

CHAPTER FOUR


PITFALLS AND PROBLEMS

There are many pitfalls and problems that can arise in the course of putting on a play. Issues can occur during the preproduction, production, or performance stages. Some of these pitfalls can be anticipated. Others will be completely unexpected.

Budget Issues

One of the biggest issues for community theater groups is not having enough money. Even if work is done by volunteers, materials must be purchased, lights and sound equipment rented, and halls paid for. It's important to make a budget before even beginning a play and to estimate how much everything is going to cost. Then add 10 to 20 percent to that amount. There is always something that was forgotten or that the director didn't know was needed until halfway through creating a costume, set, or other element.

If the group is a permanent organization with money in the bank from previous productions or other activities (such as giving acting classes to children), then the director knows how much money is available. Otherwise, unless the producer is willing to put up



The director may have to address issues such as providing access to the stage for mobility or vision-impaired performers.

the money and recoup it from ticket sales, the funds have to be acquired. One way of doing this is to sell advertising in the program to local businesses. The businesses reap the benefit of publicity and the satisfaction of supporting local culture. Another way to raise funds is to solicit donations on a large or small scale. If the group is professional enough to have a board of directors, often these people are respected and affluent members of the community who have contacts with other affluent and respected people. The director should get the board members involved in fundraising. Use social media. Solicit donations on the group's Facebook page and website. Offer a discount to people who buy tickets to the show in advance. This will provide the group with working capital. Solicit funds through a crowdfunding site, such as Kickstarter. Offer a pair of tickets to anyone who donates a given amount of money, possibly combined with an invitation to an opening-night, after-show reception. Another approach, which can be combined with other fundraising methods, is to reduce the amount of money required by soliciting the lending or donation of materials and goods needed. It's unlikely one can get everything one needs this way, but everything obtained is something that doesn't need to be purchased. It is possible to apply for grants to fund community theaters, but in today's difficult economic environment, these are often hard to obtain unless a community theater is well established.

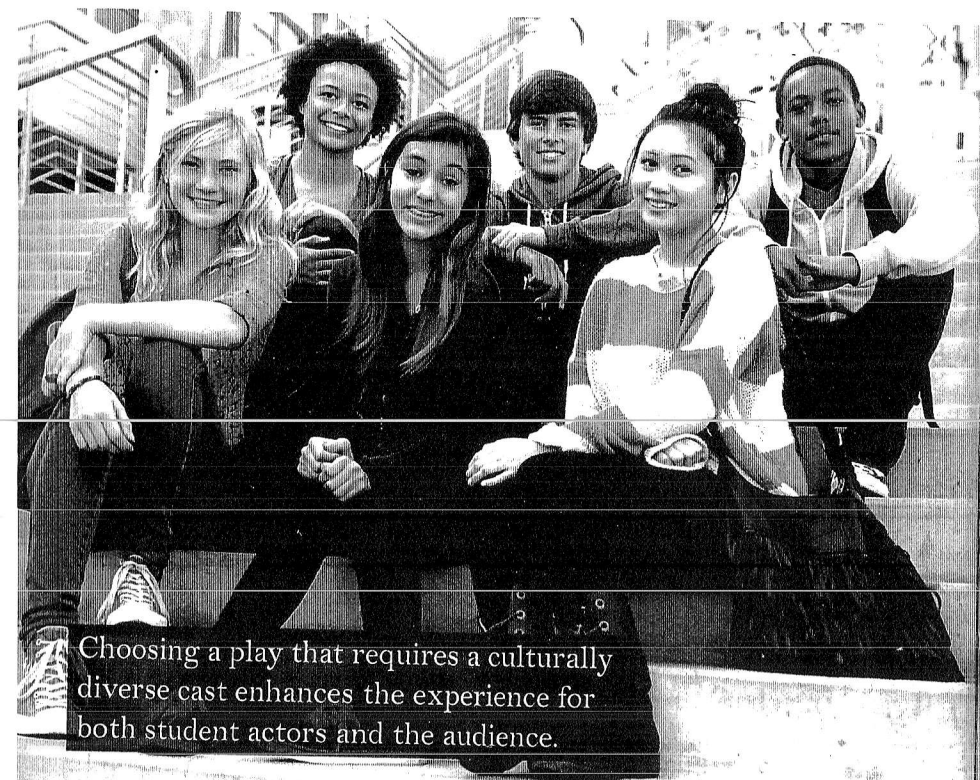
School productions have some advantages in the funding department, as they often have an auditorium with equipment they can use to put on a play. Parents

of students may be willing to chip in and make costumes and donate material for sets. Students can raise additional funds by traditional techniques such as holding bake sales, yard sales, and car washes.

