Staging the OPERA

The Facilitation of Characterization and Movement

Introduction:

What is staging? **Staging** is a process of creating blocking and movement for all the characters in the opera. What is creative movement? **Creative movement** is an exploration of different ways one's body moves as a character or in dance. This exploration and creation is important in the development of a student’s creativity, movement, poise and confidence. Students enjoy creative movement and discovering the staging of their operas. It is fun as well as physically and mentally challenging. Creative movement in opera makes it all the more powerful and inclusive of all the arts as it allows the opportunity not only to physically develop character but also builds the techniques for creating their own dances. When creating dance, rhythm and coordination improve, boosting confidence and self-image.

Objectives:

Students will be able to show events, emotions, setting, and character through their use of movement, blocking, and dance in their opera. They will learn and do movement improvisations, engage in creative problem solving, and grow in social and emotional ways. They will know and understand the following terminology: *improvisation, stage conventions, blocking, grouping, planes of theatre: right, left, and center stage, upstage, downstage, act, rehearsal, cue to cue, “open to audience” and “cheat forward”, emotion, action, beat awareness, spatial awareness, level, pattern, time, space, energy, and loco motor movement.*

Students will be able to use these words in appropriate context in discussion and in creation of their staging movement and dance. **All** adults involved in the process must let students have control of the opera.

You should be involved during each session of the opera creation even if you have mentor assistance. Be part of the process, yes, but not as a director, but as a facilitator. Do not to dictate. Review the **facilitation skills** found in “The Creative Process” section.
Enable the class to write and participate appropriately in the opera:

- Assist your students to and ensure all participate in creating simple movement and staging.
- Encourage all to perform in their opera.
- Ensure the staging they create be uplifting (funny or serious) and contains no vulgar behaviors.
- The subject material will not glamorize unworthy elements of life, history or society.
- Present a definite beginning, middle and end.
- Stage solving the problem and resolution in focus
- All children onstage for the whole opera.
- Present a moral- a reason “why” the story is told.

Process:

It doesn’t take long to include movement in the opera.
The same way that a song streamlines the storytelling in music, staging demonstrates story through action!

Logical questions
Improvisation
Body movement

The staging process begins in the early stages of story writing through the development of setting and characters. When there is adequate time taken for students to fully explore Who, Where, and What, they have a better idea of how to stage their opera for performance. Group discussion, facilitated by logical questioning, and improvisation can help students become aware of their opera’s setting and character’s behavior and logic. Maintain a lack of inhibitions through creative visualization, thinking before doing! Creative visualization increases their confidence and chances for success.

Begin With Improvisation:

Help the students become aware of their body movement with creative drama improvisations (Improv) before writing begins (see Theatre Games, p. 20) Getting the students physically involved, singing and moving, the first day of school, and continue during the story and libretto process with improvisation, helps them jump into staging. Many of the difficult staging ideas are worked out during the improvisation process. It also helps the students understand the difference between live performance, movies, and television.
Section 1~What To DO Before the Music is Returned

Pre-blocking Activities:
♫ While the music specialist works on the opera notation continue to utilize creative drama activities and theatre games to facilitate student’s development of character.
♫ Improvise scenes from the opera to workout difficult action moments in the opera. Give all the students a chance to experiment.
♫ Have students create costumes from “found” clothing. Have a costume parade, or fashion show with students taking turns being the announcer. Announcers describe the outfit and tell about characteristics of the character modeling.
♫ Have the students walk like all the characters in the opera.
♫ Design the costumes and scenery by having students draw pictures in their opera journals.
♫ The drama specialist or teacher may share “Theatre Magic”, the secrets or conventions of live theatre and opera that make all performances successful.

Theatre Magic:

All “Theater Magic” topics may be discussed before you have your music back!

Staging elements of composition~

♫ Demonstrate the aspects of the stage. Draw a diagram of the stage on the board if you are in the classroom. If you are in the school’s theatre you can show them the physical aspects of the stage. Refer to “planes of theatre” chart.
► Show them where the audience sits, where the front of the stage and backstage is on the diagram.

