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The Wonderful World of the Musical

By Susan Poliniak

The challenges and joys of presenting high school and middle school musicals are myriad—and, due to the many variables involved, often unlike those of choral concerts, band concerts, or just about anything else that you may encounter as a teacher. With so many moving parts, it's easy to feel overwhelmed, especially if you're new to the game. That's why we've spoken with several school musical theatre directors to learn about their experiences and hear their recommendations, not just for producing a great show but also for ensuring that the show provides a great educational opportunity for students. Each director has a different approach and takes on different duties within a production, but all of them have learned what's required to keep everything running smoothly.



Sharing the Stage

When getting a production off the ground, it's essential to determine who's doing what early on. Matt Wehr, the choral director at Southern Lehigh High School in Center Valley, Pennsylvania, directs that school's theatrical productions (the most recent being *West Side Story*, which won a 2009 Freddy Award for outstanding achievement in local Pennsylvania and New Jersey high school musical theater), but he makes sure he has a strong support staff. "My 'regular' team is composed of a hired choreographer and our high school instrumental director," he explains. "Both our technology education and art departments assist when they are able in creating specialized props, programs, posters, etc. Also, as an outgrowth and outreach component of the high school program, I advise my students in assuming the tasks of director, choreographer, etc. in creating the middle school musical each spring."

Melissa Steward, choir director at Blaine High School in Blaine, Minnesota, has a very specific job in her school's musicals. "I am only responsible for teaching the students the songs of the show," she says. "I like that I am doing what I'm trained to do and feel good about the division

of labor. It is challenging to come up with a schedule for both acting rehearsals and singing rehearsals. My theater director takes my input for how many rehearsals I think I need for each number and works out a schedule.”

Other directors have to don many hats, but also delegate a few chapeau-wearing responsibilities. Kyle Weary, vocal department head of the Barbara Ingram School for the Arts, a public high school in Hagerstown, Maryland, has “done everything from directing an entire musical by myself to being just the music or stage director. I learned very early that if I wanted to remain a sane teacher during musical season, I had to employ the help of others so that my students were getting the best of me in rehearsal and in the classroom.”

As a former middle school vocal music teacher, Victor V. Bobetsky—now an associate professor and director of music education at Hunter College in New York City—has been in charge of many shows himself, and is an advocate of delegation. “It is extremely important to involve as many teachers and students as possible in the production of the musical so that the entire school has a stake in the production’s success. Never try to cover everything yourself. If your school has no drama, art, or dance teachers, you may need to reach out to the community to find people who can help you. My book *The Magic of Middle School Musicals* [MENC/Rowman & Littlefield] explains what the drama, art, and dance teachers, the lighting, sound, and tech advisors, and the wardrobe and makeup helpers actually do, so that the music teacher can become knowledgeable enough to delegate and supervise these activities when necessary.”

Show Selection

The process of choosing a show can be challenging and frequently dictated by personnel or budgetary constraints, but there are certain general criteria that should always be taken into account by directors. Wehr notes that four ideas factor into his calculations: “What haven’t we done? What students do we have? Will this be an audience-seller? Does it drive the creativity of our staff?”

Bobetsky adds, “Is the music going to be singable for the students I am working with? Will the topic of the show be interesting to the students and engage their enthusiasm and imaginations?” He also recommends that the show be a pedagogical tool: “Could the theme possibly constitute a unit of study involving different subject areas?”

Kyle Weary has used an innovative approach that gets the audience involved and can help to fill seats at curtain time. “In the program for the current musical, I would include a survey sheet that has a list of shows that I would consider doing the following year. I would then choose a show that my audience would want to come and see (one of the top three that they would pick from my list). As an added bonus for me, I would have people include their contact information, and then before tickets would go on sale the next year, I would send them a reminder postcard.”

Casting Call

You’ve chosen your show, but now it’s time to select and prepare your performers and begin rehearsals. Weary advises looking for students who are quick studies: “I hold an open vocal

rehearsal for students to learn a song from the show to audition with. This way, I can see who catches on quickly and who is prepared before they audition. After auditions, I tend to teach music first and then add choreography and staging.”

