

We the Players ...

The Bigfork Community Players is a community theater company. Community theater is amateur theater. The actors are amateurs, the directors are amateurs, and the stage and technical crews are amateurs. It's an honor to be an amateur, and a privilege to be part of a community theater company. Because to be an amateur implies neither a skill less than professional nor a drive less than earnest. It simply means that those who call themselves amateurs do what they do for the sheer love of doing it, without regard to being paid. And when they push themselves to excel, it's for the simple joy of excellence.

We, the Bigfork Community Players, are proud to call ourselves amateurs. We don't do what we do because we're good at it. We don't do it because we're paid for it. We don't do it because we're vain. We do it because we love it. We act because, for a few short moments, we have the privilege of literally giving life to a character. We produce because we love to bring the roles we present alive onstage, alive such that our audiences may come to understand, to empathize, to care about the characters we portray in the same way we have learned to care about them. Such that they may vicariously experience the thrill of living we feel when we're in character onstage.

Although we're a company of amateurs, we strive to function and perform in a professional manner. What this means is a concept that has, to some extent, evolved over time. The purpose of this document is to help provide you with the tools you will need to perform professionally in an amateur environment, to experience the joy that attends the privilege of giving life to a production. I hope you'll find it helpful.

Although we're a company of amateurs, we strive to function and perform in a professional manner. What this means is a concept that has, to some extent, evolved over time. And the understanding of the concept is somewhat personal. This is not an official document. Rather, it is my attempt to describe the concept and to provide you with some tools and ideas, as I have come to understand them, that may help you to perform professionally in an amateur environment and to experience the joy that attends the privilege of giving life to a production. I hope you'll find it helpful.

David Vale
President (2014-2017)
Bigfork Community Players

Actors, as we Understand Them

Actors perform onstage. And off. As an actor, you are the primary vehicle through which the script reaches the audience. Through which the director's vision of the script transpires onstage. Through which you transform from your real self to the self needed to portray the character. You have the distinct pleasure and privilege of presenting the face of the Players to the public. Enjoy it and do it well!

Lines

Lines refer to the words of the script. When we talk about a line, we mean an uninterrupted sequence of words spoken by a single actor. Regardless of whether it is one word or three pages, a passage spoken by a single character without interruption is a line.

Lines with your character's name are yours. Yours to speak, yours to act, yours to enjoy, yours to learn. But learning comes first. Learn your lines, or nothing else you do will matter.

If you have your own approach to learning your lines and it works for you, you may ignore the rest of this section. But if you have difficulty learning your lines on schedule, difficulty learning your lines well enough to say them at double speed, or difficulty learning your cues well enough to respond to them promptly, then read on.

Learning your lines proceeds through three stages. First you have to learn the words and sentences that comprise your lines. You cannot learn to respond to cues until you learn what to respond with. So learn your lines. So well you can recite them at double speed.

Then learn your cues. Cues come in many forms. They can be key words, key thoughts, or key positions. Use whatever information is available to inform yourself as to when to speak your line and which line to speak.

Finally, learn your context. Understand the story behind the words, both yours and your co-actors. Context itself acts as yet another cue. And it can be extremely helpful when primary cues are omitted or unheard and the dialog goes off script. A short passage of improvised dialog can seamlessly repair a missed line or section if it is in character and in context. Context also allows you to adjust your responses, through active listening, to unexpected changes in the language of your co-actors.

And although learning lines is your responsibility, understand that your knowing them is important not just to you but to your co-actors as well. Acting is reacting, and it is difficult to give the right reaction when the response is a stumbled or tepidly delivered line.

Of all the things that can go wrong in a live production, missing lines and/or cues is the most immediately disruptive. So don't just learn your lines, learn them well.

Blocking

Blocking refers to gross movement on stage, that is getting from here to there. Generally, blocking will be provided by your director. When it is, learn it as if it were a part of your lines. Make your moves consistently and with intent.

Do not wander. Every move you make should be motivated by the action. Every move you make should be natural and believable. Avoid the tendency to make “discrete” corrections by shuffling. Be aware that backing up is usually an unnatural move.

