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Building Bridges: Connecting Performance Studies and Forensic Oral Interpretation

Alyssa Reid

ABSTRACT

Forensic educators have faced long standing criticism, within our discipline and beyond, in regards to the true educational benefits of forensic competition with particular scrutiny towards oral interpretation events. Although forensic interpretation events may seem like fun raucous performances, they are in many ways are grounded in sound pedagogy of oral interpretation scholarship. However in recent years, forensic oral interpretation has evolved to move beyond mere rendering of a text. In many ways forensic interpretation has shifted towards a paradigm of performance studies. Therefore, I shall reexplore past criticisms of forensic interp in order to argue for new ways to interpret interpretation and build a stronger bridge between forensic pedagogy and the communication discipline.

As a forensic educator and coach I am aware that I will face criticism from colleagues about the academic legitimacy of intercollegiate individual event speaking. An outsider observing a forensic tournament might enjoy watching the oral interp events the most, even if they do not understand some of the strange speech norms. It is not only the norms but the modes of forensic competition that have caused the practice of oral interpretation to face particular scrutiny. Although, forensic interpretation may have been birthed from oral interpretation of literature it has since become its own medium of study. Geisler (1985) pointed out that forensic interpretation events vary from the non-competitive oral tradition of interpretation. Forensic

interpretation is highly nuanced and in some ways inaccessible to outside audiences. Whereas the academic field of oral interpretation has evolved into a more comprehensive study of performance.

Performance studies addresses not only traditional stage performances, but also daily performance and cultural rituals. Performances academically grounded in performance theory are implemented in a very differently textured setting, while forensic oral interpretation varies from contemporary performance studies scholarship. In many ways it functions as a cursory introduction to the practice of academic based performance. Because performance scholarship is often rooted in dense language that is foreign to the untrained ear, forensic oral interpretation provides another frame in which to understand performance theory. Performance studies focuses on performance theory while competitive oral interpretation teaches students the necessary practice of performance. Although forensic interp can serve as a basis for comprehending performance scholarship, it faces criticism from disciplinary scholars as disingenuous performance lacking sound pedagogy. In order to understand this tension and justify forensic interpretation practice I will first introduce the academic function of performance studies, then explain the criticism forensic oral interpretation receives from performance scholars, before finally clarifying performance pedagogy within forensic interpretation.

Performance Studies

Performance studies was originally defined as oral interpretation. In order to understand the layered academic terrain of performance studies it is necessary to grasp the foundation of the discipline, then discuss the paradigmatic shift to performance studies.

Oral Tradition. Most definitions surrounding the tradition of oral interpretation pay close attention to the literature selected. Yordon (2002) defined oral interpretation as the “artistic

process of studying literature through performance and sharing that study with an audience” (p. 4). Lee and Gura (2005) argued that communicating the meaning of a text and the aesthetic performance of the literature are the primary components of oral interpretation. Their explanation places an emphasis on *how* a text is used to guide performance and they ground much of their definition of in the reader’s duty to perform within the parameters of the author’s intent. Further, Rossi and Goodnow (2006) stated, “the communication of textual content and form is a central aspect of the interpreter’s art” (p. 46). The foundation for interpretation of literature is based in how the interpreter can communicate emotional development of throughout an author’s script. In order to interpret literature it is important to have an understanding of the script being performed to create a performance of a script. Holloway Allen, Barr, Colley, Keefe, Peares, and St. Clair, (1982) defined oral interpretation as “the art of eliciting in the mind of a listener the imagistic, intellectual, and emotional potential of a piece of literature through the subtle appropriate use of voice and body” (p. 45). Bowen, Aggert, and Rickert (1978) stated that interpretation of literature “offers a fusion of literature and communication” (p. 12). A text in this way can be brought to life through performative reading of the text. In this understanding of interpretation the interpreter should be able to evoke audience imagination through masterful elocution, to compensate for a lack of physicality. By these standards, oral interpretation is an art form that is supposed to bring forth emotional processing of an author’s text through proficient use of technical performance skill. Forensic interpretation was not only conceived around the principles of oral interpretation, it has relentlessly clung to the principles even as the academic field has matured. An oral interpretation paradigm initially limited the expression of a worldview to the reading and analysis of canonical literary texts, but a performance studies paradigm would open up many texts to be analyzed and performed.

