

What's in a Name? Quality Theatre Experiences for All Students

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ABSTRACT

Busy high school theatre programs may do a great job of offering opportunities to those students already performing at a high level while unintentionally neglecting students whose skills are currently more suited for the ensemble. This focus on the high achievers is damaging to the culture of a program and breeds resentment among students. It is challenging in a busy high school theatre teacher's already packed schedule to find ways to support and lift those members of the ensemble so they can get the skills practice and confidence to compete in auditions. This article examines two steps taken by one high school program to address this issue and the impacts on the program, the culture and the students.

The High School Theatre Challenge: Good Parts for All

A high school theatre student, a senior approaching graduation, sat in front of my teaching colleague and me, distress twisting her face as she talked with us during our traditional exit interview. Generally, these interviews were a final moment to touch base with students who were on the edge of stepping out into the world as high school graduates. Sometimes there were sad tears as the thought of leaving the soft nest of high school theatre occurred to them. Many times, there was shared laughter at the retelling of favorite moments. This time, there was frustration and accusation.

Our student, on being asked to share any suggestions they might have to improve the program, gave us a laundry list of what was wrong with the department from her point of view. I was a bit taken aback. Had she not been part of award-winning one-act plays? Had she not been cast in everything for which she had auditioned? Had she not been an essential part of the department during her four years with us? A leader in our very large, active theatre department? Yes, to all of that.

What she hadn't done, she pointed out, was ever get cast as a character that had a name. Ouch. She was right.

"I've been a loyal member of this department for four years and I've never had a part that was a named character or had more than a few lines in a show. That's just not right," she said.

This was more than just sour grapes about casting. We've all endured that. You post the cast list on Friday afternoon and run out the door, so you don't have to hear the complaints.

You're just trying to get the best cast possible! And, in a large, active department like ours, there were always multiple students who could all do a great job in several different roles, so casting is an agonizing, difficult process. You choose who you think will get you the best quality show so that the community gets to see what your kids can do!

It's not even that we were casting the same students in leads over and over. We've all seen that kill the culture in departments and we had avoided that assiduously. We were fortunate to have built a large department and have a wide range of students who could carry a lead

or secondary role. This meant we were able to spread the wealth out to many different kids. We taught that having a leading role once didn't guarantee a leading role in the next show. Some of my proudest moments were seeing students that had leading roles in the past really dig into secondary characters and make them shine. We were doing a great job! Awards! Accolades! Community buy-in! A growing program!

Rethinking the Culture

Our upset student, however, caused us to sit back and rethink what was happening in the department in terms of our vision and mission and how we executed that for kids who weren't the leads. We were not a professional theatre or even a community theatre, where the mission was simply to put on the best show possible. We were an educational theatre, and our calling included providing educational opportunities to all students who expressed the interest. We were doing a great job educating and providing opportunities for that student who would probably go on to major in theatre. We weren't, however, providing those same supports and opportunities to the students who were committed but participating for fun. We were taking for granted that students would want to participate without that focus and attention.

Indeed, we had too many students want to participate. We put 168 students on stage during one of the musicals! Don't tell me we aren't including people! We were cramming everyone we could into shows to meet the demand. So, it was difficult to listen to what our student was saying. But we had been put on notice that we weren't educating everyone to the best of their ability and to the level they deserved in an educational setting. In his book, *Educational Theatre Management*, John E. Clifford posits the following:

The paradox, however, is that the human institution of the theatre has important aesthetic values, and when it is part of an educational institution it loses many or most of its aesthetic values and takes on the educational values and functions of the school. Educational theatre, to be true to both terms, must be two things at once: theatre and educational. (p. 11, 1972)

Where had we gone wrong in trying to create something both theatrical and educational? Why had our student never had a character with a

name? Who else was not getting what they wanted and needed to experience?

In *School and Community Theater Management*, Lawrence Stern admonishes the readers in the very first paragraph:

It is easy to overlook the importance of theatre education, because people tend to judge it solely by its productions. Its main purpose, however, is student development. (p. 3, 1979)

If our main purpose is student development (and my colleague and I were adamantly agreed about that), then additional questions surface; why had some of our most talented students never experienced the key skill of being an ensemble member? What was missing in the culture we had created that the educational calling consistently came in second to the artistic one, but only for some students? Did this culture cross over into the technical side? And, most importantly, what could we do about it?

The Solution: Increase the Types of Opportunities

The obvious answer of course, is more opportunities for stage time for all students. That answer however, felt suspiciously like a clarion call for adding at least one more show to the already-packed theatre department season. Doing that would mean spending even more time away from our homes and families. But the need was there, and it was real. If one student felt this lack of opportunity, then others did also, so we sat down and brainstormed to come up with solutions. What follows are some of our ideas and a bit about how they helped us correct the imbalance in our department and put educating all young artists back at the forefront of our high school theatre program. The answer we chose was to increase the types of opportunities we were placing in front of students.

