

Putting on a school musical, part one

KS3/4/5

James Manwaring

Introduction

If you've never put on a musical or you're about to embark on the process, then this resource is for you. It is split into two parts, the first covering the musical side and the second dealing with practical side.

This first part goes through some of the basics to putting on a musical, offering ideas, advice and tips for success. It also looks at a range of musicals that you might like to consider, and gives guidance on choosing a show and ensuring it is successful.

The second part will look at the show week, budgeting, fundraising, selling tickets and marketing. Part two will be a lot more practical – but essential for all those teachers wanting to put on a successful production.

This resource also draws on my own experiences, which I've written about in my Musical Theatre Diary in *Music Teacher* magazine – if you haven't already read those columns, you'll find more information there.

Start with why

It's important to consider why you're thinking of putting on a school musical. Think about your aims, benefits and goals before you embark on a production.

The benefits are easy to list:

- 1 It brings together staff from across the performing arts.
- 2 It unites students in a common goal and creates a sense of community.
- 3 It's something that brings in an audience and raises the profile of performing arts and the school more generally.
- 4 It has the potential to raise money for the performing arts department.

But there are also crucial benefits for the students you're working with:

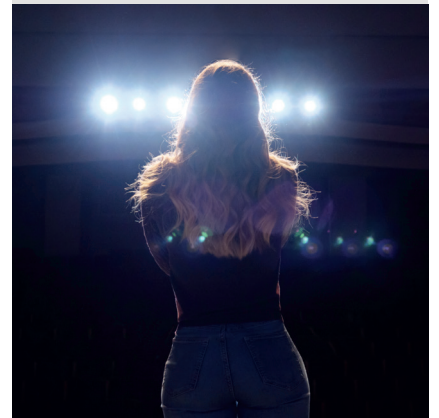
- 1 It helps to create a sense of community in your performing arts department.
- 2 Talented students have a platform on which to shine and develop.
- 3 Most musicals can bring together students from across different year groups. Therefore, younger students can work with older ones, learning from them and being inspired by them.
- 4 Being in a musical is a life-changing experience for all involved, and hopefully a boost to students' own morale, self-esteem, confidence and character. Students should come out of the process with a real sense of achievement.

There's no doubt that putting on a musical is a positive venture, and one that will bring lots of benefits. But taking time to consider why, when and what you're doing is very important.

Start small

Putting on a full-scale musical is no easy venture, and if you're starting from scratch, you might like to consider a couple of different options. Although a full-scale musical will reap huge benefits, there's nothing wrong with starting somewhere smaller and building things up over time. It all depends on your setting, and on the age range you're aiming things at.

James Manwaring is Director of Music for Windsor Learning Partnership and has been teaching music for 16 years. He is a member of the Music Teachers Association and ISM and he writes his own music blog. He has also produced 11 school musicals.



Junior productions

There are a number of productions designed to be performed by junior students. Musical Theatre International (MTI, www.mtishows.com) have a number of productions of this nature which can be great for Years 7 and 8. They are generally about 60 minutes in length, which makes a good starting point. They also come with all the resources you need in a 'show kit'. Of course, these junior versions can also be tackled by schools where musical theatre productions are commonplace, but if you're just starting out then these productions are ideal.

A Night at the Musicals

Over the years, I have put on a number of 'Night at the Musicals' evenings, which are a very effective way of getting students used to performing songs from shows.

In essence, they're designed to give soloists a chance to sing a song from a show in a relaxed setting. This could be the drama studio or a performing arts space of another kind. A more intimate setting works well, and a simple lighting plot will suffice.

This kind of event can get students used to singing in front of an audience under lights, and it also helps staff know what kind of talent you have. The evening can be accompanied with a pianist to keep it low-key, and students can choose to either just sing or give some background about their song as well. If you haven't ever put on a full musical production, one option is to start with a 'Night at the Musicals' event and build things up from there.

There are so many musicals out there, and students may well have their own favourite songs. But as a starting point, here is the set list from a recent 'Night at the Musicals' that I produced at my school:

