

PERFORMING ARTS PACK

Write Plays, Stage Plays, Music Games,
Drama Games, Perform Poetry

How to Stage Successful Shows

CENARTH FOX

How to Stage *Successful Shows*

Tips and Ideas on Musicals, Plays and Concerts

By Cenarth Fox

© Copyright Cenarth Fox 2016

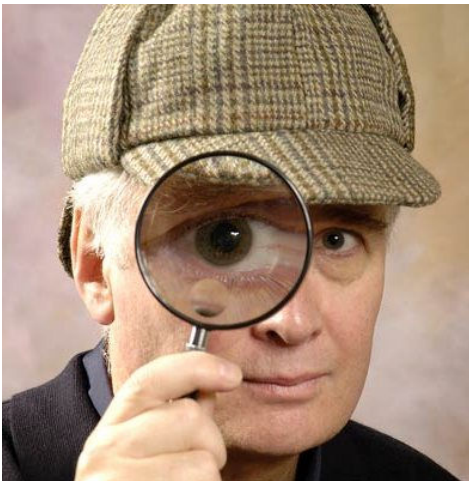
Published by FOX PLAYS

<http://www.foxplays.com>

ISBN 978 0 949175 41 2

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

About the Author



Cenarth Fox has been actively involved in live theatre for more than 50 years. He's been an actor, director, musical director, producer, stage manager and playwright. He worked as a primary school classroom teacher, a secondary school music teacher and as a curriculum consultant. He has appeared in television soap operas, professional pantomimes and in plays, musicals and operas. He has organised and directed dozens of school music festivals and in-service training programs for teachers. He was a soloist with the *Melbourne Symphony Orchestra*, formed and conducted school choirs and instrumental ensembles and directed a 17 piece swing

band for concerts and recordings. He created a theatre company which staged several world premiere musicals. He has been the director and musical director of many school and community theatre plays and musicals. For the Australian Broadcasting Corporation he wrote several series including *The Invisible Radio Show*, *The Story of Jazz* and *The History of Rock 'n Roll*. He has published more than 50 plays and musicals including a trilogy of shows about Sherlock Holmes, many music/drama text books and a series of children's mystery stories about the Schoolboy Sherlock Holmes. His novels to date are *A Plum Job* and *Cassocked Savage*. His stage shows and books have sold in some 50 countries.

This book is part of a series of five books on the performing arts. These books involve writing plays, staging plays, music games, drama games and performance poetry.



Contents

Introduction - page 1

What's it all about? Who's it for? Is this book for me?

Chapter 1 - "Idiots Rush in Where Directors Fear to Tread" - page 3

Do nothing. Discover, Develop, Dream.

Chapter 2 - "Crawl Before You Direct" - page 6

Improve yourself. Start small. Music-drama games. Mini-Musicals. Pennyweight Plays

Chapter 3 - "Why Do It?" - page 11

Convince the critics. Sway the sceptics. Answers to Questions. Save yourself.

Chapter 4 - "Let's Do It" - page 17

Select the staff. Who does what? Choice of show. Approval to proceed. The Licence. Finance. The budget.

Chapter 5 - "Timetables ain't just for trains" - page 32

Rehearsals. Production Plan. Rehearsal Routine. Bulletin board. Venues. Times.

Chapter 6 - "How do I get to Carnegie Hall? Practise." - page 44

Rehearsals. Warm-ups. Routine. Split rehearsals. Discipline. Rehearsal camp.

Chapter 7 - "Right, pay attention. I said *PAY ATTENTION!*" - page 53

The Director. Role. Responsibilities. Methods of directing. Blocking. Preparation. Notes.

Chapter 8 - "*A one, two, three, four!*" - page 62

The Musical Director. Piano, band or tape? Audition routines. Warm-ups. The score. Conducting hints. Encores.

Chapter 9 - "*Bend and clap, bend and ... Damien!*" - page 73

Less can be more. Warming up. Auditions. Choreography. Dress the stage. Pitfalls. Tips.

Chapter 10 - "Next!" - page 77

Auditions. How? When? Who? Scoring system. Call-backs. Understudies. Be Friendly.

Chapter 11 - "Technical stuff - I don't understand it either!" - page 85

Venue. Safety risks. Audio. Lighting. Special Effects. Scenery. Make-up.

