A HIGH SCHOOL THEATRE TEACHER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

Published in 2005 by
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square
Milton Park, Abingdon
Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-87830-201-8 (Hardcover) 0-87830-202-6 (Softcover)
International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-87830-201-7 (Hardcover) 978-0-87830-202-4 (Softcover)
Library of Congress Card Number 2005004714

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ames, Raina S.
A high school theatre teacher's survival guide / Raina S. Ames.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-87830-201-8 (hardback : alk. paper) -- ISBN 0-87830-202-6 (pbk : alk. paper)
1. Theater--Study and teaching (Secondary)--United States. I. Title.

PN2078.U6A43 2005
792'.071'273--dc22 2005004714

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is the Academic Division of T&F Informa plc.

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Why Read This Book?

Often, theatre teachers emerge by default. They may be young English or speech teachers who participated in a few plays in high school. They may not be particularly comfortable being the extracurricular drama director, but by lack of seniority, the task falls to them to run a theatre program.

There may be theatre teachers whose only goal is to create the supreme high school drama department. They love teaching theatre and they thrive on directing plays; however, they didn't foresee the reality of teaching theatre plus other subjects such as speech or English.

This book is intended to serve as a guide for theatre teachers of any background experience. I spent eight years as a high school drama director and theatre teacher. I also taught English, speech, and television broadcasting. I know the demands of teaching while trying to hold together an extracurricular drama department. I have very specific ideas about the quality and shape of a high school theatre department, but the content is not meant to be prescriptive. This book is only meant as a guide to help teachers form their own programs. I know the feeling of floundering, and I only hope, as someone who has already been there, to give something tangible for drama teachers to help answer tough questions that arise during the curricular or extracurricular process. The text is short because I know a teacher's time is valuable. There is an extensive collection of appendices with lesson ideas, sample schedules, and resource guides. As an educator, I feel it is my duty not only to let others learn from my mistakes, but also to share what has worked for me. I had a mentor who said you are only as good as the things you steal; please feel free to use these ideas in your classroom.

Enjoy,
Raina S. Ames

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Acknowledgments

All I have come to believe about training high school theatre students has its genesis and superior example in the teaching of Maxine Joyce. Through her exacting standards and knowledgeable guidance at Macomb High School, I learned what it means to be a drama teacher. Mrs. Joyce influenced who I am both as a student and as a teacher of theatre.

Dr. Noreen Barnes gave me inspiration and confidence for the creation of this work. Many of the ideas in this book were sparked by stimulating discussions in Dr. Barnes's classes; her validation and guidance then helped me to shape my experience and understanding into a coherent form.

Both of these extraordinary women deserve thanks and praise for the positive influence they have had on all of their students. They are each a tribute to educational theatre.

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Part I

Curricular High School Theatre

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Chapter 1
Developing a High School Theatre Curriculum

SCENARIO

A father of a male student comes to you to ask why his son should be involved in that theatre stuff instead of sports. Do you have an answer?

Yes! Theatre is also about learning to be on a team. The intangible benefits of discipline, cooperation, and artistry are just as valuable as the knowledge we impart. Theatre layers its education and gives students a wealth of varied skills. Just as sports create a cohesive camaraderie among its players, theatre combines multiple skills and many different kinds of talent, putting forth a group-inspired piece of art. This unique experience brings just as much personal satisfaction and offers valuable outlets for those who choose theatre as their extracurricular activity.

In whatever discipline we choose to teach, as educators, it is our responsibility to prepare students for the level that is to come. All courses and activities have value, but many people do not see theatre as a "real" class. As high school theatre teachers, we provide a challenging curriculum that lays a firm foundation that prepares students to enter any college theatre program with integrity and a wide knowledge base. For those who say, "Many of my drama students are not going to be theatre majors," I say that your students will then have benefited from a program that has fostered self-discipline and appreciation of the arts that will enrich and color their life experiences from that point on. Challenge and quality in a high school theatre program will never be wasted on our students.

