

# MOVE IT, OR LOSE IT!

by  
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## The Debate Over Movement in Interp

Let's face it; there are very few issues in forensics which cause as much criticism and complaining as the amount of movement that coaches and judges see/think they need to use in interpretation. When I began my career as a coach (and I was an interp coach, mind you) I remember being schooled in the theory that "the difference between interpretation and acting is visual; if you can CLOSE YOUR EYES and envision the piece, then it is interpretation. If you need to SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING, then it is acting." And for years, I have coached and judged in this fashion.

But this year, something strange seems to be happening. At every tournament I have been to and in every tab room that I have served in, I have had to address the issue of movement in interpretation. My pat response is to say something like "well, if you are bringing this issue to me, it is obvious that the amount or type of moving bothered you, so it should be a voting issue for you." And in retrospect, that seems like an acceptable answer. Still, there must be a reason why the coaches choose to incorporate that much or kind of movement in the piece. And maybe it is not fair to make such a blanket statement when, perhaps, I am simply acting out of a pre-conceived bias or out of date ideals.

So I have decided to address the issue in the form of a modified debate. I will use the L/D format (kind of) and voice both sides of the argument. And then I will leave it up to you. After all, this is an issue that

we all have to deal with. How many of us have had students fail to qualify/place because of a hyperactive ham with a bad case of St. Vitus dance? How many of us have resorted to over-the-top performances and coaching to compete against the other schools in our District? How many of us have watched the Final Round tapes in disbelief, saying over and over to ourselves "this is interp?" Are there valid reasons for restraint? How about for the physicality of interpretation? It is up to you to decide as I offer the following resolution:

**RESOLVED: The use of excessive movement in Interpretation is justified.**

### Affirmative

"Acting is not just from the mind; it is from the soul, and the body. It is in the stance, mannerism and physicality of a character", and it is because I agree with two (2) time Academy Award winner Kevin Spacey that I must stand affirmatively resolved that the use of excessive movement in interpretation is justified. Without movement, any and all movement, interpretation would be limited to the words on the page alone. And while the negative may think this is the true meaning of interpretation, I will show that it is exactly the opposite.

My highest value in today's round will be that of FREEDOM. Without freedom, the liberty to be as physical or non-physical as an interpretation requires, "one cuts the performer off at the knees, literally", ac-

ording to actor/performer John Leguizamo. Certainly, actors need the freedom to inhabit and live a role, dealing with the physical as well as mental issues. But limiting an interpreter to the mental only creates a dynamic, which inhibits, not enhances freedom.

Since we are dealing with students competing interpretation at the high school level, criteria to further define FREEDOM would need to be based in personal as well as the forensic. Therefore, looking at personal expression, as well as the reality of forensics provides a valid foundation for upholding the value. After all, one cannot truly be free to do what is necessary to adequately and fully interpret a piece if one's expression, or the society in which they must function, are over structured.

CONTENTION 1 - Freedom is maximized by the use of movement in Interpretation.

*Sub-point A:* Expression has more than one component.

Not to cite legal precedent, but the Supreme Court of the United States has held, consistently, that expression is not only verbal, but also physical. Speakers, from orators to debaters, would never cotton to a rule that disallowed movement or gestures. Now, the negative will argue that the use of movement in interpretation is excessive. While this may be true, one cannot argue that it not exist. How one uses their

body, and how they interpret a scene or dialogue physically, are all part of the interpretation process.

The question seems to be the amount, not the ability to use. Still, it seems that both of these issues are tied together. One cannot have access to something, yet not feel free to use it to their maximum benefit. It would be like telling a debater that they could only use certain sources, or that only a specific set of philosophers are valid. If it is a necessary part of the event, then students should be allowed to use it, in any way they need.

*Sub-point B* - Without free personal expression, there is no freedom.

So, the argument becomes how much freedom is too much. Just how much movement in an event is tantamount to excessive? Well, in debate we practice word economy and directness, so why should it not be the same with interpretation. A good maxim may be to limit the amount of movement as the piece limits it. Only focusing on outside demands, on the limitations that one wishes to place on it for some questionably noble ideal like integrity or fairness undermines two sets of expression; one claimed by the author and the other claimed by the performer.

