DRAMATICS for FARM FOLKS

UNIVERSITY of ILLINOIS
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To establish and maintain economic opportunity for farm people is but the background of the picture of rural life. The people themselves, enjoying a wholesome and satisfying country life, must occupy the foreground.

Dramatic production, since it is one way of helping to meet this end, is recognized as a legitimate part of the extension program in agriculture and home economics, helping to lighten the task and add interest to the fundamental work contemplated in the Smith-Lever Act. Rural community clubs, local cooperatives, farm- and home-bureau units, and similar groups will profit by thus weaving color into the sturdy fabric of their regular work.

The suggestions made in this circular are especially adapted to the limitations of staging and equipment that are met by rural groups.

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PLAYS, particularly one-act plays, are coming to form an important part of many country community programs. Desire to act is almost universal. Many satisfy the desire thru play; others repress it altogether; still others work it out in unsocial channels. The production of plays not only provides an opportunity to satisfy this desire in a way that is likely to be enjoyed by both participants and spectators, but is often the means of discovering and developing valuable latent talent. An increasing number of appropriate plays, better means of communication, and a growing desire for group entertainment makes it possible for play production to form an integral part of the social life of every rural community.

Lack of knowledge of the steps necessary in play production is the chief obstacle confronting rural groups wishing to produce plays. It is not easy to get a play ready. It is not always easy to find the right play, nor is it easy to find the right person to direct it. Committees on production must be selected. Then the group is faced with staging, costuming, publicity, and similar problems.

This manual is prepared for the use of rural groups desiring to produce one-act plays. It cannot give complete instructions, but it does suggest ways to begin, ways out of difficult situations, and sources of more detailed information on plays and their production.

To a dramatist dramatic production is an art, and artistic expression is the highest form of play production. Milton Smith in "The Book of Play Production" says, "A play is a story designed to be presented by characters in dialogue and action. . . . acting alone, however, does not produce a play; . . . a 'play' is an effect made upon an audience. Play production is the process of building up this effect. Play production is the union of two elements: the first is the author's idea, and the second is the interpretation of that idea by actors, costumes, scenery, lights, and many other details."

Those who have a tendency to take play production too lightly must be cautioned that few entertainments can be quite so terrible as bad amateur dramatics. Nor can anything be quite so delightful as an amateur play produced even with the simplest skill.

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Each play is made up of a number of situations, all of them contributing to the progress of a story. Since each line is part of a situation, its importance cannot be slighted. Every line, therefore, must be given understanding treatment. When an actor muffs or forgets a line, he sometimes wrecks the play, for everything that follows may be dependent upon the forgotten line. While this may sound discouraging, dramatization of a play is not so difficult. It is only necessary for those who would become engaged in dramatics to understand their own problems. Once they do this, the rest is comparatively easy.

Some of the steps necessary in putting on a play may be outlined briefly as follows:

1. Find a suitable play.
2. Select a competent director.
3. Organize a working production staff.
4. Choose a suitable, willing cast.
5. Get a thorough understanding of the play.
6. Make rehearsals count.
7. Secure adequate stage, properties, lighting, costumes, and make-up facilities.
8. Secure essential aid and information from books and play lists.

Each of these steps is discussed in the following pages. Detailed information may be gathered from publications listed on page 19.

Find a Suitable Play

Whether it is desired to use a play as part of a program, as an instrument for artistic expression, or for some other purpose, the type of play must be carefully chosen. An unlimited variety of plays is available. None may be suited to a group at the beginning—no play really is—but with time and effort spent in rehearsal, groups often adapt themselves surprisingly well to the play they select.

A catalog of plays may be secured from almost any publisher. In these catalogs are brief synopses of the plays, but they may be misleading since a publisher is sometimes bent more on selling the script than on giving dependable information. A good plan is to go to the nearest adequate public library, secure books of one-act plays, and read those plays which appear to be suitable for the group. It may even be to the advantage of some groups to start building a play library which, in a few years of accumulation, will far outvalue the money invested. In selecting a play the following points should be given careful consideration.

1. Nature of group that is to produce the play. The number of people available, their ability and experience, maturity, and willingness to work are elements which cannot be overlooked.
2. *Nature of audience.* A comedy, if produced well, is always safe, but greater satisfaction lies in giving a well-worked-out so-called "heavier" play. Circumstances alter cases, however. Heavier plays often require more skill; yet the funny play is not always the easiest to produce. A good comedy well presented often requires greater skill than the presentation of any other type of play. Hobart Bosworth in "Technique in Dramatic Art" says, "Actors generally concede that it is harder to act in comedies than in serious plays." This does not mean that groups should avoid comedies but rather that they must fully appreciate the task they take upon themselves in choosing one.

3. *Reason for putting on play.* Does the group want dramatic training, or is the play for community recreation or to raise money? Plays are often produced by groups to develop a sense of community cooperation.

4. *Place for staging.* What is the size of the stage? What equipment does it have? What are the possibilities for securing equipment—will stores lend furniture, or lumber yards rent materials?

