

INTRODUCTION and IMPORTANT TIPS for Creative Dramatics and Songs with Actions

Everything I present here has been child and audience tested and the feedback was great, so have confidence that it can work for you. It may inspire you (or cause alarm!) to know that I have never had any formal or informal training in drama, puppetry, public speaking, etc. I was not even in a high school or college play. The biggest performance I ever did as a child was a piano recital. I was terrified to speak to a group of more than 2! But the Creative Word lives up to its name—it is what inspired me and gave me the courage in every single program, game and lesson plan I have ever done. One of the great things about drama is that if done in the spirit of service, it can force us to detach from our egos and self-consciousness—and thus helps us to grow spiritually, to become more selfless.

With many of the entries in this document, I go into great detail for those of you who don't have a lot of experience in drama. I hope the detail gives you confidence and encouragement to take the leap into this form of education. The details are not meant to be intimidating or overwhelming. Those of you with experience probably will find the details unnecessary or even irritating. Sorry about that. You folks can just take the material and put your own twist on it or totally transform it to fit your needs and tastes. I want these productions to be for everybody, even those who have never been on stage.

Practically all children love and really relate to drama. Dramatic interpretation makes concepts come alive for kids. They remember and understand the lessons they learned through drama much better than through just hearing them. Drama stimulates the emotions, and the more a child's heart is alive and engaged, i.e. the more they are feeling, the more attention they pay and the more they absorb.

Every classroom should have dress ups and a mirror. Most kids of all ages love dressing up and the costumes make the skits seem more real and really enhance the visual interest of the performances. Collect masks, hats, shoes, men and women's clothing, wigs, jewelry, office, kitchen, and school supplies, fake money, sunglasses, accessories, keys, purses, briefcases, animal noses, gloves, doctor kit, baby supplies, old cell phone and camera, etc. Have some outrageous styles as well, from elegant to gaudy to plain—like an apron or suit coat. My students raid the dress up supplies every single time they are here and gleefully don them for any skit. The single most versatile dress ups I own are 3 feet by 9 feet long lengths of silk-essence fabric. We use them again and again and again—for costuming and decorating spaces for holy days. They are quite lovely and not cheap—so these are not kept out for the students to use at any time.

In creating a dramatic piece, you can use dolls, stuffed toys, puppets or children. There are numerous puppet shows in this document. Dolls can be used in place of puppets. Also, bear in mind that most puppet shows can be converted to skits using the children. When you dramatize with dolls and puppets, have interracial and international families, i.e. a Caucasian mother and Black father, etc. Use foreign names for the dolls: "And the little girl's name was Akhtar, and her brother's name was Carlos." Whenever I play a mother with a doll baby, my baby is always black, b/c I am white. Mixed families exemplify the principle of unity in diversity on a very basic level. They are a true indicator of the sincerity of openness to different kinds of peoples. Its easy to make a makeshift puppet "theater" by throwing a large cloth over the backs of 2 chairs side by side and putting carpet or pillows down for the comfort of the puppeteer's knees.

The possibilities are endless in any form of drama: You can set up conflict situations that children regularly experience and problem solve using input from children, encouraging them to insert virtues. You can illustrate the unattractiveness of prejudice, the beauty of inclusiveness, and demonstrate the expression of virtues in a myriad of situations. A key to success is to use situations that are personally relevant and meaningful to the kids—something they encounter in their daily lives and will recognize and relate to immediately. However, that doesn't mean you can't be fanciful. Indeed, many of the most popular scenarios I have done with children consist of totally imaginary situations—but the lesson or actions needed are common in children's lives. For example, in *Zymic Zelda* and *The Flood*, kids have to practice fairness, detachment, caring, generosity, etc., in regards to precious resources. Kids face these choices almost daily—how much to share a beloved toy, a candy bar, etc. In one of the most magical scenarios, *The Dar*, children are required to think in terms of how they can use their supernatural powers to serve mankind. This definitely has a correlation to reality—how can I use my talents and skills to make the world a better place, to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization?

Here are some examples of how I regularly use creative dramatics in the classroom and with my daughters when they were young:

1. A simple form of drama is to demonstrate a virtue and the children watch. It becomes a game if you ask children to identify the virtue. They like that.
2. Teachers or students can dramatize a story from a book or a situation with the relevant virtues absent, illustrating negative consequences, then ask children what qualities or virtues are needed here. Dramatize with those virtues present, followed by a discussion which compares and contrasts the outcome of the two situations. (I tend to prefer that kids do not act out negative roles—they need practice in being virtuous! So, usually myself or an assistant plays the negative role.)
3. Provide a personally meaningful situation and ask the children to express a virtue which you provide, or a virtue they see as relevant, --- or they can choose from a list of virtues.
4. Another method for older children (at least 8 years old) is to provide a virtue then ask them to develop and act out a situation using it.