Certainly, an argument can be made that there is too much movement. And this is true if it is movement for movement's sake. But if the piece demands it, if the interpretation requires it, why not allow it? Why should this area of expression be limited, when we would not do it to others? Reasonable restraints can and should be applied, but only as long as they compliment, not hinder, free expression, because if an interper feels hindered, then they are not free to interpret, but only follow set guidelines. And who are to set these guidelines? What organization or group can create a universally accepted standard? It seems impossible, just as it would be if one were to attempt to police the content of interpretation. One man's pornography is another's literary treasure. The same can be said for the use of movement.

**CONTENTION 2 - THE ABILITY TO FREELY INTERPRET A PIECE IS NECESSARY TO COMPETE.**

*Sub-point A* - Movement is the norm, not the exception, in competition.

Attend Final Round at NFL Nationals and ask yourself this question: Who is getting the most applause? The biggest reaction? Is the most recalled and imitated later on in the new season? I can guarantee you it is not the controlled performance that follows a strict set of proscribed parameters. No, it is the competitor who is freewheeling and breaking the rules, taking risks and chances in the pursuit of entertainment, free expression and an award.

Again, this does not mean that the rulebook should be thrown out and that every event should be allowed to modify and create new standards on the spot. What it means is that, in the current climate of incredible talent and overwhelming competition, a group of students should not be handicapped by, frankly, outdated notions of what an event is. It used to be that forensics felt females could not compete on the same level as males, and created separate categories for their participation. Should we do the same, simply because some coaches feel that walking across the front of a room during an interp is not "traditional"? Should we create an entire subcategory of competition for those students who merely want to 'pivot on one foot'? An event needs to grow and modify itself as the times dictate. It should not cement itself in the past for the sake of antiquated ideals.

*Sub-point B* - Forensics will police itself.

One of the best arguments for the use of any and all movement in interpretation is that, unlike other events where the validity or veracity of a strategy may never come into question, interpretation has judges, schooled in various forms of forensics, who will make quantitative decisions. If a student competitor uses what is universally viewed as excessive movement, then his or her ballots will reflect such a determination. If there is a gray area, however, the ballot will reflect that as well, making clear who thought the performance went over the top and who felt it was perfectly acceptable. There is no denying that the students who win tournaments with excessive movement are talented. There has to have been something there other than the movement for the judges to vote for.

But the issue boils down to a matter

of fairness for some coaches. Watching a student use wild gestures is perceived as illegal: as cheating or underhanded. Now, it is truly against the rules to falsify evidence in team debate or extemporaneous, just as it is to claim the speech of another is yours in original oratory. But when rules are as vague as "excessive movement is discouraged in interpretation", there is no true way for a student or coach to gauge what is acceptable and what is not. You could use the minimal amount of movement, and still find judges who would rank your students low because they thought even that was too much. Unless there is an absolute ban on movement, there will never be an adequate set of guidelines to make every coach/competitor/League/tournament happy. Self-policing, while rewarding some and rejecting others seems the only reasonable way to proceed.

And this will do more to maintain the integrity of an event and promote freedom than a thousand rulebooks. If the purpose is PURELY to win events, then excessive movement may seem an inevitable. But winning is not everything, and since only 1 out of a 1000 can ever be the winner, it is not necessary to focus on what is best or worst about that one person alone. Trying to curb the few exceptions with rules that affect everyone is narrow-minded. When you undermine freedom, either of expression or competition, you affect everyone, not only the violators, but also those looking to improve and experiment. How can a student know their limits without having a chance to freely challenge them?

Interpretation is the recreating of the author's intent. If the author intended for the piece to be purely vocal, then strict movement requirements are fine. But the vast majority of pieces are not stiff monologues delivered with no motion. Interpretation means freedom, freedom to move and freedom NOT to move. Anything less undermines the very nature of the event. And when we undermine the nature of the event, we do more damage than any kneeling, jumping or waving of arms could ever do. I see no other position than Affirmative.