Chapter 12 - "You gotta have a gimmick" - page 92

You must advertise. Cheap, simple methods. DIY. Gimmicks. Tickets. Competitions. Freebies. VIPS. Ticket design. Ticket prices. Logo.

Chapter 13 - *"Three teas, two coffees and a program, please."* - page 102

Front of house. Refreshments. Displays. The program. Advertising.

Chapter 14 - *"Why didn't I think of that?"* - page 108

Thoughts, hints and ideas

Chapter 15 - *"What's it mean?"* - page 119

A mini-dictionary

Chapter 16 - *"What else can I read, watch and hear?"* - page 121

Books. Tapes. Videos. To copy or to create?

All the photos in this book are from successful stage shows written by Cenarth Fox



Garden Folk

Introduction

Do you travel? Ever been interstate or abroad? Even popping next-door can be a bit of an adventure. Well if so you'll know what I mean when I say *staging a show is like travel*.

Some journeys are fantastic. You have great expectations, the actual trip is terrific, and you meet interesting people, see unusual and exciting things, *do* exciting and unusual things and bring home wonderful memories.

Some journeys are the pits. The plane/train/bus/car is late, overcrowded, delayed, and uncomfortable and breaks down. It never stops raining. A pickpocket takes you to the cleaners, the lavatory is not flushed with friendliness and you can't speak the lingo.

Well staging a show is like travel. Some journeys [shows] are sensational. Some journeys [shows] are definitely off.

So how do we get to take happy snaps? How do we make our hols, our vacation a stunning success? How can I stage successful shows?

I'm glad you asked because this book is all about just that. If you're going to travel, do it in style. Enjoy yourself. You don't need a fortune; you don't even have to go to the ends of the earth. Here are some tips and ideas on having a simple, enjoyable holiday. *Holiday!*

Are you seriously equating organising a bunch of ego-mad, untalented, two-left-footed "*performers*" into something resembling entertainment with a *holiday*? Oh, come on! And you expect me to seriously consider the contents of this ... this ... *publication*?

I'm always reading to learn although I do not always like to be taught.

Winston Churchill

Maybe you're a seasoned traveller; maybe you've staged many successful shows. If so, some [most?] of this book may seem irrelevant. You could skip the first five chapters.

My experience has been that whenever I think I know something, whenever I reckon I've got all the answers, then I'm in trouble. We can always improve, always learn and often from an unlikely source. A novice actor can deliver a speech in a new and interesting way. A young director can suggest a set design that works a treat. A parent waiting to collect their theatrical offspring can offer assistance that can save you hours of work and heaps of money.

Go on. Read the lot. I dare you!

What Sort of Show Are We Talking About?

Yes, be specific. Well there is a concentration on the school musical but really you could be involved in just about any form of the performing arts - play, opera, musical, ballet, concert, revue, pantomime, talent quest, etc. It could be a huge, complex, expensive and lengthy performance or something simple, inexpensive, short 'n sweet.

Is The Writer Right? [He means "correct"]

I've started at the *very* beginning of staging successful shows. Not the auditions, not the first rehearsal, not the choice of the show. To me, the real beginning deals with our motives. The first question should involve *why* rather than *what*?

I want to get one thing straight right from the beginning. You see I'm silly enough to admit I may not be right. That what I say is the *right* way may in fact be the *wrong* way and vice versa. And what really has me nervous is your reaction. If I leave you sitting on the fence, I've died a death.

My aim is to get you to say [inwardly if you like] either of the following.

"*Fantastic. I agree with that 100%.*" or "*Absolute rubbish! Wrong, wrong, wrong!*" Okay, maybe there's room for some middle ground but I'm really keen on you making some kind of response.

I'm putting my experiences, mistakes, ideas, opinions and suggested solutions on paper. They may not be correct but if they help you stage successful shows, that's great!

Is This Book For Me?

I hope so. Basically it's aimed at teachers in schools. But anyone involved with youth theatre, community groups, scouts, guides, amateur companies, etc should find practical tips and ideas. Perhaps you're a director, a musical-director or choreographer. Or all three! You could be a scenic-artist, a graphic-artist, the accountant or prompt. You mightn't be any of these but would like to be. Look, you could be anyone.