“Auditions are a combination of a singing and dancing performance,” notes Wehr, who conducts a rigorous screening process. “We look for students who exhibit talent in both, as well as a great attitude and work ethic. In preparing students for the show, I typically start the rehearsal process with music. I run the full ensemble numbers as I would a choral rehearsal, and schedule time to work individually with soloists. Students are taught the show in a very programmed sequence that allows them to master each step of the show progressively. We approach a new number each week.”

Bobetsky advocates an integrated approach. “Make the learning and performance of the musical part of the choral curriculum. Involve the entire chorus in the show. This shifts the perception of the musical as an extracurricular activity to one where it is a legitimate part of the chorus class. You can create written objectives and evaluations based on the National Standards to show what you expect your students to achieve. Teach some of the solo numbers to the entire chorus at the very beginning of the semester. That way, students who want to audition for a particular part will already be familiar with the material.”

Filling the Pit

Whether you populate your pit with students or professionals, every show needs musicians. “I always get the music out to the pit a couple of weeks before the first rehearsal,” Weary says. “After they’ve had time to work on their parts, I put the group together for a run-through. If they’re high school students or volunteers, I will have more rehearsals; with professionals, I expect everything to be just about perfect when we do the run-through since they are getting paid.”

“If the school has a band or orchestra and the students are capable of being part of the instrumental accompaniment, by all means use them and make the learning and performing of the music part of the curriculum for those classes,” Bobetsky advises. “If the students can’t handle the whole score, but could manage one or two numbers, use them for those. If your school does not have a band or orchestra program and you want the accompaniment to consist of more than piano alone, you may want to consider using a small ensemble (keyboard, bass, and percussion).”





Dressing the Stage (and the Players)

For creating the “physical” elements of the show—sets and costumes—parents and other volunteers are an invaluable resource. “We are blessed to have a number of dads in construction or with a particular knack for it,” remarks Wehr. “The moms of the students sew the costumes from scratch. We also have a wonderful group of adult and student artists for the set.”

Delegation is the way to go if you have a general idea of what’s needed but are not adept in all areas of production. Weary confesses that “costuming is an area I’ve always hated dealing with—not because I don’t know what I want, but because I don’t know how to make it. I typically have a parent that is crafty and a good sewer, and put them in charge of costuming. I am not a builder, so I also try to find a parent that is a good craftsman to do set design.” Bobetsky recommends that directors make the production a school-wide project: “At the beginning of the year, tell everyone in the school community what kinds of costumes and props you will need and ask for their help in finding or donating these items. The school’s art teacher and art students should manage the scenery and set design. If you have no art teacher, find an artist in the community to supervise the hands-on art activities.”

Come One, Come All

Volunteers needn’t be relegated to only the “hard labor” of crafting costumes and constructing sets, however. “I recruit volunteers to do EVERYTHING now: ticket sales, cast party, ushering, concessions, etc.,” Weary notes.

Wehr has noticed that highly detailed requests serve the dual purpose of filling volunteer jobs and ensuring that those volunteers don’t feel taken advantage of. “Parents, students, and faculty respond to very specific calls and requests for help. We have a meeting at the beginning where parents are able to sign up for all aspects of help that are needed. It is a very efficient use of their time. It really does make them feel needed when we ask and then they make sure to respond.”

Budgetary Concerns

For most directors, there is one crucial issue that looms above all others: the budget. Financial situations can vary widely from school to school, as many teachers who have directed a production in more than one locale may attest.

There is, of course, one way to get around the issue, or at least make it less of an issue. “I try to do some fundraisers,” says Weary. “A dinner theatre matinee is always a great sell. Do spaghetti—it’s cheap! Lots of presold tickets are also key to having a successful year. I also sell ads for my program. It’s like free money; I can use it wherever I need it.”

Bobetsky notes that there are several common budgetary challenges, and he offers ways to conquer them: “If you do not have a capable student or faculty pianist who can handle the piano/vocal score, explain to your school administration that a good pianist is essential to the success of the show and arrange to pay this person either through school or PTA funds. Also, do your investigating early in the planning stages and let your administration know in plenty of time what your royalty and rental fees will be. It may be tough scraping up the money the first time, and you may need the help of the PTA or to do some fundraising. However, after the success of your first musical, get your administration to factor the approximate costs of royalty and rental fees for future musicals into future years’ budgets.”



