

# TEACHING

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# theatre

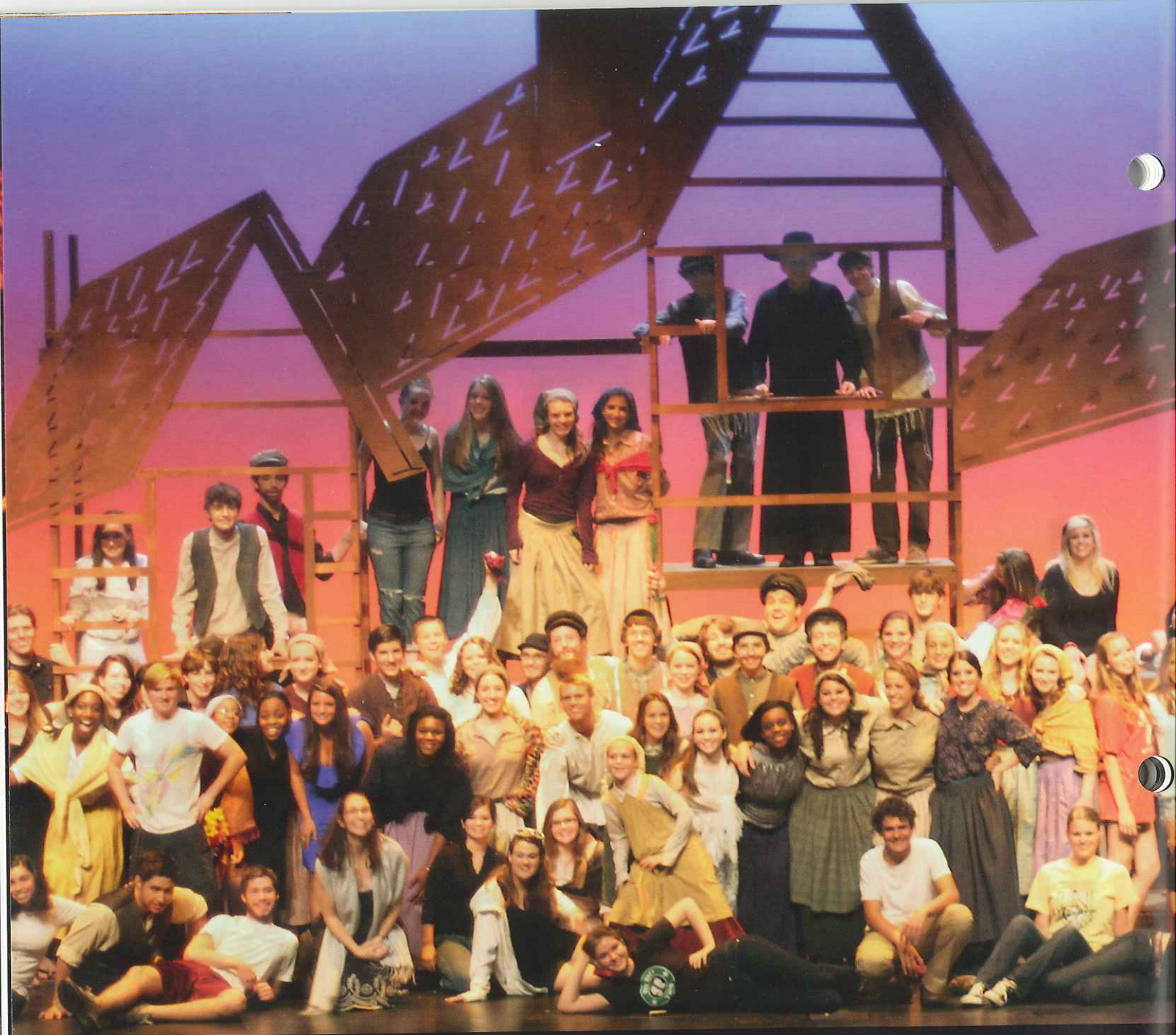


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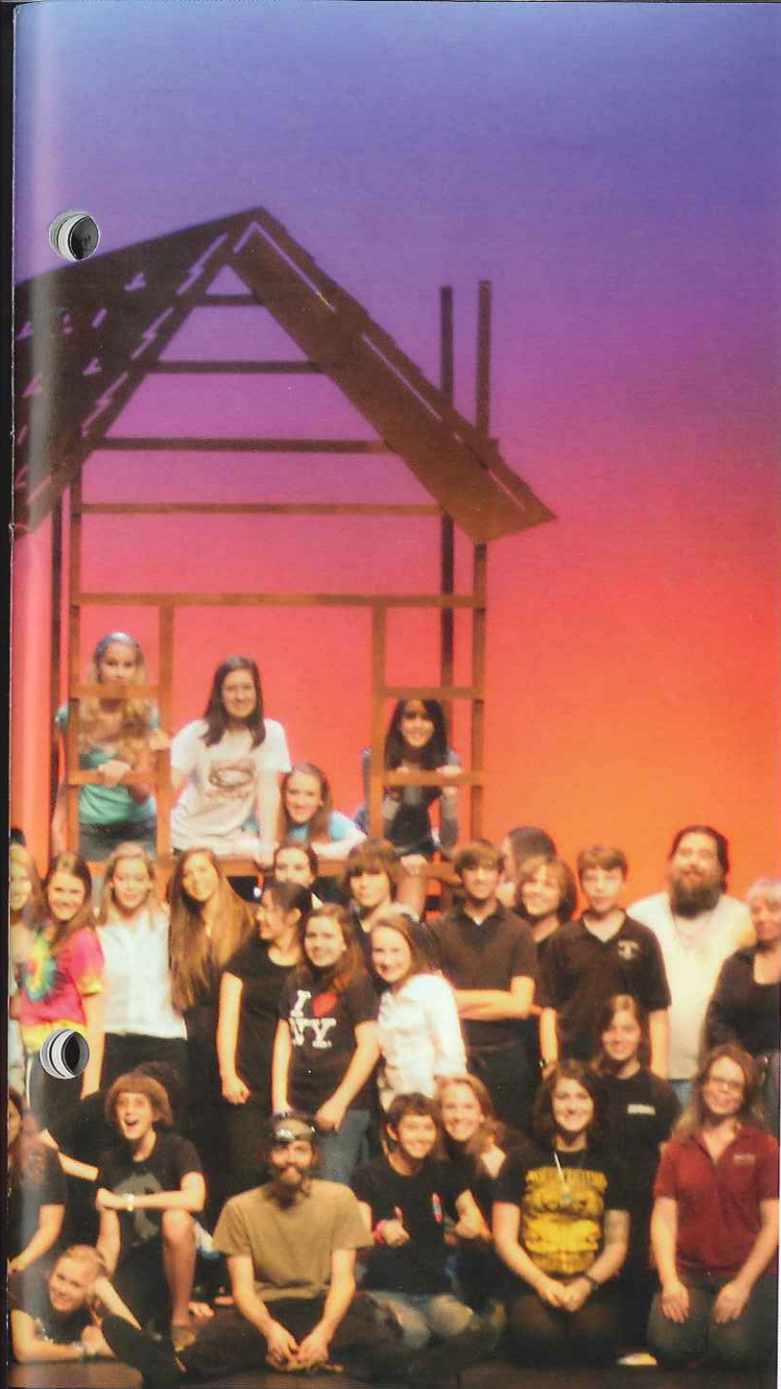
- Deedle deedle everyone:** Creating a school-wide curriculum based on a musical
- Emotional circumstance:** an acting exercise that builds character through backstory
- It's technical:** the movement towards technical theatre standards
- Follow-up:** a new interview with Jill Dolan about actor training





# DEEDLE DE EVERYONE





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## *How one theatre program created a school-wide curriculum based on 'Fiddler on the Roof'*

BY KATIE LEBHAR BLACK AND JOHN W. WHITE

AS THEATRE EDUCATORS, we're fully aware of theatre's potential—through its unique synergy of reading, acting, singing, storytelling, dance, etc.—to help students learn complex content-area materials in new and exciting ways. As one of the earliest forms of public service announcement, drama has long had the power to educate community members about important socio-political issues and to influence or even change people's beliefs. (A good example is the article in this issue of *Teaching Theatre* detailing how teachers and students in theatre and civics classes can collaborate to create a re-enactment of a Supreme Court case.)

