

Staging a takeover

What students need to succeed
as first-time directors

name _____
BY WILLIAM MYATT period _____

"A TEENAGER directing a production? *Really* directing a show? Are you insane?"

Sanity, or lack of it, notwithstanding, I have had success with students as directors. This is not a case of throwing them to the wolves and slipping out to grade papers and savor a latte. Teenagers, with the proper training and mentoring, can prove to be quite effective directors.

In his 1998 book *Directing a Play*, Michael McCafferey defines a director as "the person entrusted with the responsibility of making decisions which affect the artistic welfare of the entire production"—a role I took on for the first time myself as a high school senior, when I was entrusted with the responsibility of co-directing our competition one-act. We chose Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*. Very quickly in the rehearsal process, we decided a live flute player was needed on stage. My fellow director played flute. This left me alone in the house as the artistic eye. I had worked with and watched my director mold high school students into sweet little old murderesses in *Arsenic and Old Lace* and disturbing townspeople in *Dark of the Moon*. I also had the fortunate opportunity to learn photography from my cousin. These experiences gave me a visual viewpoint upon which I could draw as a first-time director.

These days it's more common for students to have directing opportunities in high school, and not just with short competition pieces or "second stage" projects; I hear of more and more schools where outstanding students are directing major productions, and many of my own current students are hungry for the challenge. The most successful ones, I've found, have a number of things in common:

- Onstage experience
- Backstage experience
- Time-management experience
- Positive people experience

Acting and crew prerequisites

In order for students to fulfill the role of director, they must understand what it is like to be on the receiving end of direction. However, in order for students to take up the directorial mantle in the future it is imperative that as I am directing them in the present I explain what it is I am trying to achieve. As we rehearse a show and I create a picture on stage I explain to them what I am doing, the story I am trying to tell. The ones who understand the goal on a more meta level are the ones I look to as potential directors.

But having a lot of experience as actors isn't enough. Directors, students and adults alike, often stumble over the myriad technical elements involved in a production. It is not imperative that you be an expert in every aspect of technical theatre, but you must have a working knowledge of the components that will bring your artistic vision to life. Young directors should have worked their way up the ladder to leadership positions on crews and ideally served as assistant directors or stage managers under an adult director. I utilize students as assistant director and stage manager throughout the entire process. They watch auditions, are in the room casting the show, and manage countless things throughout rehearsals. During production, it is the stage manager's

responsibility. I may be finishing up the financial report in the box office or seated in the back of the house taking notes. I am never far away, but the student

leader is in charge of the production.

This experience is a well from which to draw in the rehearsal room for the first-time director. The mentoring received over time will provide the young director various tools that will be honed and sharpened throughout the directing process. More subtly perhaps, the young director's peers have seen the student in a position of authority, supported by adults. This "respect by osmosis" will aid the teenage director in guiding

"I am very hands-off through most of the rehearsal process. The feedback I offer depends on how much they want it. Some students decide that they will never direct again, while others love the experience, but all have gained many life skills. If we want to support theatre arts education, then the adults need to take a back seat sometimes and let our students take center stage."

—Amy Sando, theatre arts teacher and director, Douglas High School, Minden, Nevada

ing her peers toward achieving her artistic vision. In order for a student to be successful as a director, the adult production staff (or at the very least an experienced and talented student production staff) must be willing to listen and operate in the same way they would with an adult at the helm.

Rishi Wagle is a senior at Pleasant Valley High School. He is a well-rounded theatre practitioner, having worked his way through various crews to the position of lighting designer and various onstage roles, including a recent turn as Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Rishi is also a troupe officer, an all-state vocalist, a string player, a black belt in karate, an honor student, and a chapter Thespian officer.

"Before becoming a director, I had the opportunity to play a few leading roles. I had completed a few lighting designs for various shows, and I had been stage manager for two shows," Rishi reflects. "Having these leadership experiences in both the onstage and backstage elements helped me to have a complete understanding of the whole process behind a production. Without these experiences, I wouldn't have been able to work as effectively in production meetings and I wouldn't have gained the respect of my peers needed in order to efficiently fill the role of a director."

'I can't. I have rehearsal!'

Time management can be the downfall of student directors. The responsibility of managing a production is immense. The responsibility of managing a teenager's social, academic, aesthetic, and everything-else life is immense. Before applying to direct a production, the teenage director must take an honest, hard look at existing commitments and time constraints. The adult production staff of the department must be convinced that this student can handle this responsibility and be prepared to step in and pick up the show if there is a fumble. A rehearsal schedule from auditions to strike, modeled after the department standard, is a must. We use Virtual Stage Manager so that parents, students, and staff are aware of the time commitment from the outset. We produce a number of shows throughout the school year. To help assure a positive, successful experience, first-time teenage directors start by directing short competition scenes then work their way up to directing a one act, a children's show, our annual murder-mystery comedy, and, on the rare occasion, a full-length production.

"I have always been an immensely busy individual," Rishi says. "I am currently taking five AP classes, I play two instruments, and I am involved with many various organizations such as a youth symphony and my school's student council. However, I knew that

"An additional benefit, I've found, of having students direct a main stage production is the amount of ownership the entire cast and crew take on. I've noticed that the kids tend to rest on my knowledge and experience when I am directing. When that is no longer the case they really work at improving the show based on their own thoughts, suggestions, and creativity."

—Shira Schwartz, theatre educator
Chandler (Arizona) Unified School District

when I had the opportunity to be a director that I had to make the show an absolute priority."

No one is alone

Just as young designers need mentors, first-time teenaged directors need a "director whisperer." Throughout the rehearsal process I sit behind the director, take notes, and have teachable moment conversations with the young director. The conversations are a give and take as both of us attempt to bring the first-time director's vision to fruition. There have been numerous times when I have given a note to a director who has then logically, passionately, and respectfully argued against my note because it did not fit within the artistic vision of the young director. Throughout most of the rehearsal process I continue to take notes and give them to the director. The director then decides to give them to the cast and crew or not. At these moments, I am confident that my duties as a mentor are being fulfilled.

It's also important to teach students in leadership roles how to surround themselves with good collaborators, whether other students or supportive adults, and how to really listen to and incorporate their feedback and ideas. Of course, we

should always model these behaviors ourselves, which isn't always easy in a school setting—and sometimes our most talented, capable, hard-working students have a hard time considering different approaches, sharing responsibilities, and trusting others to get jobs done. If you see a miniature dictatorship rising, and/or if your first-time director seems overwhelmed by all the tasks at hand, remind him that the best theatre happens when *everyone* has an opportunity to create.

"During the production I was directing, I was fortunate enough to have many talented student designers under my direction," Rishi recalls. "Being able to trust completely the people I had in charge was key in reducing the stress that could have been caused by the production."

The stress still was there, for Rishi as for anyone who takes on a director's responsibilities for the first time

(or any time). Still, he says he found the job "incredibly rewarding" overall: "Getting to see your vision exemplified in front of you is a breathtaking sight. I would highly recommend that any qualified student be given the opportunity to direct a production at some point, as it is a truly unforgettable experience."

With the experienced adult director acting as a safety net, teenagers can take their first real creative flights without crashing and burning. The journey might not be smooth, but no one will die, and everyone will learn—perhaps that insane teacher most of all. ▼

See Jon Jory's advice to young directors on working with designers, page 11.

The comments from educators that accompany the articles in this section are drawn from a discussion on the Theatre Education Community Open Forum board on Schooltheatre.org.