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FAMILY

TRADITIONS

How rituals build and sustain a strong theatre department

BY MARLA BLASKO

OUR LAST CAST meeting before the final matinee of the spring musical, students sit in a circle, sip coffee, munch on cereal, and dab their eyes as seniors give advice, share stories, and reflect on their past four years in high school theatre. I have sat through many of these “senior circles” over my tenure as a high school theatre teacher and director, and I have heard countless students comment that they felt like part of a family. When I hear the word “family,” I know I have succeeded in my job, for I have found that the success of a theatre production is measured not by how many tickets are sold but through the creation of a close-knit community.

As theatre teachers and directors, we know how important it is to build the ensemble and to collaborate, but what is the most effective way to do this? How do we build that “TEAM” spirit? I’m not referring to sports but to the acronym Together Everyone Achieves More. Every production is a leap of faith that comes with a set of unknown anxieties. From casting

through the final curtain call, it’s a balancing act of constant decision-making — but building your TEAM traditions can minimize your production anxieties. As Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* proclaims, “How do we keep our balance? Tradition!”

“Let’s start at the very beginning”

As Maria points out in *The Sound of Music*, the first tradition of building your ensemble starts with basic skills. My theatre productions begin with a pre-audition workshop. For example, for our spring musical *Mary Poppins*, we hosted a choreography workshop to learn part of “Let’s Go Fly a Kite” that included basic musical theatre steps: jazz square, grapevine, chassé,

Some traditions, like the “energy squeeze,” are practiced by theatre departments nationwide, as shown here by Thespian Troupe 3149 of Pittsburg (Kan.) High School, before their 2018 International Thespian Festival main stage performance of *Urinetown*.

and pivot turn. The magic of ensemble-building and collaboration began: Students who were skilled dancers assisted and demonstrated the skills for the less experienced. By the end of the hourlong workshop, everyone was dancing as a cohesive group, striving as one to give their best performance.

For a straight play, you can use improvisation games to teach basic skills such as characterization and ensemble acting. Before auditions for *Black Comedy*, a play where the actors have to pretend like they are in a blackout, I led the game Minefield, from Michael Rohd's book *Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue*. The basic idea is that everyone stands in a circle and tosses backpacks, note-

books, jackets, etc. into the middle. Then the group works together to verbally navigate one blindfolded volunteer student through the obstacles and across the floor from one side of the circle to the other. As with the dance workshop, the group members ultimately formed a cohesive team working toward a common goal. These pre-audition customs commit the group and prepare them to face the next challenge: auditions.

"Getting to know you"

A huge part of ensemble-building is, as Anna from *The King and I* emphasizes, the getting-to-know-you stage. Don't wait until you cast them; make it a tradition to find out who they are

at auditions. A résumé and headshot can't begin to tell us about the actors standing onstage sweating in their shoes, nervous about their voices cracking. Add something fun and informative to the audition slate.

At my school, after stating their name, grade, and audition piece, students tell one fun fact about themselves or they answer the question, "If you were a fruit, what would you be and why?" ("If I were a fruit, I would be a banana, because I'm very ... appealing.") One student, who had immigrated to the United States, told a memorable story about her first Halloween. Her mother had gone to the grocery store on October 31, and the home doorbell kept ringing. Being

the only one there, she didn't want to answer the door, so she hid under her bed until her mother got home. She comically told the audition audience, "I didn't understand why people kept ringing the doorbell." Make it a tradition to break the ice, share stories, and laugh together.

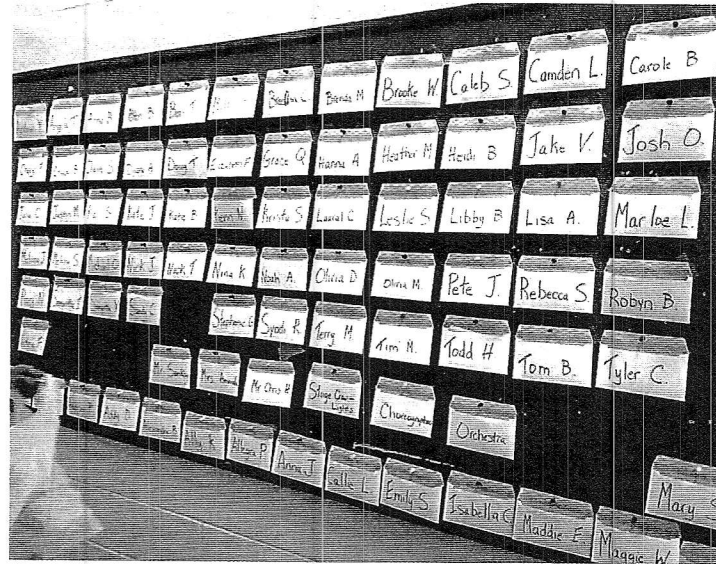
"Putting it together"

