

THE ROLE OF THE SENIOR PLAY AS PART OF THE DRAMA PRO-
GRAMS IN SELECTED HIGH SCHOOLS OF TEXAS

A THESIS

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PREFACE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It would be hard to determine the exact origin of the class play. It did not originate as a project of some national organization; it probably came into existence in most schools because of the need for student activity and funds for other school projects. The reading of plays in English class and the reciting of speeches from plays, possibly prompted the idea of students presenting class plays. We do know that class plays were produced in many high schools at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Many educators in the field of dramatics have shown great concern about the future of the class play. However, little has been done toward changing it, because the educators could not present a suitable substitute for these productions. Mr. Leon C. Miller, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the National Thespian Society,¹ says:

Because these plays were financially successful, they spread like a cancerous growth throughout the country until practically every high school was affected. These plays were, and still are unfortunately, judged successful only if they were profitable. They were, and still are in too many instances, poorly

¹National Honorary High School Dramatics Organization with chapters in over one thousand high schools.

written plays, badly cast and directed, and atrociously staged, yet praised to high heaven because they "made money" for the class or school. A member of the faculty, since he was the class sponsor or advisor, was the director; whether he was properly trained or had talent in the Dramatic Arts was immaterial.¹ No thought was given to these plays as a fine art.¹

Today, an increasing number of schools are presenting all school plays instead of the class play. This seems to be a more democratic procedure. The National Thespian Society encourages all its member schools, whenever it is possible, to adopt this policy. Mr. Leon C. Miller comments on this procedure by saying:

Teachers well trained and talented in Theatre directed all the school plays. Better plays are being presented, most important, they are no longer considered as a means of raising money. The trend today is to keep all money earned in the Dramatic Arts Department. These better schools have made the secondary school Theatre a fine art.²

Many teachers in our high schools feel that we should not limit dramatics. Mrs. Roberta Dinwiddie Sheets, Secondary-School Chairman of the American Educational Theatre Association, says, "Basketball teams are not restricted to juniors--nor school band to seniors, so why limit dramatics?"³

¹Quoted from a letter written by Mr. Leon C. Miller to the writer of this thesis.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

No one seems to know just why class plays are produced. The fact that they make money and are traditional seems to be the only justification for their existence. One school that has done away with this tradition is the Central High School in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Mr. Howard Chenery, director of dramatics in the Michigan High School, says:

The class play, produced as it is produced in many of our schools, tells more than a story. It reveals, I believe, that somewhere along the line, within the community and within the administration, something is wrong. I am not saying this because of an exhaustive study and research I have made, but only because, through experience, I believe it is true. It is an extra-curricular activity and, in the light of healthy community growth and development, it is short--it lacks something. The class play, to me, produced as so many of them are produced, in the light of what I have already mentioned is as bad an influence as teaching English with comic books, instructing high school orchestras to play be-bop, or training an a capella choir to sing Park Avenue hillbilly! These things, too, of course, may be going on--nothing is impossible--but, if true, the dosage, I suspect, is not so robust or evident.¹

Since dissatisfaction of this sort has been expressed, the writer planned to survey by questionnaire two hundred schools in Texas and attempt to find out from school principals themselves the present status of the class play. A few of our schools are headed by administrators that are concerned about the class productions and as a result of this interest

¹Howard Chenery, "We Do Not Produce Class Plays," Players Magazine, December, 1951, p. 58.

have placed sufficient equipment on the stage. They have chosen a qualified person to head their speech department. This would seem to be an "ideal situation".

This thesis is not written to advocate doing away with the class play, but only to make certain recommendations for improving the play. Recommendations are based on a bulletin prepared for the National Association of Secondary-School Principals in December, 1949, by the American Educational Theatre Association. In areas where professional entertainment is lacking, school dramas can be a stimulating substitute. In communities where people have access to professional performances, the school should strive to match their quality. If a study of this sort is made, perhaps school administrators will become more conscious of the role of the class play in their curriculum.

CHAPTER II

DRAMATIC PROGRAM IN TEXAS HIGH SCHOOLS

While teaching speech for eight years in the public schools of Texas, the writer became interested in the literary, cultural and educational value of the senior play. Where the writer had contacts, there seemed to be little thought given to these values. The writer directed twelve class plays and noticed that their success was judged almost entirely by the amount of money received from the play. This was true in the small as well as the large high school.

The first two years were spent teaching in a school with eighty students. There were twelve members of the senior class; therefore a play had to be selected to accommodate this number of people. It had been the custom to present a non-royalty play, since the administrators felt there were good plays that did not require a royalty. The stage was located in the gymnasium and practices had to be held when the athletic groups were not using the gym. This was a consolidated school and most of the students rode twenty or thirty miles to school. Since they were so far from the school, night practices were discouraged until the week of the performance. This gave little time for play rehearsals. The stage was equipped with a cyclorama, two

rows of border lights and two door flats. There was no space off-stage, since the doors from the stage led directly into the corridor. In spite of these limitations, the director was supposed to do the best she could and present a finished entertainment. A majority of the people came to this annual event and apparently enjoyed the traditional production.

The next two years were spent teaching in an entirely different part of the state, in a school with about two hundred and eighty students. The class productions had previously been directed by the class sponsors, and the chief purpose was to provide money for the seniors' all-day picnic. Facilities were somewhat better than those found in the first teaching situation, since the stage was located in an auditorium and the director was allowed to select a royalty play. The school also owned one set of permanent flats for an interior scene, which the director was not permitted to paint or reconstruct in any way. The stage was equipped with one row of border lights and a set of footlights. Even with this much lighting equipment, it was impossible to color or direct the lights. Since most of the students lived in town, night rehearsals were permitted, if they didn't interfere with any other school activities. All

the plays were presented one night and the attendance was small.