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The cast of Episcopal High School's 2010 production of *Fiddler on the Roof*.



In 2009, Katie Lebhar Black, the theatre teacher at Episcopal High School in Jacksonville, Florida, began planning a school-wide curriculum around a production that was intended to unify students, faculty, and administrators across grade levels, as well as heighten community involvement. She settled on the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, with the notion that it could serve as a foundation for an in-depth look at anti-Semitism and intolerance. (Editor's note: this article's two-person byline reflects the collaboration of Black and her advisor, John W. White, on a graduate school project based on the production.)

Theatre educators often work on productions that extend into other learning disciplines. However, unlike more traditional approaches to integrating theatre and other core content, Black went further and created a school-wide curriculum based on the musical. She built her strategy on the belief that focusing on the theme of a play across content areas and involving students of all interests and grade levels, as well as faculty and community members, would foster a deeper sense of collaboration and a greater appreciation of cultural differences.

Episcopal High School is a private 6-12 Christian school whose students' religious make-up reflects that of the greater community: Jacksonville is roughly ninety percent Christian and ten percent "other," of which less than one percent is Jewish. Unlike the greater community, however, the school's ethnic makeup is largely homogeneous. Jacksonville's population is sixty-two percent white, twenty-nine percent black, and nine percent "other," while Episcopal is eighty-nine percent white. Still, the school makes significant efforts to attract and support ethnic and religious diversity. Additionally, they have made a conscious effort to incorporate a social justice theme into the school's mission.

Coming from a family with Jewish roots, Black studied in Israel and has worked with local churches to promote greater cross-cultural understanding and community. She hoped that *Fiddler on the Roof* would help this school of mostly Christian students discover



The school made an exception for the production and allowed cast members to grow (or in some cases, wear) beards.

how Jewish traditions, celebrations, and scriptural connections feed and enrich their own faith.

Despite the challenges of mounting such a complex production involving so many individuals, Episcopal's *Fiddler on the Roof* was launched with very high expectations. In a school where the arts are supported, the administration wanted to use the production to positively influence Episcopal itself, while simultaneously reaching out to the community. Additionally, they hoped that it might help raise financial support for the school, providing a unifying project around which everyone could rally and take pride. On both counts, the production succeeded. It ran for an additional weekend and nearly all of the tickets for the five performances (690 seats each) sold out. The play got good press—via two newspaper articles highlighting Black's educational approach—that showcased the strength of the school's arts program. There was also a noticeable spike in enrollment applications and donations after the show closed.

More importantly, the production formed a strong foundation on which a school-wide curriculum serving students in all grades could be shaped

and implemented. Further, Black was able to get buy-in from individuals beyond her usual drama students and parents by inviting in faculty, administrators, alumni, and the Jacksonville community at large. Here's how Black and her colleagues made it all work.

### We're all in this together

In the spring of 2009, one year in advance of the production's opening, Black and Episcopal's fine arts director Sally Deming pitched the idea to the head of school, Dale Regan. In turn, Regan introduced the project at a faculty meeting. To get everyone in the mood, she played *Fiddler's* opening violin movement over the sound system while inviting the theatre faculty forward to detail the project. There was much initial excitement at the meeting and brainstorming in the weeks before the end of the school year. The faculty seemed to really like the idea, though there was some apprehension about what would be expected from them. The following year, while in preparation for the play, Hebrew blessings and songs became a part of each faculty meeting and many school assemblies.

To foster greater involvement, Black, along with members of her school lead-





A ghost makes her point in "Tevye's Dream."

ership team, worked to develop various curricular activities that drew on the play's story and theme. These curriculum ideas were intentionally general to allow teachers to integrate material into their classrooms in a way that supported their pedagogy and subject area. For example, social studies classes incorporated lessons about anti-Semitism and ethnocentrism into their curricula. Teachers in English classes were offered the opportunity to explore *Fiddler's* libretto, examining such things as plot, theme, setting, and conflict. (In fact, the English and history teachers were given MTT's *Fiddler on the Roof* study guide and encouraged to incorporate it into their classrooms.) Religious studies classes explored the basic tenets of Judaism and its connection to Christianity. In the spirit of this curriculum, even science classes were provided with a lab project based on Pythagorean string tuning and its application to an actual fiddle.