But feel free to act within the zone of your location. If you notice your shoe is untied, it is natural to bend or keel down and tie it. But don't make an unblocked trip across the stage to the bar because you think your character should be thirsty.

Focus

The audience cannot watch the entire stage at once. Most often the audience will concentrate on the action taking place in a very small portion of the stage. The action at that portion of the stage draws focus. If you are in the focus, all eyes should be on you. If you are not, any eyes that fall on you should be directed toward the focus. This means that if you are out of focus, you can either stand still and remain invisible or you can attentively concentrate on and react to the action at the focus. But you should never move, act, or speak if it will distract from the focus. Understand that standing still and remaining invisible at the right time is an important skill. Develop it fully.

Touch

Physical contact is a natural part of life and should be a natural part of acting. But understand that your co-actors are real people with real reactions to touch. An intimate touch such as a hug or kiss should be preceded by some agreement between the parties that such touch is acceptable and welcome. And kissing, if done in a realistic manner, can be not just intimate, but a possible disease vector. Actual kissing should probably be delayed until near the performance so any germs exchanged don't have a chance to grow until after the show closes.

Voice

For most acting, your own voice is the best voice you can have. Speak with your natural intonation. Avoid a stage voice, effected to sound like you're acting.

We currently use body microphones on all of our actors because this delivers a superior sound to the audience. Not only can the audience hear every word, the actor is allowed the opportunity to us tender expression when needed without fear of not being heard.

Gaze and Cheating

Generally its good to look into the eyes of the person you are speaking to. But it's also good to keep your face toward the audience. Cheating refers to turning your body toward the audience

while keeping your gaze on your co-actor. It's a compromise that lets you show your front to the audience while maintaining the realism of a conversational stance.

And, should you have the opportunity to address the audience, address the top row or the control booth. With the lights in your face, you won't be able to see a thing. But as one theater expert pointed out, "It's not about you."

Automaticity

When you are at the point of knowing your lines well, along with your context, and are not struggling for your own lines, you will notice what has been referred to as the two-brain situation. You will be able to deliver your lines automatically and simultaneously think about what is happening onstage and to plan for contingencies, such as missed lines. Modern neuroscience recognizes that you can have several processes going on in your head at once, although you'll only be able to put your primary attention on one at a time. When delivering your lines becomes automatic, you'll be able to focus your attention on more important things.

Working with Your Director

Your director is not God, but it's best that you don't point that out too often. The director is responsible for the overall vision of the play, the integration of the characters that develop, and a pile of management details that can be tedious and at times overwhelming. It's important that you trust and obey your director. We understand that this is asking a lot and we do our best to select directors that you can trust. But, in the same way you as an actor try things that may not work, so the director must be allowed to do the same. For a director to recognize that his or her idea or approach has not worked, the idea must be tried out. Work with your director performing as closely as possible to his or her suggestions. If it's not working for you, discuss it with the director at a break or after rehearsal. A director should be willing to discuss your issues, peer to peer. After all, the director is not God.

Our No-Stars Policy

We're happy to have you as an actor in our company and look forward to seeing you onstage. But understand that acting in our company is a privilege and there's a lot of invisible work that goes on behind the scenes to bring a production to life. Don't just acknowledge that effort; be part of it. If you act in every play, make sure you also work as crew in every play. If you don't have time to both act and crew in every play, then don't act in every play. We all want to act, but someone has to crew. There are good actors in our company, but there are no stars who are above the fray of production.

Alcohol and Drugs

Many of us enjoy the opportunity to have a drink with friends and cast members. However, alcohol (or recreational drug) consumption in any quantity has an effect on one's ability to remember, to concentrate, to act, and generally to function. During a performance, it is essential that all our faculties be sharp. And when working on a set or with tools, safety is always a concern. Thus it is expected that anyone acting or otherwise participating in a

production will refrain from consuming alcohol or drugs on any performance or work day until the last performance and the work for the day is done.

