

NARROWING THE GENDER GAP IN INTERPRETATION

by Ron Krikac

If asked, "What is the most important quality in an interpretation performance?" I answer without hesitation, "Believability!" When an audience says, "We fully believed that performance--the characters, the situation, the emotions," then the interpreter has succeeded. Some rare competitive performances succeed so well that, in the words of the NFL interpretation ballot, "the hearer forgets this is a contest and in a perfectly-created atmosphere, is carried away to the time and place of the story being unfolded." Most student presentations, however, are less successful than that ideal, often because the students are unable to portray believable characters different from their own genders. Yet interpreters need not accept such limitation, for by following an intelligent, systematic, and disciplined approach, they can enact convincing characters of the opposite gender.

Consistency

Most of us have seen at least one of those galvanizing performances in which the interpreter so successfully portrays believable characters of both genders that we are indeed "carried away to the time and place of the story being unfolded." And we never forget such magical experiences.

More often, however, we see performances which are excellent in a number of respects but which lack consistent believability because the interpreters do not portray characters of the opposite gender as realistic human beings. Such a situation mars both serious and

comic performances: in dramatic interpretation, performers unable to depict such convincing characters often create unintentional and unwanted humor because their juxtaposition of realistic and unrealistic characters is comic; in humorous interpretation the performer's limitation often results in flat, stereotypical, cartoonist characters who ultimately fail to engage the sympathy -- or even the interest -- of the audience. The audience members feel no involvement because they cannot connect with such characters as fellow human creatures.

And we should make no mistake: in contest work the

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student's ability to portray believable characters of the opposite gender is a real asset. First, performers with such abilities are not restricted in their choices of materials. Because they can play characters of both sexes, they have an almost unlimited range of literature available. Second, contestants effectively playing characters of both genders have an edge in competitions because sensitive evaluators recognize their accomplishment as remarkable. Like the competitive diving

judge who takes into consideration degree of difficulty before granting a score, the critic-judge in interpretation contests will react favorably to the achievement of this difficult task. All other aspects being equal, the competent critic usually will award higher scores to those performers successfully meeting the gender challenge.

Believability

How does the student performer achieve such believability?

The first step in preparing any interpretative performance is to understand the characters, relationships, and situations as thoroughly as possible. Interpreters must put themselves into the minds and hearts of the characters in order to answer some fundamental questions: Why do the characters behave as they do? What do they want? What tactics do they use to achieve those desires? What are the characters thinking and feeling as they speak? The student wanting to enact characters with depth and honesty needs to know moment-by-moment what is driving them to act and speak as they do. Without this understanding, the performer cannot hope to realize a richly-textured characterization.

Understanding complex characters, many of them much older and more experienced than the young interpreter, is always a difficult task. But it becomes enormously more challenging when the character and performer are the opposite genders. For centuries the sexes' inabilities to understand each

other have been the subject of great literature, both comic and serious. In this century, through systematic research, we are discovering how very differently men and women think, value, feel, and communicate. And interpreters must comprehend those vast differences if they are to understand characters of the opposite gender and perform them convincingly. By reading works such as John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and the writing of Deborah Tanner, performers can gain an essential and fascinating base for understanding the other half of humanity. Grounded in this knowledge of the opposite-sex characters' reasons for acting and reacting, the interpreter can move to the next step, physicalization.

It's no secret that males and females are anatomically different from each other, but often student performers don't consider how those differences affect the way men and women stand, move, and speak. No doubt studying the skeletal and muscular differences between the sexes can show the physical and vocal adjustments needed to suggest the opposite gender, but directly observing living human beings is probably more helpful. Serious interpreters and actors are committed people watchers: wherever people congregate--malls, theatres, sports complexes, churches-- they study and note how individuals stand, move, and talk; and they then incorporate these realistic qualities and mannerisms into unique true-to-life portrayals.

Generalizations can be dangerous; nevertheless the careful people watcher will probably note a number of qualities evident in most males and most females.

Characteristics

In general, men tend to stand with their feet further apart than do women: men often place their feet about shoulder width whereas women keep theirs a bit closer together (but not touching). From that base, men characteristically place their weight toward the middle of their feet while women usually move the weight slightly forward. Typically, men gesture less often than women; but when they do gesture, they tend to make broader, firmer, more direct gestures than do women. Often women's hand movements are more fluid, less direct, and more graceful than men's; and women gesture a little closer to the body than do men. As a result, women's gestures are usually smaller than men's. The interpreter recognizing

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these fundamental differences can adjust his or her body accordingly to suggest the physical qualities of characters of the opposite gender.