Lend Me a Tenor (and a Few Baritones, Too)

It should come as no surprise that another common problem is finding enough boys to participate on stage. “My biggest challenge in putting together musicals is the amount of tenors required to put on a show,” Steward says. “I haven’t always been successful at finessing that problem.”

Wehr has one suggestion for dealing with a lack of male involvement: “Making theatre cool has been a tremendous success for us. As a smaller school, maintaining boys in the program is a major issue. We have solved this by reaching out and making the theatre program a component of the high school at large so that it is accepted. Many of the guys on stage are also on the football field—possibly our biggest coup to date!”

Troupers’ Advice

What final words of wisdom do our experts have for their fellow directors? Steward suggests “getting as much input as you can from others who have done the show before. Most directors want to share their ideas and frustrations.”

Weary advises directors to “do everything by the book. Don’t add stuff, don’t delete stuff. This is someone’s work that you are representing, so if you need to change or adapt it, contact them for permission.”

“Reach out to the administration, faculty, student body, and community, as you will need their support in order to succeed,” Wehr says. “The focus needs to always be on the students. Remember that we are here to educate. Those skills learned on the stage are in demand no matter what path a student will follow after graduation.”

Bobetsky reminds directors to “enjoy yourself as you move through the various phases of putting on your show. It’s a great creative experience for you and your students, and it gives you an opportunity to bond with them. The important thing is to share with them the joy of musical theatre and to give them the opportunity to explore their talents and gain confidence.”

Considerations for Middle School Students

“This is one thing that’s very important,” Kyle Weary emphasizes. “Don’t have students singing music that isn’t vocally appropriate for them. Yes, *Annie* is a great musical, but most girls can’t sing the orphan parts. The Broadway Junior [from Music Theater International, broadwayjr.com] and Getting to Know (G2K) series [from Hal Leonard, halleonard.com] are great because they are voiced for middle school voices, so the keys have been changed. The other reason that I like these series is the support you get with doing them. They’re budget-friendly, and you can have just piano accompaniment or you can use the fully orchestrated CD that is provided to give your students the opportunity to sing with an orchestra (even if it is recorded).”

“Whenever you’re working with middle school students,” Victor Bobetsky cautions, “you will have to do some arranging of the music so that the boys have parts they can handle within their sometimes limited ranges. I would avoid considering a show for your middle school students where the vocal score is overly difficult to begin with.”

Top Picks

We asked our four experts to recommend musicals for middle and high school. Here’s what they chose.

Beauty and the Beast

Kyle Weary notes that it has “great characters, great music, and many opportunities to showcase talented students (both singers and non-singers).” Melissa Steward seconds the notion that this is one to consider.

Grease

Weary cautions that “you have to be careful because most people are familiar with the movie version, which is different from the stage version. Don’t even think about adding the songs from the movie that aren’t in the stage version. You will get into trouble!”

Seussical

Steward and Weary both recommend this one. Weary: “I love this show for so many reasons, mostly because it’s funny. Don’t be fooled, though. It’s almost completely sung through and the vocal parts are demanding on every singer, from the leads to the ensemble.”

West Side Story

Matt Wehr, who believes in choosing the classics, recommends this as “a magnificent choice if

Matt Wehr, who believes in choosing the classics, recommends this as “a magnificent choice if you have the singers and dancers.”

Fiddler on the Roof

“This is a timeless classic with enough material to keep everyone busy,” according to Wehr.

“And it allows you to involve younger students from other elementary and middle schools.”

Victor Bobetsky has also had success with *Fiddler* as a high school show.

Little Shop of Horrors* and *Damn Yankees

Bobetsky has had “great success at the middle school level with these two. The shows’ themes (a monster plant and baseball) always engage the boys, and it is so important to get them enthusiastic about being part of the show.”

South Pacific

“I’ve seen this work very well at the high school level,” says Bobetsky. “The themes are more adult, the stories involve more romance, and the high school students respond well to this.”

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