Director

The director is in charge of all creative aspects of the play he or she is employed to direct. Although the director reports to the producers, their responsibility is limited to selecting, and if necessary, removing a director for unacceptable performance. There are certain expectations of a director that include acceptable fidelity to the script, use of an agreed upon type of actor (e.g., adults), effective use of cast and crew resources, and maintenance of cordial relations with cast, crew, and producers. But with those expectations met, the director is free to be creative.

The director is, in a sense, God. But only in a very limited sense. The director gives the characters life by choosing the actors and instructing the actors in his or her vision of the play. But the actors expect, trust, need confidence that the director is wise, benevolent, and has their best interests at heart. And, important as you as the director may be, should you allow this to go to your head, bear in mind the relative inconvenience of losing the director versus a lead actor on opening night.

It's important that the director realize that everyone involved in a production has a job to do and it is his or her job as a director to make sure that every actor has what he or she needs to do the job. This means that the director is responsible for ensuring that each actor has competent and prepared co-actors to act with, has appropriate sets and props, has accurate and competent technical support, and has direction to ensure that his or her experiments as an actor will be nurtured and refined to a satisfying final result.

There is a line between acting and directing and, although the line is ill defined and often hard to see, it is helpful if the director observes it. Ours is amateur theater, which means that everyone involved in a production is doing it for enjoyment. It is the director's responsibility to envision the overall production, to select actors who accept that vision, and then assist those actors in their efforts to fulfill that vision. In the case of individuals new to acting, this may require a good deal of effort and even coaching by example; in the case of more experienced actors, it may be preferable for the director to allow them to experiment and then provide feedback on the result. No one wants to appear foolish on stage, and it is the director's responsibility to see that no one does.

Casting

Casting is a delicate balance involving considerations of entitlement, quality, fairness, and blend. In part, we're here to provide an opportunity for our members to act. But frequently a good casting process will discover an unknown talent who is more suited to a role than is any member of the company. Considerations of fairness must include our loyalty to the hard-working company members, our goal of producing quality theater, and an obligation to give everyone who puts forth the effort to audition a fair opportunity to secure a role. Clearly a daunting task.

There are a few guiding principles that have emerged from experience. Precasting has, at times, been a controversial process. We are not, by policy, opposed to precasting, but suggest that it be used with due caution. Casting is not a matter of finding the best actor for the part; rather it's a matter of finding the best actors for the cast. If you know just the perfect actor for a role, invite and even encourage him or her to audition. But it's usually best not to promise, offer, or even hint that the role is secure. You may find a better actor during the audition process. And with any cast of more than half a dozen, you will often find that you want to subvert optimal choices to achieve the best overall assignments across the whole cast. This is difficult when individuals feel they have been promised a part.

Of course, every rule has its exception. Some plays require special talent for one or two lead roles. The requirement is such that it would not be possible to produce the play without securing such talent. In those cases, precasting may be done. However, it needs to be done openly and honestly. Announcements for auditions after one or more roles have been cast should include both the disclosure that the role has been cast and the actor who has been cast in the role.

Once an actor makes it to audition, it is our obligation to give that actor fair consideration for a role. In the case where the talents of two actors appear equal, we would consider it fair to choose in favor of a company actor. But a director should never feel compelled, or even encouraged, to select a company actor of lesser promise for a role.

Roles should generally not be announced at the audition. Delaying the announcement allows issues of talent, schedule, and cast balance to be dealt with in a more considered manner. Also, it is not a requirement, or even a preference, that all roles be assigned to those who have auditioned. If there is no one who is right for a part, delay the announcement and actively recruit for the role. Although casting before an audition may be troublesome, vigorous recruitment and individual casting post audition is often a good idea.

We generally plan two months of rehearsals and casting needs to be done prior to the commencement of rehearsals. Depending on holiday schedules and other things, casting is typically done a week or two before rehearsals begin.

Scheduling

Since we are an amateur company, cast members will often have other interests (jobs, for example). As part of the casting process you should identify the times they are not available and then develop your schedules around them. If an actor is not available for sufficient time, it's good to identify this problem before casting.

