

A COOL SOLUTION TO A HOT PROBLEM – THE SCHOOL CONCERT

By Michele Quirk

It is desirable to put an end to teachers finding themselves in intensive care with hypertension preparing for the annual school concert. The annual school extravaganza can seem like a dose of insanity to many teachers. The performance is ideally a slick, sassy, seamless production that showcases the school to best advantage. The concert can be a positive or negative bill-board for the school in the community. A high standard must be achieved.

Teachers are often expected to integrate the concert with particular curriculum work and /or a particular school concert theme. They are expected to incorporate script, song, percussion, sound effects and dance. There is also the pressure of organizing costuming, back-drops, props and music. What a daunting task for many teachers who may have an impressive lack of expertise in some of these skills!

Finding an appropriate script to fit the nominated theme can be very time consuming and frustrating. The script is also expected to incorporate a cast of thousands. Writing a script is also very demanding. Using a formula can make it much easier.

The following 22 elements are bedrock ideas for devising a successful humorous play.

1. Introduce the play with a rhyming couplet poem.

Use the poem to give the audience a thorough grounding in the plot. The poem can also incorporate any number of children. Choose soloists to do featured lines. This group can then stand at the back of the stage to form the back-drop and provide sound effects and other choral inputs.

To maintain optimal audience attention the poem should be no more than 26 to 28 lines. A child with a precocious talent for funny writing can write it. Gavin Baker, a 12 year old, wrote a poem for The Emperor's New Clothes seemingly effortlessly in 20 minutes.

There once was an emperor
Who was a total fool.
He was probably more foolish
Than a three year old mule.
He paid some cons money
To make clothes that weren't there,
All he ended up doing
Was to make his treasure chest bare

They said you must sew it
With gold and silver thread,
But you couldn't have seen it more
If sewn with heavy lead.

That was his first mistake
Followed by quite a few.
His second followed
He paid them gold too

He wore his clothes while riding
His horse in a big parade
Thinking all the time
They were gold and silver laid.

It took all the intelligence
Of a 6 year old dude
To figure out
The emperor was totally nude.

“He’s got no clothes on,”
Shouted the child.
Realising he was right,
The crowd went wild.

Screams of laughter
Filled the land.
The emperor knew
He was a vain and foolish man.

2. Writing the script primarily in rhyming couplets with some free verse is effective.

Having 3 or 4 narrators taking turns to read a couplet swells the number of children involved and takes the pressure off a few.

Talented writers can take the burden of script writing. Joel White, a 6th grade child, wrote a wonderful basis for a script in 3 lessons.

The Emperor’s New Clothes
by Joel White

Narrator:

The emperor, an obnoxious prig,
Stated his clothes were not fit for a pig.
Although his clothes were the best to be bought,
On with the weavers the emperor fought.

Emperor:

Make cloth with flowers, make cloth that’s blue,
If they aren’t perfect, I will hang you!

Narrator:

The poor silly weavers, one hung every day,
Tried to do the work without much delay.
Alas though the weavers, they tried with their might.
Were hung then each morning and later that night.

Emperor:

FETCH ME MY WEAVERS!!!

Narrator:

the emperor shouted,
When he heard they were dead the emperor pouted.

Emperor:

There must be some more,
I had quite a score!

Narrator:

But none were to be found,
In the air nor the ground.
One guard with a cheek,
Thought hard all week,
Until he came up with a plan.

Guard:

I'll swindle the ning nong ,
And call him a ding dong,
"If you can't see this cloth ,
You're as slow as a sloth."
Then I'll take his money
'til it's no longer funny."

Narrator:

Along with his friend,
They planned to the end,
To become rich before moving away.
So they went to the fool,
Played really cool,
Dressing him in nothing by the end of the day.

The officials admired nothing at all.
They may as well just have looked at a wall.

Their faces were gloom ,
As they thought of their doom,
If anyone found out they were dumb.
But nobody saw.
Their eyes had a chore.
So they simply just remained 'mum.'

On the morn of the twelfth,
The emperor got dressed in his clothes.
Again to his surprise,
Not a sight met his eyes.
His stupidity the emperor loathes.

Still, he marched down the street,
Not admitting defeat,
Of not having a brain in his head.
And with no great pain,
He acted quite vain,
But he should have just stayed home in bed.

A kid about three,
Laughed aloud.....
"Tee Hee Hee.
The Emperor's totally naked!"

Narrator :

The adults turned on him,
As their brains ceased to be dim,
And the spell on them suddenly was break-ed.

The swindlers had run,
And were seen by no-one,
It was clear they had gotten away.
The emperor sighed,
They had conquered his pride,
His vanity gone by the end of the day.

The moral to this story,
Is never to be haughty.

3. The use of repetition is appealing.

In *The Emperor's New Clothes*, for example, you can incorporate the use of the word 'royal' to great effect, e.g. The royal emperor was in his royal palace with his royal servants.

The child who calls out in the emperor's parade can repeat his observation to great effect.

Child : The emperor's got no clothes on!!

