

USITT Education Commission Poster

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by

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Included in this packet: Assignment Guidelines, Hypothetical Production Notes, Sample Instructor Prompts and outlines for three teaching sessions.

ASSIGNMENT

Objective:

Develop procedures, plans, and methods to successfully manage auditions, rehearsals, and performances for a large-scale production.

Methods:

Given a hypothetical production, students will brainstorm worst-case scenarios and optimum outcomes for three major steps of the production process: Auditions, Rehearsals, and Performances. With prompting from the instructor, students are encouraged to envision all steps of production. As students form the details for positive and negative experiences, they are stimulated to provide suggestions to prevent problems and to promote success. Each session culminates in various ways in which the ideas and solutions are applied. Each session is comprised of: Brainstorming, Problem Solving, and Application.

1. **Brainstorming:**

The brainstorming session begins with a prompt from the instructor, which might be the telling of a story, either from professional experience, or hypothetical. The instructor will need to interject details or situational dynamics to guide students in seeing as many possible outcomes as possible.

The result of the brainstorming is a **Brainstorming Chart** ① made visible to the class (overhead projector, chalkboard, computer projection, etc.).

2. **Problem Solving:**

Next, the class meets in small groups to address each of the items generated on the brainstorming chart. Each group creates a **Problem Solving Checklist** ②: suggestions for solving or preventing potential problems, and for making a positive experience for everyone.

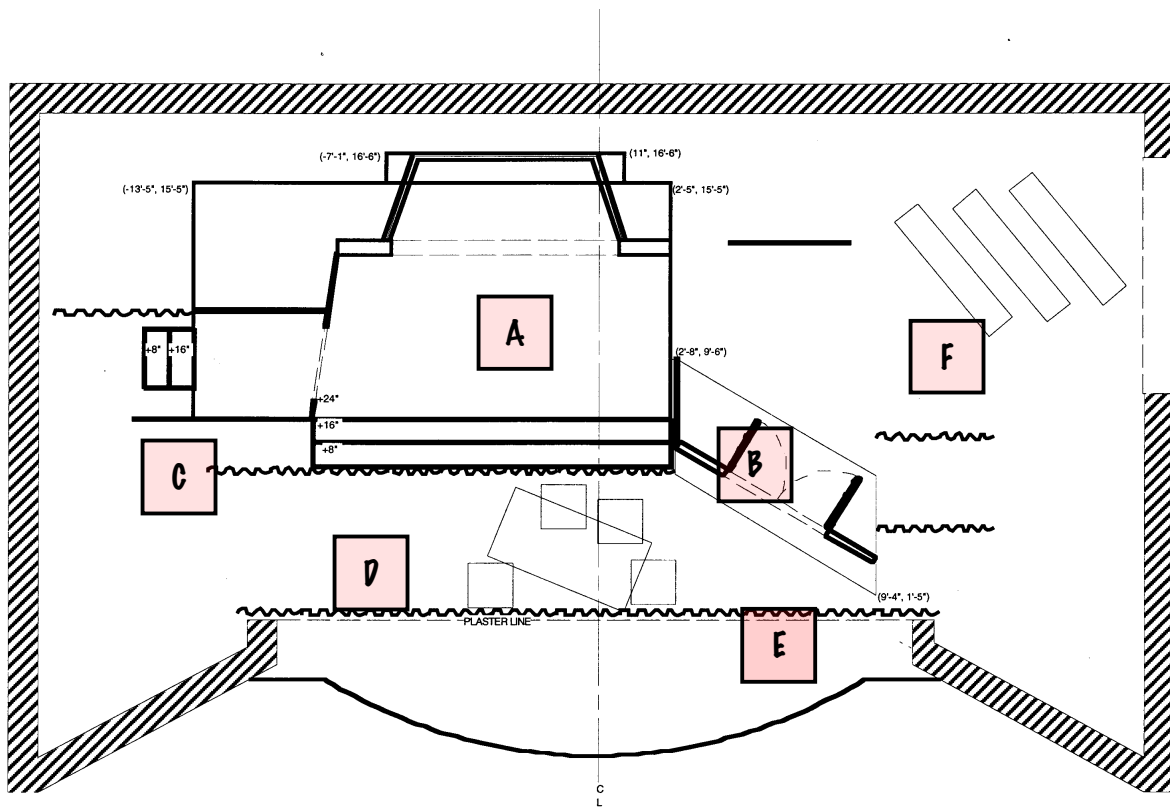
3. **Application:**

The last part of the session is devoted to applying knowledge. This is an opportunity to allow students to test their solutions through class exercises, individual written analysis, or class discussion. The substance of this step in the session is highly relevant to what ideas students have generated and will result in **plans and procedures** ③. Some ideas may inspire original managerial documents and spreadsheets. (It was in this final phase that students created the idea of using tape, along the far walls of each wing, to create a line-up for children, in the order of their entrances for each scene.) The results will be varied depending on the experience and creativity of the students.

