

GROUP INTERPRETATION

ORAL INTERPRETATION OF PROSE

POETRY READING

ORIGINAL ORATORY

Speech & Debate

By Stephen Karam

Florida Players Proposal, Fall 2018

DUO INTERPRETATION

DECLAMATION

Jesse Desrosiers

STORYTELLING

CROSS-EXAMINATION

DRAMATIC/HUMOROUS INTERPRETATION

## Synopsis

In 2008 in Salem, Washington, three teenagers become begrudging allies through the pursuit of their own (extremely unrelated) goals. Solomon is doing research for a school newspaper article he is fighting to write on a subject against school policy, as explained by his teacher: the link between far-right politicians and closeted homosexuality. Howie is trying to found a Gay-Straight Alliance at his new high school and just get through his senior year. Diwata wants to prove herself as an actress after having gotten cast in the ensemble of her school's musical.

Their paths converge in Speech and Debate club, of which Diwata is the only member (it is the only place she can showcase her skills). After discovering a teacher (Mr. Healy) at their school had a homosexual online chat with a student (Howie), Solomon goes to Speech and Debate in the hopes of getting more information from Diwata. She convinces him to join the club to get his article heard, and to get her talents recognized. Diwata tries to convince Howie to join the group as well, promising him information in return for his participation. Diwata reveals she had seen Solomon and Mr. Healy in the men's bathroom engaging in sexual contact. Howie then reveals he knows Diwata is pregnant and that she is getting an abortion.

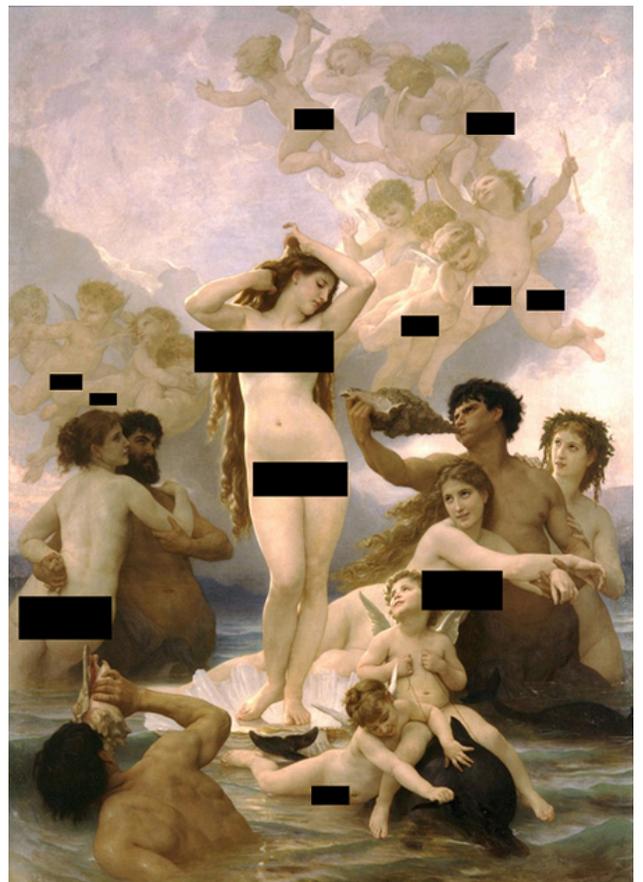
Not without a great deal of fighting, name-calling, and collaboration, the group pulls through and creates their performance pieces for Speech and Debate – Just in time for a reporter to view it and completely miss the point, spinning their message to benefit her own agenda. The three are surprised to find friends in each other, and move on with their lives, deciding not to unearth their uncomfortable pasts.

## Main Themes and Ideas

### Censorship of ideas

There is a puritanism of ideas and speech in America. Many topics are too “taboo” or “uncomfortable” to bring up, and so important issues are simply not discussed. Recently, we have seen important movements taking steps to overcome this puritanism of thought. Think Black Lives Matter. Think #MeToo. Think the survivors of the Parkland shooting. However, these movements do not mark the end of this censorship of ideas, only the beginning of the fight against it.