Paradigm Shift

As scholars of the oral tradition began to develop and expand their academic discipline, the overall ideological standard of the field adapted. Pelias and VanOosting (1987) described that oral tradition shifted to a performance studies paradigm to adapt with changes in both oral tradition and Communication as a discipline. This paradigmatic shift warrants the question of what performance studies actually is. In this shift, instead of defining how interpretation is different from acting, everyone in cultural contexts is a actor/performer of culture. Elizabeth Bell, in her widely popular introduction to performance studies text, *Theories of Performance*, stated in the opening chapter, “Oftentimes, we get so involved in any one set of ideas, or one specific performance, that we forget that all theories and performances are products of their times and larger world-shaping views” (p. 1). Performances can thus be thought of as a reflection and/or criticism of the world in which we live. This is reflected beyond mere costuming for stage but also in contemporary attire. Pelias and VanOosting (1987) framed “performance as a social act relying upon emergent principles and cultural conventions of enactment” (p. 224). Culture, in this understanding, is a performative act.

Although one cannot spell description without script, a performance studies approach to studying the drama of a text, to exploring the human drama, enacted daily. Bell (2008) structured performance theory as a means to make clear why and how performance aids in intricate social and political understandings through multiple creative forms. In many ways, theatre, rituals, parades, protests, or even acts of terrorism are not only creatively expressive forms but very powerful transformative mediums. Performance is not only a way that people understand culture, it can also be a site to change views about culture. Conquergood (1992) described performance as existing in a space between rhetoric and ethnography. Often the ways in which performances

are negotiated and understood is through an individual's systematic processing of culture. Performance then, is a facet of cultural production that is apparent in performances outside of a theatre. Boal (1995) argued traditional theatre was occupied by the social elite and theatre was a means of controlling messages communicated to the masses, but performance can become a location for cultural opposition. Performance studies is not necessarily limited to the construction of theatre, but rather how humans communicate as drama. Shultz (2000) stated that Kenneth Burke theorized that all human interaction is played out through "dramatism". Human beings process the world through stories and dramatism thus functions as a symbolic interaction of metaphors used by humans to distinctly communicate their experiences. In this way the stage is more than a physical structure to observe others acting out culture, it is a fluid space that aids in viewing culture happening around us. This posits that performance is not just a site outside of ourselves to observe, it is something that we do in order to describe contemporary life. Many facets of ourselves are thus elements of a story; there are heroes and villains, ebbs and flows, and yes the perfunctory beginning, middle and end. West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that even gender is a performance element in our symbolic life metaphors. Performance studies moves beyond the realm of textual analysis but into a complex method of informing our processing of the world we live and the cultural conceptions adhered to our bodies.

Fox (2007) argued that performance of the self has the potential to alter how one perceives their position in the world. Our bodies can cast us into particular roles. The ways in which people present themselves is a performance of identity. Warren (1999) framed the body as a performative site that is irrevocably distinguished by political, ideological, and historical inscriptions that act as an interactive canvas of alternative experiential knowledge. Aspects of the self that are often perceived as private can function as performative indicators of identity. Fox

(2007) explained how his body was marked as a cultural signifier of a sickly gay man. His *Skinny Bones* demonstrated how our bodies look and move are reflections of culture and cultural values. Evaluation of the body's shape, movement, and character is just one of the many ways which performance studies has progressed.

Performance studies covers a broad area of academic ground. It is clearly a varied field of scholarship that operates and analyzes how performance works on stage, in culture, and in presentations of the self. Forensic interpretation was founded upon the discipline of oral interpretation that has since evolved into the field of performance studies. Performance studies now has placed a scrutinizing eye on the forensic practice of interpretation that has not evolved at the same pace as the academic field it once attempted emulate.

Criticism of Forensic Interpretation

Both forensic interpretation and oral interpretation have evolved significantly since their inception. They were born out of the same theoretical concepts but much has changed in both fields. However, performance studies has grown at a quickened pace and scholars in the field are often frustrated by many norms inherent to forensic oral interpretation that are isolated performance skills. Performance studies currently criticizes forensic interpretation for the ways in which the field overvalues forensic aesthetic and how competition undermines pedagogy.

Overvaluing Forensic Aesthetic.