While individual class curriculum suggestions were widely embraced by the other discipline teachers, the

need to cover their existing curricula sometimes meant that not every good suggestion and commitment came to fruition. Still, the range of options and materials created a stronger school awareness of the musical.

Black and the school leaders also prepared curriculum materials that transcended content areas. All teachers were provided with a song title study sheet so they could see how they might be able to connect the songs in the show to content in their classrooms (see the sidebar on page 16). Teachers of world languages were offered a Hebrew workshop day where they and their students could learn some basics. The entire school participated in Israeli dance workshops while learning the centrality of dance to Jewish identity and expression. Quotes from the play were printed in the school's daily bulletin during the weeks leading up to the production, and served as a discussion prompt in homeroom classes. Episcopal held school-wide activities promoting respect for diversity.

"Creating learning opportunities that required teachers to simply show up and participate with their students was the key to garnering involvement," said Black. "Most teachers welcome the chance to expose their students to a lesson that they are not responsible for creating."

The school-wide activities and cross-curricular efforts helped fuel widespread enthusiasm for the production in the school and the community. Almost two hundred students, parents, faculty, administration, and alumni eventually became a part of the production. The opening number, "Tradition," included nearly 120 people, ages two through seventy, dancing on the stage and in the aisles. With arms held high, children of alumni, football players, teachers, parents, and administrators joined hands in dance and song.

### Making it work

Black said she went about getting community members on board in a straightforward fashion. She asked Episcopal's



# 'Fiddler on the Roof': Song titles as writing, discussion, and activity prompts

## Rationale

Each of the following songs appears in *Fiddler on the Roof*. The play itself deals primarily with Jewish culture and anti-Semitism; however, it also confronts issues that are relevant to all people.

## Procedures

Choose any of the songs below as a focus of discussion. These are prompts for further exploration and to help engender interest in the theme and the play; be creative in how you approach each.

You should, however, do your best to connect the song and theme you choose with a) the overall school curriculum of anti-Semitism and Jewish culture, b) the content of your classes, and c) students' lived experiences and beliefs (including their misconceptions).

## Song title studies

"Tradition"—What is tradition? What are your favorite family traditions? How does tradition shape culture?

"If I Were a Rich Man"—Economic implications: What can the rich do that the poor cannot? What can the poor do that the rich cannot? What does it mean to be rich? Is it only wealth? What are other riches? Theological implication: The riches of heaven; the Biblical story of the rich young ruler and Jesus' "eye of the needle" statement.

"Far From the Home I Love"—The idea of home; immigration; seniors leaving for college.

"To Life"—The idea of celebrating our community. What is there to celebrate here? In our own lives? The U.S.? The world?

"Sunrise, Sunset"—The implications of the metaphor, life-death, new day; Earth science's literal planetary movements.

"Sabbath Prayer"—What is a Sabbath? Psychology classes can look at stress and rest; theology classes can look at the Ten Commandments; prayer; Jewish tradition.

"Do You Love Me?" and "Matchmaker"—The need for love and acceptance; older students can look at the relationship between love, marriage, and commitment; discuss marriage patterns in other world cultures, e.g. arranged marriage.

## Other ideas for advisors and homerooms or subject-area classes

Do any students play violin, fiddle, or another string instrument? Do you play any instrument? What does this entail—rehearsal, lessons, practice, etc.?

Try including violin music in class when this is possible—Joshua Bell and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg are two important contemporary violin artists.

Science classes can look at Pythagoras' study of string lengths, connecting loosely with the "fiddle" part of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Go to <http://www.sciencefairadventure.com> and search "Pythagoras" for a detailed project.





development office to send a message to all the alumni, parents, grandparents, and community supporters.

"We offered two workshops, one before the first weekend of the run, and one before the second," she said. "We focused on two things during those sessions—learning 'Tradition' and some simple choreography that included entering and exiting the stage." After the workshops, community cast members were required to come to one dress rehearsal, where the student or faculty cast member that they would be standing next to could mentor them through the number. Additionally, they were provided with a list of acceptable clothing ideas to choose from so that they could devise their own costumes.

