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Theatre "Coaches" An Editorial by Beth Rand

One of the biggest issues facing education and operations in high school theatres is funding for staffing.

It's virtually impossible to address high school theatre staffing without talking about high school sports. Why? We often need to use sports as an analogy simply because people aren't as familiar with theatre as they are with sports. Most people understand sports and what goes on "behind the scenes" – the practices, the training, the equipment and uniforms - mostly because almost everyone has played at least one sport before at some point in their lives, whether in school or out of school. Not everyone has "played" behind the scenes in theatre, so it's useful to be able to explain things in terms of sports.

Unfortunately, using sports as an analogy to help explain theatre is not always an easy conversation to have with school administrators because it's too often assumed that sports is being used as a *comparison*, and so they immediately perceive that sports funding is being criticized, and it is consequently assumed that the theatre person is about to ask for more (some?) funding.

But, how else do you explain the need for theatre education staffing to someone who has had no experience behind the scenes, and who only sees a polished production from the other side of the curtains? How do you explain all the requirements, factors, and components needed to make it happen? One of the best ways to explain is to use the *analogy* of a sports team and its various coaches. Which is what I am going to do here.

When you think of a sports team, there is the head coach, and then often times a LOT of specialty assistant coaches; as well as a coach for every specific sport, within each specific sport there will be a running coach, a catching coach, a hitting coach, a throws coach, a jumping coach, the list goes on. Sometimes these coaches are working with teams of only 5 to 20 students. Almost every high school has a plethora of after school sports coaches and assistant coaches - you have only to look at any school district's jobs page. The sports department in one high school where I once hung my hat even had its own physical therapist. At every high school I've worked at there were continual notifications in my e-mail for hiring assistant coaches. One school district put out job postings for six coaches - in one day's posting. Including the posting for a paid position of Timer for Track. Also typical is postings for paid Ticket Takers for school sports events. I've never seen paid Box Office Staff at a high school theatre production. There is rarely an after school sport where one sports coach has to operate as a 'one person show', as a theatre teacher-director is expected to do for a school play.

Too frequently in the high school theatre, the Drama teacher is the only "coach". But they can't do it alone - although too many are charged with doing just that. The Drama teacher needs a LOT of assistant coaches; the stage management coach, the lighting coach, the sound coach, the set coach, the props coach, the costume coach, and in the case of musicals, the choreography coach,

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the vocal coach, the instrumental coach, and sometimes the fight coach, and these days the Parkour coach, the list goes on.

JOB DESCRIPTION

As is the case with most high schools, job postings have to go out to the staff first. At one high school where I was the Theatre Manger, one day a job posting popped up in my inbox for "Pole Vault Coach" for the upcoming spring Track and Field season. Now that's a very specific specialty within the specific specialty of Track and Field.

I looked at the Pole Vault Coach's job description on the district website and saw that it was a generic "Assistant Coach" job description that the district uses for all assistant coaches. For each assistant coach they paid a stipend (which they called a "salary") of over \$3000.00, for 12 weeks worth of work

It was then that an analogy dawned on me. Sports practices and games generally last only a few hours a week, compared to rehearsals, set building, and performances. So in actual fact, someone designing and building a set for a show in 8 weeks will put in more total hours than a assistant coach for 12 weeks. I wondered what would happen if we called all the tech designers and musical directors that we need for our productions (think 'seasons') "Coaches". Would a similar job description validate the need for them in the eyes of our admin? So, I took the generic assistant coach job description, and everywhere there was a sports-related word, I substituted a theatre-related word. I changed nothing else about the actual job duties.

I came up with the following generic job description for Assistant Theatre Coaches. I have underlined the theatre related terms that were substituted for the sports related terms. As you will see, it is fundamentally no different than a sports team.

