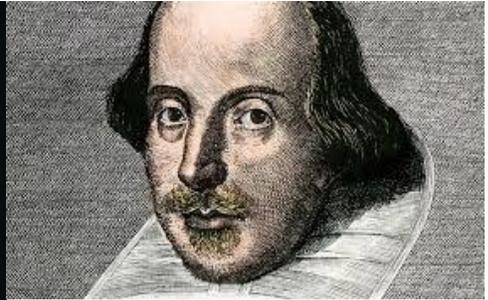


Good Practice Guides

The Jurassic Coast Teaching School Alliance



Shakespeare
Schools Festival

The aim of this resource is to encourage teachers with limited experience of putting on school productions in the community to get going and get involved.

How to: Take part in a Shakespeare Schools Festival

The Idea:

This idea came from an external agency, The Shakespeare Schools Festival, and, in this instance, we were invited to take part. There are occasionally similar opportunities available, and this kind of event can, of course, be staged using your own ideas and resources, but the support of an experienced theatre in education group is a good place to start. They supply the support, the teaching materials, the publicity and, above all, the expertise.

There is a cost – in this case around £700 – but it is heavily subsidised and it can be recouped in a number of ways. We opted to charge students for attendance at a summer school, and there are always ticket prices to help.

The Shakespeare Schools Festival links

three schools and each prepares a thirty minute play. The company provides the edited scripts, offers training and workshop days and publicises the event under a national banner. They also arrange the date of the performance and programme the various intermediate stages.

Of course, the school needs to be open to putting on such events but, given the excitement of the pupils involved, and the feedback from the community, what school wouldn't want to be involved?

The outline:

The Shakespeare Schools festival offers colleagues with little experience of putting on an event of this kind a very supportive structure, as well as plenty of help in terms of advice and expertise. Hence, it is an ideal starting point for anyone wishing to do

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something a little bit different.

The company provides a folder of ideas and lots of back-up. The process begins with a directors' workshop with 10-15 other teachers involved in the project. This in itself is incredibly useful and gives you a chance to meet other colleagues planning to do exactly the same thing as you. Often there are some very experienced people involved who are willing to help out the less experienced.

In the initial session you are introduced ways to explore the play with your students. This takes place in June, well before the planned performance in November, giving you time at the end of the summer term to try things out. There is a cast workshop later (in our case it was on the 8th October) run with the two other schools you will be performing with. Each school shows an extract of their play and feedback is given. This session is incredibly useful to less experienced teachers, and everyone leaves with something to work on.

We chose to do a large chunk of the preparatory work in a summer school. It was aimed at our more able dramatists but it could be done with anyone. The summer school ensured the appropriate degree of commitment and enabled us to recover most of the £700 entry fee. We charged each student £100, which is not bad for an intense five day course led by a qualified teacher, and we also enlisted the help of an ex-student, now at drama school, who proved to be invaluable. Of course, you could involve sixth formers, or, in a primary school, parent volunteers provided they are CRB checked.

A neat addition for sixth form helpers could be the completion of an Arts Award, at Silver or Gold level depending upon their prior experience and other arts work they have done.

In our case, we undertook the play with a specially selected group of students; it could be done equally as easily with one class. It is up to the school to choose the clientele.

Securing commitment

Making sure everyone is on board is key to making this kind of event work. Ensuring that the students are excited, parents prepared to help, and other staff in the school at least tolerant can sometimes be harder than it first appears. The enthusiast must not assume that his or her enthusiasm will automatically be transmitted to everyone else. These things sometimes have to be worked at.



These early stages can sometimes be quite complex but good planning ensures a successful outcome. In our case the first step was to draw up a list of pupils in years 7-11 who were suitable and who we thought might like to take part. If we had chosen a year group, or class, the process would have been the same but the advantage of working with a specialist group is the fact that you can almost be certain of their enthusiasm. A single class will have a range of enthusiasm, and some pupils will need a lot of encouragement and cajoling. Similarly, some parents may not initially see the point of all the work – but they usually come round when they see the final performance.

In most schools, permission also needs to be sought from the leadership team, and the more details you can provide the better. If you present a really exciting opportunity with a definite list of dates, a confirmed list of pupils, and an outline of how it will impact on other staff, you are much more likely to receive a positive response. Remember that this is exactly the kind of project which head teachers and governors want you to undertake so they are usually incredibly supportive.

