

# Designing a School Play

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The art of play production is perhaps the most challenging of all the arts because it requires the co-operative effort of a large number of artists each competent in the various arts of acting, directing, costume and set designing, music, make-up and lighting. In using drama as a tool for education we can utilize these various elements to give our children an opportunity to mould rounded personalities through intellectual and physical development. It is a medium through which the students of science, literature and the industrial arts can work together to exercise their various skills. Besides this, the finished production that goes on stage before an appreciative audience will provide children with immense emotional and spiritual satisfaction. I say "finished production" because today a school play is not judged simply in terms of whether it is enjoyable to be acting in it. The art of play production requires the skilful co-ordination of not only the artistic skill of the director and his actors but also the equally important skills of designing, lighting, effects, wood-working, metal-working and the other related arts. In fact, the play can become an instrument through which a school can put into practice all the lessons that are taught by the history, geography, art, science and industrial arts teachers.

In this article I propose to consider one of these aspects: the form in which a play can be presented bearing in mind the limitations of a typical Malaysian school stage. All too often we hear teachers complaining that plays cannot be performed because their school hall is inadequate, or worse, because it is non-existent. Let us consider how we could overcome some of these limitations and present a school play that is meaningful besides being visually attractive and practical.

For obvious reasons, the typical school hall in our country is not designed primarily as a theatre. It has also to serve among other things as a badminton hall and an assembly hall. It is too long and narrow, so that when the hall is full nothing can be seen from the back. Again there are too many doors and the ceiling is too high: these create acoustic problems. A typical school hall is good for badminton and assemblies but for a school play it is quite inadequate because young actors will find it difficult to project their voices. Again the lighting is inadequate and hardly any school has the complex and sophisticated equipment that can do justice to the make-up, costumes and sets.

What about the stage itself? The proscenium arch is generally too low. The sets will therefore have to be small and this will reduce the sense of grandeur we may want to achieve. Also, the floor of the stage is too high for the actors to establish a sense of intimacy with the audience.

The next area to consider is back stage. Too often we find practically no space at the back where actors can comfortably dress and wait before they appear on stage. Whatever space is available is taken up by stage props and actors have to literally jump over them to make an entrance. The result: unimpressive entrances and clumsy exits by actors. It is also true that the stage itself is too shallow so that when an actor stands in front of a painted scene we lose the sense of perspective. A stage like this will make it difficult to present a play requiring a large cast.

Different schools may have different stages but they present the same kind of problems. This does not mean that we should throw up our hands in despair and give up the play. The art of the theatre has survived over thousands of years in spite of these and similar problems. It has survived because imaginative people all over the world have taken these problems as challenges and derived great artistic satisfaction by overcoming them. We too can achieve the same thing if we agree that the very problems the physical stage presents invite experiment and innovation.

There are many ways in which we can present a play in a school but we must first of all recognize that there are two types of drama activity in schools.

One is the dramatization designed to underscore a teaching point – to encourage pupils to converse or to help them remember a history lesson by enacting a scene from a historical event for example. This type of exercise can be performed with very little sophistication in the classroom. Such entertainment may well lend itself to a simple 'in-the-round' technique of presentation (Fig. 1) or some other method of staging suitable for very informal classroom activity. Here it is essential to improvise and get on with the scene with the minimum of fuss. However, we must always encourage the pupils to concentrate on their acting and not indulge in tomfoolery and undisciplined behaviour.

