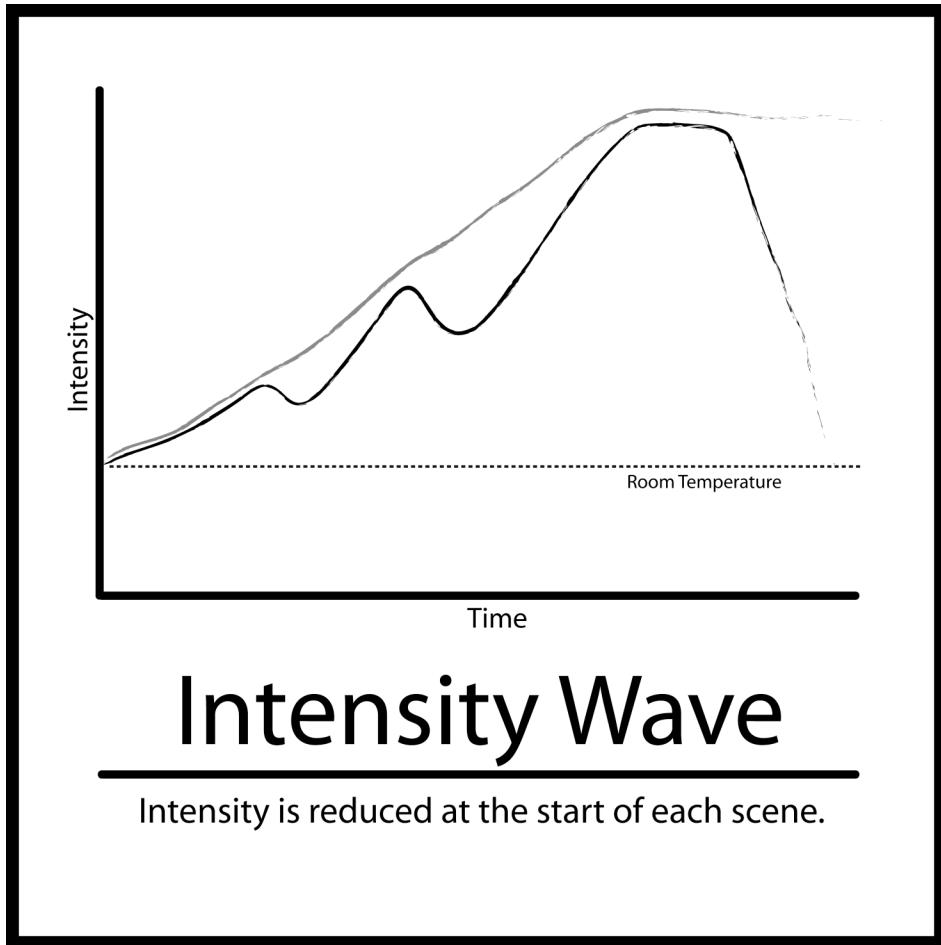
The longer the emotional disconnect lasts, the worse the problem gets, and the further down the audience's trust level falls. Eventually trust will

flatline back near room temperature and it will be almost impossible to bring it back up. This spells disaster for your performance, so you must always be aware of where you are in relation to the audience.

There are some moments in interp that reduce intensity whether you like it or not. The most common ones are switching from scene to narration (discussed extensively in future chapters) and making a scene transition. Rather than fighting these unavoidable elements, embrace them.

A steady rise in intensity is predictable and exhausting to watch. Audiences need a break to catch their breath. If you give it to them, it will actually increase the trust level even more – provided you don't let the break last too long.

The most advanced and effective approach is the Intensity Wave, shown on the following page...



Think of each individual scene as having its own intensity arc, steadily building and then dropping away (either before or immediately after it ends). Then drop down, but not as far down as the beginning of your last scene. Build up to a new high, then drop down again.

Interestingly enough, this wave isn't unique to performing arts. Many aerobics regimes use the same technique to plan a workout (with intensity meaning greater exertion). Something about the human body reacts well to this approach. Harness that.

A final warning: every audience has an invisible intensity ceiling beyond which you cannot build trust. This ceiling is different for every audience. For instance, the kids watching West Side Story were unable to stay connected past the gunshot. We pushed past their intensity ceiling. More mature audiences will have higher ceilings, but a million factors can impact its exact location, including personal experience, trust of the other people in the room, and how they reacted to the piece before you (warmed up by a good intensity arc, or hardened by an emotional disconnect). It's hard to predict exactly where the intensity ceiling will be, so it's best to avoid pushing the limits. In other words, don't experiment to see how far you can push your audience. As we'll learn later, this will result in a better acting performance as well.

Again, understanding intensity will impact every aspect of your interp. But it all begins when you're cutting your piece. Plan each scene around the intensity wave, stay connected to the audience trust level, and watch your performances flourish.

Cutting for Intensity

1. Select a well-known book or movie. Analyze it in terms of Freytag's Pyramid and the intensity arc.
2. What factors would cause two people to take different amounts of time to read the same script?
3. What factors would cause two 1300 word scripts to take different amounts of time?
4. How much of an average conversation is story? How much is character?
5. Does real life follow Freytag's Pyramid?
6. Does everyone build trust the same way?

CHAPTER 4

Memorizing

Now that you've got a clean cut of a brilliant piece, it's time to commit it to memory. Your piece will stay with you for the rest of your life. It will become a part of you. Decades from now, you'll still be impacted by this piece in ways you don't even realize. The journey of grappling with your interp never quite ends, but it starts the moment you pick up your script for the first time and begin to memorize. As always, the right approach now can save you time and tears later. As the old adage goes: "Well begun is half done."

Though memorization is a prerequisite to performance, you never stop memorizing as long as you're performing. There is always some additional detail to add to the piece – and as you add characterization and blocking, you'll learn to "lock it in" by memorizing that, too. Your memorization journey will continue until the very last time you perform the piece.

The Right Way to Memorize

The way you process and retain information is unique to you. You see the world in a special way that no one else can see. You have a memory that no one else can fully understand. Your mind is special. It works in special ways.

There are some mental wizards who can flip through a deck of 52 playing cards, then close their eyes and recite the exact sequence without error. "King of hearts, two of spades, ten of spades, jack of diamonds..." Such people have mastered techniques for memorizing long sequences of items. You could give them a page full of random numbers and they

could memorize it in a few minutes. But give them an interp script and they would be hopelessly lost.

There are also folks who have memorized hundreds of Bible verses and quotations. They're so accustomed to learning short strings of text they can practically do it in their sleep. But ask them to memorize all of Proverbs 13 and they'll come apart like confetti tossed into the air. They don't know how to connect the verses.

During my interp competition, I developed a method of memorization that worked well for me. I've also talked with countless others who have unique methods that worked well for them. I'll be offering these techniques for memorization in this chapter, some you'll find useful, others not. That's okay. Find the keys that fit your style best.

Memorization Before Characterization

A mistake common to novice interpers is muddling memorization with characterization. The error is determining how you will act a certain role before you fully memorize the piece. You should certainly be aware of characterization before you memorize, but it is a step that should always come after you memorize the entire piece, and for good reason.

As you memorize, you'll become more and more familiar with the lines of the characters. The characters move from simple constructs on a page to living and breathing creatures that you want to convey faithfully. As you memorize, the characters come alive, the more you discover about the characters, and the easier it is to characterize them—*after* you finish memorizing. Waiting until after you've memorized the piece will make it that much more effortless and natural.

When you begin memorizing, avoid making sounds or gestures. Don't read aloud. Just follow the words with your eyes. Listen with your mind as intonations and voices begin to whisper to you. When you're feeling more confident, move your lips over the words. Then mutter under your breath. Try not to impose your own idea of what a character should sound like onto the line. You're more than just memorizing it; you're getting to know it.

Force nothing. The time for acting will come later.

The Three Learning Styles (VAK Profile)

For a moment, jot down a paragraph of what your bedroom is like. One good, solid paragraph. Be as descriptive as you possibly can, including what you would see, hear and do in your room. What you write down will tell you a lot about yourself.

Everyone retains information in one of three basic forms: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Knowing which way you best retain information can help develop a unique memorization style.

Visual

Visual learners have a preference for what they see. They think in pictures. They remember events in the past as a sequence of images, like scenes in a movie. They comprehend fastest when presented with a visual form of information, like a maze to navigate or a chart to examine. Mental imagery is very important to visual learners. They're always aware of what they're looking at and what message they're sending with their eyes. The easiest way to spot a visual learner is to ask them a simple question requiring a descriptive answer. Visual learners will tend to close their eyes or look up when they are thinking. This is because they are accessing the "big picture" in their mind. Their speech will typically involve the visual, like "The food looks great!".

Question: "What is your bedroom like?"

Visual answer: (Eyes roll up) "It's got a big south-facing window so the light can pour in every morning. Posters all over the walls, and a big white teddy bear on the bed."

Auditory

Auditory learners prefer listening; they think in sound. Dialogue, music, and lectures are the bread and butter of auditory learners. They love language and have the easiest time remembering the exact wording of a sentence. They remember in terms of describable sequences and facts. For instance, they recall their vacation by telling themselves a story about what they did and where they went. Auditory learners tend to look left or right while in thought and favor phrases emphasizing language and audio, for example: "That sounds like a good idea."

Question: "What is your bedroom like?"

Auditory answer: (Eyes move to the side) "Average size, two windows, a bed in the center and a messy closet to the right of the door."

Kinesthetic

Kinesthetic learners favor the sensual, like touch and emotion. They're the ones with the amazing projects at science fairs. They love making physical contact with things; they go exploring and run their hands along banisters. They remember in terms of a sequence of sensations. A kinesthetic man will remember his first love by how she smelled and made him feel (as opposed to how she looked or what she thought and said). You can spot kinesthetic learners because they tend to look down when thinking and use sensory / physical phrases like: "Get a grip." They also unconsciously reach out and touch someone when they're saying something important.

Question: "What is your bedroom like?"

Kinesthetic answer: (Squint downward slightly and rub face slowly with hand) "A big window so it's nice and warm in the morning, and a big, soft bed – with a cuddly teddy bear."

Look back at the paragraph of your bedroom. You will likely find an emphasis of one of these three learning styles. None of these styles are better or worse than the other. They reveal how we think and how we learn.

Why does that matter to you? Because all the slide shows in the world won't help you much if you're kinesthetic, and a year of lectures will just bore you if you're a visual learner. You need to adapt your memorization style to your learning style. Know how you think, then leverage it.

If you're Visual, try to envision a scene in your head while you're memorizing it. Watch the characters move around and talk. Associate lines with visual cues in the story. When you're more comfortable with your script and you're not looking straight at it, closing your eyes may help.

If you're Auditory, you'll probably find memorizing to be fairly easy. Read the script over and over. Absorb the wording with each pass until you're completely comfortable with it.

If you're Kinesthetic, avoid sitting still while memorizing. Get up and pace. Let yourself gesture. Move your lips with the words.

The Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic (VAK) profile is a very complex neuro-linguistic programming model. The study of VAK is vast and encompasses all sorts of pedagogical theories. For interpers, it is wise to figure out which type of learner you are—and, if you are doing a duo, which type of learner your partner is. It will help you as you memorize and interpret your piece.

A Time to Memorize

Let's face it: memorizing is boring. It's repetitive, tedious, and time consuming. There's nothing creative about it. Because of this, many interpers put off memorizing as long as possible. It is common practice early in the competitive year to enter a tournament with the piece barely memorized. Don't let yourself be like this. The sooner you memorize your piece, the sooner you can start the fun stuff, like characterization, blocking, final timing, and a thousand little polishes that will be required before you'll be ready to show your piece to judges.

Most of your competitors won't find a piece more than a month before the first tournament of the year. Most won't start memorizing until two weeks before. Some will still be memorizing on the ride to the tournament. A few will be pacing in the parking lot during orientation, frantically memorizing.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that such procrastination is a key ingredient for failure. You can't afford to put off memorizing because there is so much work to do afterward. Don't waste your first tournament memorizing. Set the goal early on to have your piece fully memorized at least three weeks before your first tournament. You then will have enough time for the fun stuff.

Set realistic goals that give yourself plenty of time to memorize. For instance, you can usually memorize a piece in two weeks if you dedicate an hour to memorizing each day. Become consumed with the piece, always thinking through the lines, even while you eat breakfast and brush your teeth.

For most interpers and pieces, 20-30 complete readthroughs of the script are all it takes to develop a working familiarity. This is perfectly doable, but only if you buckle down and push through it.

Stay disciplined. Get it done.

Mnemonic Devices

A mnemonic (nu-MON-ik) device is a memory or learning aid. It's popular with students of hard sciences who have to memorize lists of words. For instance, the sentence...

My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos.

...can help us remember the names of the planets:

Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune.

The sentence...

Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain.

...helps us remember the order that the colors of the rainbow appear:

Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet.

Others prefer acronyms like ROY G. BIV for rainbow colors and HOMES for the Great Lakes of North America (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior).

Remember those memory wizards who can learn the sequence of a deck of cards in one pass? Many of them use complex, variable mnemonics to help them. Such people often measure their memory ability in terms of "digit span," meaning the number of digits they can remember in order, hearing them at a rate of one per second and then recalling immediately afterward without error. The average adult has a digit span of 5 to 9. An unnamed test subject once used mnemonic training to increase his span from 7 (average) to 79.

The mind-boggling Japanese engineer Akira Haraguchi used a story-based mnemonic device to memorize Pi to 100,000 digits (recitation was a grueling sixteen hour process). The point is: mnemonics work.

Of course, mnemonic devices are unlikely to help you in memorizing normal dialogue. You're not memorizing a list; you're memorizing

sentences that connect to each other already. But sometimes, the script will have lines that are hard to distinguish. The best way to avoid mixing them up is to put them into a list and develop a mnemonic for it. I'll give you two examples of mnemonics I've used.

Let's start with a section from a Duo Interp I did from Moliere's *The Would-Be Gentleman*. I played the philosophy master.

JOURDAIN: I wish to write to her in a letter: "Beautiful Noble Lady, your lovely eyes make me die of love"; but I would have this worded in a genteel manner, and turned prettily.

PHILOSOPHY MASTER: Say that the fire of her eyes reduce your heart to ashes; that you suffer day and night for her the torments of a ...

JOURDAIN: No, no, no; I don't want any of that. I simply wish for what I tell you. "Beautiful Noble Lady, your lovely eyes make me die of love." But they must be put in a fashionable way. Pray show me the different ways in which they can be put.

PHILOSOPHY MASTER: They may be put, first of all, as you have said:

*Beautiful Noble Lady, your lovely eyes make me die of love; or else,
Of love to die make me, beautiful Noble Lady, your lovely eyes; or else,
Die of love your lovely eyes, beautiful Noble Lady, make me; or else,
Me make your lovely eyes die, beautiful Noble Lady, of love; or else,
Your beautiful eyes of love make me, beautiful Noble Lady, die.*

JOURDAIN: But of all these ways, which is the best?

PHILOSOPHY MASTER: The one you said: "Beautiful Noble Lady, your lovely eyes make me die of love."

JOURDAIN: I have never studied, and I did all that right off at the first shot!

The hilarious and peculiar phrases used by the Philosophy Master are not hard to learn by themselves. The challenge lies in placing them in the correct order. And order is important, especially in this piece; each sentence is funnier than the one before it. The audience's chuckling always grew steadily during this monologue, and was released into full blown laughter after a short pause and the final word: *die*. But how to remember the correct order of four sentences of nonsense?

I built a mnemonic device that remembered the first word of each sentence (which was enough to prompt the rest of it). Love, Die, Me,

Your. I thought of the sentences in couples. Love and Death, Me and You. From there it was easy to recall the correct order every time.

I once played Riff for a local production of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. Consider this interchange:

RIFF: Weapons.

BERNARDO: Weapons?

RIFF: Your call.

BERNARDO: Your challenge.

RIFF: Afraid to call?

BERNARDO: Belts.

RIFF: Rocks.

BERNARDO: Pipes.

RIFF: Cans.

BERNARDO: Bricks.

RIFF: Bats!

BERNARDO: Clubs!

TONY: Bottles, knives, guns! What a coop full of chickens.

I'm a visual learner. Memorizing this section of the script was a thorn in my side until I developed a mnemonic for it. First, I ignored all of Bernardo's lines; in this short dialogue it wasn't important what he said (this can be a useful trick in some duos). We took turns shouting at each other. Next, I told myself a story in my head. The story went like this:

I'm standing on a small mound looking out at a lake. I pick up a rock and throw it as far as I can, but the rock is heavy and falls disappointingly short. Then I toss a can into the air. I raise a bat and grand slam the can across the lake.

Of course, during the scene I registered it as three simple images: heaving a rock, tossing a can, a powerful hit with a bat. Following that story in my head, it was easy to remember what weapons my character, Riff, proposed.

If you're struggling with a particular section of a script, see if you can create a mnemonic device for it.

The 3 Keys to Yearlong Memorization

Getting a script into your head is one thing. Keeping it there all year is another. How do you stay on top of your game, sometimes with weeks between tournaments?

1) **Rememorize**

No earlier than a week before each tournament, go back and blow the dust off your script. Physically re-read it as if you hadn't memorized it yet. Then put the script down and recite it. Don't worry about acting and blocking. Just focus on the words. This is a good way to catch yourself on any pronouns you may have switched up or a line you were a bit shaky on.

Rememorizing can be a very helpful step to getting back into your script, but it's important not to do it too far or too close to a tournament. Too far, and the benefits will wear off again. Too close, and you'll be seeing a script in your head (or hearing it, or feeling it) rather than a fully memorized and absorbed piece.

2) **Perform for Anyone**

When family and friends come over for dinner, when you and the gang are waiting for the pizza to arrive, whenever someone asks, *do your piece*. You'll get valuable feedback from people who may not have any experience with interp. Actually, it is sometimes better to receive "coaching" from someone other than your coach. It's fresh and unbiased, more like the judges you'll be performing for at a tournament.

You'll also get a chance at a performance experience without having to go to a tournament. Memorizing alone is one thing. Performing for a live audience means you'll give 100 percent. It instantly freshens your memorization to tournament levels.

So don't be shy or embarrassed. If your piece is as good as the previous two chapters should have helped them be, you're not going to bore your audience. Interps are fun to watch. Do your guests or hosts a favor, and gain a little something in the process. If you are not comfortable with performing in front of friends, get over it. It comes with the territory. If you fear it, consider this an opportunity to face your fear and conquer it. You're an interper. So, interp!

3) Load your *Functional Memory*

Science generally recognizes two kinds of memory. Short-Term Memory (STM) holds a limited amount of information in a very available state for a short period of time. STM doesn't appear to be limited by time – that is, you don't suddenly forget your STM information after twenty seconds – but STM can't remember much. When new information comes into STM, the old stuff decays away. Most people's STM can hold four or five items at a time.

Long-Term Memory (LTM) can hold large amounts of information indefinitely. Information is stored in your LTM that you don't even realize you have. But when you bring down the Christmas decorations or flip through old family photos, the LTM information comes flooding back.

Everyone has occasional memory slipups; we all forget things. Some people have serious memory disorders that make basic life functions difficult. But by and large, LTM is a dependable, inexhaustible warehouse of information. Your goal is to get your piece from STM to LTM, but be able to access LTM whenever needed. It is much like the difference between the two memory devices on a computer: RAM (Ready Access Memory) and your much-larger hard drive storage. The hard drive holds hundreds of times more information, but it's slower than the RAM. RAM is fast but can't hold all the data you need and forgets everything when you turn off your system. So the computer stores information that it will probably need right away in RAM, and leaves the rest on the hard drive.

I find it helpful to divide LTM into two parts: functional and archive. Functional memory is information you can access right away when your mind goes there. Archive memory is information that you haven't forgotten, but you will have to think about for a bit before you remember.

When you're walking through an airport looking for your flight, your gate number is loaded into your functional memory. When someone asks you how old you were when you learned to ride a bike, you'll have to stop and access your archive memory.

What's the difference between the two? *Usage*. You probably already know how many fast food restaurants there are in your town, but you'd have to stop and think about it because you don't dwell on that sort of thing every day (or at least you shouldn't). In contrast, you probably use your email password daily. It's loaded into your functional memory.

Your script will always be in LTM, probably for the rest of your life. If you don't practice it for a while, it will begin to decay in your mind as it transitions from functional to archive memory. Throughout the competitive season, you need to keep your memorization fresh.

So what does all this theory mean practically? It means that in the week before each tournament, you need to reload your functional memory. Doing your piece (even if it's just in your head) at least once a day for that last week is helpful.

Continue your functional memorizing through the tournament, too. Don't be the socialite who stands in the halls chitchatting but can't remember their piece. Pace the parking lot or hallway reciting your piece for a half hour between rounds. Loading your piece into the forefront of your functional memory will pay huge dividends when you appear in front of an audience.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of VAK learner are you?
2. Have you ever used mnemonic devices? What were they?
3. Someone who is terrible with names was just introduced to your entire family. What mnemonic device would help him remember everyone's names?
4. How many times would you choose to perform your piece for an audience between tournaments?
5. In what form (short term, functional, archive) do you retain what you learned in Chapter One?

CHAPTER 5

Acting

What This Chapter Is Not

Acting can be a very complex business. Most professional actors study the art of acting for years. Entire libraries have been written on the subject. Though I am a student of acting, I am not an authority on it. This book is about *interpers*, and though I'm a pretty good actor, I'm about coaching champion interpers, not impeccable actors.

