“Bread & Jam for Frances”
by Cody Cessna

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This is a Humorous Interpretation performed by Cody Cessna in the 2009-2010 season. It placed 2nd Place at the 2010 NCFCA National Championship and did well at local tournaments as well.

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# Introduction to Piece

It began long, long ago when I was basically brand new to speech. I wanted to do a Humorous Interpretation, but I could not find a piece. At long last, my mom found *Bread and Jam for Frances*. She saw potential immediately, but I did not. I thought it was too predictable, repetitive, immature and childish. It was too late, though; time was up. I had to prepare an HI for the next tournament. *Bread and Jam* was my destiny. Later, this speech would take second place at Nationals.

I competed in speech for a very short time compared to most of my friends and colleagues authoring this book –– two years (or fourteen, in dog years). In those two years, I had the honor and privilege of performing two Humorous Interpretations. This one was and is my favorite. I hope you, the interper of the future, find it helpful. If you decide to do Humorous Interpretation, I hope you will find it as rewarding and enjoyable as I did (or, if you decide to be lame and not to do HI, that is fine too).

Everybody has a unique sense of humor. I am not going to try to teach you to do HI *exactly* the way I did. If I did, one of two things would result: you would fail miserably because my style does not work for you *or* you would do my style better than I did and make me feel terrible. So I encourage you to be funny in your own, special, unique, original, creative, innovative, different-from-me way. Hopefully you will be able to glean enough general insight from what I did with my speech to help you with whatever sort of HI you end up creating.

Now, a little background on the author of my piece:

Russell Hoban was born in America on February 4th, 1925. He moved to London in 1969. His Frances series includes several other books, such as *Bedtime for Frances*. Russell Hoban has written many other pieces of children's literature as well. However, aside from being a children's author, he is also well-known as a writer of science-fiction novels such as the post-apocalyptic *Riddley Walker.* He has a cult following of fans who celebrate his birthday by writing quotations from his books on yellow paper and hiding them in random public places. He still continues to write (his most recent novel was published in 2010), but despite his continued success, the Frances series remains the best-selling of his works.

A bit of trivia: One thing that often surprises people who have seen my speech, but have not read *Bread and Jam for Frances,* is that in the book all the characters are actually badgers. Because there is no reference to badgers in the text, I left it out of my speech. Instead, I let the characters look the way the audience imagined. If you leave out irrelevant details, the audience fills in the blanks in their own mind. (If you do not give them enough detail, they will get confused, but if you give them too much, they cannot keep track of it all and get even more confused.) Thus, the fact that the Frances in my speech was really a badger became nothing more than a bit of trivia for this book.

Anyway, before I jump into this next section, I want to give you a chunk of interp philosophy. If you do not get anything else from this selection, then glean just this one, helpful nugget of wisdom: As a funny person, you bring something to the piece that even the author did not see coming. Do not rely solely on the lines themselves for the source of your humor, but rather on the intent behind them; your timing, your pauses, your inflection, your characters, what happens between the lines, and the creative ways you paint your backdrops in the theater of the mind.

# Interesting Things to Know

Frances is a picky eater who says she only likes bread and jam. So, her parents decide to play along and give her only bread and jam breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Meanwhile, everyone around her enjoys foods that are new and exciting...

If I could pinpoint one thing about *Bread and Jam* that made it work, it was that it resonated with people. The nature of children's literature, that beautiful predictability and familiarity that makes little kids want to read the same book every night, made my speech stick in people's minds. It was quotable. It captured the nature of kids in a way that resonated with parents. It told a story that was both emotionally appealing and comical.

So, the piece itself was very special, but there were also some things I did with it that were vital to its success. In this piece, I learned most of my key philosophies of interpretation. The most basic thing I learned is the importance of really *interpreting* the speech, making it your own. Only a fraction of the humor of my piece was there to begin with. I had to brainstorm to add the rest of its comedic elements. *Bread and Jam* was cute, but it really was not very humorous at the beginning. The work I did to bring out the humorous subtleties of the piece made up the difference between 11th place at Rocky Mountain Classic and 1st place at the Colorado Open a few weeks later.