This book often refers to teachers and much of my work has been with students, teachers and amateur actors. But that's not important. What is important is you and *your situation*. Adapt each example in this book, each situation to your own. Use your imagination. It's your group, your concert, play or musical. You're the star. You're the one with the sign on your desk.

The buck stops here.

President Harry Truman

For each example, for every tip, with every suggestion and idea - relate it to *your* situation.

Let's go!

Chapter 1

Idiots Rush In Where Directors Fear To Tread

Do nothing. Pardon? You heard. Do nothing. Don't board the plane. Don't even buy a ticket. Don't go anywhere. Stay put.

One mistake I've made [as have many others] is to try and stage a successful show too soon. A wise person once said, "*Hasten slowly*". Excellent advice. Staging a show is never easy. Staging a *successful* show is even harder.

But don't be discouraged. Learn to control your urge to conquer the world in five minutes. You *can* stage successful shows. Millions have and continue to do so. But there is a right way to get started. My advice is *temper your enthusiasm*. Don't rush in where angels [and wise directors] fear to tread. Consider this.

A teacher, busting to stage a show, arrives at a school and sets to work. "*I want to do this*" s/he says. "*It'll be great!*" And maybe it will be great. Maybe it'll be fantastic. But hang on. You run the risk of wearing a dozen eggs on your dial. And that's just for starters. Think about this.

1. You may offend those already working in this area. Put yourself in their position. They've been helping students stage a show for a year or more when suddenly in bursts a new face. You. And this new face announces to the world they're keen and rarin' to go on some fabuloso extravaganza. How do you feel? Threatened? Annoyed? Embarrassed? Maybe all three. No. The advice is definite. Wait. Staging a show involves dealing with people. People have feelings. You must not *offend* them. Quite the opposite. You must *befriend* them.

2. You may isolate yourself. Even if you enjoy working on your own [and I think that's inviting problems] you'll benefit enormously by having friendly, co-operative, industrious helpers. Boy will you benefit. A good right-hand wo/man is worth their weight in gold. But if you are too enthusiastic, too confident, aggressive, bossy, self-centred or just plain rude, you'll lose support before you start. There is an art in getting people to support you. It won't happen if you're *too* keen.

So whilst I've told you to start by doing *nothing*, that's not strictly true. Do nothing *obvious*. But in a subtle and sensible style, try doing three things. The three Ds.

Discover – Develop – Dream

Discover. It's essential you *discover*. Study the people in your school, company or group. **People are the most important part of any show.** *Discover* who can do what. *Discover* what [if anything] has happened before you arrived. Is there anyone experienced or interested in performing? Is there a tradition of staging shows? If so, what has happened?

Have previous shows been successful? Were there any major problems? What shows were staged? Why? How does the group operate? I mean, who makes the decisions? Who are the power-brokers?

TIP

It's not what you know but who and knowledge is power.

If you know *who* is influential and if you can win their support, your chances of staging successful shows immediately improve. Discover.

Develop

Develop. Form relationships. Relate. Get on with people. If you're snobbish, timid, and aggressive or have halitosis and body odour, you could have problems. Major problems. People will shy away from you. This is bad news. You want them on your team. **Improve your social skills. Learn how to mix.** Within your school, theatre company or group - MIX! And if you can't mix - learn! Develop. Okay, how?

People I find boring are those who talk only or mainly about themselves. They seemingly have little or no interest in others. You'll get on much better with people and win their respect if you show an interest in them. And I mean a *real* interest.

Learn and remember their name. Use their name. Discover their interests. Sincerely [without being a sticky-beak] enquire about their situation. People like being remembered, being treated with kindness and genuine interest. *Please* and *thank you* don't cost anything and manners maketh the wo/man.

Use your social skills. Mix with everyone. Discover.

Dream

Dream. Think about your show, your cast, your venue. It sounds corny but if you think positive, happy, successful thoughts [and you prepare thoroughly] you may well find yourself involved in a triumph. It helps if you have a vision. Become a dreamer.