The forensic world is its own cultural microcosm filled with demanding norms that dictate how performers should look and act. Interpretation competitors are often evaluated more on aesthetic of performance instead of how a script is interpreted. Bacon (1979) warned that to place too much emphasis on *how* something is said diminishes the emphasis on the message of *what* is being said. This can be seen in forensic interpretation when a judge evaluates a round on

ambiguous terms. Mills (1991) highlighted that character and delivery were the most prominent evaluation factors in interpretation rounds. However, both of these evaluation tools are vague. These are facets of how a judge arbitrarily determines that a student interpreted a script “correctly” even though they likely have not read the text. Lee and Gura (2002) advocated that while performing a text that “technical display is not an art” (p. 5), meaning that a brilliant performance of literature is distinctly different from interpreting a text. It also suggests that someone can interpret a script incorrectly. I have seen many powerful performances in forensic interpretation events, however the performance trend has become increasingly more separated from the text and more motivated in performance aesthetic and forensic norm expectations.

Rossi and Goodnow (2006) stated “Put simply, oral intepers, like all artists, make choices reflective of individual experience as well as aesthetic understanding, technical training, and personal goals” (p. 46). The interpreter then is expected to find a personal connection to the literature they are presenting, otherwise the performance is definitively shallow. However, a shallow performance is not necessarily *bad* in forensic performance, or even an incorrect interpretation of a script. Often times, a forensic interpretation performance is rewarded for technical skills. Bookwork, blocking and page turns are technical aspects of forensic interpretation that have little relevance outside of a speech tournament. In this way, forensic judges critique how well forensic performances portray forensic performance.

A fine line exists between what warrants educational practice and pure performance. Klosa and Dubois (2001) explained that ballots function on two levels: judging and educational feedback. Oral interpretation has faced criticism even by forensic scholars as emphasizing performance aesthetic over educational interpretation practices: Lowrey, 1958; Green, 1988; Koepfel & Morman, 1991; Rossi & Goodnow, 2006. Forensic evaluation of oral performance

also relies heavily on the elocution of performance. Mills (1991) found that delivery was a key component in the judging paradigm of interpretation events. Further, Conquergood (2000) articulated that elocution has traditionally been used as a mask to hide racial, ethnic, and class biases. This should be prompting discussion in the forensic community in regards to potentially problematic judging decisions. Evaluations more focused on how a message is delivered are subject to discriminatory practices. Scott and Birkholt (1996) criticized forensic judging stating that personal bias can never be effectively removed from ranking decisions. For example if a judge were to rank a round on elocution, it could reflect a bias against a particular regional dialect or even speech impediment, that in forensics is justified due to the objective opinion of a judge. Morris (2005) highlighted evaluative practices in judging forensic tournaments that were based in superficial distinctions prefers style and execution of norms over performance quality. Without sound pedagogy supporting judging decisions in the forensic community an evaluator may resort to qualitative intangibles to rank and rate a round. This could allow for hidden discrimination within forensic participation. Meaning that certain cultural voices within interpretation for multiple reasons are unrecognized in forensic interpretation.

Competition Undermines Pedagogy.

One of the most prominent criticisms of forensic oral interpretation from performance studies are the ways in which competition tarnishes performance integrity. Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) stated that in intercollegiate forensics “the practice of competition coopts education” (p. 12). Competition can motivate students and coaches alike to stoop less than scrupulous practices. Gaer (2002) further argued that forensics has success formulas for students to construct speeches in order to meet the unwritten rules of the activity. Students and coaches in many ways observe what wins and begin to copy models of success instead of inventing new

models or deriving success through individual understanding. This model suggests that if students want to become successful they need not learn the skills of textual interpretation they just need to learn forensic norms. This emphasis can promote winning over interpreting a text with integrity.

Sometimes, coaches are complicit in pedagogical undermining. Managing a successful team can be difficult, especially if there is pressure to achieve external goals. Gernant (1991) argued that in interpretive events, students are sometimes handed pre-cut literature complete with introductions. This means that some students are not doing the initial processing of a script. This criticism, in my opinion, is valid. Although I have heard of programs taking this approach, I would argue that those teams are the exception to forensic interpretation and not the norm.

A majority of interp competitors are learning how to critically examine a text. In some cases, the examination of the text goes so in depth that the interpretation performed veers slightly from the original text. Gernant (1991) conducted a survey of interpretation competitors in forensics and concluded that the students were not necessarily interested in the intent of the author, only the success of their performances. This was framed by Gernant as a lack of regard for the script shows that demonstrates students are not extracting meaning from the text they are performing. However, I argue that it demonstrates that they are performing—in many cases successfully—devoid of knowledge of performance theory. So many forensic interpreters think they are integrated into the world of performance, but in reality, they engage in a practice of Sophistic mimicry of performance. Of course, I think it is necessary to point out that many forensic students go on to become performers and communication scholars. Forensic interpretation has served as a stepping stone to future academic ventures. I thought I knew all there was to know about performance before I began researching performance scholars,

discovering my true ignorance to the field was a rude awakening. It also made me even more interested in how to improve as a performer and scholar. Even though forensic interpretation did not adhere completely to performance scholarship, it provided me the impetus to delve into performance scholarship.