Every person involved in your play or musical has a role to play. Just as in *Sunday in the Park with George*, the only way to make a work of art is piece by piece. "Every moment makes a contribution. Every little detail plays a part." To build a strong ensemble, you must make everyone feel important. After the cast list is posted, I

gather the entire cast and crew — everyone involved in the production — in one large room. Student designers, stage managers, and directors, with the cast, introduce themselves and their roles in the show.

As Margaret F. Johnson points out in her book *The Drama Teacher's Survival Guide*, it's essential to include the crew in the first rehearsal to help protect against "star syndrome" and foster a sense of family. This may require correcting those musical performers who refer to themselves as "just in the chorus." Rather, chorus members should identify with specific, named groups. For example, *Mary Poppins* was cast into identifiable ensembles: chimney sweeps, kite flyers, parker strollers, and chatter boxes. During introductions, some proudly smiled and declared, "I'm a sweep," while others shyly said, "I'm a kite flyer," looking around the circle for another friendly kite flyer. This exercise helps the cast connect.

If piece by piece is the "only way to make a work of art," then the second piece of the puzzle after introductions is the read-through. In a straight play, everyone with a speak-



Cast and crew members can leave and receive encouraging, personalized notes in this backstage message board.

ing part reads their lines. In a musical read-through, sometimes the leads read their lines and the chorus listens to the songs. However, I take this one step further. I turn off the music and direct the chorus to read the lyrics together.

A community theatre I worked with never held an entire cast read-through. During tech week, I was shocked to hear a fellow chorus member remark, "So that is how this number fits into the story." You should not wait until tech week to put the pieces together. These read-through routines bring leads, designers, crew, and chorus together to help ensure that everyone involved knows their contribution to the work is critical to the production's success.

"Every little detail plays a part," so make it a tradition to encourage all of your cast members to contribute, not only onstage but also behind the scenes. When we produced *In the Heights*, "Set-building Saturday" ran simultaneously with costume fitting. After cast members streamed into school to get costume approval, they stayed to help with the build. Some stayed for half an hour and held

boards, while experienced technicians screwed the bracing together for the flats. Other groups were tasked with dressing the set, lining Usnavi's store shelves with candy, coffee cups, and magazines. Yet another group dressed Daniela's salon with wigs and hair products.

One group of friends wanted to paint, and the set happened to require lots of painted faux bricks. They didn't know how to paint faux bricks, so they found an instructional video online and stayed for the rest of the afternoon — and even returned the next weekend to finish the job. They were so proud of themselves and afterward asked me when they could paint bricks again. The opportunity came up when we needed chimneys painted for *Mary Poppins*.

No matter whether the show is a musical or straight play, working on the sets is a win-win situation. Cast members bond with the technical and backstage crew — and they don't take the crew for granted. They create the space their characters live in. Even a set detail, like a painted brick wall, can build camaraderie among the cast and crew.

There'll be actual real people"

Anna's eagerness in *Frozen* as plans are made to open the castle gates always reminds me of the excitement and nervousness in the countdown to a production's opening night. "There'll be music, there'll be light!" For weeks, the cast and crew have been separated in small groups — blocking scenes, singing duets, choreographing dance numbers, and putting in technical cues. The anticipation of opening the doors to an outside audience can lead to high anxiety. Often, cast members think, "I know my part, but what about everyone else?"

If you are producing a musical, you can soothe those worries and build confidence by calling the entire cast for a sitzprobe — a sing-through of all the songs in the show. If you are producing a straight play, bring the cast together to run lines. To give

them a different feel for the lines and for each other, try having them run lines with their eyes closed, so they have to listen for their peers, or having them experiment with different tempos. Truly hearing how all the lines and music come together is important in uniting the cast and fostering a familial atmosphere.