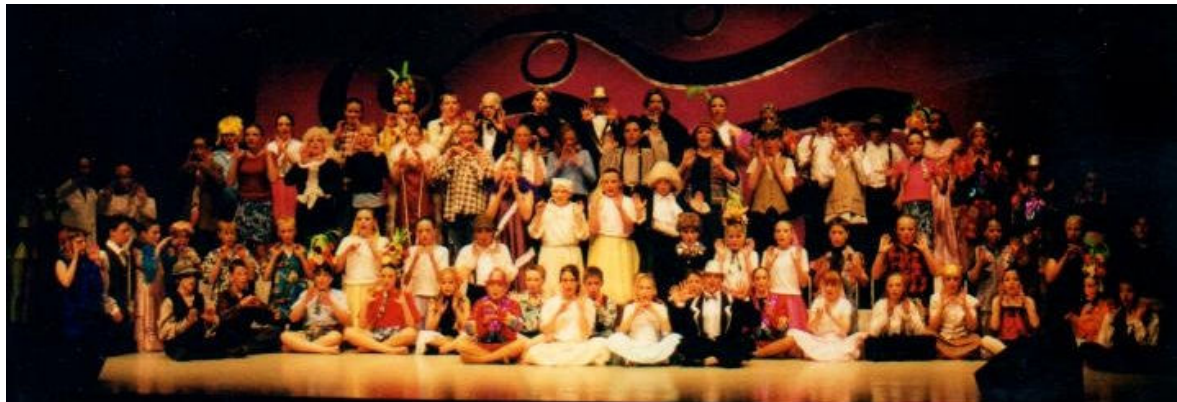
There's an old cinema in my suburb. It's now a giant furniture warehouse. The seats, screen and ticket-box are long gone and the floor is piled high with chairs, lamps, desks, wardrobes and plumbing supplies. Whenever I have the chance, I stroll in the front door, imagine what films are showing [and it would be two features] and climb the stairs to the dress circle. Here the floor is raked, the ceiling intact [well, almost] and the proscenium-arch is a bit tacky but still in place. I dream. I think about all the stars who've graced the screen, the patrons who filed in here for their weekly entertainment. I dream of buying the building and converting it to its original state. Mind you I'd add facilities to perform live theatre, include a restaurant, art/craft studio and bookshop.

I think this is helpful. The dreaming I mean. Crazy but helpful. You can do likewise. Examine the performing spaces in your school, suburb or town. They need not be magnificent auditoriums with all manner of superb facilities.

I've seen terrific shows performed on the back of a truck! A basic classroom or old hall can be turned into a marvellous venue. You don't need huge finances. You *do* need a vision. Get your creative juices flowing. Dream.

So now you've started. You've done nothing obvious. But in a subtle way you can *discover*, *develop* and *dream*. The three Ds. Do it.

Our journey has started. We're off.



Music!

Chapter 2

Crawl Before You Direct

Oh come on. Get the curtain up. On with the show. I mean at first it was *do nothing*. Now it's *crawl before you walk*. We want action. Let's call the first rehearsal!

Really? I suppose you're the type who packs their bags an hour before the plane takes off and spends the entire holiday wondering if you turned off the gas! Twit! Look, all I'm asking is, *Have you got your passport and ticket?* A reasonable request I would have thought. It's no use standing at the check-in counter only to discover your traveller's cheques are home in the bedside table. Keep calm. Hasten slowly.

I've mentioned the importance of people. Now I wish to emphasise the *skills* involved in staging successful shows. Skills are essential. You must have some theatre skills. Not necessarily fancy or detailed skills. Simple, basic skills are fine when you start. They're simple to obtain. And as you travel you'll refine your skills and collect new ones. Remember experience is the best teacher. Get some experience.

How?

Well there are many possibilities. Of course you may already be experienced and have many, well-developed theatre-skills. If so you can ignore this part of the journey and my earlier comment, *You're never too smart to learn something new*. But if you'd like to test what you already know or if you're keen to pick up a new skill/s, read on. Here are just two ways to gain experience. Invaluable experience.

1. Join a theatre company or the production team of your own school show. Become an assistant, a worker. Start from the bottom. After all, that's where all the real work is done. I've found one of the best ways to learn is to copy. [So much for teacher-training!] If you join a theatre-company [a local drama or musical group would be fine] you can learn many things. The same goes when helping your fellow teachers on the school play. If you work backstage moving scenery, you'll learn how this important task is performed. But you'll learn much more. You'll value the importance of silence. You'll see how the stage manager works, how the curtain and screens and scrims "fly". Don't worry about the technical lingo. Most is explained in Chapter 15 page 104. No, by working backstage you'll learn the importance of uncluttered wings and how much time and effort an actor needs to make a quick change.