In one of the largest high schools in the state, where the writer taught for the next four years, she found that a lot of the same policies prevailed. The first impression of the auditorium was most favorable; however upon closer examination one discovered that a large amount of money had been spent on much impracticable equipment. The lighting equipment included three rows of border lights, three sets of footlights and several soft and flood lights with a system for dimming. All the space in the fly area was useless, since the stage curtains were permanently hung and could not be raised or lowered. Although there were still many things to be desired, it was an improvement over the situation in the other schools. Even though this was one of the largest schools in the state, they still presented the class play to get money for class activities. It had been the custom to have a faculty committee select the play and the cast. The plays were presented two nights and large crowds attended both performances. The proceeds were always large because the students were given a commission on the number of tickets they sold. There was much enthusiasm among students and faculty, but the inevitable question was always raised, "How much money did you make?"

As a result of teaching in the three high schools, the writer became interested in the status of the senior play in the various communities of Texas. Since little research had been done in this field, the most logical means of getting information was to send out questionnaires. An original questionnaire was written concerning the senior play and other dramatic activities in the school curriculum.

These questionnaires were sent to two hundred schools in Texas.¹ Schools were selected on the basis of the size of their enrollment. As a result of this selection, information was obtained from all sizes of high schools.

Out of the two hundred schools surveyed, one hundred and thirty-six answered. The answers showed that one hundred and twenty-two schools produced a senior play during the 1950-51 school year. From these statistics, we know that school administrators feel the senior play is important enough to be a part of the school curriculum. Since class plays are being produced in a majority of the high schools of Texas, the question rises concerning their educational value. Mr. Leon C. Miller, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the National Thespian Society, says:

No one thought of the educational value of drama. Any teacher could direct a play, and

¹Complete copy found in the Appendix.

in the earlier days practically every teacher on the faculty at sometime or other had such an assignment. Thus, the plays were poorly selected, inadequately directed, and carelessly presented, but financially they were successful. Parents and friends of the members of the cast paid not so much to see a play, but to see their children and friends "on the stage." Thus the term "high school play" was born. With it came the reputation of "rank amateurism." One attended these performances only if he "knew someone in the cast." This notoriety grew to such an extent, that in too many communities it is still present.¹

In many schools the senior play provides the only dramatic experience for students throughout the school year. From the one hundred and thirty-six schools surveyed, fifty-nine said that the senior play was the only dramatic production in their high school. This is true not only in Texas high schools, but also across the nation. The National Thespian Society surveyed six hundred and twenty-one schools and found that one hundred and nineteen, or nineteen per cent, presented one full-length play during the 1947-48 season.²

The National Thespian Society has continually suggested that schools replace class plays with all-school plays, so that more students would have an opportunity to

¹Leon C. Miller, "The Dramatic Arts," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, February, 1952, p. 74.

²Ernest Beverly, "The Status of Dramatic Arts in Secondary Education," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 28.

participate in dramatic productions. It is not necessary that all schools belong to the National Thespian Society to have a good dramatics program; however, those that do belong seem to have improved their standards. Mr. Earnest Bavelly, past Executive Secretary of the National Thespian Society, says:

While it is true that the majority of the schools affiliated with the National Thespian Society sponsor more dramatic art projects than the average high school does, it can be assumed that at least one-third of our American high schools sponsor dramatic art programs comparable in quantity to those presented by Thespian groups.¹

Out of the one hundred and twenty-five schools that answered the questionnaire, twelve stated that they had a Thespian Society, while seventy-seven said they had some sort of dramatic organization. The National Thespian Society reported that there were forty-eight Thespian Societies in the state of Texas.²

More and more school administrators are beginning to see the advantages of dramatics in the high school curriculum. They felt it was so important that they asked the National Educational Theatre Association to prepare recommendations for a high school dramatics program.

¹Ibid.

²Leon C. Miller, Personal letter to writer of thesis.

Administrators are beginning to classify dramatics as part of the curriculum and not just an extra-curricular activity.

Mr. Francis L. Bacon says:

Whenever extensive recognition comes to an activity within the extra-curriculum, there is an inevitable transfer to the regular curriculum. It is by such means that, over the long years, the school curriculum has been enriched again and again. It is in such manner that the outcomes of interest in the dramatic activity have infiltrated into full curricular recognition.¹

Mrs. Florence Epps also feels that dramatics should be a part of the regular curriculum. She says:

The first objective of the high school theatre after the war should be to become incorporated into the curriculum. Dramatic activities aimed at supplying the Junior or Senior class with ill-gotten funds should be outlawed. Indeed there should be a dignified, constructive, graded course in speech and dramatics with the sole responsibility for producing all public dramatic presentations sponsored by the school. All proceeds from plays and recitals should go into the dramatic fund.

Incorporated into the curriculum necessitates trained directors--graduates of university departments of drama or their equivalent. Only such directors understand the wide range of theatre arts--from dramatic literature, through casting and training players, to designing and lighting the stage.²

Mr. Ernest Bavely says that there are three groups of dramatic work in our high schools today; divided according to the extent of their dramatic courses.

¹Francis L. Bacon, "The Administrator's Point of View," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 10.

²Florence Epps, "High Schools," Theatre Arts, July, 1945, pp. 437-38.

In Group I are those schools which have "dramatic departments" or "theatre departments" or "speech departments" in which dramatics work is a major activity. These schools--their number is extremely small--are characterized by a definite schedule of dramatic productions for each season, with plays directed by well-trained persons.

In Group II are those schools which have a fairly active dramatics club under capable faculty leadership. A number of these schools also offer a course or two in dramatics and presents several full-length plays a year, although some of these plays may be given as class plays with the direction entrusted to class sponsors.

