



## 2009 National Shakespeare Competition **Student Guidelines** The English-Speaking Union of the United States

### **The Rules of the Competition**

The purpose of the Shakespeare Competition is to help you develop your speaking and critical thinking skills as you explore the beauty of the language and the timeless themes in Shakespeare's works. You are encouraged to bring Shakespeare to life in your own way and to express his words with understanding, feeling, and clarity. The most important aspect of the competition is your ability to understand Shakespeare's works and your ability to communicate that understanding.

- You will memorize, interpret, and perform a monologue and, if required, a sonnet. (All school winners must present a monologue and a sonnet at the ESU Branch Competition.) It is strongly recommended that you be familiar with the play from which the speech was taken.
- You should identify your selection before you begin your presentation. You may perform your pieces in the order you prefer.
- You cannot wear costumes or use props of any kind, including chairs, jewelry, items of clothing, and hair/hair clips. You should select clothing that allows you to move freely. Some styles of footwear such as heavy boots or high heels can be distracting and limit your movement.
- Prompting, if necessary, is allowed.
- You should speak naturally. We urge you to use your own voice rather than affect a British accent.
- You must be enrolled in the 9th, 10th, 11th, or 12th grade.
- You cannot act for pay on television, the stage, or in film during the 2008-2009 school year.

### **Getting Started**

The first step in the Shakespeare Competition is choosing a monologue and sonnet to memorize and perform. Be sure to check whether or not you are required to select one from a list provided by The English-Speaking Union. Choosing the character and the part you will play is important; you need to be an actor and a casting director at the same time. Ask yourself if you would be a more convincing Juliet or Miranda, Hermia or Helena, Richard III or Henry V? Also remember that actors research their roles; it would be a rare thing to perform a monologue convincingly without knowing the character inside and out. That means knowing the plot and characters of the play well.

**Your chosen monologue must not exceed 20 lines (verse and prose) according to *The Riverside Shakespeare (1997)*. The English-Speaking Union will adhere strictly to this rule, and the presentation of a monologue exceeding these limits will result in disqualification.** If you are searching outside the suggested list, aim for consecutive material with a beginning, middle, and end. While it may occasionally be appropriate to cut the lines of another character in a shared dialogue, try to avoid cutting within speeches. The winner of the school contest will also memorize a sonnet to add to his or her performance at the Branch competition. Ideally, your sonnet will complement your monologue and help demonstrate your interpretive range.

## **Suit the Action to the Word, the Word to the Action**

The role of the actor is to thoughtfully interpret his or her character on stage. He or she must know his or her role in the play and accurately interpret the meaning of the character's actions. Every great actor is praised for being "natural." However, actors master the tools of vocal and physical expression so completely that they *seem* natural. This should be your goal, too. Explore the range of expressive possibilities of voice and movement. You might experiment with emphasis, phrasing, volume vs. economy of gesture, and facial expression. As you do, you will begin making decisions about which means of expression best fit the tone and character of your pieces. Allow your work to grow and change. While a momentary pause may be effective, avoid extended pauses that can detract from your performance.

### ***The Selections:***

#### ***The Monologue***

A monologue is a speech presented by a single character set within the context of a play. In selecting yours, remember that some action (whether implied, reported, or presented) has preceded and/or will proceed from this speech. The words spoken by your character will generally fit within the larger framework of the play in one or more of these ways:

- They may reveal something about the character's personality or goals.
- They may be used by the character to incite others into action and move the plot forward.
- They may set the scene or close the action, as in prologues and epilogues.

Once you select a monologue, read the whole play and place yourself in the circumstances faced by your character. Pay particular attention to what happens immediately before the monologue begins. Then begin to explore the words—the character's thoughts and feelings—with your voice and body. Remember, your goal is to make the character come alive on stage, and, in doing so, to convince the audience to accept you as that character and to believe in the message you are delivering. Avoid the temptation to "blow the audience away" with an excess of emotion. In acting, more is often less. An actor who "protests too much" rarely convinces.

As you work on the monologue, ask yourself:

- Who is my character?
- In what situation do I, the character, find myself?
- What decisions and discoveries am I making?
- What do I want to happen as a result of this speech?
- Given my past and my personality, how will I act to bring about the desired effect?
- What is my mood at the beginning of the speech?
- Has it changed by the end? If so, how?

#### ***The Sonnet***

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, all of which were published together as a sequence. The first thing you will notice about these sonnets is their traditional form. They are generally fourteen-line poems written in iambic pentameter, and they are made up of three quatrains and a couplet. A quatrain is four lines of verse. The couplet is the final two lines of verse. Their rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

It is also very important to pay attention to the rhythm of the verse. Shakespearean sonnets were written in iambic pentameter, which is a line made up of ten syllables or five iambic feet – an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Try to keep the rhythm of the speech in mind when you perform. Often it will help you to interpret the sonnet's meaning and aid your performance.

As you read over these sonnets to make your selection, you should notice that Shakespeare touches on the themes of love, death, art, beauty, and the passage of time. You may find it helpful to think of the sonnet as a short scene, story, or meditation. It explores and resolves a thought or an experience, and frequently contains a “turn” or change of thought. Lines 1-12 often develop an argument or give accumulating examples. The couplet (lines 13 and 14) draws a conclusion (sometimes witty), or acts as a zinger, ironically pointing out a paradox or contradicting the preceding twelve lines.

As you study your sonnet, try to be aware of its form and rhythm and bring your understanding of it to your performance. In preparing your sonnet, try to clarify this understanding by summarizing your sonnet in the shortest sentence possible. Then work on achieving the same clarity in delivering Shakespeare's words.

As you work on your sonnet, ask yourself:

- What is the central idea of the sonnet?
- How do the lines break down into an introduction, development of the theme, and conclusion?
- Is there a turning point in the sonnet?
- How do the meaning and delivery of these words differ from my monologue?
- Can I strengthen the contrast?
- How should the examples and arguments be emphasized?
- How should the tone of the couplet be interpreted? Is it ironic? Witty? Contradictory?

In past years, movement during the sonnet had been discouraged. The rules of the National Shakespeare Competition have changed to allow competitors to use movement and gesture if they feel it will enhance the delivery of the sonnet. As mentioned before, your sonnet will, ideally, complement your monologue and help demonstrate your interpretive range.