## **Negative**

"Acting is about control. It's knowing what to do and what not to do. It's about making the most of the moment, and minimizing the obvious. It is not about excess", and it is because I agree with Michael Caine, two (2) time Academy Award winner, that I must stand negatively resolved that the use

of excessive movement in interpretation is justified. Let me moderate the negative position in this matter. I am not arguing that interpers should NEVER be allowed to move. After all, they are not playing statues.

No, it is the position of the negative in today's debate that the excessive amount of movement that is currently the practice in interpretation is detrimental to, and is destroying the integrity of the event. Therefore, the highest value in today's round should be INTEGRITY. Just because someone can use something, does not make it beneficial or vital to the progress of an event. And it is important to view this from the progress of the event and its student participants as well as of speech and debate in general. Therefore, the criteria that I will use to further define my position are the event welfare, as well as the overall forensical welfare of the excessive use of movement.

CONTENTION 1 - Excessive movement in Interpretation destroys internal integrity.

*Sub-point A* - There is a difference between acting and interpretation.

I think one of the strongest arguments that one can make against the excessive use of movement in interpretation is the concept that, by its very definition, interpretation asks for something other than acting. In the definition of , the rationale for, and the performance of, this is in the formal makeup of the event. We do not allow props. We do not allow costumes. If this were indeed an acting event, it would be so called. And there are other organizations, such as the Young Theater Group and Thespians, which hold tournament like competitions in acting.

Interpretation is defined as "*a concept of a work of art as expressed by its representation or performance*" (The American Heritage Dictionary, Office Edition). Acting is defined as "to take on the characteristics of another, to pretend or put on a false show." (Same source) Interesting how different these definitions are. Interpretation has a very clear bright line. Acting is more ephemeral. And that is the main difference between the two. By allowing too much movement, we blur the line so much as to destroy the purpose of interpretation. Saying it is interpretation, but really allowing it to be more and more like acting de-

feats the purpose of having a so named event. And this destroys internal integrity.

*Sub-point B* - Too much movement destroys the work of art expressed.

Another reason too much movement is detrimental to the internal honor of interpretation can be also found in the definition above. Look at what is being said. A work of art, in this case a play or piece of fiction, is supposed to be defined by the expression or performance. When someone interprets a play, it is to reflect the actual work, not some off the wall notion of the work. That means that someone interpreting a drama as a comedy, and vice versa, is violating the mandates of interpretation. It is supposed to represent the material.

And wild, uncontrolled gesturing does not do this. Excessive movement, unless SPECIFICALLY delineated in a piece, undermines the artistic integrity of a piece. Take a comic monologue, for example. IF the author asked for the performer to roll around on the ground to prove a point, or flail their arms wildly to make a statement, then they would be totally appropriate in an interpretation. BUT, when a student or coach adds this type of grandstanding, these grandiose gestures that function is nothing more than the attention grabbers they are designed to be, then they are not following the author's desire. They are selfishly using histrionics to gain a kind of 'outrageousness', a 'look and remember me' advantage over the rest of the field.

And, once again, unless the author mandated it, this is not what interpretation is supposed to be. If we allow massive, over-the-top gesturing, then we should allow other assaults on the author's intent. We should allow for males to be females and the old plays as young. We should not balk at rewriting for content or the times. Excessive movement undermines the internal integrity of interpretation because it undermines the author's intent. And when we undermine the internal integrity of something, it has very little base integrity left. Therefore, excessive movement in interpretation is not justified.

CONTENTION 2 - Excessive movement in Interpretation undermines speech and debate in general

*Sub-point A* - Without clear limits, there is no fairness.

One way to measure the external integrity of an item is to determine the equity or fairness that can be found. And in this instance, where we are looking at movement in interpretation, equity truly does not exist. There are many causes of this: differing leagues and league rules, the duplicity and contradiction of rules and standards, and the age-old notions of competition and strategy. Sometimes, it is merely a matter of degrees. In other instances, the differences can be as clear as day or night.