During many of the skits, children are exhorted to behave like they think Abdu'l-Baha would. In that case, they are never to get rude with any of the characters they meet, no matter how obnoxious the character may seem. (We do discuss the role of justice though, and I have shared with them a story about how Abdu'l-Baha did not allow Himself to be cheated or abused. He never stooped to revenge or violence, but He did assert Himself.)

For public performances, always carefully consider the setting and mood you want to elicit before selecting a performing piece. Many of the performances described in this document may be too playful, silly, or considered undignified for some settings or groups. Use your best judgment and consult with others. For example, I have noted that some groups and cultures find the joyful, uninhibited, and spontaneous sounds and movement of gospel church goers not reverent or dignified enough for their tastes. (Personally, I feel that if the spirit is one of love for the Manifestation, and the ecstasy in singing His praises is expressed through joyful and playful sounds and movement, that this is not irreverent.) And many folks who come into the Baha'i Faith from a lively Southern Baptist church find our Feasts and Holy Days dry, boring, sterile, and uninspiring. So basically, we must strive to respect others' standards in this manner if they are the main audience. For any dramatic piece, you can't please everyone all the time—artistic tastes are just too diverse. Verbal and physical modesty/chastity is always called for, however. And I would never choose a silly piece for more somber occasions such as Holy Days commemorating Ascensions or Martyrdom. Ridvan celebrations tend to be elegant and dignified in our community. But dignified and elegant does not mean being quiet, somber and serious 100% of the time—there can be joy, lively expression, and humor—it should just be befitting, that's all. Also, in the Baha'i Faith, out of reverence, we do not impersonate or draw any Messenger of God, God Himself, or Abdu'l-Baha.

More tips:

- For the more demanding pieces, try to arrange for more rehearsal time than you think you will need. This makes rehearsals less stressful and more relaxed. You can always cancel a rehearsal if the kids look great well ahead of schedule. I find there is nothing more stressful than having an unprepared group attempt to perform. And kids know if they looked bad—and they don't like that one bit. Then instead of being a source of joy and upliftment, the performance gives them negative associations with the Baha'i event—which totally defeats your purpose. The audience also will feel embarrassed for them. Not a good situation. People are much more forgiving of children's performances, so there is leeway for imperfection—but total mess up is another story. Panic, stress, and a sense of failure are definitely not the emotions you want the kids to experience in a Baha'i celebration. This can be prevented by good planning.
- It is so important that you do not lose your cool and snap or get harsh with the kids and kill the spirit. I always have to raise my voice a bit to get the excited performers to calm down and listen, but I never chew them out or humiliate them. If the kids are well rehearsed—everyone feels more relaxed and confident. We always say prayers to calming music before rehearsals and the event, and this helps.
- If possible, always do a rehearsal the day of the actual performance on the actual site of the event. Kids can really get thrown off by changed angles and directions. And you will become aware of logistic issues you did not foresee.
- For audience participation pieces, it is essential that you go over at least once, preferably twice, actions to any song with the audience/class before doing it to the music. Have kids do actions with you, not just watch. They will remember better. The second run through is faster, more abbreviated. I often will read just a key word or part of a phrase that goes with an action and ask them to show me the correct action.

- If using sound equipment, always do a sound check well before the performance to check appropriate volume levels and health of the components. Duct tape cords to floor to avoid tripping. I also recommend always bringing an extension cord or two if you don't know where you will be setting up equipment in relation to electrical outlets.
- Many of the activities have numerous quotes that relate to the theme of the drama or song. The Creative Word should always be included in activities whenever possible because the Creative Word has the power to transform souls. (I have a whole compilation on this subject, if you are interested.) In addition, relating the Word of God to the activity teaches children how relevant Baha'u'llah's and Abdu'l-Baha's teachings are to everyday life. The drama also helps to clarify the meaning and applicability of the scripture—it gives more life to the words. However, I do not recommend using too many quotes when explaining a dramatic activity—the kids will shut down and get impatient and annoyed. That said, I find that I can capture their attention longer and share many quotations if I try to be very expressive when reading them. One can even pantomime imagery when possible, and standing commands more attention as well. It also frees one's body up to move about, which will engage the students more than rigid sitting.

