

Directing a

Don't let a student ego steal the show

name _____

period _____

★
diva

BY KELLIE B. GORMLY

THEATRE TEACHERS who grew up watching *The Brady Bunch* may chuckle with recognition during the episode where Marcia Brady gets the lead in *Romeo and Juliet* — and turns into a vain, imperious diva who can't get along with her castmates, director, or family. Mother Carol Brady (played by the late Florence Henderson) meets with Marcia's teacher, and the two reluctantly agree to remove her from the show for her own (and everyone else's) good. Then, when the student playing Juliet's mother gets sick, a humbled Marcia talks the adults into letting her play the supporting role of Lady Capulet.

The plot of this episode ("Juliet Is the Sun") mirrors what occasionally happens in real-life school plays, but, unlike in sitcoms, the problem won't get neatly resolved in a simple half-hour episode. This diva-like attitude can take many forms: domineering behavior with castmates, resistance to coaching from the director, a haughty demeanor, unwillingness to work hard or persevere with the show, and an all-about-me sentiment.

"The biggest problem we have with diva behavior comes out of our musical department," says Amber Hugus, an English and theatre teacher at Seneca Valley High School in Butler County, Pennsylvania. "We usually have one or two girls who don't get

what they want, then quit. It drives me crazy. High school theatre is supposed to be about participating and learning and having a great time with your friends."

Hugus, who serves as stage manager and theatre director, recalls one show in which a small group of students, including an upper-classman who had participated in many musicals, quit a play due to dissatisfaction with casting. The more experienced student got an ensemble part and accused the teachers of unfair callbacks. Hugus lets students make their own choices about quitting, noting that sometimes the departure of a disaffected, vainglorious cast member is better for the show.

She also dealt with a similar situation when a student accustomed to central roles was devastated about not getting cast in a lead role. "He moped around, hemmed and hawed, and came to all the directors to talk about it," Hugus says. "I was very proud of him for coming to us and not just up and quitting." Her response? "I just told him the truth: The other boy out-sang him and fit the part. I told him that he shouldn't quit. It would look bad on him and possibly influence our decisions for his senior year."

Colleen Doyno, executive artistic director of the nonprofit Pittsburgh Musical Theater, which runs the Richard E. Rauh Conservatory for kids ages 4 to 18, makes a point of teaching students humility, and she believes that proactive coaching helps prevent a lot of diva behavior. "We teach them from the very beginning that whether you're the lead or second in the ensemble, you're all one team telling the story," she says. "Not that we haven't had people allow this to go to their heads. ... We just put a stop to that right away."

Students who behave this way tend to unravel, Doyno says, because in their mind they separate

themselves from the rest of the cast, which undermines collaboration. Once they cultivate animosity with other cast or crew members, directors struggle to get the story they need. Students difficult to work with also build a negative reputation that can follow them for a long time. "This is a very small world," Doyno says. "Every day I get a call from a director from somewhere in the U.S., asking, 'What were they like to work with?'"

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Normally, Doyno says, you can tell early on when a student ego may cause trouble. "From day one, you can see them separate themselves. It's OK for them to challenge a director a little bit, but when they start challenging students around them, you know you're dealing with a personality that's not going to work well." As soon as you detect a budding diva, it's best to gently and privately explain your concerns to the student, suggests Doyno, emphasizing the play's cohesion, how their behavior negatively affects the team, and that "stories are not just from one perspective — every single person on that stage is vitally important."

Though it presents as arrogance, Doyno believes that the diva complex ultimately stems from insecurity. She sees this behavior equally in girls and boys. It often occurs among those in principal roles, she notes, but it can also occur among students

whose roles sit just underneath the lead. "They are the people emotionally struggling. They feel like they were almost there," she says. These students think, "I almost got this lead, then I got this. I could have done that better."

According to Doyno, this kind of disappointment reflects a scaled-down version of the professional acting world. "We're really trying to teach the true world of theatre, but in a more nurturing environment," Doyno says. "It's just a matter of them understanding that it's not personal, and it's based on their skill levels. They just need to work hard."

Rauh Conservatory Director Jennifer Lybarger says the conservatory's double-casting practice of having two students play the same role and alternating performances helps to ward off diva mentality. If you peek into the wings of any Rauh double-cast performance, you can see students cheering on their co-stars. This way, they also learn there is more than one way to play a role. "They are there to support each other and not view each other as cutthroat competition," she says. "Your success doesn't depend on someone else's failure. At different times and different shows and different points, everyone will have their time to shine. When it's someone else's turn, that doesn't mean you are diminished in any way."

It's important to focus on the broader artistic goal and how to achieve that as a team. "It is definitely possible to have a really successful program where students are not feeding that ego, where they learn it is about telling a story, and they are part of something bigger than themselves," she adds.

Alison Leytem, who teaches English and journalism in southeast Iowa, encountered the theatre version of senioritis when she recently directed the school play. One upperclassman, presuming to have su-

perior command over the material, did not show up to multiple rehearsals. "Not that they didn't work hard when they were there," she says.

Still, Leytem didn't want to tolerate the truant conduct and attitude of exceptionalism. She directly approached the student about this, telling her that she needed to take responsibility and that her behavior wasn't acceptable. "The student said, 'I don't need this!' and walked out," Leytem recalls. "That was shocking to me. I thought, who is this person?"

Leytem called the student to the principal's office to have a follow-up discussion. There the student apologized, then showed up at practice the next day and participated with no further issues. If addressing the problem with the student doesn't lead to improved behavior within a week, consider recasting the role, Leytem suggests. You should have an understudy plan in place, so that students can be replaced if necessary without too much upheaval.

Meanwhile, when dealing with disgruntled students, remind the whole team to bring concerns and complaints about other students to you as the director and to let you handle it, instead of trying to correct their peers, which almost always ruffles feathers. Occasionally it may help to contact a student's parent about the situation, but not all parents will prove as helpful as the fictional Mrs. Brady. In fact, some may reinforce or encourage diva behavior. When dealing with concerned parents, Leytem suggests standing by your decision and calmly, factually explaining the situation.

Rex Sanforth, a veteran teacher who has directed theatre at Edison High School in Milan, Ohio, for 46 years, admits there are no quick fool-proof tricks or easy solutions. He deliberately seeks plays that are more ensemble pieces than star vehicles and doesn't select shows with the in-

tent of casting one particular student. "Star vehicles work in the professional theatre, where folks are drawn to the performer as much or more than they are to the story, but it does not work for high school theatre."

In addition to picking ensemble productions, Sanforth also avoids using the words "star" or "lead." He includes as many names as possible in press releases and offers students of various experience levels for media interviews. His theatre lobby features photos of the entire cast and crew. When Sanforth talks to his cast, he uses character or student names rather than referring to roles as lead, supporting, or minor.

It can take patience and experience to achieve the right atmosphere, but once it gets rolling, Sanforth believes the culture can

self-perpetuate. "The best thing to do is, over time, build a program that values all students and that teaches students to work collaboratively and respectfully, to value the efforts and contributions of others. ... I try to keep focused on what is the story and how do we best tell it with the talent and resources at our disposal."

No plan is fully diva-proof. So, when diva behavior inevitably does arise, Hugus simply explains casting decisions to disaffected students and reminds them of the big picture. "There will be plenty of opportunities for them, and the show isn't about being the lead or getting the most attention but about enjoyment and fulfillment and creating memories with us — their musical family." **T**

3