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AUTHOR Hundhausen, David
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ABSTRACT

The high-school drama teacher's choice of plays, emphasis on spectacle, and overemphasis on competition reflect the commercial influence of Broadway, together with a desire for good public relations with the school community. Teachers often produce plays because they are popular, neglecting good innovative and experimental works in favor of musical comedies, and spending time building elaborate sets instead of helping their students understand the theater as art. To counteract this commercial influence, teachers can select plays that focus on characterization and can adopt a minimal staging approach (e.g., building sets only from a standard collection of platforms, cubes, and rectangles). (DD)

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HOW TO SUCCEED IN PRODUCTION WITHOUT REALLY SPENDING

DAVID HUNDHAUSEN
University Center System
Waukesha County Campus

I can recall a day not so many years ago when I held my first tryout session for my first high school play production, a musical version of Tom Sawyer called "Mississippi Melody." I was fired up and idealistic about the prospect of directing an equally fired up and idealistic bunch of seventh, eighth and ninth graders. A week or so later, I was in the early throes of rehearsal, fast becoming a bit tired of excuses like, "I can't come to rehearsal cause I have to go to my grandma's for supper," or "I have to go to the dentist," or — of course — "Was there a rehearsal? Gee, I forgot."

A week or so after that, somewhat less fired up and idealistic, I was struggling to get together a crew of kids to come on a Saturday morning to work on the setting. Two showed up — and they both forgot to bring hammers. Now I have never been what you call a do-it-yourself kind of person. My father, an accomplished carpenter and general all-around fixer-upper, has never understood or been sympathetic about my all-around ineptitude as a handyman. It was a very dark Saturday, then, when I had to telephone Dad and ask him to come over to school to help me build scenery for my first major production on a high school stage. There was a moment of silence, some unintelligible grumbling, and then an intelligible, " All right, I'll help."

Meanwhile, I was facing a new ordeal: costumes. I conned two of my English colleagues into helping me with this knotty little problem. "There are only thirty-five in the cast," I said cheerfully. They jumped in bravely; so did the mothers of the cast members who persisted in consulting me about the details of sewing Butterick patterns even though I assured them I had never pedaled a sewing machine in my life.

Well, the costumes got made; the set got built (good old Dad!), and I managed to teach my charges where to move, when to move, and how to move. After seven agonizing but wonderful weeks, magic time was at hand. Somewhat frazzled by the whole thing, I managed to stay in one piece through the two performances. After the closing night, there was the inevitable ritual of striking the set, putting everything away, and cleaning up. The janitors watched warily and jealously as we pushed brooms across the stage and pulled nails out of boards. The head custodian sauntered over to me, pulled me toward one side of the stage, and pointed dramatically to some rather large scratches on the floor. They happened to be close to some large blobs of paint — in assorted colors — which the head custodian pointed out to me with another of his dramatic gestures accompanied by a pained expression that seemed to be saying, "How could you do this to me?" I tried to explain — with as much patience and understanding as I could muster up after seven weeks of harried existence — that these minor damages (he flinched at the word "minor") were bound to occur whenever a play was produced. I also apologized several times for these minor damages. The head custodian nodded condescendingly, but I could tell that he had rejected my

explanation. Later I climbed wearily into my Ford Falcon and sped home to the comfort of my bed. I didn't awaken til sometime the next evening — and I was still exhausted.

I imagine that this story is a rather familiar one to those of you who have directed high school productions. It exemplifies the manner in which we have been "spending" to succeed in high school production. I suppose that most of us who have chosen to direct plays have not been naive about the hard work and long hours connected with play production. Most of us expect to don work clothes and take hammer in hand in order to get the setting done. Most of us expect to rummage for costumes or even to help sew them. Most of us expect to assist with the lighting, even to climb up on an A-frame ladder and focus the lights ourselves. We have been conditioned to this kind of routine — mounting a show is a lot of work. In fact, our very conditioning — our having been brought up in this kind of a production tradition — is probably one reason why we continue to perpetuate it.

