

Curtain Call



If your last school play ended with the Three Wise Men burning down the stable, Sue Cowley's advice on preparing for the big performance will help to ensure that, next time, the show will go on...

There's something fantastically rewarding about staging a school show with your pupils. Putting on a play or musical is a brilliant way to boost the profile of drama and music. Your pupils get to build their confidence in front of an audience, and they learn that taking part in live performances is great fun. Of course, parents, carers and family love the chance to see their children 'in the spotlight'. And the show is a great community event which boosts the public profile of your school.

But getting a school show right can be tricky. You don't want to cause lots of additional stress and work for staff and pupils; you can't afford to spend vast amounts of lesson time on rehearsals. You'll need to make the right choice of show, and ensure that all the children get the opportunity to participate. You'll also want to make sure that everyone enjoys the event.

Most primaries rightly see the Christmas play as an essential part of the school calendar, but there's no need to limit yourself to one show a year. It works well to have a second, summer time show, perhaps a musical revue or a talent competition. And don't forget, not all drama performances have to be large scale, whole school events. As a class teacher you can also prepare a short presentation with your children, and invite parents to come and see an in-class performance. This is a great way to get younger children used to performing and speaking in front of an audience.

Choose your show wisely

Making the right choice of show is essential, but these days there are lots of options. Are you going to go for a

'traditional' play, or something more up to date? Can you find a show that reflects our multi-cultural society, or that offers strong, positive role models for the children? To help you make a good choice, ask yourself the following questions:

- Will this show appeal to our audience of parents and carers?
- Will the teachers and children enjoy putting on this show?
- Do we want to challenge preconceptions, or go for a 'safe' option?
- What kind of resources (costumes, instruments, props) will we need to stage this show?
- What sort of technical demands are there (live music, singing, perhaps even lights) and can we organise these?
- Are there lots of different parts, so that everyone has an opportunity to participate?
- What kind of budget do we have available to spend on staging the show?

Pick the right cast

Once you've chosen your show, you're ready to get started with casting it. It is tempting to choose children to get the right 'look' for the play, but remember that this is an educational event, not a Hollywood blockbuster. Fight the instinct to cast along traditional lines – so many Mary and Angel parts go to pretty blonde haired girls. Remember that, as a school, you should be challenging stereotypes rather than reinforcing them.

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How to put on a stress free show

Here are some tips for getting the casting right:

- Consider giving key roles to some of your less academically able pupils, or to those who rarely get a chance to shine. One of the best things about a school play is the chance to boost the confidence of a whole range of children.
- For speaking parts, consider asking pupils to give a short reading before casting them, to check that they don't freeze in front of an audience.
- Aim for an inclusive and culturally mixed cast, which reflects the make up of your school, and of society.
- Choose some reliable children to understudy any key parts, in case of absence or sickness. If your show is performed more than once, let the understudies have their moment in the spotlight.
- Sometimes, I've found it works very well to give a key role to a child who has behavioural issues in lessons. Taking a leap of faith and giving your trust to these pupils can result in a huge boost to their self esteem.

Don't waste rehearsal time

Rehearsals tend to expand to fit the amount of time you devote to them. Having said that, it's wise to leave just a little bit more time than you think you'll need, but not so much that energy lags and the children run out of steam. For the typical primary school show, four to six weeks is about right. If you divide up the parts along class lines, individual teachers can spend some lesson time rehearsing with their groups. Organise a couple of whole school rehearsals in the week coming up to your performance. One of these should be a full dress rehearsal, performed as though it is the 'real thing'. To make the most of rehearsal time:

- Write yourself a schedule, so that you know which bits of the play will be rehearsed at which times.
- Aim not to have large numbers of pupils sitting around with nothing to do, while you rehearse a few key roles. If possible, divide rehearsals into those for a few key actors, and those for the whole cast.
- When pupils do have to sit and watch for a bit, encourage them to give you some constructive feedback on what their peers are doing.
- Give out lines for pupils to take home (e.g. via book bags), and ask parents to help their children practise.
- Insist on a disciplined and focus approach to rehearsal times, with pupils listening and concentrating well.

1 SPREAD THE LOAD

Ask for volunteers to help you out, and perhaps delegate bigger jobs, such as organising costumes, to a willing parent volunteer

2 BE DISCIPLINED

Take a professional approach. If you insist on a mature, adult attitude from your pupils, you'll find that you encounter far fewer issues with misbehaviour.

3 DON'T BE A PERFECTIONIST

It's not the end of the world if there are a few slip ups. In fact these can add to the fun (and sometimes humour) of the show.

4 TIDY UP

Factor in clearing up after the event, otherwise you'll end up sorting the mess yourself. Line up some volunteers to help you before the show takes place

5 ENJOY YOURSELF

And make sure your children enjoy the experience as well. That way, both you and they will be keen to do it over again.



- Consider doing a quick 'warm up' (both vocal and physical) before you plunge into your rehearsals. This helps pupils focus and shows them that drama is a skilled activity. Just as a footballer warms up before a game, so they should warm up before acting.
- Don't forget that rehearsals should be fun as well as hard work!

The perfect performance

If you're well organised, and everyone knows what their role is, your performances should hopefully run smoothly. If you're doing your show on a stage, it's a good idea to keep the 'wings' as clear as possible (i.e. the areas directly side stage). Not only can it get chaotic and noisy if there are too many people backstage, it is always tempting for children to peek out and wave at their parents. Keep your cast in a room close by, and use runners to call up the performers as you need them.

Make sure that you organise cards and presents to thank those people who have made a major contribution to your show. If you've been running things yourself, hopefully someone will remember to do this for you as well!

SUE COWLEY IS AN EDUCATIONAL AUTHOR, TRAINER AND PRESENTER. HER LATEST BOOK IS GETTING THE BUGGERS INTO DRAMA (CONTINUUM). FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT www.suecowley.co.uk