More ideas: I often ask students to fill in the blank of key words, giving hints if necessary, such as the beginning sound of the key word, a rhyming word, or syllable, or a description, & it becomes like a riddle. Kids love riddles & guessing games. Choose ahead of time with a highlighter the words you want to have the students guess—try to choose ones that can be pantomimed or logically deduced by the phrase. Sometimes I ask questions on a topic then ask them to find the answer in the quote, or to see if their answer matched what the quote said. Of course we also explore the possible meaning of the quotes, the meanings of the unfamiliar words, and I try to relate them to their own lives. I remind the kids that these are the words of the Creator of the Universe, spoken through His Mouthpiece, Baha'u'llah, The Bab, or Baha'u'llah's chosen successor, Abdu'l-Baha—and this tends to build respect and reverence for the quotes. Also, for many of the dramas and songs I go into rather long elaborate discussions/speeches that elaborate on the lesson the drama is intended to teach. (The activities were usually designed to support a theme we were studying in Baha'i children's classes). While these verbal excursions can promote thought and insight, they can also be too much to absorb in one session. In sum, always intersperse quotes & discussion with action-- and be expressive and ask questions if you want kids to stay engaged and grasp the significance of what you are trying to convey.

- Never allow gum, or immodest or dirty clothing in a performance. Hair should be secured so students are not constantly brushing hair out of their eyes or putting it behind ears during a choreographed piece. Another thing to avoid is loose fitting pants or skirts so that a performer is constantly pulling up the waistline. Remind performers to use the restroom at least 15 minutes before the performance.
- It is really important to be enthusiastic, expressive, and animated when explaining and doing drama with kids. Your positive energy will excite and inspire them, help hold their attention, and assist them in overcoming their insecurities. If a teacher manifests self-consciousness, insecurity, nervousness, or a ho-hum attitude, the students will absorb that and the activity will not go well. Be playful and have fun! Joyfulness and being uninhibited often go hand in hand.
- When getting students and parents to commit to rehearsals, it is always preferable if the student agrees and is motivated b/c rehearsals can be demanding, and conflict of interests such as birthday parties often come up. If the child has not agreed, he/she can pitch a fit and create a lot of disunity and negative feelings in the home atmosphere—or sabotage the performance by not memorizing lines. On the other hand, there are those children who reflexively say no to new or challenging situations, and if never forced will always remain in their comfort zone. They then are deprived of the joy and esteem building effects of overcoming fears and difficulties. Parents are thus the best judge as to whether to ask a child if he/she wants to perform or not. I know of many kids who if asked will say “no way” but if not given a choice, will obey and then do wonderful and are so glad they participated. Being a servant of God, in fact being a human, is not always “peaches and cream” and if we rarely demand that our children rise above their insecurities or inertia, we are doing them no favor. Abdu'l-Baha exhorts parents to accustom children to hardship—this is very, very wise advice indeed. Parents should remind resistant students that the performance is service to Baha'u'llah. Also, given that both Abdu'l-Baha and Baha'u'llah have written about the role of reward and punishment in the education of human beings, I think on occasion, if a child has real issues with the effort required for a performance, or is quite insecure about it, offering a reward may be warranted.

Ideally, the joy of service and success should be its own reward, but if the reward is not huge, it will not detract from the child realizing how a difficult job well done is truly fulfilling. In the end, parents need to be the judge of whether a performance is truly asking too much of a child and is setting them up for failure. If a child is resisting, it is always a good idea for the parents or teacher to express empathy and explore the reasons with the child. One child came home from rehearsing "If I Were to Be" and became totally hostile about being in the performance. The parents and I consulted a long while, debating several ways to entice the child (we really needed him) and trying to understand the root cause of his aversion. Well, it turned out that this child had a hearing problem and that problem was the source: He thought the line that talked about the red roan stallion carrying Baha'u'llah to Constantinople said "constant nipples" and he was too embarrassed to say that in public! Once we cleared that up, he was totally OK with performing.

- I am continually amazed how often, when you give a reserved person a prop, it gives them permission to let go of inhibitions. Shy kids or kids worried about looking cool, and rather inhibited adults, will be much more likely to dance with a long ribbon on a stick or one or 2 silk scarves (another favorite material I use in countless ways). Any prop helps with feeling more at ease with any drama. If allowing the use of costumes and props for quick skits, make it clear that actors are to develop their skits first, before getting into the dress ups & props. Otherwise they can get so totally engrossed in choosing costumes and props that when time up is called, there is no skit.
- Students love it when humor and fantasy are employed. If the humor and fantasy are not carried too far, the educational value of a skit is not lost, but perhaps even enhanced b/c it is much more memorable.