Audition Issues

Sometimes not enough people show up for auditions to fill all the roles in the play. There are a few ways to approach this problem, but the best solution is to hold further auditions. The worst solution is to recruit someone to play a role. An actor cast this way often has the attitude that he or she is doing the director a favor, which may lead to problems such as refusing to follow the director's instructions. Careful choice of a play can help avoid this situation. In school and community theater, plays with few characters and more women than men are preferable because more women than men generally show up for auditions. Also, when posting notices of auditions, include information about the gender and age of the roles. A retired older male actor may turn out for a community theater audition if he knows that there's an appropriate role for him. Get the word out as widely as possible that you are holding auditions. Send flyers or post them on bulletin boards at local college drama departments and other places with a lot of foot traffic, such as your local library.

If you are putting on a play in a public school, the student body probably includes youths of many cultural and ethnic backgrounds. If a play is cast with only white actors, this may be taken as a sign of prejudice and cultural insensitivity. Certain roles



Choosing a play that requires a culturally diverse cast enhances the experience for both student actors and the audience.

require a person of a particular ethnic background. For example, in the musical *South Pacific*, a young white lieutenant in World War II falls in love with a native girl on a Pacific island, which would horrify his family back home. This situation requires a white boy and an Asian girl. Another factor is that the white male, Lieutenant Cable, must be able to sing the beautiful but difficult "Younger Than Springtime." The choir director can inform the director if such a talent is a member of his chorus. However, many roles in plays can be played by people of any race, and sometimes by people of any gender. A sensitive director tries to encourage cultural diversity in his or her work.

Dealing with the disappointed is a problem often faced by directors. Those who don't get roles, or who get a supporting role instead of a leading role, may be disappointed and even resentful. The director needs to acknowledge their feelings. It's best to tell them honestly why they were chosen for the role they were given, rather than the one they wanted, and to stress that you are relying on them in their present role. If the group has a permanent pool of actors who put on plays, or a group of locals who put on most of them, try to rotate the lead roles. Obviously, this depends on the choice of play, but the director usually controls that choice or has significant input. If actors know from past experience that different people get the lead in different plays, they are more likely to accept not being chosen this time and will not feel that the director is playing favorites. In general, community theaters with a regular group of actors are less likely to be problematic in terms of roles because they tend to develop camaraderie. However, the director is like the parent in this theatrical family. He or she must make sure that all the actors receive acknowledgment for their contributions.

Problems with Actors

Inevitably there will be times when an actor doesn't work out. A person might continuously fail to show up for rehearsals. He or she might feel that performing in a play is not important because it is not a job. This behavior inconveniences the other actors and makes it impossible to put the play into shape. An actor might not be able to memorize his or

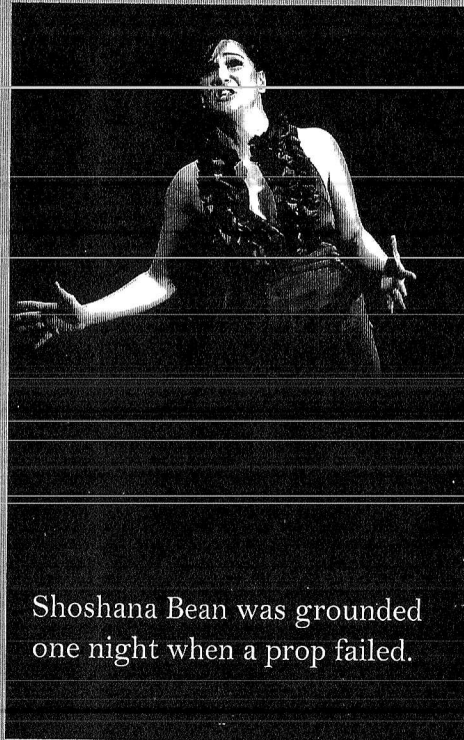
her lines—or the actor may not feel he has to. The author once worked with a television actor. Based on his experience in television, he felt that it was not necessary to say the lines as they were written; for TV work, adlibbing something that approximated the meaning was good enough. Of course, this not only undermined the playwright's intent but made it difficult for the other actors to respond, since they rely on certain lines for their cues. Another problem that can arise is that some people simply cannot act, no matter how much direction they are given. The actor may still be struggling to emote and portray anything despite the director's best efforts to work with him or her. A person who shows up drunk or high cannot be kept in the cast under any circumstances. In these situations, the director may have to fire the actor.

