

Putting on a school musical, part two

KS3/4/5

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Introduction

The first part of this two-part resource (*Music Teacher*, December 2019) looked at the creative side of putting on a musical. This second part will consider the practical side, including ideas on how to organise the production and raise money.

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.

Getting the rights

Sticking to the law and to your own professional standards is of huge importance. For any musical you're planning on staging, you'll need to make sure that you acquire the rights and the music legally, and then pay the company you've worked with. Make sure you that you find out well in advance if you are able to put on your chosen show in your school.

The rights for many shows are held with Music Theatre International (www.mtishows.co.uk) and Rodgers and Hammerstein (www.rnh.com). Getting the rights means that you are legally allowed to stage the show, and that you will have the correct materials. Rights holders will let you know of any parameters you need to meet, and also provide you with rehearsal material and music for your orchestra. Some shows have backing tracks that you are legally allowed to use, but others have to be performed to live music.

The producer

When you start the process of putting on a musical, you should work out who's going to be in charge of the production. Who is your producer? This may well be a team effort, but it's nevertheless good to have someone overseeing the whole process.

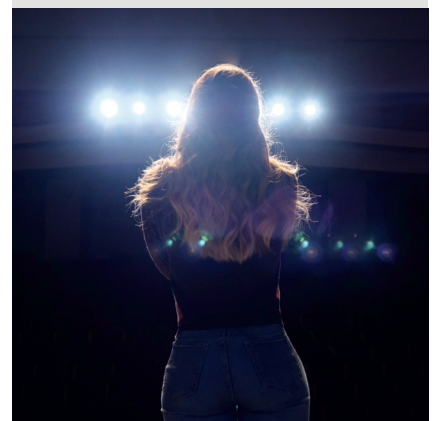
These are some of the things that a producer needs to consider as you start out on your musical production:

- ▶ Tickets sales.
- ▶ Advertising and sponsorship.
- ▶ Photos and videos.
- ▶ Set design, hire, building and safety.
- ▶ Lighting hire, design and programming.
- ▶ Front of house on show nights – programmes, stewards, bar and seating.
- ▶ Backstage staffing and organisation.
- ▶ Props.
- ▶ Costumes and makeup.
- ▶ Sound, microphones and sound design.

Obviously, the relevance of this list's contents will depend on the size and scale of your production, but they are still all issues that need to be thought through. You may have a small-scale show without a big lighting rig, but you will still need to think about what lighting to use.

It's worth looking through this list and considering each issue before you start on your production. Work out who is going to do what, and make sure that someone oversees the whole process. The more you can delegate, the better, but make sure whoever you delegate to knows what they are doing.

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The technical side of production

Lights and sound

After a few weeks of rehearsal, it's crucial that you can hear and see the students on stage. Sound and lights can be a costly area, so you should think about them early on. You will also need a plan for how sound and lights are going to be run and managed during show week itself.

Here are some questions to consider:

- ▶ Do you have lights in school, or do you need to hire any lights in? What local companies can you hire from, or can you borrow them from another local school?
- ▶ Who's going to run your lights, and do they know how to work a lighting desk and set up the lights on the rig?
- ▶ Are you going to train any students to run sound and lights? If so, involve them in the rehearsal process towards the end so that they know the show really well.
- ▶ When are you going to programme your lights? It's a good idea to set aside a slot for a technical rehearsal where you go through every scene.
- ▶ Are you going to use microphones? If so, how many will you need? Do you need to hire microphones? There's nothing worse than bad microphones and a situation where the audience can't hear what's being said or sung. Consider lapel mics and also other mics on stage or hung over the stage. You will need to pick up not only soloists but also the chorus.
- ▶ If you're planning to swap microphones between cast members, you'll need to create a microphone plot. *Les misérables* requires swapping mics between cast members, and ideally you need about eight microphones to make this work. A plan is needed so that there are no surprises.
- ▶ Do you have a good-quality PA system to run your sound through? It's worth considering the size of the room you're using for the production, so that you have enough speakers and long enough cables.

Although lights and sound can be expensive, there's also a chance that parents, local theatres and other organisations will support you. If people can't provide money, they may be able to provide a service. Make a plan for what you require and then email parents to see who might be able to help. You might be lucky enough to have a theatre at school with everything you need, but make sure you know how it works and have a plan for utilising the various resources.

Set

Every show is different, and has different set requirements. Some shows are more demanding than others – *Sweeney Todd*, for example, needs a barber's chair. The key thing is to make any decisions regarding your set early on.

