

CURTAIN UP!

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**How to Stage
Great Youth Productions**

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NICK HERN BOOKS

London

www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

CONTENTS

1 DIRECTION	8
<i>Practical and inspiring advice on the role of the director</i> by STEVEN STEAD	
2 VOCAL DIRECTION	30
<i>Taking voice to a new level</i> by SHELLEY McLEAN	
3 CHOREOGRAPHY	44
<i>Step-by-step advice on bringing choreography to life</i> by JANINE BENNEWITH-VAN WYK	
4 PRODUCTION DESIGN	54
<i>Innovative design that won't break the budget</i> by GREG KING	
5 PUPPETS & PROPS	68
<i>Practical magic in fun, easy-to-read recipes</i> by PETER COURT	
6 SCRIPTWRITING	90
<i>Ideas and practical hints on writing a musical revue</i> by CHARON WILLIAMS-ROS	
7 LIGHTING DESIGN	108
<i>A comprehensive guide to stage lighting</i> by TINA LE ROUX	
8 PUBLICITY	122
<i>Expert advice on how to get the audience off the couch and into the theatre</i> by ILLA THOMPSON	
9 PLANNING	134
<i>Extra tips and worksheets to assist with planning a production</i>	

INTRODUCTION

Curtain Up! serves as a highly accessible, introductory guide to theatre-making for any school, college, amateur or semi-professional theatre company. Each member of our team has experienced the frustration of not having enough time to assist more than a handful of the drama teachers or youth theatre groups who have asked for help with their productions. This is our solution: a comprehensive guide which contains the relevant information we believe will take any production to the next level.

Like theatre, this book is a collaborative effort where each member of a professional production team reveals the essence of their specific craft. As it is written by a team, it should be read by a team, either in its entirety or by those chapters relevant to their job descriptions.

You can find a useful resources pack to download, print and share at www.nickhernbooks.co.uk/curtain-up

We hope you find *Curtain Up!* useful, and wish you all the very best with your productions!

Charon Williams-Ros

Chapter One

DIRECTION

Steven Stead

Steven Stead is a multi-award-winning actor and director who has directed opera, drama, pantomime, comedy and musical theatre. He is the executive director of Kickstart Productions.



Directing professional adult actors, amateur actors, or casts of young actors is fundamentally the same job: You have to be one-third team leader, one-third psychiatrist, and one-third nursery-school teacher! And the basic tenet of being a director is the same for whoever you are directing:

*You are there to make sure that the story
the actors are there to tell is being well told.*

Every piece of information that an audience receives in the process of watching a story told by actors – whether that information is visual, aural, or emotionally subliminal – is important. The actors cannot ever fully appreciate the impact that their movements, their positions, the underscoring music, the scenery, the costumes or the lighting might be having on an audience, because they are *in* the picture. But the director sits outside the picture, as an audience member might, and acts as an editor and facilitator, and guinea pig, constantly checking the semiotics being transmitted from the stage – *which is just a posh way of saying checking the flow of communication from the stage to the audience.*

How a director goes about this very specific and sometimes very lonely job is very subjective, and varies widely from director to director. But every director has a *process*, no matter how much it may differ from their colleagues. And that process will include certain common fundamentals covering preparation, casting, scheduling and staging. Though there might be vastly divergent opinions on the more esoteric aspects of theatre-making, like textual analysis, voice work, workshoping and movement exploration, these four practical elements should be part of any director's process, whether they are doing *Red Riding Hood* at a kindergarten or *King Lear* at the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Before we take a look at the practical aspects of putting a production together, it is worth saying that when working with young people especially, one should have a much stronger sense of structure and intention than one might need with experienced adults. There is no doubt that children have enormous amounts of creative energy and often vivid imaginations, but in order for these to truly be unleashed and harnessed, they need structure and order, and a clear sense of common purpose.

PREPARATION

This part of the director's journey is hugely personal and very private. It would begin with choosing the material. Or, very often, being told by your headteacher to '*Do something for the Year 5's next term*', ...and then having the headache of choosing the material.

When you are looking for a play or a musical, or a story that you are hoping to workshop a production around, be realistic about the time you have, and the talent at your disposal. If you only have a short rehearsal period (and for young people anything less than four weeks is short), you are better off doing a short one-act play, perhaps with a few simple songs and a small cast. Don't choose a book musical like Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* because those big shows need much more rehearsal time because of the music and choreography that has to be learned.

In my experience, every minute of stage time in a musical number requires an hour and a half of dedicated rehearsal time just to get blocked or sketched out, let alone polished.

Similarly, if you know that you have a couple of really good actors, who are not the strongest singers, don't choose a musical like *West Side Story* just because you love it! There is no shame in choosing something modest in scale and doing it well.