One of the most daunting competitive challenges for forensic interpretation events is to fit within the ten minute time frame stipulated within the rules. A piece of literature is often much more detailed than the script that is presented in forensics but it is necessary to cut it down in order to fit within time constraints. Gernant (1991) claimed that students, in order to compensate for the work of cutting, will turn to easy literature that is shorter or not as complex instead of challenging themselves and the audience with a richer text. This criticism should make the forensic community place a greater emphasis on literary merit. If judges began to think of their ballots as a means of promoting students with messages worth sharing to more people than this criticism could dissolve.

Performance scholars also argue that if forensics was true to interpreting a text than it would not cut it apart and restructure the authorial intent of the literature. Geisler (1985) argued that competitive oral interpretation restricts an honest creative work of an original text. The disruption of the text distorts the creative integrity of both the text and the forensic activity. However, similar criticisms are made about a book translated to a movie. The book is usually better and the same is also true for forensic performance. The translation of a text to a performance almost always requires interpreting words on paper and figuring out how to communicate them to an audience. The text is admittedly altered, but not necessarily distorted. Understanding these criticisms is not only an important reminder for our community but also a means of justifying our practice to colleagues within our discipline.

Forensic Interpretation Pedagogy

Forensic competition is a unique subset of society that not only represents culture through performance texts, but also simultaneously critiques itself and society. Currently forensic interpretation does not completely bridge the gap between performance theory and practice. Although I have provided justifications for forensic practices in interp, I also want to demonstrate monumental changes in the forensic activity that show a shift towards more progressive performance practices. This can be seen in shifts to include original authorship and the incorporation of embodied performance.

Original Authorship.

Scrivner and Robinette (1980) suggested that the fundamental role of oral interpretation is to understand personal experience through performance. In many ways, this fundamental aspect of performance is agreed upon among oral tradition scholarship, forensic scholarship, and performance studies scholarship. Forensic interpretation competition rules, despite much controversy, have shifted in order to allow students to select original material for competition. Paine (2005) articulated that forensic competitors often express dissatisfaction with the rules and norms of forensic competition. He offered that the alternative to stifled creativity for students should be to play with the norms that they had spent years mastering. Original material or “homewritten” material can serve as a means to promote creativity and performance scholarship within forensic competition.

Rossi and Goodnow (2006) suggested that original literature is unfair and should be disallowed in forensic competition, because original material can be changed and unfairly understood by the performer/author. Green (1998) claimed that forensic judges may not necessarily be qualified to evaluate original material, because it establishes unfair starting points

for competitors. Students that write their own text do not have to analyze a text in order to make performance decisions. Gernant (1991) argued that original literature is “easy” to perform. Further, Rossi and Goodnow (2006) claimed that it was disingenuous to the foundations of interpreting literature. These criticisms from forensic scholars are still grounded in the antiquated oral tradition.

The process of performing is a different educational act than writing. In many ways, writing and then performing can function as means to equalize cultural representations in forensics or otherwise. Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough (2003) argued that literary representations of intersectionality are *still* difficult to find in modern fiction and non-fiction. This literature is not as likely to be published or available in “credible” places. Conquergood (2000) stated that writing a textual history of a marginalized experience sheds light on disenfranchised discourses. In forensics, members of marginalized groups have an opportunity to express a perspective or cultural experience that is often ignored in the public sphere. Miller-Rassulo (1988) stated that “competitors who compromise our individual events constituency increasingly include students who possess varied life experiences and desire to impact others in every aspect of the communication beyond competitive forensics” (p. 13). Because literature is not as varied as life experience, writing and sharing those stories can function as a subversive act to include a discourse of difference into an overwhelmingly homogenous landscape of forensic competition. Pelias and Van Oosting (1987) argued that practitioners of performance studies embrace *all* modes of available discourse. In this framing of literary discourse, home-writes could provide a critical perspective and revelatory performance for the student performer. Lauth (2010) offered “As educators we have to ask ourselves a simple question, do we want students to show us the paintings of others, or do we want to hand them a brush and let them paint?” (p. 90).

In many ways this question elucidates much of where someone sides in the “What Qualifies as Interp” debate”. Although Endres (1991) described original material as a shortcut to pedagogical practices in forensics, this new conceptualization of home-written material functions as a different form of pedagogical practice in forensics.