That said, an interper must become acquainted with some of the theory and techniques they'll be using in their interps. If anything, studying acting as an interper may help get you started in a lifelong formal study of acting. This chapter isn't going to turn you into Meryl Streep, but there is enough here to unlock many doors for you in the interp world.

Everyone Is Special

That's right. You get a golden star.

Seriously, you may have thought memorization was personal, but it's nothing compared to acting. There are few hard and fast rules about acting because everyone's understanding of portraying a role is unique and special. It's built on a lifetime of personal experiences, opinions, and emotions.

Fundamentally, acting is not difficult. Children act with little conscious effort. They naturally understand how to let go of themselves and become someone else. They don't need an expert coach to figure out how to do it. They just pretend.

This is because children haven't yet created an identity for themselves. They're free to let their imagination run wild. In children this behavior is encouraged; in adults it is suppressed in favor of more productive activities. The complexities of life and experience over time limits our ability to act.

It's definitely helpful to study and practice. In this chapter more than any other, you must approach what you are reading as a set of keys. No one on the planet acts in the same way you do. Take what works, and leave the rest.

Acting in Interp

Think of your favorite film actors. Mine include Tom Hanks, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Kate Beckinsale, Antonio Banderas, Jimmy Stewart, Mel Gibson, and Milla Jovovich. Your favorites, too, have their own unique forms of acting. Some forms, like method and literal acting, are popular or famous. It is unlikely that any of your favorite actors use techniques you can implement for interp. Let me explain why.

Of the various forms of acting, none are more famous than *method*. Method acting involves an effort to become the character as much as possible, to the point that the actor's mind does not distinguish between *self* and *role* (or, in other cases, to the point that there is only the faintest degree of separation). Absolute dedication to method acting means playing the character 24/7. If you're playing Don Quixote on set, you don't walk off and become yourself again. You walk off set and attack a windmill – even if no one is watching. You're oblivious to your identity as an actor.

Daniel Day-Lewis made a name for himself as a method actor in 2002 during the filming of *Gangs of New York*. The film was set in the 1800s. When he contracted pneumonia during filming, Day-Lewis refused to accept treatment for it because such treatment did not exist when his character lived.

Such extreme measures are regarded by some as the height of professionalism and dedication. By others, as pointless excess. For the sake of argument, let us assume you want to adhere to the principles of method acting: you want to become your character as fully as possible.

A theater actor has the privilege of walking out onto stage and beginning his performance without introductions or qualifications. No one stands up in the middle of the first scene and says, “Hey, wait a second. Who are you? I mean, what’s your real name? Let’s get ourselves introduced, and *then* you can do your performance.” In theater and film, the actor’s real-world identity is unimportant. The audience has paid to see a show and they’re going to watch it.

In contrast, interp involves introductions. You shouldn’t be in character when you introduce yourself; you should be yourself. You have no choice but to break character.

HEAD JUDGE: Speaker four?

SPEAKER FOUR: I am here.

HEAD JUDGE: What’s your name?

SPEAKER FOUR: Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

Even after the interp begins, method acting is difficult. Film and stage actors portray one character, so they can immerse themselves as fully as they wish. Interpers usually portray a significant handful of characters, making lightning-fast transitions between them.

This makes immersion as an actor virtually impossible. You can’t get worked up into an emotional frenzy, or become completely consumed by your character. You’ll have to show someone new right in the middle of it, making instant, dynamic switches throughout the speech.

Intro to Physical Acting

This chapter will present a form of acting that is both completely convincing and totally applicable to the unique challenges of interp. It’s called *physical acting*, and it’s one of the oldest kinds of formal acting (used in ancient Greek theater). It’s a sort of techniqueless technique – one of the most basic forms of acting ever conceived. With it, you’ll be able to deliver consistent performances every time. Hot rooms, small audiences, and personal exhaustion will cease to be obstacles for you. You won’t need to “get into character,” and you won’t have any trouble switching roles in the blink of an eye. Physical acting is effective and can be very natural, but truly mastering it takes years of practice.

So, what is it? Physical acting is a form that emphasizes use of the body as the only instrument in a performance. In other words, it makes no effort to “get into an actor’s head.” Physical actors do not “become” their roles; they don’t feel great emotion; they don’t transform.

Method acting is based on an idea that there is a clear line of communication between emotion and performance. But even method acting’s most famous adherent, Constantin Stanislavski (basically the father of modern acting) only considered emotional memory to be effective as a rehearsal tool. Emotions are clunky in real performances. They’re hard to control. Remember that one time you couldn’t stop laughing? Imagine being taken from that moment and having to walk into a room and do a scene in which you saw your best friend dangerously sick with disease. If your acting came from within, it would be incredibly difficult. You wouldn’t be emotionally prepared. It would be obvious you were about to burst back into fits of laughter.

We have limited control of our thoughts, and control of our emotions is even shakier. It takes training, focus, and dedication to harness them as an actor. The only thing we have full control over is our body. Our body is what we do. There is an ironclad line between body and performance. If our body knows exactly what to do when our best friend is in the hospital, it doesn’t matter if we were rolling on the ground with fudge on our faces five minutes earlier. The muscles take over.

Whereas you think you’re widening your eyes and pursing your lips, the audience sees deep, suppressed anguish. Whereas you think you’re cracking a slowly widening smile and catching your breath a few times, the audience thinks you’re coming to terms with winning the lottery. The audience can’t tell the difference between a genuine, completely immersed method performance and a carefully controlled physical performance.

The challenge, of course, is in determining what your body is supposed to do. That will require some dedication to practice and rehearsal. The most important part of physical acting is characterizing. Let’s dig in.

Intro to Characterization

Think of Characterization as the creation of a template. It keeps you from having to reinvent the wheel every time your character has a line or

action. It means you don't have to start from scratch. You start off with everything you already know about the character.

If you know the character has a high-pitched, whiny voice, you don't have to ask yourself what voice to use for each new line. You've got that question solved. If you know your character has a broken leg, you'll adjust his movements to account for the crutch. With solid characterization, you'll be able to physically alter your body and speech patterns to fit your template and refer back to the template of how you want your character to behave.

Once your template is complete, you'll have to apply it to your character, then tweak and edit the result as necessary to create the finest possible result.

The 6 Keys to Characterization

1) ***Self-Annihilate***

Like your character, you have your own unique traits and behaviors that set you apart. Your posture, smile, laugh, favorite gestures, accent, status, and a thousand other traits make you distinct. When you behave differently, your friends notice that you are "not yourself."

Your character has its own posture, smile, laugh, etc.—entirely different from you. Though your bodies are technically the same, your character may be stronger than you, or have a broken arm, or be blind, or taller or shorter.

If you simply add your own traits to your character, you'll get a confused mess. You'll look like yourself pretending to be someone else, because there will be plenty of "self" left over and erroneously bleeding over into "role." The only way to prevent this is *self-annihilation*.

Think of your body as a sophisticated robot. Your physical body has been designed to look and function exactly like a real human. But it doesn't naturally do anything unless certain files are loaded onto your brain. There's a file that says: "Sound of Crying," another: "Reaction to Kindness," and another: "Sensitivity to Personal Space Violations." There

are thousands of files in your brain, and they're being constantly altered and rewritten and new ones are being added as you experience life.

If you were to delete all of those files, you would have a blank slate. You'd have a human body: fully functional and reflexive, but with no personality. Your "self" would be removed from your body. This is "self-annihilation."

It is onto this blank human-robot that you can now load your new character. If you build from scratch, it will be impossible for your personal traits to bleed over onto your character. You'll be limited only by your imagination and the physical limitations of your body.

Self-Annihilation is not just a step in the process. It's a foundation. The moment you take on a role, you should self-annihilate. You should remain annihilated until you are done acting.

2) Learn the Facts

You should know as much as possible about your character. What you can't find out, make up. Know where he was born, what his childhood was like, his relationship with his friends and family, important events in his life, his likes and dislikes, his emotional complexities. You should know how he thinks, what he wants, and what he's afraid of.

The blank body created by self-annihilation creates a massive question: what goes on this body? The character's facts are the answers to that question. How does the character react when someone raises a fist? He was beaten up by all the bullies in school, so it follows that he would flinch and shy away. How does the character change when he goes outside? He spent the last four years in a bombing shelter, so he'll squint and put on sunglasses, then look around in wonder and fear.

The more you know about the character, the more believable your characterization will be. If I tell you to look into the distance like a sailor, you'll be at a loss about how to do it accurately. If I tell you the character is a sailor who was on his way home after four years of naval war to be with his wife who was in labor when he left, you'll have a much better idea how to look into the distance.

3) *Fill in the Blanks*

If you memorized correctly (“listening” for the voice of your character), you should already have some idea of how your character should sound. Now it’s time to begin execution. Perform the character’s lines, starting silently and slowly adding volume and body movements. You will grow more and more familiar with the piece and more confident in performing it.

Try not to force anything. Don’t worry about character consistency or having a perfect accent. Right now you’re building the “soul” of the character, which you will adjust in the next step.

There will be moments when you’re not sure what to do with your character (i.e. how to stand, how to gesture). When this happens, follow the next two steps.

First, make sure you’re fully self-annihilated. Remember that self-annihilation liberates you to fully become your character. You can be totally shameless. You would never weep in front of a stranger or shoot someone in the back. But your character might. Don’t be afraid of stepping outside your box. Self is gone, and your box with it. You’re in your character’s box now.

Second, go with your first impression. Your character may surprise you sometimes with an eyebrow raise that you didn’t consciously think of, but which really feels good and adds a new dimension to your performance. Right now you’re trying to fill in the blanks; you’re writing a first draft of your character. Don’t overanalyze. If you have something that works, use it.

4) *Differentiate*

One of the unique challenges of interp lies in a varied cast. You must switch from the World War II marine to the terrified French farm girl to the jealous Nazi boyfriend so effortlessly that the audience forgets they are watching the same actor.

This is even harder if the characters are similar. Maybe your cast contains three old Russian fishermen. They’re all different in their own ways, but the audience is just going to be seeing what they have in common: they’re

hunched over, they have wrinkled faces and tired voices, and they each speak with a Russian accent.

So once you have a rough draft of all your characters, it's time to set them apart for the audience. The biggest differentiators are, in order of importance: posture, speech, and face. It is helpful to use a mirror to experiment and practice.

Posture is the way you hold your body. If one of your characters is a guard at Buckingham palace (ramrod straight body) and another is a hunchback (almost doubled over), the audience won't have the least bit of difficulty telling the difference.

Consider your own posture. If you stood behind a sheet and used a bright light to throw a shadow onto the sheet, what would the audience see? Would each character cast a different shadow? Experiment with variations to differentiate your postures as much as possible. Move your legs apart at the feet or the knees. Throw your gut out or suck it in. Hunch over. Lean back. Position your shoulders. Determine where your head sits in relation to the rest of your body. Push your chin in or out. Find where your character comfortably leaves his hands. There is no alternative to extensive experimentation. Don't be afraid to try something crazy. The more varied your characters' postures are, the better. Try everything and keep what works.

Speech is the combination of voice and accent. Voice is what happens in your chest and throat: your control of the diaphragm; the force and airiness of your breath, your vocal placement, etc. Accent is about how you shape the sound to form words. We'll cover both in a few pages; right now it's just worth noting that either voice or accent can make your character totally unique.

Face includes the shape of the facial features and the choice of expressions. You can change the shape of your character's face in many ways, but be warned: unless you want to look humorously cartoony, keep it subtle. You want the character's face to still have plenty of room for expressing a variety of emotions. Something extreme (like raised eyebrows, bugging eyes, and a wide frown) will be distinctive but won't give you any room for variation within the character. Adjust your face in a comfortable, subtle way. Pushing your jaw forward or back, very slightly raising an eyebrow, flaring your nostrils, or pushing your tongue past your teeth should be enough to change your facial shape.

You should also be aware of where your character usually hangs his jaw – and be aware that a wider mouth and eyes suggest youth, naiveté, honesty, and innocence.

More importantly, you should be deliberate about your facial expressions. This can be tricky because you already have so much to consider about what you're doing with your face to express the character. Don't stress too much about differentiation until you're confident about the rest. Then consider: do two of your lead characters both love to raise their eyebrows in shock? If so, give one of them a new way of expressing surprise, such as gasping.

5) *Tweak*

Practicing your piece will help you get to know your characters. You'll notice things that can be changed about your characters to make them clearer and more compelling. Coaches and fellow competitors from your club can be incredibly useful in tweaking. Ask them what they think of each character and contrast it with what you wanted to communicate. Then edit your characterization to match. Maybe your accent is too thick. Maybe your old man should seem older. Find the little ways to improve and implement them. You'll continue to make tweaks all year long.

6) *Lock it in*

You're going to be acting physically, and that means you need to be able to portray your character without ever having to "get into his head." You'll need to make lightning-fast transitions between characters. There will be no time for other considerations.

It's customary to lower your head for a few seconds before beginning your interp. Use this time to self-annihilate. Then, when you raise your head, perform that first transition.

To keep it fast, you'll have to know exactly what you need to do physically to get into character: your posture, speech and face; and where that character is in the context of the scene. You need to know your stuff cold and be well practiced in snapping into each character – leaving no residual from the one before it. Many people interp, but few master this skill with the accuracy and speed it takes to be excellent.

Practice, practice, practice. Lock it in.

Voicing

Your characters should all have different voices. It's tragic how many interpers fail to do this because they are unaware of their own potential in creating unique voices. Don't be one of those people.

Once again, experimentation is your friend. Changing the sound of your voice involves a lot of practice. Some people turn to formal training from vocal coaches to develop their dynamic capacity. Professional vocalists invest years of practice into their placement, vibrato, etc. Voice actors practice voice therapy to modify their voice.

Practice often for short periods; it's easy to strain your vocal chords when you're experimenting and you don't want to hurt them. The key is frequency – you have to train your voice to respond as you wish and produce certain sounds. Fifteen minutes twice a day is about as far as you should push it.

While "proper technique" is hardly necessary, it's helpful as a starting point to assume control. Stand with your feet flat and balanced, clench your buttocks (yes, it makes a difference), stand straight with your shoulders back, and place a hand on your belly. Now push air from your diaphragm – the point at the base of your ribs. Practice making a long "ah" sound until you can feel your belly vibrate.

This is a good starting point for experimentation, but remember that most people don't speak from the diaphragm. Be ready to vary your technique and posture.

Visualize an invisible ball through which your voice passes in order to convert from air to sound. When you're speaking normally, that ball is in the middle of your throat. Moving the ball around can produce changes in the basic quality of your voice. Give it a try. Practice positioning the ball in a certain point and repeating the following sentence aloud, changing nothing else:

"I have chosen to embrace it."

This sentence is useful because it contains a handful of easy vowel sounds without tricky consonants that close your mouth. This sentence is great for vocal warm-ups and practices.

Resist the natural impulse to raise your pitch as the ball moves up into your mouth. If you hold the same note you'll be able to notice your harmonic changes.

It is technically impossible to voice outside your voice box in your throat, but visualizing distant places can sometimes help.

Middle of throat: Normal

Top of throat: Nasal and Airy

Bottom of throat: Deeply Resonant

Back of throat: Hollow

Front of throat: Flat

Front teeth: Harsh and Airy

Back of neck: Flat and Resonant

Stomach: Very Airy

Heart: Raspky

Once you get the hang of modulating your voice you can branch out and hone your skill. Feel parts of your belly, chest, neck, and face vibrate when you make a sound. Vary and control them. Keep practicing as your vocal strength grows.

Male voices tend to be slightly lower than female voices, but they are most distinct because they resonate in the chest as well as the throat. Female voices generally resonate in the throat only.

Another way to alter your voice is to change the pitch. Walk one character down to the lowest octave you're comfortable with, and give someone else a high-pitched voice. Voices are divided into registers (i.e. ranges of pitch). If you take your voice into another register, it will automatically change its basic sound. This is how males learn to produce female voices, by going up into falsetto and then walking the pitch back down.

With experimentation and practice, you'll be able to give each of your characters a totally unique voice.

If any of your characters have a voice that strains your voice box, you may experience something called *vocal loading*. Your vocal folds hit together several hundred times per second while you're speaking, and

this naturally causes stress that's aggravated if you're using a strange voice. Rest your voice often, especially right before a competitive round. Stay hydrated, but avoid drink that is too hot or too cold as it may damage your dynamic range. Avoid shouting. Your voice is a critical—yet vulnerable—tool to your success in interp. Treat it with respect.

Accents

Goodvoices can do much for you when combined with masterful use of accents. An accent is a unique form of oral expression and pronunciation within a language. Most people think of accents as the regionalization of a language (Southern accent, New York accent, Boston accent) or the transfer of sounds from one language to another (French accent, South African accent, Japanese accent). But to a good actor, accents are much more precise. The fact is, everyone has an accent. Everyone has a way of speaking that is unique to them and where they live.

I once had a coworker who used a soft “i” normally sound except in the word “pink.” She pronounced it “peenk.” A friend of mine stresses all “ah” sounds to about twice as long as most people and uses “ain’t” in the midst of otherwise pristine grammar. I sometimes have trouble with “L” sounds that aren’t at the beginning of a word; I drop them out or minimize them, as in: “a-right,” “reckwess,” “troubo,” and “rebui-d.” We’re all unique in our speech patterns.

Your characters should have accents too. Language or regional accents are great when applicable, but they’re just a starting point. As you memorize slowly and listen for the voice, you’ll hear other accents coming out, accents that are unique to that character.

Depending on the character, it is sometimes possible to create a new accent as extreme as a language accent. For example, my portrayal of Captain Ahab from Moby Dick included a completely original accent that had nothing to do with his hometown of Nantucket. It is best described as a mix of Scottish and Spanish. Not a single person called me on this accent – or even, as far as I know, consciously recognized it – because it fit the character so well.

Proper vocal technique involves an accent that softens and emphasizes vowels by opening the jaw and singing into the “mask” at the front of the face. Classic theater actors speak with the same accent because it helps

them project and be understood clearly. The accent sounds more British than American; every vowel is exaggerated. “The theatah ess no playce foh myusic.” Unless you’re doing Shakespeare, there’s no need for you to adopt this accent strictly. But you should be aware of it and be ready to utilize it. You’ll have to open your mouth up more to project.

The key to learning an accent is to listen to it. It’s helpful for many folks to find a movie in which the lead characters use the target accent (like *Cool Runnings* to learn Jamaican). Listen to the accent until you’re comfortable with it. Then begin mimicking. Listen to someone say a line, then pause the movie and say it over, exactly as that person did. Repeat until you get it right. Listen for the differences between your personal accent and the one you’re learning.

Listen for unique accents. I once learned a Russian accent from a 30-second radio ad. If the accent is a variation of your own, start with the most similar accent you can find and isolate the ways in which it is different. Then practice reading text aloud very slowly, stopping and correcting yourself when you make a prounciation error.

Once you’re comfortable repeating lines with an accent, you can strike out on your own. Use the accent in everyday interaction. Don’t worry, though your friends may think you odd, they will still love you. It takes about six hours of accurate conversational use to grow accustomed to an accent, to the point that you can summon it back again when necessary. Practice is absolutely and utterly essential to lock an accent in.

Having learned your accent, you need to keep your mind and mouth conditioned to produce it. Practice often to stay in shape. Don’t let a tournament go by without a few sessions of accent practice beforehand.

Cartoon Acting/Subtle Acting

I love cartoons. The characters fascinate me.

Walt Disney, accredited for the novel developments of 20th century animation, made many important discoveries. Biggest among them was the realization that cartoon characters cannot move like real-world characters. In real life, our movements tend to be small and fluid. When cartoon characters – who are less detailed or realistic – use these subtle

movements, they simply disappear. The audience can't tell what they're doing.

To overcome the problem, Disney exaggerated every gesture to the maximum degree. Cartoon characters tend to be fairly still until they're ready to move; then they move with tremendous purpose. Every inch of their body communicates them.

If the real-life Snow White were surprised, she would gasp and slightly widen her eyes, then raise a hand to her mouth a split-second later. But such a motion is too subtle for a cartoon character, who must open her mouth and eyes as wide as possible, raise her eyebrows, and throw both hands into the air, fingers spread.

Such a reaction on a real-life person would be ridiculous. Cartoons in the real world would look odd. In the cartoon world, Snow White's reaction isn't questioned at all. That's how all cartoon people move. It's perfectly natural.

In interp acting, the dichotomy between cartoon and real life is called "cartoon acting" versus "subtle acting." Both are completely legitimate, but only one kind is ever appropriate for your piece.

It's frustrating to see a piece that doesn't use the right kind of acting. For instance, you might watch a delicious tragedy like *Antigone* presented as a cartoon. The characters move with exaggerated gestures and their grief is expressed at the top of their lungs. As a result, the audience has no serious questions about the characters and is not drawn in – in fact, they may feel pushed away by the emotional barrage. They don't believe these characters are real because even a guilt-stricken father does not shout to rock the palace for his entire soliloquy.

On the other hand, you may watch an absurd comedy with real-life acting. The script has a few funny moments, but you can't shake the feeling while watching that the performer isn't really getting into his piece. You want to see more reactions; funnier characters.

You must choose carefully between *cartoon* acting and *subtle* acting, and to do that, you must understand the basic philosophy behind both kinds:

Cartoon acting delivers a performance to the audience, and subtle acting pulls the audience into the performance.