For those who were thrust into the position of theatre teacher, I understand your dilemma; as educators, we have taken on the huge responsibility of imparting knowledge. If we sign a contract with a district in which we agree to teach theatre even if it is not our forte, we have made a promise. In many districts, especially with speech and theatre, this will mean the students' only contact with this discipline is with you. Before signing that contract, it is imperative you recognize the magnitude of that promise. If you accept the responsibility, your charge is to provide a quality education. In addition, those trained in theatre who accept positions in other disciplines have a similar responsibility.

Many people look at theatre courses as the easy, throwaway classes, and it is difficult to combat this. Our best defense is to build a solid program. The first step should be to

decide what you feel is important for students to know about theatre when they leave high school. A teacher's philosophy is a very personal thing, but I want to give you some ideas to think about.

If the purpose of education is to prepare students for what is to come, the obvious question is what comes next for high school students? There are three answers to that. Some students will become theatre majors, so their need for knowledge is immediate and obvious. Others may be going to college, but they are not going to be theatre majors. Still other students will not go to college. They will go either to trade schools or directly into the work force. Surely they will not need to know anything about theatre.

Here comes the part where you have to start formulating what you believe is the good of teaching theatre. Your principal will be the first in a long line who will ask you to articulate this. If your answer is simply, "I have to teach it to have this English/speech job, so I'll make it work," perhaps your philosophy needs some tweaking. Michael Brandwein is a motivational speaker who, in his seminars, demonstrates that teachers can teach any discipline. The work is about the motivation of students, and the subject matter has little to do with accomplishing that task.

Maybe teaching theatre is really the only thing you want to do, but the English/speech classes are the only way for you to even get close to that. Maybe you think you will suffer through those other disciplines until you can gradually weed them out and be teaching theatre only. You have to rethink that theory as well. There are very few schools where teachers teach only theatre, and the people who have those jobs hold on until they die or retire, so the rate of turnover is very low. The first step in your philosophy, whether you are born to teach theatre or are thrust into it, is to accept the responsibility for anything you were hired to teach. Then you need to make the conscious commitment to educate students as earnestly and creatively as you are capable of doing.

Next, you need to map out what concepts are important for students to know. If you study the history of theatre and its various periods, you see parallels to the development of literature. You also see historical influences on the emergence and disappearance of different periods. Theatre is one of the very few disciplines that combine several other areas of study. It is easy to see play analysis as literature, philosophy, psychology, *and* history. Teaching production aspects involves self-discipline, artistry, excellence, cooperation, group dynamics, and patience. Not to mention geometry, woodworking, art, and home economics. Theatre has the potential to prepare students for life. There is a wealth of material, but you as teacher must decide what will be emphasized. That choice depends on your specific school's needs (*see* Appendix A and Appendix B).

The standard high school program hopefully already has classes in place. Typically there will be at least one course; it may be a play analysis class for academics who want to learn more about theatre, but do not like to perform. Then there also may be a production class to introduce students to the elements involved in putting a performance together. This class is geared toward performance. If, however, your school only has one theatre class, you may wish to combine academic and performance assignments so all types of students are served.

The question still remains: what do you think they need to know when they leave high school? Let's start with the assumption that these classes would be separate. The way to start building that philosophy is to look at a list of the different periods in theatre history.

If you have little knowledge of this, there are several valuable resource books. You can also ask your local university or professors in your alma mater's theatre department to see what theatre history book they use, but an extensive overview of each period can be found in Oscar Brockett's *History of Theatre* (*see* Appendix P). After you look at the different periods, you can decide which major influences you would like to cover and from what angle. If you are not strong in history, perhaps you would like to take a different approach by concentrating on the literature of different periods and teaching theatre like an English course. Many anthologies of plays can be found starting from Greek theatre and moving through the periods, though you have to be aware that not all literary time periods match dates exactly with dramatic time periods. *An Introduction to Theatre & Drama* is a comprehensive collection of plays separated by different periods in theatre history (*see* Appendix P). At the beginning of each section, there is a brief discussion of the period and the historical influences. If possible, also try to include as many plays with young people as central characters to draw your students to the material. Bottom line, though: teaching new subjects is all about trial and error. You may rewrite this course two or three or ten times, but find what works best for you. When you start, though, I recommend having a solid plan. Even if that plan morphs into something you did not expect, at least you will have a solid foundation from which to work *(see* Appendix A).