In Group III, which is quite large, are those secondary schools which have no organized program of dramatics. Dramatics activities are largely confined to the production of one or more class plays a season, with class sponsors or other faculty members who happen to have a free period serving as "coaches." These class plays are looked upon as traditional with the school and community, and their primary objective is the raising of funds for yearbooks, annual class frolics, and a variety of other projects.¹

Perhaps one of the retarding elements in giving dramatic arts full curricular status, is the presence of a substitute--the senior play. Class plays, properly delineated, can add to the general dramatics program of any school. If they are well chosen and well produced, they can have literary, cultural and educational value.

¹Bavely, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

CHAPTER III

THE SENIOR PLAY IN TEXAS HIGH SCHOOLS

The senior play constitutes, in many instances, the major portion of the dramatics program in the high schools of Texas. Many dramatic arts programs were developed from the custom of presenting class plays. For whatever reason a class play may have been presented, it is believed that the participants have benefited in one way or another. With the professional productions that we have an opportunity to see today, one might feel that there is no place in our society for high school plays. Mr. Leon C. Miller says:

One hears that the American professional theatre is slowly disappearing from our American life, that the movies and radio and television are slowly taking their toll. Be that as it may, the high-school theatre will never die. Boys and girls enjoy too much the thrill of participating in a "live" drama. There are no failures in the high-school theatre!¹

The class play can offer an experience for students that they will not encounter in any other school activity. In play production there is a place for everyone--whether it be working behind the scenes or playing a role in the play.

¹Miller, "The Dramatic Arts," p. 76.

Apparently school administrators have felt that their students benefited from class play productions. As stated previously, one hundred and twenty-two high schools out of one hundred and thirty-six that answered the questionnaire, said that they presented a senior class play during the 1950-51 school year. A variety of values were placed on the senior play in the different schools that were surveyed. Almost all the principals or teachers that gave added comments said that the success of any class production depends on the enthusiasm and capabilities of the director.

The Director

The director of a play needs to know many things. It is most desirable for him to have a broad general educational background as well as specific training in the field of speech and drama. He should have a thorough knowledge of the best of dramatic literature for youth of the past and present, in order to select a play for his own use. After he has chosen the play, he should be able to design a set and costumes that would be appropriate to the time and period. It is important that he keep in mind the amount of money that should be spent on this phase of the production. In addition to the responsibilities usually associated with directing, the director should know something about publicity,

painting, sewing, carpentering and working with electrical equipment.

One of the first things that a director should learn is to be able to adapt his training and knowledge to any situation. He has possibly received his training in a college or university where he worked with a well-equipped stage, a workshop for building scenery and an elaborate switchboard. Very few of our high schools have these facilities. Mildred Streeter, dramatics teacher in the Charles E. Gorton High School, Yonkers, New York, says:

The beautifully equipped college and university theatres of today offer the student of dramatic arts great opportunities for development as directors and technicians. Yet, the revolving stage, the elaborate switchboard, the scene decks, and workshop sometimes spoil those who grow accustomed to their use. It is a rare high school that has many, or any, of these facilities. The new director usually finds an ungainly stage with a forty-foot proscenium, a depth of some twelve feet and a six-foot apron. There may be no entrance through which scenery can be passed, and what serves for a switchboard may be found in an adjoining cubbyhole out of sight of the stage.¹

While acting in a play during his college training, he probably saw a staff of three or four technically trained people working on one production. When directing his first

¹Mildred Streeter, "The Teacher of Dramatic Arts in the Secondary School," Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 76.

production, he will possibly find himself assuming the responsibilities of director, designer, carpenter, costumer and light technician. Few high schools can afford to employ a director and a stage technician. Hal H. Ulrici, Hartnell College, Salinas, California, says:

The average high school cannot afford to employ both a director and a stage technician; consequently, when the director is unprepared in technical production, most set designing and construction work is forced upon the woodshop instructor who is not trained in this specialized type of work. Certainly, all secondary-school dramatic arts instructors should be able to design, construct, paint, and light properly the various settings required.¹

Because a director of high school plays is working with amateur actors, inadequate stage facilities and with other school responsibilities, he must realize that he is within certain limitations. Any relief from these limitations comes slowly. The wise and happy director, who displays a great deal of patience, gradually improves the attitude of the students and the people of the community with regard to play productions.

All of us have a tendency to feel that our department is the most important part of the high school curriculum. A play director must cooperate with other departments. She

¹Hal H. Ulrici, "The Teacher of Dramatic Arts in the Secondary School," Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p.77.

cannot always have her rehearsals at the most convenient time for her. She is going to have students in her play who are also in other events and on many occasions she must be willing to compromise. This problem arises frequently and presents a real problem for any director involved. Some athletic coaches and directors even go so far as to tell students that they cannot be in a play if they participate in athletics. This seems a little unfair, when the problem could probably have been solved with a little cooperation on the part of the play director and the athletic coach. Isabel Bodden, Riverside High School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, says:

I strongly suggest that somewhere along the line in the training course these fledgling dramatics directors should be warned that in their zeal for successful dramatics performances, they will meet with opposition from other high-school faculty members who will not share their enthusiasm, and that, therefore, before starting work on a play, it would be a good idea to find out what other functions one is likely to run into during rehearsal periods and how to avoid them with the least possible friction. He must also realize that the most talented actors are not always the best pupils, and that, consequently, they must be prodded to keep up their grades in other classes, as well as to memorize their parts if they and their director are to live peacefully with the world about them. It is wise to get the whole school sold on the idea before a single advertisement appears, by tactfully getting the cooperation of as many departments as possible.¹

¹Isabel Bodden, "The Teacher of Dramatic Arts in the Secondary School," Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 71.