You never have any questions while watching an overactor. Everything in the character's head (which is usually a single thought or emotion) is clearly displayed so it can be read without the slightest difficulty. Thus, cartoon acting is appropriate for pieces that the audience is not expected to believe or be immersed in, such as farces. The audience doesn't have to work to follow the story, so they can sit back and laugh as the piece washes over them.

On the other hand, subtle acting captures the nuances of human motion and emotion. The audience must pay close attention to the performer's face, wondering if the character is angry, grief-stricken, or grimly determined. They're watching for details, not huge gestures, so they must be sucked in to understand what they're seeing.

Subtle acting is much harder than cartoon acting, but it can be more rewarding because it is the only form that can immerse an audience in a story and communicate complex situations and emotions. The audience never forgets they're watching an interp while in the care of a cartoon actor. But with a good subtle actor, the audience is completely transported. They suspend disbelief in a teenager in a suit standing in a stuffy classroom, because that teenager has so accurately captured another character that it is easier to see him as that character than as the suited teenager.

Subtle acting is therefore appropriate for stories that demand immersion, usually anything involving tragedy, mystery, suspense, or any sort of emotional complexity. Cartoon acting is appropriate for stories that do not require immersion, like farces, situational comedies, and monologues.

It's easy to say that dramatic pieces call for subtle acting and humorous pieces call for cartoon acting, but this generalization is not always accurate. You must make a unique analysis for your piece and determine how you want the audience to experience it. Some comedies are only funny if they're completely believable (which is why so many comedy acts involve a "straight man" who reacts to the absurd characters as the audience would, thereby increasing their credibility). Some tragedies are more compelling if you know they represent something bigger, like *Romeo and Juliet*.

No matter which approach you choose, you should understand the principles behind both. Let's dig in.

The 5 Keys to Cartoon Acting

So, how do you manifest your characters to the fullest?

1) Watch cartoons

Remember, this is research.

Avoid newer cartoons like the ones you'll get on the Cartoon Network; there's been a surge of low-movement cartooning in recent decades in which characters remain fairly stationary and only their lips move; their gestures tend to be awkward and clunky. 3D animation is also of limited use to us for the study of cartoon acting. 3D has too much detail, resulting in less exaggeration.

Your best bets are the Disney classics, like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, along with newer high-quality animations like *Aladdin* and *The Emperor's New Groove*. Old Saturday morning cartoons like *Tom and Jerry* are also fantastic, especially for showing anticipation (I'll explain that in a moment).

Enjoy the films, but don't get sucked into them. You're watching for academic reasons. Study the way the characters move – their timing, their reactions, how they express themselves. Watch for the other cartoon acting keys. You should see them in nearly every shot.

Watch the action through the eyes of a physical actor, noting how physical action communicates. Emulate what you see on screen. It can really help you apply. Here are some samples to try out.

Aladdin: just before *A Whole New World*, Aladdin bends down at a forty-five degree angle with one hand on his thigh, the other arm fully extended toward Jasmine. "Do you trust me?" Eyebrows raised, full smile. Completely inviting.

The Little Mermaid: During *Kiss the Girl*, Eric jerks his head around and asks: "Did you hear something?" Ariel raises both shoulders as far as they'll go, turns her head to the side, cracks a wide but close-lipped smile, and blinks innocently.

Cinderella: The carriage arrives at the house and the Step-mother facetiously invites Cinderella to join them. Cinderella says she can't go. Step-mother: "Not going? Oh, what a shame. But of course, there will be other times, and ..." Cinderella: "Yes. Good night." Step-mother is standing very straight with her hands loosely clasped in front of her. She turns her head to her daughters with an evil grin and closes her eyes, communicating total triumph. Then turns to watch Cinderella leave with a slightly inclined head and squinted eyes.

2) ***Anticipate***

When a real-world batter wants to swing at a ball, he just swings at it. A split-second before a cartoon batter makes a swing, he raises the bat further into the air, raises one leg, and sticks his tongue out to one side. This anticipation makes it obvious what he is about to do and underlines the action when it actually happens.

When you sneeze, you first gasp a breath of air to give the sneeze force. During the actual sneeze, you cover your nose, close your eyes, and incline your head a bit. Cartoon characters go through a protracted: "Aaah-aaah-AAAAH-CHOO!" During the anticipation, they raise their head higher and higher and open their face wider and wider. This makes the actual action (which is a reverse – lower head and close face) more defined.

An interper can anticipate almost anything. Before putting your fork to a plate, you can raise it a bit and incline your head toward it, as if aiming for just the right morsel. Then, you can tilt your head back and open your mouth in anticipation of lowering your head and clamping your mouth on the food. A quick breath through the nose anticipates chewing. A raised finger while chewing anticipates swallowing. Staring at the ceiling after swallowing anticipates: "It's delicious, Mrs. Chatsworth."

When you're cartoon acting, you should anticipate as much as possible. Consider each defined action that your character takes. Then ask yourself if there's a way to prepare for it, or an inverse of that action. The more anticipation you incorporate, the easier it will be for your audience to understand you.

3) Move like a bird

Take a few minutes and go bird watching. Notice the movement of a bird's neck, and compare it to a human's movement.

When a human looks around a room, she moves smoothly and gradually. When a bird looks around, it moves its head in sudden jerks. There's a pause between each jerk to process the new information it can see, then a jerk to a new position. Birds don't look with their eyes; they look with their whole heads.

In the same way, cartoon characters use sudden, decisive movements followed by pauses to take in the direction they're looking. Gradual movement is harder to understand; it can get lost in the cacophony of action. But a quick, jerky movement is unmistakable. It is magnified for the audience so they can pick it up easily.

Watch a movie like Walt Disney's *Peter Pan* and see how the character's movements are birdlike. For instance, when the pirates have captured Wendy and the kids and are dancing around them, they're suspended briefly in mid-air at the top of their leap. Then they go back to the deck, jump back up, and are suspended in mid-air again. This motion is much easier to understand visually than a realistic, smooth up-and-down dance.

There is power in decisive movement, and there is power in stillness. Avoid moving like a human. Instead, be birdlike. Move and pause.

4) Fully manifest each action

Manifestation means the process of materializing. When you decide to do an interp, you have an idea that you manifest by finding a piece, cutting it, memorizing it, and so on. When you want to eat, you manifest that desire by grabbing a banana. You manifest your decision to be a good student by doing your homework.

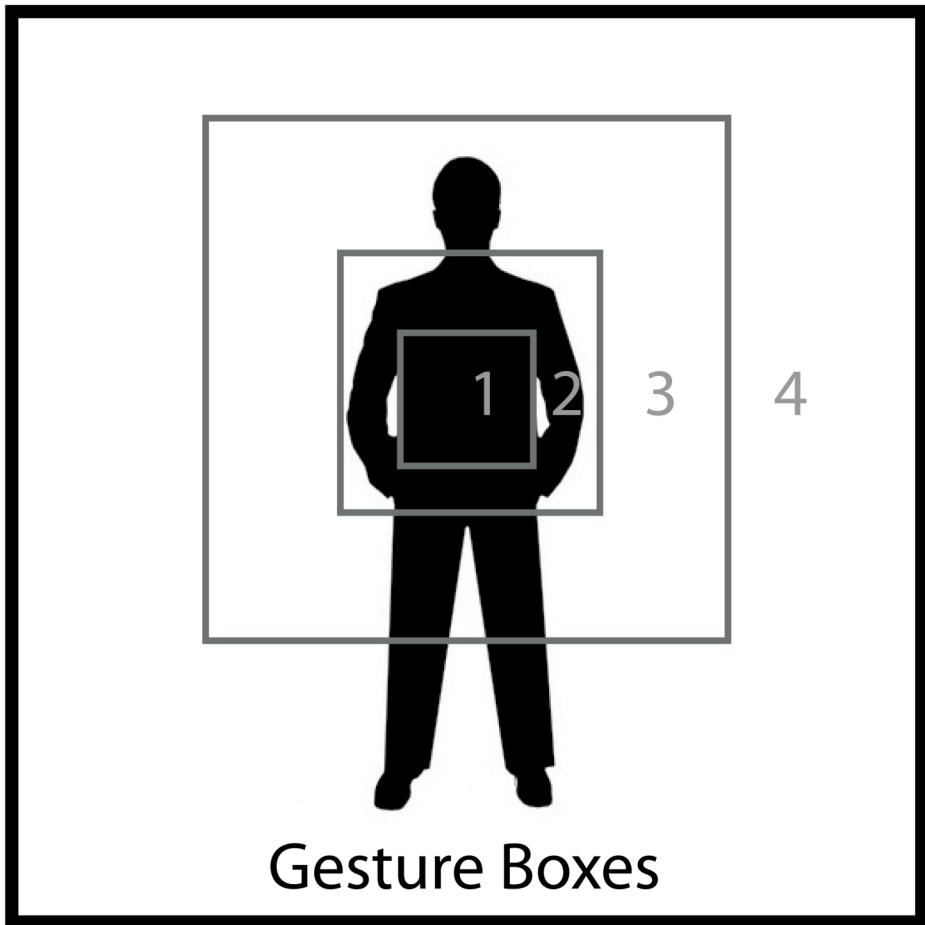
Manifestation is not a feeling. It is the product of a decision based on a feeling. When we're angry (feeling), we decide to punch the wall (decision) so we swing our fist (manifestation). Then our knuckles hurt (feeling), we decide that was a stupid idea (decision) and go bandage our hand, promising never to do that again (manifestation).

Manifestation can be measured. Your decision to eat is manifested by snapping a crust off the edge of a pie or shaving a slice from a block of cheese. But it is more fully manifested by inviting the whole neighborhood to a magnificent 11-course feast with every conceivable delicacy, and eating until you're sick.

Full manifestation is about jumping in head first and doing whatever you're doing to the maximum possible extent. You don't just cross the street: you look both ways, then confidently stride across like a general walking into the palace of a defeated foe. You don't just ask someone to pass the salt: you jump up from the table, go grab the salt, then unscrew the top and vigorously barrage your plate.

Full manifestation of an action is critical to cartoon acting. Let us suppose you have decided to communicate confusion by scratching your head. Rubbing your temple with a fingernail will manifest that, but not fully. The full manifestation of a head scratch is to incline your head upward, wrinkle your nose, slightly open your mouth, and scratch the top of your head with all five fingers in a claw shape.

Gestures can be divided into four categories, or “boxes,” as shown in the following illustration...



Box 1 is the area directly in front of your torso. This is where the smallest, most subtle gestures take place. Most gestures in Box 1 utilize the wrist and fingers.

Box 2 is the area from your waist to your shoulders, and out on either side of your body a similar distance. These are bigger, more confident gestures, but still not intrusive. These gestures usually involve the elbow and wrist.

Box 3 extends to the furthest reach of your hands. These are the most expansive gestures, which make use of your shoulders and elbows.

Box 4 is the area beyond your reach. You must physically move your body to enter Box 4. Such gestures are rare, an example being stepping into a punch. They're more common in cartoons. Characters throw themselves into their gestures with abandon and make full use of their bodies. Think Wile E. Coyote stretching out to catch the Road Runner.

When cartoon acting, use the biggest box you possibly can. Your natural impulse will probably be to use a realistic box for a gesture. To increase its manifestation, move the gesture to the next box up. Don't just show that your hands are empty, spread your arms wide with fingers spread and thrust them at the person who accused you of concealing something.

Make each action big and decisive, and the audience will feel your manifestation.

5) ***Keep it simple***

It's difficult to cartoon act complex thoughts or emotions. Each competing feeling works to drown out and minimize the others. You can fully manifest anger, but anger mitigated by admiration and sentimentality gets tricky. Complexity has no place in a cartoon actor's repertoire.

So whenever possible, try to narrow down what your character is thinking about to a single element. Your character really wants his towel back. He's not thinking about how he was betrayed, he just wants it back. As long as your character is simple or fixated, you can keep his signals clear.

Inevitably, you'll run into points in a script where your character has to enter some level of emotional complexity. In such a case, you can use a simple trick to stay in cartoon mode. I call it *emotional cycling*.

Emotional cycling is the process of jumping rapidly from one emotion to the next while holding only one in conscious manifestation at any moment. Compare:

JANET: *I'm leaving you, Hank.*

SUBTLE HANK: (*confused, surprised*) *What? Why?*

JANET: *There's someone else.*

SUBTLE HANK: (*confused, surprised, hurt, angry*) *Who? The plumber? I swear, if it's the plumber...*

JANET: *It's not the plumber.*

SUBTLE HANK: (*confused, surprised, hurt, angry, suspicious, despairing, pleading*) Janet, please. I know we've had some rough spots. You've been gone so much. I never had a chance.

JANET: *Don't you put this on me! You've been insufferable.*

SUBTLE HANK: (*confused, surprised, hurt, angry, suspicious, despairing, pleading, indignant*) Are you kidding? How can you say that! You've been cheating on me – and don't say you haven't! I can't believe I trusted you. I'm such an idiot. Well, this isn't over, Janet.

With:

JANET: *I'm leaving you, Hank.*

CARTOON HANK: (*surprised*) What? (*confused*) Why?

JANET: *There's someone else.*

CARTOON HANK: (*confused*) Who? (*hurt*) The plumber? (*angry*) I swear, if it's the plumber...

JANET: *It's not the plumber.*

CARTOON HANK: (*hurt*) Janet, (*pleading*) please. (*confused*) I know we've had some rough spots. (*suspicious*) You've been gone so much. (*despairing*) I never had a chance.

JANET: *Don't you put this on me! You've been insufferable.*

CARTOON HANK: (*surprised*) Are you kidding? (*indignant*) How can you say that! (*hurt*) You've been cheating on me – (*suspicious*) and don't say you haven't! (*despairing*) I can't believe I trusted you. (*confused*) I'm such an idiot. (*angry*) Well, this isn't over, Janet.

Real people work like Subtle Hank, with a million emotions swirling around at once. Cartoon people work like Cartoon Hank who uses emotional cycling to fully manifest every emotion individually. As can be expected, cartoons are a fantastic place to go for practicing emotional cycling.

Emotional cycling is a tricky business, and it takes a lot of practice to do correctly. Some transitions – like “surprised” to “indignant” – are fairly easy and can be done smoothly. Others – like “confused” to “angry” – are

trickier. You can show the break in emotional flow by pausing for a moment as your character switches to a new emotion.

Keep it simple by paring down the script and using emotional cycling to stay on top of complex moments.

The 3 Keys to Subtle Acting

What if you want your audience immersed? This means you'll have to jump into the wonderful world of *subtle* acting. The road is rougher here, and there are no road signs. But the final destination is incredibly rewarding.

1) *Maintain dignity*

Remember in Chapter One when we learned that everyone is an actor *all the time*? Let's explore that idea further.

"Dignity" historically meant self-respect or arrogance. Today, it means something a little different. Dignity is a control or attitudinal barrier that prevents a character from doing or expressing something.

When I was a child, I dreaded family functions. I remember wanting to simply know when dessert was being served. But I didn't shout: "Boring! Cake! Cake! Cake! Cake!" Why not? Because I didn't want to hurt everyone's feelings and create an awkward situation. I also didn't want to embarrass myself, my family, or my relatives. The desires to avoid awkwardness and embarrassment were both dignities that kept me polite.

When you're on the verge of tears and someone you don't know very well asks you if you're okay, you say: "Yeah, I'm fine." You're not fine; you just don't want to have to unburden yourself onto this person. You have a dignity that prevents you from opening up.

Real life characters have dozens of complex dignities layered into every situation. Even when they're alone, they have dignities with themselves and their surroundings that keep their inner impulses concealed.

I love Mel Gibson. He's a fantastic actor. His performance in *The Patriot* is like no other. When his son dies in his arms, we see the light leave the

hero's eyes. His world is shattered. But he doesn't raise his arms to the sky and wail. Instead, he shakes his head slowly, holding back sobs, whispering "God, help me" over and over before falling back as tears stream down his face. This grief is compelling because it's believable. Even in the darkest moment of his life, Benjamin still has dignities keeping him from full manifestation of his weeping.

Cartoon characters have between one and zero dignities at any given moment. Subtle characters should never have less than one. Complete release of self is rare in real life. So don't fully manifest any action or emotion. Instead, temper it with dignity.

2) Add subtext

There are always two conversations happening during human interaction: the spoken and the unspoken. Sometimes they're basically the same thing, as when lovers who completely trust each other talk about something with little importance. But often, the unspoken conversation can be totally different. Consider:

KUZCO: Uh, hey. Thanks.

PACHA: Oh. Uh, no problem.

KUZCO: Feels like wool.

PACHA: Yeah.

KUZCO: Alpaca?

PACHA: Oh, yeah it is.

KUZCO: Oh, yeah I thought so. It's nice.

PACHA: My wife made it.

KUZCO: Oh, she knits?

PACHA: Crochets.

KUZCO: Crochets! Nice.

PACHA: Thanks.

KUZCO: So. So I was thinking that ... when I got back to the city ... we'd uh ... I mean there's lots of hilltops and ... maybe I might, you know ...

This dialogue is in *The Emperor's New Groove*. The rest of the movie – including Pacha's next line – has minimal serious subtext. That's to be expected of a cartoon.

This short dialogue, however, illustrates perfectly the paradox between spoken and unspoken conversations. Kuzco and Pacha aren't talking about the wool at all. The subtext goes something like:

KUZCO: I want to still be friends, but I realize how that could be difficult since I mistreated you so badly.

PACHA: You hurt my feelings, but I still want to be nice to everyone – even you.

KUZCO: I feel really bad. I'm sorry. I won't destroy your house. Please just take me back to the palace.

This is how real conversation works. When your mother, significant other, and casual buddy ask you where you were last night, they may all use the same phrasing and body language, but the subtext is completely different.

When I'm coaching, the most common question I ask my student is: "What does your character want?" Sometimes I have to go through the entire script line-by-line asking the same question. Why? Because the interper has neglected subtext.

Remember, the actual line doesn't have to have anything to do with the subtext. Kuzco's apology comes out sounding like a discussion of Pacha's blanket. Consider what your character is thinking and wants to communicate in each line. Then deliver accordingly, and you'll create a level of subtlety that will enrapture your audience in its realism.

3) Exercise Restraint

When you shout, your viewers draw back. When you whisper, they lean in. Subtle acting is about drawing your audience in, so avoid beating anything over the head.

There will be moments when your characters get big and loud. In these moments, ask yourself, "Is there anything here that will fascinate my audience?" Is there enough complexity and nuance to make someone lean

in closely to catch every detail, or is it a cartoony assault that fully manifests an action?

The bigger each action gets, the louder you shout, the more intense you become, the more you must season your performance with subtext and dignity. Never give your viewers everything they want. Instead, whet their appetites. Compel them to keep watching, hanging onto your every action. Make them lean forward and squint in concentration, not wanting to miss a single detail.

The only way to do that is to have details for your audience to watch for. Real people are naturally nuanced, so it's just a matter of capturing that subtlety and presenting it to your audience.

Keep it small. Draw them in.

Status

Two people walk toward each other on a narrow sidewalk. Ten seconds before reaching each other, they make eye contact. Then, something magical happens. One of the pedestrians keeps looking, and walking straight forward. The other pedestrian looks away and quietly walks to the side to make way for the first.

No one has to be trained how to do this. There are no written rules of engagement. But we all know, deep down in our bones, how to play this game.

What decides who walks forward and who veers out of the way? A nifty little social construct called *status*. Status is a defense mechanism that interacts with a person's surroundings by communicating a position on a social pecking order.

The master-servant relationship is a classic example of the basic status interaction. Master plays high status; servant plays low.

MASTER: Jeeves!

SERVANT: Yes, sir?

MASTER: Fetch me my smoking jacket.

SERVANT: Pardon me, sir.

MASTER: Well?

SERVANT: The red or the blue jacket?

MASTER: You know I hate the blue one.

SERVANT: I'm so sorry, sir. But the red one was burned.

MASTER: Burned! You imbecile!

SERVANT: Quite right, sir.

Master's high status is a form of personal defense. He's saying, "Don't bite me; I bite back." Servant's low status is another form of defense. He's saying, "Don't bite me; I'm not worth it."

Of course, Status doesn't necessarily have to be caused by anything external. It's a completely personal thing. Consider:

MASTER: Um, Jeeves?

SERVANT: What now?

MASTER: I'm so sorry to trouble you, but I don't suppose you could bring me my smoking jacket?

SERVANT: You look fine in what you've got on.

MASTER: Oh, you think so? Thank you. I know it's a big imposition. I'm sorry. Forget I asked.

SERVANT: No. It's no trouble. I was headed upstairs anyway. Might as well.

MASTER: Oh, thank you.

SERVANT: But of course, the blue will look awful with those pants.

MASTER: Blue? What about the red jacket?

SERVANT: It was burned.

MASTER: Good heavens! How clumsy of me.

SERVANT: Indeed.

We're all playing the status game every moment we're awake. We play it with our family, our friends, passing pedestrians, even our chairs. We all have one of five roles we like to play, but depending on the situation, some people will vary their status. The five basic statuses are:

HIGH: Plays the highest status of everyone.

OVERLAY: Plays just above normal status, or just above everyone else.

MATCH: Plays the same status as someone else.

TUCK: Plays just below normal status, or just below everyone else.

LOW: Plays the lowest status of everyone.