- ▶ 'Feed the Birds' (*Mary Poppins*)
- ▶ 'Waving Through a Window' (*Dear Evan Hansen*)
- ▶ 'Lifeboat' (*Heathers*)
- ▶ 'Evermore' (*Beauty and the Beast*)
- ▶ 'She Used to Be Mine' (*Waitress*)
- ▶ 'Giants in the Sky' (*Into the Woods*)
- ▶ 'I Say No' (*Heathers*)
- ▶ 'Michael in the Bathroom' (*Be More Chill*)
- ▶ 'Thank You for the Music' (*Mamma Mia!*)
- ▶ 'Johanna' (*Sweeney Todd*)
- ▶ 'Don't Rain on my Parade' (*Funny Girl*)
- ▶ 'Consider Yourself' (*Oliver!*)
- ▶ 'This is the Life' (*Love Life*)
- ▶ 'Satisfied' (*Hamilton*)
- ▶ 'If I Only Had a Brain' (*The Wizard of Oz*)
- ▶ 'Burn' (*Hamilton*)
- ▶ 'Seize the Day' (*Newsies*)
- ▶ 'I Can Go the Distance' (*Hercules*)
- ▶ 'Inútil' (*In the Heights*)
- ▶ 'Breathe' (*In the Heights*)
- ▶ 'Some Enchanted Evening' (*South Pacific*)
- ▶ 'High Flying, Adored' (*Evita*)
- ▶ 'Proud of Your Boy' (*Aladdin*)
- ▶ 'When He Sees Me' (*Waitress*)
- ▶ 'I Know Him So Well' (*Chess*)
- ▶ 'Pilate's Dream' (*Jesus Christ Superstar*)
- ▶ 'No One Knows Who I Am' (*Jekyll and Hyde*)
- ▶ 'So Big So Small' (*Dear Evan Hansen*)
- ▶ 'You'll Be Back' (*Hamilton*)
- ▶ 'Goodbye' (*Catch Me If You Can*)
- ▶ 'The Movie in my Mind' (*Miss Saigon*)
- ▶ 'Out There' (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*)

This list encompasses a range of styles and songs, and worked well for a 'Night at the Musicals' performance. It's good to give students a certain freedom to choose songs they love, but you should also aim to put on an entertaining evening with a mix of lighthearted and more serious songs, ideally with a few items that audiences might not already know. You could also consider a chorus number to bring together all the soloists performing on the night.

Step by step

The process of putting on a musical will depend on your own experience, but also on the students you're working with. It's advisable, of course, to make it as professional and organised as possible, in order to give the students a really good experience of being on stage. Here is a step-by-step look at the process involved:

Set the dates and clear the rights

Your timeline will depend on a number of factors, but it's advisable to allow around three months or more for rehearsals and the show itself. More time can be better, but stringing a show out over too long a period can also tend to suck the life out of the process. You'll also need to check that the rights are available for your chosen show – something that can easily be overlooked or forgotten, but it's crucial to do everything legally. Don't even assume that you're able to put on a chosen show until you've secured the rights. There's more information on choosing a show later in this resource.

Auditions

When are they going to be, and what are you going to ask students to do? It's always a good idea to launch the show to the students, and then spend some time talking about the characters, the story and the musical abilities required. It's also important to allow time for the director to discuss with the students what will be required in terms of dialogue and characterisation. Choose short sections from relevant songs, and also short sections of dialogue. Giving students about two weeks to prepare is not unreasonable, and should allow them enough time.

Casting the show

This is possibly the hardest part of the process, and it's also something you really need to get right. Auditions are tough on students, but ultimately you have to whittle them down to a final few and then decide who is going to get the part. This is best decided with a small group of staff so that you can draw different opinions in the mix.

Drawing up a rehearsal schedule

This is an equally daunting prospect, since you have to commit to paper exactly what you're going to do and when. It can be easier to work backwards from the show nights, to ensure you don't miss anything out. Make sure you allow time for dress rehearsals, costume fittings, full runs in the final weeks and maybe even some time away from lessons for the cast, so you can have a full day of rehearsals. The schedule will also depend on staff and student availability. Once you have drawn it up, however, ensure you stick to it and follow it.

Set, costumes, sound and lights

These are all crucial elements for any musical production, and should be looked into and arranged as soon as the process has begun. If you're hiring set and costumes, make sure you look at options and check availability. If you're having a set built, meet with your builder and ensure that they have everything they need. Costumes can make a show, and if you're hiring them, you will probably need measurements and requirements a couple of months before show week. It's likely that you will also need students to source costumes: if so, let them know what they need as soon as you start so that they can start looking in charity shops and online. Sound and microphones can be expensive, but if needed, are an essential part of the show. Work out what you need and then start to work out how you can source it.

Rehearsals

Rehearsals need to be organised, consistent and well attended by the cast. Keep them regular, only call the students you need, and make sure that you keep moving through the show. Don't get stuck in one scene or song. You can always revisit sections later, so aim to get through the show and then improve it from there.

Show week

Show week itself will be examined in more detail in part two of this resource. But it's a good idea to think about a few things right at the start of the process, such as seating plans, ticketing and advertising.

These points will provide an overview of the process from deciding on a show to actually staging it, but there is a huge amount to think about. Seek advice where necessary, and make sure that you plan well ahead.

Shows that work

There are many, many great musicals out there to choose from. But as ever, more choice can mean that making a decision becomes harder. This section will take you through some specific musicals and provide some information to help when choosing.

Selecting the right show is crucial, and there are a number of factors to consider:

- ▶ Will the show be popular with the students you have? Will they know it, buy into it and enjoy staging it?
- ▶ Will the show be popular with audiences? Will it sell well and make you some money?
- ▶ Do you have the students to put on the show – the talent, the voices, the range? Some shows require quite skilled performers in order to make them successful productions. Others are more accessible to younger or less experienced students.
- ▶ Is there enough to do for the chorus? This will depend on how many you have in your chorus, but if it's big then you need plenty for them to do.
- ▶ Do you feel it's a show *you* will enjoy? Do you like the music, the story and the feel of the show? This also goes for the rest of your production team. If it isn't a show you personally like, you might find it's harder for you to put your energy into it.
- ▶ Do you have the musicians in your school who can play the score? If you don't, consider getting in some professional players – with related cost implications, of course.

