

## Directing a School Play in a Special needs Setting

The following is intended to provide practical advice regarding the production and direction of a school play in a Special needs setting. This paper will be divided into three segments-

Pre-production

Production

Post-production

### Pre-production

#### Choice of Script

The choice of a suitable script/ play is of paramount importance to showcase the talents of the students. Much research and consideration should go into the selection of an appropriate “vehicle”. An intimate and thorough knowledge of your student’s skills and capabilities is of great assistance when making this choice. The usual choice is that of a musical because it displays talents other than acting. You will have talents like dancing, singing, skills like playing a musical instrument and quirky skills already existing throughout the school population. If putting on a well known already existing play, remember a rights fee will apply. If time permits and if the writing abilities are available on staff, a play can be written tailored to the specific talents of the students. If the entire school population is to be in the play, a play with various groups of similar characters appearing in the production means that rehearsals for dances and acting will be facilitated.

Tip: Make sure the play is available to work with as soon as possible.

#### Casting

As a general rule every play will have at least one lead role or even two or more. The casting of these roles deserves thoughtful attention so that the play will be successful and entertaining and won’t put a physical and mental strain on a student whose health is compromised in some way.

Holding auditions is one way of gaining an insight into a student’s abilities, stamina and potential for carrying a key acting role. Consultation with the child’s teacher is also recommended to get an overall view of your potential star. Avoid using the same student year after year to essay key roles. Always be willing to try someone new who will often surprise you in the way they rise to the occasion by displaying talent, timing and appeal in their interpretation of these lead roles.

The use of adults like teachers and aides is sometimes necessary to support and provide a model to the actors and dancers who have a disability be it mental or physical. My advice here is to use these personnel in a subsidiary or supportive way to compliment the disabled actors or dancers rather than dominate them.

#### Choice of venue.

The venue must provide the following criteria.

Be large enough to accommodate the expected audience.

Have wheel chair access and disabled toilet facilities.

Have seating that will provide a clear view of the stage.  
Provide good acoustics and sound system so that the play can be heard.  
Have lighting bars to mount stage lighting.  
Have large and commodious dressing rooms to contain the entire cast.  
Have clear access from dressing rooms to stage to avoid difficulties with wheelchairs.

### Rehearsals

The time frame for rehearsals should be longer rather than shorter because you will find you lose much time through absenteeism of key cast and dance groups, school camps, curriculum days, public holidays and sporting events. Another reason for this longer rehearsal time is that the students will need the constant repetition to remember lines, stage movements and routines. Try to have these rehearsal times worked into the normal school timetable rather than trying to fit them into an already existing timetable. Check with classroom teachers to ascertain if main cast students are having a long overseas holiday during rehearsal times or during production time.

It is a good idea to rehearse students in the same venue that the performance will be in, so as to build up the familiarity and acceptance of the environment. If this is not possible, rehearse students in the same size venue and one with the same configuration.

Tip: As rehearsals continue, introduce props like swords or telephones and costume pieces like hats or long dresses to train the student to handle these additions with skills honed through familiarity.

### Budget

The budget will drive the size and degree of complexity of any production. Always work out a projected budget to avoid any surprises or budget blowouts. Main areas that need to be considered here are venue rental, seating hire, lighting hire and costumes. Possible revenue raisers here could be charging for tickets for the performance and selling the DVD of the production to parents and the school community.

Tip: Always overestimate the costs to take into account unexpected costs.

### Costumes

The first consideration in costume construction is the measurement of actors. It is advisable that this process is double checked by another colleague. The making of costumes is a big job and could be done by farming out the costume making to a group of volunteers say parents or other teachers or by employing a professional from a costume shop to make them. Remember that you have no basis for complaint if you are using volunteer labour and you won't be able to control how well made the finished costumes will be. Certainly the professional costume maker will be more expensive but you will be able to demand changes if the finished costumes are substandard.

Tip: Design costumes for ease of dressing and undressing if student playing a double role.

### Sets and Props

It is a good idea if students from selected art classes could construct and paint appropriate sets for the play. Instead of using timber for this, sceneboard, a theatrical cardboard, can be used as it is lighter for transportation. Consider painting sets on both sides to minimize the number of them. Props (hand held articles like swords, guns etc,) should be made to withstand rough treatment.

Tip: Make a “rehearsal” set of props for students to use so that the real ones aren’t damaged.

### Production

As production looms schedule in a full week of rehearsals. This means that every day for a week, the entire cast runs through the show. This will ensure that cast and crew know what to do and can solve any problem arising from their contribution to the production.

### Bump in

#### Personnel Needed

To enable a smooth running performance, you will need the following personnel.

Stage manager

Sound Department

Lighting manager

Costume back stage

Makeup artists

Tip: Have running sheets of the order of the show affixed to walls and doorways so that the stage manager and others can understand the flow of the show.

#### Dress rehearsal

A full dress rehearsal will be essential to discover any “bugs” that need to be ironed from the system

#### of Opening Night

### Time management

#### Costumes, hairstyling and make up

Have at least two dressers backstage to assist children to get into their costumes. By having costumes designed for ease of dressing and undressing, potential problems will be averted. Conduct tests to see if the children will tolerate wearing wigs and make-up.

Tip: Use water-based make-up on children for ease of application and removal.

#### Back stage crew

Use senior students to move stage settings between acts.

#### DVD recording

Ensure that at least two camera people are recording the performances. One of the cameramen could catch mid and long shots, the other could film close ups.

#### Refreshments

This can often be provided by the Parents and Friends committee

### Post Production

Every director has an overall view of how he/she wants the final play to look. If it hasn't turned out as planned it is best to accept this fact and concentrate on the positive aspects of the production.

### Return of rental equipment

Check dates on contracts to avoid getting a fine from rental company

### Editing of DVD

Get raw footage to editor as soon as possible so that DVD of the play can be produced before the next year. Editing is a lengthy process.

### Bump out

### Thank you letters

Don't forget to send thank you cards to any volunteer even if they helped only in a small way. You may be using the same people in a bigger way the following year.