All status decisions can be categorized as *high*, *overlay*, *match*, *tuck*, or *low*. Though we're usually not conscious of it, we are playing one of these statuses with each person in our immediate circle of interaction. It's not just about what we say; it's our eyes, our stillness, the line of action in our body. Every little detail increases or decreases our status in some way.

It's worth noting that there is no "right" status to play, just as there is no "right" color to like. We all have preferences, but no one is wrong in their decision. Highs are not actually superior to lows, necessarily.

Next time you're at a big social event, watch a circle of people when someone new enters the conversation. Watch how everyone adjusts his or her body language ever so slightly to accommodate the new status situation. A leg will cross. A head will incline. A hand will scratch a chin. Status signals are being sent all around you at every moment.

Status can get complex, considering how unique each interaction is. Consider this interchange, which only involves three people.

A always plays High.

B always plays Tuck.

C makes it up for each person he meets.

A: (playing high to B) Well, hello B.

B: (playing tuck to A) Hi A!

A: Good thing you showed up. Rowing is tedious when you're alone.

B: I can imagine.

C: (playing match to A and low to B) Well! Going canoeing, you two? B, it's a good thing you're going with him.

A: (playing high to C) Yes, I promise he'll be safe with me.

C: Safe? B? You do realize he has a state rowing championship.

B: (playing tuck to C) It wasn't that big a deal. There were only eight teams.

C: Well, you did win.

A: You know, I've been rowing for twenty years.

B: Yes, he's being very nice in letting me come with him.

Every line of this dialogue is primarily motivated by status. This is an accurate presentation of real life. Though very few are aware of it, we are all fighting for our status. We guard our status positions because they keep us safe. We never lose sight of them; never forget them. We're terribly uncomfortable when we're pushed out of our status alignment, or when someone else tries to invade it.

Status, in fact, is what causes of stage fright. Stages elevate our status, forcing us to play high to the audience. Those of us who play lower statuses get very uncomfortable when forced into playing high. We fear what the audience thinks of our status, it consumes our thoughts while on stage, and our knees shake and our voice quivers.

Tricky situations occur when two people with competing statuses collide. This is a status battle. Suppose A, B, and C all played High:

A: (welcoming B into A's territory) Welcome, B.

B: (indicating that this is actually B's territory) Ah! A. Good of you to show up early.

A: (talking about his problems) I must say: I nearly didn't wake up this morning.

B: (downplaying A's problems) Yeah, me either.

A: (refusing to back down) My doctor gave me the wrong dose on my prescription. I slept past my alarm.

B: (calling A's problem and raising) Last week I overdosed on painkillers. I should have died.

A: (realizing this is going nowhere) Look! C is here. (creating a new problem) I can't seem to be rid of him.

C: (claiming the territory for himself) Thank you both for coming.

A: (taking command) I was just taking B here out onto the lake.

B: (*discussing his achievements*) Yes, I was going to show him the stroke I used to win the state championship.

C: (*minimizing B's achievements*) I heard there were only eight teams.

A: (*making his schedule the most important*) I'd love to sit and chat, but I have a meeting later. So if you don't mind.

C: (*offering advice*) Don't let me keep you! Be careful out there.

A: (*minimizing the advice*) Don't worry. I've been rowing for twenty years.

Compare this to a status battle in which all three play low:

A: (*giving B authority*) I hope you don't mind that I showed up early.

B: (*giving A credit*) No! Thank you for getting everything ready.

A: (*minimizing A's credit*) Well, I don't really know what I'm doing.

B: (*calling A's self-deprecation and raising*) I probably would have made a total mess of things.

A: (*making someone else important*) C is here! I hope he's in a good mood.

B: (*agreeing*) Me, too.

C: (*giving A and B the territory*) Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude.

A: (*pushing the territory back onto C*) No, no! We were just going out onto the lake. We'll get out of your way.

C: (*refusing A's offer of territory*) Please don't go on my account!

B: (*making C important*) Do you want us to stay?

C: (*making B important*) I can't hold back the state rowing champion from going out on the lake.

A: (*agreeing with C and increasing B's importance*) You were the state champion? Wow!

B: (*minimizing their comments*) Thanks, but it wasn't that big a deal. Only eight teams showed up.

C: (*not backing down*) Still, you did win.

A: (*agreeing with C again*) What an honor to go rowing with a state champion!

B: (*deflecting*) Well, I was actually hoping to learn a few things from you, A.

A: (*minimizing B's compliment*) Me? What could I possibly teach you?

B: (*fighting back*) Well, you've been rowing for twenty years.

Body language will be different for high and low. If you're playing low, you stick to low signals. If you're one of the three middle statuses, you mix and match as necessary to meet your needs, working relative to everyone else in your situation.

Highs stand straight, hold eye contact, spread their legs and feet, make big gestures, move smoothly and confidently, speak loudly, and hold their body still when it's not being used. With every action, they communicate that they are the most important and that the space belongs to them.

Lows hunch down, look away, contract their body, make small and jerky gestures, move hesitantly, speak quietly, move their body constantly, and touch their face often. With every action, they communicate that they are the least important and that they are trespassing on someone else's space.

When two people walk down the street and see each other, they immediately size each other up to see who is giving off the highest status signals. Whoever loses this appraisal moves out of the way.

So, what does this have to do with interping? Simple. Your characters are all playing status games with each other. Learn how to play those statuses and act accordingly. This will take practice and training. Learn to identify status interactions in everyday life. Know what statuses you and your friends personally prefer. For instance, I prefer playing tuck, but when I'm teaching or coaching I am more comfortable playing overlay.

If you're fascinated by status and want to know more about it, check out the brilliant work of improv master Keith Johnstone. I highly recommend *Impro* and the lengthy but equally genius *Impro for Storytellers*. They are entertaining, informative, and thought provoking. Both books devote exhaustive chapters to exploring status. This chapter humbly builds on Johnstone's work.

Reacting

What is wrong with this dialogue?

A: My car was cut in half.

B: Do you smell smoke?

A: I hope I'm not late.

B: Atilla the Hun was a horrible person.

Not much of an exchange. Neither are responding to one another.

Without reactions, there is no conversation. With reactions – even absurd ones – a conversation makes sense.

A: My car was cut in half.

B: Is that why I smell smoke?

A: It doesn't matter now! I'm late!

B: I bet Atilla the Hun did it, trying to make you late. What a rascal.

Conversations depend on reaction. Your audience is subconsciously waiting for it in a dialogue. “Bob said that to Jane? What does Jane say back? Oh! Nice one, Jane. Now what does Bob say to that?” It’s so simple, yet far too many interpers forget to react to the previous line. The result is a tedious recitation of lines instead of a lively conversation.

You can avoid this by going under the hood a bit. Look at it this way: when one character speaks to another character, that character is changed in some way by what he or she hears. The change is indicated in the response.

The second line of dialogue is a chance for the audience to learn how the first line impacted its listener. The third line shows the impact of the second, and so on. You must show your audience how your characters are impacted by ensuring that they directly react to stimuli.

This can be done in a number of ways – mainly by using nonverbal communication before a line. For instance:

A: My car was cut in half.

B: (gasps, raises eyebrows, sniffs) Is that why I smell smoke?

A: (*sniffs for a second, then stops and shakes head*) *It doesn't matter now! I'm late!*

B: (*glances at wristwatch, another gasp*) *I bet Attila the Hun did it, trying to make you late. What a rascal.*

Audiences love reactions. When done well, they show understanding of human interaction that your audience laughing, crying, and eating out of your hand.

Breathing

Creating interpretive intensity is dependent on breathing, much more so than you might think. Plot climaxes, leaping around the room, screaming, crying, and speaking quickly have some impact, but your breathing helps more. Let me explain.

Movies use soundtracks and lighting; theater productions use blocking and lighting (and sometimes music). But in interp, you're stuck with the basic intensity-creator – you.

The indication of intensity in a scene is simple: the more intense the breathing, the more intense the scene. Consider your character when he's not saying anything. What does he sound like? Unless he has serious asthma or some kind of sickness, he's probably silent.

Now, what if he's watching an alien mother ship landing on a lake near his house? He's probably holding his breath, waiting to see what will happen next. And when alien soldiers charge out and start shooting, and he's running away through a forest? Panting as he runs. And when he reaches the US Army line of defenses and is told to hide behind a barrier, and he hears the aliens approaching through the forest? Will he breathe silently? No. He'll breathe very loudly, shakily, communicating his fear and anticipation. If he doesn't, the audience won't find anything intense about the situation.

To create intensity in a scene, you simply must use dramatic breathing. Let's return to Mel Gibson's performance in *The Patriot*. Gibson's character is about to ambush a convoy that has captured his oldest son. He's instructing his two very young sons in helping him ambush. As he speaks, we feel anticipation swelling within us. His breathing lets us know something is about to go down.

BENJAMIN: (breathing hard) It's a good spot. (a moment to catch his breath) Boys, listen to me. (swallows, interrupting the breathing for a moment) I'll fire first. (holds his breath, studying his boys, his resolve builds and he resumes breathing, speaking in a resonant whisper) I want you two to start with the officers and work your way down. Can you tell the difference? (pant)

BOYS: Yes, father.

BENJAMIN: Good. (two pants, continues breathlessly) Samuel, after your first shot I want you to reload for your brother Nathan. (pant, speaks faster and faster) Now, if anything should happen to me, I want you two to drop your weapons and I want you to run as quickly as you can. Now you hide in the brush, make your way home, get your brother and your sisters and you take them to your Aunt Charlotte's. Understood? (heavy breathing while they nod, continues slower and more solemnly) What did I tell you fellas about shooting?

BOYS: Aim small, miss small.

BENJAMIN: Aim small, miss small. (heavy breathing) Boys. (pant) Samuel. (his breathing suddenly steadies; his face hardens, he nods) Steady.

Gibson is a genius actor, but his formula boils down to little more than rugged good looks and intelligent use of breathing. He applies good breathing techniques in many of his movies. Consider watching some; they all have fantastic breathing scenes. When William Wallace is being tortured at the end of *Braveheart*, when Lt. Colonel Hal Moore weeps after the Battle of la Drang in *We Were Soldiers*, or when Rev. Hess peers under the pantry door at the alien in *Signs*, it's Gibson's breathing that adds to the intensity.

Looking the Part

You're not allowed to use costumes, props, or visual aids in interp, but that's no reason you can't look the part to an extent that is reasonable.

I once knew a girl with a beautiful mane of wavy light brown hair. She usually wore it down, as any girl would with hair like hers. But then she took on an interp playing Queen Elizabeth as a villainess. For competition, she showed up with her hair in a tight bun, smothered with

gel. Her whole demeanor spoke of a regal severity – perfect for her character.

Don't compromise your professionalism or the dress code, but do adjust your appearance to suit your character. Make choices that are consistent with trying to create immersion. If you're playing Willy Wonka, you shouldn't be wearing black and white. You should be wearing a colored suit and a gaudy bow tie. If you're playing an elf, you should wear your hair long and somewhat fuzzy with a few pins here and a few braids there.

Of course, you won't be able to fully manifest your "costume" because you have to compete in other events. Your debate partner won't let you wear a tacky bow tie. No one will take your expository or illustrated oratory seriously if you have hair getting caught in the boards. This doesn't mean you can't find ways to tweak your appearance.

For instance, in my last year of competition (when I was doing the *Les Misérables* dramatic interp) I usually dressed in bright and cheery colors to match my partner, Renee, who is (unlike me) a human ray of sunshine. This didn't match well with Jean Valjean as I had characterized him: dark, brooding, made vicious by years in the galleys, deeply resentful. So when I was done debating, I switched my "happy Renee" tie for a "somber Jean" tie, which had muted, darker colors in a subtle pattern. It was a little thing. It took just a few seconds to make the switch, but I can assure you that attention to such details made all the difference in taking me to the championship.

I hope you're not intimidated by the concept of acting. With practice and experimentation, these keys should unlock creative doors for your interping. Start small, pushing yourself slightly outside your comfort zone, and implement new keys at your own pace. Top actors are paid millions of dollars a year for their work. You're an unpaid student at the bottom of the totem pole. Please don't beat yourself up. You are here to improve. Let this chapter help you in your climb to the top.

Discussion Questions

- When a teenager lies to his parents, what kind of acting is he using?

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2. What is your default posture?
3. What is your default face?
4. What is your default status?
5. Do you change your status based on the situation?
6. Is cartoon acting ever useful outside of performing arts?
7. Is dynamic breathing equally important for humorous and dramatic pieces?

CHAPTER 6

Communicating

Let's face it: you're acting in a strange format. It takes some training just to watch and understand an interp. It would be tragic to let all that hard work in acting go to waste just because you're not utilizing the format correctly. This chapter explores *Communicating* – making sure your performance is delivered to an interp audience.

Focal Points

Your characters—unlike you, the performer —are unaware that they are performing in front of an audience. They're going through scenes as if for the first time. You know, though, that they are standing in a room full of people staring at them.

Performing arts have a convention known as the *fourth wall*. Vincent Canby called it "that invisible screen that forever separates the audience from the stage." The fourth wall allows the audience to watch what is happening as if they were not present. The characters are on a stage with three walls and an imaginary "fourth wall" between them and the judges. The characters are oblivious to the audience's company. Any time a character directly acknowledges the audience, we call it "breaking the fourth wall."

Such a breach is only appropriate in two cases: narration and asides. In a normal scene when characters are in their own fictional world interacting with each other, the fourth wall insulates the audience.

An odd facet of interp is the convention to face the audience to give a full view of your face. This stems – as you remember from Chapter One – from the days when interps were more bound to physical literature, and

acting was simply a helpful contribution to the reading. The reader wouldn't get up and move around playing the characters. He would face his audience and read, offering voices and maybe a little face and gesture work. The convention stuck. In a normal dialogue, all your characters should face the audience. But the fourth wall forbids your characters from acknowledging anyone but each other.

This is where focal points come in. Focal points simulate the point your character would look if he were actually in a scene, but facing the fourth wall. For instance, characters dialogue facing one another. The focal point is the hypothetical location of the conversation partner's face. The point at which the characters focus (the "focal point") is where the interper focuses.

If both characters are of comparable height, there's really no reason to change focal points during a transition. The characters are mirroring each other. A common interp practice involves moving your focal point a few degrees to the left or right for each character to make it clearer when a transition takes place. I encourage you to interp beyond this. If your characters are well differentiated (as covered in the previous chapter), there's no need to add this construct. It sometimes makes your transitions clunky and less natural, risking the immersion of the audience. An advanced interper can often make the transition with his or her eyes fixed straight ahead.

However, if you have a large cast – especially a scene with four or more characters – you'll need to use every tool at your disposal to help the audience understand what's going on. In these cases, turning your body off center for some characters may be appropriate, but avoid anything more than a 45 degree turn.

Physically walking from one part of the room to another to perform a transition is never necessary. Such transitioning, is exhausting to watch. Depending on the piece or the amount of action in the scene, even shifting position by a foot or two can slow down your performance.

If there is a height difference between your characters, it is critical that you portray it accurately and consistently. Nothing is more distracting than watching Jack talk to the giant as if they were of equal height, or a child looking up at her mother but the mother looking straight ahead.

One of the reasons this happens is that interpers allow their focal points to wander. It's easy to do if you do not consciously rehearse your focal point. Even when you enter the room at the tournament, you should think about focal points. Before you start your piece, in the few seconds you're waiting for the judges to be ready, look for focal points in the back of the room, the floor, the ceiling, etc. Know where you're going to look – the corner of a window or picture works well. Don't use people as focal points, or something too far away like out a window. When you know where to look, you can do so with confidence. You know your focal points aren't going to wander, and you can switch between them – if necessary – with ease.

Whenever the blocking allows, have your character look around to interact with his environment (or, if your character is visual, to think). If you're interacting with something in the scene, that's great. If not, just think about what he might look at that the audience will be able to understand. Because you have a static focal point waiting for you in the back of the room, you have nothing to fear about looking away.

Narration and Asides

Narration is one of the most misunderstood elements of interp. Most interpers handle narration incorrectly. Those who handle it well consistently perform at the top of their game.

When a character is in a scene, he is ignorant of the audience's presence. The fourth wall insulates him. He doesn't know the audience exists.

Narration is the opposite. When a character is narrating, he is standing in the competition room addressing the audience. He is not in the scene; there is no fourth wall.

One of the most common communication mistakes interpers make is to mix a scene with narration. I remember judging a Dramatic Interp about a captain fighting in World War I. The interper narrated his actions "the captain moved among his troops, shouting orders..." and acted it out at the same time. He even showed his character dodging bullets as he called: "dodging bullets every step of the way!"

This is such a common mistake, you may be used to watching it. Champion interpers, however, know such actions are confusing. A

narrator *telling a story* about dodging bullets isn't actually being shot at. Thus, he shouldn't be *acting* like he's dodging bullets.

When studying your piece, you should know whether you're acting a scene or narrating, because you never want to mix the two. Present the action in a way that doesn't require narration. This is a lot easier than you might think. The piece may narrate that the captain is walking among his men shouting orders, but you are the captain. Shout the orders! You don't need to say that you're terrified. You don't need to say you're looking into the distance pensively. You don't need to say your back hurts. Show it; don't tell it.

Don't misunderstand. When you narrate, it's okay to be in character. Creating a narrator character is necessary to make sure you never stop acting through your piece. Being in character is good, but narrating while "in the moment" is bad. Narrators don't experience the action; they describe it. Go ahead and be animated. Use your face. Make gestures. But make sure the narrator stays in narration.

Show; don't tell. That's a practice interpers live by. Speaking breaks immersion and robs the audience of the joy of Discovery. As a general rule, you should have as little narration as possible. Use it only if you absolutely must, only when it cannot be communicated any other way.

An exception is a storytelling interp. There are too few such pieces in interp these days. Storytelling – the art of communicating a story using predominantly spoken words – is becoming a lost art form. It is perfectly acceptable to use a piece like that, in which case you should embrace your narration and make it as engaging as possible.

While well-acted scenes are immersive and compelling, storytelling involves speaking directly to the audience. This means it can be tremendously personal, making up for its loss of immersion. Storytelling pieces are thoroughly valid – in fact, some of the best interps I've seen followed this format. The danger lies in mixing narration into a piece that should be told through acted scenes.

The rarer exception is asides. These are comments made by a character directly to the audience without exiting a scene. They are deliberate breaches of the fourth wall. A popular example of asides is the 1986 cult comedy *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. In it, Ferris is constantly looking straight into the camera and explaining how his life works.

Asides are tacky, a literary device modern writers usually avoid. This was not true several centuries ago. European theater was extremely cooperative and the fourth wall between cast and audience was more blurred than today. Back then asides were fashionable and common. If you have a piece from that time and place (such as a Molière comedy), your characters will almost certainly have asides. You can probably cut them out, unless you want to be authentic. I've seen interpers handle asides quite effectively, but be warned that they are a challenge to implement and they damage immersion for the audience.

Asides should be quick and friendly, like you're confiding an unimportant secret. The audience is the conscience and invisible friend of your character, and the audience understands the inside jokes of the character. Deliver it as you would mutter something to a best friend. Taking a step forward or to the side while the rest of the action pauses is a helpful way to communicate that the fourth wall has been temporarily lowered. I advise, however, that unless you're storytelling or doing a piece rife with asides already written in, your narration should be rare and pure. Stick to the scenes. Show your story.

The 4 Keys to Blocking

“Blocking” is the choreography of actions and movements in a scene. This can range from a simple doff of the hat to an intense sword fight. If you choose and cut your piece correctly, you should have at least some serious blocking. Let’s consider basic blocking for one-person piece.

1) *Explain*

Suppose you started a scene by showing Jeeves going upstairs to get Master's blue smoking jacket – without any explanation beforehand. Even if you performed very well physically, the audience would be thinking: *“Okay ... he’s on an exercise machine. No! Going upstairs. He’s opening a door. Is he going to rob someone? Another door. Now he’s looking for something. He picked something up. What? His dog? It looked like it was hanging. Maybe it was a picture. Or a gun. I knew it! He’s going to murder someone. Now he’s going back downstairs. Maybe I should cover my ears.”*

Just as anticipation makes it easier to understand an action, explanation makes it easier to understand blocking. Your audience should never be confused about what you are doing. Unless the blocking is short and obvious, like drinking from a canteen, you should craft the scene – along with the dialogue – to help your audience understand.

You've probably heard the KISS acronym before: "Keep it Simple and Stupid." Keep true to this principle. Don't worry; you won't be insulting the intelligence of your audience. The fact is, watching what you've blocked should not require much thought at all. Your audience should be occupied by other, more intellectual things, like wondering what will happen next. If they're ever wondering what you're doing as you're doing it, something is wrong with your blocking. Have the Master ask for the jacket before the audience watches Jeeves ascend the stairs. Keep it simple and "straightforward."

2) Practice with real objects

Blocking should blow your audience away. It's delightful to watch an interper mount an ATV and skim over dunes so believably one can practically smell the dust getting kicked up behind. On the other hand, a wooden, unbelievable performance is a serious let down. Your judge wants more, so block it right.

If you've been trained in oratory, you probably make natural hand gestures as you speak. I remember a moment in my *Les Miserables* piece when Jean Valjean had to pull a folded piece of paper from his left jacket pocket, unfold it, and present it to the Bishop. Interping the unfolding of paper is complex business; there are many motions to it. Early in the competitive year, I took shortcuts that were damaging the immersion for the audience. I didn't look like I was unfolding paper; I looked like someone *pretending* to unfold paper.

