

Staging the Opera

Logical questions
Improvisation
Body movement

The staging process begins in the early stages of script writing through the development of setting and characters. When there is adequate time taken for students to fully explore **Where**, **Who** and **What**, they have a better idea of how to stage their opera for performance. Group discussion, lead by logical questioning, and improvisation can help students become aware of their opera's setting and character's behavior and logic.

Help the students become aware of their body movement with creative drama improvisations before writing begins (see Theatre Games pg. 18).



Getting the students physically involved the first day, singing and moving, along with creating the story and libretto through improvisation, helps them jump into staging. Many of the difficult staging ideas are worked out during the improvisation process. It also helps the students understand the difference between live performance, movies, and television.



Pre-blocking Activities:

? While the music specialist works on the opera notation continue to utilize creative drama activities and theatre games to facilitate student's development of character.

? Improvise scenes from the opera to work out difficult action moments in the opera. Give all the students a chance to experiment.

? Have students create costumes from "found" clothing. Have a costume parade, or fashion show with students taking turns being the announcer.

Announcers describe the outfit and tell about characteristics of the character modeling. Have the students walk like all the characters in the opera.



? The drama specialist or teacher discusses “**Theatre Magic**”, *sharing the secrets or conventions of live theatre and opera that make all performances successful.*



They must want to know in order for you to share:

Theatre Magic:

Stage
Backstage
Center
Stage

? **Demonstrate the aspects of the stage.** Draw a diagram of the stage on the board if you are in the classroom. If you are in the schools theatre you can show them the physical aspects of the stage.

? **Show** them where the audience sits, where the front of the stage is on the diagram and backstage.

? **Begin with center stage!** Ask the students what they think the most important part of the stage is. Most of the time the students know, and they know good logical reasons why! It is the strongest point on the stage. It is the most important part of the stage because everyone can see it. The **most important action in opera should occur Center Stage.** Most important or strong characters use this space. The strong characters can, and do, change throughout a good story. Help them identify important action, the location (setting) where most of the action occurs, and strong or dominant characters throughout their story.

? Many times students will think that the front is the most important part of the stage. Tell them it is very important. Actors can be seen and heard when they come forward on the stage.

Stage Right
Stage Left
Raked
Stage

? Teach them about **Stage Right** and **Stage Left**. Talk about the stage being **raked (like half a hill)** during Shakespeare’s time instead of the audience. The terms **Upstage** and **Downstage** meant going up to the back of the stage and coming down the stage to the front.

Downstage
Upstage

? Talk about **Downstage** being the front of the stage. Ask them what happens when actors are downstage (“they are heard better”, “can be seen”). Most of the action takes place downstage. **Upstage** is in the back. Scenery is in the **back** ground to show location. Have the students place the locations in their opera on the diagram. Settings where important action or most of the action occurs will have their location (scenery) at **Upstage Center**.

Upstage
Center
Curtain

Thumbnail
Sketch

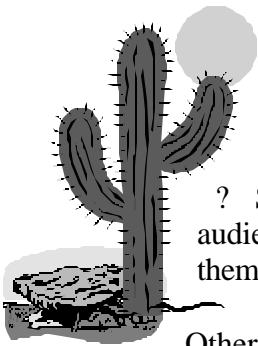
? Have them add the remaining settings on the stage diagram. *Students will plan with their teacher at a later time exactly what their costumes and scenery will look like. This is simply creating a thumbnail sketch. A thumbnail is a quick drawing of ideas or plans to help the design later.*

? All the locations needed to tell the opera's story should be on the stage, **No more than three**. Absolutely, **no scene changes at all K-5. The curtain goes up (opens) at the beginning of the opera and does not come down (close) until the end**. Middle school can dabble in simple and well thought-out scene changes.

MINIMALISTIC = MINI = SMALL = AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE = LESS IS MORE

? *Opera by Children* utilizes **Minimalistic** theatre conventions. Teach the children the word *minimalistic*. It is a theatre word based on a smaller word we use in everyday English. Ask, "Who can find a smaller word in the beginning of this one?" They will identify the word *mini* or *minimal*. Have the students define mini or minimal. They will come up with answers like, "mini is small" or "Minimal means a little bit of something".

To stage the opera *minimalistic*, use very few props, scenery and costumes. A true *minimalistic* theatre production might produce a play with the actors all dressed in black using a black box or a ladder painted black in front of black curtains. Tell them they don't have to do everything in black, but they must remember to keep everything simple as they plan the staging of their opera.



Example: One cactus plant and a rock will show the audience they are in a desert. Brown sweats and a headband with dog-ears will show you are a dog.

? Solos or small groups of singers need to be downstage, close to the audience. If microphones are to be used, talk about microphones and how to use them.