PRODUCTION DETAILS

NAME OF PLAY: The Best Christmas Pageant Ever¹

GROUND PLAN:



OLD LYRIC CHRISTMAS PAGEANT
GROUND PLAN SCALE: 1/4"=1'-0"
DRAWN BY MARK ROSS IN MINICAD

The set is designed to provide three different settings. Unit [A], is stationary and serves as the church sanctuary. For scenes that occur in the Bradley dining room, a door unit [B] is moved downstage, and masking [C] is flown in to cover the sanctuary unit, and dining furniture [D] is placed center stage. Some “cross-over” scenes occur downstage of the act curtain [E]. Benches [F] are used in the first scene, for “Sunday School.”

¹ Robinson, Barbara, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Samuel French, Inc., New York, NY, 1983.

COSTUMES: Children will each have one costume (contemporary clothes) over which they will wear various “pageant” clothes: bathrobes and headscarves for shepherds, robes and crowns for Kings, sheep and cows (zip-up with hoods), and angel robes, wings, and halos, etc.

SET SHIFTS: Adults and older children will move large props, furniture, and set pieces.

CAST:

- 10 Adults, 9 children (speaking roles), 20-40 additional children (ages 4-15)
- The play consists of a series of scenes, four in which all children will be present. The children play members of a Sunday school class and take part in the “pageant” in one of the final scenes of the play. Children with speaking roles must remain in the stage area throughout the performance as they are in several other scenes.

MOVEMENT:

- Scene #1: All children present on stage at rise of scene. (See blocking diagram.) Various children exit alone, and in groups, throughout the scene. Several children remain on stage as the scene ends.
- Scene #2: Some children are present, on stage, at rise of scene. Others enter later. (See blocking diagram.) Most children remain on stage at the end of the scene.
 - Costume changes for some of the children in between these scenes.
- Scene #3: Groups of children enter and cross the stage, in various stages of costumes. At one point, the children are directed into the house for the “pageant” entrances. (See blocking diagram.) The scene culminates in “chaos” with children running everywhere.
 - All children change costumes for the next scene.
- Scene #4: This is the “pageant.” Children enter from the aisles of the house and assume their “pageant” positions on stage. The scene ends with everyone on stage.
 - All the children must clear the stage quickly, in a blackout, before the next, and final scene.
- Curtain Call: (See diagram.) Children will return to the stage for bows. All cast will exit, off stage, to change costumes before greeting guests in the lobby.

AUDITIONS:

- The director expects to audition the children in groups of six to eight. They will engage in a short acting exercise to determine basic ability to concentrate, and observe creative potential. The children will then read short excerpts from the script.
- The first audition is a basic screening process to determine which children may be considered for speaking roles, and which ones will interact well as “classmates.”
- The director does not want parents present in the audition space in order to minimize distractions.

The total amount of time any child should expect to spend at the first audition is 45 minutes.

Teaching Session Outlines

SESSION ONE: AUDITIONS

BEFORE AUDITIONS:

1. Brainstorming:

Instructor Prompt: Encourage the class to create a vivid account of finding out about an audition. Insert your own experiences (good and bad) and allow them to share stories. You might begin with a hypothetical scenario: “Seven year old Renaldo is given a flyer from his homeroom teacher, at school. He brings the flyer home to Mom and Dad, and is excited about taking part in the production. As a parent, what information would you expect to find in the audition announcement?”

Brainstorming Chart ① Engage students in keeping a running record of the stories, noting positive and negative aspects.

2. Problem Solving:

Instructor prompts: “One worst case scenario is having no one show up to the audition. What reasons might there be for actors not coming?” “For younger children (4-12 year-olds), parents expect to stay (like they do for sporting events). Can they expect to do the same for this production? What other questions might parents have regarding their involvement?”

Checklist ② Groups create detailed lists of ways to improve the pre-audition experience.

3. Application:

Procedures/Plans ③ Determining how to inform actors, before the auditions relies entirely on your plans for the actual audition process. Once they have completed “During Auditions,” students will discover what procedures and plans are necessary in preparation.