There is no *one* way of presenting a play. The

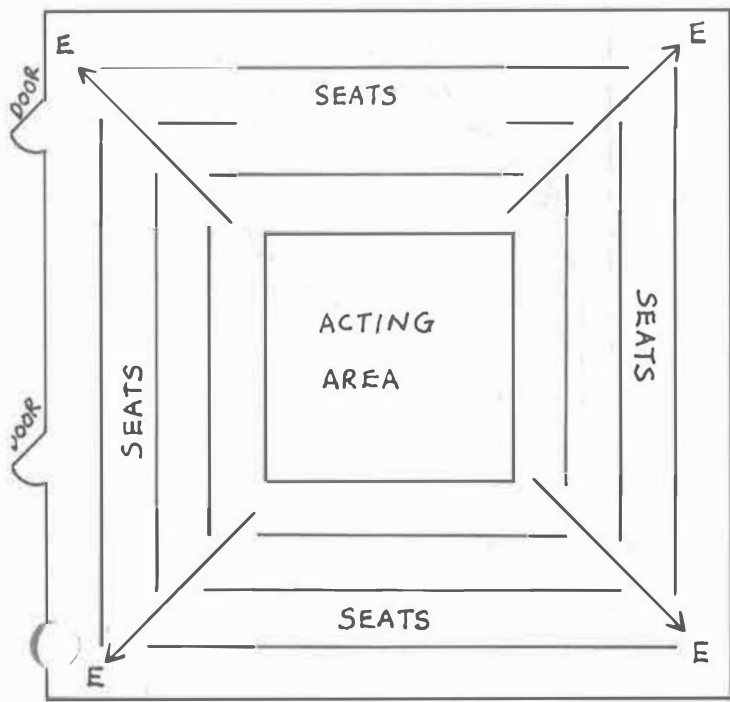


Figure I E = EXIT

director's imagination can help him experiment with a number of ways in which to stage a play. He has, however, to be constantly aware of two pertinent questions when planning his play: Is the presentation practical? Is it going to convey the message without distracting the audience's attention?

The second kind of drama activity is something we are more familiar with. This is the formal school play that is presented once a year before an adult audience after several weeks of intensive preparation. For this kind of activity the first thing to consider is the choice of script. Obviously some plays are unsuitable for production in our schools because the technical demands are too complex or because they demand a closed, intimate drawing-room atmosphere. But luckily there are dozens of other well-tried plays that lend themselves to grand productions with suitably large casts. Many modern translations of Greek and Roman plays are of this type.

Once we have selected the play, bearing in mind its suitability from the technical and financial aspects, we proceed to consider the *form* or *style* in which a play is presented to the audience. The commonest method is to stage the play behind the proscenium arch. The typical school stage has been designed with this type of presentation in mind.

In Figure II we see the ground plan of a typical school hall, with the stage (shaded area). We can overcome the problem of a shallow stage by constructing an "apron" which can be at a slightly lower level than the stage proper thus reducing the height of the stage and creating a more interesting variety of floor levels. The apron also serves to bring the actors closer to the audience and

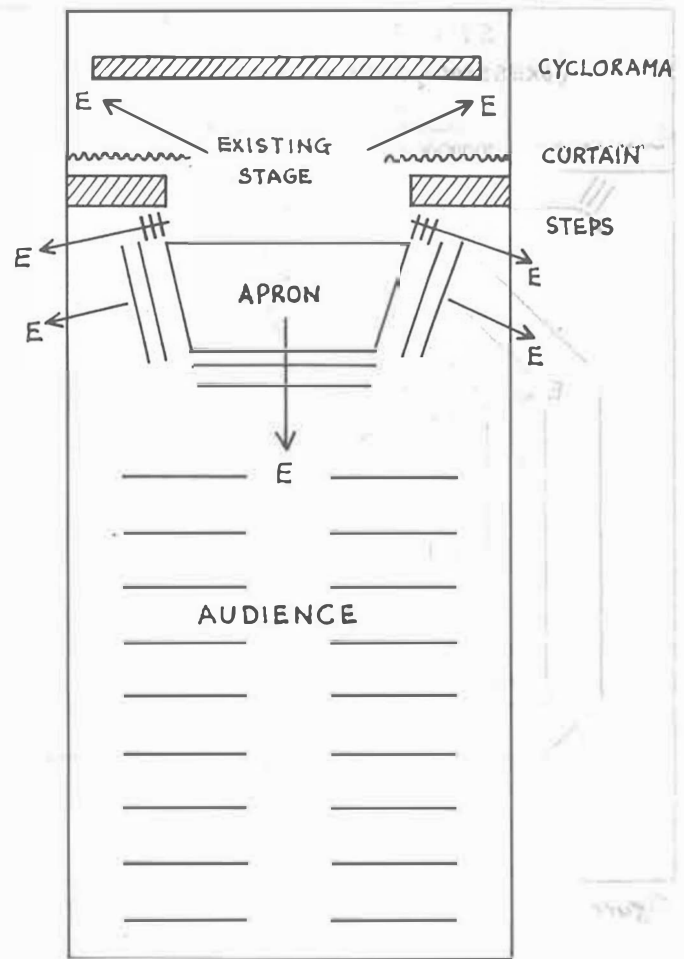


Figure II E = EXIT

reduces the length of the hall. The area behind the front curtain can be used for fixing locale with scenery and furniture while the apron can be used as a general acting area.

Another good idea perhaps is to get away from the stage altogether and convert it into a dressing room. The new stage can be constructed in the centre of the hall with the audience arranged around three sides (Figure III).

