

Theatre Ministry

by Rob Tessier

In chapter 12 of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he uses a beautiful image of how each individual person has been created for a purpose, each with unique gifts. The collaboration of the many different gifts is what creates a beautiful Church, the Body of Christ. If all the teens in a youth ministry program fit into the ears and mouth category of the Bible passage, there would be something wrong because the majority of the teens in the parish spectrum would be left out. If possible, a Director of Youth Ministry should seek to create a holistic program that invites a diversity of young people into the doors of the Church.



Theatre ministry is the use of the performing arts to communicate the Christian message by inspiring, uplifting, and forming a production team, ensemble, and audience with solid Christian values. Theatre ministry in a parish setting provides a hook to get drama-minded youth involved who otherwise would not have been involved in the parish. A former teen and now youth worker said, "Being involved in theatre ministry locked me into the youth community at my parish that I would otherwise have been totally isolated from. I had tried to go to youth ministry events, but since I didn't really have any good friends from school that also went, I didn't feel like I fit in very much. Getting involved with theatre ministry threw me into a situation where I felt more comfortable (rehearsals for a show) and I got to know some of the other teens of the parish and realized that I could fit in. Some of my closest friends to date were made within the theatre ministry!"

Fr. James Hudgins said, "Theatre ministry brings young people back to their faith by bringing the faith into their lives. Their involvement in the performance is simply the vehicle that delivers it." The beauty of mixing ministry with theatre is the ability to keep God as the central focus. When everyone is focused on the same sense of mission and is reminded that each part is essential to the operation of the body, those involved gain a much clearer understanding of the mystical body of Christ. Constantine Stanislavsky, a great Russian director, once said, "There are no small parts, only small actors." This message rings true in a theatrical production as much as it does to Christians who try to heed the words of St. Therese of Lisieux, "Do small things with great love."



Theatre ministry can be used in any number of ways, and a **large-scale summer musical** is probably the biggest. Not every Director of Youth Ministry or every parish is going to want to go that direction, but there are simpler ways to incorporate theatre ministry into your holistic program. **Here are some examples:**

Youth Ministry Talent Show

- Requires about six weeks' notice; teens prepare their own acts; auditions can be held to be sure acts are "safe"; the performance can be displayed on its own special night or in place of a regular Youth Ministry Night
- At one parish, this event happens every December as the last Sunday Youth Night before Christmas. Parents and families are welcomed to attend. Cookies, cocoa, and other goodies are put out. Teens and even adult leaders perform everything from songs and dances to silly human tricks, bands, poetry readings, and jumping rope, juggling, to name a few. Anybody can perform as long as it is appropriate. It is very low pressure and a free event.

Living Stations of the Cross

- Requires about four or five two-hour rehearsals during Lent; you can either select teens for roles or audition them; someone will need to direct their actions and another person will need to create costumes and props for the performance; the performance could be done in the actual Church on Good Friday or another Friday in Lent for the whole parish.
- At one parish, they use the same script and same actions, the same set of costumes, and the same props every year. It is easy to re-create every year. It is okay that it is exactly the same. Year after year, the Church is absolutely packed to see the teens perform the Living Stations. The teens move and take different poses, also called a *freeze*, as narrators read the station and a reflection over the microphone. It is fairly easy to pull this off and doesn't cost much to put it together.
- Using the same concept, you can perform a Living Nativity. In the Hispanic Culture the re-enacting of the Nativity is called "Las Posadas."

One Act Play and the Diocesan One Act Play Competition

- Requires holding an audition; about two months of once-a-week two hour rehearsals, and can be performed as part of a Youth Night or a special presentation night or can be taken to the Diocesan One Act Play Competition. Someone will be needed to direct, someone to take care of costumes and props, and someone to look over the management and production details.
 - One act plays can have as few as a couple of characters or as many as twenty. They generally last 30 minutes and can be done effectively without sounds and lights. There are a large array of scripts on websites like www.pioneerdrama.com and www.bakersplays.com
 - The most effective one act plays have few technical requirements and can be successful with a minimalist approach.



Cabaret Performance

- This is similar to a talent show but the point is to be sure all the acts are very good. One parish does this every winter as a setting used to display their entry for the One Act Play Competition. The cabaret is a segmented production that brings together several types of performance, such as:
 - 20 minute pre-show of piano playing, magic tricks, or musician.
 - 30-40 minutes of Broadway Music Review mixed into the night
 - A choreographed opening and closing number
 - Small solos and duets mixed in-between
 - 30-45 minute Improvisation performance, like "Whose Line is it Anyway?"
 - High school teens or college-aged students with improv experience can do this
 - Or, this could be a guest magician...or some other act
 - 30 minute one act play
- A stage can be rented for about \$500 or it could be performed on an elevated stage area at the parish or school. Theatre lights and sound equipment could potentially be borrowed from the local school or from someone in a band. Admission can be \$5-\$10 and the

setting can be a “dessert theatre ”: tables can be set up and the performers serve items off a menu at an extra cost.