Mum : Shoosh! Dear.

Child : But Muuummm (whining tone and much louder) the emperor's got no clothes on!!!

Repetition can also be in the action of the play. In the play "The Coming of the Europeans" by Rosemary McCubbin an action is repeated 6 times.

Scene 2: English courtroom. Judge and a policeman. Jail at the side being guarded by soldiers

Policeman: Here is the prisoner your Honour

Judge: What is your name?

Prisoner: Francis Flexmore, sir

Judge: What did he do?

Policeman: Stole two silver shoe buckles

Judge: 7 years in jail!

(Policeman hands him over to soldiers who put him in jail)

Policeman: Here is the prisoner your Honour

Judge: What is your name?

Prisoner: Christian Klencke, sir

Judge: What did he do?

Policeman: Broke into a house and stole food

Judge: 7 years in jail!

(Policeman hands him over to soldiers who put him in jail) etc

This structure continues for four more prisoners

4. Incorporate a string of words in a pulsating patter.

For example, the weavers in The Emperor's New Clothes could pronounce their fabric supreme by saying: it is extraordinarily, extravagant, exquisite, chic, ethereal, celestial, glittering, glistening, drifting tiers of gossimer.

The father in "Max and the Wild Things" could denounce his naughty child by saying, "You're nothing but a wild, cheeky, rude, naughty, greedy, grubby, sloppy busy brat!"

5. Incorporate a few slices of well-known nursery rhymes or song lyrics for effect.

Emma Hawkins (12 years old) did this well in her version of the 'Emperors New Clothes'-

Emperor: I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascals. I deserve the best and you deserve the rest.

When the weavers speak to the emperor about their cloth:

Weavers: Nothing could be finer!
Emperor: Nothing could be finer!
Chorus: Nothing could be finer!!

6. There is often the opportunity for a mock fight or a fracas of some kind.

This can be carefully scripted and can include sound effects. For example you may script a slow motion "fight". There is no body contact. One actor performs the action of slapping the others face. The other actor turns towards the audience feigning an 'impact' reaction of the slap with a shocked expression on the face. The offended actor pretends to kick the protagonist in the bottom. The protagonist puts on a pained facial expression with gaping mouth and clutches his bottom etc

7. Use of exploitation of disproportion can be very entertaining

Use a couple of grossly exaggerated reactions e.g. a scream or cry or a raucous laugh by one character is effective. Kevin's scream in 'Home Alone' when he puts on the aftershave is a good example of this ploy.

In the 'Emperors New Clothes' the prime minister could announce the fabric supreme with an exaggerated reaction: Aaaabsolutely Faaabulous!!!

A grossly exaggerated prop is effective, e.g. a huge spoon for a dose of medicine or an excessively high wig on the emperor.

8. Use a couple of good old riddles either incorporated into the script or between scenes.

One child asks the riddle and the children in the chorus repeat it. This ensures that the audience has heard it. Repetition slows the action and enhances clarity e.g.

Child: How does an octopus walk with his girlfriend?
Chorus: How does and octopus walk with his girlfriend?
Child: Arm in arm in arm in arm.

9. Building of anticipation, expectation and tension (and release) is a valuable device in entertainment.

One very funny school play, 'Robbing Hood' by Graeme Atkins (a teacher at South Queanbeyan School) had Tarzan swinging precariously on a rope across the stage at intermittent intervals throughout the play before Tarzan was introduced to the plot.

Rosemary McCubbin (South Queanbeyan Public School) used anticipation to great effect in her rendition of the song 'You Can't Keep A Horse in A Lighthouse'. The children sang the song with exaggerated enunciation, particularly the 'h's'. During the song, six children in yellow raincoats and rainhats and wearing gumboots pulled with exaggerated strain on a rope that extended the width of the stage so that the audience couldn't see the end of it. On the last 'neigh, neigh, neigh', of the song the children pulled two children in a horse suit who were on the end of the rope onto the stage. This was the antithesis of the audience expectation and was hilariously funny.

10. Incorporate classic routines where appropriate.

For example the
" that's good, that's bad routine:

' She fell out of a plane'
'That's bad'.
'That's good. She fell towards a haystack'.
'That's good'.
'No, that's bad. There was a pitchfork in the haystack'.
'That's bad.'.
'No, that's good. She missed the pitchfork'.
'That's good'.
'No, that's bad. She missed the haystack'.

Audiences always enjoy the classic ploys. Don't dismiss them as being banal, e.g.

Narrator: there was a knock at the door
(the bell rings).
Narrator: In no time at all, the door bell was ringing
(a knock at the door)

11. Reactions are shown by all cast members and chorus.

For example in the 'Emperors New Clothes', every member of the cast may gasp and sway back in horror simultaneously in reaction to the king shouting 'off with their heads'!

12. Use melodrama techniques.

Tell the audience to have their handkerchiefs ready and their glasses off. Have signs with 'clap', 'boo', 'hiss', 'groan', 'cry' and 'laugh'. Get the audience to practise these before the performance as a warm up. Have children running around in front of the audience with the appropriate sign as scripted.

