Pseudonyms, Performance and Pedagogy: Performing Original Literature in Forensics
Kurt Lindemann

Changes in the forensic landscape are marked by many details, including the performer's style of performance and his or her selection of literature. But a quick mental check of the latter reveals that the performer's selection of literature has remained constant in many ways. One constancy that both maddens and delights competitors and coaches is the performance of material specifically written for oral interpretation in forensics. As far back as 1988, forensics scholars addressed the use of original material for interpretation as a critical recurring issue (Endres, 1988; Green, 1988; Lewis, 1988). Today this practice is perhaps at its most prevalent, with countless national finalists placing with material they have written for themselves or that others have written for them.

The practice of performing original literature is indeed "the dark, hidden secret of individual events competition," as Billings writes. It need not be, however. The performance of original literature in forensics has many potential educational benefits and, given the proper coaching and competitive mindset, is a practice that can be openly embraced by judges and competitors. This essay attempts to illustrate the educational benefits possible when students and coaches carefully question and re-articulate the methods of bringing original literature to performance in the forensics context.

(Post)Modern Literary Theory and Analysis

Some forensics educators may argue that the practice of writing material for oral interpretation in forensics is one that hampers the educational activities of selecting literature, discerning themes, and exploring character (Green, 1988; Endres, 1988). A common tenet of this argument is that writing material for performance shortcuts an important part of oral interpretation: literary analysis. Endres (1988) claims that a student can study neither the intrinsic factors of a work, such as mood and rhythm, nor the extrinsic factors of work, the author's culture and history, when the piece is written by that student.

This argument seems to hinge on a notion of maintaining authorial intent in the translation of the piece from page to performance. However, much of standard literary theory taught in literature classrooms today involves a recognition that author's intent simply does not matter (Birkerts, 1996). Structuralist theory states...
that since the author's very notion of self is constructed through language, it is therefore irrelevant, or at least not any more important than the views of the reader or performer, in the face of the higher-order system of language (Abrams, 1993). Proponents of Reader-Response Criticism state that the very act of reading constitutes another construction of the text, so that each reader "writes" the text a different way each time he or she reads that text.

Even with work written by an author who is not the student, coach or an acquaintance, the student in his or her analysis becomes an author, splicing sections and pieces and cutting paragraphs and lines to adhere to the time limits and highlight certain themes. While this is most easily realized when looking at the event of Programmed Oral Interpretation, where the student's hand in shaping the tone, mood and build of the program is perhaps most visible, it is no less prevalent in the events of Prose or Poetry. Students engaging in such analysis often exhibit an understanding of the various meanings a text can make in relation to other texts. The texts are placed together, juxtaposed, contrasted and compared to make an argument based on the properties of that text and not necessarily the intent of the author. The homoerotic themes in a certain work, then, may be highlighted over the traditional aspects of the plot and character regardless of what the author "really meant." Indeed, this approach to literature is what many forensics coaches might simply call "interpretation" and is not far removed from what might be traditionally taught by these coaches. The relationship between performer, author and text, then, cannot be the relationship argued for by Endres (1988), Green (1988) and other forensics coaches in which the performer is a simple conduit between the work of literature and its author, and an audience. The performer is not simply "an intermediary between the work and the audience ... communicating the intent of the author" (Green, 1988, p. 70). Such a relationship is clearly inconsistent with modern literary theory.

Some forensic educators may argue that they are not teachers of literature; in other words, it is not their duty or place to teach literary theory. But it seems that the performance of literature, even in the view of the most conservative forensics coaches, involves an analysis of literature, and literary theory must figure into the performer's analysis to some degree if the analysis is to be informed and thoughtful. Since modern literary theory involves a setting aside of the author's intent for a closer examination of the text, to argue that authorial intent must figure into a student's analysis of literature is to ignore the important role these theories play in literary analysis. With the author of the piece set aside, then, it becomes obvious that it may not matter who the author of the piece is. Literary analysis can still take place if the literature is approached in a thoughtful and informed manner and is tempered with an air of objectivity. If a student author can divorce him or herself from the text for purposes of analysis, the process of adapting original literature for performance can give students the same pedagogical benefits as can analysis on a previously published piece.