All the letters our Head of Drama, Anne Cruwys-Finnegan, wrote along the way are included with this resource and may provide helpful models for those not used to putting on this kind of event. Frequent contact with parents is vital, not only to sustain commitment but to keep up the momentum of the production.

The first letter explained the project and set out very clearly the summer school commitment. Students needed to be free for the summer school and October rehearsal. There is no point suggesting you can be flexible at this point; attendance at all sessions is really vital if you wish to achieve a polished product. Of course, you can do all the rehearsals in school time but this brings its own difficulties. It is possible to take a primary class off timetable for extended periods but in secondary schools this can often be problematic because there are too many other commitments on students' time. A lot can be accomplished in after school rehearsals but there are times when the cast needs to work together for extended periods and whole day rehearsals are vital.

In our case the event was offered to around 30 selected students from all year groups and twenty four expressed an interest. As only fifteen actors were required, the Head of Drama chose the cast using her knowledge. This was relatively straightforward as she teaches virtually everyone! It could have been done by audition, depending on the numbers involved, but most teachers are skilled at assembling the appropriate students. In order not to disappoint those not selected, they were offered the chance to play minor parts, which did not require attendance at the summer school. In this case, the play being *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, they could become fairies – and six of them signed up. Because of the physicality of the final production, some of them ended up playing a significant role and really added to the performance. So, in the end, no one felt left out.

Parents were asked to sign a slip agreeing to commit their sons and daughters to the production, recognising how much time would be involved. There is also a considerable commitment on the part of the parents to be recognised because a fixed rehearsal schedule can mean that they need to fit family events around what their children are doing. There can also be a great deal of ferrying involved, particularly in a rural area like ours where after school transport is limited to say the least.

Some schools could use parent helpers and these can be incredibly useful. They have to be chosen carefully however, and the appropriate checks completed. Remember some

parents can lose interest, or find their other commitments make their involvement unmanageable, so it's best to regard them as a support rather than an essential element of the production. We were very fortunate to have a parent who had been a professional actor to help us out (Wizadora, no less) and she proved to be a tremendous support. She took part in a cast workshop and frequently helped us out chaperoning students, as well as offering vital feedback.

Drawing up the plan

One of the first things you need to decide is how you will get everything done in time. The easiest way is to work back from the date of the final performance, creating a timeline of the various activities. Working with a commercial company is helpful here because they provide the dates of the performance and the workshops which act as staging points along the way.

Once the time line is complete, the work begins with the pupils. First they need to understand the play, the language and the general idea of the production. Above all they need to be comfortable with each other and happy to work together. Most of the pupils will probably know each other but there is work to be done to ensure that they become a cohesive group. Initial ice-breaking drama activities are useful here but so are the regular meetings where the play is discussed and ideas put forward. Student ownership is vital. The teacher who comes in with a completely set view of how the play will look often finds it difficult to engage the cast. Their ideas help to shape the play; their input and involvement is vital. Then they will own the production and their commitment will be much greater.

In our case, the summer school was used to explore



the play. Time was spent getting to know it, and there were lots of preparatory exercise which helped the group to bond. Our ex-student put on a fantastic stage combat workshop which everyone really enjoyed and this really helped to get everyone working together.

One unusual aspect of our version of the play was an intense focus on music. The actors played their own instruments on stage and they did a lot of work on composing. The musicians and singers were encouraged to work together to work out the incidental music as they went along, and this eventually became a key part of the final performance. And while the musicians worked on this aspect of the production, the others worked on creating the forest with an emphasis on physical theatre and stylised movement. The music could, of course, have been pre-recorded but live music is always better.

By the end of the summer school the ground work was done and the play ready to be produced.

The cast worked for two hours after school for eight weeks. In that time the play was blocked and fully rehearsed. The blocking was done in sections and the number of rehearsals required for each section was worked out. The rehearsal schedule was organised initially to make sure that students who are not involved in the scene in question were not called. Later this can't be avoided but at first it is important to ensure that students are not sitting around doing nothing. They soon get bored and lose interest.

