

# Producing the School Play: A Director's Reflections

By

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It's the Monday after the production run of the Spring musical. The set has been struck, costumes and props are in the process of being cared for and returned, and the other directors and I are musing about the production just completed. The question we always seem to ask ourselves is, "I wonder, do people have any idea just how much time and effort it takes to produce a show like this?" I think the average person, with no theatrical or performance background, probably has a vague sort of idea that it takes some time, but hey, you hand out the scripts, memorize some lines, throw up some scenery, throw on some costumes, and put on a show, right? What's the big deal? It can't be THAT hard, can it? To help answer that question, I'd like to give you a brief overview of what goes into the successful production of the school play.

## **PLAY SELECTION**

One mistake many new directors make is that they attempt to produce shows based on their own personal favorites. Catering to one's own preferences often leads to a mediocre show that is cast poorly or inappropriately, and is disappointing to cast, audience, and director alike. It is critical that when choosing a play, the director must consider the abilities of the available talent pool. Attempting *Les Miserables* with a young, inexperienced, untrained cast will result in disaster! The director must always think about the future, and building the program. After all, this is an elective, extra-curricular program. If it doesn't appeal to the students, there won't be a program. What show would appeal to the students, utilize the talents of the veterans most efficiently, and provide training and involvement opportunities for the most newcomers? Almost immediately after the completion of the Spring Musical, speculation begins about NEXT year's musical. This is normal, since the kids in the Drama program are extremely enthusiastic about their Art, and can't wait to start the next production. However, in a high school setting, one cannot make decisions about the following year until one is sure of the available talent pool. That means, while speculation is fine, the final decision can't be made until the Fall, when the new freshmen are available.

## **LICENSING AND ROYALTIES**

Once the play has been selected, the director must obtain a performance license. This is done by contacting the owner of the rights to the show, usually one of three major theatrical libraries: Music Theater International, The Rodgers and Hammerstein Theatre Library, or Tams-Witmark. These people will determine if there are any restrictions on the show, and will determine a royalty fee based upon the size of the auditorium, expected attendance, and number of shows to be performed. For musicals, this fee is extremely high. The more popular the show, the higher the fee. For three performances, I have paid as much as three thousand dollars, and as little as twelve hundred. It really depends on the show. There will also be an additional fee to rent the scripts, usually about four hundred dollars, as well as a four hundred dollar security deposit. On top of all this are fees for any extras that may be desired, such as logo packs, performance recordings, computer rehearsal software, extra scripts or extended rental time, and many others.

## AUDITIONS

There are many schools of thought about how auditions should be run. I've tried many different approaches, and what works for me might not work for someone else. In my situation, I see most of these students in show after show, with the possible exception of incoming freshmen or new students. I know their voices and acting ability already, therefore, I am very specific in what I want them to do on stage for their audition. What I need to see are particular characters from the show. Most of the time, given no particular guidance, a student will select an audition monologue which portrays them as a teenager in a variety of situations (there are dozens of books of monologues for young actors). The problem is that most of the time, the characters I am attempting to cast are *adults* (unless the show is *Grease*, or *Oliver*, or some other kid show). I don't want to see teenagers on stage. Teenagers find it easy to do these teen monologues because they usually involve behaviors most of them engage in every day. The last thing I need to see at an audition is a student acting like him or herself. Therefore, when I conduct an audition, I will select passages from the show, and have students perform these short segments on stage. I plug various students into each role until I have a good sense of how appropriate the students are for the various roles.

Another important consideration in the audition process is politics, or to be specific, the LACK of politics in the casting process. Directors must avoid being sucked into the "quid pro quo" trap. No student should ever think he or she is "owed" a particular role because of years of service or any other factors. My students all know that every show starts with a clean slate. The casting will be based upon appropriateness of the student for the roles, and upon how well a particular student sells him or herself in a particular role. If the character is not believable at the audition, it won't be for the show either. The only time service enters into a decision is when two students are EQUALLY qualified for a particular role. In that case, the student with seniority (number of shows, NOT grade in school) will be awarded the role. Also, I have found that using an audition committee comprised of faculty and staff helps remove any perception of favoritism from the audition process. Directors must remember they are casting a show, not running for office. Sometimes the decisions are not popular, especially the first year in a new district. However, if the director remains consistent to the goal of casting the best possible show, year after year, the students and parents will come to respect that integrity.

## PLANNING

Now comes the most important part of the production process. The director must have all his or her "ducks in a row" prior to the first rehearsal. A detailed rehearsal schedule must be made which shows the cast what will be worked on, who needs to be present, time, location, duration, for every rehearsal, for every day, for three months. The rehearsal schedule alone can take days to complete. The Director must know what actors are in every scene, predict how long it will take to learn each scene, juggle over forty students between singing, dancing, and acting directors, then somehow organize all this so the learning of the show is spread out over approximately 12 weeks (or less), while allowing for snow days, sickness, injury, water-main breaks, or anything else that may cancel or disrupt rehearsals. It is a daunting task which must be completed before the first read through of the play. In addition, the director must have the props list completed, as well as costume plot, set design, and light design. The most important thing directors need to remember is to organize a competent team, then DELEGATE.

