

# Royal Irish Academy of Music

## Theory Guidelines for Teachers of Speech & Drama

(Revised January 2012)

How many times have students asked teachers ‘what theory questions will I be asked at the examination?’ This is an impossible question for a teacher to answer because each examiner has his/her own particular way of engaging with students to see what they know. Indeed, some students have come into examination room and said to the Examiner ‘Here’s my poem, my drama, my mime, my book for reading and my theory!! It doesn’t quite work like that!

First of all, let me assure everyone, that we at the Academy do not strive to find out what students **do not** know but rather what they **do** know. We realise that every teacher has his/her own particular method of teaching theory and making notes for students but because we, at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, have often been asked for guidelines on theory requirements for Speech & Drama examinations, we have put forward the following suggestions that we hope will be of some use to teachers and students.

First of all some general points:

### (1) Questions:

Examiners do not have a prepared list of questions for each candidate. It is the candidate’s work and performance that propels the questions. For example, if a candidate speaks far too quickly, the examiner may talk to her about the value of pause or if an older candidate performs without much vocal variety, the examiner may talk to her about Modulation.

### (2) Theory from previous grades:

Candidates are sometimes surprised when asked theory from earlier grades. This is clearly stated in the syllabus and is particularly important to remember with senior grades when an Examiner is entitled to go back and ask questions from previous grades – again the individual performance will propel the questions. Grade 3 students

might also be asked about the use of Pause in Prose (Grade 1) and Phrasing (Grade 2) because they are still at the early stages of 'Reading Aloud' where all these elements are especially important.

(3) The Waiting Room:

Very often when a candidate leaves the examination room, we hear a chorus of '*what did she ask you*'? This sometimes causes alarm in the waiting area. Remember that Examiners do not necessarily ask the same questions for every candidate of a particular grade.

## **Kindergarten, Preliminary and Primary Grades:**

*Discussion on the work presented, to test understanding and develop communication and language skills.*

In these early grades we are keen to engage the candidate – who may be quite young – in conversation. Often we ask what they like about the pieces they have performed or if they had to draw a picture of the poem to describe what they would draw. We are looking for eye contact in conversation. They are also expected to understand the meaning of words within the pieces and examiners look for an exchange of ideas in discussion.

### **Grade 1:**

*To discuss the selections spoken and have a knowledge and understanding of the use of Pause in Prose.*

Candidates need to know what pauses are used when speaking prose and why we use them. In this area, some students offer only punctuation pause. It is important to understand why we use Pause of Emphasis and the Dramatic Pause also.

### **Grade 2:**

*To discuss the selections spoken and have an understanding of the Pauses in Prose and Phrasing.*

Students need a good definition of phrasing e.g. – *Phrasing is the grouping together of words and phrases in order to create sense and interest in speech.* A typical question here might be ‘*What is a phrase?*’ Or ‘*Why do we phrase?*’ or ‘*Is a phrase the same as a sentence?*’. It is important to remember that phrasing must make sense. Very often students relate phrasing to their story or prose extract but fail to see the importance of phrasing in verse speaking. We will also recap on the Pauses in Prose for Grade 2.

### **Grade 3:**

***To answer questions on the use of Pause in Prose, Phrasing, AND the use of the Suspensive Pause in Verse.***

In grade 3 we recap on the pauses in Prose from Grade 1, Phrasing in Grade 2 and add the use of the Suspensive Pause in verse speaking. This is a very important here because it introduces the students to run-on-lines and teaches them about flow and the shape of the poem. They should be aware of enjambment and be able to point out a run-on-line should they come upon one in their verse speaking. It is important that the students understands how this pause is achieved technically.

### **Grade 4:**

***To discuss the selections spoken and answer questions on the Means of Achieving Emphasis (including Inflection), to name the Articulative Organs, the Classification of Vowel Sounds and the Specific Organs used in their formation and all subjects dealt with in previous grades.***

Students need to be aware of the various means of achieving Emphasis – and not just reel off a list without any understanding. Very often here students do not include Inflection. It must be remembered that Inflection is the most subtle form of Emphasis. There is also a belief among some students that Emphasis and Stress is the same thing.

