

8-1998

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Recommended Citation

Boatright, Delana, "Directing a One-Act Play" (1998). *Honors Theses*. Paper 66.

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Senior Honors Thesis

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Summer 1998

I directed a one-act play for my senior honors thesis. The play, "Tira Tells Everything There is to Know", was by a British playwright, Michael Weller. The play is about a young woman, Tira, and her five lovers: Edward, a boring and uptight man who is cheating on his wife, Poof, a raving homosexual, Lucio, the stereotypical Italian lover boy, Brute, a mysoginistic abuser, and Tib, a shy and brooding boy she meets on the bus. All the male characters are played by one actor. The play was performed outdoors in Turley Park in Carbondale, Illinois.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the entire experience of directing the play, both for my own learning experience, and to work as a guide to any other students that may wish to do a similar project for their own thesis. The points I will cover will include: preparation, practicing, and performance. I will briefly describe what I did to accomplish each of these tasks, then reflect on what things worked and what things I would improve in the future.

The first thing I had to do in order to direct a play for my senior honors thesis was to find a suitable sponsor who would approve the idea and agree to grade the project. I chose a member of the theatre department that I had worked with before.

I think this is important, because I knew the level of involvement I would want from my sponsor would be low, so I chose someone who would allow me to do what I wanted and still be supportive of my endeavors. Most professors have never heard of the senior honors thesis, so the whole concept of what they are responsible for is in your hands to explain. My sponsor

was very thankful for the opportunity to be involved.

I will mention hear that I was working with a small group of people who were trying to start a new theatre group in Carbondale. It was easier to work with a group because that helped defer the responsibilities somewhat to many instead of just me, but it was difficult working with an unestablished group. Had I chosen to perform the play at the Greylight theatre in Murphysboro or in McLeod at SIU, I would have had full support from them technically speaking and I would have had access to their publicity department. But as it was, I had a few people who gave me monetary support for the royalties and other expenses. Their biggest contribution was that they wanted to do the play in a park.

If I had one piece of advice to give, it would be do not have the play outside. It was difficult for rehearsal scheduling because other activities went on there. The weather impeded rehearsals, as did the fact that it gets dark at nine at night. The insects were also a factor. Outdoors you have to project better, as an actor, to the point of almost screaming. It rained the day of the show and we had to perform in the pavilion which had horrible echoes. If you do decide to do a play outside, plan for bad weather. You also have to pay a fee to use the park and you must plan around days that the park is not being used.

The theatre group also wanted a voice in the play selection. I wanted a short play, that is why I chose a one act, and I also wanted a small cast. They wanted a family oriented play.

I was looking for a script that was more adult oriented. We finally compromised and began the search for a small cast, one act for an adult audience. Limiting factors such as these are necessary in play selection. There is a web site called "Dramex" on the world wide web that has cheap royalty plays and the scripts available for reading. That was the basic way we searched for scripts. We found a play we liked and my professor approved it. I ordered the rights to produce the play about four weeks before my show date. It would have been better to do this ahead of time because I did not secure the royalties until a week before the show. Now I had to find actors.

The man had to be non-descript and the girl young but not overly pretty. I chose my actors from people I knew who fit the parts. Because there were only two actors for the play, this was the best way to go. I could have had auditions, but you do not usually get a large turn out for auditions if you are unknown in the community. For a larger play I would have had auditions.

About two weeks before the show, I personally did all the advertising. I sent letters to all the local news stations and had the play information put on the community bulletin boards on television. I also sent the information to the local newspapers. Because we did not charge admission for the play, our royalties were cheaper and we got free advertising as a community event. We also posted posters all over Carbondale. This is a cheap form of advertising. Two days before the performance, we wrote with sidewalk chalk all over the SIU campus

about the play, time, place, and cost. I think I spent too much time on advertising because we were not charging an entrance fee and, considering the audience that showed up, I do not believe it was successful.

Now for the actual rehearsal. I planned for a four week rehearsal schedule. The night before rehearsals began, I wrote out a rehearsal schedule for the actors. This included the dates and times of rehearsals and the show, what scenes we would be doing at each rehearsal, and what days they had to be off book for each scene. This was a good idea because we all knew what was expected of us; the actors knew what to prepare and I knew what scenes to have blocked for each day.

I began rehearsing with the intention of the actors memorizing a scene and blocking that scene every few days. After a week, I realized that was not the best course of action. For a one act, it is better to block the whole thing at once and work the whole show each rehearsal. It provides the actors with a feel for the movement of the show and allows them to combine that blocking with the dialogue better.

Actors never have their lines memorized when they are supposed to. But they also hold those scripts in their hands like security blankets. You, as a director, have to force them to let go at some point. This will make them memorize their lines. Prompting was what I spent the last two weeks of rehearsal doing. I should have had my actors doing warm up exercises at every rehearsal. They were opposed to doing them and I could never get them motivated to try. But I realize

that it would have helped get rid of the nerves that led them to bobble the first scene in performance.

Before the play, I addressed the audience about the theatre group that was putting on the play, the characters in the play and future of the theatre group. This served the same purpose as a program. But, because we were outside, we were without the standard dimming house lights that signal the beginning of the play. My speech was necessary to settle the audience and begin the play. If you make a speech like this, prepare it before hand and practice it, because I was the first impression for the audience, not the actors.

During the performance I was in our make-shift back stage area where the costume changes occurred. I had a script to help cue actors to make entrances. This is normally the stage manager's job, but I had only myself and the actors to work with. This was a bad idea because I did not get to see the performance. I did not get to hear the audience response. Because I had a script, I knew exactly where the actors messed up on lines. Next time, I would have another person help with back stage jobs and I would watch the play.

The play was received well by the audience. I enjoyed being able to direct the play and I am thankful that the senior honors thesis exists. Do not do a play if you do not have the time commitment. I worked four to five hours a night on the play for five weeks. But when I was done, I saw my vision acted out in stage. It was worth it.