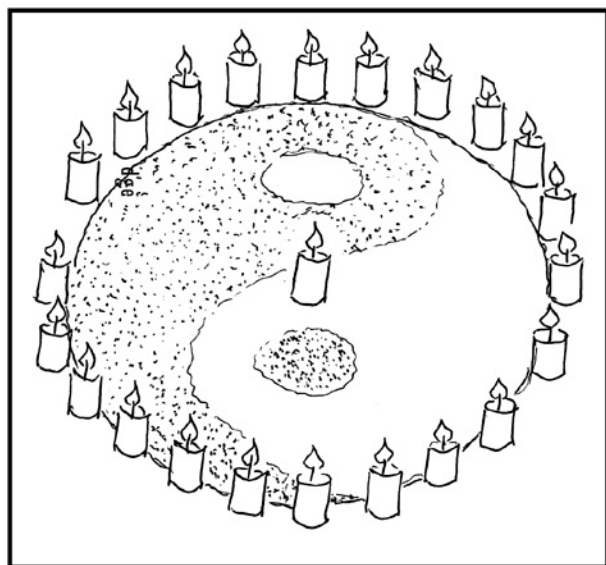


# Zen and the Art of the Monologue

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Jay Sankey

By the Author of *Zen and the Art of Stand-Up Comedy*

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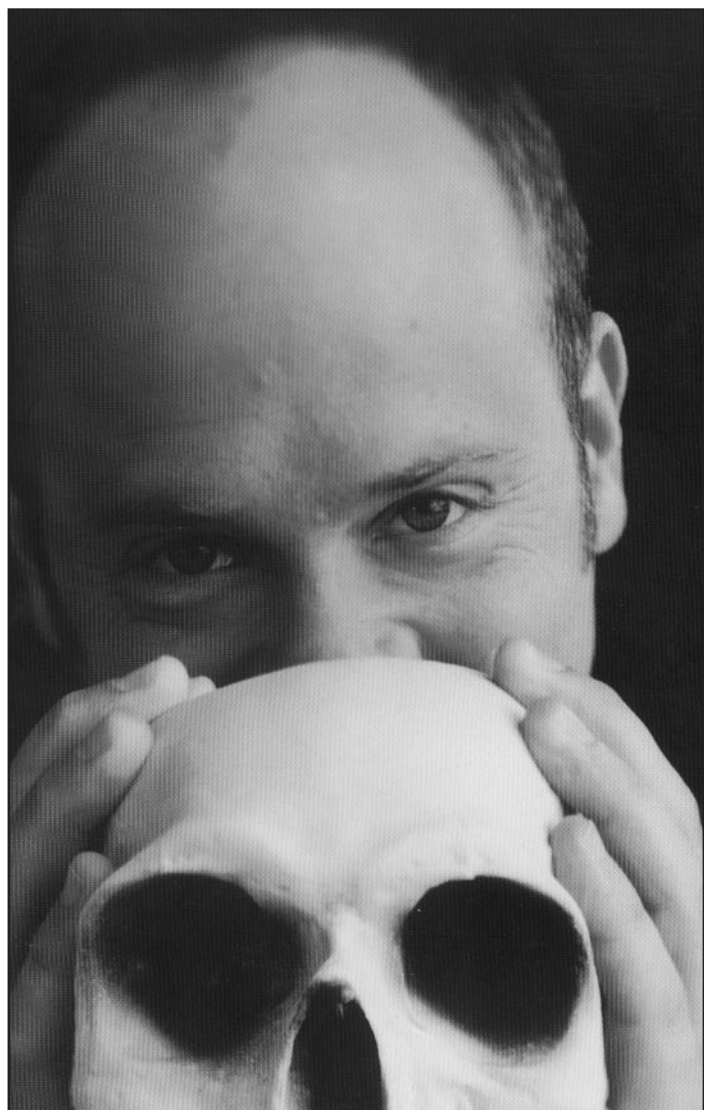


Photo by David Leyes

# Zen and the Art of the Monologue

Jay Sankey

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*I have had to strip myself naked. One does not like what one sees then, and one is afraid of what others will see and do. To challenge one's deepest, most nameless fears is also to challenge the heavens. It is to drag yourself and everything and everyone you love to the attention of the fiercest of the gods; who may not forgive your impertinence, who may not spare you.*

—James Baldwin

*Oddly, the more personal something is, the more universal it is as well. When we dig deeper to truthful experiences, that's the work that really touches people and connects us all.*

—Bill Watterson,  
creator of the cartoon strip  
*Calvin and Hobbes*

*The practice of zen is forgetting the self in the act of uniting with something else.*

