Getting the word out

How to create effective press releases and programs

BY RANDY HINES AND ERIK VIKER

IT'S OPENING NIGHT and as a director you've thought of everything—the costumes, the set, even the fake food the actors will pretend to eat in Act III. But there's a good chance you might have overlooked two essentials of effective school theatre departments: pre-production promotional materials and the all-important but often neglected show program. Here are some pointers on handling both the press and the playbill that will fill your house on opening night and ensure your show is remembered long after the curtain has come down. Let's begin with the issue of news releases.

Newspaper offices receive enough stories to fill a recycling dumpster on a regular basis. Editors will use the few good ones and gladly toss the others aside. Sometimes even public relations experts write lousy releases, which is why on average nine out of ten are ignored. Once you learn the secret to getting into the keep pile, you'll see more stories about your drama department showing up in print.

Journalists want news, and here's how they want it:

Timely. Nothing will annoy an editor more than getting a good story tip that arrives too late to use. Familiarize yourself with the deadlines of your town's daily newspaper and keep in mind that the entertainment section might run on Thursdays, but the editor might require articles be in by noon on Tuesday or even earlier. Get your copy there long before the deadline in case the section fills up quickly. A side benefit of prompt action is the possibility of higher quality coverage; extra days give journalists time to ask for more details and get answers to questions.
Local. The editor of *USA Today* will not consider your local production newsworthy but all the daily and non-daily papers that cover your school district are prime prospects. If someone with a leading role lives on the fringes of your city but close to a neighboring weekly paper, send an article with her name and address in the opening paragraph to that suburban publication. You will be making it easy for that reporter or section editor to justify using your news release as a springboard for a longer article.

Objective. News states the facts, not opinions. If you want to avoid the recycle bin, make sure your release does not include descriptions of how great, funny, or elaborate your production will be. When you do want to use a subjective statement, make sure it is surrounded by quotation marks. Make any direct quotes worthwhile, avoiding comments about factual or mundane issues, such as, “The performance will begin at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday,” said drama coach Sandy Saxman.

Unique. What is special about this performance? Is this the first time the play has been performed in this country? Is it the first time the playwright has allowed a high school to attempt it? Will the playwright attend? Is this the first performance in a new or remodeled auditorium? Is this the first musical your school has attempted after years of serious drama? Editors like to see such qualifying words as first, latest, largest, and last.

Brief. With the exception of earth-shattering stories, most newspaper articles run 10” or 15”, so condense your press release to a maximum of two double-spaced pages. Eliminate every extra word. Newspapers appeal to a wide audience by using short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs, so you should try to do the same. Copy the writing style you see in the local papers, and double check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Follow journalistic style
The opening paragraph of a newspaper article, called the lead, communicates the crucial aspects of the story in roughly two sentences. Follow this example as you write your press release, and use your school letterhead so the newspaper knows the source of the article (or create your own letterhead) and include a contact person’s e-mail address and telephone numbers. If the reporter has a question about your release, the director or drama teacher should be available to answer such inquiries.

You’ll also notice that journalists avoid using technical jargon. In your public relations materials, use common terminology even for theatre terms that every cast member knows. A reporter doesn’t want to seem ignorant by asking you what you mean by “counterweight rigging scenery.” If the journalist doesn’t know the meaning of a particular phrase or term, neither will a majority of the audience.

Think of all media
Newspapers are not the only outlets for your press releases. Consider local radio stations that often run news announcements about theatrical productions prior to each performance. Public Service Announcements are free advertising opportunities broadcast by most radio and television stations. As PSA time is limited, you should send a brief but thorough announcement of your event, following the classic “who, what, when, where, and how” journalistic formula. Unlike paid advertising, you do not have an option to include artwork or photographs, and you may not even have a guarantee the PSA will be used, but chances are good that even a few airings will garner some attention. When approaching radio stations for airtime, consider the fact that many students probably already know about the play. Don’t make the mistake of restricting your pitches to their favorite rock or hip-hop stations. If a station is especially popular with arts-loving adults in the community, make sure you target that station for your announcement. You may even use the same or similar text for online bulletins, another free-of-charge publicity outlet sometimes offered by chambers of commerce, internet service providers, and online editions of many newspapers.

Cable television is another good venue for promoting your show because there is often at least one channel devoted to a community news bulletin board. Check with the cable company public service announcement deadlines, which are often two weeks prior to the event. If you are in the coverage area of a local television station, send its public service director information about your performance and final dress rehearsal two or three weeks ahead of time. An assignment editor may be able to squeeze you into the schedule, resulting in a television news feature and substantial free publicity.

Creating the show program
The kind of pre-production promotion described above should attract an audience beyond that of your guaranteed base of high school students and parents of cast members. Now that you’ve done the proper PR work, it’s time to focus your attention to creating a program that will represent well the sophistication and quality of the performance that the audience is about to witness.

When creating such a program, it’s important to remember that while the audience’s experience of your performance may end in about two hours, the playbill may be saved for years as a reminder of the event. The program is an official publication of your theatre department and school, and in some cases is the only way to recognize the many behind-the-scenes contributions that lead to a successful opening night. Careful advance planning, a good design, and thorough editing are necessary to guarantee a souvenir-quality product.

There are certain elements every program should include, regardless of the production. We recommend that the front cover feature:

- Producing school, company, or organization.
Large cast. Broadway-style musicals for community theater, high school and middle school.