A set doesn't have to be complicated – fundamentally, the show is all about the students on stage performing. But a set can help create a scene or atmosphere. In the early stages of the production, it's worth considering what you need and how you plan on setting the show. You might consider the time period, the place the show is set, and also whether or not you're doing something traditional. You can then consider the cast size and the space on stage. The larger the cast, the less space you will have on stage.

A key factor for a successful set is ensuring that you can see as many students as possible. This will come down to the number of different levels you have available to you. A level can be created with staging but also with blocks, chairs and platforms. Big chorus numbers will require everyone to be on stage, and for those, the more levels the better.

Costumes

Costumes are a fundamental part of any musical. Some shows (for example *Sweeney Todd*) are easy to costume, but others (for example *Beauty and the Beast*) are not. However straightforward costumes are, though, it's crucial that you decide early on what costumes you need and how you're going to get them.

One option is to ask students to source their own costumes. If you take this route, make sure you show them *exactly* what they need to get. You might ask them all to get the same costume from the same place, or you might give them some freedom. Students can then visit charity shops or ask friends and family for bits of costume that will work.

Another option is to hire costumes, which can be a fantastic way of making your show a top-quality production. It can, however, become a bigger task than you realise. As well as cost implications, you

will also need to get the cast's measurements and requirements early on so that the costume company have time to check they have what you need.

Molly Limpets (www.mollylimpets.com) is one of several costume hire companies, and they have many shows on offer.

Stage, backstage and front of house

Stage Manager

It's crucial to have someone controlling what's going on both backstage and on stage. A stage manager will need to know the show inside out, as well as knowing exactly what needs to happen on stage. This includes the moving of the set and also the people required for each scene.

Make sure that you assign someone to this role, and ensure that they come to rehearsals near to show week. If possible, the stage manager needs to be able to communicate with the lighting and sound booth, and also any other key staff.

Backstage

You may never have been backstage on a show night. If you're a musical director, you will almost certainly have been out front with the orchestra. It is therefore worth considering what needs to happen backstage and how it's going to be run:

- ▶ How many staff are needed backstage, and what are their roles?
- ▶ Do you have someone backstage who knows the show and is ensuring cast members are on stage at the right time? Strictly speaking, this falls under a stage manager's responsibilities, but you might like to ask a student teacher or another colleague to ensure that people are in the right place at the right time.
- ▶ Who's managing props and ensuring that they are taken and returned?
- ▶ Backstage works best if you have a dedicated room for the whole of show week. Make sure you book a room that can store your props and costumes, and act as a backstage space. If that isn't possible, make sure you have a setup and clear-up plan.
- ▶ One key rule is that no one may go backstage unless they're part of the production: no visitors, and no guests at the end. Backstage should be a safe and organised place.
- ▶ Before the opening night, make sure there are no doors that slam.
- ▶ Keep backstage tidy, and make sure the cast tidy up every night.

Front of house

There are several jobs that you need to consider for your front of house. Aim to use any student leaders within your school to take them on. Work with your senior leadership team and your site team to ensure that things run smoothly:

- ▶ Bar staff need to be over the age of 18 in order to sell alcohol.
- ▶ At least one person should be on the door to collect tickets and money.
- ▶ Car parking is often a last-minute thought, but a team will be needed to assist with parking cars. Senior students may be able to help with this, but bear in mind that parking can be hard. Make sure you have a plan and some high-visibility jackets for safety.
- ▶ Announcements often need to be made at the start of the show. Assign a student leader to welcome the audience and give out any information required.
- ▶ Assign someone to sell programmes and raffle tickets.
- ▶ Make sure you have a bar, ticket and raffle float. Last-minute cash is sometimes hard to come by, so visit the bank if you need to.
- ▶ If you have to set up chairs, make sure that someone is assigned to that job. They will need to know the seating plan and make sure the seats are clearly numbered. Don't underestimate the chaos that will be caused if seat numbers are confusing or in the wrong order.
- ▶ Clearing up every night is hard. Having a clear-up team is important, and they can always come at the end to help with this job.
- ▶ Make sure that the site team knows when you need to open up and lock up so that everything is clear and organised.
- ▶ Ushers and stewards are always useful when it comes to showing people to their seats, and pointing out the locations of toilets.

How to run a bar

A licensed bar is a great way to make money at your musical production, particularly when you sell alcohol. But it is not as simple as just buying drinks and selling them. In order to have a licensed bar, you will need to apply for a Temporary Event Notice, which carries a small fee. This is basically a temporary licence for a particular event, allowing you to sell alcohol. If you stick to soft drinks then you don't need a licence, but you're likely to make more money if you sell alcohol.