But I'm wondering whether investing as much time and energy as we do in the technical aspects of production doesn't sometimes prevent us from being teachers of theater. Do we also have sufficient time and energy to train our actors, for example? Or in struggling to get a production mounted, are we sometimes forced into taking shortcuts with our actors, using a "show and tell" directorial approach, for example? And somewhere in the flurry of building sets, sewing costumes, hanging lights, and putting out publicity, perhaps values and ideals like the necessity of commitment, self-discipline, and striving for artistic perfection get lost. Perhaps our students don't really develop an understanding of theater as art.

Why, then, do we spend so much time on the technical aspects of production? I think it is because we have been conditioned to regard high school theater as big business. The commercialism of Broadway's professional theater seems to have a strong influence on the shape of play production in schools which frequently use the Broadway success of a play as an important criterion in deciding whether or not to produce the play. Only the professional resident repertory theaters and the university theaters (and even here there are exceptions) seem to be able to escape the commercial influence of Broadway. Not only are theatres influenced by Broadway in their choice of plays, but audiences are influenced in their selective viewing of plays. People are much more likely to attend a performance of a play they have heard of because of its Broadway reputation than they are a performance of a good play that did not enjoy a long Broadway run. The desire of the public for popular entertainment as opposed to something experimental, innovative, or avant garde, is being perpetuated when high school directors persist in drawing upon Broadway fare for their big productions each year and in mounting these productions on a commercial scale. If we are to educate an audience as well as potential theater artists, we must carefully consider what plays we present. If we are content to give them what they want — the commercial product — we are never going to get them to want anything else. The theater will continue to offer the marketable box office vehicle to the neglect of innovations and experiments, particularly by unknown playwrights. In the high school we have a chance to alter the vicious cycle of commercialism in the theatre, to broaden and educate the tastes of our audience, to develop a new set of expectations in audiences across the country. We cannot afford to let this chance pass by.

Besides the commercialism which permeates high school theater via Broadway, I think there is another factor responsible for forcing high school theater to operate as a commercial enterprise. Along with the music program and to a lesser extent

the art program, high school theater occupies a peculiar position in relationship to the school and the community. I am talking about the fact that the drama program is in part the basis of a public relations program for the high school. It does not exist solely for educational purposes as do most of the other academic disciplines such as English, mathematics, and history. It is often the only means of attracting parents to the school. Parent-teacher associations are not usually established or active in high schools, so there is little opportunity for contact between the parents and the school. Plays and concerts attract parents to the school and thus serve a useful function from the standpoint of public relations.

But does this position — serving as a public relations agency — serve the interests of the drama program? Obviously an audience is needed for a play or a concert. But aren't high school drama directors under at least an indirect kind of pressure to produce a commercially marketable product? Don't they almost have to do something "safe" so they can attract a large audience and not offend anyone's taste so they can please the school administration and the local newspaper?

I think that the musical comedy boom which has hit the high schools in recent years is a good example of what I am talking about. No one can deny that the advantages of doing a musical in high school include the possibility of having a large number of students participate and of attracting large audiences because of the great popularity of musical comedy in this country. Obviously the musical comedy (whatever its virtues as an artistic undertaking) is above all a commercially marketable product that is also a highly effective public relations device.

I think that it is unfortunate that a great many high schools have made the musical comedy the primary focus of their drama programs. Students from these schools get brainwashed on musical comedy to the point where they think it is synonymous with theater to the exclusion of other forms of drama. As a teacher of theater at the University of Wisconsin, Waukesha County Campus, I have been disturbed by a question frequently posed by my students: "Why can't we do a musical? We did a couple of them in high school and they were really a lot of fun." Though I patiently attempt to explain to these students that we ought to try the classics, the avant-garde, and the experimental in the educational theater environment, it is difficult to drum up enthusiasm for something like Paul Shyre's adaptation of John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* as compared to venerable favorites like *Bye Bye Birdie* or *Oklahoma*. I might add that audiences respond in kind: it is as difficult to attract people to a performance of a play like *U.S.A.* as it is to find a cast to perform it. The production of musicals in high school is probably at least partially responsible for perpetuating a narrow-minded view of theater in those students who participate in the shows and in audience members who are given a steady diet of musicals.

Suppose those of us who direct high school plays did not feel any pressure to serve as public relations ambassadors? Would we still select a musical or similar popular entertainment for our playbill or would we be willing rather to try a character drama or an original script? And would we invest the time ordinarily spent in attending to the technical minutia of production on the training of actors? Freed from the pressure of getting results, would we be able to concentrate on the means rather than the end?

