

So You Want to **PRODUCE A PLAY!**

BY KEN GREENMAN AND WENDI CALBI

Have your students been asking to put on a play? Or have you thought that one of Shakespeare's plays would come to life if students could only *see* it instead of reading it from a literature anthology? I would like to offer some suggestions that will help you during the production process. Before we get into the how-to, it might be helpful to hear from a student of mine who went through the process a dozen times, playing a number of roles.

Her testimonial may help convince you, early on, that the work involved is well worth it, that the payback is greater than the investment. Let's let Wendi speak:

From the third grade, I wanted to be a star. The opportunities for participation in drama were rare in elementary school and junior high, but I finally got a chance to be a part of

an organized group when I went to Takoma Academy.

Like most things worth doing, drama required a trip up the ladder of success. Seniors comprised the acting troupe, and underclassmen the technical crew. My first job in a tech crew was prompter. When we were far enough along in our rehearsals, and the actors had dropped their books (memorized their lines), prompters would sit just off stage and silently read the lines of the play as the actors said them. If one of them forgot a line, they would call "line" to one of us, and we would supply them with it.

A variety of tech roles taught me that it was not necessary to be the star or the director to be an important part of the drama community. Every role, whether it was dramatic or technical, was equally important because everyone was contributing to something larger—the final performance.

Finally my senior year came and I became a member of the drama class. The drama classroom was unique. Creativity was rampant, personalities collided, and artistic temperaments

prevailed, but through all of this it became even more clear to me that drama teaches what cannot be found in books. No text can teach "give and take," or the teamwork that is required when one actor rescues another in a scene. In drama we had to learn by doing.

The rewards of that experience by far exceeded the trials, and even today I am reaching back to the lessons that I learned. Drama is a great teacher.

My drama class is in its 12th year. The class size has varied from eighteen (a bit unwieldy) to seven (small but very workable). Some years I've held auditions because too many wanted to get into the class. Typically, fear of the audition reduced the number of applicants enough so that whoever auditioned was in. Never force anyone onto the stage. If students hesitate, let them have a back-stage role—props or stage crew. Forcing only intensifies the apprehension.

This year's reluctants will be motivated by the realization that no one dropped

dead on stage. They will become the nervously anticipatory participants next year.

If you need to audition, require a two-to five-minute memorized monologue. Also give the aspirants a “cold reading” using a work they’ve never seen before. This will tell you as much, if not more, than the memorized work. And remember, compatibility may be a more important criterion for choosing your cast than acting skills.

All right, now you have your actors. What are you going to do with them?

Before any scripts are given, parts chosen, or rehearsals scheduled, four basic rules must be established. With these rules in place, the program will succeed. Without them, you can expect catastrophe.

Rule Number One

You are boss. There is only one director—you. This is not a democracy. Nothing will mess up a student-actor’s concentration and self-esteem more than another student actor telling him what to do. If someone in the troupe has a suggestion about how another actor might do a particular scene, line, or movement, the student should come to you—in private—and you can decide whether the idea has merit.

That being said, there is room for the individual actor to experiment, suggest, and try new ways during rehearsals.

Rule Number Two

Establish the “sense of company” as soon as possible. Everyone is interdependent. The technical crew and prompters are as important as the lead actor. Theater is a collaborative art.

If one of your prima donnas doesn’t buy this idea, either get rid of him or her—fast—or arrange to have him on stage while the lighting crew intentionally puts him in the dark, or the stage crew “forgets” to place a prop. This will quickly cure the “star complex.” This brings us to Rule Number Three:

Everyone must swear loyalty and slavish commitment to the production until death do you part or the last performance night, whichever comes second. From the beginning, make sure everyone understands this. If someone hedges a bit, saying he has a potential work conflict or that transportation may be a problem, *insist* that these problems be solved *before* the hedger joins the production. Otherwise, I guarantee, by mid-rehearsal, your ulcers will rampage, and the company’s frustration level will reach explosive heights. This brings us to Rule Number Four:

The company must establish a circle of confidentiality. In order for each member to be free to fail, or to do something

wonderful, what happens during the production process must stay within the company.

If one actor's momentary emotional explosion or temporary inability to understand a scene is being laughed about at lunch the next day by people not in the company, then none of the actors will be willing to risk. And acting is risking.

It is a good idea to dedicate an hour or so a week for the company to relax and let off steam, all in the assurance of this pre-established confidentiality.

Violation of this trust is punishable by confrontation with the company, and if bad enough, expulsion from the play. In the 12-year history of my drama class, two people have been confronted by the company, but no one has been kicked out.

All right, now you have your company and rules to govern the process. What's next?

Over a period of nine or ten weeks my acting class does a series of theater exercises, which teach them basic acting skills long before anyone sets foot on stage. Otherwise, going directly from audition to play, for the beginning actor, is like throwing a nonswimmer into the deep end of the pool. However, it's easier to rescue a drowning swimmer than an actor floundering on stage!