Other important theatre secrets that must be communicated are:

- Bodies at a Slant** ? **Always face the audience**
- Cheating** ? Performers place their bodies at a **slant** when singing to each other one on one or in small groups. **This is called cheating. It is okay to cheat in an opera.**
- Less is More** ? Be sure **all characters can be seen and heard** during the opera. It is each performer's responsibility to make sure they can be seen. If someone stands in front of you, **move!** Do not stand in front of someone who is singing or is part of major action during the opera. Be aware of your surroundings.
- Logical Vital** ? **Strong characters stand firm.** They don't *wiggle* and *fidget*. *Weak* characters do.
- ? **Less is more! Let your audience use their imaginations!**
- ? There should be at least three blocking moves per page of libretto. Be sure the performers are making logical and vital movements for their character by helping identify their characters motivation.
- No Parallel or Perpendicular moves**

? There should not be parallel or perpendicular moves on the stage. Make movement creative and interesting; big movements that can be seen.

Stage Tour:

? The first trip to the stage is always chaotic. The students will explore the stage, so make it part of your plan.

Lights
Stage
Curtain

? Use a quick tour of the stage as a reward for concentrating and running through the entire opera in their classroom!



the teacher

? Schedule the stage for a 10-20 minute block of time with before your visit to ensure its availability.

? Show the children the lights, the stage and the curtains. Talk to them about how these are tools actors use to create *magic*, to transport an audience somewhere else.

? Take the children on the stage. Allow the children to look behind the curtains with your guidance. Have them see how the curtains hide things off stage and how it is distracting when they are touched because they wiggle.

? This is a good time to review “stage magic” elements or introduce them if they haven’t been discussed.

? Next, have them stand stage right, stage left, center stage, upstage and downstage when called out by the teacher or drama specialist for a theatre game.

? Let the students ask questions. Let the students explore.

The First Rehearsal:

Breath
support

? After the performers are cast (See *Audition and Casting*), have them sing through the entire opera, each character singing his/her own part. Make sure they use good breath support and projection.

Projection

? A 5-10 minute warm-up exercise focusing on the muscles used to control breath and diction will help prepare them for use. It will also help focus the student’s attention during the rehearsal.

? Sing through the entire opera twice. Try a third sing through without the CD vocal track for a challenge.

The Second Rehearsal:

Background

? **Have each student invent a background for his or her character, especially chorus parts or small cameo roles that haven’t been given a**

Cameo role

name. Each performer must know their character’s name and who they are in the community. What they do for a job and hobbies. They need to know how their character reacts to action in the play within this context.

All the characters need to know these details so that they know how the characters react with one another.

? Performers can **tell one another their information in character**, i.e. *who* their parents are, *how many* people are in their family, etc. (This is really fun when the story is based on animals or fantasy characters).

? **“Character Courts”** are a fun way to pass this information. One character stands in front of the group. The group asks questions about that character and his or her relationship is to them. This is repeated for each character.



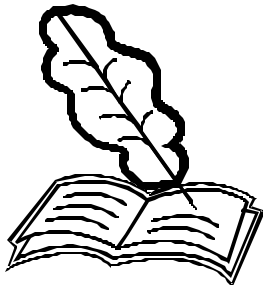
? **Interpretation and expression** need to be the focus of the sing-through during this practice. Performers should use facial and vocal expression. Help them identify what it is they desire to express. Have them do exercises of emphasis. What words are important to carry meaning? For example, “Look at that Frisbee playing dog!” What emphasis brings different meanings? Read the lines to find emphasis, then sing them and add expression.

Rough Blocking:

(Never rehearse for more than 60 minutes)

Blocking
Let the
Children do
it

- 1- **Take each scene one at a time**. It takes about 45 minutes to stage 3-5 minutes of the opera. Allow plenty of time for staging. It takes a lot of time to draw out ideas from the kids. It would be much easier for you to tell them what to do. Do not fall into this age-old theatre technique. This is your student’s opera and you have to let them be their own directors. Help guide them in making it possible to communicate ***their ideas on the stage***.
- 2- Have the students **review their stage diagram** for the setting locations. Have the students go to the stage location where their character lives or begins the opera. Have the characters move where it feels natural on the stage. Ask the characters why the action works or doesn’t work. Help them identify this by asking **“Is this a good choice?”** and **“Is there a better choice?”** Open it up to the group, **“Does anyone have an idea?”** Be sure their ideas are believable. Remind them **this will be a live performance, not a movie**.



- 3- When the group agrees on believable blocking for the action have them write it down on their libretto or score. The teacher should also ***write it down*** as a reference for future run-throughs. This will help everyone remember the good choices that were made.