In *Theatre in the Classroom, Grades 6-12; Methods and Strategies for the Beginning Teacher*, author Jim Patterson proposes offering a variety of ways to increase participation and opportunities as part of developing your production philosophy:

In short, teachers must consider the extent of their commitment to developing new student work, providing opportunities for students to do advanced or difficult plays in small cast settings, and how

new students will get stage time to develop skills and experience in the performing arts. (pp. 108-109, 2017)

In considering our season, we realized that one of the ways to increase the types of opportunities for all students while decreasing our possible additional workload was to use a junior musical rather than adding another full-length production. I know, I know, another show?

But junior musicals were a great response to our problem because they have several virtues; among them is the fact that they are shorter so require less rehearsal time. This meant less additional time in the building as we attempted to meet this new situation. In addition, junior musicals come with a director's book that have tons of suggestions about staging and technical aspects. They basically carry some of the mental load of producing a show if you choose to use their suggestions.

Using a junior musical turned out to be one of the best things we could have done for the department as a whole and not just as a solution to this issue. We chose the junior version of a popular musical and announced that everyone in the department could audition. But we also said that anyone who had previously been cast in a named character role in the department would only be eligible for the ensemble in this show. This meant that every named character would be played by an actor that had never had the opportunity to step up and get that stage time. It also meant that some of our already established triple threat actors would get to work on the crucial skill of being an ensemble member, a skill foreign to many of them.

Former student Hannah, now a stage management intern in New York, emphasized the wide variety of opportunities and skills the junior musical allowed her to practice.

I think having those opportunities allowed for me to not only have the chance to get a variety of roles, but it also allowed for leadership opportunities. As a sophomore, being Mrs. Mayor in *Seussical, Junior* allowed for me to grow as an actor by having multiple chances to go through the work of creating a character. It allowed for people to start having leadership skills when sometimes students weren't given that chance in other places. I think because of the leadership opportunities with the younger students, I was able to feel confident in other things like stage

management and production management. (personal communication)

This addition of the junior musical and the decision that lead/named roles were only for those who hadn't had one yet lit a fire among the performers in our department. We had students who had never gotten to polish their skills in a larger role suddenly able to get the attention and time they craved and deserved. It strengthened the equity for all performers across the department. Many of these new leading performers went on to get named and or leading roles in our other season offerings. Being in the junior musical had given them the practice and confidence in their skills that they had been lacking. It worked in two ways, really; students received increased and more personal direct instruction from us during rehearsals and we got to build those performer/director relationships that showed us we can depend on them as performers.

At first, our triple threat performers didn't audition as much for these junior shows, knowing they wouldn't get a leading or secondary role. Gradually though, they began auditioning anyway, just to be on stage. Working with them during and after the production, you could see how much they were learning as ensemble members. Watching them figure out how to focus audience attention during a scene, how best to support other performers, or sharpen their physical reactions to scenes in which they had no lines was stunning. Their awareness of stage pictures increased, they saw the need to develop their focus and attention. You could see them become exponentially better performers during the experience and many expressed their pure enjoyment at performing in a show with less pressure for them.

Former student Jack, who in his time with us was cast as The Baker in *Into the Woods* and Sweeney in *Sweeney Todd*, went on to get a degree in vocal music. He described his experience being in the ensemble for *Seussical, Junior* this way:

I think for me, being ensemble in the junior musicals was a great opportunity to get more perspective on the shows as a whole. Of course, being a named role or lead brings its own rewards, but it can often feel like a much more singular or isolated experience. It's a shift of priorities. You're no longer so focused on making your performance the best it can be, you're making sure the show as a

whole is the best it can be. You get to see (and remember) the show a bit more holistically and honestly, I think. (personal communication)

Not only did this new addition to the department boost all the performers, but it also changed the culture of the department and the role of the department in the school. Students who previously didn't bother to invite friends and family to see them in small roles now had many people coming into the theatre, so ticket sales increased across the season. Friendships blossomed between groups of students, with our junior show leading performers seeing those performers in the ensemble as people who were willing to do all the work of theatre instead of just the leading role work. This one decision boosted the overall skill level of our department and increased the quality of all shows across the board. It also gradually lessened disappointment with casting choices as students realized how much talent there was in the department. They began cheering for each other when the cast lists were posted.

The first two years of this new addition did mean more work for us and for the department. But, as the popularity of the junior musical grew, we were able to bring in guest directors and support our most mature students as they student-directed some of these productions. The junior musicals always sold well and were self-supporting from the start after the first production, so they added to the bottom line of the department in a positive way.

