

DRAMA vs FORENSICS AYE, THERE'S THE RUB

by Rusty McCrady

It's a conflict that's as old as the activities themselves. Still, we have to ask ourselves: does it have to be this way?

Typical scenario: Laura is the forensics team's star in both dramatic interpretation and in humor. She is the coach's pride and joy, and captain of the team. In previous years, she's never missed a tournament. The fall of her senior year, she tries out for the school play and--surprise, surprise--she is awarded the lead role. Her drama coach, who knows talent when she sees it, is delighted that Laura has finally seen the light and become a part of her traditionally excellent program. The fall play is a success, and in the big October regional forensics invitational, Laura enters in only one category, and has to drop her duo piece because she can't find time to practice, disappointing her partner, who had his heart set on a winning performance. The coach asks Laura to come to practices more often in preparation for the winter and spring tournaments, but she again gets one of the major parts in the annual school musical, and thus begins to feel torn between the two programs, forensics and theater. The situation comes to a head when Laura tells the forensics coach that she is forbidden to come to a key forensics rehearsal because the drama director has laid down the law that anyone who misses so much as a minute of play practice for any reason will be dropped from the show. Upon hearing this from Laura, the forensics coach becomes furious and goes to the drama director's room to confront her by asking if what Laura has said is true. The drama director replies with an emphatic "YES," and then she goes on to explain that a director cannot run rehearsals unless performers are present and on time, with no exceptions. The cast must work as a team and it depends on each individual's participation, especially on key performers such as Laura. The forensics coach retorts that forensics is also a team, but privately he knows that this argument will get him nowhere, since in effect, most forensic events are individual, and hence no one is depending on Laura most of the time other than Laura herself and her coach. The confrontation ends in a hostile impasse.

Angry feelings have been worsened rather than moderated. Battle lines between forensics and drama programs at this high school have been drawn.

While I do not have my finger on the pulse of forensic programs nationwide, I can attest that the above vignette epitomizes the experiences of a number of forensic coaches here in Montgomery County (MD). Because forensics and theater programs naturally attract many of the same students, they have the potential for competing for these students' time and energies, thus creating nasty situations like the one I've described. To answer the question posed rhetorically at the beginning of this article, it *doesn't* have to be this way.

The Play Director's Case

Let's look at the situation first from the drama director's point of view. Most high schools produce, at a minimum, a major fall play and a spring musical. Each of these requires thousands of student/hours of rehearsal, set building, lights, sound production, choreography, etc. Typically, the final few days before opening night are deemed, only half-jokingly, "hell week." A play director is not overstating her case when she maintains that a lax disciplinary policy regarding attendance at rehearsals will spell doom for a show. For any given scene, the timing, chemistry, flow and other subtleties cannot be achieved if all actors are not present and working together day after day, with few if any exceptions. Thus most high school directors require that each cast member, once s/he has made the cut and been chosen for a part, sign a contract which stipulates that drama rehearsal time will take first priority over all other activities for the duration of the show. In other words, they pledge in writing not to miss play practice.

Let's give the director her due here. It is simply impossible to schedule and then reschedule drama practice times to accommodate each cast member's individual priorities. Hence the strict discipline that high school directors routinely impose.

Colleen's Story

Fortunately, I am not writing this article because of any personal axe to grind;

I'm happy to say that I have an excellent professional relationship with the theater director here at Walter Johnson High School, Colleen McAdory. (Maybe it's the similarity of our last names?!) She annually produces ambitious, big budget, sell-out extravaganzas which are the secret envy of many of the other high school's in our county (where, incidentally, there are 22 high schools, and since we are adjacent to Washington, D. C. the standard for theatrical excellence is quite high). So it's always amazed me that she and I have never had a conflict over the extracurricular time of any student, even though each year about half of the twenty-five or so students on the forensic team also are involved in the school shows, in a variety of ways.

