

Running a Theatre Program — *a Guide for the Complete Klutz*

By David Tate Hastings



Why It Matters

More than forty years ago, my father gave me the book *Juggling for the Complete Klutz*. I read the book and practiced and practiced and practiced. Eventually, I learned to juggle. I'm still not great at it, but the more I practice the better I become. Running a high school theatre program is similar. There are so many things to consider: leadership styles, managing without additional staff, managing volunteers and students, managing conflict, cast and crew safety, box office and house management, communications (meetings, accountability, etc.). If you study from those who are successful, and you work hard at it, even a complete klutz can run a theatre program.

Things to Consider

I wanted to be the best theatre program in Kansas. Having always loved sports, competition was natural to me. When I was kid, I played baseball. I wasn't particularly good at it. My father would try to encourage me to keep my eyes open when I was batting. I practiced catching and hitting the baseball incessantly in my yard. I never got great at it, but I read as much as I could about the sport and I worked on my skills. In middle school, I did the same thing with basketball. I made the school team in 8th and 9th grade, and I even scored a single point. I was never great at sports, but it taught me to work with others and to practice hard. It also taught me to learn from the people that were the best.

In college, I majored in theatre, but I also took coaching classes. I loved John Wooden's book *Practical Modern Basketball*. I also loved *Team of the Century: The Greatest High School Football Team in Texas* by Al Pickett. These two books are about how amazing coaches formed their programs to be successful. It became clear to me that coaches are just like theatre teachers. For them, sports is the tool. For us, it is theatre. The skill you learn from both is how to be successful in life working with others.

That is how I think of running a high school theatre program: We make lesson plans, take attendance, grade assignments, recruit students, select shows, secure rights, block, design, build, costume, direct, etc. But what we really do is show students how to accomplish a goal with a team. This isn't always a pretty process. We probably fail to master any of the individual skills, but collectively we are producing a product that serves as an example for our students to emulate in their lives. We are teaching kids that even a complete klutz can juggle.

My program is hardly a one-man show. My wife runs our box office and house management. We sell tickets through an online ticket platform. We set up display for the show, as well as concessions to help make more money for our program. I'm sure she is doing it better than me, but nothing about it is right or wrong. My wife also takes care of our production and costume fees, as well as t-shirt orders and makeup orders. She got involved to make my life easier, as there's not enough time to do everything. With one person, it's simply impossible to supervise the students at all times. Getting someone else to be with you in the rehearsal process makes a world of difference. At the least, it is nice to have an adult that you can be with to share the experience.

Because there are so many skills in theatre that I *don't* possess, I try to bring in friends and theatre professionals to teach skills to my students. I bring in a hair and makeup professional, costume coordinator, choreographer, and tech experts to help with a variety of jobs. I also hire one or two directors a year to direct extra shows. Knowing your limits in terms of expertise and time is a big help. All of these positions are paid out of ticket sales to our shows.

I'm fortunate enough to have stipends from our school to pay a vocal director, assistant director, conductor, and tech director. We are very blessed. If I didn't have these stipends I would have to decide what things to cut from my program. I strongly believe that it is important to live within the means that your school provides. For me, that is using our building allotment for theatre and then trying to sell as many tickets as possible to fund everything else we want to do. Occasionally, we do fundraisers or charge fees, but anything extra I do is at the expense of time I could spend teaching or directing students. I believe my skills are best used working with students rather than raising or managing money.

Besides, I'm not really a manager in my role as an educator. When I worked at a bank before I was a teacher, I had three secretaries, a department of personal bankers, tellers, and multiple branch managers that I counselled. I hired, evaluated, and fired employees. As a teacher, I don't really have this benefit as my staff are technically hired and paid through our school district. The money for these hires either comes from stipends provided by the school or from ticket sales that are deposited into a school account. The biggest way I encourage my staff is by trusting their decisions in the rehearsal process,

and by reminding them that the work they do this year will be considered in whether we offer them a contract for the next year. I get to choose who works with us, even though I don't technically hire or fire the staff. My recommendation to the school is how these staff members get a contract for the next year.