Veteran student cast members were assigned to mentor middle school students and others for whom this was their first show. Black feels that the artistic quality of the production actually benefitted by virtue of the communal commitment to success. "It surprised

me, but everyone was so focused on making this work," she said. "Our drama students took their mentoring jobs very seriously and, in turn, those who were new to the stage worked hard to create their own stage presence and character commitment. I really didn't have to spend much time coaching."

Additionally, Black worked closely with the set designer so that nearly all elements of the set could fly, leaving room in the wings for lots of bodies. This creative and conceptual set design by Johnny Pettegrew, of Jacksonville, even included a roof line that went through the audience over the aisles so that the scenes taking place in the house were part of the show's set.

Black noted one lesson learned during the project. The school had tried to include the local Jewish community, but discovered after the first show, which was on a Thursday, that due to Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath day of observance), the remainder of the shows would be unavailable to the Jewish

community. "We were devastated and frustrated," she said. "But we did learn an important lesson for the future." And Black and some of the *Fiddler* cast members had a request to showcase scenes from the production for the Jewish community.

### The student value

Students' benefitted from the school-wide curriculum approach in several ways. Academically, those who were cast in the play or worked on some other aspect of the production showed marked improvement in their overall understanding of *Fiddler's* historical period. More importantly, the show experience made the tragedy of anti-Semitism and intolerance real to the students. One student said, "Being a part of *Fiddler* has opened my eyes up to the Jewish community and the struggle that they went through. You learn about it in history class and you think, 'oh that's sad,' but being a part of this show, having family and friends in the



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play that are so deeply affected, it really touches you and you think, 'that's my sister [in the play] that's going to be affected by this.'" Another student: "[The play] made it [oppression] so much more personal for me. I could really understand and empathize with the Jewish people."

The schoolwide curriculum-play fusion also succeeded in teaching students about cultural differences in ways that more traditional methodology and content seldom does. "Taking on the play's characters, they began to see and even feel the issues that affected the play's characters," she said. "For instance, they learned that Judaism is—in addition to a religion—a culture, an ethnicity, and a form of identity."

One student put it this way: "This show has really helped me see a whole different culture that I've never really understood before. It's given me so much more appreciation for those of the Jewish culture and the Jewish faith." Students also gained a better understanding of the long history of Jewish oppression. A candid fourteen-year-old said, "I learned that, like, it wasn't all the Holocaust. Life sucked for them [Jewish people] for like a really, really, really long time."

In some cases, students learned more about themselves and their own heritage. A football player acting in his first play said, in a *Jacksonville Times-Union* story, "We learned Jewish dance; we learned some Jewish prayers—it was very interesting to see the roots of my religion [Christianity]." In another news story, a female student discussed how she had earned a new respect and appreciation for the Jewish side of her family and that she was "honoring her grandmother" through participating in the play.

The production also helped the school come together as a community; students in the 6-12 school typically remained with their grade-level or within different cliques and at the end of the school day (or after graduation) went their own ways. *Fiddler on the Roof* drew them together in a common cause, thus creating a sense of school spirit. Students not accustomed to working together or socializing formed

friendships across grade lines and interests.

The production brought fresh interest to the school's theatre program and new respect for the discipline as an academic subject. The entire offensive line of the football team came in as a group to audition. The football coach (as did other faculty and staff) donned makeup, a beard, and a period costume and performed on stage beside students, fostering enthusiasm from his players. The administration decided to break with the dress code and allowed male students in the play to grow beards. One student, a senior athlete, said, "This was my first year in theatre and I got to meet a lot of new people and learn a lot more about the acting experience, and performing in general. I learned more about myself and about people that I probably wouldn't have met if I hadn't done the play. It was just really good to expand my horizons." This same student, who played Perchik in the show, now intends to study theatre in college, something he might never have done without his *Fiddler on the Roof* experience.

### The adult experience

The adults involved with the production seemed to get as much out of the experience as the students. One teacher who helped create costumes said "[The production] makes me more familiar with the students. It gives us more common ground and aids in my understanding of their extracurricular activities." Another adult costumer, a community member, expressed disbelief about how much work gets done in such a short period of time: "There's much more involved [in a play production] than I had imagined." A teacher who was an integral part of the cast stated, "I especially enjoyed my bond with my 'daughter' [in the show]. I had taught her in the past, but it's nice to continue the relationship. It's as if we share an inside joke." This same educator also commented on the historical relevance of the musical: "[It] is obvious. This has been a fantastic cross-curricular opportunity. The art of bringing a moment in history to life is such a powerful teaching tool."