You will notice that in this way the audience is brought very close to the actors and the problems of acoustics are very easily overcome. The corridor on one side can be screened off to provide space for the storing of furniture and so on. As there will be no front curtain in this type of presentation changing of scenes will be done in full view of the audience or during a blackout. Provided that the stage crew are efficient and properly trained, the audience will easily accept this kind of scene shifting. It is also advisable to work with minimal and multipurpose furniture to reduce the number of scenes to be changed.

Then we could design a stage with the audience all

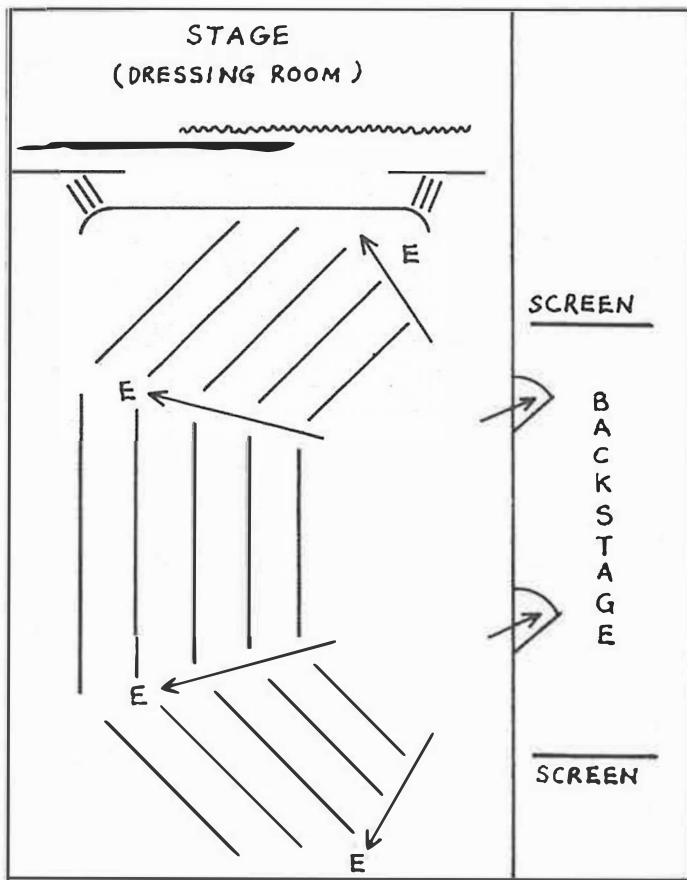


Figure III

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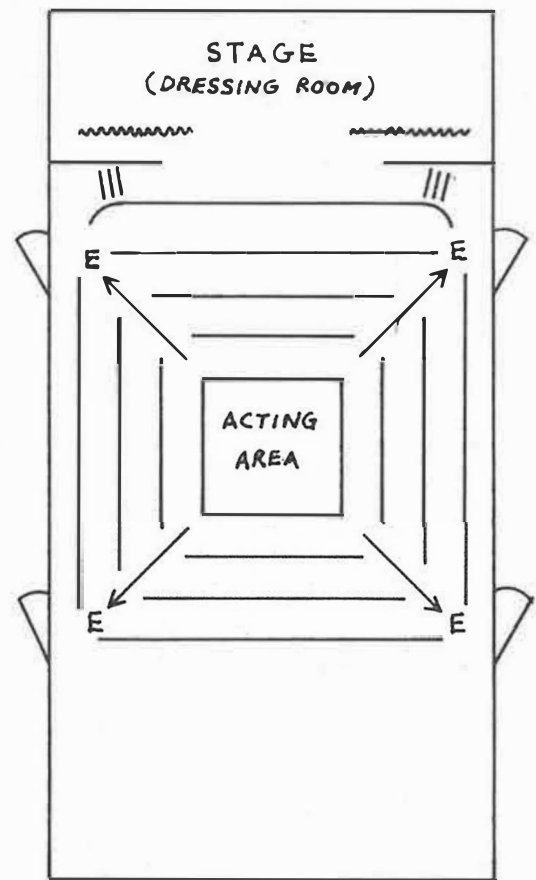


Figure IV

E = EXIT

round it (Figure IV). Such a presentation would mean the use of very little furniture and the scene changes should again be reduced to a minimum.

In all these forms of presentation, there is one basic departure from the traditional proscenium style of presentation. This is that the actors will have to get used to having the audience on more than one side of the stage. The director will have to get his actors to move in such a

way that the actors are constantly addressing different sections of the auditorium and therefore inviting total participation from the audience.

At first sight the beginning teacher-director may be afraid of presenting the play in this so-called "experimental manner", but if he summons enough courage to try it once, he can be assured of greater audience participation and appreciation.