If you're a performer, the skills you'll acquire cannot be bought. If you're going to be a director, a musical director or choreographer, having to act, sing and dance is essential training. By watching a director, you'll absorb techniques and ideas to use when *you're* the director. The same applies to music and dance. The styles, ideas and methods you like or which work, you'll use. The things you don't like or which you think have failed, you'll reject. Experience is a great teacher. **Get some experience.**

2. Start small. Even if you have some experience, it's always wise to start small. So let's assume you've had some experience working on a school show or with a local group. Now you're ready to tackle a show yourself. You're ready to be the boss. The project is your idea. You're the driving force. Well my advice is simple. **Start small.** Curiosity may have killed the cat but excess enthusiasm absolutely slaughtered the novice director.

If music theatre is your interest, don't, repeat, *don't* mount *Aida* on ice complete with tap-dancing elephants playing the overture on electronic xylophones! Start small. Start tiny.

Some years ago, as an educational consultant, I worked with many enthusiastic teachers who wanted to stage a show but were tentative about taking the plunge. The whole project seemed daunting. I mean a 70 minute musical can take weeks or months to prepare and rehearse. It can be intimidating for the inexperienced director. So I wrote some very short shows. Of course such works have existed for centuries [*opera buffa* being a good example]. I called my short shows *mini musicals* and introduced them at seminars for music/drama teachers. I made the teachers actually perform them. They were a hit!

A mini musical is just that. Most have a song, sometimes two, dialogue and the whole thing lasts about 15 minutes. There are exceptions. One lasts all of 123 seconds! And I've published some body-percussion mini musicals where there is no singing as such but plenty of vocal sounds, clapping, slapping and snapping. The benefits of a short or small show are many and varied. Here are some of the benefits.

- you can rehearse and perform in the one small space e.g. a classroom
 - total rehearsal time is very short and can be as little as an hour
- if you make a mistake e.g. casting, time for costumes, etc., it's no big deal
- by tackling a short show, you'll quickly gain skills, satisfaction and confidence

So I suggest you start by choosing a play or musical which is easy and short. Make your task simple. Increase the odds of the show being successful.

And if a *mini musical* seems a touch difficult [and really they're a cinch], why not a *pennyweight play*? These are very, *very* short plays. Most last about two minutes. There is no music, few if any props/scenery and you can rehearse and perform them in 30-40 minutes. I've published 48 *pennyweight plays* which are fun, entertaining and ideal for you the budding director.

Bush dancing, square dancing and action songs are also possibilities. They get the performers "performing" and there's no pressure on you to present some glittering extravaganza.

My book of music/drama games *Play It Again, Ham* is another way for you to direct, stage and work with your performers building their confidence and yours too!

Yet another idea is to enter some festivals/eisteddfods with a choir, verse-speaking group, folk/modern dance troupe or instrumental group. **Give yourself experience at running the show.** Learn how to get the best out of your performers and gain valuable experience.

And to illustrate what you could use, here is a *pennyweight play*. This work is subject to the laws of copyright but purchasers of *How to Stage Successful Shows* may stage amateur performances of this works without payment of any performing fee. Happy performing!

Up In Smoke

© Copyright Cenarth Fox 1993

Cast Henpeck, Taps, Moitil, Shrapnel, Abbott

[Setting: Interior of warehouse or factory. It's night, only dim lighting is used. The five business partners [male or female] are seated in various positions. TAPS hops up and paces up and down]

Taps *[Pacing]* I don't like it. I don't like it all.

Moitil I'm lost. What comes after the signing bit?

Henpeck It's sink or swim time, folks. You knock this back and we'll all go under.

Shrapnel But it's not our fault. The suppliers are always late. The customers want ninety days. The workers strike for anything.

Abbott The idea's a good one. Morally, it's spot-on.

Taps I still don't like it. *[Stops pacing]* I tell you I'm scared.

Henpeck Anyone else got a better idea?

Moitil Better than what? *[OTHERS groan or ignore MOITIL]*

Abbott And we *deserve* the money. We've built this business out of nothing.

Shrapnel We've been paying those ridiculous premiums for what ... ten years?