With regard to Vowel Sounds, we suggest students begin with a definition – What is a Vowel? This is a good starting point. It helps focus the candidate. Students should be familiar with all the Organs of Articulation and understand they role they play in making vowel sounds. There will be simple questions here e.g. *what is the vowel sound in the word 'pool'*. This might be followed with the questions - *'what organs of articulation are used in making this sound'?* And *'is this a long or a short sound'?* Candidates should know the difference between a Monothong, A Diphthong and a Triphthong and to be able to give examples of each. It is also important to remember the value of vowel sounds to the speaking voice for flow and musicality of language.

## **Grade 5:**

In this grade we ask students to choose for the first time the full text and the background of **ONE** the authors. Students are very keen to tell you all they know about the background of their chosen author but when posed with the question *'What do you think the writer will be remembered for?'* Inevitably the answer is correctly given *'the writer's canon of work'*. Students need to be aware of this when studying their chosen author. A certain amount of biographical information is indeed necessary but examiners want to know what **you** have read by the same author and what else the author has written. Very often in the case of a chosen poet, candidates can only offer the poem that they are presenting. But this is a given! If you choose a poet, you must be familiar with a couple of other poems and to offer an opinion on them. Likewise with the playwright/prose writer – it is important to know of the *other* works and offer an opinion. If you choose a contemporary writer makes sure you are up to date with his/her latest literary output.

***To discuss the selections spoken, the literary background to chosen author, to answer questions on Breath Control, Relaxation and Posture and all subjects dealt with in previous grades.***

Before we begin to think about Breath Control, we need to be familiar with the Respiratory Organs. We find here that students are very confident about telling us the correct method of breathing and how we inhale and exhale but when the question is posed *'how is the outgoing breath controlled'* we sometimes come up against a blank. It is necessary to be familiar with the muscles that are used and the role they play in controlling the outgoing air.

Relaxation is a very necessary component of any performance so it is especially important to know how to relax. Examiners may ask individuals (especially those of you that appear tense) *'how do you relax'*. It's a good idea to have an exercise or two that you can share with the examiner.

Students need to be familiar with correct posture from head to toe. Very often students stand in a very casual fashion while performing – the weight of the body resting on one foot only and not distributed evenly between both feet. Others clench hands or hold head in an awkward position and all this contributes to tension.

We now move on to the Senior Grades of our Syllabus and at this level we expect a more detailed response to a theoretical discussion and hope that students will be able to apply the theory to the work.

### **Grade 6:**

*To discuss the selections, literary background of chosen author, to answer questions on Resonance and the classification of Consonant Sounds and the organs of articulation used in their formation and all subjects dealt with in previous grades.*

Again, it is a good idea to begin with a definition of Resonance. Resonance applies to the initial sound made in the larynx and should not be confused with volume. Students should be aware of the resonators and understand how a balanced Resonance can be acquired. It is a good idea to have an exercise or two to enhance understanding.

As with Vowel Sounds, candidates will be expected to define a consonant and, at this level, may be asked what is the difference in making a vowel sound and making a consonant sound. An examiner may ask for a consonant sound made with the lips. Here students often answer the letter 'p' or the word 'pan' – a clearer response would be 'puh' as in 'pan'. Again, you need to be familiar with the different types of consonants and the role played by the organs of articulation in making these sounds. Give some thought to the value of Consonant Sounds in giving 'bite' and 'attack' to the speaking voice.

## **Grade 7:**

*To discuss the selections, literary background of chosen author, the structure and speaking of Sonnet Forms – giving examples of each kind, Modulation, the Neutral Vowel and all subjects dealt with in previous grades.*

Regarding Sonnets, it is necessary to understand the main sonnet forms, the rhyme scheme and form employed and to be able to give examples of each kind. The form is a much disciplined one - a mere fourteen lines and the speaker must be aware of the importance of grasping the mood of the piece with controlled speaking so as to avoid any tendency to dramatise the emotion expressed.