Considering all the things a play director needs to know, it would seem very unwise to ask a person who has no training in the dramatics field to direct a production. Out of the one hundred and twenty-two schools that answered the questionnaire, seventy-three per cent of the directors were teachers of speech and English; nineteen per cent were other teachers in the high school; five per cent were school administrators; and two per cent were selected from persons outside the faculty. It is encouraging to know that a majority of the directors had received some training in dramatics. Mr. Ernest Beverly says that play directors fall into three groups; determined by their training:

In a class by themselves are those who are trained as dramatics directors and teachers. They hold degrees from the better known college and university drama departments. Much of their academic training is in the fields of speech and dramatics. They have experience in acting. They see the value, professionally speaking, of attending professional schools of the drama, summer theatres, conferences, and conventions. . . . At present, the number of these directors is not large, but, thanks to the progressive teacher-training programs of some of our colleges and universities, their number is gradually increasing.

In another group may be placed that large number of teachers, the majority of whom hold degrees in English, who have either taken over the supervision of dramatics because they are genuinely interested in the theatre or who were asked at one time or another to take over the direction of the school plays and who took their assignments seriously enough to go out and acquire training in dramatics

during summer school, through night classes, and by participating in community theatricals of one kind or another.

In a third group are those teachers who are more or less compelled to take over the sponsorship of the dramatics club or to direct one or more school plays a season. They are not trained for this work. They do no more than is absolutely necessary to get by; and once the job is done, they are more than willing to forget the whole episode as somewhat of a nightmare. Of course in schools which follow this system, there is no discernible improvement in the dramatics program from one year to the next. In fact, these schools are in a perpetual state of having to start all over again each year, a situation which would be considered most unfortunate if it were applied to the athletics program.¹

Students who are planning to direct high school dramatics should have as clear a picture as possible of what will be expected of them and the things they will need to know. The more information and experience that they get during their college training, the easier will be their job as a director. The success of their plays will depend on their enthusiasm and leadership because the director must at all times be in complete charge of his play and be able to accept the responsibility of making decisions.

Selection of Plays

Selecting an appropriate play for a high school group, offers a real challenge to the director. He should

¹Bavely, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

carefully consider his limitations before he chooses a play to produce. If he is familiar with a good many plays, it will be easier for him to decide which ones will lend themselves to high school use. A great deal of thought should be given to the plays that have been done previously and the ones he intends to produce in the future. The more variety the director has in his types of plays, the more value it will be to the students and community.

Mrs. Roberta Sheets suggests:

The production program should be a long-range one planned over two or three years. Only in that way can it be co-ordinated and varied. The ideal long-range program includes the classics, a play of youth, possibly a play successful on Broadway, a social problem play, a folk play, a fantasy, and, if the audience demands, a mystery.¹

Along with considering the types of plays to be included in the season's program, the director should keep in mind what constitutes a good play, what plays are suitable for high school productions, the acting limitations of the high school cast and the objectives of his entire dramatic arts program. When a play program is carefully planned, it can systematically advance educational and cultural standards.

Some school administrators limit their directors to non-royalty plays. This presents a problem to the director,

¹Roberta Sheets, "Selecting the Play," Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 105.

because for the most part, any author who has written a play worth producing, should receive royalty payment. However, there are some good non-royalty plays, and by wide reading of many plays the director should be able to find one. Companies that publish play catalogues divide their royalty and non-royalty plays. It is very difficult to judge whether a play is usable by reading the brief synopsis given in the catalogue. The director should have an opportunity to read the entire play before he selects one; especially if he is selecting a play without a royalty. Mrs. Roberta Sheets says,

While a high royalty does not necessarily insure high-class material, the dramatist writes to live, and the director will find it difficult to get something for nothing.¹

It seems that a majority of our school administrators are beginning to realize this, since seventy-three per cent of the schools that answered the questionnaire, said that their school produced a royalty play during the 1950-51 school year.

A well-trained director should select a play that is worth his time and effort, as well as that of the students. He alone should be responsible for making the choice of the

¹Ibid., p. 107.

play because he knows the limitations of his actors, stage facilities and budget. If we are to justify the educational value of high school plays, the director will have to consider his selection very judiciously. Richard C. Johnson says:

Choosing a carelessly written play for production is no more consistent with sound educational policy that would be the use of comic books as basic text materials for a literature class. The fact that audiences are pleased with the performance of such a play is a matter of little consideration. The educational theatre should lead rather than follow the dramatic taste of its audience. Furthermore, considering the fact that most of our pupils have little or no opportunity to see good theatre elsewhere, we must recognize our obligation to satisfy an obvious need. The play selected should have definite literary value and should be an enriching experience for people on both sides of the footlights.¹

Where the director is untrained, he will probably select a farce or comedy that play companies have recommended for high school use. There have been hundreds of these plays written with the primary intention of entertaining. These plays can be produced cheaply and usually do not present many production problems. The director and school administrators will probably think it has been a successful production, since the audience seemed to be enjoying themselves at all times. Mr. Ernest Bavelly says:

A farce or comedy is preferred because "it makes people laugh" and because it is "easy to

¹Richard C. Johnson, "The Rural Consolidated Secondary School," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 46.

coach." Least prepared to bring improvement into this situation is likely to be the school principal who has no knowledge of the cultural and educational values found in a well-directed dramatic arts program. He sees nothing particularly wrong with the practice of presenting class plays. He looks upon the production of school plays as a convenient method of raising funds for various projects, and as long as he observes from the rear of the auditorium that the audience is laughing, all is well indeed. Of course, the chances are good that he will object to the use of a royalty play. More than that, he can't see much good in spending money for materials and equipment for the stage. After all, so he reasons, the stage has a curtain and a set of flats which have been put into use for every show given during the past eight or ten years. Why spend money on additional stage equipment?¹

On the other hand, the untrained director may try to do a play that is far beyond his ability to direct or the students to act. Here again, extensive knowledge of plays is invaluable.