5. *Qualities of the play.* Almost any intelligent person can be taught to express emotion, but is the director sufficiently skilled to get them to do it? Is there too much conversation in the play? If one person must carry the greater part of the load, is a capable actor available or would it be better to scatter the responsibility?

6. *Financial requirements.* Will the play cost too much to produce? Can the royalty be paid? If the group can afford it, royalty should never be allowed to stand in the way of selecting a play. Playwrights have to live; royalties are their means of paying bills. As a matter of fact, almost every good play requires payment of royalty.

**Select a Competent Director**

One who understands dramatization is to be desired as a play director or "coach." However, one who understands the group that is to produce the play and has the confidence of everyone, even tho he is somewhat short on the knowledge of dramatization, may prove more valuable than one who understands the play but not the people who are to participate. This kind of person usually can learn enough about play production to do the job as the group wants it done. More often than not, he is one of the group.

The following points describing the duties of the director may help in selecting someone for that office. The group must be unanimous in their choice.
1. The director must be given complete authority, must head all committees, be general supervisor, and have final voice concerning the organization and production of the play.

2. The director must study the play thoroughly until he can clearly and quickly visualize (1) all parts and episodes leading to climaxes, (2) the stage setting to be used, (3) the entrances and exits, and (4) the important stage pictures. In short, the director, before he starts to train the group, should have vividly in mind what the play will look like on the evening of its production. At a very early rehearsal he may tear the action to small bits, may have the entire production appearing as though it were nothing more than an unintelligible jumble, and in the end produce a play of surprising finish.

3. The publishers' script is merely a skeleton. The cast of characters becomes the body. But the director must put the dress on the body. He must be sufficiently versed in human nature to know something of what every member of the cast is capable of contributing.
toward the finished production, and he must use those people with care. He may need to invent auxiliary action for his cast. He should strive to know the character that he wants each actor to develop, even if he has to show each member of the cast how to take every step.

5. The director needs to help every character understand why he makes the motions he does and why he says a line in such-and-such a manner.

If the director will study the script and the material thoroughly, then set about in a business-like manner to produce what he feels is what the author intended, he is almost sure to succeed.

6. The director should be given full voice in selecting the cast, and this cast, to a man, must have complete confidence in the director, who, in turn, must be open to suggestion. In professional productions the director is king. What he says must go. Characters may feel annoyed, at times, by his persistent efforts to make them do what they do not
feel like doing, but they must remember that on the director’s shoulders is the responsibility for producing a play that will be a matter of pride to everyone who appears in it.

7. The director must be able to cooperate with the group in organizing a working production staff.

8. The director must welcome suggestions from members of the group and should use them if, in his judgment, they fit and will benefit the production.

Organize a Working Production Staff

It is usually best to select a chairman for each type of work and then allow those chairmen to choose their own committees. It is advisable to keep committees confined to one, two, or three members whenever possible. The coach or director should supervise and cooperate with each committee. The committees that are likely to be needed are the following:

1. The stage manager and his committee, to have charge of the stage before, during, and after the performance. This committee secures or designs, makes, and arranges all necessary scenery, and shifts and cares for the stage scenic equipment.

2. The lighting director and his committee, to secure or arrange, plan or install, and manipulate necessary equipment to obtain required lighting effects.

3. The property manager and his committee, to list all necessary properties, such as furniture, dishes, etc.; collect, buy, or make them; and have charge of arranging them for the play.

4. The costume director and his committee, to plan for, secure, and arrange all costumes necessary to the play and assist players to make quick changes. This committee, however, is rarely necessary except when the costumes are unusual. Ordinarily members of the cast will be quite capable of providing their own.

5. The business manager and his committee, to plan all the publicity; to provide tickets, ticket takers and ushers; and to keep careful account of the finances, supervising all expenditures. This committee should place in charge of publicity an individual of initiative and tact who will be capable of supplying newspapers with the right sort of information and who may be capable of devising novel means for advertising the play. If he does not know what should go into a good news story, he should be frank about it; any reporter will be glad to
suggest the type of material that will be acceptable. Editors cannot print everything given them. While the papers want news, they may have some policy against publishing certain details. The business manager should see that the reporters get complimentary tickets to the performance.

6. A competent prompter who, at every rehearsal, will hold the script and call attention to mistaken action and cues. On the night of production the prompter stands in the handiest wing and, upon a given signal apparent only to him, supplies to the actors forgotten cues. A skilful prompter is half a director’s battle.

7. The make-up committee, to assist the director in making up the actors on the night of the production (see pages 17 and 18).

Choose a Willing Cast

To find the right type of person for each part is a difficult task, which becomes less difficult when an opportunity is given for all members of the group to display their possibilities in a “tryout.” Two precautions are necessary in order to cast a play properly.
1. The director or casting committee must encourage every member of the group to try for different parts (the individual himself is often surprised at what he can do in a certain part).

2. Final selections must be made without personal bias, and only those wishing to put time and effort into the work should be chosen.