Sexuality remains for many a taboo subject of conversation, especially in an educational setting. The characters in this play are taught sexual education using phrases like “bathing suit area” as opposed to clinical words like penis and vagina. If straight sex is still taboo, let's think for a moment how uncomfortable people can still feel about gay sex.



Think of how uncomfortable gay people have to feel, knowing their existence is stigmatized to such a large degree.

The three main characters deal with the shame imposed by these imposed social norms and the idea of how one “should behave/should speak/should be” to varying degrees and for various reasons. From abortion to sexuality to censorship of the public school press, this issue was relevant in 2008 and remains relevant today, especially to youth in America. What is perceived as normal and acceptable growing up often continues to be what feels acceptable as an adult. Until America can have frank conversations about “uncomfortable” topics, they will never not be uncomfortable to talk about.

### Expectations of Society on the Individual

Related to the above, society expects people to fit into it’s – well – expectations of how one should act, think, look, sound, dress... no aspect of one’s identity is free from judgement and, therefore, no aspect of one’s identity is free from expectations imposed by society. Because no one is a carbon copy of anyone else and because no one is fully without a soul, no one really fits this standard. Another way of phrasing this: Everyone is an outcast in their own way. This is something that unites the three characters. They each struggle with parts of their identity that is deemed weird, unacceptable, or downright wrong. They struggle with others, with each other, and with themselves to find acceptance and peace with their uniqueness qualities that form who they are as individuals.

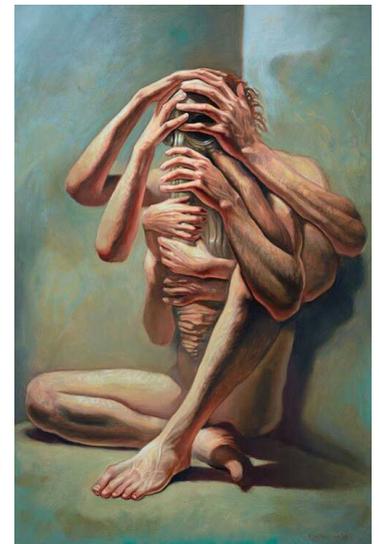
As an extension of this, the judgement of society against one who breaks the mold is also a major theme. Fear of being judge is a huge driving force in the play: threats to reveal “shameful” secrets about each other is how most things get done in Speech & Debate. As a result of this, the characters struggle with the choice between being true to themselves and letting their truth out, or holding it in and keeping themselves safe from the judgement of others.

These characters are thoroughly misunderstood, but they ultimately find acceptance within themselves and from each other. This is ultimately a piece of theatre rejecting the idea of “normalcy” and embracing the idea of the individual and the unique weirdness that comes with it.

## Character Breakdown

### Solomon (16, M)

A reporter. Calculated in his actions. Eager to prove himself. He is a catholic, pro-life democrat whose parents reject his homosexuality. Struggling to reconcile his feelings with what he has been taught about the “gay lifestyle” (i.e. promiscuity), Solomon is not in the closet, but is quietly and internally at odds with himself, his parents, and the world around him. He is pulled in opposite directions by everyone in his life, and he struggles to find a sense of complete self in the mess of expectations that he has grown up in. He wants to prove himself. He wants to fit in. He wants to make his parents proud of the person he is. He wants to be comfortable in his own skin.