While safety is of upmost importance with working with students and staff, I wouldn't even know where to start in explaining my process. There just isn't enough time to think about it. My motto is "*if in doubt leave it out.*" This works for almost everything in teaching and monitoring a program. If you can leave something out, don't take the chance to add it in. If I think anything is risky or dangerous, we just don't go there.

Addressing email and social media is another big part of this job. On a daily basis I get somewhere between 60-100 emails. This doesn't include my volunteer work for EdTA and Kansas Thespians. I simply work from a zero-sum basis; as one email comes in, I delete another email. However, my email is my to-do list. I block any email from people or vendors that don't apply to my job. I delete all emails and don't keep any emails in files. If I have something that I have to do that I don't want to deal with at the time, I drag it to my desktop. When I wrote this article, I had six emails in my combined four email accounts. I also keep all email accounts separate so that my school, home, Kansas Thespians, and EdTA work are kept separate. There is not enough time to check every email so I need to deal with it or delete it immediately.

The social media I use for school is *always* kept positive. It is simply a tool to promote and build our program, with the primary goal of getting people to buy tickets to our shows. I will follow almost anyone, as long as they post positive things. I only want the program associated with things that are educational or uplifting. I use Facebook (for parents), Twitter (for the general public), and Instagram (for students). I sometimes use GroupMe to communicate with kids. I'm always looking for new ways to be more efficient with our message and with my time.

I really have four rules: be prompt, be prepared, be respectful, and follow the school's rules. Part of the rules process is a permission form that both parents and students must sign for a student to be in a show. I work on it a little bit each summer. I also make sure to include all information about my program on our theatre website. It is a continual work in progress.

Managing my program is just like juggling. I drop the balls all the time, but it looks really cool when it works. I also work ridiculously long hours just to keep things moving. I work sixty hours on a slow week and nearly one hundred hours in the weeks leading up to a show.

The key to the success is studying other people that are great. They don't have to just be teachers and directors. Your mentors can be coaches, managers, CEO's, etc. You're just looking for leaders that work with other people to assemble products that are judged by an external audience. The other key to success is hard work. You must love what you are doing and have a calling to work long hours.

And one more thing: It's not always about the rules. I tell my students that "you need to learn the rules so you can break them."

If a complete klutz can learn to juggle, you can learn to run a theatre program.

Recommended Actions

• Study from best.

- Read about great leaders in theatre
- Read about great leaders in sports
- Read about great leaders in business

• Attend Thespian Festivals and the EdTA National Conference and talk to:

- Troupe Directors
- Chapter Leaders
- EdTA staff.

- **Live within your budget.**
 - This is for time, money, staffing, etc.
- **Get adults to help you.**
 - It is more fun to spend time with people you like and that support you.
- **Define your own success.**
 - Set achievable goals
 - Break the rules
 - Create your own program
- **Stay positive.**
 - Remember that you will drop a lot of balls
 - Remember how cool it looks when you do it right

Links and Resources

Juggling for the Complete Klutz

by John Cassidy and B.C. Rimbeaux

Practical Modern Basketball

by John R. Wooden

Team of the Century: The Greatest High School Football Team in Texas

by Al Pickett

Drama High: The Incredible True Story of a Brilliant Teacher, a Struggling Town, and the Magic of Theater

by Michael Sokolove

The Educational Theatre Association

www.schooltheatre.org

Theatre Educator Pro online learning center

<http://learn.schooltheatre.org>

About the Author

David Tate Hastings was banker for nearly six years before becoming a teacher. He has been a theatre educator for the last twenty years. David has served as chapter director and treasurer for Kansas Thespians. He has produced six main stage shows at the International Thespian Festival, including two all-state musicals. David is a member of the Educational Theatre Association Board of Directors.

Additional Credits

EdTA's Business of Theatre Steering Committee Members

- Sarah Jane Arnegger, iHeart Radio Broadway
- Jason Goldstein, Booktix
- Andrew Kuhlman, Stages, St. Louis
- Meredith Lucio, Producer
- David R. Scott, Disney Theatrical Productions
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