When I taught "History and Analysis of Theatre," I saw this class as an upper-level English course that was designed to combine the analysis of significant works in the historical context of the different periods of theatre. I felt it was important for students to start with Greek theatre to see how it evolved; we then examined what historical and social influences affected the periods and the style of writing. I approached this as a college preparatory class, so analysis, synthesis, and evaluation were the most important skills I wanted to develop in my students. By critically analyzing texts and making comparisons to other works within the historical framework, I wanted students to have a scholarly understanding of theatre history, something we covered through lecture and discussion as related to the analysis of representative works (*see* Appendix F). I used essay tests so they had to think and evaluate what they were reading (*see* Appendix G). This was a rigorous approach, but these students were challenged, and they learned a great deal about theatre and history, which they could then apply to their further studies in World History and English. In fact, after some of my students graduated and they came back to visit, they said that the essay tests I gave helped prepare them for the rigors of college.

As the final project in my history and analysis class, I had students choose a particular period, pinpoint the specific play requirements of that time, and write a play in the style of that period. I stressed that quality was not the issue. They had to articulate what were the major criteria for a play of their chosen period and they had to demonstrate those criteria in the writing of a work that fit the time. This was a demanding yet creatively satisfying project for students, and it helped them get to know a theatre era in greater detail.

If you feel this assignment is too rigorous, you can lead students in other playwriting activities. TheatreVirginia, a professional regional theatre in Richmond, Virginia, ran "New Voices for the Theater," a statewide playwriting competition for Virginia students. When I was Director of Education & Cooperative Learning there, we held the thirteenth annual summer residency and festival for high school students. Our Playwright-in-Residence was

acclaimed author and alumni of the program, Clay McLeod Chapman. He chose pictures of real people from the turn of the century who were living in Jackson County, Wisconsin. Through his guidance, students used these pictures as springboards for writing monologues. During the festival, this was perhaps the most prolific exercise; students created poignant, moving monologues that we then incorporated into a separate performance. You may still further simplify your use of playwriting in class by checking out the classroom playwriting ideas found in Appendix E. You see that students need not tackle entire units to exercise playwriting skills.

Turning to a theatre production class, you need to pinpoint what areas you feel are most beneficial to study. For example, in my last school, students were not allowed to go on the catwalk, so teaching lighting would not serve a practical purpose. Because I could not use students to set lights during actual productions, I did not highlight this. However, our program included student-directed one-act plays, so I spent a great amount of time having students create director's books and actually direct scenes for class (*see* Appendix E). Because as directors they are responsible for all aspects of production, I also focused on scene design and makeup techniques. In addition, we spent a great amount of time on acting both in monologues and in scenes. Students were required to do character analyses (*see* Appendix J), and they had to costume and block their scenes and monologues.

Because I often found that actors tended to have a superior attitude toward technicians, I required all actors to put in ten hours of technical work that usually translated into set construction. I felt this was of major importance, so I also covered set construction in my class. I always planned the show with the largest set to run concurrently with this class so students were getting practical experience working on a set from nothing to the final product. This served as a wealth of teaching opportunities for me, and because I was usually the set designer, much pressure was removed by being able to do some work during the school day. For me, the overriding philosophy for that class was to make it functional, so whether students were writing director's books or working on set construction, their work was immediately applicable to the production of theatre in real circumstances.

One of my best examples is the collaboration I had with the woodworking teacher at my first school. He was interested in having his students help with the sets to get practical experience in woodworking. We were able to work out a system in which he took his students to the auditorium during his class period and they would work on designs I supplied the woodworking teacher. It was one of the most stress-free experiences I have ever had dealing with set construction. Find any way you can to alleviate the stress that rests on your shoulders.