A conscientious director will constantly be reading new plays. Play companies rarely send out plays on approval for directors to read; however, plays can be found in some of our better libraries and in such publications as Theatre Arts and Dramatics. These magazines also offer suggested production notes and suggest advancements that have been made in the production field. A director will want to read as many plays and look through as many

¹Bavely, op. cit., p. 29.

catalogues as possible before he selects his play. Most high schools receive annually publications from the major play publishing companies.

While considering plays to be produced, the director should keep in mind the purpose of the high school play. In 1946 Ernest Beverly sent out a questionnaire to high school directors asking for a practical, workable list of play standards. After receiving his answers he submitted to the high school division of the American Educational Theatre the following conclusions:

The purpose of the high-school play should be that of furthering the development of the high-school pupil. It should be regarded as a part of the educational process of the school. Its value as entertainment should be given careful consideration, but held secondary in importance to its educational value.

Standards

1. The high school play should have a worthwhile theme, be sincere and true in its interpretation of life, and accurate in its reflection of customs and manners.
2. It should have literary value. That is, it should be written in acceptable language and in accordance with accepted standards of play-writing, and, as such, it should be emotionally and intellectually stimulating.
3. It should be within the capacities of the high-school pupil to understand and appreciate, taking into consideration the influence of vicarious experience and the pupil's natural interests.

4. It should challenge the higher creative and artistic abilities of all who are associated with its production, thereby affording rich opportunities for study, analysis, and experimentation.

5. It should be good theatre, affording opportunities for sincere acting, and be satisfying as entertainment. It should lead rather than follow the community standards of entertainment and appreciation.

6. It should be free of highly sophisticated or advanced roles, vulgarity or profanity, objectional subject matter, and sordid, unwholesome presentations of characters and scenes.¹

While selecting a play for a high school group, the director should never underestimate the ability of his students. He should keep in mind that high school students are capable and enthusiastic. They are interested in doing a play that is a challenge to them, rather than one that is purely entertaining. The students can be proud that they participated in a high school production if the director has chosen a play in keeping with some of the suggestions made in the above section on play selection.

Casting the Play

Having selected the play to produce, the directors next problem is that of casting. He has possibly seen many methods of casting being used while receiving his college

¹ Ernest Bavely, "Selecting High School Plays," Scholastic, February 4, 1946, pp. 1-2.

training, and it will more or less be left up to him to decide the method he thinks is best. Several methods of selecting the members of the cast have been suggested by our leaders in the field of drama. The director should clearly have in mind the method he intends to use. If he plans to use the general tryout method, he will want to post a notice about a week in advance of the tryouts. He should have copies of the play before he posts this notice. In some instances, he may want the students to check out the books so that they will become familiar with the play. Some directors prefer sight-reading, feeling that all the students who are interested in trying-out might not have had an opportunity to read the play. The general try-out method does not usually require as much time as the audition or individual try-out. The director should use his own discretion as to what the best method will be for his individual use. In an article prepared by the Curriculum Sub-committee of the Secondary-School Committee of the American Educational Theatre Association, the committee says:

Although there are many ways of casting the production, the most generally acceptable is by means of the general tryout. It is better to let play scripts be available for general reading before the actual tryout, but, if it seems unwise to have the play read by the pupils before tryouts, then a play containing similar character types should be used for the tryout. Many high-school pupils who actually want to be in a production

hesitate to try out on a sight-reading basis, feeling that this system is unfair. They are logical in their thinking for, perhaps sub-consciously, they feel immature and, consequently, insecure in unusual situations.

Some educators object to the element of competition that is present in casting a play by the tryout method. However, if the dramatic director can help pupils to face the element of competition and not become engulfed by it, then he is providing actual living experiences for them. Again, the tryout may be an opportunity to teach the element of objectivity that is important in the lives of well-adjusted people.¹

The director must do everything he can to make the student feel that he is getting a fair tryout. Possibly he will want to have more than one tryout, since it is rather difficult to decide if a student can interpret a role from just one reading. Some directors have one general reading and then the next day select two or three people to tryout for a specific part. He should not be too hasty in his selection of the cast, since there are many considerations that need to be taken into account. Some of these are: interpreting the role, emotional nature, time to give to rehearsal periods, and his reputation to cooperate with other members of the cast. The more opportunities he has to hear the students read, the easier it will be to make these decisions. If the director has worked with the

¹Marion Stuart et al., "Materials, Methods, and Special Projects in Dramatic Arts," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, pp. 100-101.

students previously, he will have a fairly adequate idea of their abilities. If he knows very little about his prospective cast, he is faced with the problem of judging by first impressions. Leon C. Miller says:

One of the director's major needs is knowledge of casting. Quite frequently a director is fooled by first impressions. A study of human nature and personalities is invaluable. I have been fooled by pupils, adult-coached for their tryouts, who, after having been selected, were unable to interpret the role. Type-casting is important and must not be ignored. Although every dramatics teacher should strive for the development of the talents of as many pupils as possible in his field, those who have unusual talent must be given additional opportunities to further that talent. The greatest need in this field is the study of the various methods used to cast a show fairly and satisfactorily.¹

After the director has selected the members of the cast, his next step is the selection of the technical staff. Many students prefer to work back stage, rather than play a role. The director should realize the importance of back stage people, because they are primarily responsible for a smooth production. When he has finished selecting his staff, he will be ready to begin rehearsing the play.

