

THE ART OF ORIGINAL ORATORY

by
Kim Mendelsohn

O r a t o r y

I competed in original oratory throughout my high school debate career. Over four years, I witnessed the unfortunate devolution of the event I love.

The art of original oratory offers high school students the unique opportunity to speak to peers and adults for ten (hopefully) uninterrupted minutes. For a generation that made Will Smith's "Parents Just Don't Understand" the first rap song to win a Grammy, one would think this opportunity to enlighten adults would be seized

upon. The opposite, however, is true. Students are choosing topics that will get the most laughs, topics that offer the best opportunity for sob stories, and, most depressingly, topics that are so dull and benign that they do not merit attention at all. Then, having chosen a topic, they write a speech designed not to cause controversy or stimulate thought. The focus has shifted from intelligent analysis of a significant problem, delivered with persuasion and panache, to banal patter masquerading as analysis, delivered to amuse. The emphasis on presentation, and the fear of offending, or even challenging, the judge supercedes the concern for content.

"Oratory is about moving people; enlightening people, touching people; making people reexamine their beliefs."

Original oratory; has slowly shed its emphasis on thought; delivery is the sole obsession. Consider Josh Gad and Jared Weiss who, while they are both great orators, are not the only orators. Since Josh Gad staged a sit-in and won Nationals, orators have been desperately searching for the next and more daring way to push the envelope. Raps, many identical in rhythm, appeared in oratories across the country once Jared, "Played that Funky Music, Weiss boy." Now, orators walk out of rooms, scream at their audiences, dance, jump, or sing to their next point. Simply, they do everything in their power to avoid saying anything intellectually challenging. Humor is an effective rhetorical tool; however, when orato-

ries are nothing more than a series of jokes, the intent and the integrity of the event are completely lost. Instead of using presentation as a way to further our arguments, we are using spectacle to hide it; instead of delivering our message, our message is delivery.

Much of the problem derives from the belief that there is a necessary structure that every oratory must follow in order to be successful. The "heart story," has become a staple of the universal oratory. The heart story is, of course, the most heart wrenching story the speaker can find. It might apply to the speaker's topic, but it might not; in recent years nothing has stopped orators from using any story that sounds tragic. Rape victims surface in speeches about patriotism. Murderers begin to teach us all about depression. To say these examples are far-fetched is a gross understatement. To say they are links from speeches at Nationals is depressing.

The aforementioned offenses against original oratory are egregious, but an equally significant transgression is the selection and development of topics. Orators, it seems, are not seeking topics they are passionate about, they are looking for topics that will "bring home the hardware." Thus, the most mundane and mind-numbing topics are being chosen again, and again, and again. And worse yet, the topics are not being explored in any significant way. Depth of research- actually having research- seems unimportant. Challenging widely held beliefs or current ways of thinking has become a choice rejected as too intellectual. Social issues, not just personal issues, give us substance, but those are topics requiring serious thought, and, therefore, topics not being selected. The thinking is that boring the audience to death is far less of a crime than actually asking them to challenge what they believe. Therefore, we'll keep hearing the same old oratories on stress. On love. On hope. On the need for pillows in the oratory competition rooms to cushion the judge's head as (s)he sleeps through the round. The problem isn't just the topics; it's the lack of passion for ideas about the topics and the lack of scholarship in developing the topics.

Kate Georgan's oratory in Finals of NFL Nationals, 2002, was about going for the gold and being a hero. That is nothing new. Yet the way she told it mesmerized (Mendelsohn continued to page 88)

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the audience at Nationals. She was funny, she was sincere, and she was passionate. But above all, she was real. Her comedy wasn't so jerky that she looked as she might lapse into an epileptic seizure at any moment. Her stories didn't make the audience want to hang themselves, and her topic was neither outlandish nor insignificant. Most crucially, her ideas were intellectually sound and supported by evidence. As in most oratories, there is a deceptively simple solution. The NFL Manual says that orators are not required to solve a problem, but should, "discuss (it) intelligently, with some degree of originality, in an intelligent manner, with some profit to the audience." We profit from stimulating ideas. Oratories need to be written by high school students and critiqued by their coaches for worthwhile subjects, sound logic, thorough and current research, and precise and meaningful use of language.

Oratory is supposed to be a forum for the expression of ideas; ideally, oratory challenges the listeners to examine the way they live and think. My coach once told me that, in her sixteen years of coaching, she has only heard a handful of oratories that made her want to change, or at least think about changing, the way she lives. In its essence, that is what oratory is about. Moving people. Enlightening people. Touching people. Making people reexamine their beliefs. The ability to do that is rare. The opportunity is remarkable. The fact that it is wasted is incomprehensible.

Both the coaches and competitors in original oratory must take steps to save their event from a dismal fate that currently seems inevitable. As Gary Green, former forensic competitor and current student at Yale stated, "original oratory has truly become deplorable."

(Kim Mendelsohn is a freshman at SUNY Binghamton. She graduated from Nova HS. She was a two-time State Champion, Qualifier to NFL and CFL Nationals and participated in numerous elimination rounds at national tournaments.)