I could never get the motion right, until I actually tried with a real piece of folded paper. I practiced and practiced, studying the movements, the turns of the wrists, the tensions of my fingers. I memorized how to unfold the real piece of paper. Eventually, my blocking the imaginary piece became believeable. I practiced with all the objects for that piece – a bench, a bowl, a pistol, two candlesticks, handcuffs, and others. I started

with the real things, studied how they would be handled, and blocked it accordingly.

I once judged an interp that was well done *until* one of the characters was required to pick up and carry another person. The student didn't pull it off. He held the person at arm's length—something not even possible with a small child—and carried the other human being quite a distance. Even Superman holds Lois Lane close.

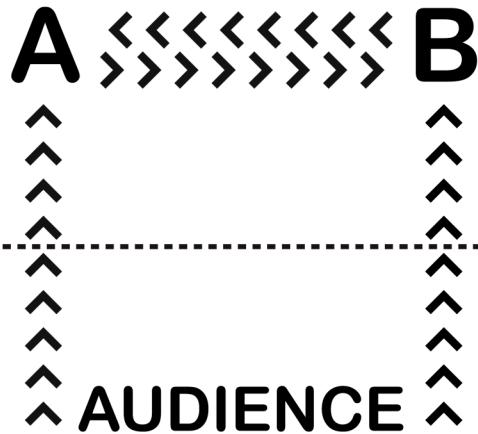
Real lifting – as can be learned only through practice and observation – happens close to the body. The character would have had to slide his arms under the person he was carrying and bend at the elbows, then lift with a grunt and lean back slightly to balance the weight. At that point, the contraction of the chest would preempt most gasping and grunting.

Study the article you're blocking, even if you can't get the real thing. If you need to block a limousine, settle for a commuter car. Be the kind of interper who realizes that swords are heavy, and swings them with the sort of effort and momentum that will make the front row duck for cover.

3) Master the Walls

Blocking can get complex, but understanding your action in relation to the audience will pay big dividends. The trickier the blocking, the more important it is to know what format you're using.

Note that learning the wall formats is not, by any means, easy. Just learning them in theory is like conquering a Sudoku puzzle; applying them to your piece is harder still. After years of applying and teaching advanced blocking, I still find it helpful to draw diagrams of the blocking I'm trying to fix. Do what helps you understand – the next few pages are among the most challenging in this book. Let's examine the three basic wall formats.



Open/Stage Wall

Characters share a 4th Wall

Open Wall is the simplest and most well-known form of Fourth Wall in performing arts. In almost every case, it's the kind of wall used by film and stage.

In it, there is a single wall separating the characters and the audience. The characters interact with each other with no special conventions. All the conventions associated with real life space are also true of the Open Wall. If A looks at B, he must turn his head to look at where B is standing. If A points at something in the distance, B looks in that exact same direction. In other words, watching Open Wall blocking is like watching real life.

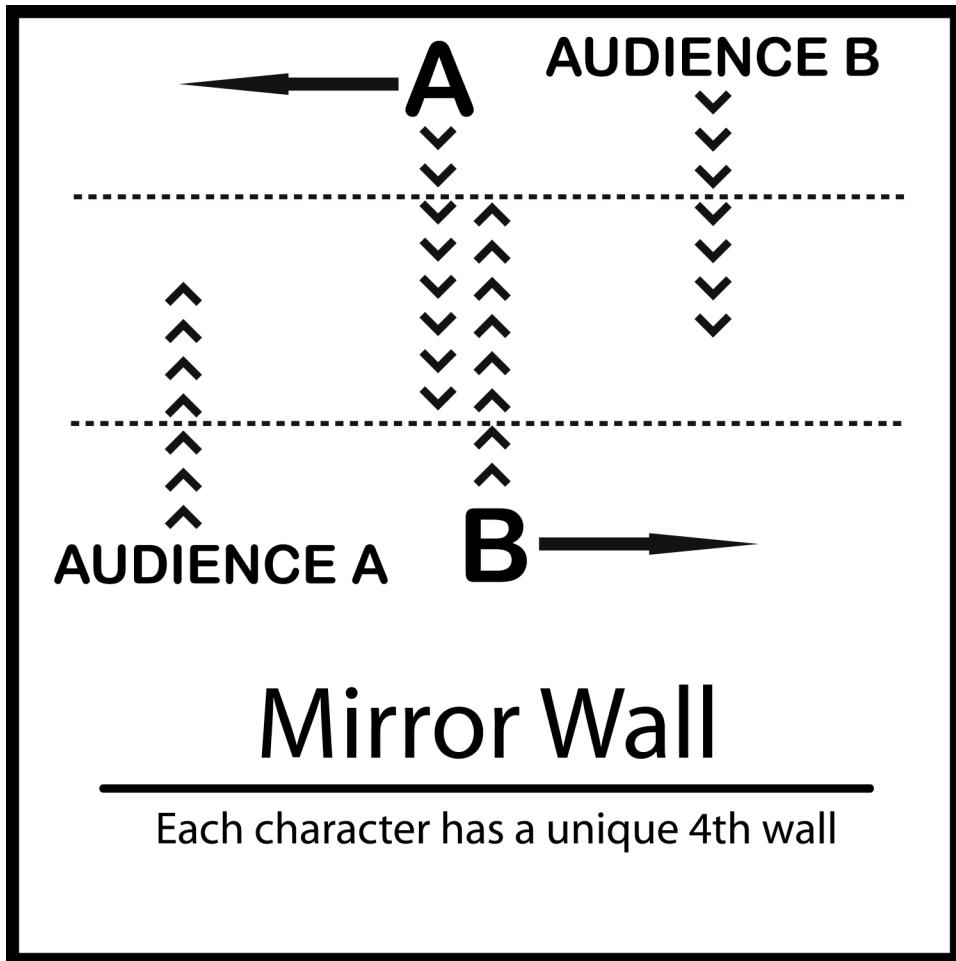
In single-person interps, the Open Wall is rarely used because it involves turning your head to the side to look at someone rather than presenting all of your face. Unless the real-world situation involves everyone already facing the same direction rather than each other (such as sitting in a car or watching distant storm clouds roll in), lone interpers must resort to more complex blocking formats. In addition, Open Wall transitions are incredibly clunky.

Duos, however, utilizing the Open Wall fairly frequently to solve complex blocking questions. For instance, I once did a Duo which used the Hybrid wall (which we'll cover in a moment) until the last minute of the piece. At that point, both characters were standing on ramparts watching in terror as enemy forces poured into the city. My partner's character would point at, say, the gates as they were falling. Then I would look in the same direction, off in the distance, and snarl.

When the enemies got closer, we switched back to Hybrid Wall.

Other examples, such as two characters holding each other, riding in something, or talking to someone else who isn't being played, are all good reasons to use an Open Wall.

In most leagues, Duo interpers are not allowed to look directly at or touch each other. This prevents extensive use of Open Wall, because most dialogue and direct interaction requires looking at the person you are talking to. For that, you'll have to invoke a new kind of wall that is almost exclusive to interp:



Mirror Wall is the standard interp format because it simulates having the characters look at each other and allows the performers to face straight forward, making the performances fully accessible. Though it's fairly easy for an audience to get used to watching Mirror Wall interps, we interpers have to get a little more technical.

Character A looks straight into (or past) his fourth wall at an imaginary place where B is standing. The audience looks back at A, straight back through A's wall. To accurately portray the conversation in physical space, the performer would then have to turn his back to the audience and show B looking back at A. Instead of doing this, we move the fourth

wall so it faces the other direction. Now, the audience can now look straight at B from A's point of view.

In practice, a Mirror Wall means the interper can transition between characters A and B while still facing the audience. Whenever we show a new character, we move the wall in front of that character.

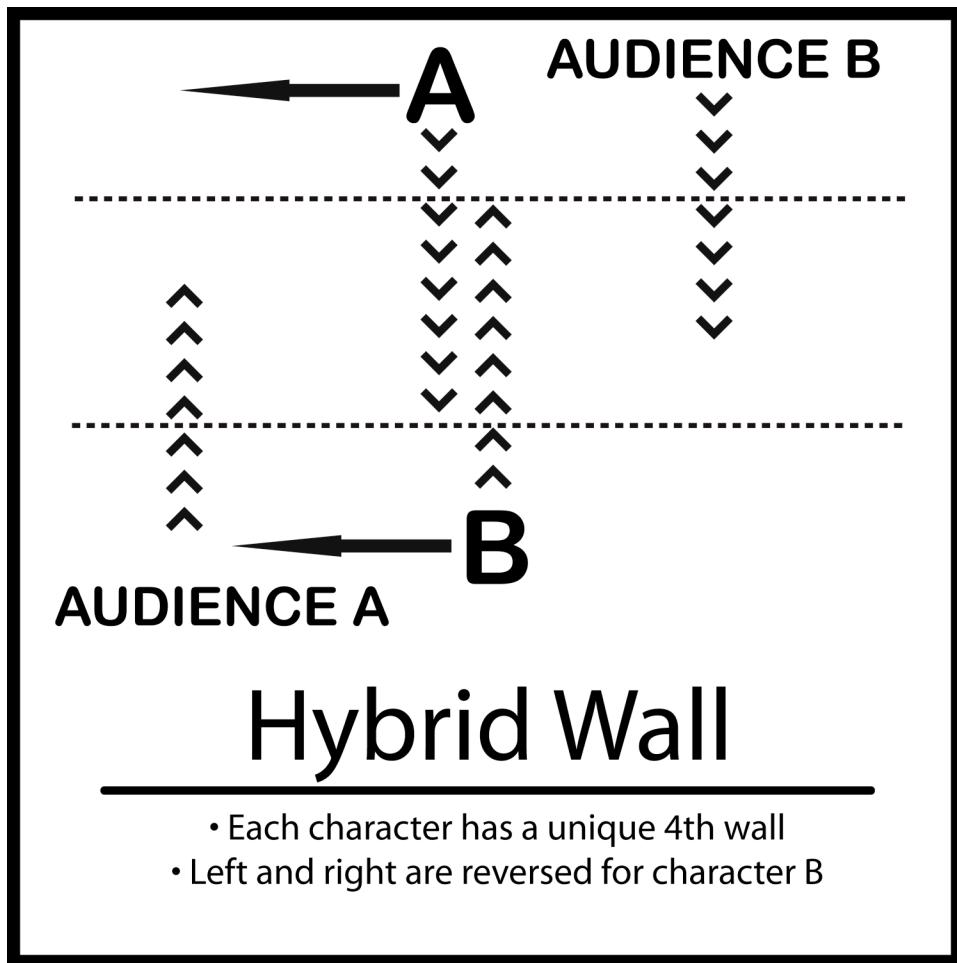
Mirror Wall earned its name from the idea that the wall bends or reflects physical space – that is, A looks straight into the wall and the wall bends back on itself so B is looking in the same direction.

When an individual interper performs with a Mirror Wall, he faces forward for all characters and performs simple character transitions. Duo interpers both face forward as if they were speaking to each other. This style is simple, effective, flexible, and easy to understand.

However, it has one serious flaw.

Suppose character A pointed to his right (indicated in the diagram). In physical space, B would look to his left in the same direction. But in Mirror Wall, this blocking can look rather odd. A points one direction, B looks in the exact opposite direction. While this is technically correct, it doesn't look right to the audience. To solve this problem, there is a third kind of Wall.

Hybrid Wall is a cross between Open and Mirror: it uses the forward-back dimensions of Mirror Wall and the left-right dimensions of Open Wall.

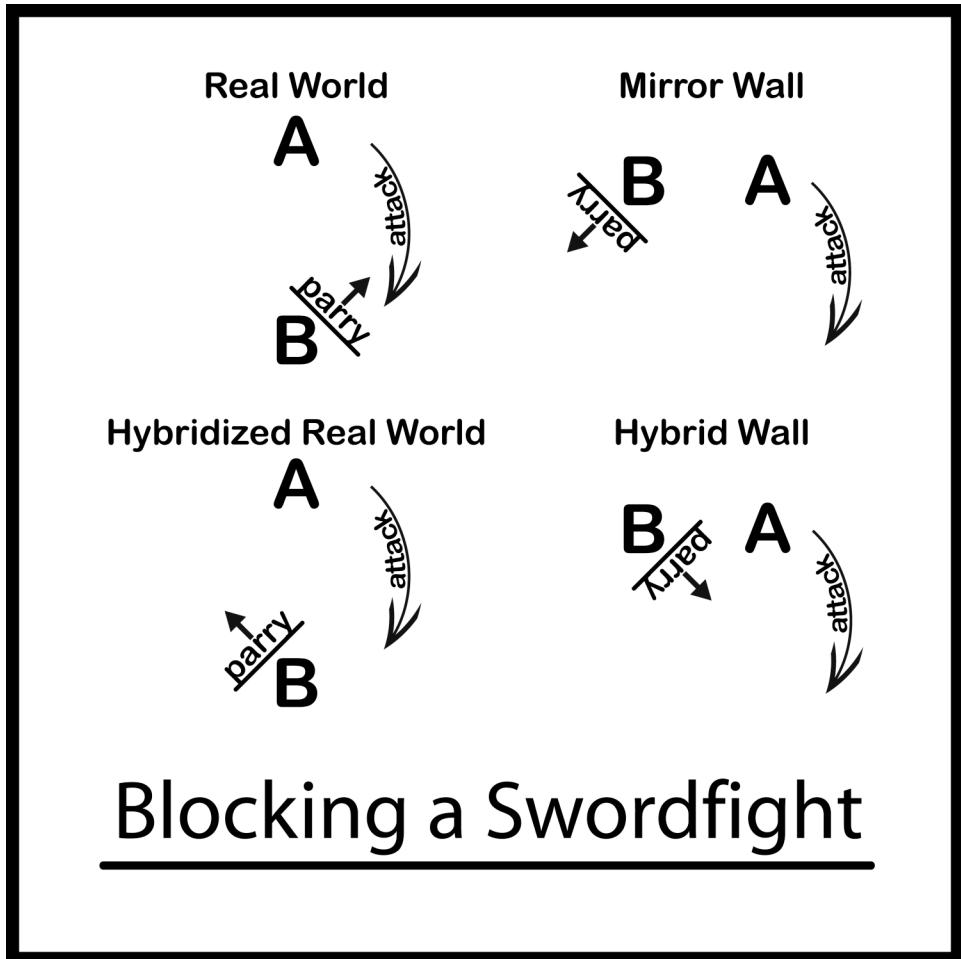


This system is incomprehensible in physical space. It hurts the mind just to think about it. But it makes perfect sense to an interp audience, and it solves the biggest problem with Mirror Wall.

While you can still keep the conventions about facing forward, thereby making your performance accessible and legal, you can still avoid confusing the audience because you present a continuous left and right. A points to his right; in physical space that's B's left. But in hybrid space B's left and right have been reversed, so B's right is the same as A's right.

The audience sees A point in one direction, and B look in the same direction. A walks three steps to the left, and B's focal point moves three steps to the left. This system doesn't require any explanation to the audience – it just makes sense.

Hybrid blocking is especially useful when characters interact directly. For instance, suppose our two characters enter a sword fight (well-trod ground for Duos because of the blocking opportunities). Character A raises his sword to the left and makes a right-moving swing toward B. In the real world, B would parry to his right, where the attack is coming from. But in Mirror Wall, parrying to B's right means swinging in the same direction as the attack. This doesn't look right visually; the swords are both moving in the same direction so a sudden clang of steel on steel seems odd.



In a Hybrid world, B's left and right are reversed. This is dysfunctional in a real world where A and B actually face each other, as B's parry is in the wrong direction. But when we switch to Hybrid wall, with both characters facing the audience, the parry is finally moving in the correct direction: toward the attack.

This blocking principle applies to anything else involving facing characters interacting with back-and-forth action. A point in a certain direction should use Hybrid wall, while a handshake can maintain Mirror.

This is very difficult to understand in theory. When working with a particular piece of blocking, I like to use paper or a whiteboard to draw out how it'll work. It's often helpful to try the blocking in Open wall and then revert to Mirror or Hybrid to work out the kinks.

Many scenes require that you switch dynamically between the three wall forms. There are no absolute conventions about how to do this, but be sure that you do something to indicate a perspective transition. If you can't put in a scene break, try to find a place where the feeling of the scene changes. Other opportunities: when a character exits or enters the scene, when something in the distance is referenced, or when the characters cross in front of each other (extremely useful in Duo).

If you switch without warning, your audience will be confused. Think of it something like moving the camera in a movie. Of course, since the audience is the camera, they need to feel the need to move the camera on their own. If your blocking suggests that, the audience will follow along.

Study Open, Mirror, and Hybrid Walls until you can master them, then use them to tell a visually compelling story.

4) Present yourself to the audience

Because of the fourth wall, your characters are technically unaware of the presence of the audience. However, there are certain interpretive conventions that make your movements more visually accessible.

If you bow your head for a few seconds, it indicates a scene change. If you turn away from the audience, it indicates your character's exit from the scene. If you speak with your back turned, it suggests a phone conversation, the voice of God or conscience, or sound effects. If you make eye contact with the audience, it usually means you are narrating from outside the scene.

The rest of the time, your blocking will keep you facing, but not engaging, the audience.

Unless you're deliberately trying to remove or isolate your character from the scene, you should avoid blocking that presents your back to the audience. For instance, suppose your character is facing ninety degrees to the left (so the audience can see your right side) and wants to turn around. You could turn away from the audience, or toward them. The

correct method of presentation is to turn toward the audience so they never see your back.

Blocking that presents more than a forearm of the back of your body should be carefully evaluated so it doesn't create a visual obstacle between you and the audience. For instance, if your character raises an arm for a back-handed slap, you should lean into it with your shoulder to bring your face forward – giving the audience a clear signal that they are not being shut out. When you walk, start with the leg furthest from the audience. The closer leg will block you.

Focusing on presentation may sound mundane, but it's important. Get the hang of it and incorporate it into every element of blocking in your piece.

Transitions

Good transitions – known by some as “pops” or “snaps” – are critical. Without them, your audience may be distracted.

The two elements of a transition are speed and accuracy. They're like the wheels of a bike. You'll need both to get where you want to go.

Fortunately for the interper, the process of obtaining speed and accuracy is very simple: *practice*.

In Chapter Five, we learned about creating a physical template for each character – a body that you can snap into that defines the person's posture, profile, and gestures. You should be intimately familiar with how that body feels, from the tips of your shoes to the ends of your hair.

Your transition should be instantaneous, not fluid. Practice transitioning into each character over and over again until you can do it up to speed. Then examine the transitions in your piece, which may require special tweaking. Your character may be holding something or be going through a strong emotion that is sustained through the previous character's line. In other words, specific moments in the piece often call for specific transitions.

That means every transition is technically unique, and the only way to memorize it is through constant practice. A full-length mirror helps. Other people from your club help, too. Watch for consistency, speed, and maintaining differentiation.

Projection

Projection is a very simple concept, but a prerequisite to successful performance.

You may have a character speak in a hushed whisper audible in a small room to a tiny crowd. For competition, you need to be able to adjust to larger audiences. Hopefully, you will end up performing in front of a large crowd at the final round at nationals! The giant room will take great effort to fill. Soft bodies and yards of carpet will soak up your sound.

Even a hushed crowd has its own ambient noise: the air conditioning, the rustle of clothing, a soft whisper from the back of the room. It all amounts to a dull, almost imperceptible hum that can deaden the sound of your interp.

Your voice must cut through all obstacles. It must penetrate to every person in a large auditorium. Unless you're given a lapel microphone (rarely done for interps), you're going to have to adjust your performance for your audience. Instead of whispering, put a hand to your mouth and make your voice breathy. For normal conversation, use the loudest voice you can. The audience knows you need to project. It will seem normal.

A good principle for projection: perform to the back row of the room. If you're performing in a closet with three judges and a timer, shouting will echo and hurt someone's ears. But before a crowd of hundreds, the back row will only hear your loudest possible voice. So use that.

Enunciation

Normal people in normal conversation don't enunciate well. There's so much un-spoken context in dialogue that real conversations don't need to take enunciation seriously. I've carried on conversations for as long as a half hour without saying a word – just using body language and the occasional nonverbal (like a chuckle or "mhmm") to communicate meaning. It is amazing how effective nonverbal communication can be. Once, in a heated twenty-minute conversation where I didn't utter a word, the person I was speaking to told *me* to shut up. There was so much context in our relationship that it was perfectly obvious what I was thinking. I didn't need to help out much. You may have guessed: I was in an argument with my twin brother, Cody.

Try listening to a conversation in your household. Focus on the difference between what you hear and what is actually coming out of the speaker's mouth. As I write this, a conversation is happening in the next room.

"Be sure poocks checken sleeve unroll. Ju clean out tha stain on er shirt sterday?"

"Be sure your pockets are checked and your sleeves unrolled. Did you clean out that stain on your shirt yesterday?"

Of course, there was never any doubt what she was saying. In fact, there was no doubt to me what she was going to say as soon as she had two words in. The speaker is my mother, and I've heard her say that to my brothers and me all my life.

I speak passable French. I lived in France a few years ago and really got a chance to practice blending in. My vocabulary, dress, and mannerisms began to approach those of the French, but I always gave myself away as a foreigner when I spoke – not because I had an accent, but because I enunciated so carefully. Real French speakers let it all muddle together, just as real English speakers do.