Rehearsing the Play

The amount of time that should be spent rehearsing the play depends on the length of your rehearsal periods and

¹Miller, "The Teacher of Dramatic Arts in the Secondary School," p. 73.

the type of play you are doing. The director has probably worked with plays during his college training and from this experience he will be able to decide the number of rehearsals that are necessary. It would be impractical to say that one should spend an exact number of weeks to rehearse a play; however, results from the questionnaire showed that thirty-five per cent of the schools rehearsed three weeks for a full-length play. Answers concerning the length of the rehearsal period ranged from two weeks to eight weeks. Some directors feel that students can work on a play so long that they become tired of the play, and lose all vitality and interest; while others think that you must work several weeks in order for the actors to develop their characterization. This decision rests entirely with the director and the more experience he has, the better he will be able to judge the number of weeks he should rehearse.

When he first begins rehearsing the director should set up complete rehearsal schedules to give the members of the cast. Attending all of the rehearsals and being on time cannot be stressed too much. It is very difficult to have a successful rehearsal with half of the cast present. During the rehearsal period, the director assumes the role of a teacher. Marion Stuart and her committee comment upon the importance of a director being a good teacher.

The director as teacher becomes foremost once the cast has been assembled and rehearsals are ready to begin. Perhaps the most essential element of a good teaching attitude is a willingness to explain directions, to give reasons, to teach why, what, and how. Any other plan in the high-school theatre falls short of its attainable objectives or terminates chaos. The director must be in absolute authority, yet never dictatorial or militaristic; for no one is more humble or painfully aware of the magnitude of his medium than the sincere director.¹

There are many things that young actors need to consider when acting a role in a play. They must learn to think in terms of the entire play and not just of their individual part; of the stage picture that the audience will get; and of the relationship of their character to the rest of the play. When high school students fail to do this, they cannot present a finished production. Marion Stuart and her committee says:

Having impressed upon the case its responsibilities and goals, the director is ready to teach. He must first teach, obviously, the meaning and importance of the lines and business of the play: he must teach his actors to think in terms of plays and not parts, of stage pictures and stage actions as seen by the audience, and not of individual movements and business; he must teach his actors how to analyze a script, to find the meanings, to catch the mood and rhythm, to visualize the background and period, to discover the relationships of the characters to the whole of the play and to one another.²

¹Stuart, op. cit., p. 155.

²Ibid.

While rehearsing, the director should be able to see growth and development among the members of his cast. During the workshop period, the actors should learn something about plot construction and play craftsmanship along with stage movements and devices of acting. Mrs. Stuart says,

Usually, most rehearsal plans provide for a study of the meaning of the script, a mastery of the role, and a command of action in the play; some rehearsals give unity and form to the productions; and finally, the co-ordinating rehearsals bring together all of the various elements of the total production.¹

Financial Considerations

In most of our high schools today, the primary reason for having a senior play is to raise money for class activities. The questionnaire that the writer sent to two hundred schools in Texas, listed five possible reasons for having a class play. They were: (1) to make money; (2) to improve the speech of students; (3) to provide good dramatic material for student actors; (4) to give the student body a chance to see a good dramatic production; and (5) because you have always had one. Out of the five reasons, "make money" ranked first with twenty-eight per cent of the schools saying this was the reason they produced a class play. "To improve the

¹Ibid., p. 101.

speech of the students" was second, while "to provide good dramatic material for student actors" ranked third.

Since the play is presented primarily to make money, administrators may curtail the amount of money spent for the production. After the play has been selected, the director should be asked to submit a suggested budget, under which he will be able to produce a successful play. If the sponsors and officers feel that this budget is too high, they should ask the director to select a new play, which can be produced more reasonably. It is impossible to say that any play can be produced on the same budget.

Evelyn Konigsberg says that frequently directors ask what a reasonable sum would be considered necessary for a high school theatre production. Her answer to this is:

Obviously, there is no one answer. Costs vary from year to year and from place to place. Costumes made by the sewing classes will not cost as much as those necessarily hired for the occasion. Scenery constructed by the shop class will usually be less expensive than that purchased. The number and types of productions vary from school to school and from place to place. Obviously, the school which is well-equipped to start with will not need as much money as that which must be prepared to purchase rather expensive items from the market for several years.¹

The director should invest his money wisely and adequately. If necessary funds are provided for the produc-

¹Evelyn Konigsberg, "Financial Problems," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, pp. 158-59.

tion expense, the proceeds are usually larger. A majority of the schools in Texas that spent more money on their plays made more money. Twenty-three schools spent an average of \$6.55 on the play and their average profit was \$68.91; while four schools spent approximately \$193.50 and averaged \$355.92 profit.

In too many cases the seniors may expect to use the proceeds from the play for their own selfish end. There is no feeling of responsibility for providing such stage equipment as scenery, lights and costumes. They are glad to use this equipment, but they are very reluctant to leave anything of a permanent nature behind them. If it were the policy of the administration to allow in the budget enough money for permanent additions to the stage, all the classes would eventually benefit by it. If the administration does not adopt this system, then the school must provide means for replacing and improving stage equipment. Only twelve schools that answered the questionnaire said that they returned any of the proceeds to the drama or speech department. A majority of the schools stated that they used the money from the senior play for the senior trip or a gift for the school. Evelyn Konigsberg says:

The director and administrator who wish to initiate and maintain a production program that is culturally worth while, educationally valid, and

financially sound will have to plan carefully. They must ever have in mind the needs of the school and the community and the sources of revenue. They will have to establish a sound system for keeping an accurate inventory of all theatre equipment and a method of anticipating and budgeting for maintenance, repair, replacement, and expansion. They will insist upon an open and businesslike system of bookkeeping, so that the director may know in advance the funds upon which he may draw and be assured of the financial as well as the educational security of his program.¹

¹
Ibid., p. 159.