—Koun Yamada



*This book is dedicated to my very dear friends  
Jason Maloney, David Peck, and David Acer  
for always making me feel that my thoughts  
and feelings are worth sharing.  
And to Meredith. Sweet angel, it was worth the wait.*



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# Foreword

*To believe that what is true for you is true for all men. That is genius.*  
—Henry Miller

Standing while others are seated can be a brazen act. But to stand there in front of everyone and boldly share your thoughts and feelings can be the act of a revolutionary, a social dissident—or at least an upstart. For such an act reflects a belief that is still a tad heretical, even in these modern times: the belief in taking one's own personal experience seriously; the belief that, as personal as it is, it is nonetheless a part of a larger, collective truth.

This belief presents a great many challenges, both to yourself and to others. After all, what are you to them? And why should they spend even a single moment listening to you talk? Taking one's own inner life seriously and having a fervent desire to share it with others also dares the ego to take the wheel, drive to the closest greasy spoon, tuck a napkin into its shirt collar, and shovel as much crap into itself as possible, bloating it up to a truly monstrous size.

Yet for me, so much of standing up and speaking my mind in front of strangers comes down to trust—trust in the act of sharing; trust in myself, that I can handle being misunderstood, and even more frightening, being *understood*; and most of all, trust that perhaps none of us are really strangers after all.

At first glance, this may seem to be a book of questions and answers about monologuing. But in truth it is a small



book about an enormous subject: unique perspective and the art and craft of sharing. For example, while the questions reflect a wide range of perspectives, the answers reflect but one. Mine. Actually, my own background in the art of monologuing lies much more in the area of solo shows than that of soliloquies and short monologues performed for acting auditions or within the context of a larger play. This book does, however, explore a great many aspects of the monologue form, including the use of monologues for acting auditions and the role of monologues in full plays.

Our experiences give rise to our answers, whether in matters artistic or metaphysic. And though my own answers in the realm of the monologue are based on experience (lending the book some credibility), I believe perhaps an even more valid answer to any of the questions asked in this book is, It's really up to you. Or, Experience and find out for yourself.

Why then did I bother writing this book? Well, I remember once reading about how, around the turn of this century, professional safecrackers would routinely brush sandpaper across their fingertips to make them all the more sensitive to the task at hand. Think of this book then as a couple hundred sheets of sandpaper, written in the hope that as you flip through them, you too will become a little more sensitive and receptive to the fascinating personal challenges involved in the writing and performing of your own monologue. Your story—and ours.

Jay Sankey  
Toronto, Canada  
August 2000

# The Monologue

## What is a monologue?

*Words have the power to destroy or heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world.*

—Shunryu Suzuki

A monologue is a predominantly verbal presentation given by a single person featuring a collection of ideas, often loosely assembled around one or more themes. Note that I do not define it as a *strictly* verbal presentation; many, though certainly not all, successful monologists also employ nonverbal elements to great effect, such as, their use of facial expressions and hand gestures, along with a variety of props and stage devices.

## Is it okay to have a friend perform my monologue with me?

No, it's not okay. In fact, it's very wrong. It's a *monologue*, coming from the Greek word *mono*, which means "singular," "one," "alone." Just you. No friends. No family. No supporting actors. No highly publicized cameos. You are alone onstage: accept it.



## How does a monologue differ from a play?

*Zen insists on personal experience and insight.*

—Irmgard Schloegl

Both a play and a monologue have a script, a performance, and (on a good night) an audience. But while a play usually features several performers, a monologue has but one. A play, with its usual cast of several performers, has much more with which to appeal to not only the audience's eyes but their minds and hearts as well. Several actors make group dynamics possible and provide a much greater variety of physical actions onstage. This in turn gives many more possibilities for an engaging narrative.

As a monologist, you have none of this. From one moment to the next the audience's attention remains solely yours. But what incredible freedom! This combination of intense attention and personal freedom is in fact one of the most powerful attractions to the monologue form.

Of course, such freedom also represents a very real danger, especially to the vain or inexperienced, as it offers more than enough rope for the impetuous to hang themselves. Monologues also tend to explore a single event or theme from various intellectual and emotional vantage points, rather than, like plays, telling a long and complicated story. In most monologues, not a lot actually "happens." Again, this is probably because action is not one of the natural strengths of the form. Nevertheless, an hour of mere "telling" can get excruciatingly dull for performers and audiences alike, which is why really effective monologues tend to explore and examine the most intimate contents of a human soul. In response to the intensity of an entire audience's silent, respectful, even expectant focus, the monologist works to share his or her most personal thoughts with equal intensity.

