

**Program Notes: Hannah's Gift**

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Research Week

Performing Art Presentation: Graduate

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The chosen piece of literature for the performance is "Hannah's Gift" by Maria Housden written in 2003. This is a nonfiction memoir about Maria's life. Her daughter, Hannah, died from cancer at the age of four in 1994. This memoir shares the life of Hannah and how Maria processed the traumatic loss of her daughter. In this creative research process, a research question is identified: How does the act of writing and interpreting traumatic experiences facilitate the cathartic function of communication, and what are the factors that contribute to this process? Individuals use narrative storytelling to serve them in their healing process after a traumatic loss.

The performer's voice, gestures, and the use of the binder as a prop are carefully orchestrated to bring the character's journey of grief to life on stage. The performer uses pauses, silences, changes in tone, and subtle movements of the binder to create a rhythm and pacing that draws the audience into the story. The emotions of the character, from shock and disbelief to joy and sadness, are conveyed through the performer's nuanced interpretation of the text. As the performance progresses, the audience is taken on a journey of innocence, loss, heartbreak, and self-discovery. The performance conveys the character's struggles with grief, the search for meaning in this life, and the profound impact of the loss of a loved one.

### **Oral Performance Overview**

Prose interpretation focuses on a single piece of literature with a single character. The manuscript is held in a little black binder. The binder can be used as a prop to make the performance come to life. A prose performance is about ten minutes. A short introduction of the piece is provided after a brief teaser. According to Gura and Powell in 2019, "The interpreter embodies and evokes the persona in all prose selections; in short stories/novels, that persona is a narrator... This becomes one way to explain how the most troubling parts of our lives contribute

to the person we become" (p. 145). Prose typically has one character, and that character is the narrator. In this piece, the interpreter must become Maria Housden for the performance. The interpreter must effectively tell her story by embodying her persona.

### **Prior Research Informing the Performance**

According to Fordham University Press, "One of the most enduring ethical functions of narrative is catharsis. From the ancient Greeks to the present day, the healing powers of storytelling have been recognized and even revered" (Kearney, 2008, p. 187). Maria Housden wrote this memoir, "Hannah's Gift", as a coping mechanism. Performing her story also functions as a cathartic communication outlet because the interpreter grapples with the concept of loss and grief. By telling her story, Maria can find agency in the unexpected trauma of this loss. This performance can be transformative for the author, the interpreter, and the audience by providing a platform for growth and joy amid suffering. Drawing on the latest knowledge from fields like psychology and communication, the performance can accurately depict the mother's journey of grief, adding depth and nuance.

### **How the Performance Contributes to the Discipline**

The oral performance of "Hannah's Gift" contributes to the discipline by showcasing the transformative power of narrative storytelling in the context of traumatic experiences. Through the interpreter's embodiment of Maria Housden's persona, the exploration of performative elements, and the alignment with existing research on catharsis, the performance adds depth to the understanding of oral interpretation and its broader implications for healing, empathy, and communal connection within the discipline of performative narratives. By displaying the challenges and opportunities of navigating grief, the performance deepens the audience's understanding of these fundamental aspects of the human experience and fosters empathy towards those who are struggling with loss. Overall, this piece contributes to the discipline by

expanding the understanding of how performative elements can enhance the storytelling experience, providing insights into the craft of oral interpretation.