Observation will also reveal some generalizations about vocal characteristics. Because of their larger larynxes, men usually have bigger, lower, and more resonant voices than women. This physical fact can make vocal changes more difficult to achieve than postural and gestural adjustments; thus in matters of voice, interpreters must rely more heavily on suggestion and illusion than on true-to-life imitation. Women portraying male characters will

need to take deeper breaths than normal, open their mouths more to create additional resonance space, and relax their throats in order to lower the pitch slightly. Often women with light voices can make their voices sound richer by focusing the sound more forward into the mask of the face. (This is a difficult concept to explain on paper, but a speech or singing teacher can easily help the performer to achieve this focus.) Finally, when playing men, women need to reduce the amount of vocal inflection they use, as most men (Americans at least) use a relatively narrow inflectional range.

Males portraying female characters must also employ vocal suggestion and illusion. Above all, men must avoid the popular practice of using exaggerated pitch changes to suggest women's voices. Such use of the falsetto voice conveys exactly what the word suggests--falseness. To suggest a woman's voice, the male performer may raise his normal pitch slightly but should not exaggerate. Instead he should lighten the quality of the voice and add more breath than he would normally have. He also may reduce the force in his voice and employ a wider range of inflections than he would normally use. It's better to seek a softer, lighter voice than a higher one.

Performers of both genders may also create more distinct but believable voices by altering their vocal qualities. In making such alterations, it's sometimes helpful to think in terms of musical instruments. Listeners often describe women's (and young boys') voices as "flutey" or reedy." Men's voices (and some women's voices) are called "brassy." An especially rich, warm voice suggests the resonant sound of the cello. Through vocal experimentation interpreters familiar with the specific timbres of instruments can

often adapt those sounds to create distinct but believable voices for either gender.

Considerations

Three related matters need to be mentioned. First is a reminder that there exist millions of human beings of both genders who do not fit the physical and vocal generalizations mentioned above. In real life we often encounter people who are atypical. For example, recently while shopping, I heard the most unusual voice I'd ever heard (outside of humorous interpretation contests!). I thought surely the speaker was using a false voice for some reason, but he was not. Although the voice seemed to come from a Saturday morning cartoon, it was the habitual voice of a man about fifty years old. If I had heard that voice in a round of interpretation, I would immediately have written a comment about its unrealistic quality! Human beings also who remarkable physical uniqueness: there are manish women and effeminate men, and most human beings possess a complex of traits which we normally associate with one gender or the other. In fact, we've probably all had the disconcerting experience of being unable to tell whether a person we've encountered for the first time is male or female. Uniqueness is a part of human existence; but unless interpreters have strong justifications for creating such unusual beings, they are better off suggesting opposite-gender characters who are closer to the generally-perceived norms.

Second, good interpreters realize that age considerations are inextricably linked with those of gender in determining effective physical and vocal characterizations. A person's manner of standing and moving changes with age as well as with

gender, and one's vocal qualities and mannerisms change as he or she gets older. In fact, various studies have shown that age-related physical and hormonal changes often make older people take on the characteristics of the opposite gender. For example, as men age and become increasingly frail, their movements often become lighter and more delicate just as their voices become higher and thinner, like women's voices; as women age, they often shift their weight back on their feet, become more forceful, and even develop lower, "masculine" voices. These facts can also influence opposite-gender characterizations and thus underscore the need to base portrayals on observation of real-life human beings rather than strictly on theory and imagination. Good art feeds on real life.

Third, as strange as it may seem, in rare instances, one can become too realistic in creating opposite-gender characters with the result that the audience is pulled out of the scene rather than into it. Some years ago, I saw a very talented young woman perform a scene between a mother and her adult son. The mother was a believably character; but when the son spoke, I was jolted out of the scene: the performer had somehow found a voice that was so big, full, and "male," that I found myself asking, "How does that petite young woman produce such a huge voice?" The effect was something like the diabolical voice coming from the young girl's body in the movie *The Exorcist*. Every time the son spoke, I couldn't help focusing on how the performer created that sound. I simply would not get involved in the scene as I was too fascinated by the contestant's extraordinary vocal technique. This performer would have been more effective, I think, if she had relied on suggestion rather than absolute

realism to produce the male character's voice.

Ultimate Test

In summary, I believe that the ultimate test of good interpreters is their ability to create a wide range of believable human characters. One particular challenge to developing this versatility is creating believable characters of the opposite sex. Such creation demands an understanding of gender psychology and anatomical differences, careful observation of human beings, and the technical skill to embody the desired characterization without calling attention to itself. Performers who are able to create convincing characters of both genders, whether in dramatic or humorous interpretation, have a strong advantage in competition. Perceptive critics recognize and reward their achievements; and more importantly, they remember the outstanding work. In 1985 and 1986, when Andy Thornton of Texas won the national championships in dramatic interpretation and humorous interpretation, I remember so many people commenting on his exceptional ability to play female characters who were convincing without being "campy." Today, nearly a decade later, I still hear veteran coaches praising those convincing characterizations. Indeed, the ability to create believable characters of the opposite gender is the mark of the very best interpreters; and that skill gives special pleasure to both the performer and the audience.

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