Principles of Oral Interpretation

Oral interpretation is a fun and popular form of vocal acting, in which the majority of the performance is done with the voice, only vaguely suggesting a character through physical acting. Oral interpretation-which includes prose, poetry, dramatic interpretation, humorous interpretation, and duo interpretation-, is one of the most practical, usable forms of drama.

Presenting oral interpretation is, in many ways, a great deal harder than regular acting. You have to interpret and create a different characterization for each character in your selection, not just one. In addition, you only suggest each character; you do not give a complete creation. This subtlety is often harder than a complete creation.

In oral interpretation, you are concerned with two main items: 1.) characterization, which is created through the use of voice, eyes, face, gestures, and posture; and 2.) mood, which sets the emotional context of the selection through the use of poise, involvement and imagery.

I. Characterization

Remember, in oral interpretation you only suggest your character(s). This is more true in dramatic, or serious, interpretation, where the honesty and believability of your characters is often key to having your audience believe in your presentation. In humorous, your suggested characters can be less subtle, as one of the key to audience enjoyment usually lies in the zaniness and contrast of many of the characters.

Your narrator, or character relating the narration, is your most important character. Therefore, the narrator must be interesting (use a lot of voice variety). He also must be the type of character the audience cares about and wants to believe. One good way to accomplish this is to make the character of the narrator a combination of yourself and your favorite news anchorperson.

The narrator, as well as the other characters in your selection, is mainly characterized by the use of your voice, eye-to-eye contact and character placement, and physical movements, such as facial expressions, posture and gestures.

A. Voice

In most forms of oral interpretation, you will portray each character in your selection yourself. The best, most versatile instrument you have for transforming into those different characters is your voice.

1. Narrator’s voice. Since your narrator is your most important character, you need to pay particular attention to his voice. You usually want him to sound honest, intelligent, and well adjusted, because the audience sees the selection through him. You want your audience to relate to your narrator.
2. Character voice. Give each character a different voice. This can be challenging when you have four or five different characters. You create different characters through voice variety, voice quality, and accent or dialect.

a. Voice variety. Use voice variety to define the different characters in your selection, as well as to keep your audience’s attention. You can vary your voices by:

1.) Changing pitch, either higher or lower.

2.) Changing volume, going louder or softer.

3.) Changing speed, speaking faster or slower.

4.) Pausing for effect, especially good just before or after a keyword or phrase. Pausing before a word or phrase gets your audience’s attention; pausing after a word or phrase gives their brains a moment to digest it. It is frequently said in theatre that “A pause screams with meaning.”

b. Voice quality. Some of the stock or typical vocal qualities often used to differentiate characters are:

1.) Harsh, but not gravelly or guttural. That’s hard on both your voice and your listeners’ ears.

2.) Nasal, speaking through the top of your throat, pushing sound out your nose.

3.) Breathy, often works well as a “sexy female” voice.

4.) Deep, very resonant; not necessarily low. This often works well as a “macho man” voice.

5.) Dark, very resonant. This work well portraying someone who’s not too intelligent. It especially works well when combined with a slower speed of delivery.

6.) This, a higher, shallow voice. Works well to suggest someone who’s timid or frightened.

c. Accents and dialects. One of the best ways to differentiate you characters is to add dialect or accent.

1.) The more common American dialects include: Southern, Western, New England, Brooklyn, and Jewish.

2.) British dialects include: British, Cockney, Irish and Scottish.

B. Eye-to-Eye Contact and Character Placement

Your eyes are called “the windows of your soul.” Let them help you share your selection with your audience. This is done through eye-to-eye contact with audience members and character placement, or where you look to find other characters.

1. Eye-to-eye contact. Maintain eye contact with your audience during the narration. Eye contact keeps your audience involved and makes them feel you care about them.
2. Character placement. Where do your eyes move when you are “looking” for other characters in your scene or selection? This is particularly important when you are playing more than one character. To help your audience distinguish the different characters you are portraying, ‘place’ your characters; that is, look in a different, specific direction for each character. Look in that same spot each time that character speaks.