DURING AUDITIONS:

1. Brainstorming:

Instructor Prompt:

“Auditions are the first opportunity for the director and production staff to meet potential actors. More importantly, it is the first time potential actors will meet the staff face-to-face. Put yourself in the role of parent and child. Picture yourself arriving at the theatre. (Hopefully there is enough parking.) Imagine walking through the entrance to the theatre and emerging into the reception area for the auditions. In the best of all possible worlds, what do you see? How are you treated? What is the process that gets you from arrival to departure from the auditions, leaving you satisfied and glad you came?”

“Picture the worst-case scenario, one which leaves the child traumatized, the parents angry, and everyone confused. Describe the environment through sight, sound, and emotional feeling. Finish the following scenario: You arrive at the theatre and you can’t find a parking space. Once you do park, a half-mile away, you reach the theatre only to find all the doors locked. You circle the building and finally find one door unlocked which happens to be 360 degrees from where you started. Upon entering, there is no one in sight, but you can hear a raucous din not too far down the hall, where children are screaming, laughing, crying. . .” (Proceed to Step 2, offering further prompts, as necessary.)

Brainstorming Chart ① Engage students in keeping a running record of the stories, noting positive and negative aspects.

2. Problem Solving:

Instructor Prompts: “Where is the stage manager? Are there assistants? Is the actual audition space the same as the reception area? Is there a distinction between arriving, auditioning, and leaving? Do we know when a new actor has arrived? Are there enough adults to manage the large number of parents and children?”

Checklist ② Groups create detailed list, noting what procedures or information **BEFORE** the auditions would be helpful in preparing actors and their parents.

3. Application:

Procedures/Plans ③

- Class discussion -- Examine how assistants can best be used, and what information would make the process run more smoothly. Draw a ground plan of the theatre space and have students indicate where actors will wait, what route will be used to escort actors to the stage area, where they will be released to their parents, etc. Have the class consider what sort of documentation (forms, letters, charts, ground plans, etc.) would be helpful in the process.
- Homework Assignment: Each student should create a chronological list of how auditions will take place, explaining the role of each of the assistants throughout the process. Also – have each student prepare an example of one of the documents from the discussion (letter to parents, audition form, signs to be posted, etc.).

AFTER AUDITIONS:

1. Brainstorming:

Instructor Prompt:

“The first round of auditions is over and everyone has gone home to wait. What could the actors and parents expect, to complete the process in the most positive and organized fashion? What is the worst-case scenario for actors in this critical time?”

Brainstorming Chart ① Engage students in keeping a running record of the stories, noting positive and negative aspects.

2. Problem Solving:

Instructor Prompts:

“Do you promise to call each child? Do you post a cast list on the door? What would happen if you sent emails? Suppose some families decide not to participate because all six of their children were not cast? What additional information will actors expect should they advance further in the audition process?”

Checklist ② Groups note what procedures or information **BEFORE** and **DURING** the auditions would be helpful in preparing actors and their parents as they wait to find out whether or not they have been cast, called back or not cast.

3. Application:

Procedures/Plans ③ Class discussion – Have the class share their results from group work. (This is a relatively short part of the session.)

SESSION TWO: REHEARSALS

1. Brainstorming:

Instructor Prompts: “The show is finally cast, and actors have been notified about the first rehearsal. Of the 200 children who auditioned, 10 children have been cast in speaking roles, with an additional 34 children who will comprise the rest of the Sunday school class/pageant characters. Picture the first rehearsal. The director plans to get to work with blocking at the first rehearsal. All 44 children are expected. The first rehearsal will be quite exciting for all of them. You can expect an extraordinary amount of energy and anxiety. Imagine the most amazingly positive outcome for the first rehearsal, and all those that follow. Picture yourself at rehearsal. In what roles do you see assistant stage managers, or other staff, in the process? Picture, in detail, what happens as soon as a child is dropped off. Where do they go until they are needed on stage? What do the parents do? How do they behave while they wait to rehearse? How do they behave while they are being blocked? What happens when they exit the stage? Imagine the child finishing rehearsal, completely content when he/she is picked up by a parent.” (Proceed to Step 2, offering further prompts, as necessary.)

“Consider the worst-case scenario. Children are chasing each other around the theatre. No rehearsal can actually occur because the noise level is so loud that no one can hear each other. Some kids have not come to rehearsal at all, while others leave without anyone knowing it. Continue the story.”

Brainstorming Chart ① Create a chart outlining the best and worst-case scenarios of the first, subsequent rehearsals.

- 2. Problem Solving:** Consider your relationship with 1) the director, 2) the children, 3) parents, 4) your stage management staff (assistants).