Some leagues have decided to attempt parity by developing harsh rules and consequences for this violation. Still others have seen fit to let the event kind of "regulate itself", figuring that it will eventually right its own wrongs. But there is a danger in following either one of these courses of action. Strict rules lead to rebellion, with coaches and students purposefully misusing them to fulfill a greater or more personal agenda. Self-regulation means that abuses will occur, and when they do, they end up becoming the status quo for long periods of time. And in most cases, the regulation part never happens. All that does occur is what is happening now, that is, the excessive amount of movement in interpretation.

And this creates a basic inequity in the event. Those who wish to play by the rules find themselves at the short end of the posting as the violators move on to set the agenda and pick up the trophies. Effective or not, if everyone cannot or does not play by clear rules, then there is no equity in an event. And where there is no equity, there is no external integrity. There is not a need for an outright ban of movement. Just a basic understanding of the definition of interpretation would be enough, and what it is not, can restore integrity to the event.

*Sub-point B* - Standard can be created.

Affirmative may argue that there can never be a clear set of standards, because no one group of coaches, judges, forensics executives and/or students could ever agree on what those doctrines would be. Is walking two paces too much? Too little? Should we be able to kneel? And if we can kneel, why not lay down? For every positive, there will be a negative, for every proposal an exception. It would seem an impossibility (like finding an understandable team debater or a lucid forensics coach) to create the rules.

But that is not true. And the answer is right under our reading glasses. IF the piece demands movement, then movement can and should be used. It should be consistent with two (2) things: (1) the author's intent and (2) the physical reality of the event. If a writer images a character climbing a ladder, or riding a horse, then the performer can incorporate those actions into his work. But if there were an all out brawl, or a chase scene that is meant to cover many portions of the stage, to attempt to mimic this would be excessive. Why? Because of the physical limits involved. There is no other actor to fight with, no stage left or right to deal with. To try and pretend you are taking on an army of villains when all you have is a ill fitting suit and a bloodstream full of caffeine seems a little outside the boundaries.

And this includes instances where the author mandates NO action. Just because you think the crucial ending dialogue between dying father and son needs some jumping jacks to "liven" it up does not mean it is acceptable. A comic monologue about horrible tasting food does not require you to incorporate Ricky Martin style dance moves. The piece, not the desire to win, should dictate the amount and type of motion. And judges who wish to question this should be able to view the original cutting to see if the movement is inherent. Either way, they can discover the truth and make their decision.

Under this system, we solve many problems. We keep out of control performers in check by making them stay honest to the work. We provide a standard for judges to go by when confused, or angered by what they see. We do not modify or restrict the student's abilities by making them stiff and rigid, delivering lines like an audio animatronics President at Disney World (or on C-Span). There is a universal applicability. This is the only way to maintain integrity, both within the event itself and in forensics in general. We should strive for inclusiveness and this can only be achieved if everyone, violator and conformer alike, knows the score. In light of the analysis presented, I see no other vote than negative.

So, what do you think? Affirmative or Negative? Swayed by the idea of complete freedom, or liking the idea of following the original intent of a piece. Maybe you like a little from column A and a smattering from column B. Whatever it is, I would like to hear it. I think that, in some cases,

this is the biggest problem in forensics today. Students feel they cannot compete against others who "play fast and loose" with the rules and seem to always end up standing on stage at the final award ceremony. It is not right that some members of our community think that others "cheat" in order to gain their trophy reward, looking with a jaundiced eye at otherwise talented students.

Just as we would not tolerate the "perception or inference of impropriety" in the tabulation of a tournament, or in the proffering of evidence in L/D, TD and Extempore, we should not allow interp to continue on this path of "anything goes". While it may make the event more fun, or gratifying, hardware wise, it will eventually harm the event, just like speed in team or spreading in L/D, and create questions in the minds of coaches as to whether or not they can compete in the current climate of competition. Good riddance, some of you may say. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the break posting. Is this really what we are all about in forensics? If it's just the trophies, then maybe there is something wrong, in general. Whatever it is, write about it. I would like to hear about it.

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