

# MONOLOGUE OR DIALOGUE

by Cathy McNamara

Every September I gaze at the faces of between 25-30 eager novice forensicators, each of whom I've required to do a solo interpretation event and wonder where all that "new", "fresh", and "emotion-wrenching" material will come from. My first instinct is to guide them to a classroom set of "Great Monologues for Young Actors" just to get them out of their chairs and working. However, as most of my colleagues know, my dislike of monologues in Dramatic Interpretation is great. They are, in my opinion, a wonderful tool for getting many timid, confused first year interspers in the performance mode. But, put in a competitive round with finely tuned dialogue cuttings, they just don't survive. I will admit that I have occasionally been captivated by powerful monologues. It is indeed, incredibly difficult to hold an audience's attention for ten minutes with only one character and I consider this when I'm seated on a judge panel. There is a wealth of great one-character material out there and I would never tell a student they cannot do a monologue. I'm reminded of the beauty of *A Trip to Bountiful*, the suffering of

*Sunflower Forest*, and pain of *Tradition IA* and more recently, the melancholy of *My Son Susie*.

Why then my general dissatisfaction with monologues? The answer, and thus my first criteria for script selection, lies on the back of the dramatic interpretation ballot which reads "The final test of a good interpretation is that the hearer forgets that this is a contest and is carried away to the time and place of the story being unfolded." With a few exceptions, monologues are incapable of transporting me anywhere except the classroom or auditorium in which the performance is taking place. When a performer breaks the proverbial fourth wall, makes eye contact with me and forces me to be not an observer of the action but a participant in the action, much of the sense of "transportation" is essentially lost. As an audience member, I want to be an eavesdropper in the drama unfolding, not a part of it. I want to silently and unobtrusively be "swept away" to the psychiatrist's office in *Equus*, the jail cell of *Someone to Watch Over Me*, or the hospital room of *Piece of My Heart*. The reason is simple and leads to the sec-

ond criteria for choosing not a monologue but a dialogue--dramatic conflict.

In a well-crafted and delivered monologue, the competitor usually tells the audience a story or a series of stories about their character's life. The audience can then feel their pain, relive with them their inner conflict, their agony. And, done well, this is awesome. How much more powerful thought, when that internal conflict is coupled with external conflict? Real live human beings, struggling through their personal and interpersonal crises. Then I can feel for both of them!!! I can change sides, I can double my angst!!! Consider father and son in *I Never Sang for My Father* or, lover and wife in *On Tidy Endings*, actor and servant in *The Dresser*. The list can go on. If this event is truly "interpretation" and not "acting", when placed in the highly competitive and dynamic round, dialogues more truly meet the criteria set forth by the official ballot.

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