► Begin with center stage!
Ask the students what they think the most important part of the stage is. Most of the time the students know, and they know good logical reasons why! It is the strongest point on the stage. It is the most important part of the stage because everyone can see it. The most important action in opera should occur Center Stage! Most important events or strong characters use this space. The strong characters can, and do, change throughout a good story. Help them identify important action, the location (setting) where most of the action occurs, and strong or dominant characters throughout their story.

► Many times students will think that the front is the most important part of the stage. Tell them it is very important. Actors can be seen and heard when they come forward on the stage.

► Teach them about Stage Right and Stage Left. Talk about the stage being raked (like half a hill) during Shakespeare’s time instead of the audience. The terms upstage and downstage meant going up to the back of the stage and coming down the stage to the front.

► Talk about Downstage being the front of the stage. Ask them what happens when actors are downstage (“they are heard better”, “can be seen”). Most of the action takes place downstage. Upstage is in the back. Scenery is in the background to show location. Have the students place the locations in their opera on the diagram. Settings where most of the action or very important action occurs will have their location (scenery) at Upstage Center.

► Have them add the remaining settings on the stage ground plan. Students will plan with their teacher at a later time exactly what their costumes and scenery will look like. This is simply creating a thumbnail sketch. A thumbnail is a quick drawing of ideas or plans to help the design later.
Planes of the Theatre:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Up Right</th>
<th>Up Center</th>
<th>Up Left</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Center*</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down Right</td>
<td>Down Center</td>
<td>Down Left</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*most important place

MINIMALISTIC = MINI = SMALL = AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE = LESS IS MORE

**Opera by Children** utilizes Minimalistic theatre conventions to create more magic because it relies on the imaginations of the audience. Teach the children the word *minimalistic*. It is a theatre word based on a smaller word we use in everyday English. Ask, “Who can find a smaller word in the beginning of this one?” They will identify the word *mini* or *minimal*. Have the students define mini or minimal. They will come up with answers like, “Mini is small” or “Minimal means the least amount of something”.

To stage the opera *minimalistic*, use very few props, scenery and costumes. A true *minimalistic* theatre production might produce a play with the actors all dressed in black using a black box or a ladder painted black in front of black curtains. Tell them they don’t have to do everything in black, but they must remember to keep everything simple as they plan the staging of their opera.

**Example:** One cactus plant and a rock will show the audience they are in a desert. Brown sweats and a headband with dog-ears will show you are a dog.
Multiple Setting: All the locations are present on the stage that are needed to tell the opera’s story at rise; when the curtain comes up. One setting is best, but no more than three settings. Absolutely, no scene changes at all K-4. The curtain goes up (opens) at the beginning of the opera and does not come down (close) until the end. Grades 5-6 may attempt a few simple and well thought out scene changes, but the curtain should not draw or come in. Grades 7-12 may choose to have scene changes and utilize the curtain.

Solos or small groups of singers need to be downstage, close to the audience. If microphones are to be used, talk about microphones and how to use them.

More Magic Once the MUSIC is Returned:

The following topics should be addressed after you have made some decisions once your music is in a score form and you have it and a CD recording, but may be addressed before in necessary.

How to Use Body Movement and Position in OPERA:

- **Always face the audience**
- Performers place their bodies at a slant when singing to each other one on one or in small groups. This is called “open to the audience” or “cheating forward”. It is okay to “cheat” in an opera.
- Be sure all characters can be seen and heard during the opera. It is each performer’s responsibility to make sure they can be seen. If someone stands in front of you, move! Do not stand in front of someone who is singing or is part of major action during the opera. Be aware of your surroundings.
- **Strong characters stand firm.** They don’t wiggle and fidget. Weak characters do.
- **Less is more! Let your audience use their imaginations!**
- **The only mistake a student can make onstage is to BREAK Character!** (Gently remind them to stay focused and in the action!)

Blocking: Performers moving with action! Here are the many different ways to move on stage for emphasis and interest:

~ **Crossing:** When a performer goes from one side of the stage to another: may be straight, curved, s-form, zigzag, or turning while facing the audience.
Groups must share with a give and take as the action dictates in the storyline. It is everyone’s focus which helps to tell the story. The audience will look where the performers look. Where should each character look? Is it the same place the whole time? The following body positions bring focus more powerfully than a spotlight:

~Strength emphasis
- Body position: Put body—full front—usually feet firm to ground
- Area: Performer position center
- Planes: Performer positioned downstage
- Level: Performer positioned on highest platform
- Space: Performer positioned separate from others
- Repetition: Performer with a group attending or listening or serving; i.e. King with three servants instead of one.
  Focus: Other performers turn to look at, and/or point toward performer.