I've staged several musicals over the years, and although this is far from an exhaustive list, here are my personal top five.

Les misérables Schools Edition

This show is packed full of parts, and it is well known by students and audiences alike. It will also provide you with a platform to showcase a range of performers, as well as your chorus. It's a big production to tackle, but it's also one that doesn't need to be changed. The characters and songs are so strong that it's tempting to let the cast simply just stand still and sing them.

Beauty and the Beast

When it comes to Disney musicals, this is possibly the best score of them all. The characters are strong, and there's a breadth of styles to enjoy. The chorus will love the opening village scene as well as Gaston's drinking song. You need a strong Beast and Belle of course, but this show is great for pushing your talented students, and it's an easy sell for audiences.

Guys and Dolls

There can be few more perfect comedy musicals than this. It needs talented performers, of course, but it also has a great deal for less experienced students. If you're a looking for a musical to begin with, this could be the one. There's scope for dance, too, if you have strong dancers.

Kiss Me, Kate

This is a show that brings together Shakespeare and musical theatre, and it's a lot of fun to work on, as well as being slightly less well-known than other shows, making it perhaps a musical better suited to schools with an established audience.

Sweeney Todd

This is something of a Mount Everest of musical theatre, but it's a fantastic show nonetheless. It's not for the fainthearted, and you need a strong senior cast. The score is complex and challenging, but hugely rewarding. The set requirements are huge and you need to ensure that you can pull off the all-important barber's chair. Audiences may be unsure about it, but they will leave having enjoyed the beauty of the lighter moments along with the challenge of the darker moments. Be aware, too, that staging it might slightly darken your life during the rehearsal process as it's fairly morbid in places. It's one to tackle, however, when you have a few shows under your belt and you have the students to handle it.

Rehearsals

Show week is just a week, but the rehearsal schedule will cover months. Running successful rehearsals requires teamwork and careful planning. The more you can sit down with colleagues and plan what you're going to do, the better. Using students is also a good way of getting more done and keeping everyone – staff included – happy and smiling.

Rehearsals should be fun, productive and engaging for all students. Only call the students you need, and make sure that everyone is doing something – that goes for the staff, too. While it's a team effort, it's good to have someone overseeing the whole process, so make sure you or someone you appoint fills that role.

It's also a good idea to work in the space that you're going to use to stage the actual production. Not only does this help everyone picture the show, but it will also prepare students for the size of the space. As you get close to the performance dates, you can start to lay out chairs, staging and set as it will be on the night, which helps with the final stages of the production.

Early on in the process, determine what roles the staff will have and how the overall process is going to work. If you have a team of performing arts staff, all of you should sit down and discuss and agree your roles. Every school is different and will have different traditions and ways of doing things. If you're a music teacher who wants to put on a musical and but you don't have anyone to work with, choose a show that's easy to stage and direct. Ideally, work with your drama staff as they will be able to partner with you. Your situation will determine the show, the rehearsal process and the whole production. Don't start until everyone knows their roles and responsibilities.

Top ten tips for a musical theatre production

- 1 Make sure you have access to good recordings of the musical, in order to give you and your students inspiration.
- 2 Find productions on YouTube that will give you ideas, inspiration or encouragement. You don't necessarily have to come up with lots of new ideas yourself – and some shows (for example *Les misérables* School Edition) even seem to stage themselves.
- 3 Don't neglect, forget or ignore the practical side of a musical production, including show week. Part two of this resource will look at practical issues in more detail.
- 4 Get support from your singing teachers, music hub and any other colleagues. Asking for help is important, and the more people you can get on board to assist you, the better.
- 5 Trust your senior students and let them come up with ideas, direct scenes and lead sections of rehearsals.
- 6 If and where possible, hire professional musicians to play in the band. Although this has cost implications, it will take away some of the stress for you as the musical director. If you're using a student band, make sure it's a show that they can handle, play well and enjoy.
- 7 If you're a musical director who plays piano for rehearsals, consider booking a pianist for the final few rehearsals. Doing that will give you space to focus on the students and make sure they are comfortable, as well as allowing you to conduct the show and get used to the flow and changes in time and tempo.
- 8 Work out who to invite to your show, and make sure that your list includes local politicians, local mayor and local businesses. You may also have sponsors that you want to invite – get them the information early so that they can keep an evening free.
- 9 Start mentioning the show on your social media well in advance. You might also like to state a specific day that tickets will go on sale, so that you create a buzz.
- 10 Always remember that it's all about the students and the experience for them. You can't please everyone, and there may even be people in the audience who don't like musicals. But if the students are smiling, you've won.