When you are looking for a show and your local library only has *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* and a couple of murder mysteries from the 1940s, don't despair. The internet is a wonderful tool, and you can find almost anything you could wish for. Search online for 'Plays with 15 Characters' and check out the great websites that come up which are sure to inspire you. Sites like applays.com, Concord Theatricals and Nick Hern Books will be full of inspiring scripts at reasonable prices.

Whether you decide to write your own piece or use one already written, analyse it carefully:

- *How many scenes are there?*
- *What scenic/visual elements do those scenes require?*

Chapter Two

VOCAL DIRECTION

Shelley McLean

Shelley McLean is an award-winning singer and vocal director who is much in demand as a voice coach. She divides her time between teaching, performing and musical direction.

The voice is the actor/singer's instrument. A vital tool that can enhance or transform a character. It is also flexible and, most exciting of all, trainable!

Basic vocal exercises for range and flexibility work equally well for both actors and singers, bringing life to the words they speak and the lyrics they sing.

This chapter deals primarily with the direction of vocals in a musical, but the basic principles apply for all performance involving the voice.

PREPARATION

Effective preparation will give you confidence, and will make it possible for you to begin the rehearsals with both a vision and a plan of how to get there. So, get cracking!

Before you have even met, both you and the performers are already working towards a common goal: a successful audition. With that in mind, make sure the information you provide beforehand leaves them in no doubt as to what you are looking for.

AUDITION PREP FOR THE SINGER

When sending out information regarding the singing audition, be clear about what you want to hear. It's a good idea to give examples of musical styles/genres that will assist hopeful performers with their preparation.

Should there be an audition pianist available, perhaps include their e-mail address in your audition notice – but only if the pianist is happy with this. This will make it possible for the pianist to see the music before the audition.

It is the performer's responsibility to ensure that the written key is suitable for them, and they need to confirm this.

If you are allowing them to audition using backing tracks, make sure they know to bring in two copies of the track in whichever format they have chosen in case of malfunction. Also, let them know which technologies you can support – e.g. CD, memory stick, iPod.

AUDITION PREP FOR YOU

It is vital that you have a very clear idea of what you are looking for in terms of vocal range and performance before you even begin the audition process:

- *Make sure you are extremely familiar with the show material and what the various roles require.*
- *Be very clear about what notes need to be hit and in which song.*
- *Make sure there is a piano/keyboard for the accompanist if necessary, and/or a CD player/iPod station/laptop with speakers for backing tracks.*
- *It is essential to have a clear idea of what the director's casting priorities are. You may audition someone who fits the singing role to perfection, but isn't quite what the director is looking for, in terms of acting and dancing skills.*

It is important to remember that the correct vocal fit is vital not just for the character's solo parts but for the group numbers as well. The soloist's ability to harmonise and their contribution to the overall vocal blend affects the musical quality of the entire show.

THE AUDITION

Confidence is key: Set the tone for the audition room. Very few people perform well in a tense atmosphere. The more relaxed the singers are, the better they will perform.

ICE-BREAKERS

You have the power to make the audition fun and exciting, but also as relaxed as possible. Here are some ways to set a relaxed tone for the entire audition, so you are more likely to see what the performers can do:

- *Welcome everyone into the audition space.*
- *In a friendly manner, explain the day's proceedings.*

Chapter Five

PUPPETS & PROPS

Peter Court

Peter Court is the founder and one of the creative geniuses behind the innovative production company Creative Madness. He is an award-winning actor, puppeteer, production designer and director.

CONSTRUCTING PUPPETS AND PROPS

There are as many ways of making a puppet. No one way is right or wrong. It depends entirely on:

- *What your puppet needs to do.*
- *What you want the finished puppet to look like.*

Before you dive in with various materials, paints and glues, you need to stop, think about it, and ask yourself a few questions. This will help you in the design process, and in the long run save you money and huge amounts of wasted time!

Think about these questions:

- *What is the style of the production? Naturalistic, stylised, abstract, fantasy...*
- *What does the puppet need to do on stage? Gaze at the moon, fly, hold things, spit fire...*
- *What is the character? Human, humanoid, animal, spirit, monster...*
- *What is the budget? None, very little, some, not bad, a lot...*
- *What skills do you have? Paint, sew, glue, solder, cut wood...*

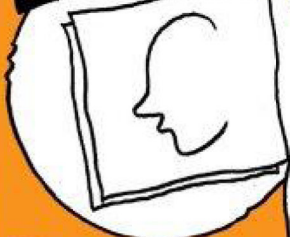
With these questions answered, look up images on the internet of the type of character you want. Don't copy someone else's work. It is illegal and unethical, but there may be a costume detail here or an expression there that you can borrow as inspiration. Once you have your research you can then start sketching.

Yes, you can draw... everyone can draw... no one is asking you to be Picasso or sell your sketch for millions, but it will help you keep the idea and basic look of the puppet in mind as you make it!