~Contrast Emphasis:
- **Sharp contrast:** Performer is different from all others
- **Stage Position:** Actor upstage center—other downstage
- **Body Position:** Actor’s full front— or emphasized actor full back (difference gives the strength)
- **Costume:** Group of students as elephants most in gray costumes—leader in blue gray

~Balance:
- Each side of the stage has equal weight in relation to another (Same # of performers)

~Seesaw:
- Downstage single and upstage a group or people verses props, scenery or costume.

~Stability:
- Line of performers are upstage—one performer down stage left and another down stage right.

~Sequence: A definite progression of movement or height or level.

- There should be at least three blocking moves per page of libretto. Be sure the performers are making logical and vital movements for their character by helping identify their character’s motivation (NEWUB).
- There should not be parallel or perpendicular moves on the stage. Make movement creative and interesting; use big movements that can be seen.
Section 2 ~ CREATIVE BODY MOVEMENT SHOWS THE STORY:

Characterization

The body is an instrument of expression as it shows emotion and characterization. Have the students be specific about their characters. The more a class exaggerates the characters and their differences the better. Have your students try some simple dramatic actions as the different characters. Have them make each movement mean something.

Example: Wolf = He is goofy, stupid, but mean.

How will he move? What does he do that shows he is stupid and mean in his body? How does the performer show that he is a wolf?

Townsperson #1= A baker who is very brave. He would attack the wolf with a wooden spoon- if he had a chance. How will he move? What will show that he is brave?

Interpret and move to different rhythms (beat awareness)

The class created the melodies for their opera; they suggested the rhythms; and mood for the action music. They decided the setting. All these are a part of the music. Now they need to listen to the music to remember why they made those choices and to utilize creative visualization to think of how they will move with how the beat makes them feel. Begin at your character’s beginning spot – close your eyes and listen to the music—the words you sing and the action music. Go where you feel your character would go. Use your body the way your character would move (i.e. heavy footsteps if you are a great big ELEPHANT).

Levels, patterns and group shapes

The discovery of these elements will bring variety and interest to the staging and movement and is essential in any staging or dance session whether they are improvising or choreographing a dance, creating a tableau, or blocking on stage. This connects with blocking emphasis list mentioned above.

During staging, find places that need more characterization movement, action to songs, or
extra movement to tell the story. Remember to KEEP IT SIMPLE! Use the three elements of
Levels, patterns and group shapes. Here are some good suggestions to help with this:

1. Have a group opening shape- i.e. a rainbow or a grouping
2. Change levels
   a. High
   b. Medium
   c. Low
   d. A combination of levels
3. Have the students decide on a pattern and return to it throughout the music
4. Encourage variety in tempo-How fast or slow they move!
5. Have them work individually, with partners, and in groups
6. Change formations to enhance movement. Examples of formations:

7. Encourage a variety of steps (loco motor movements):
   a. Walk
   b. Run
   c. Skip: step-hop-step-hop
   d. Hop
   e. Jump
   f. Slide
   g. Gallop
   h. Swing
   i. Sway
   j. Leap
   k. Swing
   l. Ball Change: step-ball of other foot behind-step
   m. Balance: Same as ball-change except much larger
   n. Running Man: Lunge-hop one foot-lunge-hop one foot
   o. Side Running Man: Side lunge-jump feet together
   p. Chasse- gallop any direction
   q. Twist: Twist torso
   r. Turn: Turn clockwise or counterclockwise
   s. Twirl

8. Pathways(Where they go and how):
   a. Different directions
   b. Curved
   c. Winding
   d. Zigzag
   e. Straight
   f. Snake

9. Encourage the use of arms to enhance their dance movements
   a. Arms on waist
   b. One arm up and one down (switch)
   c. Both arms up
   d. Both arms down
   e. Both arms at side: one up, one down
   f. Ballet arm positions
   g. Jazz hands

10. Ending Shape (Tableau) -with levels or one level formation with the entire group of
    performers.