Warm-up Exercises

Here are some exercises to warm up your actors:

1. *The prop-bag* or "50 Ways to Use a Toothbrush." Have your actors ravage their basements, attics, china closets, or little brothers' toybox, and fill a pillowcase with whatever they find. Then ask them to use these items imaginatively, improvising new scenarios. For example, a quilt is a tent. A broomstick is a fishing rod. A plate is a mirror. Throw three or four things into a circle and have the actors create a scene using the things (now props) in a unified way. (The actor, lost in the woods, sets up his tent, sticks his head out, and uses the mirror to flash signals. He tries to catch something with his "fishing rod" while he waits for someone to find him.)

2. *Who, what, where.* This is an improvisation game. Put three students up front and have them ask for a who, what, where. They may get "three pregnant women, standing in line waiting for a phone, on a Minnesota winter morning." Let the three newly pregnant actors react to the situation and to one another. Acting is, to a large degree, reacting.

3. *Character creation.* Let the actors design a character. Have them give the character physical attributes: accent, limp, ... and a history: born in New York City, 40 years ago, fought in Vietnam, now a

writer, lives in Atlanta. The next day, let the newly defined characters introduce themselves. Create a situation: a party, a bus ride, an acting class, and let the characters act out what they would do in these circumstances.

Choose other theater games that help your actors get used to acting. Such games should help them loosen up in a nonthreatening atmosphere. Choose games that lead your actors toward scene-study, and ultimately, toward the play you plan to put on.

Other aspects of acting that are important to be acquainted with include "objective, obstacle, victory"; "method acting"; "inner monologue"; blocking, stage position; "character acting"; types of stages, and "scene study." These topics are discussed in most introduction-to-acting texts. You can obtain these and scripts for plays from theater publishers. (See list at end of article.)

Be sure to purchase the scripts from the publisher. Photocopying extra copies is stealing. An artist's creation is not only a vehicle for personal expression; it is also the source of his or her livelihood.

Rehearsal

Let's talk about rehearsal. One of the most effective techniques to lead actors into the interpretations you desire is to ask questions:

"Why does the character say that?"

"What happened to your character 20 years ago that makes him react this way? Create the answer that will give you a motive."

"Why did the playwright use that word instead of another? Why does he repeat that word three times? How many different ways can you say that word?"

"Would you mind doing that again?"

"Why do you think your character says that from up-stage-left? Do you think down-stage-center would be a stronger position?"

When, as director, you ask questions, be polite. Say "Please" and "Excuse me." Use a gentle tone. Give yourself somewhere to go as you evolve toward dictatorship and the performance date draws near. You will have to make unilateral, arbitrary decisions soon enough. Insist that the actor to whom the question was addressed answer the question. He or she should make the decisions.

Give skeletal stage movement (blocking) early in the rehearsal schedule so the actors can be memorizing words and actions simultaneously. The body reminds the brain.

Changes can be made right up to dress rehearsal, although by then, alterations should be minimal. (Be prepared, though to see some fascinating changes during performance, when the actors are out of your reach.)

Rehearsal Time

I try to have *at least* six weeks of rehearsal for each full-length play I direct. Eight is better; ten is too long. Three nights a week, two hours a night—except for the week before performance. This is lovingly called "crash week" by my actors and crew. They say good-bye to parents and lug their suitcases to school.

During this evolution from stumbling first reading to performances, there comes the time when you must let go. It is one of the most rewarding, enjoyable times you will have. The machine now runs on its own. Ideally, this will come the week before Crash Week or at least during that week. Sit back in the dark and watch the art take shape. Ah, fulfillment!

Coping With Problems

Listed below are some problems you may encounter. Some of them can be solved or at least addressed by the suggestions I've included. Knowing in advance what to expect should make things go more smoothly.

1. Scheduling rehearsals around other activities. (Good luck!)
2. Punctuality. (Having a grade for clout helps.)
3. Line memorization. (Provide time in production schedule for memorization.)
4. The star complex. (See rule number two.)
5. Scripts that contain smoking. (Usually not essential to the play—edit.)
6. Scripts that contain drinking. (Again, not usually essential to the plot. If essential, weigh the play's value against your audience's reactions.)
7. Blocking retention in rehearsal. (Repetition. "Would you do that again, please?")
8. Actors not taking work seriously. (See rule number three or solution to problem two.)
9. Scripts with profanity.—edit.
10. Students who use the play as an excuse for poor academic work. (A minimum GPA requirement for the cast and crew helps. Give academically weaker students smaller roles.)

Conclusion

Some of the benefits to be gained from the play production process include speaking and listening skills, literature and art appreciation, time management, interpersonal development, reading

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shaping the directions of the Renaissance?

⁷ William F. Newell, "Interdisciplinary Studies Are Alive and Well," *The National Honors Report* (Summer 1988), pp. 5, 6.

⁸ Newell and Green, p. 29.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Herbert Weigand, "From Science Into Art," *Art Education* (November 1985), p. 18.

