



FROGPOND XXVI:2

essays

Presenting Haiku

Considerations for the Oral Interpretation of Haiku

HAIKU CAN BE SUNG, CHANTED, DANCED and presented in sign language but most often are just read aloud. Haiku enthusiasts often find themselves in the situation of having to present some poems orally for various kinds of audiences. According to Dr. Randy Brooks, in Japan the presentation of haiku was more visual than oral with a part of the art being the calligraphy on the *shikishi*, the narrow scrolls that sometimes included a painting vertically displayed on a wall.¹ During the sixteen hundreds in Japan at the *renga* parties the poetry was recited or shared orally as well as written down.

In the West, oral presentation of haiku is common. Sometimes these performance experiences can be uncomfortable and frustrating. The purpose of this discussion is to offer some ideas, methods and techniques that can improve the performances for both the presenters and the audiences. This discussion will focus on the presenter of haiku as a performer seen and heard by an audience, either live or on video. The occasion can be a meeting, an interview, a bookstore reading, or a lecture at a conference. The following information can be utilized in any of these situations.

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Homework

Prepare the Material

First, the poem or poems, which are to be presented, need to be analyzed and understood. After carefully studying the haiku one technique is to say to oneself, "in other words—" and then reword the poem in complete sentences with adjectives and adverbs. This will create a full mental picture that can be recalled when the presentation occurs. Always try to stay faithful to the intentions of the original author. If the presenter has written the haiku, then this part of the preparation may be easier.

For each poem decide on the relationship between the presenter and the audience. Giving the poem directly to the audience with direct eye contact is called the presentational style. Another way, is when the performer experiences the haiku in his or her own "world" with the audience seeing it

through an invisible fourth wall which can be called the dramatic style. A third method is sharing the experience of the haiku as though the audience is another character in the presenter's "world".²

Who is experiencing the events of the haiku? Is there a different personality or character or is it being experienced by the presenter? Assuming a different character or a role will require some acting skills but it can be an effective technique. The presenter's choice of perspective will depend on what seems most effective for each poem and what the presenter feels most comfortable doing.

If time allows, fully memorize the haiku but having a script in view can help build confidence. Using large print with notations in different colors makes for easy reference if a word or idea slips the mind. Remember, whether presenting one haiku or several haiku as part of a longer lecture, these techniques can still be utilized.

Prepare for the Performance

The presenter's main tools for communication are the voice, body, arms, hands, and face. Appropriate use of all of these will make the presentation of the poems more fulfilling for both the presenter and the audience.

Vocal Techniques

The voice is the vehicle. Clear and appropriate pronunciation, articulation, phonation and resonance are important. Know the meanings of all the words in the poem and how to say them correctly. Say each part of every word clearly. Allow each sound to fully develop in the chest, head and mouth. Be clear and precise but avoid sounding phony. A general rule is to clip the consonants and prolong the vowel sounds. A presentation is not like a "one-to-one" conversation, so think of projecting the voice out to the audience.

The meaning and emotion of the haiku comes from the appropriate variety of the pitch, pace, power and pause. The variation of pitch is the intonation and inflection in the voice. It is the song or highness and lowness of the tone. Monotone is boring. A sing-song pattern is also boring. Variation of pitch is important to maintain the audience's interest, understanding and emotional involvement. The

Japanese haiku generally contain cutting words or *kireji*. These joining, separating or exclamation words tell the reader to stop and take notice. However, in English if there is no punctuation and these cue words are missing then the reader needs to express this emotion or cut with the interpretation techniques.

The pace is the speed at which the words are spoken and joined together into images. The presenter already has the ideas clearly in his or her mind. The audience needs the time to go through four steps for the full, effective communication of the poem. Each member of the audience needs to be able to 1) hear, 2) think, 3) react or feel, and 4) understand. If a presenter keeps this four-step process in mind then the audience will have time to appreciate the poem. Again, variety of tempo adds interest

Vary the intensity and volume. Both of these help put the emphasis on the important words and create the subordination of the less important words, which the earlier analysis has determined. Allowing for proper pauses helps the phrasing and timing. Because haiku are short, take time to orally present each image appropriately. Remember to project to the back wall of the space in which the event occurs. There is a heightened realism when presenting poetry but don't overact.

Develop a Script

As the vocal interpretation develops, mark the script by underlining with two lines the words to be strongly emphasized. Moderate emphasis with one line. Perpendicular lines between words denote pauses. Two for a longer pause one for shorter. With wavy lines the presenter can show upward or downward inflection. Each person can develop his or her own method of notation. Using the word processing program on the computer can provide interesting possibilities. Adding an additional space between the letters in a word or placing words on different lines can denote specific interpretations. Using different colors of ink or pencils for the notations can help show emotional content. Have several copies of the script for practicing and developing. Once there is a satisfactory performance script, make a second copy of it in case one is misplaced or lost.