The Current Landscape of Literary Publishing

Those who disagree with the use of original literature in forensics may also
argue that the literature students often end up performing is of poor quality. Billings seems to be of this opinion. But we must ask ourselves: who is to determine the quality of literature? Green (1988) notes that using original literature unfairly turns judges and coaches into literary critics as they are forced to answer this question. As illustrated in this author's argument regarding literary theory, criticism—the ability to discern the relationship between meanings in a text and the support of arguments regarding these meanings—is a large part of reading literature, and therefore adapting literature for performance. Coaches and judges, then, must become literary critics, in every sense of the word.

Furthermore, coaches and judges cannot look to outside criteria, like publication, as a measure of literary quality. While publication may have been an acceptable ruler for "literary merit" at one time, the changing nature of literary publication has made this ruler inaccurate as a measure of quality. Spahr (2000) reports that, in response to dwindling governmental and institutional support, many writers are self-publishing, forming collective presses and setting up magazines on the World Wide Web. This trend is also due, in part, to the widespread introduction of the creative writing class into the university curriculum (Eshleman, 2000). With so many students taking creative writing classes and looking for an outlet in which to publish their writing, it seems that many are finding the market for unpublished writers saturated and magazine editors faced with a glut of submissions. As a result, these students, whose work may not even be viewed by their creative writing teachers as worthy of publication, are starting to self-publish chapbooks or are starting print or electronic magazines themselves. And since relatively obscure literature is valued as "new" and "fresh" by competitors, it is no wonder students in search of literature find web sites and self-published books to be gold mines of possibilities.

Judges and coaches are guilty of pushing students to find literature that is "new" and "fresh." How often have judges remarked on a ballot that a topic or script was "done last year" or "won nationals the previous year?" Clearly, students are in a double bind: pressured to choose material that has not been done before, yet frowned upon for writing their own material or performing literature published in less "literary" outlets. Considering the changing nature of literary publishing, there may be virtually no difference in quality between published writing and work written by the student or someone else associated with the activity. And unless we start specifying the outlets in which acceptable literature appears, which may be virtually impossible to effectively regulate, we must accept student writing as an alternative to published writing.

The Use of Pseudonyms in Forensics Performance

Endres (1988) notes that when students do not write their own work, they engage in the unethical practice of using pseudonyms. The reason for such practice is obvious: students know they may be judged unfavorably if they admit in their introductions that they are the author of their selection. The American Forensics Association Code of Standards (1998) does not specifically prohibit the use of pseudonyms in a student's piece unless the evidence or facts attributed to that
author are also distorted or fabricated. The author's name may be a fact that has been fabricated or distorted by using a pseudonym, but the practice of using a pseudonym cannot be viewed as unethical, especially when, as Lewis (1988) notes, we would not prohibit students from performing the works of Mark Twain or George Sand simply because the authors use pseudonyms to identify themselves. Nonetheless, the possible sanctions that judges may give a student who admits in the introduction that he or she is the author causes students to hide the true name of the author, again making the use of original literature something that is widely practiced but seldom talked about.

**Future Directions for Forensics Education**

Clearly, those who fight against the use of original literature in forensics oral interpretation are fighting a battle they cannot win: students will continue to write and perform original work, original work will continue to do well competitively, and the practice will continue to be legitimized by its competitive results. But as long as unpublished literature continues to be "the dark, hidden secret of individual events competition," it will remain an aspect of the activity whose pedagogical benefits are not fully realized. In the past, forensics scholars have suggested forming a separate event for original work (Lewis, 1988). This suggestion should be seriously considered. Another suggestion: perhaps tournament directors could put a separate rating scale for quality of literature on the forensics ballot. To be sure, judges already comment on the quality of the literature being performed, and, as with an overtime or undertime performance, a judge's evaluation of the literature may figure (however amorphously) into the rank and rate given.

Forensics educators must realize that the pedagogical value of adapting original work for performance has yet to be fully explored. And given the changes in the practice of oral interpretation and how it is informed by current literary theory and the changing nature of today's literary publishing world, the use of original literature in forensics deserves not only to be re-examined but also embraced by coaches and judges.

**References**