13. Play up stereotypes

e.g an American tourist with cameras and binoculars hanging around his neck; the politician trying to kiss a baby or a French lady with a poodle.

14. Type-cast and feature any child with a particular talent.

For example, a child in Queanbeyan West school did a great Frank Spencer impersonation. Her teacher Christopher Kidd, wrote a clever script that enabled the child to show-off her talent.

A scene from the play 'Noah'

Enter Frank, wearing normal outfit and several cameras around his neck

Frank:

Hello my name is Frank. I'm a reporter. I've come to get a story about the ark. Did anyone see the animals embarking? (produces a note book and pencil).

The audience, which has been nudging each other and silently laughing at him proceeds to mock him.

Audience:

Yes there was....

a dog... a frog....and a hog
a cat.... a bat...a rat...and a gnat
a seal...and a eel
a bear... a deer....a hare....and a mare
a cow...and a sow
a ram... a clam... and a lamb
an owl... and a fowl
a baboon... and a loon
a monkey... and a donkey
a ewe... and a roo
a chook... and a rook
a wren..... and a hen
an eagle... a beagle... and a seagull
a hawk... and a stork
an ox ... and a fox
a shark... and a lark
a snail... and a whale
a crab... and a dab
a tortoise.... and a porpoise
a peewee... and a kiwi

Frank:

Did anyone perchance see what they were wearing?

Audience:

Yes, there was a bandicoot
In a yellow suit
A rat... with a pork pie hat
A llama ... in a suit of armour
A yak... with a pack on his pack
Ants... in orange pants
An ox in a pair of socks
A pig... in a wig
A butterfly... with a purple tie
A unicorn... in a uniform

Some were not allowed to go.

Frank:
Why not?

Audience: The crane
He's a pain
The swine
He was out of line
The bull
He was full
The drake
He made a mistake
The cockatoo
He had the flu
The weasels
He had the measles
The roo,
He went to the zoo
He spat in Noah's eye

Frank:
I'd better get back to the paper and prepare this for the next addition.

Audience:
If there is one!
(They laugh as he leaves)

15. **Use of a soloist**

Feature a child with a silver tongue to sing a short ditty unaccompanied

16. **Adapt traditional songs to fit your script.**

Rosemary McCubbin did this most effectively in her play, 'The Coming of the Europeans':

Song: The Grand Old Duke of York
 O-oh Grand Old Captain Cook
 He sailed across the sea
 In a little ship, with sailors bold
 He found a new country

 He left England behind
 And sailed both south and west
 The sun was fierce, the wind blew strong
 But the good ship stood the test

 The lookout called 'land ho!'
 As a fair new land he saw
 They called the new place Botany Bay
 And landed on the shore

 Cook claimed it for the King
 And hoisted up his sails
 And returned and sailed back home again
 Cook: 'I've discovered New South Wales!'

17. End the play with two morals if appropriate – one serious and one funny:

For example to finish 'The Emperor's New Clothes'-

The moral of this story
Is never to be haughty
If you are of little brain
It is foolish to be vain.

OR

All that glitters is not gold!!!

18. Introduce props as part of the caste

e.g. 'Beanstalk is played by chair'. Have signs labeling less obvious props e.g. 'The Castle'.

19. Use music to set the mood

e.g. marching music for the procession of the emperor with the rest of the caste (his subjects) behind him onto the stage at the beginning of the play. By incorporating music in this way you are helping to create the atmosphere and at the same time you are getting the cast onto the stage as part of the action.

The keyboard and other instruments can be used very simply by a child for dramatic effect in the play. One deep note on the piano repeated over and over in succession or two neighbouring notes repeated alternately over and over create a sense of tension. A glissando down the piano can be used effectively to highlight a dramatic moment e.g. when an actor falls over.

20. Incorporate other areas of the creative arts.

Find your Ginger Rogers of the school parent body to take a small dance group,. Add a splash of percussion to the dance. A full-blown concussion band is best avoided.

21. Make creative use of the available resources.

Take a sharp[sighted view of materials readily available to you at the time e.g. a strobe light may be installed for the school social. Use it for lighting effect for a scene in your play (such as a fight scene). Do not create extra work and stress for yourself by organizing spectacular effects.

22. We've treated the lines, the wit and now the wardrobe.

Costumes can be an enormous source of stress to the teacher. Elaborate costuming is time-consuming, expensive and not appropriate to a school situation where things are easily lost or broken. The rule is keep the costumes simple and bright. Live in the available world and adapt school uniforms and use clothing readily available in the children's homes.

Devise a folder of simple costuming ideas.

It is desirable that your school play provides fair-dinkum entertainment and gives the parents a jolly good wheeze. As the cliché goes, making the audience laugh isn't everything, it's the only thing. If you incorporate a number of the ingredients listed above your production will have a star rating. Still expect a few hiccups the size of a Krakatoa eruption. The 22 elements are not a 'must use' list but some interesting food for thought.

Bon a petit!