

## **Developing Programmes -**

### **Diploma Modules in Speech and Drama:**

Towards the end of 2009 I had the privilege of adjudicating the drama section of the Mazda Young Performer of the Year and it was an enthralling experience. 24 talented young people from around the country presenting 15-minute programmes which were the culmination of months of hard work, selecting material, developing ideas, rehearsing each segment and then ensuring that they all come together as a whole and engaging performance. Each performer was entirely worthy of their place, some were truly there to showcase their considerable talents, some for the experience, and every one displayed an enthusiasm for performance and for developing their skills.

However the demands of a competition in planning a programme are totally different from those of an examination, in two key areas: the nature of competition v. examination, and the criteria and audiences for whom they are prepared.

By its very nature a 'competition' seeks to rank the performers. This is unlike an examination where, if worthy, every candidate can receive a Pass or even a Pass with Distinction to reward their efforts.

So after the PACANZ competition, individual talents aside, I fell to musing what makes the difference between a good programme and a great programme and what is required to develop that programme. Every competitor or candidate, I feel has the capacity to present a 'great' programme. To do this a programme must:

- o Meet the specific criteria set
- o Ensure the material suits the performance ability of the presenter
- o Suit the material and theme to the candidate or performer
- o Fully engage the audience – whoever and wherever that audience may be.

**So let us examine some aspects of programme planning – for Speech New Zealand Diploma examinations.**

#### **First and foremost:**

Check you are fully conversant with the criteria.

#### **Second:**

Choose your audience and your purpose. More of this later – but without a clear vision of your audience and purpose it is very difficult to develop a 'great' programme.

**Then select the theme and material.**

What comes first? The chicken or the egg? For an examination - what is the purpose of the programme? In a real world the purpose, theme, audience and venue would come first. But in reality with examinations it may work differently. Sometimes a theme may come to mind and the purpose, material, audience and venue will follow. Occasionally a student will find a poem, reading or drama extract that excites them and work with that as a starting point. Exploration from that piece will suggest a final theme and the other selections will follow.

Contrasting pieces are important too, there are the obvious ones of comedy and tragedy or drama, but also more subtle ones of period, style or perspective. Choices that enable a range of skills to be shown are the most effective.

**Poetry selection** can be problematic. By its very nature the poet is often expressing complex ideas in a very condensed form. Consider your specific audience as you choose: they, usually, have not had the luxury of studying the poem and thus need to understand and be engaged by the poem **the very first time they hear it**.

Will your chosen audience be drawn in to the ideas or the narrative of the verse?

Can you perform it in a way to engage your chosen audience?

**Prose** is storytelling and storytelling seeks a response from your chosen audience. Choose an extract that is well shaped and 'stands alone' without the need for too much explication. Do note, at Associate level, that if you choose to read the extract this does tend to place a barrier between the performer and the audience.

Will your chosen audience be drawn in to the ideas, the characters and the storyline?

Can you present it in a way to engage your chosen audience?

**The drama extract** is usually the 'showcase' for each performer. Choose a piece that offers personal challenge, and ensure it is well suited to your experience and maturity as a performer. As with the prose extract, your extract needs to 'stand alone' with very little need for explication. By all means use cuts as necessary to develop a solo characterisation, but too many cuts will destroy the flow of dialogue and leave your audience confused. Similarly an extract that is essentially for two people, with the dialogue of one character cut, has little chance in performance for satisfactory development or for the performer to connect with the audience.

Will your chosen audience be drawn in to the circumstances, the needs of the character and that character's inner life?

Can you perform it in a way to engage your chosen audience?

**The linking commentary** is a vital component of a good programme. This is yet another style of performance that is being considered: extempore speaking, which is planned, prepared and practised but not memorised. This style of speaking is natural and uncontrived and, most importantly it allows you, as a speaker, to truly connect with your audience. Writing the words of this into your script extracts is a sure sign that the link will not be in an extempore style!

As with a good talk, the introduction to your programme needs impact and clarity. This also needs to give the audience essential information to lead into the mood and content of the programme.

The links must be well paced to allow audience time to take in what has happened and prepare for what is coming – and remain effective and succinct.

The conclusion must wrap up effectively and strongly to suit the programme and leave your chosen audience feeling satisfied and replete with your performance.

### **The audiences and the venue:**

By now you will have noted, continually, my emphasis on **your chosen audience**. Unlike competitions, which cater for a very general audience and may be performed in a wide variety of venues, in diploma examinations you are asked to specify your intended audience – and the intended venue for that performance – even though, as we all know, the actual audience may be a gathering of friends and family and the venue in fact will be the examination space.

For an examination, the intended performance venue and space must be well considered so this can be discussed with the examiner. You will need to note any differences there may be between the actual audience and space within the examination and what may occur in performance relationship with your chosen audience and the specified venue to achieve the purpose of this particular programme.

Actors do not perform in a vacuum and must connect with their chosen audience in a specific venue and space.

So, overall, your programme must express your ideas and showcase your personal performance skills but, ultimately, this is a performance for an audience that you want to affect in one way or another: to think more deeply, to laugh, to empathise, to feel sorrow, pity, contempt or joy and so on ad infinitum. The more you consider your chosen audience as you choose your programme, the more successful it will be.

There is a great deal of discussion on audiences in the field of public speaking but not necessarily around theatre.

To truly succeed there must be a synergy between the performer, the material and the audience.

That is what sets an audience alight, and ultimately that is why we perform.

***For tips on developing a programme for competitions see the article 'Musings from an Adjudicator' in the April, 2010, edition of Speech Communication Association's magazine 'Cue'.***