- 4- At this point, the group must identify if more music is needed to

allow clear and understandable blocking to occur. If you have live accompaniment, the pianist may vamp, repeat the interlude music several times. If not, the music specialist must be contacted by the teacher and a request made for additional music. ? ? ? ? ?

Polish Rehearsal (Run-through):



secrets of theatre magic. (Face the audience! Which is your upstage hand? Remember, not to cross in front of the action. Can everyone be seen?) Ask them why these things are important.

- 1- Once all the scenes have been blocked, review the scenes. Begin acting-out the blocking. Stop and review the good choices written down during the rough blocking rehearsals if needed. **New discoveries can be made and refinements, but they must be instigated from the performers themselves.** Keep reminding them of the secrets of theatre magic. (Face the audience! Which is your upstage hand? Remember, not to cross in front of the action. Can everyone be seen?) Ask them why these things are important.
- 2- Stop and **match characterization, motivation, and emotion with the blocking.** Remind them of the character choices they made.
- 3- Focus on the chorus characters. Help them remember the choices they made and have them **react** to situation in character. Have them come up with **stage business** (activities the character does utilizing props or pantomime). What are they doing? If their character is always grumpy have them tell you how they would react to certain situations that arise in the opera. Ask, “What does your face and body look like when you are grumpy?” Ask them to tell you who they are, their name and other background information.
- 4- Practice problem areas. You may practice scenes in different order. If you never seem to get to the end of the opera before the bell rings, start with the last scene first, and then begin at the start.

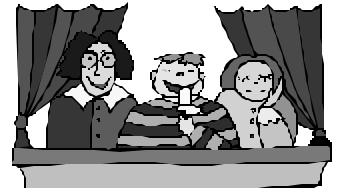
Dress Rehearsals:

- ? Should be as much like a real performance as possible. The students should be in costume using all props and scenery to be used in performance.
- ? Praise the students for all their efforts! *Absolutely*, no shouting or coaching while they practice.
- ? Use microphones if you plan to use them for a school performance.
- ? Clap for the students when they are finished.
- ? Evaluate, with them, their performance. Ask them what they felt went well. Ask them what they would improve if they could do it again. Let them know what you thought went well. Ask them how they might improve the parts they felt they wanted to do better.



Performance:

☞ This is the grand reward for all the hard work. The children must have confidence in their performing abilities to succeed. If the process has been followed precisely the performers will have the confidence and knowledge that no matter what they do on stage it is the right action or choice.



In a nutshell your students need to know:

Performer's Objectives:

- 1- Have an understanding of their character and maintain their character throughout run-throughs, dress rehearsals and performances.
- 2- Conduct oneself in a professional manner by being respectful of other's ideas, being where they are suppose to, being memorized on assigned dates.
- 3- Record the staging that the group decides upon so it can be reviewed and remembered during subsequent rehearsals and performance.
- 4- Project voice while speaking and singing, so that the audience easily hears them.
- 5- Cheat forward to the audience.
- 6- Act with appropriate emotion and motivation.
- 7- Be prepared and creative in helping the show go on if it doesn't go as planned.



Student Director/Stage Manager Objectives:

(Note: Children should all be actors. If you are working with Junior or Senior High School Students, you may use the following suggestions. Otherwise, the children direct themselves.)

- 1- Keep a complete record of the group's blocking
- 2- Learn all cues.
- 3- Learn all the parts so he or she can play any of them if someone can't.
- 4- Learn to supervise peers.
- 5- Learn to develop initiative.
- 6- Be sure the stage has appropriate props and scenery in place before each rehearsal begins.
- 7- Help to see if actors are communicating the desired emotion and motivation they wish to communicate. Help make suggestions on how to make them match.

Now I know the Process, But Why and How Do I Do It?

Drama Specialist and Teacher Objectives:

(Teachers can and should do as much of the process as possible!)

1- Enable the class to write and participate in an appropriate opera

- ? Assist the children and ensure all participate in writing, creating and performing their opera.
- ? The opera they create will be uplifting (funny or serious) and will contain no vulgar language or behaviors.
- ? The subject material will not glamorize unworthy elements of life, history or society.
- ? 10-15 minutes in length.
- ? Simple in plot, music, scenery, costume and staging.
- ? A definite beginning, middle and end.
- ? A problem to solve and resolution of that problem.
- ? All children onstage the whole opera.
- ? A moral- a reason *why* the story is told.