¹¹ Theodore Lopushinsky, "Science for the Non-scientific: A Role for the Humanities," *Improving College and University Teaching* (Winter 1982), pp. 13-16.

¹² Paul D. Houston, "Stalking the School Administrator: Advocating the Arts," *Art Education* (September 1981), p. 19.

¹³ Ruth M. Freyberger, "Integration: Friend or Foe of Art Education?" *Art Education* (November 1985), p. 6.

A CONTEMPORARY ROLE FOR THE CAMPUS ART GALLERY

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lege campus has a unique place and opportunity in a contemporary culture. Through it the community can see us responding to the needs of present society rather than longing for the romanticism of the past. Much of contemporary art is based on "newness" and innovation. The history of art over the past century has shown us that the creations that lasted have been fresh and inventive. The large museums generally are careful about acquiring "new" works for fear that they may not stand the test of time. The college gallery can accommodate the avant-garde through its format of small shows. The role as justifier of "good" art can be put aside in favor of simple reporting. The small gallery can say, "This is what is going on. What do you think of it?"

The Seventh-day Adventist-operated gallery can say the same to its community: "This is what is going on... What do you think of us?... Are there ways we can meet and mutually benefit?"

The responses may vary from "The cider was good" to "The painting looked unfinished, but it gave me a feeling of movement;" or, "It made me uncomfortable to look at that photograph, but its subject kept drawing me back..." It made me think about my family history;" or, "I didn't know your gallery would exhibit non-Adventist artists... Can other religions come to your school?"; and, "I'm glad I came out on a cold Wednesday evening... I'm glad I met you."

If the viewer can come to an art gallery with an attitude disposed toward learning... accepting each artist and his art as a serious statement, whether it be humorous, satirical, philosophical or experimental... then the ability to appreciate and understand will be greatly

enhanced and rewarded.

If an audience can avoid having judgmental attitudes... "I like it... I don't like it... It would look good in my house... I wouldn't want it on my wall"... then enjoyment becomes paramount and criteria is expanded.

If an observer can have a willing openness to view visual statements unlike any he may have seen before... then artistic phenomena may become an accepted form in the same way new scientific and natural phenomena become understandable.

If the viewer can accept works which are not repetitions of traditional art forms or works which please a collectable nature... then he may learn something of himself as well.

The challenge of new forms does not do away with tradition.

By recognizing traditional as well as contemporary directions in art, the viewer becomes more aware how each era complements the other through the very thing that makes clear the difference... that is, the tremendous creative power with which each period is endowed. To narrowly define the ever-widening concept of art is to relegate the artist to a depersonalized form of copying and to admit that creative energies no longer exist in contemporary society. —*Mabel Bartlett Gallery Statement*. □

Gene Cobb is Associate Professor of Art at Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Massachusetts, where he teaches studio and art history classes and has been the Mabel Bartlett Gallery director for 13 years. He is an exhibited photographer, and will soon be on leave to do visual research for a portfolio entitled, "The English on Holiday."

The Mabel Bartlett Gallery is named for Dr. Mabel Bartlett, who founded the art department at Atlantic Union College. She died December 9, 1988, at the age of 89. Art openings at the gallery are regular events that usually attract at least 300 students and members of the community.

REFERENCES

¹ Kenneth M. Lansing, *Art, Artists, and Art Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 52.

² Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1957), p. 17.

³ Michael J. Parsons, *How We Understand Art* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 13.

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enhancement, stress control, and creative expression.

When the student-actors bow to audience applause, they have come through a long, exciting learning process. They have learned about themselves; they have learned to depend on others

and to be dependable themselves. They have analyzed human behavior as never before. They have overcome their fears: they have risked and won!

Though school theater production is a high stress enterprise, it is an incredibly rewarding way to invest your time and energy. The results for you and your students will be well worth the time and effort expended.

Sources for Plays

Catalogues of plays are available from many publishing companies. Most collections include royalty-free plays. These are typically of fair quality but totally unknown, so what you save by not having to pay royalties you lose through poor attendance. If making money or at least breaking even is your goal, use a well-known play—*Our Town, You Can't Take It With You, The Miracle Worker*—and pay the royalties.

An excellent source of play suggestions is the National Council of Teachers of English publication, *Guide to Play Selection*. This book will solve many of your problems relating to cast size, publishers, and play analysis.

Additional sources include the following:

Bakers Plays

100 Chauncy St.
Boston, MA 02111
617/482-1280

The Dramatic Publishing Co.

86 East Randolph St.
Chicago, IL 60601

Dramatists Play Service, Inc.

440 Park Ave. South
New York, NY 10016
212/683-8960

Samuel French, Inc.

45 West 25th St.
New York, NY 10010

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

1111 Kenyon Rd.
Urbana, IL 61801

Greg Morris, *Being and Doing*

(A Workbook for Actors)
Whitehouse/Spelling Publications
8004 Fareholm Dr.
Los Angeles, CA 90046

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