Nonverbals and context are such massively important factors in real conversation that your exact words are rarely important. Everyone knows what you're going to say. Thus, enunciation is far less important in everyday use than in public performance. Context in interp is limited. The audience has only just met your characters. They aren't familiar with their subtle intricacies or their hidden motivations, nor are they particularly familiar with the story's conflict. This is all very new to the audience, so context will do little to help you.

You must replace context with something just as effective (if somewhat harder to use): *enunciation*. This is different from characterization. Your character may have a speech impediment, a heavy accent, and a mouth full of food, but you still must make yourself understood.

Enunciation takes conscious effort and practice. You know how to speak clearly. The reason you don't among friends and family is because it takes a bit of effort. You must open your mouth wider and move your tongue and lips more to accurately create the correct sound.

Mumbling won't cut it. Look for feedback on your enunciation. If you do your piece for your club, ask them, "Did you understand everything I

said?" If they understood everything, it was fine. If not, fix what was mumbled.

Enunciation isn't necessarily difficult to master, but interpers make the mistake of overlooking its importance. Juggling enunciation among the myriad of other concerns can be daunting. This is where practice comes in handy. Make a habit of speaking as clearly as possible, even with family and friends. Cut sloppy speaking from your casual talk. It is a lifestyle change interpers should embrace.

Using the Floor

There's a very clear convention about where you are supposed to stand for your interp. In a normal classroom with a judge's table at the front, you typically stand about two and a half yards in front of the audience. Of course, tournament directors get desperate sometimes and have rounds in parking lots and broom closets. But even in regular-sized rooms, speakers rarely move too much to the left or right. You don't have to reinvent the wheel, but you should be aware that using the floor correctly can make you significantly more compelling and memorable. A competitive advantage can be established by responding to the interpreter's conventions.

Start your piece standing a bit further back from the audience than convention dictates. This makes you less threatening and invites the audience to lean forward and engage you in your piece. As you move through your piece, you can gradually move yourself forward until you end slightly further forward than the convention. Your forward movement should be subtle, matching the swelling increase in intensity in your plot.

Never get so close to the audience that the judges have to incline their heads upward or are unable to see your entire body. Never go further back than you have to, and make sure you have room behind you so you don't smash into something during the piece. You want to end with a close, intimate feeling, subtly communicating a deep connection with the judges.

Try to find at least one point in your piece to make a movement to the left or right. This increases visual interest and communicates ownership of the room. For instance, in my *Les Misérables* dramatic interp, there's a

point where Jean Valjean sees a bowl of soup that has been set for him on a nearby table. He walks toward it (three steps to the right and toward the audience), then grabs the bowl and slurps it down. When he's done, he returns the bowl to the table and goes back to the center of the room to continue his monologue. This movement was not intrusive, but it showed that I was comfortable with the entire room. It also made me more memorable – I was usually the only interper in the panel to make such a journey.

Don't let this simple opportunity to improve your performance slip away from you. Use the floor with purpose.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare and contrast theater and interp as storytelling formats.
2. Are asides ever used in real life?
3. Is narration or scene more likely to cause an emotional response in an audience?
4. In what other situations is projection important?
5. What about enunciation?

CHAPTER 7

Humorous Interpretation

What Is Humorous Interp?

Ask an untrained eye in a humorous interp (HI) panel, and you'll probably get an answer like this: "Humorous Interp is about being as funny as possible." That seems to make sense. Watch a high-level final round and you'll see hundreds of people laughing until the tears come. The funniest interpers seem to do the best. And after all, it's called "humorous," isn't it?

It is a widespread myth that being hysterically funny is a precondition to doing well in HI. The fact is that you don't have to be anything more than lighthearted or amusing. My first year of competition, a friend of mine won the national title with a piece that didn't elicit more than a few chuckles here and there.

Humorous Interpretation is simply this: an interp with a humorous script. To be successful, you must present something that satisfies the seven keys to finding a great piece in a genuinely excellent way. If the piece you have selected is a funny one, it is an HI.

This event was not created to encourage laugh-till-you cry pieces. Don't get me wrong: such pieces can and should be in the event. But Humorous was created simply to separate lighthearted pieces from the more intense, dramatic pieces. This is one of the reasons we learned in Chapter Two not to look for a piece by starting with the event. You may have found a completely wonderful, charming piece that isn't hysterical but is certainly amusing. Will you be able to compete against the gassers? Yes.

The Right Kind of Humor

1995 was the year of the Macarena – a hit single from the Spanish music duo Los del Río. From an objective standpoint, Macarena is not a good song. It's simplistic, repetitive, and tedious. But Macarena came with a fun dance that you can learn in about thirty seconds. Because it was so accessible, it rocketed to the top of international charts and became one of the most successful singles of all time, then suddenly fizzled into nothingness. Today, Macarena has faded from memory. The song had no staying power. It was a fad.

There's a kind of interp piece I like to call the "macarena." It is received with huge crowds and tremendous laughs. When you're standing next to postings you hear, "Have you seen John's piece? It's so funny!"

But when you watch John's piece, you're not impressed. John has raw talent. He's shameless, definitely. His piece, though, insults the intelligence of everyone in the room. It is a barrage of childish gags. You can't believe the judges are laughing. Is this really the sort of thing that wins rounds? It feels like watching a bad song top the charts for a few weeks.

Goofy humor will get laughs and draw crowds, but it seldom ends up as "excellence." Macareñas sometimes make it to final rounds, but more often than not this is simply because there is a shortage of excellent interps to beat them. Don't envy this kind of piece. You'd be setting yourself up for failure – and worse, a wasted competitive season with a piece you wouldn't be proud of. Poor humorous pieces are characterized by gags and goofiness.

A gag is anything that deliberately damages the immersion of a piece for the sake of humor. For instance, a gun battle in the Old West may suddenly enter "Matrix mode," with one of the gunfighters dodging backward in slow motion. This will always get a cheap laugh because we love seeing intensity and seriousness mocked. But it also ruins the piece: unless the story is about Neo going back to the old west, the characters don't have the ability to dodge bullets or slow time. If the literature suggests such an approach, then it's fine. If not, then it reminds us that we're sitting in a room watching a student make a fool of himself.

You're here to *interpret* literature, not to add to it. Throwing in gags that aren't motivated by the original story don't just hurt the performance, they strike at the core of the entire activity. This is humorous manipulation, not humorous interpretation.

Essentially, gags are about poking fun at the very piece that contains them. Interpers get laughs, so they think they're doing the right thing – but they're not. They're shooting themselves in the foot. Judges won't take an interper seriously than he takes himself. When he forces jokes into a piece instead of letting it speak for itself, he destroys it.

Goofiness is humor drawn from ludicrous or ridiculous behavior. If you shout "MONKEY!" at the top of your lungs, you can probably get people to laugh at you. You can also do it if you cross your eyes and smile with closed lips. Goofiness is the sort of humor that we use to cheer up crying babies. Humans never lose the ability to laugh at goofiness, but we do develop a yearning for something deeper – something that requires thought instead of shamelessness.

It's tragic that so many interpers think they need to give us gag reels or slapstick to make us laugh. On the contrary! Truly great pieces involve careful thought. Humor based on wit, satire, or that is "funny because it's true" reflects basic understanding and penetrates down into the depths of your audience. We can't help laughing at stupid humor, but we can't breathe in the face of smart humor.

The right kind of humor stems naturally from a story worth telling. Ask yourself if you're here only to make the audience laugh. If so, you're in trouble. Your top priority should be to interp good literature. That's the purpose of the activity. If you find funny literature and interp it well, more power to you. If you mimic a standup comic routine or poke fun at a beloved classic, you're in the wrong place.

No performance exists in a vacuum. Competitors watch each other and hear the laughter coming from the Macarena pieces. They think: "I could do that! That's easy!" Yes, bad humor is easy to do and will win laughs. But it can't compare to the more rare and truly excellent humorous piece.

Laughter misguides the performer as well. It's one of the great dangers of being a comedian: you face the temptation to be grow addicted to the laughter. Making others laugh feels great, and with good reason.

Bringing happiness to others is a wonderful gift. But when your desire to

create laughter overpowers the story, you have fallen prey to the mob. Guard yourself against this temptation.

If you build your humor on a solid foundation of story and character, you'll see something amazing happen. Not only will your piece be worth watching, but it will actually be funnier than the desperate gag/goofiness pieces! Audiences will be much more compelled by good plot involving interesting characters doing funny things than by a barrage of absurdity. The Macarenas won't know what hit them.

Wit is humor rising from mental ingenuity. Nifty quips, sparkling repartee, clever comebacks, wordplay, banter, and sarcasm all count as wit. Romantic comedies are expected to be gold mines of wit; if they're not they generally fail.

"All I ask is the chance to prove that money can't make me happy." - Spike Milligan, master of witty humor

Fundamentally, your humor should grow from the piece you selected, rather than be injected into the piece with gags or goofiness. That means finding a funny piece and presenting that humor to the audience as faithfully as possible. Once your piece is selected and seen for the humor that is within it, you can start interping it with all the wit and timing necessary for a successful HI.

Don't settle. Find a great piece with humor that reflects truth.

Comedic Timing

Basically, humor is release of tension. Good joke tellers try to build tension before the punch line. They let anticipation of a laugh steadily grow, so when the punch line is delivered everyone is ready to laugh.

Your funny content should be carefully controlled and timed. Go through your script and mark each moment you want the audience to laugh. Now examine the buildup before each mark. Does the audience have time to feel a laugh coming, or does it take them by surprise? Does each mark show a time when your audience will burst out laughing, or merely chuckle to themselves? Either answer is fine. The key is that you know what the answer is so you can plan accordingly.

Seek to steadily build tension and anticipation, maintaining the desire to laugh through all the chuckle-worthy moments and releasing them occasionally during punch lines. You want to be walking your audience to crescendos of laughter that die down and begin building up again. The pace of the buildup depends on your piece. Some pieces call for a laugh every eight seconds. Others, every two minutes.

Punch lines can be underlined by pauses before and after, and by slight exaggeration of delivery. The key to your timing is in how “slight” you are. Slightly increase intensity leading up to a laugh and release it slightly after, as you would if you were telling a sequence of jokes. The audience will figure out your pacing quickly, to the point that you'll be able to make a punch line out of anything.

If you've got a long string of chuckles that don't crescendo, slow the whole thing down so the audience can release after each moment. If the string does have a crescendo, pick up the pace so the audience can't release until the end (thereby making the laughter more intense and controllable).

You may have your piece timed down to the second, but audience laughter can add several seconds to a well-rehearsed piece. You have an important choice about how to deal with this. If you pause to let the laughter die down, you'll make your piece longer and you may kill the tension that transfers from one buildup to the next (that is, you'll let the tension dissipate). If you don't pause, the audience won't be able to laugh freely or they won't be able to hear the next line. Ultimately, they won't enjoy your piece as much as they should. So what do you do?

The key in waiting for laughter is *balance*. Let the audience have their laugh, but not for so long that the tension dissipates. You want your audience warmed up and ready for the next punch line. Don't worry too much about how laughter will impact your time. Judges are told not to penalize speakers who go overtime because of audience laughter. They'll understand.

“Oh, do you know how Beethoven was inspired to his famous minuet in G? No, you don’t – but you will in a minute.” - Victor Borge, master of comedic timing

It's helpful to watch the work of comedic geniuses to see how they handle timing. Search YouTube for timing greats such as these: Victor Borge, Jack Benny, Dane Cook, and Rowan Atkinson.

Discussion Questions

1. Select a humorous movie. Analyze it in terms of the kind of humor it uses and its comedic timing.
2. Are some forms of humor naturally funnier than others?

CHAPTER 8

Dramatic Interpretation

What Is Dramatic Interp?

Technically, drama is fiction designed for performance. In interp we use the word more strictly to describe pieces that are not humorous. Dramatic Interps are sad, serious, or intense (or all three). Some leagues call it Serious Interpretation.

There is no more classic icon of the theater than a pair of Grecian character masks – one showing a huge smile, the other showing a terrible frown. These masks summarize the two faces of interp as well: humorous and dramatic. Because it's hard to compare Jerome K. Jerome to Edgar Allan Poe, dramatic pieces are separated into an event of its own.

As with Humorous, there is an insidious myth about what kind of pieces are best to use. While tears can be the side effect of watching a great piece, they are not a requirement. Your piece does not have to make your audience cry, nor does it even have to be tragic. But it does have to be compelling. This is the key to excellent dramatic pieces.

The Right Kind of Tragedy

In Dramatic Interp (DI), audiences are constantly forced to suffer through what I like to call the "Leukemia DI." This is a piece that pursues tragedy. Little else matters in the tragedy other than tugging at the audience's heart so much that they will cry. Sometimes, the piece that makes the audience cry the hardest will win.

The classic example of a Leukemia DI – the one from which it draws its name – is one in which a young innocent child contracts a terminal

disease and slowly dies. The story is told from the perspective of a parent or older sibling who has to watch and cope. As the piece unfolds, the performer sobs and sobs, even shrieks in anguished grief. It usually ends in a climax of despair and confusion.

There are plenty of variations on this sort of piece: someone is horribly handicapped in a fire and has to cope with his injuries, a man dies without warning on his wedding night, a despondent teen commits suicide.

Such pieces are unpleasant to watch and typically leave the audience in a state of confusion. Because of the tears, novice interpers tend to think: "This must be a great piece!" Not always so.

If the goal of Dramatic were to make the audience cry, Leukemia DIs would be a valid competitive option – just as gag reels would be valid if HI existed simply to make the audience laugh. But good interpers should be running excellent pieces, and Leukemia DIs are seldom excellent. Why? Because they devalue and dehumanize the subject matter. The Leukemia DIs leave you with the sense that life is meaningless.

For example: *Little Women* is a fantastic work of literature on many, many levels. Interpers like to do a cutting of Beth's death. In the context of the novel, this is a poignant but beautiful sequence. Watching the family cope with the loss and seeing Beth's ultimate triumph over despair is the sort of thing of which great stories are made.

But in an effort to make the story *more* depressing (thereby squeezing more tears out of the audience), many make the mistake of crushing all the hope out of the story. This is not hard to do – in ten minutes it's difficult to communicate anything other than the seemingly arbitrary tragedy of a shy little girl's death. Instead of appreciating Beth's life in the broader context of the story, we see only meaningless suffering. The result is not a story worth telling, very much unlike the greater novel *Little Women*.

Tragedy can be very powerful, but only if there is a reason to watch it. Arbitrary death is not a reason.

Romeo and Juliet is a good example of meaningful tragedy. Though it ends with both our lovers needlessly cut down in the freshness of youth, there is a potent and meaningful message to be drawn from it. We learn about the power and danger of hate. *Antigone* is also a very sad tragedy loaded

with a message about stubbornness and cruelty. In both pieces, the survivors seem to have learned a lesson and come away as wiser people.

Contrast this with the Leukemia DI. A child dies; his older sister is overwhelmed with grief and despair. There is no takeaway message. There is no hope. In fact, it is not realistic. Life has meaning. Leukemia DIs say otherwise.

Leukemia DIs are also arduously unpleasant and sometimes scarring. I once judged a piece in which a young man got drunk for the first time in his life, then got into his car and struck his younger sister, killing her. When he sobered up and realized what he had done, he committed suicide. I saw the piece years ago, but I'm still troubled by it. The piece was not uplifting or entertaining. I remember waiting for the tasteless, gratuitous grief to let up. It didn't, the piece ended, and I was left wounded.

I remember another panel at the same tournament in which – and I am not making this up – I watched three pieces back-to-back involving a child dying of leukemia. They were all different stories, but all were completely meaningless. This experience leant to my calling such pieces "Leukemia DIs."

Tragedy exists in drama to capture the reality of grief and sadness. Redemption can be found in the most tragic situations, even at the death of a child with cancer. Tragedies worth retelling are ones that bring relief and greater realization. Tragic stories that have no relief are not yet finished. The tragedy that ends as such is a story stripped of its redemptive conclusion.

If you really want to take on a piece as heavy as a dying child, I give you this challenge: interview a parent or sibling who has gone through the story. You want to be as genuine as possible. You will be surprised at how redemptive the most emotionally exhausting stories become. Family comes together, they learn to appreciate life, they weep with one another, they grow into better people. If you are privileged enough to befriend someone who walked through the very tragedy you are about to perform, your performance will inevitably be stronger.

This goes for any tragedy. The war veteran, the rebellious teenager, the kid who is forced to shoot his sick dog, and so on. Be sure you talk to someone who's own tragedy has completed, who can see the hope that

lies at the end of heartbreak. You will learn more from those who walked through the tragedy than from the one still experiencing it. Please don't interview the drug-addicted teen to find out what it's like to be on drugs; instead, interview the recovered addict. There you will find resolution, redemption and victory over tragic realities of life. There is always hope. This is the power of the right kind of tragedy.

Climax

As we've already learned, there are many possible structures for your story. There's no hard and fast rule about how your piece should flow, but there is a red flag you should be aware of: the placing of climax.

Great dramatic scripts usually – not always, but usually – have a late, intense climax focusing on character choices. Consider the cut I used from *Les Misérables*, found in Appendix B. The climax comes in the last 60 seconds of the piece – when the priest has to decide whether to hand out justice or mercy on Valjean. There's a high level of intensity that has been building up over the entire piece, like a lengthy joke building up to a punchline. In this case, the punchline is: "Here are your candlesticks. Take them. Now, go in peace." This releases the tension and completes the basic story.

But instead of laughter, the audience simply needs some time to come to terms with the new situation. This is where we roll out the denouement – releasing the final elements of tension so the audience can leave satisfied (rather than frustrated, as they would if the piece ended immediately after the climax).

Many DIs have early climaxes and long, drawn out denouements. Leukemia DIs are good examples of this. We learn that Sally is terminally sick (climax) and spend 8 minutes coming to terms with this and watching her die (denouement). This is not to say that an early climax is necessarily a bad thing, but you should be aware that it deviates from convention and should only be approached if you really know what you're doing.

Think of your piece as a serious joke. Gradually build tension, never quite releasing it, then culminate in a final intense climactic crescendo that has the audience leaning forward in anticipation. Then *bam*: resolution,

surprise, victory, surrender, joy, redemption, etc. Everyone should be breathing sighs of relief and wiping away tears.

Discussion Questions

1. Select a dramatic movie. Analyze it in terms of the kind of tragedy it uses and its climactic timing.
2. What is the most emotionally compelling kind of tragedy?

C H A P T E R 9

Duo Interpretation

What Is Duo Interp?

Duo is an accumulation of humorous and dramatic performed by two people. Because they are not allowed to touch or look at each other, the event requires some impressive blocking. You should challenge yourself and choose to put a piece in this event.

Duo Interps are extremely entertaining. They also take much more work than any other interp format. Working with your partner to compete at this level is challenging, but if you can do it right, you'll be compensated with an incredibly rewarding interp experience.

The 6 Keys to Finding a Partner

Decision of partners is critical. You want someone you can work with, who fits well with the piece, and who complements your skill level. It is difficult to overstate the value of a good duo partner. Make your decision carefully.

1) Start with your piece

As with any other event, you should kick things off by finding a piece. When you're confident you have something you want to use, decide which event to put it in. Ask yourself if you can communicate the story clearly if the audience only sees one character at a time. If the answer is yes, you probably have a an individual event. If the answer is no, and you need to show the audience multiple characters simultaneously, consider

your opportunities for blocking. Duo is designed around quality blocking. You will not be able to compete with teams that use exciting, action-packed blocking if all you have to come back with is two people talking.

In other words, duo pieces require a certain level of complexity. Don't go for duo unless the piece demands it. Once you're at that step, cast yourself in your piece. Typically, duos involve one person playing the main character and the other person playing the supporting cast. Know which character(s) you want to play, and which you want handled by someone else. Consider who shows up in which scene. If there's a scene with a conversation involving just your two characters, you're in trouble. Hand one of them to your partner.

Only when you know what characters you want played in what piece should you start looking around for a teammate.

2) Match with yourself

You want someone who looks good next to you, both in terms of his ability as an interper and being able to look like a team together.

If you team up with someone vastly beyond your skill level, you'll struggle to keep up and you'll battle an inferiority complex every time you walk into a competition room. If you team up with someone below you, your partner will feel the same.

3) Cast for character

Your partner should look good playing his characters. This is easier said than done. Just because a piece is perfect for you doesn't mean it's perfect for anyone. It's considered tacky to hold auditions for your partner (I've never heard of it being done), so you'll have to settle for your imagination. If you've seen your potential partner do other interps it will be easier to imagine how he'll do with your piece.

4) Choose a friend

You and your partner will go through a lot in the upcoming season. If you're two months in and realize you can't stand each other, things are

going to get very unpleasant. Therefore, know the person you want to partner up with. Be sure you can rely not just on his competence as an interper, but his friendship.

By the end of the season, you two will be bonded by a unique shared experience loaded with laughter, tears, and inside jokes. You'll have spent countless hours together both in practice and at tournaments. This should be a joyful experience for you both. Know what kind of person you're about to invest in.

5) Recruit

Duo Interpers are teaming up earlier and earlier these days. Don't wait for your dream partner to get snatched up by someone else. Drop him a line and open a dialogue.