Also bear in mind your school policy on the sale of alcohol, and how you will go about purchasing the drinks. Most schools don't allow the purchase of alcohol, so you may need to look to a parent body such as your PTA to help. It's vital to stick within the law, however, and not do things you shouldn't do.

Once you've made sure you have everything you need to sell alcohol, it's important to have a good-quality and well-stocked bar. If you make sure there's something for everyone, the audience will be happy. Consider selling snacks such as popcorn that are cheap to purchase but have a good margin. If it sounds like running a business, in some ways it is: for one week, you're setting up a bar and making money that will support your production.

Photos and videos

Capturing photos of your production is hugely important. Not only will the students want photos, but the school will also want pictures to use around the premises. Consider hiring a photographer to come to the dress rehearsal: that way, you can get the pictures in advance and use them in the programme or on opening night. There may be a parent who will help, or even a local photographer who can offer their services in exchange for publicity. Make sure that you check you have permission to photograph the cast, which is best done early in the process. The school is likely to have this on record, but it's always worth checking.

A number of shows require you to purchase a video licence if you plan on filming. Again, it's important to stay within the law. If you're using professional musicians, then it's also right and proper to check with them that they don't mind you filming the production.

Top ticket tips

Selling tickets is, of course, one of the most important parts of the process of putting on a musical. You want to make sure you have full audiences for every performance, and also that you sell tickets well in advance of the show. Here are some tips on achieving that:

- ▶ Set a launch date for your tickets, and make a big deal of that date. Choosing a Sunday evening, when people are at home and can get online and buy them, can work very well.
- ▶ Sell tickets online if possible. It makes things easier not only for you and the school, but also for the parents and audience. There are a number of ticket-selling websites to choose from: Your Box Office (www.yourboxoffice.co.uk), for example, allows you to create seating plans, sell tickets and collect money through your school parent pay system.
- ▶ Avoid booking tickets yourself for other people. It's best to create a strict system to avoid any confusion.
- ▶ Price the tickets so that they will sell, but don't undersell the quality of what you're presenting. Parents won't mind paying a bit more if the quality is good, and don't forget that people pay high prices for shows in London's West End and other big cities. Selling tickets at a fair price will also help to raise much-needed funds.
- ▶ If you're not using an online platform, make sure that you have a clear seating plan and that tickets are allocated. You should avoid people turning up and trying to find seats – it creates an atmosphere of chaos on show nights.
- ▶ Launch tickets to your cast first so that their friends and family can get the best seats – it's only fair.
- ▶ Every time you mention your production on social media, give a link to buy tickets. Make sure it's easy for people to see where tickets are on sale.
- ▶ Reserve some tickets before they go on sale so that you have some available for your senior leadership team and other VIPs who may want to come to the show.
- ▶ Considering offering a group discount for a bulk order. Students might then try and get their whole tutor group, dance class or youth group to come along to the show.

Dress rehearsals

After a long rehearsal period, make sure that you have good-quality dress rehearsals. You might consider holding two dress rehearsals, as you'll most likely face challenges on the first that can be resolved in the second. You might even like to hold an open dress rehearsal for local schools. This gives the cast the opportunity to perform in front of an audience, but without the pressure of it being a paying audience.

Strictly speaking, for a dress rehearsal you should have the costumes and the set. If you don't have the set until the week of the show, however, you should still aim to run the show from beginning to end. This is what I call a piano run, although sometimes there are backing tracks available.

Raising money for your musical: five tips

- 1 Sell programmes on the night, and make sure that they include lots of information, photos and advertising.
- 2 Make sure you that you have a bar on the night (see above for details).
- 3 Ask a parent to run a raffle on every show night. Get the cast to provide the prizes, then sell tickets every night.
- 4 Sell advertising in your programme. This is most likely to come from local businesses who are keen to get their name seen. You can also use social media to let the community know who has sponsored the show. The more you can offer your sponsors the better – think about free tickets for one of the shows, and even a free drink or two during the interval.
- 5 Approach your PTA, Friends or parent groups to see if they can help support your production. They might be able to offer money, time, talents or services: you may well be able to save some money or raise some money.

Conclusion

Putting on a musical offers an opportunity to get the whole school community involved in a large-scale project. It's also an opportunity to get an audience through the doors and show off your school and performing arts department. Staging a musical isn't cheap, and it's a big projects, but it's hugely worthwhile on many levels.