- This requires a producer and/or director who will coordinate all the different acts and ensure that transitions between them are smooth. It will also require a technical director, a food coordinator, a ticket coordinator, and a house coordinator (someone to decorate the room and work with ushers). There are plenty of opportunities for teens to be involved on or off the stage. There will be a need for stage crew, tech crew, ushers, servers, etc.
- This event can bring a lot of visibility to the youth and raise several thousand dollars. The funds could be a Workcamp fundraiser or even given to another charity.

Summer Musical

- This is certainly the largest undertaking. However, with enough support, time, and effort, a summer musical production has the potential to create tremendous results.
- A summer show will require a two-month period of four three-hour rehearsals a week, plus coordination of set construction, creating costumes, finding props, painting, publicity, and many other details.
- Due to the long hours poured into such an undertaking, the members of the cast and crew develop very strong bonds. They are all working together for a common goal in a Christian environment where they experience prayer and often use the message of the show as a way to discuss morality and theology.

Here is the process for creating a Summer Theatre Ministry Musical or Play

1. Gathering a Team
2. Choosing Material
3. Auditions and Rehearsals
4. Technical and Production Aspects



1. Gathering a Team

- A. Whether they have a theatre background or not, the Director of Youth Ministry can take on the role of Producer and handle the administrative oversight of the project as well as assuring that the content of the musical or play and the way the rehearsals are being run speak to Catholic values. The most important choice for the Producer is who will direct the show.
 1. The Director needs to be a faithful, practicing Catholic.
 2. The Director needs theatre experience, whether in college or community theatre.
 3. The Director must be good with teens and have the ability to communicate well with others, including other team members and parents.
 4. The Director’s job will be to develop a vision for the show and help find other key production team staff to help develop the vision on stage.
 5. The Director will plan and run all rehearsals and make final artistic decisions.
 6. The Director must be willing to heed to the producer if the producer feels something on stage needs to be adjusted based on audience or cast reactions.
- B. The Director with the help of the Producer must select the following people:
 1. Music Director - teaches cast the music to the show; recruits and directs the orchestra.

2. Choreographer - designs and instructs the dance in the show.
 3. Production Stage Manager - tracks the cast, records blocking notes, administrates rehearsals, stays abreast of all decisions, calls cues for the show.
 4. Technical Director - helps recruit and then oversees the technical aspects of the production. These aspects include lighting, design, sound, stage, props, set, costumes, and scenic art.
- C. Each of these heads will have assistants who are in charge of various aspects of the production. The Production Team alone could involve as many as 15-30 individuals. The heads of these areas should be adults, but many of the assistant roles can be filled by teens. It is also important to clearly define the role of each person.
- D. The Director of Youth Ministry does not single-handedly need to take care of recruiting. Once a Director and a few other key positions are identified, there is a wonderful multiplication of resources that takes place as everyone is seeking support for the show. Recruitment for a Production Team is a thousand times easier the second year than the first because most people will definitely want to stay involved.

2. Choosing Material

A. When looking for that perfect musical, here are some websites to look at:



1. www.mtishows.com - The largest selection of musicals out there; have most of the modern shows
2. www.tamswitmark.com - Another large outlet; specializes in many of the classics
3. <https://rnh.com/> Includes all the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals and the Andrew Lloyd Weber shows

B. When selecting a musical, consider certain variables like message, size of cast, length of show, difficulty level, dance requirements, orchestra size, props and costumes, and technical requirements. Plus, it is very important to consider “name appeal”. There will be a need to sell a lot of tickets to make this successful. Therefore, the first two years need to include big name shows that will attract a crowd. After establishing a trust with audiences, feel free to alternate each year between a big name show with a lesser name show.



C. When considering a musical, it is important not to watch the musical, but to read the script and listen to the music. The script and the music are unchangeable variables. However, the actions on stage are the interpretation of the director. There are many ways to do a show. Here are some examples of musicals you might consider and the themes they can emphasize:

- “Godspell” - God is with us, the Gospel of Matthew comes to life, brings the message of Jesus to our modern day world
- “Joseph” - Brings Bible story to life, the gift of family, God has a special plan for us if we trust Him
- “Fiddler on the Roof” - Faith is essential to the joy of people even when they are oppressed, God never abandons His own, true love can break down walls of division
- “Jesus Christ Superstar” - can be a reverent portrayal of Jesus’ Passion, opportunity to add Mary (mother), opportunity to add Stations of the Cross

scene, powerful music will move audience and cast to struggles of Christ in His suffering and death