You don't have to be businesslike about recruiting. Try an email that runs something like: "Hey Kevin – just read a great interp piece and thought of you for duo. What are your plans for this year?" This should suffice. You want to remind Kevin that you're his friend and that talking to you about duo is a low-pressure thing. You also want to communicate that you haven't made up your mind yet and that his input is valuable to you. Of course, that means you actually have to listen to him when he voices concerns or suggestions.

Your future partner may not be an obvious choice. Depending on the policies within your league and club, you may be able to pick up a partner from another area. Talk to your coach if this is something you're considering.

Don't be pushy, but do try to get the team confirmed quickly. Delaying until the last possible moment holds you back from all your memorizing and blocking work in the weeks ahead.

6) Be available

Though you shouldn't plan on it, sometimes you won't be the one to propose doing a duo. There are hundreds of other interpers out there looking for a great partner. If you are approached, carefully evaluate the script and partner. Only proceed if they meet the criteria we just covered,

and be confident that you'll be given the respect you need to work with your partner.

It's okay to turn down an offer or to ask for time while you consider other options, but don't leave the offer hanging in the cold. Your would-be partner deserves to know if you're not interested. It doesn't have to be personal. Thank the person for honoring you with this offer and tell him or her you have other plans for the competitive year.

Working With Your Partner

We're on a film set five minutes before the camera rolls. A production assistant places a red vase on a table. Then another production assistant arrives. "What are you doing? That vase should be silver."

"No, I like the red one."

The argument grows louder and louder. More people from every department jump into the fray, shouting advice and insults. People begin grabbing props and smashing them so they won't be used in the scene. "If only," says the boom operator to himself, "we had someone to go to when we have creative disagreements like this."

Of course, we don't see such things happen on real sets. Why? Because there exists such a person. In film and theater, all creative decisions stem from the mind of the director. If there's a creative disagreement, the director can settle it. Others don't have to agree with the director – it's not their production. They just have to follow along and trust the director's vision to be worthy of the effort.

When you're doing a normal interp, you are your own director. Everyone else can give you creative input, but it's up to you to decide whether or not you like it. In duo, things are different.

You and your partner are equals. You can't say to your partner: "We're using the red vase because *I say so*." Your partner's word holds exactly as much weight as yours. So how do you resolve differences?

Every team has a leader. The leader is rarely appointed; instead his natural social dominance shows itself within the team and the other partner backs down a bit. Your team will have a tendency to favor the opinions of the leader. The follower will typically voice his opinion less

often – waiting for the leader to invite him. The follower will also disagree less fervently, often acquiescing to the opinion of the leader.

While this dynamic is completely natural and can be harmless and even healthy, it's important to be sure you know how far it goes. If the follower is yielding to the leader but secretly thinks his idea was better, resentment will begin to build. In addition, his performance will be impaired. It's hard to give 100% to something you don't believe in.

Therefore, both of you should do everything you can to build consensus. This will often mean sitting down and having some very blunt arguments. Don't be afraid of this. Keep perspective; don't make disputes personal. You have a creative disagreement. Try to persuade your partner. If you can't, try to honestly concede the point. Don't suppress your disagreement, but just the same, allow yourself to be convinced.

If you can't persuade each other through honest argument, attempt a compromise. Compromises are never easy or pleasant, but they are necessary when two equal powers conflict. They're a much better alternative than having one overrule the other.

"If someone always thinks that their ideas ... are always right, they will never improve." - Brandon Rice

Resolving your creative differences may be a serious challenge. You'll learn a lot about yourself, your partner, and human beings in general. Embrace the conflict. Let it strengthen you and cement the bond between you and your partner. Things will get messy, and that's part of the beauty of the event. Rise above it together.

Blocking

There are many unique considerations to blocking in a duo. First, the conventions.

The partners typically stand shoulder-to-shoulder. They face the audience as they would in a solo interp. When only one person is speaking (such as during narration), the other partner will stand immediately behind him with his head bowed and back turned.

It's harder to do, but take the effort to make sure the action would still make sense if you were actually facing each other. Your audience will be much less confused having learned to trust your consistent blocking.

When blocking, practice by doing the motions while actually facing each other. Study the movements (recall the paper folding exercise in Chapter Six). Then, transition to practicing in front of a full-body mirror. You'll be expected to time your movements perfectly and to have plenty of blocking in which the two characters interact. This can include anything from a sword fight to a tug-o-war to handing an I.D. to an officer. You should actively look for ways to incorporate blocking that involves both characters.

Avoid crossing focal points – that is, having both interpers turn inward slightly so they are looking across the center. This makes complications blocking and reduces the accessibility of the performance for people on the edges of the audience. Unless you have a good reason, stand shoulder to shoulder facing straight forward.

Duo blocking can get very complex, and sometimes that's a necessity. Avoid the temptation to get swept up in the possibilities. Focus on your story. Use blocking as a tool to tell that story, and let the audience be drawn in by your performance. The best blocking is the kind the audience doesn't notice.

Duos usually require 4-5 times more work to prepare for performance than a solo piece because coordination is so essential. Practice, practice, practice. You and your partner should get to know each other very well before the first tournament.

Discussion Questions

1. Why should you move a script from another event to Duo?
2. Think of three scenes (they can be hypothetical) that can only be performed by at least two people.
3. Is your script or your partner more impactful on your success as a duo interper?
4. What is the top priority of conflict resolution?

CHAPTER 10

Other Interpretive Events

“Open” Interp

Interp is a broad event, and leagues will branch off with creative options outside the typical “humorous” or “dramatic” categories. Prose, poetry, oratorical literature, original pieces, thematic collaborations – these all have unique storytelling aspects to them. They keep to interpretive conventions (a one-person event, 10-minute timeframe, etc.), but leagues branch off with creative events – sometimes wildcard events – that attempt to narrow down a new category of literary interpretation.

Such events will vary from league to league. In my competitive days in the NCFCA, “Open Interp” (OI) was a category that lumped all creative literary interpretations into one event. NCFCA has since replaced OI with the more specific Thematic Interpretation (explained later in more detail), while Stoa has kept OI as a broader event category. Expect leagues to change their approach from year to year.

This chapter explores some of these other interpretive styles, the “open interpretation” pieces that you can apply in competition.

Poetry

1) ***Find a doable piece***

There are many great works of poetry that call for being cut into an interp. There are also many that are inappropriate. Most poetry is lyrical monologue; that is, it involves a character (what poets call “voice”)

speaking about something. These don't make the greatest poems to interp. Some poetry tell stories, and these pieces are much easier to perform and hold the audience's interests.

Narrative poems were very popular in medieval times. If this is something you want to pursue, look into literary epics like *The Canterbury Tales*. Make sure you get a modern translation. Your audience will not understand Middle English.

Avoid poems that are so thick, intellectual, or artsy that they're difficult to read. If you have to stop and go back and read it over and over a few times, rest assured the audience will have no idea what you're saying. Also avoid poems with ambiguous meanings. You want your audience to understand your poem, and that means finding one simple enough to be comprehensible when converted to spoken word.

2) Find a voice

While you may not necessarily need to go into scene-acting depth, you should still characterize the person speaking. Who are you? Yourself? The author? A narrator? Know whether the poem is intended for a large audience or if it speaks in a private, confidential manner. Address your audience accordingly. You may have to address a crowd of hundreds of people as if they each were a close friend.

Know also whether the poem speaks for a large number of people (such as all Americans, all women, or the entire human race). This will affect a million aspects of your delivery, including your passion and confidence.

3) Talk like a human being

Poetry is written in lines, but it is not a piece of music. Avoid using sing-song delivery that emphasizes the rhythm of the poem. The poet already invested a great deal of sweat into worrying about things like structure and meter to make sure the poem reads precisely as it is supposed to. You don't need to make it obvious; you just need to make it natural. Take the first verse of *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

*And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

Mediocre poetry interpers will pause at the end of every line:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood (pause) And sorry I could not travel both (pause) And be one traveler, long I stood (pause) And looked down one as far as I could (pause) To where it bent in the undergrowth."

Good poetry interpers will find their own pauses, based on logical and conversational breaks in the poem, and the pauses will vary:

"Two roads diverged (small pause) in a yellow wood (pause) And (slight pause) sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler (longer, reflective pause) long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth."

Finding these pauses is one of the most enjoyable aspects of poetry interp. Done correctly, it makes the poem much more meaningful and easier to listen to.

4) **Narrate**

All the rules of narration that we learned in Chapter Six apply to poetry. Don't act out what you're doing; instead, speak directly to the audience. Remember: you're reciting a poem aloud. Don't make it more complicated than it has to be. Just give the poem to your audience as clearly as possible.

Thematic

Thematic Interp involves two or more selections collected into a single interp. They are connected by an idea or theme. For instance, a theme of *patriotism* might involve "A Poem, On the Rising Glory of America" by Hugh Henry Brackenridge followed by "The Man Without a Country" by Edward Everett Hale. A thematic on the life of Julius Caesar may include cuts from Shakespeare's tragedy and Caesar's "The Gallic Wars." You might even have a theme based on a writer, like O. Henry, and refer to pieces from his several short stories.

You must have a great theme – one that connects your pieces well and engages the audience. Avoid being too broad or too specific. Find a theme that will make your audience think, “Fascinating! I can't wait to see what pieces he picked.” “Humanity” may be too broad; it doesn't lend itself to certain selections. “My Favorite Moments from the Halo Novels” is too narrow; the audience may feel excluded. “Growing Up”: now there's a good theme. It is narrow enough to suggest pieces while appealing to everyone.

Try to balance the length of each piece as evenly as possible. Instead of an eight-minute piece and a two-minute piece, find three lasting slightly longer than three minutes each. This makes for a balanced thematic presentation that helps the judge focus on the theme, rather than an overpowering piece.

Start your piece with a brief explanation of what your theme is, what it means, and why you picked what you did. List the names and authors of all your pieces so the audience knows what's coming and can see how it all fits together. If you need to give background before a piece, do that all at the beginning. Once you start doing your pieces, remind your audience what each one is called and who wrote it, then jump in. You want as little break in the action as possible once you get started, as this diffuses tension.

Thematic is a very difficult event, especially when it's competing with non-thematics, as in Open Interp. Perhaps this is why thematic interp is sometimes offered as an individual event of its own: only the best thematic pieces succeed in OI. Don't compete with it unless you have a very good reason and can justify the extra work and reduced immersion. Unless you really know what you're doing and why, stick to running a single piece.

Original

So you're ready to write your own piece as an interpretive event?

Let me first try to talk you out of it.

There is nothing new under the sun. The story you are about to tell has almost certainly been written already by a writer more skilled than you. Take the time and effort to find it. The only appropriate use of an original

script is in writing something that no one else can write – something totally unique to you. Usually, this means a story from personal experience.

Your story should be one that will never get told if you don't step up to the plate. It should be something you're very passionate about, and something you know inside and out. As with anything else, you should start with the piece, not the event. If you're thinking: "I want to write an original interp," you're in trouble. If you're thinking, "This awesome story I of mine would make a great interp," then you may be on to something.

Before writing, look yourself in the mirror and ask yourself an honest question: do you have the writing skill to make a worthy piece? Most do not. Creative writing requires years of discipline, practice, head knowledge, and talent. It's infinitely more difficult than texting on your phone. Most of all, creative writing takes genuine life experience, something not many young people can claim. Think of creative writers in our day: they're typically old people who have experienced much of life *before* becoming great writers.

Original interp shouldn't be your first foray into creative writing. Proceed only if you have produced a reasonable collection of stories of which you can be proud, and that others have read and endorsed. Interp is not a training ground for writing, as platform speaking can be. Remember, this is a competitive event. If you cannot produce excellent content that can compete with the brilliant literature your opponents will be using, the season will chew you up and spit you out. If you can't produce, there's no shame in that. Join the crowd, and go back to searching for a piece written by someone else. Then perform it with excellence.

Did I talk you out of an original piece? Perhaps not. No worries. I've seen some delightful original interps over the years. When pulled off well, original pieces can receive the nod from a judge who is impressed with your fair stab at creativity.

As you proceed in preparing your piece, stay loyal to the "Seven Keys to Finding a Good Piece" from Chapter Two. You should be able to meet all of these criteria. If you can't, edit your piece to match. That's a freedom you have with an "original" interp. You may be passionate about the piece, but you should not become so emotionally attached to any particular aspect of it that you can't be objective. Doing so makes it hard

to edit. It's difficult to delete a needless scene if it's half the reason you wrote the story in the first place. Approach your piece as if you are someone else interp'ing it.

The first draft of my own nationally ranked original piece (found in Appendix A) was dominated by an exciting story about a British spy who made fools of the nazi guards and won the allegiance of the prisoners. Sadly, it took too much time from the overall piece and had to be replaced. This required taking a big step back emotionally in order to do what was best for the interp, but the end result was well worth the initial chagrin.

Don't worry about your artistic vision or unleashing your creativity. Everyone is creative, and everyone has an artistic vision. Instead, focus on producing a great interp script. You have the luxury of starting from scratch and crafting something that will work just for you in the context of interp. You won't have to "cut" it; you won't have to adapt the characters to work for you. You can make it perfect.

Edit ruthlessly. Too many young writers produce something "in a moment of inspiration" and then are unwilling to change it. Don't be one of those people. You should write your piece at least twice from scratch before you can consider yourself to be making progress. Ask for advice from people you trust, especially coaches and fellow competitors from your club. Don't memorize until you have a polished gem.

The fact that you wrote your piece is admirable, but don't think too highly of yourself. It isn't overwhelmingly impressive. Don't puff yourself up and make a big deal out of it. Just cite the piece as you normally would, naming yourself as its author. Judges may be impressed, but don't expect groveling. Remember, you're competing against the vast library of human literary achievement. You're a tiny fish in a massive sea. Let your piece speak for itself.

Original Interp is a challenging event. If you can produce something of quality that is truly unique, you've got yourself a winner.

Discussion Questions

1. Select a short poem. Find dynamic pauses throughout, then read it aloud. Contrast your delivery with that of others in your group. What does it about your interpretation of the poem?
2. What is a story from your own experience that is worth telling?

Interp Competition

So you know how to find, cut, prepare, and perform a great interp.
What's left?

Folks who take the SAT have two steps to fully prepare. First, they develop a strong base of knowledge and comfort with the test's subject matter. Second, they develop test taking skills.

Building knowledge is what the SAT is designed to encourage. You can use what you learn prepping for the SAT in other areas of your life. Test skills are seldom encouraged because they are useless in the "real world." Nonetheless, testing skills are important. In fact, people well versed in testing skills (like educated guessing and spotting decoy answers) sometimes score better on tests than people who have studied the subject matter but don't know how to prove it in a multiple choice format!

Knowing your subject matter is your first step to being a brilliant interper. This is great. But you should also cultivate your tournament skills. This chapter will help you be the best competitor you can be.

4 Keys to Excellence Between Performances

1) *Get in the Groove*

When you're sitting on the couch in your pajamas watching TV, you have a certain mindset. When you're wondering if you should tell your friend how you feel, you have a certain mindset. When you're telling people about how great your dad is, you have a certain mindset. When you're at a speech tournament, you should have a certain mindset.

Try to reduce the number of distractions as much as possible. You shouldn't be thinking of anything but your performance at that moment. It's okay to allow yourself leisure. That's very important in longer tournaments where the last few days can become grueling ordeals. When you're in a round, you should be in competition mode. Focus on what you're doing; visualize yourself succeeding.

A lot of socializing happens at a speech tournament. It's a valuable part of the speech experience, but don't let it get in the way of your competition. Don't be laughing and joking around five minutes before your performance. Be by yourself, focusing. It makes a difference.

2) *Put Interp first*

If multi-entered in your tournament, try to do your interp piece first. This may sound biased coming from a book about interp, but you should place a priority on your interp events over your platform and limited-prep. Why? Because interp requires tremendous energy and emotional expenditure. You don't ever want to rush breathlessly into a room at the end of a round, exhausted or late. If you must arrive late, you'll recover better doing so for impromptu, not dramatic.

If you're exhausted or rushed in any way, the quality of your interp performance will take a direct hit. Your other events won't exactly flourish, but you will be able to get by. Save the stress for later.

When you go to postings, write down the pattern, events, rooms, and speaker numbers of all your events. You don't want to have to double back to postings because you forgot something. For example, you may write:

PATTERN B2

Persuasive – Jeub 12 – 2nd

Impromptu – Herche 206 – 4th

Dramatic – Chapel – 7th

If you were to follow postings as they were written, you'd be off to Jeub 12 to do your persuasive first. But instead, you should go to the Chapel. Find Speaker 1 and ask permission to go ahead of him. Speaker 1 has

every right to follow the postings as they're written and he may tell you to wait. If he does, talk to Speaker 2.

If you get permission from the speaker, talk to the judges. You don't have to be apologetic. Just say: "Hi, I'm Speaker 7. I just spoke with Speaker 1 and he said it'd be fine if I went ahead of him so I could go on to my other events. Is that okay?"

You don't want to disrupt the whole tournament schedule. If this is going to be a big deal or throw anyone else's schedule off, be courteous and wait your turn. Also, if you only have one event in the pattern, this practice is definitely not a concern. You should wait your turn at your room. But if you do have a busy pattern and everyone else is okay with it, get your interps out of the way first.

When I was competing, there was a widespread myth that those who go later in a panel do better because they are better remembered in the judge's minds. Thus, some competitors would deliberately be absent from their rooms when the time came for them to speak, and whoever was present would go instead. Then they would show up late and claim to have been busy.

Not only is this dishonest, it's pointless. After more than a century of modern competitive interp and hundreds of thousands of tournaments, there is still no empirical evidence to suggest any correlation between speaker placement and final ranking. In other words, Speaker 8 has no advantage over Speaker 1. Don't let this myth stop you from doing your interps as soon as possible.

3) Be a winner

In a perfect world, judges would rank competitors based solely on the quality of their performance. In the real world, they don't. Your behavior in the room before and after has the potential to make a big impact on the judge's opinion of you. If you subtly communicate that you are someone worth voting for, you'll be more likely to win a high rank. Developing this skill will help you in many areas later in life (i.e. job interviews).

If you go into the room thinking that you don't have much to offer and the judges should treat you poorly, they'll oblige. If you think you're going to embarrass yourself, you will. You won't give your audience

more than you're ready to, so prepare to give them the greatest interp of their lives.

This isn't about arrogance. It is arrogant to believe that you are the greatest interper of all time; it is not arrogant to believe that you can be great for those judges. You must believe that you are going to give the audience something worthwhile. If you believe it when you walk into the room, your audience will pick up on your enthusiasm. Your judges will mentally prepare themselves to watch a great piece.

You don't have to play overly *high*, but avoid playing overly *low* to the audience. Even Tuck is hard to pull off well. Leave that to geniuses like comedian Bill Murray. The audience has given you the front of the room to perform, so take ownership of it. Stand tall, smile, look people in the eye, give firm handshakes. Make it clear that you're happy to be there. You can't wait to show the audience what you've got!

Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by other competitors in your panel. So what if last year's state champion is competing against you. The worst that can happen is: she'll beat you and you'll go down one rank. There's no shame in that. But even reigning champions can be beaten. Go in there and give it everything you've got. Tell yourself you *can* picket fence the panel (receive 1st rank on all your ballots). You may not be able to control the judge's decision, but you can control your attitude. When your attitude is one of a winner, judges will want to vote for you.

4) Have a script

You never know when you might need one. If you're running your piece moments before going into a round and realize you forgot a line, you'll want your script handy. Most tournaments now require you to submit your script in advance, but either way you may be asked to produce a copy. I made it standard practice, back in the days when script submissions weren't required, to have a script with me. I was even asked once to show it.

Having a copy of your script will increase your confidence. You don't need to print it at the size you memorized (probably several pages long). Instead, shrink the font, organize into columns, and print on both sides of the page. You only need the script as a reference; there's no reason to take up extra space in your pocket.

Interp Etiquette

If you've got a well-crafted piece, you may end up being a rock star. People are going to like what you do, and they'll want to see it again. If you develop your own groupie, that's okay. You don't have to order it to disperse. But don't actively try to accumulate one, either. Groupies do not positively impact judge's decisions. Worse yet, they can intimidate other competitors. Intimidate competitors by being a brilliant interper, not by making them watch half the audience file out of the room before they start their interp. Actually, judges sometimes react *negatively* to the rock star status.

Avoid becoming part of a groupie yourself. If your time allows, stay for at least two pieces before leaving a room. This mitigates the massive in-flow before a popular piece and out-flow immediately after. If you can't stay for one more piece, you probably don't have time to be watching the first one.

Be courteous and be known for good sportsmanship. Try to make the interp experience a good one for everyone you interact with, even your arch-nemesis. You may get one, no matter how nice you are. One year, a student from another region would growl at me at tournaments, and I at him. He was running the same piece as me. Eventually we went back-to-back in a final round where a high ranking meant qualifying for nationals. After that, we were buddies. Always hold other competitors in the highest regard. You'll get more from the experience, and you're likely to do better, too. Opponents you treat well can become friends for life.

You should watch other pieces for two reasons. First, you'll learn more about the event with every piece you watch. In particular, study the people who are regularly doing well at tournaments. Learn from what they're doing right and emulate them. Second, watching someone's piece is a great way to support them.

Both my national final rounds in dramatic interp, I got massive support from other interpers from my region, folks who had once been my stiffest competition. There's nothing like walking into a room with the goodwill of dozens of former foes at your back. You want that feeling, and you want to be able to give it in return if you don't do so well.