TITLE: Assistant Theatre Coach

Assistant Coaches needed:

- Assistant to the Director Coach
- Stage Management Coach
- Set Design and Building Coach
- Lighting Design and Installation Coach
- Sound Design and Recording Coach
- Stage Running Crew Coach
- Rigging Coach
- Props Coach
- Costume Design and Building Coach
- Vocal Musical Coach
- Instrumental Musical Coach
- Choreography Coach
- Fight Coach
- Parkour Coach

DEPARTMENT: Theatre Department

STUDENT PARTICIPATION:

Play: ~18 cast, ~ 10 crew (~28 students)

Musical: ~40 cast, ~ 15 crew, ~ 20 pit orchestra (~75 students)

REPORTS TO: Drama Director

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Approximate Start Date -
Fall Play season
Winter Play season
Spring Musical season

Work Days: " Mon Tue Wed Thr Fri Sat, 3 hrs/day after school, 4 hour Saturday work parties (8 weeks)
Coaches for stage management, sets, costumes, choreography, music, movement, etc : 8 weeks
Coaches for lighting, running crew, rigging, sound, etc: 4 weeks

POSITION SUMMARY: This position is responsible for assisting the director, and coaching and providing direction to student casts, stage crews, and pit orchestra musicians so that they might achieve a high level of skill as well as an appreciation for discipline, accountability and teamwork in the part for which they are responsible. It is a supervisory responsibility of all school employees to supervise students and to assist in maintaining a safe environment.

ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS:

- Holds and or attends organizational meetings for show production prospects and parents and encourages potential student cast, musicians and crew to participate in the production.
- Assists with auditions and the collection of data and anecdotal observations on student performance.
- Supports the director monitoring the academic performance of team members to ensure that eligibility requirements are met; and encourages student cast, musicians and crews to maintain a high academic standard
- Follows and maintains knowledge of all District Regulations and procedures.
- At the direction of the director, instructs and demonstrates skill sets and techniques necessary for individual and team achievement in their respective specialty.
- Assures a certified coach/certificated teacher/District employee is present at all rehearsals, 'work parties' and performances.
- Assures student casts, musicians and crews are supervised by a paid Coach on the cast, musician and crew bus both to and from venues. *(Some high school productions travel to other schools and/or to competitions.)*
- Observes cast, musicians and crews, during rehearsals, design and construction, and performance to determine the needs for individual or team improvement.
- Adheres to financial Regulations and practices of the District in regard to the handling of money, expenses, and receipts.
- Organizes and or directs individual and small group rehearsal, design and construction activities/exercises
- Works with the director, as needed, in preparing rehearsal and construction, tech rehearsal and pre-performance schedules.
- Enforces discipline Regulations and emphasizes, safety, teamwork and healthy lifestyles.
- Supervises students in dressing rooms and construction shops at home and away performances and ensures appropriate behavior.
- Instructs student casts, musicians and crews on and maintains a safe environment and facilities for student casts, musicians and crews at all times.
- Completes District injury report for any student injured within 24 hours even if student cast, musicians or crew does not see physician.
- Models theatre-like behavior and maintains appropriate conduct towards cast, muscians and crew, staff, and audience.
- Professionally represents the school and the District in interactions with student, parents, community, staff and the media.
- Maintains appropriate certifications and training hours as required by CTE and the district.

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- Demonstrates regular and prompt attendance at all rehearsals, construction 'work parties' and performances.
- Follows CTE rules, and District Regulations.
- Participates in special activities to include parent's night, company meetings, banquets, and Thespian award nights, and pep assemblies.
- Periodically and or consistent with CTE rules and or director expectations attends staff development meetings, clinics and other professional activities to improve performance.
- Models nondiscriminatory practices in all activities.
 - Possess knowledge of and adheres to Governing Policies and District Regulations and Procedures.
- Participates in special projects as assigned and performs related duties and key responsibilities consistent with the scope and intent of the position.

(In the Qualifications and Updated sections below, I actually had to add additional requirements over and above the requirements needed for a sports coach. Additions are double underlined.)

QUALIFICATIONS:

Working Conditions & Physical Requirements

Must have the ability to:

sit and stand for extended periods of time;

operate hand and power tools;

operate a 'manlift';

operate a fly system;

exhibit manual dexterity to dial a telephone,

see and read a computer screen and printed material with or without vision aids;

operate computer control boards;

hear and understand speech at normal levels, on stage and on the telephone;

speak in audible tones so that others may understand clearly;

physical agility;

set and operate technical theatrical equipment with a high level of safety.

UPDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT JOB DESCRIPTION

to lift up to 25 pounds to shoulder height and 50 pounds to waist height;

lift set pieces approximately 40 lbs;

and to bend, to stoop, to sit on the floor, to climb stairs, to walk and to reach overhead.

regular lifting, carrying, pushing, and/or pulling of equipment, material;

work at heights;

ability to climb ladders while carrying equipment;

Work Environment

The work environment characteristics described here are representative of those an employee encounters while performing the essential functions of this job. Reasonable accommodations may be made to enable individuals with disabilities to perform the essential functions. Duties are normally performed in a school environment or in a high school theatre. Duties may be occasionally performed on field trips away from school. The noise level in the work environment is usually moderate.

(Again, in the sections below I also had to add qualifications over and above those required for a sports coach. Additions are double underlined.)

EDUCATION:

High school diploma or equivalent.

Bachelors degree in area of technical specialty.

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EXPERIENCE:

Job related experience is desired.

Three (3) years of technical theatre experience desired.

Experience in designing, constructing and operating large events.

Specialized experience in, and knowledge of, technical theatre area of expertise.

Training and experience in theatre safety required.

REQUIRED TESTING:

None Required

eSET, OSHA-10 desired.

CERTIFICATES AND LICENSES:

CTE Teaching Certification

CPR/First Aid Certificate (may be required)

ETCP Certification desired.

CONTINUING EDUCATION/TRAINING:

None Specified

Current aerial lift certification.

CLEARANCES:

Criminal Justice fingerprint/Background Clearance

FLSA STATUS:

Non-exempt

BARGAINING UNIT:

Represented classified employee

FUNDING

I also looked at that school's Track and Field sub-website to find that – while a Drama teacher alone can be working with up to 80 students for a production – Track and Field already had 7 coaches for the 10 students on the team for the season (distance coach, sprints and relays coach, throws coach, horizontal jumps coach, hurdles coach, and event coach, along with the head coach), and they were now also hiring a pole vault coach.

So when I hear administrations telling theatre teachers that there is no budget for the theatre students' education, I know otherwise. There is always funding available to a school, it's just how it is apportioned. No one questions the cost of hiring several specialty coaches for a high school sports team, it's the norm. Yet it is – mind-bogglingly - the norm that not only is one Drama teacher expected to do the work of many coaches, but it is expected that this one person should have all of the training required for each of the specialties. It is assumed that because the acting teacher has a degree, and for that degree had to take one or two classes in technical and musical theatre, that they are somehow highly qualified to teach all of these specialties.

Again, it all goes back to administrators not understanding what we do and what support we need behind the scenes for the education of our students in the theatre, like they have an innate understanding in sports education. Everyone knows that in football you need a kicking coach and a running coach and a throwing coach and so on in order to educate the students on the subject of

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football, but administrators typically still don't have an innate understanding of the 'coaches' needed to educate students in the subject of theatre.

So while it's true that administrators don't know what it takes to run a theatre program - through no fault of their own, because when they go to a theatre all they see, and therefore all they know, is the polished performance happening magically before their eyes – we cannot continue to enable them to misconstrue that one person should be running a high school theatre production on their own. It's not fair on the teacher for a start, but it's also not fair on the students who miss out on the education that the specialty "coaches" provide, not to mention the level of risk management they provide.

ADVOCACY ACTIONS

The time has come to make providing the funding to hire several specialty coaches for a production the norm as well. But, it's all very well to be 'preaching to the choir' amongst ourselves, we need to all take action now if we are going to create a new norm across the country. Here's some action items that you can accomplish right now:

Do an empirical assessment of your high school productions:

- ✓ how many students are in a typical production - cast, crew, band/orchestra (if a musical)
- ✓ what is the Drama teacher's stipend for producing a show
- ✓ how much help does the Drama teacher have producing a show; volunteers, paid help
- ✓ what are the stipends for any "coaches"

Then go to the Athletics Department and find out:

- ✓ how many students are on a typical sports team
- ✓ what is a Head Coach's pay for a sports season
- ✓ how many assistant coaches are hired for a given sport
- ✓ what are the pay rates for the assistant coaches

Then create a spreadsheet or other document that shows an empirical evaluation, of the theatre department and the sports department, of typically how many students are served by how many employees and how much are those employees compensated, per season/production. Present the job description in this article and your spreadsheet to the administration of your school and/or district. Remember, keep it to the facts.

This may seem like a lot of work, but this empirical evidence is needed to demonstrate just where the inequities are and what can be done to resolve them. Together we can start to make it the norm, in high schools across the country, that theatre students are provided with funding for an equitable education.

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