Embodiment of Performance.

When a text is performed it takes on a different light derived almost completely from the perspective of the performer. In this way the physical body of the performer becomes a new way to read the text. Littlefield, Canevello, Egersdorf, Saur, Stark, and Wynia (2001) summed “Oral interpretation is perhaps the best way to show appreciation of the literature, to bring it to life, and to understand the author’s intent” (p. 46). However, when a text is performed it takes on a new performance identity that is inherently different from what the author intended. The performance is more of a representation of the interpreter than the author. Dimock (2008) debated the standard of author’s intent through by examining the work of semiotician Roland Barthes. Barthes (1977) argued that once a text is narrated it loses its’ voice of origin, in terms of forensics, once a script is performed it is then inherently detached from the script and contextualized by the audience through the performance. The words act as symbols that make sense to the audience as they are spoken and performed. Nonverbal movement in many ways fills in the gaps of words on paper. This harkens back to Fox’s (2007) *Skinny Bones*. The text is not merely the words the student is performer but also the student themselves and how they embody the text. This frame of text moves competitive interpretation farther away from the oral tradition and closer to a critical performance studies frame, where the performance of a script is not only performed but evaluated as an embodiment of a text.

Forensic competition differs from oral interpretation literature in the de-emphasis of script and the emphasis of performance. Holloway et. al, (1983) asserted that “A good oral interpreter should be able to build images; the good oral interpreter should be able to weave a spell without the use of vocal or physical gymnastics or devices outside the self” (p. 45). Subtlety and ingenuity are key in this framing of oral interpretation. Rossi and Goodnow (2006) argued that the physicalization of performance limits audience involvement: “competitive interpreters often pantomime specific actions for which the text calls, leaving little to the imagination of the audience.” (p. 52). However, the authors never problematize this physical rendering of the text. In many instances moving into a more physical performance can offer a different, more complex way for the audience to imagine a scene. I contend that the initial assumption to judge forensics free from cultural underpinnings means to promote an impossible tabula rasa paradigm in interpretation. Physicalization of a performance introduces a new text into interpretation; the body. Regarding the body as a signifier of evaluation in forensics is a shift *towards* a performance studies paradigm. Boal (1979) theorized that the first step in theatrical production is knowledge and control of the body. The body is thus a medium and filter of corporeal expression. Butler (2004) stated “The body has its invariably public dimensions constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere” (p. 436). Cultural values are materially embodied by the adherence to socially constructed norms, yet they also serve as a theatrical site to process and critique socially constructed norms. Incorporating more unique body movement can allow for different movement to be seen and experienced by an audience. In this way embodying a text is better than antiquated oral interpretation approach. It demonstrates an increased understanding of nonverbal communication as a mode of cultural performance. A student cannot just perform as a “gay man” very long before judges begin to comment on that student’s cursory understanding of

a gay man, and demand more. In this way physicalized performances of literature in forensic competition incorporate an improved understanding of how culture signifiers can and are performed. Forensic performance functions as gateway to understanding not only how the body moves, but also how the body communicates.

Conclusion

Brennan (2010) probably contextualized the most off-putting aspect of evaluating “good interp” in forensic competition: “it is difficult to define- you just know it when you see it” (p. 86). Interp evaluation exists in a murky terrain. It is clearly contested waters that are often difficult to navigate. Therefore, it is crucial for forensic scholars to push forensic interpretation further. Croucher (2006) called for increased individual events research in order to bring more legitimacy to our field. If performance scholars are establishing the standard for what qualifies performance than we will always be defending our field instead of progressing. Formulating more links to the communication discipline is critical to the future of forensic scholarship and the pedagogical practice of performance studies offers ample opportunity for our field.

The more we normalize pedagogical practices in the activity of intercollegiate forensics and begin to bridge the gap between practice and theory, the more ties we have to scholars within our departments and field. The forensic activity can do this by embracing the rhetoric of performance studies, whether performance studies scholars or forensic judges are welcome to the idea or not. Rossi and Goodnow, 2006, Lauth 2010, and myself conclude that forensic interpretation could and should be renamed “performance” of literature. This would signify a shift for forensic pedagogies more grounded in performance theory. The ways in which the events are performed and evaluated have begun to take on more of a performance studies paradigm that should be met head-on by the forensic community. Although intercollegiate

forensics is not explicitly the pedagogy of performance theory, it *does* introduce students to the language and application of performance studies in a unique way that is beneficial for developing both academic fields.

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