The fastest way to a nervous breakdown is to try and do everything oneself. Let us briefly discuss the various positions on this team:

**Director/Producer:** This person is in charge of the entire show, and must oversee all of the other directors, assistants and team leaders. What additional jobs the Director takes on will depend largely on his or her background and abilities. Overseeing this huge operation is such a large task, the Director will often appoint an Assistant Director to handle certain aspects of the show. The specific tasks of the assistant director depend largely on the needs of the Director. In my shows, this person acts as Producer. The Producer is in charge of all logistical aspects of the program. This includes scheduling, tickets, programs, ushers, purchasing materials, advertising, publicity, box office and other money matters, and much more. This frees me up to concentrate more fully on the performance aspects of the show.

**Dramatics Director:** This person is in charge of all the acting. He or she directs the movements of the actors and coaches them in their acting skills. Most often, the Director handles this job. However, once again, it depends on the abilities and needs of a particular production team.

**Music Director:** In a musical, this person teaches all the songs and music. In some settings, this person directs the Pit orchestra as well, which means he or she must assemble and train all the instrumentalists who play the accompaniments and other music for the show. The Music Director should NOT serve as rehearsal accompanist. In my opinion, one cannot direct effectively from behind a piano.

**Rehearsal Accompanist:** A VERY talented pianist who is skilled at following a director and can play many different styles of music. This person must be subordinate to the director, yet able to contribute valuable advice and assistance to the director when needed. Be sure to compensate the rehearsal accompanist at the end of the show, as he or she will be at virtually EVERY rehearsal.

**Choreographer:** Most productions involve dancing in one form or another. The majority of high school students have little or no background in Dance, especially the boys. The production will require the talents of a person who can take untrained high school students and teach them simple dances moves that, while not Broadway quality, will still entertain and enhance the overall production. Many students think they are incapable of dancing, however, the right person can get amazing things out of a group of students who are willing to try their hardest.

**Costumer:** This person will need to be able to organize a team of individuals, usually parents, who create the costumes for the show. The costumer must work closely with the Director to be sure he or she is creating costumes according to the Director's vision. If there is enough money available, costumes can be rented in their entirety for the show from theatrical costume rental companies. However, this is very expensive, costing thousands of dollars per show.

**Props Master:** This person must be someone with a lot of connections. Talented "props hounds" have the ability to borrow, find, create, modify, or adapt anything one may need in the way of props for a show. The director will need to provide a detailed props list. Some shows provide a props list, but not many. Usually, the director will need to read through the play and write down everything that is ever touched during the production, and who touches it, plus any props to dress the set or which add realism to a scene but are not mentioned in the script (such as baskets, crates, bales, etc. for a market scene).

**Set Design and Construction:** Sets can be as simple as a bare stage, or as complicated as a multi-floor mansion or a forest full of trees. Set designs are as varied as the

imaginations of the designers. The only limitations will be the size and technical specs of the stage and wings, the available budget, and the abilities of the designer and construction team. The set designer is often the Director, but in any case, this person will need to have detailed knowledge of the script and story line, as well as the facility, and the Directors plans for stage movement, in order to design a set that meets the needs of the entire production. The set plan must be available before the actors ever hit the stage. The basic outline of the set should be taped on the floor so the actors know how to restrict their movement according to location of doors, windows, stairs, etc. I feel it is important to get the set built as soon as possible, to give the cast something concrete to work with, rather than just moving around taped lines and folding chairs. The construction of the set can be done in a variety of ways, depending on the abilities of the director and the construction team. This is a great opportunity for directors to get the dads involved, as many dads are handy, and even if they are not, they can help by holding, cutting, carrying, etc. Usually, it is best to schedule a couple of weekends to get the dads to come in and have a set construction party. With lots of help, and a clear plan, the set can be built very quickly and efficiently. It is critical to have all the construction materials on hand BEFORE the construction party. This may seem like a no-brainer, but it's easy to forget, if one is not in the habit of doing construction projects. Sometimes, there are other avenues to set construction. In my situation, I am lucky enough to teach a Theater Arts class. I use the various productions as teaching situations for my students. Using my own tools, and tools purchased through the Drama Club, we design and construct each set during the course of our class time for about a month. Any complicated set pieces that are beyond our skills are delegated to dads with the construction skills necessary to build them right (for example, a circular staircase in *The Sound of Music*).