The director needs to prepare in advance how to approach firing an actor, which needs to be done while there is still enough time to replace him or her. If it is necessary to fire an actor, it is best to take a nonconfrontational approach. Being confrontational not only creates bad feelings but can lead to an actor bad-mouthing the director and the play—and theater is a small world. You never know when you are going to run into the actor or someone who knows him or her. Instead, the actor should be told, "This is not working out. I know you're trying hard, but [*whatever the problem is*]." Often an actor who is struggling knows this and may even be relieved to be spared embarrassment.

A related problem is having an actor drop out of the show. It might be possible for the director to

FAULTY EQUIPMENT

No matter how often you test the equipment, there may come a time when it fails in performance. This can happen even in professional theaters. This happened to Shoshana Bean, the star of the musical



Shoshana Bean was grounded one night when a prop failed.

Wicked. Bean was playing Elphaba, the character who will become the Wicked Witch in Oz. At the end of act 1, she is supposed to rise up on a **cherry picker** and "fly" while singing the signature song "Defying Gravity." The problem was that one night the cherry picker failed to operate.

The actress left the cherry picker and sang the song on stage. However, the rest of the cast was supposed to end the big number by coming onstage and pointing up at her flying above the stage—which she wasn't. Their solution: run onstage and lie on the floor pointing up at her standing above them. Sometimes in theater you just have to improvise!

contact one of the other actors who auditioned and replace him or her. However, in some circumstances, especially if the actor is a man in his prime, there may not be any suitable replacement candidates. The director may have to resume auditions or contact actors he or she has worked with before.

Sometimes an actor—or a crewmember—will be surly or uncooperative. Often people become negative if they think that the work they are doing is not appreciated. Making a point of complimenting their work and giving them attention will often defuse this type of situation.

Onstage Problems

Problems will sometimes occur while actors are performing onstage. The most common problem is that an actor will forget a line. Teach actors how to deal with this situation during rehearsals when they are “off book.” If an actor forgets a line, that is the time to discuss it. Often another actor in the scene can cover by responding to the unspoken line. (Actor One is supposed to say “I hate you,” but can’t remember that’s her next line. Actor Two says, “I suppose you hate me,” or “You look like you hate me.” Often this is all it takes to get the first actor back on track.) Or, if an actor can’t remember the exact wording, he or she can say something approximating the line. It is distracting to use a prompter during a performance, as it takes the audience’s focus off the actors onstage.

If an actor is simply having trouble learning his or her lines, there are a variety of techniques that can be used to address the problem, such as having the actor

visualize what he or she is describing or having the actor focus on one key word in the line. Most books on directing include “tricks” that directors can use to help actors learn their lines. To avoid having last-minute problems, check to make sure that actors with small parts have learned their lines well in advance of the full rehearsals. Those with small parts often think that they can wait until the last minute to learn their parts, only to find it takes more time to memorize them than they planned for.

A more serious problem can occur if an actor becomes ill or injured. The best approach in this case is to have another member of the company take the role, even though he or she will have to carry a script onstage. The fact that the actor has become sick or injured and that another actor will be taking his or her place should be announced. The audience will generally be supportive of this approach, and the person filling in will be familiar with the play and the intent of the scenes. Doing this is preferable to canceling the play and inconveniencing audience members. It’s rare in community theater to use understudies because there are usually only a small number of performances. Understudies most likely will not have the chance to act, and the director will have the added work of rehearsing two people.