The additional benefit of the junior musical was it proved to be a very positive thing for our technical theatre students. We took the same approach with student designers for these productions as we had for performers. Only those who hadn't previously gotten to design were selected to design for these shows. This meant we had students designing and realizing sets, costumes, props and lighting designs as early as 10th grade. Their technical portfolios increased in complexity and the content deepened. We added younger students as stage managers, board ops, and spotlight ops. Suddenly our technical theatre bench was deeper and better prepared to take on a "mainstage" production as juniors and seniors. There are multiple technical students whose first design was with us as a sophomore who are now working professionally in technical theatre or are in a collegiate technical theatre degree program.

Former student Adam, now in his senior year of a BFA in technical theatre program states:

Having that design experience (set design, Honk, Junior) definitely helped me understand more clearly what a theatre set designer is truly expected to do. Sure, I didn't necessarily fulfill all of the aspects that are expected from a professional set designer. But going through the design process from research images to hand drafting was really eye opening and helpful for me. Not only did it help me get 90 call backs at SETC for undergraduate programs, but it helped me once I started working within a BFA program. (personal communication)

Another decision we made to increase the types of opportunities for performers was to encourage our 11th grade directing students to cast primarily 9th and 10th graders as performers in our annual 10-minute play festival. Where previously all students were encouraged to audition, changing the guidelines ensured that interested younger students got to experience carrying a show very early in their high school career. Making it a 10-minute show meant they got to practice all the skills with less time required from them.

This decision cost us no extra time as the 10-minute play festival was already a part of the season as a class project in one of the advanced theatre classes. Focusing on those younger performers provided a showcase for their talents and a way to practice their skills. It also gave them a short look at the production process in the department, so they learned the department-wide warm up routine, worked with a stage manager, learned how to adjust in the move from rehearsal space to performance space, and what was expected of them in tech rehearsals.

This shift in the focus of the project ensured that everyone who wanted stage time as a freshman or sophomore got it. Some of the performers even acted in two different 10-minute productions, although we drew the line at no more than two for scheduling purposes. As a result, we kept the interest of more freshmen students as they didn't feel like they had to wait to get cast. This in turn, upped the course requests, increasing our numbers in class. Since the auditions were open to the whole school, we also saw an increase in the numbers of students who weren't signed up for a class participating in theatre

through these 10-minute plays.

As with the junior musical, we added younger students to the 10-minute plays as stage managers, designers, board ops and technicians. This increased the early interest in our technical theatre program and started students on the road to being leaders in the department earlier in their school career.

In his 1996 doctoral dissertation which examined how students develop leadership skills through participation in theatre, Kent Seidel found that, "The combination of collaborative artistic work and the day-to-day operations of the program results in the students learning to build community, a key skill for leaders to possess" (p. iii, 1996). We found this this held true for our younger tech students. Given the chance to lead in one area, they began to show up and lead in other areas as well, such as showing up to auditions to help organize and run them. Many of our student department production managers, an indispensable role, were students who had these early opportunities to be leaders in the 10-minute play production process.

It also allowed students to easily explore more than one technical area without a huge commitment. This lower time commitment brought in students from other departments such as visual arts and CTE classes to explore being part of the technical theatre program. Former student Corinne served as our student production manager her senior year. She has since earned a BFA in lighting and is working as part of a large staff for a community-based arts center. She believes that using 10-minute plays to encourage younger students in design and technical areas allowed students a safe space to explore technical theatre:

Being able to stage manage or design for a 10-minute play instead of the big musical did a couple of things. First, it allowed people to try a new part of theatre with low stakes. If they found they didn't like it, they could say they tried and move on. Second, it gave us the opportunity to develop technical skills on a smaller scale. If they fell in love with technical theatre, they were able to learn the basics and build on them rather than being thrown head-first, with little to no experience, on the biggest show of the school year. (personal communication)

Conclusion: Solutions Create a Better Balance

These two solutions to a problem we didn't know we had didn't simply address students getting more stage time or more backstage time. They broadened the types of experiences students could have and lowered the stakes, allowing them to experiment a bit. They absolutely shifted the focus of our after-school productions to more clearly center on arts education for all students, no matter their skill level. The balance of student work in the department changed to a more holistic, inclusive approach. The solutions enabled us to meet students at their level and support them as they practiced skills necessary to take the next big step and assisted us by providing a structure to include all students in a more equitable manner.

The benefits to the department were obvious. We had better prepared performers, technical staff with deeper, more complex knowledge and skills and more positive attitudes about the casting process. It promoted student leadership among more students and contributed to a sense of ownership about the department. It contributed to increased class enrollments and brought in students who weren't in theatre classes to participate in the after-school productions.

It also lifted the skill levels of our already high-achieving performers, giving them the real-world skills needed to compete as a beginning university or professional performer. They saw their process from another point of view, and they gained more realistic insights into their place in the wider world of theatre and performance.

Not all students will go on to major in theatre or become professional performers or theatre designers or technicians. I think we can agree that most won't do any of those things professionally. But, in an educational setting, all students deserve the chance to design or to have a character with a name. Not only do they deserve it, but it also turns out it's good for the whole department as well.

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