C. Physical Characterization

Physical characterization is the way you portray your character with physical movements, such as facial expressions, posture and gestures. This can greatly enhance your characters, but it can also be a two-edged sword. Be careful to us these tools naturally. In a serious work, you need to be subtle enough to support and enrich your characters, and not so obvious that you distract or call attention to your actions. In humorous, of course, you may wish to purposely overdo some of these at times.

1. Facial expressions. Often you can use a particular overall facial expression for each key character, such as smiling for a generally happy character, or a furrowed brow for an angry or thoughtful character. This helps the audience keep the character straight and adds interest to each character.
2. Posture. You can suggest quite a bit about your characters by your posture and stance.
   1. Masculine: Feet apart and elbows out.
   2. Feminine: Feet together and elbows in.
   3. Confident: Head up and body erect.
   4. Uncertain: Head down, body slumped, can’t sustain eye contact with another character.
   5. Narrator. One posture-related technique you can use that both conveys confidence and bonds you with your audience is to lean forward a little while you present your narration. This makes you audience feel like you’re reaching out to them, wanting to share your selection with them.
3. Gesture. A gesture is a movement of your hand or arm which conveys feeling or emphasis. You may use representative or habitual gestures to suggest different characters each time a certain character speaks, such as rubbing an eyebrow or twirling your hair. Again, remember to be natural and subtle. Some tips on using gestures are:
   1. Always gesture above the elbow
   2. You will usually only use one hand at a time.
   3. Holding the palm down denotes authority and confidence; holding the palm up or outward denotes fear, uncertainty and weakness.

II. Setting the Mood

Mood is the state of mind or feeling you’re trying to create with your scene. Mood is a combination of poise, involvement, and imagery.

1. Poise - refers to an attitude of composure, confidence and self-possession. It is generally shown in the way you carry your head or the way you move your arms and body. Keep that poise even if/when you make a mistake.
2. Involvement – be mentally and emotionally involved when presenting your selection. Good, honest energy, enthusiasm, and involvement can cover a multitude of technical mistakes. Use a lot of enthusiasm for a humorous selection or a children’s story.
3. Imagery – the key is for you as the performer to imagine and feel what your selection causes the audience to imagine and feel. Imagery has two main parts: physical, or sense, imagery and emotional imagery.
   1. Physical imagery, as called sense imagery, is simply images created by using the five senses, such as smelling a pizza or seeing a small dog.
   2. Emotional imagery is sensing the emotions the characters need to feel, especially in specific emotional situations. The best way is for you to imagine the feelings your selection gives.

III. Finding Good Material

Virtually all types of literature can be used for oral interpretation. Look for a short, strong incident or story. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a complete story or part of a longer work, as long as it can stand alone as a complete story to your audience. Dramatic or serious selections need a story with a strong conflict that builds to a powerful climax.

A. Sources

1. Anything published. Short stories, novels, plays, and occasionally magazines and newspaper articles. Fiction works well, but some of the best selections also come from nonfiction sources.

B. Cutting Your Material – sometimes you will find wonderful material that is just too long for you presentation. In these cases, you will have to decide which parts to cut and which parts to keep.

1. The material in your selection is not untouchable, but cutting does not mean rewriting.

2. If your selection is much longer than needed, cut everything but the most necessary parts and write transitions between the surviving parts.

3. While you must be true to the author’s overall meaning, you have a slightly different purpose in presenting your selection than the author did in creating it. Therefore, cut the parts in your selection which are unnecessary for the effect you want. For example, if your purpose is humor, cut the less humorous parts, unless they are necessary to the plot.

4, If you can stay within the author’s overall intent for the selection while cutting it to meet your purpose, go ahead. If you must change the author’s intent, you should find a different selection.