



BIGFORK COMMUNITY PLAYERS

BACKSTAGE

Serious about comedy

Report — AACT Artistic Directors Conference

By David Vale

Michele Shapero, Rose Shannon, and I attended the Artistic Directors conference sponsored by AACT, the association of community theaters of which we are a member. It was facilitated by Keith Dixon, currently the Artistic Director at the Spokane Civic Theater.

About a dozen theaters were represented at the conference ranging in size from a senior citizens' company with an annual budget of \$5,000 to the Spokane Civic Theater with a budget in excess of \$1 million. Many emphasized musicals, but many also did non-musical plays of a traditional nature, some did skits with script in hand, and some did original works developed through improv at non-traditional venues such as Renaissance festivals.

The conference was aimed at artistic directors, the individuals (or in our case teams) charged with selecting the plays, finding the directors, and producing the performances. Some of the artistic directors (usually in theaters with an annual budget of \$50,000 or more) were paid. Others were volunteers. A distinction was made between those who worked for (or more typically as) a working board, vs. a governing board, which concerned itself more with fundraising than art. An interesting distinction was that those working for theaters with an operating budget in excess of \$250,000 typically had an advanced degree in theater, several years of experience, and viewed artistic direction as a career rather than a hobby.

A discussion of hits and misses raised a few interesting points. Perhaps one of the more pointed ones was that everyone liked the play, *Proof*, five have done it, and no one has ever experienced a commercial success with it. Everyone likes to do musicals, but they are very expensive. Spokane budgets 5-8 times as much for a musical as for a straight play. (A typical musical costs them about \$60,000 to produce; their house holds 336. The music director is paid about four times as much as the director.) Holiday shows also seem to be hits.

About half the companies do at least some new and/or original work. Success is more difficult to predict in a show with no track record, but they do them anyway. Two of the companies specialize in adaptations of royalty-free works (e.g., Shakespeare and *Little House on the Prairie*).

Friends and family are big sources of audiences. Several of the directors deal extensively with children and cited an 8-1 return for each person in the cast. One boasted of filling the house with no advertising and just friends and family. Of course, Grandma is probably more likely to watch Grandchild than vice versa.

A portion of the conference was directed at the art of directing. Among the interesting thoughts that came up:

- Rehearsal time should be about one hour for each minute of performance time, suggesting that our plays need roughly a 100-hour rehearsal budget. (This translates to four three-hour rehearsals each week of an eight-week schedule.)
- There was no consensus as to how much of the rehearsal schedule should be devoted to run throughs vs. scene work, but a 50/50 split was not seen as unreasonable. Scene work was described as a stop-and-go process, where the scene is stopped as often as necessary to make adjustments. Musicals seem more amenable to fractionated rehearsals.
- Regarding efficient use of actor time, well-scheduled French scene work was encouraged, where possible. But for run-throughs, it was suggested that actors bring something to work on during their down time and expect that they will have some.
- There are many different ideas regarding how and when to block, with many seasoned directors noting that they tend to do it on the fly, don't note it with any particular precision, and allow the play to grow (and the blocking to drift) right up to the closing performance.
- The typical rehearsal timeframe is spread over six to eight weeks with the off-book date typically three weeks prior to opening. Four or five nights of rehearsal a week appears to be the norm.
- There was no clear consensus regarding whether character development can be done before being off book.
- One director suggested, contrary to conventional wisdom, that the modern audience (the MTV generation) can handle two points of focus at once.

That seems to constitute the body of my interesting notes.