A SPINNING TALE
The Off-Broadway hit based on "Rumpelstiltskin"
By Cheryl and Alexandra Kemeny

ARSENE'S FABLES
By Cheryl and Alexandra Kemeny

COSMIC NIGHTINGALE
A Sci-Fi Political Comedy
By Mariner Pezza and Cheryl Kemeny

TROLLS
By Cheryl and Alexandra Kemeny

MOTHER JONES and the March of the Mill Children
By Cheryl Kemeny

SNOW QUEEN
The 2001 Moss Hart Honorable Mention (Youth Division)
By Cheryl Kemeny

ELLEN ISLAND
The 1996 Moss Hart winner (Youth Division)
By Cheryl Kemeny

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- Play title, author, and licensing information (as required by licensing contract).
- Production dates and times.
- The inside text should include:
  - The names of the director, production stage manager, and designers (of scenery, lighting costumes, audio).
  - The cast of characters.
  - A production staff list.
  - Setting (time and place information as indicated by play script) for each scene.
  - List of musical numbers if appropriate.
  - Director's notes or background on the play.
  - Cast/crew biographical information.
  - Special thanks section for assistance specific to the production.
  - List of financial donors, if appropriate.
  - A mention of upcoming events.

You might feel your school can hardly afford a backdrop, not to mention the expensive printing charges associated with a great program, but with minimal funds you can create a top quality product that will communicate effectively with your audiences. Today's computers often have desktop publishing capabilities that rival many professional layout and design services, and schools can print their own programs with minimal expense using basic photocopy equipment.

Pick the paper
Drama groups usually want to produce programs that will make an artistic visual statement, and that often means departing from conventional designs and plain white copy paper. Any color may look fine in a brightly lit office or classroom during the day, but may not serve your needs quite so well in a darkened auditorium. In fact, dark paper in a dark room is only made worse by one thing: dark text. Trying to read such a program when the lights are on is difficult enough for many parents, grandparents, and other theatre-goers. When the curtain rises and the lights dim, only a select few will be able to read who is playing the lead roles.

To remedy this, choose a light color for your background and readable black text. This will provide a good contrast for your readers. Graphic designers will advise that the best contrast for visibility is black text on white background, but gray, tan, gold, and other light hues are good alternatives to the plain white look you may wish to avoid.

Expensive heavyweight card stock is not necessary for your play program. Even copy paper (20-pound stock) will do if you cannot afford to upgrade to a slightly thicker material. If 8½ by 11 inches seems too small when folded in half, try a sheet that's 8½ by 14, resulting in four 8½ by 7-inch pages. If you need more space, consider using two sheets. We will explore a good reason to add more pages—advertising—in a later article.

Pick a type font
One reason for creating a program is to communicate effectively certain information to the audience, such as a summary of the action that is about to unfold, a brief description of the characters who will do the unfolding, the names of the actors, and the necessary recognition of the production staff handling lights, scenery, costumes, tickets, and even the program.

Because such information is important, you will want to choose a font that is legible, especially in auditorium lighting. Studies have shown that script fonts like "Old English" styles and italic lettering will adversely affect readership, even in a well-lit theatre. Another type font to avoid is called "reverse," characterized by white letters on a dark background. This is considerably difficult to read in reduced lighting. A common fallacy is that dark, boldface type will be easily read by all viewers. Boldface is good for emphasis, but if everything is stressed with a heavier text treatment, you have actually emphasized nothing.

Some think that using all capital letters will enhance readability, but nothing is farther from the truth. Capitalization may be acceptable for the
title of the play, but readers are used to seeing shapes of words based on the height of some letters (such as a “b” or an “h”) along with the depth of others (such as “p” or “y”). Using all capitals creates rectangular words that may actually inhibit readability.

It is impossible to determine exactly what size font to select, since type sizes are not standardized. Consider the following examples, all using 12-point type:

High School Play
(Times New Roman)

High School Play
(Verdana)

High School Play
(Courier)

It might be a good idea to have several readers with eyeglasses look over a few sample fonts. A sophomore drama student with 20/20 vision may not best represent the typical audience member squinting at a program under reduced lighting.

As with press releases, carefully consider the use of theatre-specific jargon in the play program. Have you dropped in too many technical theatre terms? For example, will the audience know what “scenographer” means? Perhaps instead of asking volunteers to help you “strike” the set after the final performance, you might substitute “dismantle” for your less theatrically experienced students and parents. If your theatre club is called Friends of Drama, apply that phrase the first time before you start using simply FOD. In short, avoid using language that is foreign to your paying customers.

Proof the program
Any program—no matter how professionally produced—will be ridiculed or dismissed if it includes misspellings and errors. Taxpayers in the audience will wonder why school funds are being wasted if they encounter a sentence like, “We would like to thank Mr. Evans’ woodworking class members for there assistance in building our

sets for this production.” A computer spell-checking program won’t catch the improper spelling of “their” in the sentence above. Make sure at least two individuals besides yourself closely read the final version of your program before copies are made. If an English teacher is not already involved in the production, perhaps you could recruit one as an expert proofreader in exchange for opening night tickets.

The same commitment to proofreading holds true for advertisements. If your school district allows the selling of program ads to generate extra revenue, try to create them with the same quality as those running in the local newspaper. Do not assume a submission from your advertiser is free of errors. Before the program goes to press, ask yourself these questions: Is the name of the store or organization accurate? Are the addresses, phone numbers, and websites correct?

Even if you cannot sell ads or sponsorships, you should thank businesses that helped you with the production. Rarely will high school administrators object to the following: “The Drama Club would like to thank Fabian Print Shop for donating the paper and printing for tonight’s programs.”

Finally, take advantage of your audience’s presence. Include a note in the program thanking them for coming and tell them about your next production. Perhaps you can provide performance dates and advance ticket information on the back page of your program, generating future attendance and support for your theatre program.

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