The script was annotated in detail by the director but student ideas changed it throughout. This way of working was familiar to those involved – this is how drama is taught at the school – but it did require a significant degree of flexibility and adaptability. In the end, many of the best ideas came from the students and they were very proud of the fact that they had helped to shape the final production so successfully.

The Shakespeare Schools festival has strict rules about keeping things simple and that can be very helpful. You have five minutes to get on and off the stage – so large sets are not possible. This is ideal for beginners since there are not worries regarding the



creation of large sets or complicated props.

Costumes were discussed at the summer school but the advice was once again to keep things simple. It was decided to base them on character not a particular period. This made things much easier as a wide variety of outfits could be accommodated by the production. The students sourced their own costumes and by a deadline. The only thing made by the school was the ass's head made by a member of staff. The same applied to handheld props, with students bringing in things from home where necessary. Not only does this way of working keep things simple, it cuts the cost dramatically.

Lighting can often be a concern for novice producers but the Shakespeare Schools Festival team send you twelve 'lighting states' (e.g. all red for danger, all of the stage lit etc.) which you have to plot out on a script. This can also be done with student involvement and there are often technical types who love this kind of thing. The lighting script goes with you on the day and is simply handed over to the lighting engineer who does the rest. Very clear instructions are given and help is available should you need it.

Student absence or illness is often a worry but this kind of thing can easily be exaggerated. Pupils are generally very reliable and, when fully engaged, rarely ill. In our production no understudies were used but if necessary a stand in would have had to be found. Remember that children learn fast and those who have attended every rehearsal will have a good idea of the other parts – and even remember huge chunks of them anyway.

Finally poor behaviour is rarely an issue. Once students are engaged, they really want to take part and behave well accordingly.

Securing the funding

This kind of production does not have to be expensive. The Shakespeare Schools Festival charge a fee but as explained above this can be recouped in a number of ways. It is perfectly legitimate to ask parents to contribute some of the cost, particularly if there are out of school activities involved, and most will do so willingly. Ticket sales help – especially if there are repeat performances – and other expenses can be kept to a minimum by using simple costumes, few props, and parent taxis.

It is important, however, to ensure that everyone who wants to take part can do so, and schools are very good at finding pots of money to subsidise those who can't afford to get involved. The Pupil Premium is useful

here but there are often charitable funds in schools for events such as these.

Remember too that the Shakespeare Schools Festival is a charity and heavily subsidised in the first place. Ultimately, students get a first class experience at a minimal cost.

Resources

The most significant resource is teacher time and commitment and this should not be underestimated. This kind of production will take up a lot of your time – but it will be worth it. Teachers running summer schools can of course be paid and for many staff this can be quite an attractive proposition.

Transport costs can be kept to a minimum by choosing local venues and making maximum use of parents. The other advantage of a local venue is that parents and friends are much more likely to attend, increasing ticket sales and creating a much more supportive atmosphere in the audience.

Some equipment can be borrowed, or hired cheaply. We borrowed amplification equipment from the music department but most things came from the students themselves.

School halls or drama studios make great rehearsal spaces but it is often good to get students off site for a change. Our local youth centre proved to be very helpful and gave a slightly different feel to the whole experience. The students enjoyed being there and it gave them more opportunities to relax and spend time with each other, both vital to a successful production.

How not to upset other staff

This is a feature of putting on any school event not to be underestimated. Other staff can be very sensitive to change and very protective of their own classes or subjects. It is always best to approach with caution and, if possible, get them to share your excitement.

Careful planning is the key. If the event itself is announced far enough in advance, others have a chance to get used to the idea. The rehearsal schedule needs to be clearly set out as early as possible and key events avoided – parents' evenings, sports events, open days etc. This is obvious but easily forgotten – especially when things are planned a long way in advance.

Make sure you invite your colleagues to the final performance and a few free tickets often help. Not too many though as you have to cover your costs!

Final preparations

Over three days in the half term before the performance – the whole thing was run, including a costume run. There had been a great deal of individual rehearsing so these had to be woven together to create one seamless unit. Everything is about polishing at this stage and simply getting the performance ready.

In fact, several final runs are necessary to ensure that everything is right. In this case the play was only thirty minutes long so it could be done relatively easily.

