Theory and Practice of Oral Discourse – Professor Margie Centron

A NEO-ARISTOTELIAN CRITICISM OF
OLYMPIA DUKAKIS’ SPEECH
A LIFE IN THE THEATRE

by Tricia Vega

Olympia Dukakis spoke at Kent State University Stark Campus on Wednesday, September 18, 1996. The audience consisted of Kent State University Stark Campus students and faculty as well as fans from surrounding communities. The title of Olympia Dukakis’ speech was “A Life in the Theatre.” Her main claim centered around a statement that she made in the introduction of her speech. It was stated as follows, “We all, actors and audience, journey forth every night to know ourselves.” The speech was very interesting and entertaining. Olympia related her experiences in the theatre to general experiences in everyday life. This technique was very affective because it allowed everyone to empathize with what she was saying, not just “theatre majors.” Olympia used the three forms of proof, logos, ethos, and pathos to coordinate her lifetime experiences with her main claim. The chronological structure of her speech contained many personal stories, poems, and quotations that helped make her message understandable, believable, and meaningful to the audience members.

Logos

According to our textbook, “Logos refers to the ideas and words of the speech itself.” The textbook continued to summarize the idea by saying, “It is the logicality of a speech, including the formal structure, logical content, claims, and evidence or supporting materials such as examples and illustrations, testimonies and quotations, visual aids, and statistics.” The logos connects the material that makes up the actual speech with the main claim. The two main forms of logos that Dukakis used were poems and recollections of her personal experiences. Olympia Dukakis began her speech with a poem (written by Garcia Long?). The poem was supposed to be a summary of how Olympia has felt over the years. The poem was a unique way to grab the audience’s attention and help them understand Olympia’s outlook on life. She also concluded her speech with a poem (by Christopher Hoe). This was an excellent way to draw closure to the speech. It left the audience feeling as if they had experienced something that was complete and certain. The poems were very affective because they allowed the audience to be an active
part of the speech. The listeners were called upon to pay attention and put meaning behind the words that she was reciting. Other alternatives to poems are short quotes by credible people. Olympia could have used quotes to begin and end her speech. Quoting a source, however, does not leave as much room for audience participation. Unlike poems, quotes usually have a very straightforward and precise meaning. They cannot be interpreted in as many different ways as poems. The body of Olympia's speech took on a chronological structure. The logos in this section of the speech consisted primarily of personal stories. She started by telling the audience how she became interested in theatre, and then continued to take the listeners on a journey through the main experiences in her life. This was very effective because, rather than just accepting Olympia's opinions, the audience had the opportunity to understand where she was coming from. An alternative to this approach would have been to simply recite/explain what it is like to be in the theatre, actually acting and performing. This approach would have excluded her background experiences and personal life. Her approach was much better because it supported the thesis by allowing the audience to empathize with her rather than just listen to her.

Ethos

Ethos is defined in our textbook as “the credibility, character, trustworthiness, and friendliness of the speaker as perceived by the audience during the speech.” Olympia used her humor and objectivity to establish a favorable relationship with the audience. She was very spontaneous and personal throughout her speech. She told stories about what might have been very embarrassing experiences, and was able to laugh and learn from them. The fact that she was funny made her less intimidating and more real. An alternative to laughing at herself could have been to tell stories about other people that she has come into contact with. This technique would not have been as good because it would have made her look superficial and perfect. The other method that she used to appeal to the audience was a sense of objectivity. She told stories about herself of both successes and failures. The stories were recited and the audience was left to draw conclusions. She could have left out the stories about her failures and confusions, but this would have made her look “untouchable.” The listeners would have only seen her as a famous actress instead of a real person.

Pathos

Pathos is defined in our textbook as “the predispositions, attitudes, values, and beliefs of an audience.” The speaker draws upon these things from the listeners as a means of support for his/her main claim. Olympia called upon the audience’s predispositions and beliefs through her personal stories.
She hit on two main facts, that we all have to follow our hearts despite opposition, and that nothing is ever easy. She told a story about how she set out to be a physical therapist and then decided that she wanted to be an actress. Olympia also stated that people told her the world does not need any more actresses, and they did not agree with her decision. I am sure this story sparked personal experiences in every single audience member. We have all made decisions that many people do not agree with. The fact that we follow our hearts despite opposition illustrates our continuous search to find out who we really are. I cannot think of any alternative way that Dukakis could have made such an association with every member of the audience and with her main claim. Her technique was great because it not only dealt with her topic of theatre, but it allowed audience members to apply it to their own personal lives. The other belief that she dealt with was that nothing is easy. She told stories about all of the hardships that she had to endure to get where she is today. She talked about her many moves, side jobs, and struggles of how to balance a career and family. Olympia also informed the audience that she was discriminated against because of her ethnic name. I am sure that every audience member could relate to one of Olympia’s experiences. Olympia could have approached this differently by drawing conclusions for the audience. She stated her hardships, but did not tell the listeners how they changed her way of thinking or added to her goals. This could have helped because it would have made it easier for the audience to understand how she finally found meaning in her life.

Olympia Dukakis’ speech was very effective because it allowed audience members to look at her life in the theatre as one example of someone’s search for meaning. The listeners were able to draw upon her personal stories as a way to relate to what she was saying. Her stories made her very “real” because she illustrated the fact that she is not perfect. She let the audience know that even though she has reached success, she had to overcome a great deal of struggles and opposition to get there.