The allocation of time to read throughs, blocking, scene work, and run throughs is up to you, but try to make efficient use of time. Start on time, try to schedule so that actors aren't sitting idle more than necessary, and avoid idle time.

Lines

We encourage our actors to learn their lines and get off book as quickly as possible. Please follow our lead in this matter. And recognize that, while it is the individual actors who are responsible for learning their own lines, it is your responsibility as a director to ensure that every

actor takes his/her line learning responsibly. You may recruit or designate line coaches, if necessary. We have several waiting to volunteer. But we preach that acting begins when everyone is off book. Please facilitate acting as early as possible. If you do not know who is willing to help as a line coach, please ask. The sooner you notice that an actor is struggling with lines and get that actor support, the better for everybody.

Blocking

There is some latitude to what constitutes blocking and how firmly the movements of the actors need to be fixed. As a rule of thumb, if an actor sits, stands, or moves more than an arm span, it's blocking. Blocking is your responsibility as a director. You may either pre-block, block on the fly, or organically block. But blocking should be done, it should be written down, and it should be relatively unchanging by one third of the way through rehearsal.

Scene Work

Blocking will usually be done scene by scene. Depending on the difficulty of the scene, the individual scenes may be run several times to get the action and effect right. Scene work can be done whenever it is necessary, but make the distinction between scene work and line work. Getting the movement, the expression, and the voice right is scene work. This is a valuable use of your time. Repeating lines to solidify them is line work and should be done by the actors themselves or with their line coaches. Your job, as regards lines, is simply to ensure that the actors learn them.

Run Throughs

Directors seem to enjoy run throughs somewhat more than do actors, primarily because run throughs usually leave some of the actors standing idle at least part of the time. Run throughs are important for developing a sense of context and timing and should not be shorted. Run throughs can be full play or single act. Either is probably equally effective. Act run throughs are more efficient if the acts contain different actors. Run throughs can be interspersed with scene work.

Set Plan

If space is available, an accurately laid out set is helpful. This not only allows you, as a director, an opportunity to check sight lines, but it also allows actors to get a feel for distance and travel timing. In general, the more accurate the rehearsal set can be, the better.

Producers

Each show generally has two producers, Board members appointed by the Board to represent the Board's interests. The essential interests of the Board, once a show goes into production, are that the show is of high quality and that all individuals participating in the production are treated fairly and given an opportunity to do their best work. In an ideal situation, these interests will not be in conflict.

The producers are the project managers of a production. The producers are responsible for all technical areas of the production to make sure that they come in on time, under budget, and of appropriate quality; to ensure that the director is effective, that the sets are not being built, that the venue is as it should be, and that the technical support is adequate.

In the event a production is not progressing properly or the participants are not being treated in a manner consistent with BCP expectations, it will be the responsibility of the producers to take action. Such action may be as minor as imposing financial constraints on participants or as drastic as cancelling a show or replacing a director. Imposing financial controls, in line with an established show budget, may be done as an executive action at the discretion of the producers. Requiring the director to conduct extra rehearsals, to implement remedial procedures for inadequate line learning, or admonishing the director to make efficient and effective use of personnel may also be done at the discretion of the producers.

A decision to cancel a show or replace a director is more significant and may not be done solely at the discretion of the producers. A decision of such magnitude may be implemented only with the agreement of a majority of the Board. While an ideal situation would involve discussion and vote by the entire Board, sometimes action must occur faster than such a meeting can reasonably be achieved. In those situations, a decision may be made with assent of a majority of Board members, the number that would be required to result in a positive vote on a motion.

Situations requiring such a decision by an ad hoc committee should be avoided where possible. Conditions that could result in a cancellation or director replacement should be identified and remediated prior to becoming sufficiently critical to require such action. Our objective should always be to succeed rather than to avoid failure. But we must recognize that things are not always as they should be.

If everything is going as it should on the schedule it was intended, the producers have nothing to do. If anything is awry, however, the producers' job is critical.

Crew

Stage Manager

Where the director is the designer of the production, the stage manager is the operator. It is the director's responsibility to establish and achieve a vision for the play. But it is the stage manager who is responsible for realizing the vision, performance after performance.