Instructor Prompt: “Your primary relationship is with the director. The role of stage manager is not always clearly defined, but you can take an active role in determining how you will best serve any production. “

Checklist ② Have students make a list of jobs they will do and the services they can provide. (In this special circumstance of working with children, some directors are inexperienced and don't know how to make the most of the management staff.)

Instructor Prompt: “Determine how you will address your relationship with the children, and how you will address their needs to have their minds occupied, how you can maintain a sense of order, and how you can do it all enthusiastically and positively.”

Checklist ② Groups should answer the following questions:

- “What kind of relationship will there be between staff and children? How many assistants are necessary to provide appropriate leadership and supervision?”
- “What differences might there be, in behavior, depending on the age of the child? How much supervision is required?”
- “How might you involve older children as role models, or leaders?”
- “How do the children know what behavior is appropriate or inappropriate? How can you make this knowledge a part of the first rehearsal, or at auditions?”
- “In what ways can you engage children while they are not actually on stage? Who will supervise?”

Instructor Prompt: What kind of communication will there be with parents? Who will be the liaison between director and parents? (Hopefully you.)

Checklist ② Groups should answer the following questions:

- “How do parents get general messages about rehearsals and scheduling?”
- “How are parents notified if a problem arises with their child?”
- “Who does the parent call with questions?”
- “How can you use parents in the rehearsal/performance process?”

Instructor Prompt: “Determine how many are necessary and what tasks they will each perform.”

Checklist ② Groups should answer the following questions:

- “How will children get from the dressing/waiting area to the stage quietly and effectively?”
- “How will the children know where they need to be before and after each scene?”
- “How will the assistants be sure everyone is in place and ready to make entrances?”

Instructor Prompt: “Be creative in determining how you will handle the blocking process. How can you prevent chaos in the wings and backstage?”

Checklist ② Groups should answer the following questions:

- “What policies, procedures, documents, etc., could be implemented at the first rehearsal, *before* the first rehearsal, or in the audition process, to prevent problems, or facilitate productive rehearsals?”
- “The children must learn songs. Some of the songs are sung only by ‘Angels,’ while others include all the children. The production opens in three weeks. How can the rehearsal time be maximized?”

Checklist ② Given a ground plan, groups should make a list of ways to take blocking and communicate with children.

- “Let’s imagine that the director is organized and will ‘pre-block’ all the large group scenes. (See Production Notes for details on scenes.) The director would like to know specific heights of all the children so he/she can block the scenes most easily. How can you get this information as quickly as possible?”
- “How can you maintain organization backstage? How do you make sure children get to the stage in time to make entrances? How do you maintain quiet while children wait to enter the stage, and when they exit?”

3. Application:

In-Class Exercise: Using the ground plan (Entrances for Group Scene #1) have students arrange the actors in single-file lines, in respective wings, in the order in which they enter, beginning with those who are “on stage” at the top of the scene. Have them put down a tapeline, with names (in the order of entrances), beginning downstage and leading upstage, along the “stage left wall.” If you have enough students, have them be the actors and practice getting them on stage.

Homework: Each student turns in a plan, as with auditions, which outlines movement of children before, during, and after each scene in the play.

Documents: Allow students to create documents or plans to implement some of the solutions they created in the process. For example, have them make a hypothetical Excel chart, listing the ages and heights of each child. Allow the program to sort the sizes and ages. (This would help a director to block group scenes, and would help to assign older children in leadership roles.)

SESSION THREE: PERFORMANCES

4. Brainstorming:

Instructor Prompt: “The show is finally through the last rehearsals and is ready for performance. Picture children being dropped off by parents and skipping to the dressing/waiting area. Everyone has arrived on time and the children are remarkably well behaved; yet excited. They make it to the stage area, perform their scenes, change costumes, make it back on stage in time for the next scene, and return quietly to the waiting area after the curtain call. They clean up their space, hang their costumes, and skip off to meet their families.” (It can happen!)

“Describe the opposite scenario, beginning with ‘It’s half hour past call time and half dozen children have still not arrived...’”

Brainstorming Chart ① Engage students in keeping a running record of the stories, noting positive and negative aspects.

5. Problem Solving:

Instructor Prompt: “Most problems that occur during performances can be prevented through routine procedures and plans that were implemented for the rehearsal process. What information, communication, systems, etc., can be used to achieve the positive outcome of the first image?”

Checklist ② Groups create detailed lists of ways to improve the pre-audition experience.

6. Application:

Procedures/Plans ③ Homework: Have students determine procedures for arriving, setting up, getting ready for first entrance, cleaning up, and getting picked up.