In all things, be courteous and thoughtful. Respect the tournament process. Be gracious and humble whether you win or lose.

Drawing a Blank

It's inevitable. At some point in your interp career, your mind is going to freeze. You won't have the slightest idea what comes next. A blast of cold panic will shock through you. You'll frantically try to get back on track, growing more flustered with every second.

Everyone freezes up at some point. The only way to minimize it is to focus on your piece as much as possible (as we already discussed). But even a laser focus can't save you. You'll inevitably have your moment. What then?

First, harness your adrenaline. It's part of a primal "fight or flight" impulse God gave you to improve your performance in such a high-stress situation. It's not a bad thing. It increases your awareness and speeds up your thinking. Let the adrenaline quicken your recovery.

Next, control and conceal your panic. Many interpers can't help saying: "Ummmm...I'm sorry...wait..." while frantically scanning the air, scratching their heads, or giggling nervously. Don't do this. Remain calm and in-character. The audience doesn't have to know you drew a blank. Insert a dramatic pause. Keep your physical acting in place as you mentally search for what comes next. If you can't remember, scan ahead to the next place in the script that you can. Then start from there as if it was all part of the plan.

If you do make a noticeable blunder, do not acknowledge it or apologize to the audience. Move along with confidence. Perhaps you'll have them wondering if it happened at all.

Mind blanks and mistakes are always a bigg deal to you. Not so for the audience. Spectators usually remember mind blanks for about fifteen minutes. For the competitors, they become the most memorable tournament moments. Don't beat yourself up about it. Within a week, the only person who will remember it is you. Learn from it if you can, then move on.

Debriefing

One of my favorite moments in a tournament is the moment immediately after the award ceremony ends. The competitors all rise as one from their seats and converge – with varying degrees of nonchalance – on the ballot packets. Everyone asks each other (whether they crossed the stage or not), “How’d you do?” Discussions of ballots and rounds usually continue through the night and the whole drive home.

Understanding what happened at a tournament is a critical part of being a speech competitor. It’s one of the reasons there’s more than one tournament each year. Competitors can learn from one and improve for the next.

Interpreting tournament results can be a tricky thing. It’s easy to say that a first place means you’re doing well, and coast into the next tournament. It’s also easy to get depressed by a barrage of low rankings.

I challenge you to change focus. Rather than trying to understand exactly *how you did*, try to understand *how you can do better* for the next tournament. A high final placement is encouraging because it means you’re doing something right. A low final placement is *also encouraging* because those ballots are probably loaded with helpful ideas to make your piece greater.

At the end of the day, the trophy is cheap plastic. The ballots, on the other hand, are solid gold. You should scrutinize them carefully.

Don’t allow any sole ballot to impact you. Look for trends within the criticism. If one judge said you should enunciate better, take the comment lightly. If three judges told you to enunciate better, you know that’s something to work on. Everything the judge says is valuable, but you can only isolate and work on a few things for each tournament. Work on the ones that more judges noticed, and bear the rest in mind.

Remember, you don’t go to tournaments to win. You go to improve yourself. Let victory be a consequence of your growth. Reading too much into final placements can get in the way of improvement, and you don’t want that. No matter how you place, move on! Focus on the next tournament, and the next. Keep climbing.

Closing Thoughts

So that's interp! I hope you enjoyed and benefited from this book. Interp is a part of an unending journey in self-improvement. I'm still traveling the interp trail myself, learning nifty new things every moment. In fact, I know more about interp now than I did when I started coaching. Every one of my students challenge me and teach me something new.

As the saying goes, an artist's painting is never finished. The same goes for interp. You'll never finish perfecting your skill. You can always improve. Never stop giving it your all. Don't get discouraged. Keep trying something new. Never apologize for doing your best.

Now go Interp! Make mistakes, get better. God bless you.

Discussion Questions

1. What impact does your day have on your performance?
2. How do judges remember competitors?
3. Name three purposes of a ballot.

A P P E N D I X A

What follows is the script for my nationally-ranked Open Interp “Glad to Be Here.” The purpose of this appendix is to show an example of two key interp disciplines: original interp and storytelling interp. Enjoy reading the piece, and see how the principles in the book were applied.

This piece is a storytelling interp. I spoke as myself, delivering the narrative in a grave, solemn tone and looking straight into the eyes of the judges. Then I would bow my head to indicate a scene change and perform a brief scene in character, using the language that would have actually been spoken. If only a single line was being delivered in character, I would perform a character transition rather than take the time to switch scenes. I got away with it because the character's lines were part of the narrator's sentence.

This piece worked for me because of its deeply personal nature and my ability to convincingly portray conversations in other languages, using nonverbals to communicate meaning. I have added approximate translations for the reader's benefit; in the interp I spoke in the original French or German. Because I was showing, not telling, judges understood the scenes, much to their pleasant surprise.

1942: The Nazis occupied Southern France. In order to obtain ration cards, Frenchmen had to serve in the new Service du Travail Obligatoire - forced labor. Their greatest fear? Being sent to slave labor camps in Germany, for few who went there ever returned.

“Glad to Be Here”

A true story

by Travis Herche

Ernest was starving. He and his grandmother hadn't had a decent meal in weeks. He roamed the streets in desperation, avoiding German patrols, knowing what would happen if the Nazis took him. Finally he knew he had no choice - it was either slavery or starvation. At the age of twenty-one, Ernest gave himself up. For the next three and a half years, he would be Hitler's slave.

He worked at the pier, loading ships under the watchful eye of armed Nazis. Every now and then, black cars would pull up and SS agents would get out and point at certain workers. The chosen would immediately be sent north to Germany. No one would ever hear from them again.

When Ernest saw the black cars, he would run and hide amongst the crates. He managed to avoid being chosen for an entire year. But one day, a Nazi officer pointed at him.

Ernest and about forty others were stuffed into a cattle car on a train headed for Cologne. For two long days and nights, there were no breaks; no food, no light, no water. The prisoners cried out for relief, but were ignored.

[SCENE]

ERNEST: Hé! Laissez-nous sortir! (Hey! Let us out!)

AUBIN: C'est inutile. Personne n'entend. (It's no use. No one cares)

ERNEST: Qui êtes-vous? (Who are you?)

AUBIN: Aubin.

ERNEST: Et moi... Ernest. (And me ... Ernest.)

AUBIN: Enchanté. (Nice to meet you.)

ERNEST: Hé! Laissez-nous sortir! (Hey! Let us out!)

AUBIN: [Shakes head]

[SCENE]

When they finally reached Cologne, it was being bombed. Ernest was assigned to bury those who had been killed by the raids. Bombs fell every night, lighting up the sky. The stench of death was everywhere.

ERNEST: Je mourrai bientôt.

NARRATOR: Ernest said to himself.

ERNEST: Au maximum, je vivrai deux jours de plus.

NARRATOR: I will die soon. At the most, I will live two days longer.

But Ernest survived, and was taken from Cologne to the first of several dismal labor camps. On Christmas evening, 1943, he was sent north to build beach fortifications against the allies. It was a hard winter, and the days were bitterly cold. Ernest wrapped rags around his bloodied hands and dragged heavy buckets of cement to the beach. There was never enough food, and the slaves were chronically sick.

Ernest knew that his work was helping his enemy, so he and the others did as little as possible. He would work slowly, stumble and spill his cement, and apologize profusely rather than clean up the mess and get back to work.

GUARD: Dumme Fransozish.

NARRATOR: The guards would sneer. Stupid French. And Ernest would smile inside, knowing he had done his part to sand the gears of the Nazi war machine.

Some slaves died of disease, malnutrition, or ill-treatment, but some simply gave up. The Nazis killed those who could not work. And then there was Aubin. He had been with Ernest from the very beginning, and they used to dream together of freedom and homecoming, but the years of slavery and the horrible conditions took their toll on Aubin. When the prisoners were counted one morning, Aubin suddenly started shouting insults against Hitler.

[SCENE]

AUBIN: Hitler! Hitler! Tu es maudit! (Hitler! Hitler! You are condemned!)

ERNEST: Aubin! Non! (Aubin! No!)

AUBIN: Hitler est un tyran! Un meurtrier! Un monstre! (Hitler is a tyrant! A murderer! A monster!)

GUARD: Komme zie here! (You! Come here!)

AUBIN: Le monstre! Hitler! [Siezed]... He! Ernest! (The monster! Hitler! Eh! Ernest!)

ERNEST: Aubin!

[SCENE]

NARRATOR: *The Nazis beat him, stripped him naked, and put him in a tiny cage where everyone could see him.*

(Note: This quick sequence of scenes showed Aubin slowly dying of exposure. In each scene he grew weaker and more delusional.)

[SCENE]

AUBIN: *Hitler fini! Meurtrier! Monstre! Tyran!* (Hitler is done for! Murderer! Monster! Tyrant!)

[SCENE]

AUBIN: *Hitler est maudit. Il est maudit.* (Hitler is condemned. He is condemned)

[SCENE]

AUBIN: Hitler ... Hitler.

[SCENE]

AUBIN: ... Je ... Hitler ... (I ... Hitler ...)

[SCENE]

NARRATOR: Ernest was heart broken. He missed Aubin terribly. But Ernest was consumed by the will to survive, and so he worked.

Time passed. Finally, news of D Day and the allied advance reached the camp, and the slaves dared to hope that they would soon be free. The next few weeks were frightful. The Germans were growing restless, pushing the slaves to the limit. Then one morning, the camp commander gave orders to split up the slaves, and Ernest's group was force marched to a river where they boarded a flat boat. While crossing the river, the men were attacked by patrolling American fighters.

[SCENE]

(Note: This scene showed the nazis and prisoners in a boat. The nazis took potshots at the planes as they strafed the river; the prisoners cowered in fear.)

GUARD: Amerikaner! (Americans!)

GUILLAUME: Baissez la tête! (Duck!)

GUARD: Schnell! Mach schnell! (Quick! Hurry!)

ERNEST: Plus vite! (Faster!)

GUARD: Nehme den hund! [Dies] (Shoot him down!)

[SCENE]

The soldiers and prisoners continued their march. The Nazis shot anyone who stumbled and fell. All around Ernest was havoc, smoldering ruins, starved civilians who ran from prisoners and soldiers alike. On the third night, they saw a line of fire on the horizon. It was the front. If he could make it across the lines, Ernest would be free.

That night, a small group of fleeing prisoners and German deserters started walking for the front. They walked and walked for hours; reached ground pockmarked by war; scarred by breastworks and falling shells and soldiers, some dead, some fighting, all of them very young, and mines scattered across the ground. At one point Ernest lay on his belly and wriggled through the mud while bullets whizzed all around him. It is indeed a miracle that he survived. Most of his friends did not. But he crossed the lines and slept that morning in a bombed-out farmhouse. When he awoke the next morning, there were only five escapees alive.

They fled for days, dodging patrols, eating animal feed, always on the run. Finally, they reached a bridge, and on the other side of that bridge were allied soldiers. The bridge looked deserted, and so they set off, but when they were halfway across they were attacked by Nazi snipers.

[SCENE]

(Note: In this scene, german snipers attacked the prisoners as they tried to sneak across a bridge. The prisoner in front of Ernest was killed; the one behind - Guillaume - was shot. Ernest turned to help him and Guillaume waved him on seconds before being hit again. Ernest ran. As he ran, I turned my back to the audience and played the rest of the scene just with sound.)

ERNEST: Quel est ce bruit? (What's that noise?)

SNIPER: Französisch! Schnell raus gehen! (French! Quick, take them out!)

PRISONER: Attention! Ils nous tirent dessus! [Dies] (Look out! They're shooting at us!)

GUILLAUME: Dépêchez vous! Dépêchez vous! [Hit] (Go! Go!)

ERNEST: [Turns back] Non! (No!)

GUILLAUME: Continue, Ernest! Vas-y! [Dies] (Don't stop, Ernest! Go!)

ERNEST: Mon ami ... (My friend ...)

[Ernest runs]

[Fade to black]

ERNEST: [Heavy breathing; crying]

MARINE: Hey, there, buddy.

ERNEST: [Breathing]

MARINE: It's okay, fella. Wake up.

ERNEST: [Breathing]

MARINE: Relax. Everything's gonna be fine. No more Nazis.

ERNEST: [Breathing; sudden gasp]

MARINE: You're free.

[SCENE]

NARRATOR: In May 1945, Ernest, one of 5 million Europeans who had toiled as Nazi slaves, returned to his home in Southern France. His grandmother was home waiting for him. They had not seen each other for three and a half years.

Ernest eventually married and had three children. The first, Rémy, moved to Paris, where he became a successful engineer. The second, Jean-Luc, became a successful professor, author, and publisher. The third, Martine, moved to America where she taught and became a UN-rated interpreter. She also married and had five sons, Ryan, Travis, Cody, Logan, and Jesse. That's right: Ernest is my grandfather, and this is his story, as he related it to me.

My grandfather does not claim to be a hero. He is a good man who persevered through dark times, and God has spared him to this day. His life is remarkable because of the stories he took from it and the legacy he left for the world. I am part of that legacy. I'm Travis Herche, and I'm glad to be here.

A P P E N D I X **B**

What follows is the script for my Dramatic Interp, taken from Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables." I used it to win an NCFCA national championship.

The purpose of this appendix is not to give you a pre-cut script to use; instead, it gives an example of a scene-based interp (this one has absolutely no narration) which satisfies all the requirements of a great script. While this piece had a challenging number of characters – seven – only Jean Valjean appeared in every scene. His characterization was strong enough that the audience never had trouble distinguishing the others.

Bear in mind that the rules for interp scripts are different in every league. In fact, the NCFCA has overhauled its rules since I competed; I would be unable to run this under the new system. Know your league. Remember also that this was the script I used to memorize, so it had a few directions marked in brackets that I kept for my own benefit. I have added a few additional directions in parentheses for the reader.

Watch how the intensity gradually increases as the piece goes on, with small intensity spikes at the end of each scene.

INNKEEPER: I cannot receive you, sir.

*JEAN: What! Are you afraid that I will not pay you? Do you want me
to pay in advance?*

INNKEEPER: No, It is not that. I have no room.

*JEAN: Put me in the stable, or corner of the loft then. We will see about
that after dinner.*

INNKEEPER: I cannot give you any dinner.

*JEAN: But I am dying of hunger. I have been walking since sunrise. I
pay. I wish to eat. I am at an inn; and I shall remain.*

INNKEEPER: Go away! The whole town knows about you! You are Jean Valjean! I sent to the town-hall and found out about you. Now go away!

[SCENE]

Les Miserables

By Victor Hugo

[SCENE]

[Knock]

JEAN: Pardon me, sir, could you give me a plate of soup and a corner of that shed, in which to sleep? Can you? For money?

MAN: But why do you not go to an inn?

JEAN: No one received me.

MAN: Have you been to What's-his-name's, in the Rue Chaffaut?

JEAN: He did not receive me either.

MAN: Are you the man?

[Gets gun]

MAN: Rascally marauder! Clear out!

JEAN: For pity's sake, a glass of water.

MAN: A shot from my gun!

[SCENE]

(Jean Valjean sleeps here; he wakes as soon as the Old Man approaches)

OLD MAN: What are you doing there?

JEAN: [Angrily] As you see, I am sleeping.

OLD MAN: On this bench?

JEAN: I have had a mattress of wood for nineteen years. To-day I have a mattress of stone.

OLD MAN: Why do you not go to the inn?

JEAN: Because I have no money.

OLD MAN: *I have only four sous in my purse.*

JEAN: *Give it to me all the same.*

OLD MAN: *Some one might have given you a lodging out of charity.*

JEAN: *I have knocked at all doors. I have been driven away everywhere.*

OLD MAN: *Have you knocked at that one?*

JEAN: *No.*

OLD MAN: *Knock there.*

[SCENE]

MAGLOIRE: *Monseigneur, a vagabond, a dangerous mendicant, is in town. A gallows-bird with a terrible face.*

BIENVENU: *Really?*

MAGLOIRE: *Really. There will be some sort of catastrophe to-night. Every one says so. This house is not safe at all. Tell the locksmith to come; I say that we need bolts, and Monseigneur has the habit of always saying 'Come in'.*

[Knock]

BIENVENU: *Come in.*

JEAN: *My name is Jean Valjean. I have passed nineteen years in the galleys. I was released four days ago. When I arrived in these parts, I went to the inns, but no one would take me. . I went to the prison; the jailer would not admit me. I went into a dog's kennel; the dog bit me and chased me off, as though he had been a man. Someone pointed out your house to me and said, 'Knock there!' . . I have knocked. Are you willing that I should remain?*

BIENVENU: *Magloire, you will set another plate.*

JEAN: *Stop, that's not it. Did you hear? I am a galley-slave; a convict. Here's the passport I have to show wherever I go: "Jean Valjean, discharged convict... a very dangerous man." There! Every one has cast me out. Are you willing to receive me?*

BIENVENU: *Sit down, Sir, and warm yourself. We are going to sup in a few moments, and your bed will be prepared.*

JEAN: *You will keep me? You call me Sir! 'Get out of here, you dog!' is what others say. Oh, I am going to sup! A bed with a mattress and*

sheets, like the rest of the world! You actually do not want me to go! But you ... are you an inn-keeper?

BIENVENU: I am a priest. Keep your money. Magloire, place those things as near the fire as possible. The night wind is harsh.

JEAN: Monsieur, you are good; you do not despise me.

BIENVENU: This is not my house; it is the house of Jesus Christ. This door does not demand of him who enters whether he has a name, but whether he has a grief. You suffer, you are hungry and thirsty; you are welcome. You have suffered much?

JEAN: Oh, the red coat, the ball on the ankle, a plank to sleep on, heat, cold, toil, the convicts, the thrashings, the double chain for nothing, the cell for one word; even sick and in bed, still the chain! Dogs, dogs are happier! Nineteen years! That is what it is like. [Pause]

(Jean sees soup on a nearby table and guzzles it)

JEAN: Monsieur, all this is far too good for me; but I must say that the carters who would not allow me to eat with them keep a better table than you do. You are poor; I see that plainly. Ah, if the good God were just, you certainly ought to be a bishop. I saw a bishop once. He had a pointed thing, made of gold, on his head; it glittered in the bright light of midday. If God were just, you would be a bishop.

BIENVENU: The good God is more than just, Monsieur.

JEAN: I have not known His justice. When I show my yellow passport, my wages are cut in half. When I object I am told "That is enough for you. Beware of the prison." One gets free from the galleys, but not from the sentence.

BIENVENU: Yes, you have come from a very sad place. Listen. There will be more joy in heaven over the tear-bathed face of a repentant sinner than over the white robes of a hundred just men. If you emerge from that sad place with thoughts of hatred and of wrath against mankind, you are deserving of pity; if you emerge with thoughts of goodwill and of peace... [pause] Let me conduct you to your room.

JEAN: But Monsieur, Really! How do you know that I was not an assassin?

BIENVENU: That is the concern of God.

[Blesses him]

[SCENE]

MAGLOIRE: Monseigneur, Monseigneur! Does your Grace know where the basket of silver ware is?

BIENVENU: I don't know where it is.

MAGLOIRE: It is stolen! That man who was here last night has stolen it. Monseigneur, the man is gone! Ah, the abomination! He has stolen our silver! A pretty idea, to take in a man like that! How fortunate that he did nothing but steal! It makes one shudder to think of it!

BIENVENU: It is the silver which troubles you? But was that silver ours? Magloire, I have for a long time detained that silver wrongfully. It belonged to the poor. Who was that man? A poor man, evidently. Oh, hello.

GENDARME: Monseigneur—

(Gendarme salutes; Jean is in handcuffs with his head bowed)

JEAN: Monseigneur! So he is not a simple priest?

GENDARME: Silence! He is Monseigneur the Bishop. Monseigneur, we came across this man running away from here. He had this silver...

BIENVENU: Ah! here you are! I am glad to see you. But how is this? I see the silver ware. I gave you the candlesticks too.

GENDARME: Monseigneur, so what this man said is true?

BIENVENU: If he told you that they had been given to him by a priest with whom he had passed the night.

GENDARME: In that case, we can let him go?

BIENVENU: Certainly. The silver is his.

JEAN: Is it true that I am released?

BIENVENU: Yes, it is true. My friend, before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them. Now, go in peace. [To Gendarmes] You may retire, gentlemen. [To Jean] Do not forget, never forget, that you are promising to use this money to become an honest man. Jean Valjean, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that was purchased, and with more than silver ware and candlesticks. Withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and give it to God.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Travis Herche



Paladin Summit, Oregon

Travis is a two-time NCFCA Hall of Famer — an interper with a decade of experience. Travis competed at five National tournaments and was nationally ranked in both forms of debate (5th place TP team 2003, 6th place LD team and 3rd place LD speaker 2005). He competed at the national level in ten individual events (punctuated by an Iron Man appearance in 2005 and a Dramatic Interp Championship in 2006).

Since then, Travis has coached across the country, helping students to achieve their own Nationals success stories. He is the author of *Keys to*

Interp and Emerald Curriculum. As an actor, Travis has appeared in film and stage productions from New York to LA, and has also worked in a number of other film roles from writing to casting directing to set design. He is a writer of both fiction and non-fiction, and teaches reading and English as a Second Language. Travis currently lives in northern California. His favorite movie is Wall-E.