Making Sure an Audience Shows Up

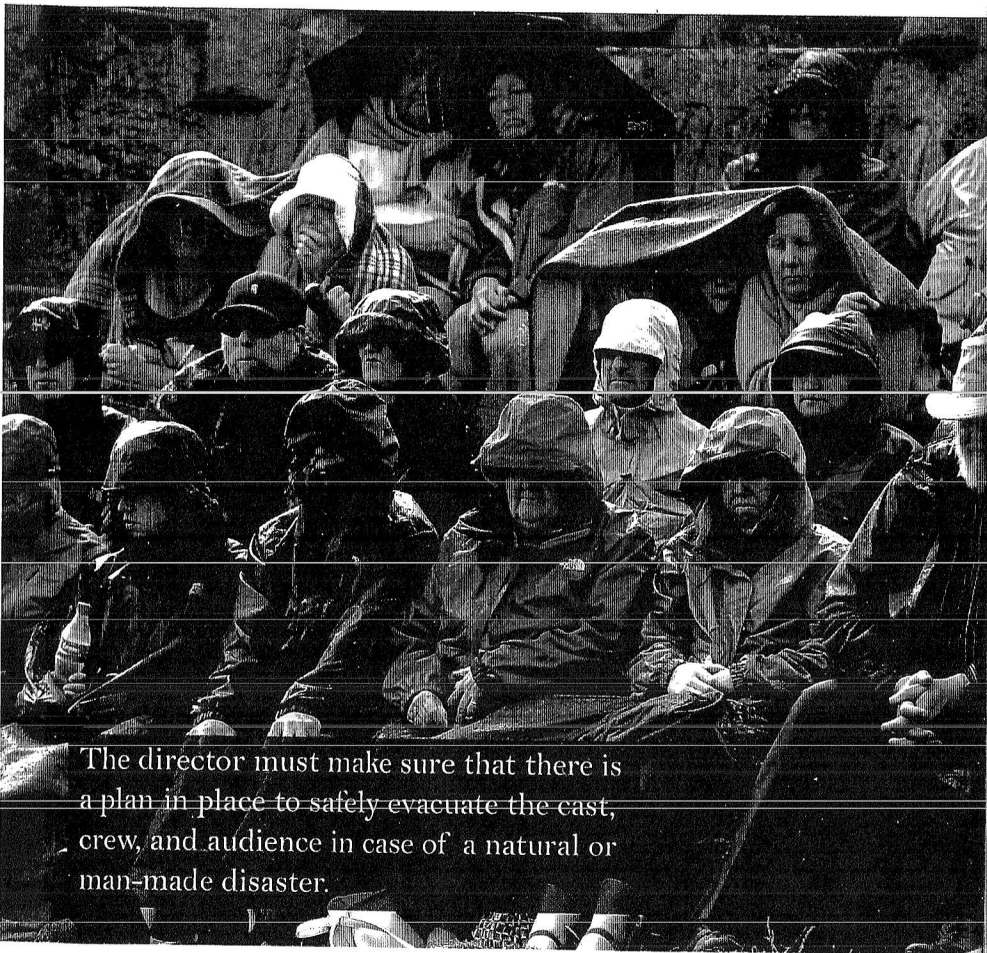
After all the hard work everyone has put in, it’s important to get an adequate audience for the play.



The payoff for all the actors' hard work comes when they perform before an audience.

Schools can rely on a core group of friends and parents to attend their performances. Well-established community theaters usually have a mailing list of people who have attended plays in the past. Often they plan their list of shows a year in advance and sell season tickets. A new or small group that puts on plays occasionally may have to work harder to get the word out about their play. For a community theater group or school play, the director is often involved in promoting the play. This usually involves writing a press release with information about the play and sending it to local newspapers. The director may

post information about the play on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and/or the group's website. Making flyers is also useful. They can be posted in local businesses and distributed to residents in the neighborhood where the play is being performed. The director might want to do an interview with the local newspaper or radio station to publicize the show. To build a mailing list for future productions, the group may want to have a guest book at the entrance where people can write their name and address "to be informed of upcoming productions."



The director must make sure that there is a plan in place to safely evacuate the cast, crew, and audience in case of a natural or man-made disaster.

External Crises

Another problem that can occur in our violence-prone world is a national or international crisis or a natural disaster such as a hurricane or earthquake. If an event were to occur in the area where the play is being held, the play would be stopped and the company and the audience either told to shelter in place or evacuate. The proper approach would be to follow any instructions from the authorities.

What happens, however, when an event occurs in another location, but people should be informed about it? The author was interning at a major summer theater on the day that President Richard Nixon resigned from office. Unfortunately, at the time he did this, the theater was in the middle of a performance of a musical comedy. The director and producer were aware of what had happened, but the audience was not. They felt that this event, which could affect the United States in a major way, should be announced to the audience. However, they were uncertain, given the serious nature of the event and the frivolous nature of the play, whether it would be appropriate to continue with the performance. In the end, the director decided to announce what happened at intermission, and then continue with the show. The audience was, if anything, more responsive to the play during the second act, welcoming a respite from the disturbing news.