- “Man of LaMancha” - seek to live a virtuous life, redemption is available to all, God desires our conversion to become holy
- “The Sound of Music” - When we give our life to God, He shows us greater things than we could have planned on our own, evil cannot overcome good
- “Honk” - Pro-life, every life is precious and valuable, each person deserves to be treated with dignity; inner beauty; adoption
- “Pippin” - true freedom comes from a committed relationship to Christ and breaking from the bondage of sin and temptation
- “The Music Man” - conversion and forgiveness
- “Seussical” - pro-life; “a person’s a person, no matter how small”

3. Auditions and Rehearsals

A. Casting decisions are very important. One parish only allows high school students to be in the show but allows students of other ages to support in other off-stage roles. Another parish is open to youth and young adults. It provides a great opportunity for side by side ministry. However, it is very important to be more careful about selecting ministry-minded young adults. They need to pass two tests: 1) the performance test (just like the high schoolers) and 2) the ministry test (they need to be adults who will be good role models to teens and ones that will be willing to go through the Child Protection Standards that are required by the Diocese. Be sure to stress to young adults and college students that they should see themselves as ministers to the teens and be very mindful about their interactions. With all that said, the primary purpose of the ministry is toward teens, so always give a higher preference to the involvement of a teen in the show over a young adult.

1. Advertise the auditions through your regular means of “getting the word out” and set it up so that they must call you or email you to sign up for a specific time so people don’t show up and wait around. At the auditions, it is important to have the Music Director on hand to evaluate the vocal range of each auditioner. Also, it is important to have the Production Stage Manager outside of the room having auditioners fill out forms while they wait.
2. Create a form that solicits the information you need and simultaneously communicates your goals. Also, ask them to respond how they will make God central to this process. On the back of the form, give a calendar of rehearsals and ask that they record any foreseeable conflicts.
3. After the auditions, it is very helpful to have a “callback” in which you have the auditioners sing songs from the show, read from the script, and dance for the choreographer. Stress to people that being in the cast is only one way to be involved, and there are plenty of opportunities behind the scenes for anyone not cast. Callbacks are a great opportunity to share the metaphor of the Body of Christ and encourage each person to seek a way to support the greater mission without too much concern as to what part they will or will not get.
4. Once the play is cast, rehearsals will begin. From the very beginning it will be essential to balance those “Martha and Mary” tendencies. Rehearsals should always begin and end with prayer. Also, the focus of rehearsals should be on

developing relationships in the midst of actors learning their positions and movements, known as *blocking*. The goal is not only to build a great production, but to develop Christian virtue in the context of the process. Whatever the theme of the show is, it can be a great foundation to build upon with the cast and crew during the process. Also, be sure to plan at least one cast and crew Mass during a rehearsal; that can be another powerful way to unite the group and stay focused on the mission.

4. Technical and Production Aspects

A. The task of building a set, making costumes, and selling tickets can seem daunting. Here are just a few suggestions that may help:

1. Call local high schools, universities, and community theatres. Ask if they have any costumes or props that they could loan. These places may also loan out lighting or sound.
2. Require parents to be on a crew in addition to recruiting heavily within the parish.
3. Check with the local Fire Marshall about the codes.
4. Get a lighting company to bid on bringing in a system of lights. Having a full lighting setup is one way to really improve the theatrical experience.

B. Here's a sample budget for a one week production:

* Royalties	\$2500
* Lights	\$2000
* Stage/Set	\$1500
* Costumes	\$1000
* Sound	\$500
* Props	\$500
* Publicity	\$500
Total	\$8500

C. Tickets: If charging \$7.00 per ticket for 300 seats for five performances, that's \$10,500! Before any concessions sales, which should increase the profit, a well-known show can generate an excellent profit for a needy charity as well as provide a great ministry to the parish at the same time.

Rob Tessier has been a Director of Youth Ministry in the Diocese of Arlington for 23 years and has been serving at All Saints Parish since 2001 while also serving as Middle School Religion and Theatre Teacher at All Saints Catholic School. Additionally, Rob is founder/director of both Upper Room Theatre Ministry and Spotlight on the Arts Summer Camps which both bring the arts alive within a Catholic setting for youth. Currently a graduate student in the Masters of Catechesis and Evangelization program through Franciscan University of Steubenville, Rob's first degrees are in Speech Communication and Theatre from Miami University. After undergraduate studies, in 1996 Rob was trained by the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College followed by a professional tour with the Greatest Show on Earth as one of its clowns. A calling to ministry within the Church led Rob back home to full time Youth Ministry and a deeper participation into the Youth Apostles Institute based out of McLean, VA. Married shortly thereafter, Rob and Carole now have 9 children between the ages of 6 - 21, live on a small farm, and perform as the Tessier Family Singers to area nursing homes.