### Diwata (17, F)

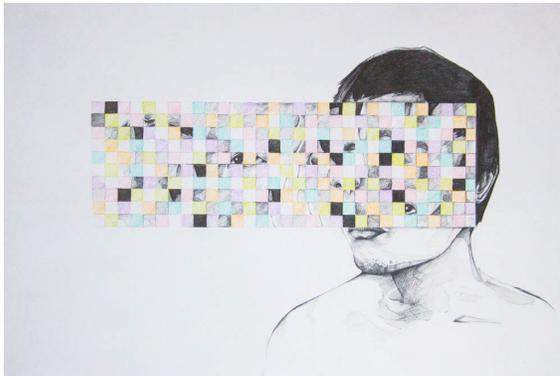
Diwata may or may not be genuinely talented, but she puts in utmost effort and she deeply, genuinely cares about the work she does. Regardless, this goes unrecognized. She has a deep, ever-present desire to prove herself as an actress. This is what drives her throughout the play, as she sees Speech and Debate as the place where she can showcase her skills. She has many quirks, but, as specified in the script, she is not a uniquely abnormal person. She is not an outcast, she is not unlikeable. She is only as weird or different as anyone else, but in her own, outspoken and attention-grabbing way. She finds herself pregnant after a drunken hookup. Also alone in this, she hides her pregnancy and abortion from everyone around her, choosing to bear the struggle herself, until she is found out by Howie.



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## Howie (18, M)

Howie is a transfer to the high school from Portland. He is out and proud to be gay. He just wants to make it through senior year, but finds it difficult to even find a sponsor for a Gay-Straight Alliance. He struggles with the assumption of others that it's no longer a big deal to be gay. Despite general acceptance in society that gay people exist, it is glaringly clear to Howie that the subject remains taboo, even dirty, in the eyes of many. The continual stigmatization of his sexuality is something Howie struggles to cope with, especially in dealing with Solomon, who Howie believes to be in the closet. He feels his identity being censored by society to keep the majority comfortable, and he struggles with the reality that people would rather ignore the "uncomfortable" subject than air it out and move on.



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## Teacher/Reporter (40s, F)

These characters are not stereotypes, but they are representative of society's expectations that weigh on and attempt to control developing youth. The Teacher prevents Solomon from publishing his story in the school newspaper because it deals with controversial issues (gay scandals in politics) and the Reporter takes the Group Interpretation the three of them create together, fully misses the point they were trying to make, and uses it to push her own commercial and professional success. They are representative of the themes of the play that the other characters battle against: the imposition of norms, the censorship of thought and speech, and the rejection of identity.

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### *Notes on cast size:*

- 1) The cast is small, but the roles are rich, deeply developed, and unique. A few actors playing complex, thoughtful roles seems to me much more beneficial than many actors playing single-layered, surface-level roles.
- 2) The script calls for several actors to be voiced in the show that do not appear onstage:
  1. Recorded interviewer.

2. The children's parents (three voices)
3. Two school bullies

With the exception of the interviewer, these roles each have about two short lines, and are not worth casting in advance and having people in rehearsal each day to practice. Only two live non-cast offstage voices are needed in total, as the bullies can also voice the parents and the actress playing Teacher/Reporter can also voice a parent. I may use crew as these two voices and have them rehearse during tech week.

## Concept & Artistic Vision

My vision is simple. I plan on sticking to realism (generally) in telling this story. Though I do not need a fully realized, real-to-life set displaying exactly where the characters are, I also am not looking for a physical manifestation of the emotional and thematic journey of the characters in the set. I want to instead focus on the human connections onstage to convey this to the audience, with design elements as helping hands in this storytelling, not as stories of their own.

I am still at a very preliminary stage in terms of design because I value a highly collaborate approach to directing. Because of this, I do not have specifics for most design elements, as these will emerge through conversation with my designers in the exchange and development of our ideas together.

My main goal is the presentation of a genuine, compelling story with a focus on the themes described above. How this develops into a fully-fleshed design will come after collaboration with designers and actors, so that the final product is not imposed by me, but is created naturally by the entire team.

## Personal Emotional Response

My first read through the script, I was obsessed. Fully absorbed. I barely put the script down until I'd finished. Originally, I was drawn in by the uniquely real and relatable comedy of the play, the interesting, life-like characters, and the odd detail of the plot that it seemed to go nowhere. Reading again, I had a fuller appreciation of the complexity of the characters, but I realized that the plot didn't go to a dead-end, it just went somewhere I was not expecting (also very true to life).

