TRINITY
COLLEGE LONDON

## MONOLOGUES AND SOLILOQUIES

In many individual acting examinations, candidates are asked to perform a "monologue written for the stage". In others, they are asked to perform "a soliloquy". In some intermediate examinations they may be offered the choice of doing either.

What is the difference? And why do we make this distinction?

MONOLOGUES are long speeches made by one character in a play. Characters may launch into long speeches to tell other characters on the stage what they are thinking, feeling or have experienced: Greek drama is full of monologues, so are Chekov's plays, so are Shaw's, Ayckbourn's – and just about every other playwright one can think of.

Monologues may also be written as two- to three-minute playlets complete in themselves (often anthologised); be longer plays written for a solo voice (Brecht's *The Jewish Wife*, Strindberg's *The Stronger,* Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*, Beckett's *Not I*); or be component parts of a larger dramatic work (e.g. *Kennedy's Children* by Robert Patrick, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Fugard, *East, West* and other plays by Steven Berkoff).

Of course, monologues reveal aspects of the "inner life" of the character speaking. But in most cases the character has a very clear motivation for making the speech at that stage in the play: to justify themselves or their behaviour or views, to explain why they are acting in a certain way, to convince someone else of their point of view. For this reason, a character speaking a monologue may give a clear explanation of WHY they are speaking about this subject and – possibly – WHAT they hope to achieve by doing so.

Characters speaking monologues tend to refer to real events in the past, and speak about the real, concrete, tangible world which they inhabit:

Like this: "Why did I kill him? Let me tell you something about Joe Smith. Ten years ago – maybe longer – I met him in a bar..."

Or: "Justice? You want justice? My father asked for justice, cried out for it..."

Or: "McDonald's hamburgers. Every time I see one I go all gooey inside..."

They may in some cases refer to events which may happen in the future:

"One day, Charlie, we're going to put all this behind us..."

Or: "Let me amuse myself by telling you my plans, Mister Bond..."

Hecuba in *The Trojan Women* may well cry out in anguish to Zeus and Apollo – because for her those Gods are a real part of the world which she inhabits. The belief system to which she adheres may be strange to us, but her lines of argument are always clear.

There are some monologues in which it is not immediately clear what the speaker wishes the other character(s) on stage or the audience to understand by his/her words. A classic example of this is Nina's "I am a seagull" speech from Act 4 of *The Seagull.* Such monologues can be immensely challenging. There is always a danger that the audience will not be able to understand or empathise with such characters because the words they speak have a private meaning comprehensible to them and them alone. In extreme cases they may appear insane.

SOLILOQUIES are mainly associated with the theatre of 16th and 17th centuries, particularly the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The non-illusory, non-naturalistic theatre of the time allowed characters to speak out loud and share their innermost thoughts and feelings directly with the audience. In almost all cases this only happens when a character is alone on the stage.

Characters in Shakespeare's plays do not have to have a reason or motivation for speaking a soliloquy beyond their need to explore their innermost thoughts and feelings at that very moment. When Hamlet speaks "To be or not to be" he is not doing it "for" anyone. He has no idea where his words will lead him or what conclusion (if any) he will reach. The imagery he invokes is as uniquely personal as the ideas that are teeming through his mind: "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", "the whips and scorns of time", "the undiscover'd country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns". At times he is even surprised where the speech is taking him: "ay, there's the rub". He is in effect "talking to himself", working out his ideas as he goes along – the words spontaneously new-minted in his mouth in that instant.

Soliloquies may sometimes be directly addressed to some personified idea or concept (Edmund's "Thou, *Nature* art my goddess", Juliet's "Gallop apace *ye fiery footed steeds*", Henry V "*Thou idol* Ceremony") – but this is a rhetorical device employed by those characters to allow them to explore and express their own feelings more vividly in that instant.

Soliloquies have sometimes been described as the dramatic equivalent of "stream of consciousness" prose – though the verse form in which they are usually written imposes a much tighter and more succinct structure than is to be found in modernist novels. As an exercise, teachers might usefully ask their advanced students to compare extracts from writers such as Proust, James Joyce, Patrick White or William Faulkner with that of 16th and 17th century dramatists such as Moliere, Racine, Webster, Jonson and Marlowe.

In asking candidates to perform soliloquies rather than - or as well as - monologues at higher grades we are not suggesting that they are somehow "better" than monologues. However, we do feel that the specific demands that soliloquies make on performers require a degree of maturity, sensitive personal interpretation and a level of performance skills that are particularly appropriate for advanced students.