Teach to your strengths while best serving the needs of your students. Choose whether a literary- or production-oriented tack is more comfortable for you and start with this. Take classes at the local university to further your knowledge and to bolster your professional development requirements. As a bonus, the more classes you take, the closer you come to moving up on the pay scale. Start building a program based on courses that enrich your students' knowledge of and experiences in theatre. All courses will need to have formal proposals passed by the board of education (*see* Appendix B). Laying this groundwork will help save your sanity while providing rich, detailed theatre education for your students. Such comprehensive detail will help you define your own philosophies and procedures so you can justify the need for theatre education even to the most skeptical critics.

Chapter 2
Discipline When Dealing with Students

SCENARIO

You have taken over someone else's program, and your students are challenging your authority because you have replaced their favorite teacher. How do you build a positive working relationship with students without discipline problems?

SCENARIO

It is your first week on the job, and two theatre students feel you won't mind if they moon you at rehearsal. After all, we're all theatre folks. How do you deal with it?

Both of these scenarios awaited me at two different schools. The mooning happened my first year of teaching. I am five feet two, and I looked very young at twenty-six. Two students in a production thought it would be cool to moon me. They were at the top of the auditorium stairs, and as I rounded the corner I was greeted with their surprise. What can you do in this situation? The students laughed as they pulled up their pants, and I have to admit that, in my shock, I also laughed, but as a teacher entrusted with students, I had to respond appropriately. I talked with the other drama director, and then I went to the principal. Our show was opening in three weeks, but I had to establish a level of professionalism and trust with my administrator. The two students were suspended for 10 days; this meant they were gone for nearly two of the three weeks of rehearsal just before our show opened. This was when I learned the lesson that following the rules, though it may cause inconvenience or distress to the play production, is more important. In the long run, students need to learn by teacher's example that making the hard choice may not be popular, but it is the only choice that should be made.

At another school, I came into a program in which the previous drama director was replaced because she was not a district employee and I was. She was extremely well liked by her students, and it was hard to come in after her. The students accused me, even before I got there, of kicking their teacher out of her job, so I entered the program with severe student skepticism and resistance.

I can tell you what *not* to do. Do not start out, as I did, staunchly going against everything the previous director did. I resisted many traditions she had set, and students do

not react well to sudden change. I pushed them to accept my way of doing things far too quickly, and it was hard to win over the students and the parents. Taking your time to ease in your ideas for the program requires patience, and I wish I had heard this advice when I took that job. I ended up building a strong, quality program, but the road was rough in the beginning.

Every teacher has to find her or his own voice as a disciplinarian, but there are some standard truths that come to mind. Lee Canter is a wonderful reference for discipline. He suggests, through what he calls Assertive Discipline, that teachers express three or four guiding principles, warn of possible consequences, but also offer positive incentives the students could gain by following the guidelines for the classroom. I like this approach because it does not automatically presuppose students will misbehave (*see* Appendix N). Another helpful teacher resource book is *The First Days of School: How To Be An Effective Teacher* by Harry K. and Rosemary Tripi Wong (Harry K. Wong Publications, Inc.). It is a book not meant to be read cover to cover, but rather to be referenced based on need. It offers ways of setting up the classroom and the rules that govern your environment (see Appendix P). Whatever references chosen, though, teachers should never shut out the humanity in their classrooms.

One of the recurring conversations I have had with students has been their dissatisfaction with teachers who do not show them respect. Students often feel their teachers treat them with impersonal distance and condescension. Whatever style of discipline or classroom rules you choose, I would suggest basing classroom environment on mutual respect. There is an old but true saying, "Give respect to get respect." Students respond to teachers who take the time to treat them as individuals.