For example, let's look at this poem.

across the window
of an abandoned house
a wisteria bloom

The following are some markings using word processing on the computer for suggesting the emphasis, tempo, pauses and inflection.

a c r o s s the w i n—dow
of an a b a n d o n e d h o u s e—//
a wis—t e r i a b l o o m—

Each performer will find the system of notation that works best for him or her.

Animation

Body language, gestures and facial expressions are included in the concept of animation. The amount and kind of animation depends on the specific haiku, the personality of the performer, and the audience. For most poetry "subtlety" is the best policy.

As the poem is being analyzed think of how the voice and body can work together to best express the images. In the above poem, just before voicing the first image, a subtle gesture of the dominant hand could precede "across the ...". Generally, animation precedes the voicing of an idea. Action precedes words. The reverse is often funny. Subtlety is important for a haiku like this one. There would be positive feeling in the voice and on the face during the last line "a wisteria bloom".

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The facial expressions will also depend on which perspective the performer takes. If the poem is presented for the audience then more facial expression is used but if the audience is looking through the fourth wall, then there will be less.

Gestures are used to suggest meaning, to emphasize an idea, or to demonstrate an action. For most poetry, "less is more". As Shakespeare says "fit the actions to the words". Avoid excess movement and "hamminess". For an exercise during a rehearsal, try putting a gesture, action or facial expression with every word. Then cut it back or edit it and go for the appropriateness, fitting the animation to the meaning. This experiment can help free up those who

consider themselves "stiff" performers.

Practice or rehearse the presentation several times. Practice does make perfect. Use a mirror, a tape recorder and/or a video recorder. No one looks and sounds the way he or she imagines so don't be too self-critical. Rehearse the entire presentation several times for the tape or video recorder until the performance feels secure. Try it on a friend or family member. Keep in mind that criticism is only as good as the critic.

The Environment

Try to learn about the setting and the audience for the presentation. Where is the performance to take place and for whom? Get a clear idea of the stage area for the presentation and of the available lighting. Will there be a lectern or speaker's stand? Will there be a microphone? Is it a stand, hand held or a lavalier microphone? Will there be an opportunity for a sound check? Can there be a rehearsal or at least a "walk through" in the performance space?

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The Audience

Who is the intended audience? How many people will there be? How much do they know about haiku? What is the age range? Why are they there? Clear answers to all the above questions are the ideal, but most often there will be only partial information so always be prepared to improvise.

Because haiku are so short, they are often recited and then repeated so that the audience can get the full impact. To duplicate the exact reading is nearly impossible. Just try to have the same mind set and take the time to glance at the marked script again. Take a deep breath and repeat the poem.

Dress Appropriately

The audience sees the presenter and gets a first impression; therefore, the presenter will want to exhibit the appropriate image for the specific event. Know how formal or informal the clothing should be. Make sure the clothing and shoes are comfortable and appropriate for the planned movements and gestures.

The center of communication is the eyes. They are referred to as the "window to the soul". Don't obstruct the

view of the eyes with hair, a hat, or dark glasses. Keep the chin up. If eye contact with the audience bothers the presenter, then look just above the heads of the audience. Avoid looking down at the floor. If the poem requires looking down, then look at a spot on the floor about ten feet ahead so the audience doesn't feel cut off.

Self Preparation and Relaxation Techniques

Before "taking the stage" a forced yawn can relax the face and jaw muscles, which helps allow for natural facial expression and speech. A few deep breaths will also help. If the script has to be held, press the palms of the hands together in an isometric way for five to eight seconds. This helps to prevent shaking hands. Keep the knees "soft" and the pelvis gently rolled under to prevent vibrating legs. Quietly hum a favorite song or hymn to loosen the vocal mechanism. Lick the lips and swallow. Smile with the teeth slightly apart. Enter! Break a leg!

Jerome Cushman

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[In his 40-year career Jerome Cushman has been a successful theatre director of over 100 plays. He has been a choreographer of dance and stage combat; an acting, voice and movement coach; an actor and dancer; but most importantly an educator of both hearing and deaf college students. Recently he originated and operated the Robert F. Panara Haiku Contest for the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology and The Tsukuba College of Technology in Tsukuba, Japan. The 2001 and 2002 contests were under the sponsorship of Pen-International and funded by The Nippon Foundation.

Over the past 28 years he has used haiku at NTID/RIT as a teaching tool and as part of various performances. The deaf actors signed the haiku while hearing actors spoke the poems. Through this activity, and his many years of studying and teaching acting and directing, he has developed his techniques for oral interpretation of poetry.]

¹ This information was discussed in an e-mail to the author from Dr. Randy Brooks, 13 December 2001.

² This information was developed from an e-mail to the author from poet and performer, John Stevenson. 13 December 2001.

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