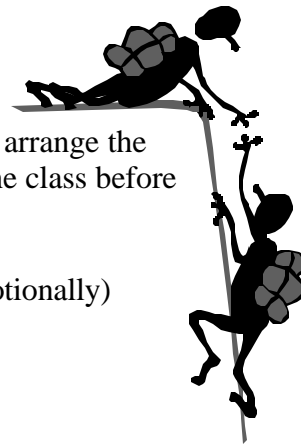
2- Let go of control

- ? Be a facilitator, not a dictator.
- ? This is the student's opera. They must own the work.
- ? Help the students become creators, performers, directors and managers of their opera. When this happens they will be successful and perform with confidence.



3- Create an atmosphere, which is comfortable, non-judgmental and supportive

- ? Teacher and drama specialist plan together how to arrange the classroom or secure a proper space to work with the class before a scheduled drama visit.
- ? Begin a drama session by establishing opera rules
 - A- No one gets hurt (physically or emotionally)
 - B- Treat everyone with *respect*
 - C- Everyone participates
 - D- This is your opera- OWN IT!
 - E- Nothing vulgar or disgusting
- ? Build trust through group creative drama activities, praising their efforts. Have fun!
- ? Sing and do group echo chants and tongue twisters.
- ? Allow the children to be creative and successful by validating their ideas, while communicating the information, skills and techniques necessary for effective acting, singing and dancing.
- ? Keep everyone involved and creating.
- ? Maintain an atmosphere of creativity within boundaries.
- ? Always give clear instruction.



- ? Create trust by asking before you tell. Praise all answers.
- ? Draw answers out of students with leading questions. Leading questions should not have a predetermined answer, but rather no answer at all. Leading questions provide a way to encourage students to think of creative solutions to the your questions.
- ? Encourage students to take risks.
- ? Answer all their questions.
- ? Listen.

4- Bring a feeling of Inspiration.



- ? Encouraging appropriate expression. Help students recognize when things go well. Ask them what they think went well. Then ask them what they think they can improve. Help them build on these moments.

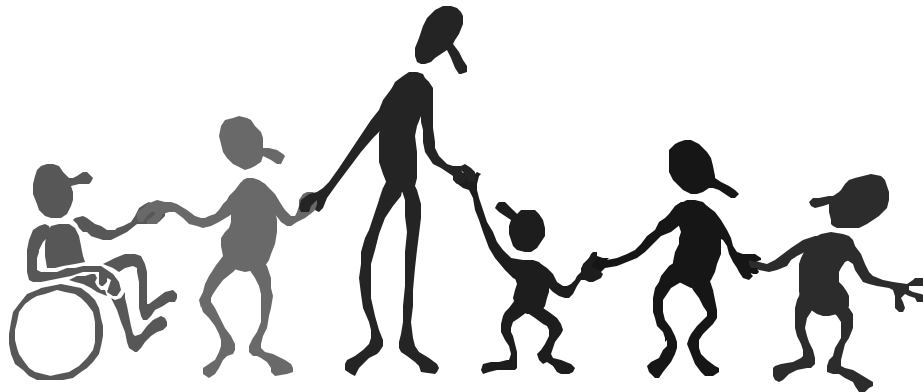
5- Specialists:

- ? Only visit a class when the teacher will be there to assist you, the drama specialist, while in his or her classroom.
- ? Train the teacher to expand his or her involvement in the process for the future.
- ? The presence of the teacher also keeps the opera process consistent

Teachers

- ? Reschedule with the drama specialist if you can't be there.

6- Validate everyone



- ? Tell the students over and over how wonderful, fabulous, clever, talented, fun, smart, and creative they are. (This may be the only time during the day when each child in the class can be all of those things.)

- ? Tell the teachers what a great job they are doing helping the children discover their opera through their encouragement and support.
- ? Tell the specialist thank you.
- ? Encourage the teacher's efforts to let students have control of the opera. Teachers are trained in methods of classroom control. Letting go of control is very difficult.
- ? Involve the teacher during each of your visits. Teachers need to be part of the process. Just like you, they are not to dictate. If this continually occurs ask the students if they wish to keep or change the suggestions.
- ? If the drama specialist dictates, notify supervisor.
- ? Do not undermine the teacher's authority.

7- Be a mirror for the students

- ? The Children's performance will be successful when they have the confidence that whatever choice they make onstage is the right choice.
- ? If they have been the decision makers with the teacher or drama specialist reassuring them that what they want communicated is working or helping them modify their choices to match what they desire, they will be able to perform successfully.
- ? The students tell you what they wish the scene to look like and you are the reflection when you tell them what you saw. Ask them if that is what they wanted. They will make adjustments as needed.
- ? Your praise lets them know it was good. They will repeat what worked!

8- Let them go! Now that the opera is completed, allow the children to rehearse in relaxed and happy – non-controlling – manner. When they perform, sit back and enjoy the show. They own it. They know it. Cheer them on!