The stage manager's role generally begins alongside the director, serving as a kind of personal secretary. The stage manager is responsible for recording the blocking. If the director pre-blocks a play, the director should give those notes to the stage manager. But it is the stage manager's responsibility to update the notes as the blocking invariably changes as rehearsals go on.

Cuing is also the responsibility of the stage manager. Cuing generally occurs from the time the cast is off book until the cast no longer may call for line. However, there are exceptions that may extend the need for cuing in both directions. When the stage manager is responsible for cuing, he or she will need to constantly follow the script so when an actor calls for line it can be

given without delay. Generally lines are given only when requested, but this practice may vary at the discretion of the director.

Once the play opens, the stage manager generally calls the play. This means that, while the stage manager is in charge of the production behind the curtain, responsible for managing the actors and their entrances to ensure that everyone enters the stage on time, much of this work may be delegated to an assistant. The stage manager is also responsible for ensuring that the set is ready before the opening act and after intermission.

If a prop master and a costumer are available, they will report to the stage manager. If not, the stage manager will assume these responsibilities.

House Manager

The house manager is responsible for managing the lobby, the box office, the concessions, the restrooms, and the auditorium.

The lobby should be opened one hour before showtime, as should the box office. The auditorium is generally opened 30 minutes before showtime, but the exact time is at the discretion of the stage manager.

The concession stand should be opened at the same time as the lobby. If we have a concession vendor, it will be their responsibility to operate the concession stand. Otherwise, it will be the responsibility of the house manager.

Ushers will report to the house manager. There should be at least one usher at each door to take tickets and hand out programs. Ticket stubs should be torn off and deposited in the ticket box at each door. Generally there will be no need to show attendees to their seats.

Light

In many of our plays, the purpose of lighting is primarily to illuminate the actors. Some basic knowledge of lighting is helpful, but most individuals with some knowledge of electricity and computers can learn to program and operate the light board.

In more complicated plays, where light serves to set mood rather than just illuminate, a lighting designer may be required. This may be the director, the lighting technician, or someone who actually understands the art of lighting design. As a director, try to adjust your lighting needs to the level of the lighting talent you are able to recruit.

In the Bigfork Center for the Performing Arts, we are allowed to move only the half-dozen or so lights designated as “specials.” The remaining lights are considered as part of the “Rep plot.” If they are re-directed, re-shuttered, or re-gelled, they must be returned to their original state when we leave. This means that you must note and reset any Rep-plot lights you change.

Sound

There are several aspects to sound in one of our productions. First is the amplification of actors onstage. The microphone system provided by the Bigfork theater is less than ideal, but usually workable. The challenge is to get sufficient gain from the microphones that all the actors can be easily understood without the risk of loud feedback, which can be extremely disruptive to the play. Meeting this challenge requires some understanding of gain curves and adjusting the curves to the needs of the actors and the peculiarities of the room.

A second aspect of sound is sound effects. In our productions, the sound person is often responsible for collecting sound effects and adjusting them to the needs of the production. (FreeSoundEffects.com is one good source of sound effects.)

More so than light, sound becomes a character in the play. Actors react to sounds as cues and it's important that the sounds be cued at the right time. Although the theater provides a CD player, it is generally not a good choice for sound effects. It is difficult to cue and time the sound effects from the DVD player. A better choice is a computer-based system, of which there are several, that will allow a specific sound effect to be played, without delay, at the touch of a button.

Again, more so than light, sound needs to be rehearsed with the cast. It should be the director's choice when to incorporate final sound effects into rehearsals, but two weeks prior to performance is not too soon. This gives the cast and the sound tech time to get the timing right and to learn to react to the sound as if it were a character.

Publicity

The publicist is responsible for getting the word out about the play. It is our goal that as many people know about the play as possible, subject to the limits of our publicity budget. Publicity outlets include the following:

Photos

Photos should be taken as needed. Generally, rehearsal photos are done prior to the first press releases about a month before opening. Costume photos may be done two weeks before opening. Final in-costume, on-set photos are generally taken the Monday before opening, which provides just enough time to get them into final press releases.