The effects of commercialism on high school theater go beyond influencing the choice of plays, placing the emphasis on the mounting of productions, and

creating what may be distorted concepts of theater art. Commercialism also encourages competition. Of course, when theater was born in ancient Greece, there was competition amongst playwrights at the drama festivals. Originally, however, the competition was solely for playwriting. Later, when the drama festivals became more "commercialized" actors also competed for prizes. In highly competitive school districts, it is conceivable that schools try to out-perform their neighbors so that we have a situation approaching inter-scholastic competition in sports — a kind of drama league. Of course, competition is not necessarily a bad thing in the arts, providing the fact of competition doesn't become the reason for the existence of art. Art should be created for its own sake, not for the possibility of winning a first prize. This is what I see as the danger of the competitive element in high school theater, whether it exists informally amongst schools, or formally as it does in the Wisconsin High School Forensic Association State Drama Contest.

Although the WHSFA Contest does not award places, there is nonetheless competition for ratings. The participants are consciously or unconsciously measuring themselves against the productions from other schools. And the judges, consciously or unconsciously, are bound to make comparisons when assigning their ratings. And in their desire to compete, some schools concentrate too heavily, I think, on spectacle. Last December, I judged the finals of the WHSFA Drama Contest in Stevens Point. While I was pleased to see schools attempting plays like Albee's "Zoo Story," Cummings' "Santa Claus" and Anouilh's "Antigone," I was a bit disturbed to find some schools focusing on the sets and costumes to an elaborate scale while the directing and acting were far from adequate. One disgruntled high school director, commenting on a production that relied heavily upon spectacle for its impact (but which was also well-directed, and well-acted, I thought) said, "Where does spectacle end and theater begin? If all it takes to get an A rating is costumes and sound effects, I'll put on a spectacle and forget about everything else." This director was, incidentally, a first-time participant in the contest. Although we might look upon her comment as an expression smacking of sour grapes, I don't think we ought to completely disregard it. In my opinion, the element of spectacle as a factor in the formal or informal competition ought to be eliminated from the WHSFA Contest.

I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that spectacle is an unimportant element of dramatic production. It obviously makes an important contribution to theater art. Indeed, it is essential to the production of some plays. I am not suggesting that it be ignored, but rather that it not be given primary consideration either in the choice of a play or in the production of a play. In the professional theater, the technical requirements do not get in the way of the director and the actors because there are professional designers, builders, and technicians who do the work. But in the high school theater, the director and the actors are frequently also the ones who build the sets, make the costumes, and gather the properties; so the technical aspects of production often become burdensome and interfere with the work the director and actors ought to be doing on the script.

I also want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that there is no artistic value in producing a spectacular show such as a musical. Certainly spectacles offer a great challenge in regard to staging. And certainly the fact that spectacles permit large numbers of students to participate is an advantage. But I don't think that sheer numbers of participants ought to take precedence over the quality of the participation or the nature of the after-experience. Four students who do demanding roles in a three-act character drama might learn more than forty who are members of the singing chorus of a musical.

If we want to de-emphasize the role of spectacle — both in the WHSFA Contest and in the high school theater program generally, how ought we to proceed? One possible approach would be to encourage schools to select plays with modest technical requirements, plays that focus upon characterization rather than spectacle. Some schools are already doing this. I recall a beautiful production of "The Brick and the Rose," which was done by Reedsburg Webb High School at the 1968 contest. There was no setting — just a number of stools which were occupied by the actors when they weren't involved in a scene or when they were performing as an ensemble. Locales were identified by means of area lighting. Costuming was simple — polo shirts, jeans, and jackets for the boys; skirts and blouses for the girls. The really thrilling thing about this production was that the young actors believed in what they were doing; they created the reality of the play without the help of elaborate technical elements.

There was also a fine production of a play called, "I'm Herbert," a two-character drama which was performed by Fall Creek High School. Like "The Brick and The Rose," the technical requirements of this play are modest: two rocking chairs, a portion of a porch railing, and a few flower pots. And the thrilling thing about this production was the acting of the two students who played the old man and the old woman.