A family breaks bread together, so once you get to tech week, plan a dinner. This can be anything from takeout pizza to a catered dinner or even a collaborative potluck. We usually vote on the type of dinner. Last fall's *The Miracle Worker* cast and crew decided to order from the local fast-food chicken restaurant. This tradition gave an authentic "family gathering" feeling to the dinner scene during the production.

"We're all in this together"

The characters in *High School Musical* realize that, in a production,

"we're all in this together" — from the back row chorus member to the leading lady front and center, from the running crew in the wings to the light operator in the back. This lesson is particularly important during tech week, which brings together the onstage and backstage aspects of a show.

One challenge of tech week is all the "hurry up and wait" time when cast and crew members are not engaged onstage or backstage. To fill their time, create a message board. Label individual envelopes with the names of every cast and crew member, then tape them in a place where everyone has access. Leave a stack of index cards and some colored pens for students to write positive messages and words of encouragement. The envelopes stay up through the last performance, when they are taken home. The cast and crew look forward to this tradition — the one

time I skipped this, I got complaints — and it helps everyone connect with other production members. I post these message board rules next to the rows of envelopes.

Please write a short, positive message to anyone in the cast and crew. Example: I love being your dance partner in Spanish Panic! — Jane Smith

Focus messages on building up your fellow cast and crew members (compliments, positive observations, or even poetry).

Sign all messages.

Avoid sarcasm that could be misinterpreted.

See if you can write a message to everyone in the entire cast and crew — not just your favorite people.

“Another op’nin’, another show”

The characters in *Kiss Me, Kate* say it’s just “another op’nin of another show,” and as tech week comes to a close, you might think your job is complete. The cast knows their roles, and the crew operates like a well-oiled machine. You are ready for opening night. However, there remain a few performance traditions and rituals that reinforce connections among the ensemble. On the first day, just before the curtain opens, I gather the cast and crew in a circle for a warm-up regimen. We stretch together. We do a vocal warm-up — even if the show is not a musical, students need to enunciate those consonants, so use your favorite tongue twister.

When everyone has physically and vocally warmed up, we all hold hands, close our eyes, and focus on our breathing. On the exhale, they breathe out their day and think of things to let go: the classes they took that day, the bus ride home, etc. On the inhale, they breathe in the show. Give them sensory examples like, “Breathe in your first moment onstage — what does it look like, sound like, feel like, smell like?” The last ritual is an energy squeeze or pulse sent around the circle. A gentle squeeze passes around hand to hand until it comes full circle. Break with a

prayer or pep talk. The energy generated by the circle will carry everyone into places.

The curtain goes up, and it’s time to enjoy everyone’s hard work. Ensemble-building traditions culminate into a cohesive performance of confident actors and crew who support each other and light up the stage.

“I’m so glad we had this time together”

One of Carol Burnett’s production traditions was to sing at the end of her weekly television show, “Seems we just get started and before you know it, comes the time we have to say, ‘So long.’” We have a final tradition too: We host a breakfast before the last matinee.

At that breakfast circle filled with sleepy teenagers sipping orange juice and coffee, I remind them all that this is the last time this particular group will perform this show together. I then ask the seniors to share what their time in the theatre department has meant to them. Seniors making their stage debut often lament they had not auditioned sooner. Veteran actors encourage younger cast members to stay with the program.

During a production of *Once on This Island*, a senior who played Asaka implored the underclassmen to never give up. “I started out as a Pick-a-Little Lady [in *The Music Man*], and now I’m a god!” Repeatedly, seniors have said something like, “I’m so glad I did this show, because we’re a family.” The sharing ends as the underclassmen honor each senior with a rose.

Traditions build strong ensembles, and strong ensembles build better productions. Find your unique rituals that help build a cohesive ensemble. Begin with skills, remember the details, and make everyone feel valued. Eat, share stories, build sets, warm up, and reflect together. Actors, crew, designers, and directors are like the fingers on your hand, and when they come together, they can produce a show with a powerful punch. Go, TEAM!