Taps But it's illegal. If we're caught, we're dead.

Henpeck We're dead anyway. The bank's given us forty-eight hours.

Others *[Shocked]* What!?

Henpeck We need half a million by Tuesday. *[OTHERS stunned]*

Shrapnel Half a million!

Moitil *This* Tuesday?

Abbott They're vultures. I'm telling you, we are absolute saints alongside that mob. The real crooks are the insurers and the bankers.

Moitil *[Twigs]* So that's it. We're robbin' the bank. *[Is ignored]*

Henpeck Let's put it to the vote. Those in favour?

[EVERYONE except MOITIL raises a hand]

Taps I still don't like it.

Henpeck Carried. *[MOITIL suddenly raises a hand]* Unanimously.

Shrapnel I'm so angry I'll light the damn thing m'self.

Abbott We're *all* angry but let's stick to the plan.

Taps And you're sure the policy covers everything?

Henpeck We set it, get out fast and provide each other with an alibi. Okay?

[OTHERS nod, agree]

Moitil What alibi?

Henpeck I'll go out the back and start the fire. *[Exits quickly]*

Abbott We've paid ten times in premiums what we'll collect. Ten times.
Taps *If we collect.*
Shrapnel If they don't pay, I'll make 'em pay. *[Smacks fist into palm]*
Moitil When do we call the fire brigade?
[OTHERS turn and stare at the curious MOITIL. Pause]
Shrapnel You saw nothing, heard nothing, know nothing. Right?
Moitil Oh right, gotcha.
[HENPECK bursts in a bit out of breath and very excited]
Henpeck I've done it. The place is on fire. *[OTHERS anxious]*
Taps Oh flippin' heck, I hope this works.
Moitil Let's get the stock outside.
Shrapnel *[Explodes]* You idiot! It's *meant* to burn.
Abbott And we're not here.
Henpeck Stay calm. No panic. The policy's gunna save us. Well done Taps.
Taps *Me?* It was *your* idea.
Henpeck Yeah but you made sure we all signed in the right place and posted the jolly thing. *[Smoke - dry ice - could start to swirl onto the stage]*
Taps I didn't post it.
Others What!?
Taps That big yellow envelope?
Others Yes!
Taps It's on my desk.
Others What!?
Taps I thought it was the new art-work.
Henpeck *[Going bananas]* Get that policy!
[Exits into the fire in haste. The OTHERS are stunned. Pause. Suddenly they yell as one and madly exit after HENPECK]
Others Get that policy! *[Curtain]*

Discussion Points and Follow-Up Activities

1. What were the characters planning to do?
2. Did their plan backfire? Why?
3. What is the pun in Question 2? What is a pun?
4. What is insurance fraud? How else could it work? e.g. personal injury, loss of possessions.
5. How do insurance companies make a profit?
6. Were the characters morally correct in their actions? Why?
7. If you've paid your insurance premium, does this entitle you to make a claim for anything or any reason? Why?
8. What do you think happened to the characters in this play?

There are 48 Pennyweight Plays available from Fox Plays

So Now You're Experienced

So now you've done some or all of the following. Maybe even more.

- you've joined a local theatre company, you've been a performer
- you've worked backstage and helped prepare/rehearse the school show
- you've directed/conducted short shows e.g. *mini musicals* and *pennyweight plays*
 - you've organised a bush dance
 - you've entered a group or groups in a music/drama festival
- you've been to see some shows [professional, community, schools]

What we genuinely understand, we can do.

Raymond Williams

Learning on the job is a great way to learn. The only way? But how long has all this taken? Do I perform in seven plays before I start to direct one? Must I sing in the chorus of five Broadway shows before I become a musical director? How long is a piece of gaffer-tape?

Obviously the time varies. If you were born in the wings of a theatre and spent your childhood travelling the world with your theatrical parents, there's a good chance you'll know a darn sight more than someone who grew up a couch potato and wouldn't know the inside of a theatre from a pizza with the lot. Previous experience counts.

But I still say this to the budding director. Take your time. Build your confidence. And once you've staged your first small play or mini musical, you may well be ready to try something more ambitious. Perhaps not *Wagner* or *Shakespeare* but certainly a longer, more complex show. Something to get your teeth into.

Go to it!



Lollies