ROD and GLOVE PUPPET

1

Draw...



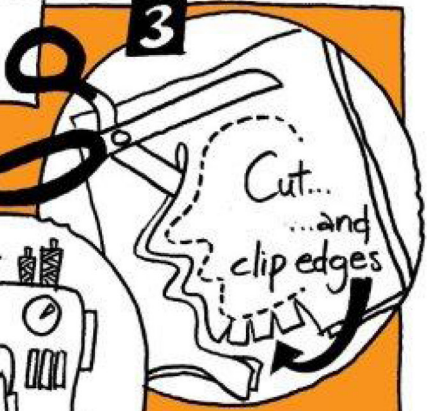
2

Sew...



3

Cut...
...and
clip edges



4

Turn inside out...

...and stuff



5

Insert wooden spoon

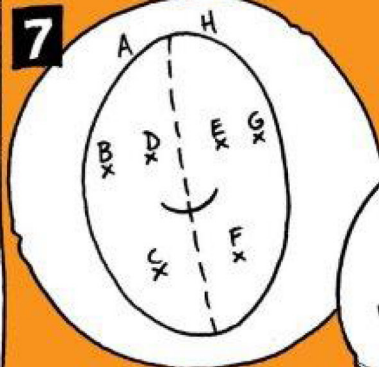


6

Needle Sculpting



7



8

Paint...

1st with P.V.A.
2nd with
Acrylic and
craft paint



RANDOM IDEA GENERATOR

This random idea generator is a fun way to break out of old mindsets. Download the resources pack from www.nickhernbooks.co.uk/curtain-up and then print out the following tables, cut out each of the titles and place into three separate bags for Venue, Genre and Style.

Each member of your production team can choose one paper slip from each bag. You might laugh at the idea of doing a Caribbean Dance Drama on the back of a truck, but then... why not? This is also a great challenge for impromptu drama sessions and improvisation workshops. Have fun!

VENUE	
GYMNASIUM	PLAYGROUND
FOOTBALL FIELD	CHAPEL/CHURCH
SWIMMING POOL	LECTURE THEATRE
BENEATH A TREE	QUADRANGLE
LIBRARY	WAREHOUSE
STREET	TRUCK
PROMENADE	MIDDLE OF HALL
MARQUEE	PROMENADE
CLASSROOM	PUB

GENRE	STYLE
BOOK MUSICAL	OLD B&W MOVIES
MUSICAL REVUE	MELODRAMA
PLAY	KABUKI
FARCE	FANTASY
SHAKESPEARE	FUTURISTIC
VARIETY SHOW	ELIZABETHAN
CHILDREN'S PLAY	VICTORIAN
MIME	AFRICAN
DANCE DRAMA	CARIBBEAN
MURDER MYSTERY	EASTERN
PUPPET SHOW	BOLLYWOOD
MULTIMEDIA SHOW	GOTHIC
ROCK CONCERT	CARTOON
OPEN MIC	MEDIEVAL
PARODY	1920s
PANTOMIME	1930s
ROMANCE	WW1
POETRY PROGRAMME	USA 1950s
TWO x ONE-ACT PLAYS	UK 1960s
OPERETTA	1970s
CHORAL VERSE	1980s

BUDGET-SAVING IDEAS

Family: Find out if any of the cast's family members have talents you can utilise – e.g. costume design and making, programme design, set design and construction, prop-making, sound and lighting.

Retirement homes: You'd be surprised how many elderly people would jump at the chance of being involved in a theatre project. Make up a list of requirements and tap into their years of experience and knowledge.

Choreographer: If you do not have a choreographer, consider asking the local dance-school teachers if they will each choreograph one number (or two, depending on how many dance studios there are) as their contribution to the school/charity/community. In return, you could advertise their dance schools in the programme.

Vocal direction: If any of your cast members have private singing teachers, give them an extra copy of their sheet music and ask them to work on their songs in their lessons.

Publicity: If you are a school or charitable organisation or donating the profits from your ticket sales, you could get free publicity. Community members raising money for charity is a good story. Start social-media pages for your production and get the cast to invite all their friends to join.

Sponsors: Ask local businesses to sponsor some of your expenses. It can be good publicity for them, but sometimes they just like to be involved in the community. Donations are useful but businesses generally prefer to have an area of responsibility – e.g. costumes sponsored by GetFit Gym; programmes sponsored by PrintHouse.

Rehearsal venue: If a church or school is willing to contribute to your project, a church hall or a school drama centre is a good rehearsal space, but make sure they won't mind you marking out your performance area on the floor with masking tape.

Cheap costuming: Charity shops are great for sourcing costumes. Small fabric flaws usually can't be seen on the stage so buying budget fabric at waste centres is also a good option.

Recycling centres: You can often source a lot of set-building/puppets/props materials from recycled waste. All you need is a van and some time.