A good director makes notes as he or she goes through each run and afterwards sits down with the students and goes through the notes with them. This is really vital to ensure that all the rough edges are knocked off. Students enjoy the attention and respond well to helpful feedback. As the company begins to gel, they find comments from their peers increasingly helpful and real 'we're all in this together' atmosphere can be created.

The run through needs to be timed very carefully and cuts made accordingly. For this production there was a strict limit of thirty minutes but, whatever the circumstances, it's always a good idea to have a clear idea of how long each scene will take.

It is also incredibly useful to film a run through so the students can see what works and what doesn't. It's also useful to let them see how they will look on stage and it makes them more aware of what is going on around them. A cast critique is often helpful as students seek to improve 'their' play and thus work ever closer together.

A final run through to a class in school helps the actors both in terms of feedback and to get a sense of a live audience. Usually it is very reassuring.

Of course, throughout this process there are constant letters to parents going over dates, times, etc. and reminders regarding make-up, hair, and costumes. Keeping parents informed is essential: it ensures their support and helps students keep on track.

Advertising and Programmes

With The Shakespeare Schools Festival this is all done for you, though advertising a school production is usually fairly straightforward. The students themselves are able to produce very effective posters and, increasingly web-based or social media trailers. There is also word of mouth as parents tell their friends and invite long lost aunts to see the final performance.

The local press is usually keen to get involved and will always publish dress rehearsal photos, provided

permission is gained from the parents.

It is important to have a programme, both as a guide for the audience and as a memento for the students involved. The key thing here is to get the names right, as a slip here will be pounced upon by even the most supportive parent.

The performance

It is essential to go down to the theatre on the day and do a technical run with the theatre technician. This is followed by the dress rehearsal. There is usually only one dress rehearsal in the actual space and this can be very different, so students have to be mentally prepared to get things right first time. They should also be told clearly to expect some differences.

Our students were first warmed up with a set of drama exercises – breathing, relaxing, vocal and physical warm-ups. This is really essential as it both mentally prepares the cast to work hard but gets them back together with a vital sense of focus, after what can sometimes be a fairly fraught morning of activities.

Some students find it difficult coping with nerves but this is often easily solved by simply saying 'It's ok' and a few encouraging words. You should perhaps be worried if they are not a bit nervous – they need to be to produce a really good performance. So, just reassure and get on with it. Students are generally fantastically supportive of each other.

It is useful to tell the cast not to anticipate laughter and not to be surprised if the audience laughs at things they didn't think funny. They also need to know that every audience is different and will react differently. They have to be encouraged to believe in the quality of what they have produced and not be swayed.

A simple final tip: work on a bow to give a clear ending. This is a simple finishing touch which can make all the difference and make even the youngest company look really professional.

Publicising success

After the performance prepare a press release and choose some of the best photos. It is also really helpful to get the cast to evaluate their own performance – and this is better done a few days later, quietly on their own so they can really think about what took place.

It can also be really good to show an extract of the finished product in a school assembly so other students can see what has been achieved. Often, someone in the audience will be thinking, 'I'd like to do that', and a new actor is born.

It is also wise to plan a second performance from the outset to give the students another opportunity to perform and to allow those who didn't get a chance the first time to see it. This needs to be done quickly after the first performance so they don't forget their lines.

Above all, allow students to celebrate their success with displays and video clips –but don't go too far. It will soon be time to prepare for the next production.

Building on the work

Students learn a huge amount from taking part in this kind of production, both socially and intellectually. They often return to the classroom with much confidence and enthusiasm, and they often demand to know 'what's next'. For drama students, the techniques and conventions learned can be fed directly back into their class work to help them eventually towards much better results in public examinations.

Another important way to build upon a successful production is to get other staff involved. The best way to learn how to put on a production is to help out first.

Final thoughts

Staging an event of this kind is not easy and it takes a great deal of commitment but it is always worth the effort. Whether it's the quality of the performance or simply the experience of working closely with a group of enthusiastic, highly motivated students, involvement in a theatre production can often be the highlight of a teacher's career. After all, what do you remember from your own schooling? It's never the lessons; it's always the other activities.

Further Information

Further information or just general advice is available from the Jurassic Coast Teaching Schools Alliance. Contact the administrator Nicola Payne in the first instance:

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