So the other day I sat down with Colleen to interview her for this article. Our conversation focused on two issues: what does she expect of her cast members, and why does she think we have not experienced the conflicts I've alluded to above.

To the first question, she replied that she gives out rehearsal schedules in advance and has each person who receives any role in one of her productions fill out a questionnaire which asks them to state any potential time conflicts with the rehearsal schedule she has previously published, and then she asks them to plan ahead three months to clear any of these potential conflicts. If they cannot or will not do so, she asks them to drop from the cast at that point. In other words, planning and communication are the key. Students know from day one the time commitment they must make if they are to play a part in a production.

To the second question, the teacher again brought up the issue of communication. If the students have signed on to the drama production in good faith, they know the rehearsal schedule and thus know when they are (or are not) free to attend forensic practices and events. I suppose with me, and because of the greater flexibility inherent in forensics, I am able to work around the play rehearsal schedule.

Why Coaches Need to Bend

Probably the source of the drama vs. forensic conflict in many schools is the fo-

rensic coach's sense that drama is taking priority according to the above arrangement, and hence the coach's ego is bruised by the this forced deference to someone else's schedule. One is our inherent flexibility, which I've previously explained, resulting primarily from the fact that most of our rehearsals are individual, while in the case of play production, all rehearsals are large groups, and all members need to be there on time and at the same time.

The second reason is harder to admit, but nevertheless it is one that I believe we all need to acknowledge, the play director has a lot more power. The students have had to compete just to be chosen for a role in the production. They have been rewarded just by getting the role they aspired to, and are not about to jeopardize this hard won status by missing play practice and thus being replaced by an understudy. Plus, they know they dare not fall out of favor with the director, because they will want a shot at major roles in future productions.

In the case of forensics, tryouts, if they exist at all, are usually much less competitive, and whether a student succeeds (i.e., places in a tournament) depends mainly on how well they prepare, and not on beating out competitors just to get registered for a tournament. Therefore, the fact of life that I believe all forensics coaches need to accept is that our position is truly different than that of the play director. We can work things differently, we can be more flexible,

and if we swallow an iota of pride, we will recognize the necessity of being the more flexible party in the arrangement, and accept this role graciously.

However, we also have the right to expect a degree of flexibility on the part of the theater director. For example, some of the coaches in our league have had to drop students from events (including the Finals tournament) because the director at their school had forbidden any student in their cast from participating in a speech tournament the afternoon of the production, because that student might be late for a 6:00 P.M. make-up call (the show went on at 8:00). My advice to coaches in this situation is to stand their ground: speak up for the student's right to participate in the forensic event, and appeal to the principal if the play director is unwilling to relent. As I've already conceded, the forensics coach really needs to be flexible on a daily basis all year; the drama director can certainly be flexible too when a little give on his/her part will have minimal effect on her show.

Janet's Solution

One of my colleagues in the county league, Janet Rodkey, is in the unique position of serving as both forensic coach and theater director at her high school. I also interviewed her in preparation for this article. She laments the tendency of the two programs to compete negatively and work at cross purposes in so many schools. As Janet points out, "forensic pieces, especially

the interpretive ones, can enhance the theater curriculum by being assigned as class projects. Even better, such pieces can be showcased as part of an evening of one-acts and/or monologues put on by the drama department. There are really many ways that speech and drama can work together for the benefit of the students."

She went on to note that if we fail to work together, both the forensic and the theater programs will suffer and may cease to compete successfully with "high profile media events such as those offered by the athletic programs." Finally, she, like Colleen McAdory at my school, stressed the need for communication from day one between the drama director and forensic coach.

As with any situation where the two sides have similar interest but separate agendas, a little rivalry is probably inevitable. But it may even be healthy if both persons are willing to be flexible, and more important, if both seek to understand the unique nature of the other's job. By the very fact that the roles of play director and forensic coach are so different, they can complement each other rather than conflict. That's fortunate, because their main goal, development of the human voice and of presentation skill, is one they share.

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