My favorite element of this speech that I added was a high contrast between characters. There needs to be a certain amount of contrast between characters anyway, just to distinguish between them, but I over-exaggerated the distinction to the point that it became humorous in and of itself. I discovered that contrast adds a great emphasis to humor. My little girl, Frances, was cute, had an extremely high voice, and happened to be a picky eater. My Narrator, on the other hand, was extremely, extremely dry. I gave all the narration as if I was talking about something very serious and intense, then I would show Frances playing with her food and making up little songs. The formula worked beautifully.

This formula was funny, but what made it work so well was that it was highly unique at the time, and therefore came unexpected to the audiences I performed for. I took a children's story and let it presume to be “intense” and the absurdity of that “intensity” was the backbone of the speech. Make your speech unique. This takes work. You have to be creative.

Much of my speech was character-driven. The two most prominent characters were Frances and the Narrator, but the other characters did their part to make the story work and the piece funny. Gloria, Frances’ baby sister, would make happy baby noises before smashing food and smearing it all over her face (much to the delight of my audience). Albert, Frances’ friend at school, was a meticulously organized nerd with glasses that kept sliding down his face. Characters with little quirks lend themselves to physical comedy. Frances’ parents were more subdued. I needed some more subtle characters to balance out the funny ones. They kept the piece from feeling overdone or ridiculous.

If you look back at the elements of the speech that my audiences and I enjoyed, you may note that I did not do anything particularly difficult in *Bread* *and* *Jam* *for* *Frances*. What made this speech work was that the majority of the humor was stuff that I added. In your speech, most of the specific elements I used would not fit with your selection, so you will have to bring something special to whatever you create if you want to reach your full potential.

# Into the Interp

It is your job, as the interper, to examine your piece and find what humor lies both in the text and between the lines. Once you understand where you are going with your story and have at least a hazy idea of what you plan to do with it, you want to show that essence in an introduction. My introduction was a little abstract and diverged slightly from the default comedic tone of the piece, but I liked it because it introduced the gist of the story in a unique, attention-grabbing way.

Note: the introduction narrator did not have a boring, monotonous tone. He gave a passionate, rousing speech. At the very end of the intro, however, he suddenly became very, very dry.

Narrator: When in the course, the main course, of a meal it becomes necessary to try new and unusual foods, we hold it to be self-evident that all children are created picky, that they are endowed with certain, inalienable dislikes, that among these are sprouts, Lima beans, and a barrage of vegetables. This idea is the driving force behind Russell Hoban’s classic children’s book… [Narrator changes] Bread and Jam for Frances.

As you can see, all I did was spoof The Declaration of Independence. It was not very difficult. Even so, it captured the central theme of my story, pickiness, and the feelings behind a revolution sort of fit with a child’s perception of “tyranny” at the dinner table: being forced to eat yucky foods. This subtle commentary grabbed everyone’s attention and explained the storyline in a nutshell.

This next part is excellent for understanding the value of a well-timed pause. If you read it straight, with no deliberate pauses or special emotion, it is really, really boring. Try it.

Narrator: It was breakfast time, and everyone was at the table. Father was eating his egg. Mother was eating her egg. Gloria was sitting in a high chair eating her egg too. Frances was eating bread and jam.

Now, try it again, pausing dramatically wherever I put ellipses. Read it as though it were an extremely dramatic, intense story and that it is your grim duty to tell us of these weighty matters:

Narrator: It was breakfast time... and everyone was at the table. Father was eating his egg. Mother was eating her egg... Gloria was sitting in a high chair... eating her egg too. Frances was eating... bread and jam.