But there were schools that chose to present plays with rather complex technical requirements, and some of these schools handled these requirements beautifully. Perhaps rather than telling these schools not to do plays with complex technical requirements, we ought to lay a few ground rules as to the manner in which the technical requirements of these productions are to be handled. Schools are already limited somewhat in the area of lighting. Since all of the participants in the contest must use the same stage, and since the lighting instruments cannot be rehung and refocused for each production, schools must make do with the lighting that's available. They seem to manage rather well in spite of this limitation.

I don't see why they couldn't manage equally as well if certain limitations were placed upon costuming and scenery. Why couldn't they build their settings out of a standard collection of set pieces — platforms, cubes, rectangular boxes, stairways, ramps, tables, and chairs, for example? Why couldn't they utilize rehearsal dress instead of the usual full costuming? When I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa, I was stimulated and excited by their laboratory theater. It was set up in an old armory that had once served as a gymnasium. Arnold Gillette, the technical director of the University Theater, has designed a set of platforms, boxes, stairways and rampways that can be moved around and put together to create an infinite number of settings. There are cubes, for example, which can be used as chairs, end tables, and the like. There are rectangular boxes which serve as beds, couches, or — when turned on end — as walls, or door frames. There are platforms of various sizes and shapes that can be used to create multi-leveled, multi-scene settings. Since there is a scale model of this assemblage of boxes, stairways, and platforms, someone who wants to direct a show in the laboratory theater can utilize the model in planning the setting and the staging. Directing students who use the laboratory theater are told that they must use only the resources that are already in the theater plus minimal props and costumes. The "limitations" of this laboratory theater force directors and the actors to focus upon bringing scripts to life. They are free to concentrate upon directing and acting skills.

I don't see why an approach similar to the laboratory theatre couldn't be

used in the WHSFA State Drama Contest. It would remove the element of spectacle from the competition. It would place the schools on a more equal competitive basis, so that budget — a factor which severely limits the technical end of many schools' productions — would not be a possible limitation for any of the participating schools. And think how it would affect the preparation of a play for the contest. The frenzied activity accompanying the building of sets and costumes would be eliminated and directors and actors alike could concentrate on developing and sharpening their skills. From a practical viewpoint, schools would be saved the bother and expense of hauling settings to and from schools where the various contests are held.

I see no reason, for that matter, why the laboratory theater approach can't be the foundation of the high school drama program. I see the possibility over a period of time of changing the expectations and values of both theater practitioners and audience members. I am amazed and frustrated by those freshmen who come to the University of Wisconsin - Waukesha, and scoff at our facilities — admittedly inferior to the elaborate proscenium theaters with fly galleries found in many high schools. The cafetorium at UWW, with a twenty-one foot deep stage, no fly space, and practically no wing space must look dismal indeed compared to the facilities available at many high schools. But these students ought to be stimulated by the possibilities offered by any large, empty space. The pioneers of the Off-Broadway and more recently, the Off-Off Broadway movements were and are. High school students should be educated to have the idea of a theater rather than a concept limited to a particular type of building or facility. And when they say to me, "Why can't we do a musical instead of this 'heavy' drama? We did musicals in high schools and they were really a ball," they ought to recognize that there is more to theater than musical comedy. And when they complain about long rehearsals and the demands made upon them for perfection, they ought to realize that hard work, self discipline, and commitment are an essential part of theater art.

How, then, can we succeed in production without really spending? By not looking upon high school theater as a commercial venture, by investing our personal capital — our knowledge and skill as teachers of theater art — rather than the capital of time and money we've been investing in technical theater. Recently I read in the monthly *Newsletter* of the University of Wisconsin Arts Council that the University of Wisconsin Green Bay Campus staged a minimal theater production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The director, Professor Jack Frisch, commented that he was much influenced by Polish director Jerry Grotowski's beliefs concerning the place of the actor in dramatic art, the responsibility of the actor to perform the play without the aid of sophisticated technical elements. Professor Frisch said that it takes guts to attempt a minimal staging of a Shakespearean play. It will also take guts for us to adopt a minimal staging approach to high school theater, but we, our students, and the art of the theater in this country, have an opportunity to reap maximum rewards.