

SUGGEST IN PROSE READING

by Debbie Bendix

PROSE ALLOWS US TO GRASP THE GREAT WORLD BEYOND OUR FRONT DOOR. The Oral Interpreter of Prose brings the LITERATURE TO LIFE in the minds (not eyes) of the audience. It is these two observations that result in one of my foremost biases between NFL's main interpretation events and supplementary interpretation events. I am of the firm belief that it takes more talent, more control and more inner intuitions to ORALLY INTERPRET a piece of literature. In Supplementary Prose the Interpreter serves as the liaison between the literature and the audience. The literature reigns supreme at all times. Whereas in our main events of Drama and Humorous, the performance of the student (physically and vocally) takes top billing. To support what I term as 'LITERATURE REIGNS SUPREME,' I offer the following definitions. ORAL INTERPRETATION -- the art of interpreting literature aloud to SUGGEST mood and meaning to the audience. PERFORMANCE OF LITERATURE -- to wholly BECOME the characters before the eyes of audience members. The end result is that Performance of literature leaves little to the imagination of the audience; while Oral Interpretation of literature leaves most to the imagination.

With this philosophy in mind, consider the following three key elements to enhance competitive success in Supplementary Prose: 1.) Choice of literature. 2.) Practice strategies. 3.) Performance techniques.

CHOICE OF LITERATURE

When my students and I embark on our search for NFL Supplementary Prose selections, we do not seek out the magical five minute selection. Generally, it does not exist. Instead we look for literature which follows three criteria: 1.) Universal in theme 2.) Memorable beyond the immediate moment and 3.) Tailor matched to the contestant.

Perhaps the most common error a person can make in choosing literature for the consolation event is to opt for Dramatic Prose (that which is written or edited so that virtually all narration is deleted and only dialogue remains). This type of Prose demands immense vocal and physical acrobatics from the interpreter. It again leaves the least to audience interpretation. The end product is a highly visual performance in which the literature all too often becomes

secondary to the performance. It is for this reason that we opt for more Traditional Prose (narrative prose mingled with dialogue). This is perhaps the safest choice because it satisfies the palates of the Dramatic and Narrative Judges equally. It subtly blends the skills of the Interpreter in a way that allows them to SUGGEST rather than become personae in the literature.

PRACTICE STRATEGIES

Once the selection is chosen and cut to the time limit (making sure to keep plot and resolution intact) we literally put the script away until one week before Nationals. This serves a duo purpose: 1.) the student does not think you've abandoned hope for Main Event success. 2.) It allows the interpretation of literature to be fresh and spontaneous by the contestant. National caliber students are such quick studies that to "perfect" the oral interpretive reading before arriving at Nationals is actually detrimental to the outcome. This is generally because the presentation becomes so technically flawless that the art of SUGGESTION is LOST and once again the VISUAL PERFORMANCE TAKES OVER.

PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES

I coach my students of Supplementary Prose to exercise the following performance hints:

1. Do not allow the physical action to overshadow the spoken word. When the physical actions take precedence over the spoken word, then you have gone beyond suggestion. As Shakespeare said, "Nor do not saw the air too much with your hands thus, but use all gently."
2. Allow the voice, face, eyes, and gestures to work in unison with the literature. Avoid technical tricks for the sole purpose of achieving audience reactions.
3. Realize that as the Oral Interpreter of the Literature, you have a proxemic intimacy with the audience that cannot be matched by a performer on stage. The Interpreter receives immediate feedback and should

not cross the audience's comfort level between suggesting personae and becoming personae in literature.

4. The book or script in hand acts as a symbol of the literature. It reminds us that the literature, not the performance, reigns supreme at all times.

In conclusion, I advocate to my students of Oral Interpretation that the true beauty of orally reading literature is that each audience member is allowed the creativity and freedom to relate, identify and react to it on their own. The best interpretive reading of literature is that which is done so well that the audience is almost unaware of the interpreter. With the reader serving only as the liaison between audience and literature, the literature takes us to that GREAT WORD beyond our front door.

(Debbie Bendix, Forest Lake (MN) Senior High, coached the 1986 and 1990 National Prose Champions.)