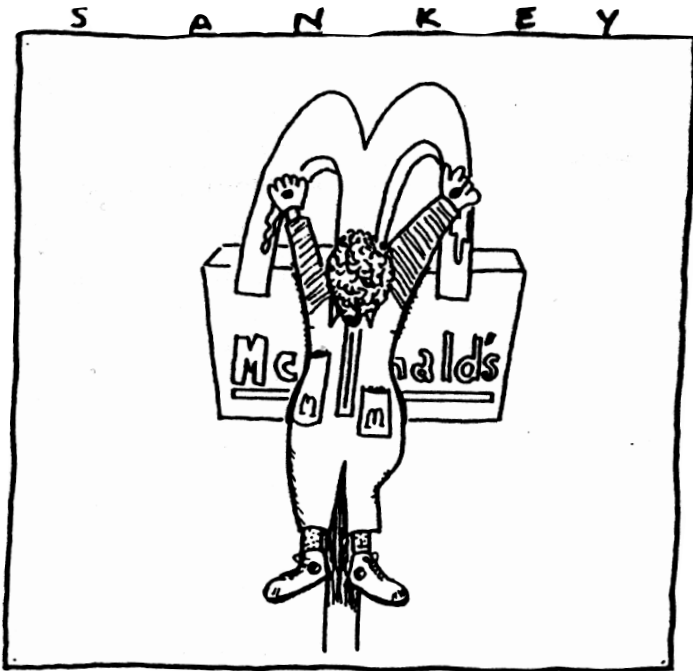


## What is the difference between a monologue, a soliloquy, and a speech?

*The script is the actor's greatest enemy.*

—Sanford Meisner

One of the most obvious differences is their typical *length*. Speeches and soliloquies are often only five, ten, or maybe at most fifteen minutes long, while monologues are commonly forty, sixty, even ninety minutes in length. This is precisely why they are sometimes referred to as “one-person shows.”



**Ronald Of Nazareth**



But even more significantly, when someone gives a speech, there is not only a definite “prewritten” feel to it, but also often a sense that the speaker (who is seldom truly “performing”) believes he or she *knows something*. Speeches are usually more about ideas than feelings. And while a soliloquy can be an extremely emotional experience for both the performer and the audience, soliloquies too still tend to feel scripted. All too often actors performing soliloquies seem more focused on respecting the carefully worded texts they hold fervently in their minds than on truly communing with the breathing audience seated in front of them.

To my mind, the very spirit of the monologue form is based on the audience’s intense involvement, with the goal being a sharing more than a “delivering” or “telling.” And it is this emphasis upon profound *sharing* that colors much of my thinking about the craft of the monologue.

On both sides of the footlights, monologues simply have a different feel. With the performer striving to cultivate a powerful sense of intimacy with the audience, the best monologues seem more like a chatty, stream-of-consciousness confessional than a prepared speech or even a moving soliloquy. And by “intimacy” I mean a powerful sense of connection resulting from a heightened awareness of a shared reality. In fact, monologists typically try to establish a “sitting across the table in a coffee shop” rapport with their audience, so they are not so much “the performer” as an extremely articulate and impassioned confidante on a roll. Consequently, monologists commonly break from their scripts, going off on a totally unprepared tangent before returning to their carefully written scripts. The form simply has a sublimely unfettered, trusting, and even freewheeling sensibility.



## DO SIAMESE TWINS REALLY UNDERSTAND DOUBLE ENTENDRES?

Yes and no. They understand them on an intellectual level, but seldom find them engaging or amusing on an emotional level. After years of intensive studying and research I have concluded (I believe definitively) that this is because the twins, connected at the hip as they are, sense that double entendres subtly echo their own peculiar physical circumstance, and so find them vaguely unsettling. Consequently, if you ever spot one or more Siamese twins in the crowd during a performance, I advise you to stick to puns and knock-knock jokes. Twins, connected or not, love a good knock-knock joke; each of them intuitively feels capable of either relating to or identifying with one of the two “knocks.”

## What is the difference between a stand-up comedy set and a monologue?

While a stand-up comedy set tends to be primarily cathartic, I believe a monologue typically explores a greater intellectual and emotional range. Monologues are also generally more interested in actual events and powerful feelings, though there are certainly comics who specialize in the telling of true stories. Bill Cosby and Lenny Bruce were masters of this kind of stand-up.

And again, the implicit relationship between the performer and the audience is very different during a comedy show in a club than it is during a monologue in a theater. In a comedy club, the crowd comes to laugh. No less, and very little more. And undoubtedly, the intensity of these two