A third teacher commented, "I have much more awareness and sympathy for the time and energy that is required. I am also more sensitive to their [theatre students'] energy level in class."

A parent who played a role in the show summed up the experience this way: "Theatre became an incredible equalizer. A lot of students, young and old, were cast together and learned to relate to each other—that's something I don't think they would do in just the school setting. Nerd, jock, popular, shy, introvert, extrovert—everyone bonded together. This group was very loving and kind to each other. I don't know if that happens in all shows, but it did in this one."

#### Replicating the project

Black conceded that trying to mount a production involving the entire school and the community might strike some theatre educators as "a little bit crazy." And she knows how busy and overworked her peers are. But she also

insisted that the payoff makes the effort worth it. "If you really think creatively about community and how to increase interest and involvement, it may be easier than you think," she said.

Black had the following suggestions to help others do something similar in their own schools:

**1. Examine your school's climate and culture with a particular focus on curricular freedom.** Private, magnet, and charter schools may prove to be ideal places for a production featuring school-wide curricular connections because, unlike their public school counterparts, they tend to be less constrained by curriculum based on state-required standards. That's not to say it's not possible to create a similar project in a public school setting; the content of many plays offer any number of curriculum connections consistent with state standards. If you are unable to create an entire school-wide curriculum around a specific play, it might be possible for you to create a modified

version that makes a limited number of cross-curricula connections. Black also advises that before you get too far into the process, meet with your school administration and department leaders to see whether or not they'll be supportive of such an ambitious project.

**2. Consider offering production-related workshops in collaboration with various other classes.** For example, have the physical education classes work with your choreographer for a day, or invite the math classes to connect their geometry studies to building sets. Have your set designer walk the math students through computer programs and provide real-world examples of the applications of mathematics. Suggest to your students that they write short speeches about aspects of your play and present them in English or forensic classes (or whatever class that seems applicable). Doing *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*? Work with your visual arts and French classes. Producing *The Crucible*? In-

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volve your history classes. Directing *Little Shop of Horrors*? Work with the science classes to research dangerous plants. The key is to think creatively, said Black, and see your play as an opportunity to connect with others.

**3. Find one scene or musical number in which you can invite anyone to join.** According to Black, you'll be surprised how many school staff and community members may want to participate—as long as you

make it very clear as to how much time you're asking them to commit. While most simply can't do daily or even weekly rehearsals, agreeing to participate in two or three rehearsals for one number is something that most people can manage. For *Fiddler*, she said, the community involvement had a substantial impact on ticket sales. "It's just a wonderful opportunity to share your program," she said. "Your community will treasure the opportunity to

come together in a different way and you'll likely gain new long-term support." For teachers, as the Episcopal experience illustrated, taking part in a production helped them gain a better understanding of the energy demanded of students participating in a show and how it might impact their work and behavior in their daily classes.

Black's efforts at Episcopal High School paid off. She realizes that not everyone will necessarily have the success she had. As happens with all new school efforts, big or small, some teachers will resist the idea of taking on additional responsibilities or adding new materials to their already well-defined curriculum. You may also be met with reluctance to give up class time for special assemblies and workshops, and perhaps you'll find it harder to garner community support than she did.

"I realize this it is an ambitious task to literally involve everyone in your community in your play," said Black. "But I also realize that it is possible. I want other teachers to know that there are people out there waiting and ready to participate. They just need an invitation. Connecting our craft with other disciplines shows our students that learning doesn't take place in a bubble. Creating a diverse ensemble teaches students to trust, respect, and honor each other and their craft. Isn't that why we do this?"

*Katie Lebhar Black is the theatre director and fine arts department chair at Episcopal High School. She has taught for twelve years and earned an M.A. in directing from Roosevelt University in Chicago and an M.Ed. in secondary education from the University of North Florida. She currently serves on the board of directors for the Florida Association of Theatre Education, where she was named Florida Theatre Educator of the Year in 2006.*

*John Wesley White, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of education at the University of North Florida. He has published his research, which focuses on literacy, language, and sociolinguistics, in numerous academic journals and has presented at national and international education conferences.*

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