Modulation is the artistic management of the voice through Inflection, Pitch, Pace, Volume, Emphasis, Pause and Tone Quality. Students need to be aware of all these ‘changes’ within the voice and to be able to explain them.

Students need to clarify the Neutral Vowel, know why it is important and give guidelines for its use.

## **Grade 8:**

*To discuss the selections, the literary background of chosen author, the Main Forms of English Verse – including Blank Verse - in structure and delivery and to give examples of each kind. To discuss metre and rhythm, the use of pause in verse and explain such terms as assonance, alliteration, personification metaphor, imagery etc and all subjects dealt with in previous grades.*

Students are usually confident about the main forms of English verse and can offer information about the lyric, the ode, the ballad, Free Verse, etc. but there is often a hesitation when it comes to how we approach the *speaking* of the different types. Think back to when you had to study Sonnet forms and how important shape and form was to the delivery. It is vital to understand the form and shape the sonnet takes because the verse line helps the speaker to shape and clarify thoughts. Think about the language the poet employs and the use of imagery, assonance, alliteration etc. If, for example you are speaking a ballad, you must be aware of the ballad metre which helps drive the story and give ‘movement’ to the verse. When speaking a ballad you need to be able to make the written words visible with vocal colour. Again, it is always preferable to have an example of each type of verse to help clarify your understanding.

Blank Verse seems to pose difficulties for many students. A definition here of ‘unrhymed Iambic Pentameter – five feet in a line, with two syllables in each foot – an unstressed followed by a stressed’ is generally well known but for many that is where the knowledge ends. Portia’s celebrated line in *The Merchant of Venice* ‘*The quality of mercy is not strained*’ is perfectly regular but if you think of Hamlet’s equally famous line ‘*To be or not to be, that is the question*’ and you soon realise it doesn’t quite fit into the definition above. It is important to remember that Blank Verse is not always regular – if it was the verse would be dull and monotonous. Sometimes Shakespeare adds an extra light syllable on to the end of the line, or turns a foot upside down or replaces one foot with another and all these variations should be understood and explained. One of the most important aspects of speaking Blank Verse (and this is very often forgotten by many students) is the use of the Suspensive, Caesural and Metrical pauses. These pauses not only give shape and flow to the verse but provide moments of inhalation and can be used to convey meaning and produce the necessary dramatic effect.

Students need to be aware that Blank Verse is also used in poetic form and have some knowledge of writers such as Milton and Wordsworth and their enormous output in Blank Verse with poems like Paradise Lost and The Prelude.

### **Senior Certificate Written Paper**

When students come to Senior Certificate level they will have an opportunity to answer theory questions in written form for the first time. This is very useful for students who wish to continue with their studies at a later stage and work towards Diploma level.

The questions will focus on an in depth knowledge of theory from grades 1-8, the classification of vowels and consonants, the neutral vowel, the speaking of Verse **and** Prose selections in form, structure and artistry, the development of Character for Performance, the value of Mime and Improvisation, research on chosen poet, author and playwright and knowledge of at least **two** contrasting plays by Shakespeare.

Answers will be expected to be of reasonable length, well written and containing a more detailed response than previously given in oral examinations. Again, examples always help clarify your ideas. For those of you who wish to sit this examination, past papers are available to purchase from Local Centre.

Finally, theory should always work hand in hand with performance during the preparation process where students can see and experience the connection between technique and performance. We at the Royal Irish Academy want students to *enjoy* the examination experience, to feel relaxed so as to give their best and to engage and share with the Examiner. The Speech & Drama syllabus offers a wide range of work to choose from and the theory section is only a small part of the whole.

*Audrey Behan, Senior Examiner  
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