Marquee board

We post a 4'x6' sign on the front of the BCPA starting 4-6 weeks prior to opening. The sign can be obtained from Meissenberg Designs. Generally, we provide the artwork. Karen Kolar, David Vale, or Saga Designs are the usual sources of art. Be aware of contractual requirements for display of the playwright's name than generally requires the name to be larger than one might otherwise make it.

Posters

We try to distribute about 50 11"x17" and 100 8.5"x11" posters through Bigfork and Kalispell. Michele Shapero has distribution channels, but sending Players door to door to businesses is also effective. Usually the posters are a minor variation of the marquee sign, but should contain the name of the play, the playwright, the dates and times, and the ticket outlets.

Programs

We generally print 350 programs for each one-weekend show. They need to be provided to UPS at least a day before we need them. Programs may be designed by Saga Designs, David Vale, or Karen Kolar. Note that much of our programs are devoted to sponsor ads and that sponsors provide about half of our annual revenue.

Tickets

We print tickets at least a month before opening and distribute them to our ticket outlets (Bigfork Drug, Pocketstone Cafe, and the Kalispell Grand Hotel). We print four different tickets: Adult, Student-senior-member, Child, and VIP. VIP tickets are given to our sponsors. Each outlet, given a bronze sponsorship for its efforts, should receive four complimentary tickets. Sponsor tickets should be hand delivered to sponsors, where possible, and left at the box office if not delivered. Quantities should be about 500 VIP tickets (or 100 more than required for sponsor obligations), 300 each Adult and Senior/Student/Member tickets, and 50 Child tickets. Each outlet should receive 25 each Adult and Senior/Student/Member tickets and five Child tickets. They should receive four VIP tickets for their own use, as part of their Bronze sponsorship.

Newspaper ads

We try to enlist newspapers as sponsors so that we have two display ads in the Eagle and the Beacon for each show. (We've only gotten these from the Beacon, thus far.) The ads need to be designed and placed to appear the two weeks prior to opening. Generally they will be similar to the posters.

Chamber of Commerce Newsletter

We try to do one insert in the Chamber newsletter the month of the show. The newsletter is distributed near the end of the month and insert art is usually due at UPS the Wednesday of the last week of the month.

Blast Emails

We send blast emails to our mailing list and the Chamber of Commerce email list a few days before opening. These should include an image of the poster, preferably in the body of the email.

Calendars

We place announcements on the calendars of the Flathead Beacon, the Daily Interlake, the Lively Times, and other online calendars we identify. These should go on at least a month before opening night.

Press Releases

Press releases should be sent to the Beacon, the Daily Interlake, and the Bigfork Eagle. Ideally they would appear the two issues prior to opening, but timing is unpredictable, as is publication. Thus, three weeks ahead of opening is a good time to start.

Sundowner Skit

The Chamber of Commerce holds a networking meeting of about 100 people, called a Sundowner, the second Thursday of every month. We generally try to perform a short excerpt from the upcoming play at the meeting. It should be 3-4 minutes in length, including introduction and pitch and should be cleared with the chamber exec prior to the Sundowner. The Chamber exec can be reached by phone at 837-5888.

Open Dress Rehearsal

We have, in recent productions, offered an open dress rehearsal the evening before opening. This is a free performance, primarily for local merchants and people with public contact, that allows us to test the performance before a live audience and provides some word-of-mouth advertising in the process. A distribution of 40-80 invitations and an email blast to the Chamber of Commerce membership usually results in about 60 in attendance. Note that, although we call it an open dress rehearsal or a preview, it is a real performance and needs to be treated as kind of a pre-opening opening.

Radio Ads and Interviews

We have recently begun to ad radio ads to our PR mix, both on the AM station KGEZ and on Bee Broadcasting channels. We have also done interviews on KGEZ. While both stations will assist in the production of radio ads, we have historically done it ourselves. Interviews follow a formula. Talk to those who have done one to learn the formula.