**Art Director:** Unless the director is also an artist, and has lots of artists in the cast (possible, but rare), the skills of a professional artist will be needed to make the set look more realistic. Hopefully, the director has the social skills necessary to nurture a good relationship with the high school art teacher. In my situation, I have been lucky enough to have the willing and enthusiastic support and assistance of our high school art teacher and her students. They are the ones I call after the set is built, to come in and do their magic, and make the set come to life. She and her students take great pride in knowing their work is being seen by hundreds of people, and it's a great learning environment for the art students too.

**Lights:** Someone will need to develop a design for the lighting needed for the show. Much of the emotional impact of a show is dependent upon lighting effects, whether it's simply lighting the town square, or special effects in a dream sequence. Often, the quality of the light design will make or break a show. There is an entire science of light and color, so it is important to find a person with some background or experience in light design.

**Sound:** Someone will also need to be in charge of sound reproduction. Nothing is worse than paying money to see a show, then being unable to hear the actors over the sound of the pit, or because they are talking too soft (a constant problem with student actors). When I first started in this business, I had the delusional conviction that students should never use microphones, but should instead only use proper vocal techniques to project their voices properly. It took one show, and a lot of angry parents, for me to get over THAT idea. Being a purist is fine in some very exclusive settings; however, that does not include high school theater productions. Successful productions will require the use of

body mics and some sort of full stage mics. I use high quality foot mics in combination with overhead mics for recording. These types of microphones are very expensive, but can be rented if the budget doesn't allow for purchase. The sound technician will also be responsible for all sound effects needed for the show. Many good sound effects are available on CDs. Tapes are very hard to use, because of the difficulty of finding the specific sound needed, especially if it is needed quickly.

**Special Effects:** All shows require special effects to one degree or another. Whether it is smoke from a fog machine, gunshots, explosions, or something else, a competent person will be needed to organize and control these effects during the show.

**Make Up:** As I stated earlier, most shows involve adult characters, many of which are middle age or older. However, we are dealing with high school age actors. Sometimes there are roles which require special prosthetics to make a believable character. In any case, ALL actors must wear stage make up. There will need to be a team of people to assist with stage make up, including people with the skills necessary to create old age, facial hair, or other special effects make up as required by the particular production (Fiddler on the Roof is a good example – lots of beards and age make up). There will also need to be people present who know how to style hair according to the time period of the show.

**Stage Manager and Crew:** I usually use students in this job. For each show, I train students to act as stage crew. As they gain experience, they develop more confidence. The most reliable and experienced students are placed in positions of responsibility, like Stage Manager. This person is responsible for everything that happens backstage during the actual performances. He or she oversees the changing of sets and all the movement of people and objects when the curtains are closed. A competent Stage Manager is critical to be the Director's eyes and ears backstage during the performances.

Incidentally, that communication will need to take place using some sort of intercom system. Some auditoriums have intercom systems built in, but not many. They are extremely expensive, and most school districts cannot afford them. We use inexpensive wireless headsets, which are basically short-range walkie-talkies. The problem with them is that there is very often interference and static that can happen at a critical time during a show, thus disrupting a scene change or exacerbating an emergency.

**Other jobs:** There are many other tasks that need a person in charge. During long dress rehearsals, someone needs to be in charge of providing snacks and drinks for the cast. Adult supervision is extremely important. No matter how "good" teenagers are, they are still kids, and they can get out of control at times. The director can only be in one place at a time, so adult supervision in student areas is a must. During shows, people expect to have refreshments available during intermission. A team must be organized to purchase and sell items at the concessions table. This is also a great way to make additional money for the production or booster organization. Forty or more teenagers have the ability to completely trash a room (or several rooms), then disappear like magic, leaving the wreckage for "someone else" to clean up. In the interest of maintaining a good relationship with the custodial staff, it is important to have someone in charge of a clean-up team. Someone will also be needed to plan and organize the cast party at the conclusion of the show. The set will need to be struck, usually right after the last show, in order to clear the stage for the next group using the stage. Dads will need to bring in their tools on the last night, and have set strike plan ready to efficiently and quickly disassemble and store the pieces of the set. Someone must plan out that whole set strike. Following the production, all scripts and musical scores must be collected, marks erased,

and returned to the rental library. Props must be sorted, repaired, stored, or returned to the people who lent them. Costumes must be washed, sorted, and stored. Bills will need to be paid; set materials, make-up, costume and prop expenses, professional musicians for the pit, professionals for services rendered, ticket and program costs, photography expenses, publicity expenses, parent reimbursements. Once it's all done, we can relax, take a deep breath, and get ready to do it all again.

Most Directors will do multiple jobs in any production. For my shows, I serve as Director, plus I handle the set design and construction, light design and set up, sound design, special effects, photography, and character make-up, in addition to my duties as Director. Any production will only be as good as the team that puts it together. It is important to realize that when looking at a theatrical production on stage, one is seeing only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The cast on stage is being supported by a large team of dedicated faculty and parents who spend hours and hours of their own time to help make a successful production.