I felt frustration on behalf of, and empathy for, Howie for his sexuality being stigmatized and judged through double-standards and misunderstanding. The pretty common idea that being gay is no longer stigmatized or difficult is uniquely difficult to cope with, especially as a white man who is otherwise pretty privileged. The double-standard of gay being "dirty" while straight men talk blatantly about sex on mainstream radio and TV is a frustrating one, and I felt that along with Howie.



What resonates with me the most, though, is feeling outcast amongst your peers; and this, for me, had nothing to do with sexuality. I have struggled personally with the perceived need to please others – to make them comfortable, even if it meant doing the opposite for myself. I know what it feels like to feel obligated to put on a façade simply to get through a conversation without feeling like I’ve done something wrong. In this way, I can relate to these characters – and to Solomon in particular – in their journey navigating the right to be themselves loudly and unapologetically.



## Rehearsal Plan

\*This is only a rough plan. I intend on allowing rehearsals to progress at whatever speed it naturally develops in, but I will be looking ahead to the performance dates and use this as a general guide to not fall too far behind of

### Week 1

Read through the show. Discuss themes. Explore character personalities and motivations together. Focus on team-building through exercises, games, and discussion. This week will be used to get used to each other and to the show. We will continue to work with the script, but I will not encourage any definitive character choices to be made yet.

### Week 2

Begin working with the show on its feet. Use this to explore new options, ideas, and motivations. Maintain consistent communication between actors, directors, and designers. Free flow of ideas. Trial and error period. Actors begin working on Group Interpretation dance, which they will largely choreograph themselves.

### Week 3

Soft off-book date. While collaboration will remain the name of the game throughout the process, directing gets more concrete here, as the show begins to solidify the direction it is taking. Music work begins, if it has not already. Continue to work dance.

### Week 4

Hard off-book date. Blocking begins to be finalized. All decisions remain open to discussion and adjustment. Dance should be about solidified now, and music should also be memorized.

### Week 5

The show should have about taken its final form by now. Tweaking and adjustment period. Finalize song and dance. Finalize blocking if this has not already been done.

### Week 6

Runs, runs, runs, runs, runs.

## Why This Show Now?

*(Benefits to Florida Players, its members, the University of Florida, and the Gainesville community)*

These roles provide complex, unique, and interesting characters that actors can inhabit and explore deeply. Playing these roles would be not only fun and exciting, but also an educational and emotional experience for those cast.

The themes of exclusion, judgement, and personal censorship are things we have all experienced. Though it is magnified in high school, this certainly follows us into our college years, and sticks around for the rest of our lives in adulthood, except in subtler, less noticeable ways. *Speech & Debate* is a call to action in the acceptance of yourself and the rejection of the ideas forced on us. It encourages us to confront these ideas and develop our own unique, personal ones.

The themes *Speech & Debate* deals with are relevant now as ever. As mentioned earlier, these issues have not gone away, they are only now truly being addressed by movements throughout the country. This play is a way for Florida Players to become part of the conversation.

## Budget Breakdown

Category	Budget
Set	\$360
Lights	\$40
Costumes	\$300
Props	\$50
Sound	\$0
Projections	\$0
Stage Management	\$20
Contingency	\$80
<b>Estimated Show Budget</b>	\$850
Rights	\$400 (\$80 per)
Scripts	\$72 (\$9 per)
Add. License Fees	\$60
<b>Estimated Total Costs</b>	\$1382

Rights and scripts can be purchased at:

<https://www.dramatists.com/cgi-bin/db/single.asp?key=3959>

## Other Commitments

I have no conflicting commitments. I will have an internship at the Hippodrome Theatre, but I have already discussed with my supervisor my plans to propose and have been assured I will be able to work around rehearsals.

## Additional Notes

There are three times in the script where one character calls another “retard” or “retarded” or uses the word in an otherwise derogatory manner: on pages 49 and 56. This seems needlessly offensive, and the general populace has become much more conscious of this since 2008, when *Speech & Debate* was first performed. I would like to replace these occurrences of “retard” and “retarded” in the script with “stupid”, with the understanding that publisher approval is required before script edits can be made.

## Unusual Tech Requirement

Use of a video projector