However, the trick is not to get too close. Especially as a theatre teacher. There is a fine line many drama teachers walk. If you look at our theatre discipline, whether in class, out of class, or both, we often spend more time with students than their parents do. As drama directors, we have ample opportunity to get to know our students; sometimes, we get to know facts about them we wish we did not know. It is the responsibility of a trusted teacher to maintain professionalism with students. The balance between appropriate and inappropriate behavior is very delicate.

Another problem arises. If drama directors know the students really well, how can they avoid favoritism? There will always be somebody accusing you of picking favorites. Teachers are human. There are going to be some students we automatically like, and there will be some who drive us bonkers. The more time you spend with students on extracurricular activities, the more you get to know their quirky eccentricities, and it is hard not to develop attitudes. The trick is to keep from showing them. If you look at drama programs, you can tell which teachers just want to be liked and which teachers wish to do quality work. I submit that if a teacher is able to get past wanting to be liked, he or she can more easily get down to the business of doing theatre. If you let go of whether the students like you or not, you can more easily stick to the constant standard of doing what is best for the program no matter what. Whenever a cast list goes up, no matter how much you have tried to be fair, you will be accused of favoritism, so you might as well do what will most benefit your production and let that idle gossip pass you by.

I had a particular student who wanted to be cast as a lead; she got angry when she was not given the role she wanted. She spent some time after rehearsal one day railing at me for

having favorites. For nearly half an hour she emotionally laid out all the ways I had hurt her by "picking favorites" and not making her one. I had particular reasons why I did not cast her in the part she wanted, but she was not interested in hearing these. She needed to get this out, so I let her say her piece, and I listened. I was devastated. When students are so unhappy, I do feel bad about not being able to give everyone what they want, but the nature of a play does not allow for that. There is only one of each character, and I have to make a decision. I can make it based on favorites or I can make it based on what is best for the play.

The next year, this same student debated whether she should audition for a production because she thought I would never cast her after the tongue-lashing she gave me the previous year. When she did audition, she was absolutely the best person for one of the parts, so I cast her. If I were to cast by using favorites, I might not have put her in the play because we did not have the best relationship going, but she was absolutely what was best for the show. During that process, we both found healing, and I think we finally came to an understanding and appreciation of one another. I certainly am glad I did not let myself be personally wounded, because she brought much to that production.

I am not lauding my altruistic behavior. I have made plenty of mistakes as a drama director, but I am merely trying to make the point that consistency is the most important factor in dealing with students. I could have tried to be this student's friend and given her the part she wanted in every show, but ultimately this would not best serve our productions. In the long run, I believe I gained more respect from students because they knew above all I was concerned with excellence. They worked for what they got, and we produced quality theatre. It also helped them to see that I was serious about my work, and I was not running a popularity contest.

There is also a practical reason for having proper discipline in a high school drama department. More to the point, if you do not have proper discipline, you will lose respect from your fellow teachers. Even if you are the stodgiest, most no-nonsense person, once you say to someone, "I'm a theatre teacher," there is an immediate connotation. People's minds flash to pictures of wacky, off-the-wall behavior because it is assumed you have to be dramatic to teach theatre. It's almost as if theatre instructors are not considered real teachers. Indeed, it took time for me to establish credibility because my classroom was not a calm, orderly place; creative chaos and group interaction reigned in my room. Education is not supposed to be fun! Some people seemed to perceive that I must be questionable in my conduct.

I have seen plenty of teachers who blur the lines of appropriateness. Maybe they invite students over to their homes or they allow the students to swear and engage in crude behavior. Some teachers look the other way when students drink or smoke at cast parties or on field trips. This may seem like small stuff to some, but everything we do casts a keen eye on our integrity. To build respect for our programs, we must behave beyond reproach.

A drama teacher should not be a cool buddy. Students should be held to all of the school's rules, and it is not the drama director's job to undermine those regulations. You need that respect from your colleagues to get their support. Be mindful of how you decide to deal with student discipline. You are setting standards. Choose wisely and stay consistent.

I was often considered a "hip" teacher, and many students came to me to talk. Often, those students were perceived as my favorites, but I allowed—within reason—for students to