CHAPTER IV

VALUES FROM DRAMATIC EXPERIENCES

In the first three chapters of this thesis the writer has attempted to explain the dramatics program in high school and specifically the place of the senior play. If any progress is to be made in the area of relating these dramatic activities to the school program, the responsibility rests with the teacher of dramatic arts. He must be able to justify the value of dramatics in the high school curriculum. In order to sell a dramatics program to school administrators, the teacher must have a thorough knowledge of what the values can be for the student. In 1929, as part of a graduate thesis at the University of Iowa, Dina Rees Evans made a nation-wide study of the teaching of dramatic arts as accredited courses and of the production of plays in secondary schools.¹ Here are some comments that Miss Evans received from students who had attended high schools where dramatics was taught. Rita Bates, a sophomore at Northwestern, feels that dramatics aid in maturation. She says, "You work with your body and voice and develop them into flexible, well-controlled objects of your mind."

¹Dina Rees Evans, "Value to the Pupil," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 13.

Chester Gordon, a freshman at Harvard, thinks that dramatics provide group activity, while Curt Lewis, student at the Case School of Applied Science, feels that dramatics give an introduction to the world. Janice Gluck, a sophomore at Ohio State, says that her high school dramatics prepared her for further college training in dramatics. George Hackett, a graduate student at Amherst, believes that dramatics embrace all the arts. He says, "I am also convinced that this training began my appreciation for the arts--not just the theatre in which I am keenly interested, but also in art, architecture, and even music."¹

If teachers of dramatics can prove to administrators that students can get, from a dramatic arts program, some of the values mentioned in the foregoing paragraph, administrators would be more willing to consider dramatics as part of the regular curriculum. Except in rare cases, school superintendents and principals have very little knowledge of the value of dramatics. Francis L. Bacon says,

It is the writer's contention that the typical high-school principal does not, as yet, see the place which dramatic arts should play in his school; that, in respect to the principal's essential obligation of maintaining a balance in values, his leadership has been and is now less than it should be."²

¹Ibid.

²Bacon, op. cit., p. 9.

Assuming that this situation exists in a majority of our high schools, the teacher of dramatics must show that dramatic arts can help balance the educational system. The teacher or director of dramatic events has to do more than suggest; he has to show results!

The lack of money and equipment is one of the most common reasons that administrators give for not having dramatics in the curriculum. Of course, one of the duties of the superintendent is to distribute the money for the various departments and activities. In one of the large high schools in the state, where the writer taught, a budget was set-up for athletics, band, choral groups, journalism department, student council and many other groups, yet no provisions had been made for the speech department. This would seem to indicate that dramatics ranked last in importance. Changing the attitude toward dramatics will be one of the first problems that the teacher of dramatic arts will have to face. It can be done, even though it may require a number of years work in the same school system. If given a chance, the teacher of dramatics can usually prove that a dramatic arts program can be self-supporting; however, if all the money received from productions is used to support other activities of the school, then, of course, the school will have to finance the dramatics program.

Small school systems often feel that they cannot afford to employ a full-time speech or dramatics teacher. However, in almost every school there will be a teacher that has had some training in the dramatic field. If this teacher is willing, the principal could allow him one period a day to teach a course in the fundamentals of speech or dramatics. This one course could help balance the educational system. In small school systems, which are operating with a limited budget, they are sometimes tempted to focus their attention on one department. The writer is not advocating that this attention should be on the dramatics department. It does not seem fair for one activity or department to dominate the entire school. Charles A. Semler says:

Now and then, one hears of a school known as an "athletic" school, a "music" school, or a "dramatics" school. It seems to me that any of these adjectives is a dubious compliment. The thing which a school should strive to be known for is a broad and sound educational program which includes vigorous offerings in all these fields. It is a very difficult thing to guide or restrain a phase of the educational program which has become too vigorous at the expense of other parts, but sometimes it is the job of the administrator to do so.¹

The only form of dramatics that some schools offer to their students is participation in the senior play. If a

¹Charles A. Semler, "The Administrator's Obligations," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, pp. 5-6.

teacher finds himself in this situation, he should strive to present as finished a production as possible. If these plays are considered successful, perhaps the administration will suggest that he direct some more plays using other students in the school. The idea of having an all-school play gives an opportunity for boys and girls to participate in a dramatic production before their last year in high school. It seems logical that the senior play would be much better if the actors and actresses had had some earlier experience. If the student has had no training in speech or dramatic arts, it seems almost impossible that he could learn all he needs to know about play productions in a four or five week rehearsal period during his senior year. Although the writer does not think that a director should limit his cast to students who have had experience; it would seem more satisfactory if a few members of the cast and crew had received some previous training in stage techniques.

The fundamental purpose of our educational system is to prepare boys and girls as our leaders and citizens of tomorrow. Dramatics can contribute to this preparation by impressing upon students the importance of dependability, cooperation, responsibility and respect for leaders. Col. Charles C. Mather says:

Whereas knowledge can be acquired by formal instruction many of the qualities that comprise what

is called character do not develop from formal instruction so much as from daily demands and actions that demonstrate those good citizenship qualities: co-operation; enthusiasm for a common enterprise; willingness to accept responsibility, either as a follower or a leader; tolerance; and respect for constituted authority. Such qualities are also caught from the study of the lives of the selfless great whose contributions have provided men with their most productive ideals. Although they may be caught by observation of such examples, they must be developed from within. It is with the inculcation and development of these qualities that go to make up the kind of character the American citizen should possess that a properly administered course in the dramatic arts can make its greatest contribution.¹

It becomes the responsibility of the director to help develop these character traits in his students. If he is cooperative with his fellow faculty members and the administration, the students will realize the importance of their cooperating with other members of the cast. If a director is responsible, dependable and a good leader, his cast will respect him enough to want to follow his example. The director is working intimately with boys and girls and it gives him an opportunity to aid in the shaping of their character and personality. While working closely with the students, the director can help train these boys and girls to be worthy citizens. Mary T. McGeath says:

¹Col. Charles C. Mather, "Character and Personality Development," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 23.