Was that any funnier? A well-placed comedic pause accomplishes several things: one, it gives the audience a sense of anticipation (almost suspense) that there is a punchline coming; two, it gives them a chance to laugh without being afraid that they will miss what you say next; three, it breaks up the rhythm of your words to make them sound more interesting; finally, it shows that you know where the where the jokes are, which serves as a kind of communication as to when the audience is supposed to laugh. Eventually, you should be able to gauge where a pause is needed based on where your audiences laugh.

In some cases, you want to be fast with your pacing.

Frances: I do not like the way you slide / I do not like your soft inside / I do not like you lots of ways / and I could go for many days / without eggs.

Father: What did you say, Frances?

Frances: Nothing.

“Nothing” was funniest when it immediately followed Father’s line and usually earned a small chuckle. I could have drawn it out, but if you draw out a little joke too much, it often deflates its humor. To hold an audience’s attention, you need to make every joke worth that attention. You need to be suspenseful when you are setting up a really great punchline, or else it will fall flat; for medium-to-small jokes, you only need a slight pause, or none at all, otherwise you will have drawn the joke out beyond its worth. Experiment with your timing as much as you can at home. Test it on a sibling or friend too. That said, the only way you will *really*know what works is by trying it in competition. If you pay close attention to how the audience reacts to your timing, you will learn how to keep them completely captivated.

Hopefully that gives you somewhere to start with understanding timing. Also watch your inflection, your pitch and your volume (I tend to be too quiet). All of these contribute to the humor.

I have spent a lot of time discussing delivery, but I would like to move on to some of the subtleties of interpretation itself. Some of my best examples are in characterization.

Sometimes, a funny characteristic is only vaguely suggested by the text. Watch carefully for such hinted opportunities. In my text, the baby Gloria’s line was:

Gloria: Ah!

For that one word, I gave her several seconds of squirming, beating her high chair, making baby noises, and eating messily. The baby noises were funny to the audience, but they were only hinted at in the text.

Another character who I built from subtle suggestions in the text is Albert, Frances’ best friend at school. I interpreted him as a meticulously organized nerd. There was not much in the text or illustrations to suggest this interpretation. I got the impression from just this bit of narration:

Narrator: Albert took two napkins from his lunch box. He tucked one napkin under his chin. He spread the other like a tablecloth. He arranged his lunch neatly on the napkin. Then he was ready to eat his lunch. He took a bite of sandwich, a bite of pickle, a bite of hard-boiled egg and a drink of milk. Albert made the sandwich, the pickle, the egg, and the milk come out even.

Albert comes across as excessively orderly and neat for a little kid. This struck me as somewhat nerdy, so I gave him a slight lisp and a pair of glasses, which always slipped. They added a dimension to his character that made him really enjoyable.

Whatever piece you decide to do, understand that you have to work really hard to bring out its full potential. The only reason my speech was successful or funny at all was that I was able to bring something unique and unexpected out of such a simple story. That is what you need to do with whatever story you find.

The most obvious interpretation for a kid’s book is to make a speech that feels like “story time,” which is why most kids’ books do not make very interesting interps. Judges do not want to be treated like a bunch of kindergartners. Make what you do appropriate and worthwhile for the adults who sacrificed their time to judge for you. I am not recommending that you do not do children’s literature, but do not choose it just because it is quicker and easier.

Whether you interpret *Bread and Jam for Frances* or *The Divine Comedy* (which is not all that funny, actually), you will have to be very creative to give your audiences something worthwhile. No cutting corners here. It is very hard to find a funny piece. It is even harder to make it funnier than it was to begin with, but you owe that work to everyone who watches you. Do not settle for mildly amusing, fight for riotously funny. Now go out there, future comedic interper, and boldly charge forth into your glorious, hilarious destiny!

1. *These are the 2010 National Championship Final Results for NCFCA. They can be found at* [*https://www.ncfca.org/wp-content/uploads/past-season-results/national-championship/Nationals\_2010.pdf*](https://www.ncfca.org/wp-content/uploads/past-season-results/national-championship/Nationals_2010.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)