No activity of the school is more communal in its nature, or more diversified in the talents used, than is dramatic arts. Through participation in this activity, latent talents are discovered and cultivated: the over-aggressive pupil subdued; the shy encouraged and given self-confidence. Each one according to his talents, five or two or one, is given an opportunity to serve the common good and reap the rich benefits of participation in a creative endeavor. This is democracy functioning on the highest plane, where all gifts of mind and heart of all the children of all the people are inspired to give creative expression in a thing of beauty. Here is training in worthy citizenship in a democracy and in the kind of leadership that recognizes the worth of the contribution of each individual in the group and the dependence of each upon all. Here, rightful authority emanating from the confidence of the participants in the arch-interpreter, the director, functions to unify the work of all who participate in a design of order. Thus, dramatic arts, in turn, render service to the greatest of all arts--the art of living.¹

¹Mary T. McGrath, "The Place of Dramatic Arts in the Secondary School," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, December, 1949, p. 3.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

Part I

Name of School _____ Location _____

Number enrolled in high school _____ Consolidated or city
school _____

Did you produce a senior play last year _____ Plan to this
year _____

What was the official position of the director _____
(math teacher, English teacher, speech teacher, etc.)

What was the enrollment of your senior class _____

Consider the following reasons for having a senior play and
rank in order of their importance to you:

_____ Make money.

_____ Improve speech of students.

_____ To provide good dramatic material for student
actors.

_____ Give student body chance to see a dramatic
production.

_____ Because you have always had one.

_____ Other reasons.

Approximately how many plays did you produce last year?

_____ Three acts; _____ One Act; _____ Pageants.

Were all the students allowed to try out for these plays?

Do you have a Thespian Society _____ A Dramatics Club _____

Who is the sponsor of these organizations _____

Part II

What was the name of your senior play last year? _____

Was it a royalty play _____ How large was the cast _____

How many weeks did you spend rehearsing _____

Approximately what was the cost of your production _____

What was your net profit? _____

Check one or more of the following, indicating the uses for the money from the play:

_____ Equipment for stage or speech department

_____ The senior trip

_____ Gift for the school

_____ Use in some other department

Other reasons _____

REMARKS. Please feel free to give any information about how successful or unsuccessful your senior play has been. (Use back of sheet.)

STATISTICAL PRESENTATION OF DATA SECURED
FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRES

TABLE I
QUESTIONNAIRE RETURNS

Size of Schools	Number Sent	Number Returned	Percentage of Returns
0-300	167	111	66
301-600	25	17	68
601-1000 or more	8	8	100
Total	200	136	68

TABLE II
SCHOOLS PRODUCING A SENIOR PLAY

Size of Schools	Number of Returns	Number Producing Play	Percentage
0-300	111	98	88
301-600	17	16	93
600-1000 or more	8	8	100
Total	136	122	89

TABLE III
DIRECTORS OF PLAYS

Position	Number	Percentage	Rank
Speech and English	96	73	1
School Administrators	7	5	3
Other Teachers	25	19	2
Outsiders	3	2	4

TABLE IV
PLAYS PRODUCED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Three act plays	59	47	6	2	14
One act plays	24	19	14	7	
Pageants	23	11	2		
Total	106	77	22	9	14

TABLE V
NUMBER OF DRAMATIC ORGANIZATIONS IN SCHOOLS REPORTING

	Yes	No
Do you have a Thespian Society?	12	113
Do you have a school dramatic club?	77	48

TABLE VI
ROYALTY PLAYS

	Yes	No
Royalty Senior Play	87	32
Percentage	73	27

TABLE VII
REHEARSAL TIME

Length of time spent rehearsing	Number	Percentage	Rank
2 weeks	6	5	5
3	40	35	1
4	33	29	2
5	14	11	4
6	16	14	3
7	1	0	7
8	2	1	6

TABLE VIII
USES OF THE MONEY FROM SENIOR PLAY

	Number	Percentage	Rank
Drama Department	12	6	3
Senior Trip	95	52	1
Gift for the school	69	35	2
Some other department	5	3	4

TABLE IX
SENIOR PLAY PRODUCTIONS

Dollars Spent	No. of Plays	Average Cost	Total Profit	Average Profit per Play
0-10	23	\$ 6.55	\$1,585.00	\$ 68.91
11-25	28	20.53	3,397.00	121.32
26-40	22	34.09	3,329.00	151.32
41-65	19	52.31	4,060.00	212.63
66-100	9	85.55	1,720.00	191.11
100 or over	4	193.50	1,423.70	355.92

TABLE X
REASONS FOR HAVING A SENIOR PLAY

Reason	Number	Percentage	Rank
Make money	450	28	1
Improve the speech of students	341	21	2
To provide good dramatic material for student actors	320	20	3
Give student body a chance to see a good dramatic production	262	16	4
Because you have always had one	196	12	5

Denton, Texas
April 29, 1952

Leon C. Miller
National Thespian Society
College Hill Station
Cincinnati, Ohio

Dear Mr. Miller:

I appreciated your taking time to write me such an informative letter concerning my thesis about the senior play in our high schools.

I am now seeking some more information. Could you tell me how many Thespian Societies there are in the state of Texas?

Sincerely,

(signed)
Thelma Henslee

(Notes by Mr. Miller)

Total Thespian Troupes as of May 1, 1952 . . . 1227

Thespian Troupes in Texas as of May 1, 1952 . . . 48

Anticipated enrollment (national) by

July 1, 1952 (close of fiscal year,

1951-52) 1250

Anticipated enrollment (Texas) by July 1,

1952 49

(signed) Leon C. Miller

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