**Get a Thoro Understanding of the Play**

Before a single copy of the play is given to any member of the amateur cast, the director should call a meeting of the characters. At this meeting he should give a detailed outline of the story of the drama. He should follow this with a clear description of each character and explain what relation each character has to the story. Characterization should be demonstrated whenever possible. This should be done before parts are given out, so that the director's interpretation is understood at the start. Every play may be given in several different ways. Even every part of the play may be interpreted in other ways than that selected by the director, yet his interpretation will help all those in the cast to play their parts in unity—that is, with the same central idea in mind.

**Plan Calendar of Rehearsals**

Before the group goes to work, a calendar of rehearsals should be carefully worked out and a copy given to each member of the cast. Then each will know how much time will be needed. For a one-act play five rehearsals are the least number that can be expected to produce satisfactory results. A two or three-act play should have ten to fifteen complete rehearsals. Something definite must be planned for each rehearsal.

Dolman in his book, "The Art of Play Production," suggests a calendar from which the following schedule for a one-act play has been adapted:

**First Week**

Tuesday, 8:00 p. m.—Reading of play. Discussion
Thursday, 8:00 p. m.—Blocking out act

**Second Week**

Tuesday, 7:00 p. m.—Stage rehearsal for positions, distance, voices, etc.
Thursday, 7:00 p. m.—Review of whole play, for corrections
Saturday, 2:00 p. m.—Special rehearsals for difficult scenes or scenes that need change

**Third Week**

Monday, 7:00 p. m.—Rehearsal for details of interpretation
Wednesday, 7:00 p. m.—Rehearsal for cues, entire cast to be letter perfect
Friday, 7:00 p.m.—Costume and make-up rehearsal

*Fourth Week*

Monday, 7:00 p.m.—Full dress rehearsal on stage. Friends invited
Wednesday, 7:00 p.m.—Special rehearsal for corrections and smoothing out weak places

The director devotes the first rehearsal to moving the characters over the stage, laying the foundation for the detailed or more finished movement which is to follow (Fig. 4). He must explain to each character where to make his entrances and exits, when and where to stand, sit, and move, and in general what his individual actions and stage businesses are to be. As soon as this rehearsal is finished, the actors must memorize their lines for the act.

During subsequent rehearsals the director should not hesitate to make drastic changes whenever he feels that a defect can be corrected by so doing. Important scenes should be gone over again and again until the actors are positive of their bearings. Where the action seems "flat," or lacks that essential element of completeness, the director might insert little "businesses" for his actors—but he must remember never to make these insertions so important that they detract from the central thought of the movement.

In all scenes, especially love scenes, rehearsal of a detail should never be skipped because the actors are self-conscious. Success depends on the naturalness with which every detail of the play is given. One cannot expect amateurs to make love, for instance, if they never practice it until the dress rehearsal. There is nothing silly about stage love but the actors who think it is silly.

The dress rehearsal need not come last. Many groups use it as much as a week before the final performance.

**Make Rehearsals Count**

There are certain important points that must be watched during rehearsals:

1. Each player must understand, picture in his own mind, and "feel" the character he is chosen to portray (Fig. 1).

2. Movements of characters on the stage must be carefully balanced. Stage movements are of two sorts, definite and indefinite. An actor employs definite movement when he has an objective and goes directly to accomplish his act as, for example, moving from a door to a table to pick up a paper (Fig. 5). An actor employs indefinite movement when he has no definite act to perform and therefore moves casually so as to keep the stage balance and still not attract too much attention.
By dividing the stage imaginatively into sections, as in the above diagram, directions regarding positions and movements are made easy to give and to understand.

When an actor, therefore, has a definite movement to make across the stage, the other actors must keep the stage balance by indefinite counter movements. The same principle must be employed when someone enters or goes out. The person making the entrance or exit must act at exactly the proper time or the best effect is completely destroyed. This is as important as singing on the exact count to make good music.

3. Movements must be natural. When it seems most natural for the player to turn his back to the audience, he should do so. There are

The definite cross movement of the actor having the center of attention is made with precision and is followed by the eyes of the audience. The indefinite movement made by the other actor or actors is complementary and should add to, rather than detract from, attention to the definite movement.

FIG. 4.—A PLAN OF STAGE POSITIONS

FIG. 5.—SKETCH OF STAGE MOVEMENT
times when backs are more expressive than faces. If the player is to speak at the same time, however, he must be careful lest the lines be muffled or lost.

4. The players need to suit the pantomime or the gesture to the sense of the lines that are spoken. If another is speaking, each must listen and react according to the mood conveyed. No player should allow himself to "go dead" on the stage even if there are long intervals when he has nothing to say. Action is suggested by the situation or the lines that are being spoken.

5. No actor should betray that he has ever heard the lines before. When it is time to be surprised, he must be surprised then—not a second before!

6. Players must avoid giving the impression of shouting or talking loud unless such is called for by the lines. They must work with the lines so that the man in the last row of seats can hear. Players should try to face the audience when speaking, as much as the situation will permit, but, as has been said before, they must not step out of character to do so. Speaking to be heard is difficult, especially when it must appear that each player is speaking to others on the stage.

7. Lines must be spoken in the mood of the character. This means that each player must have an understanding of his part in relation to other parts. No player should allow himself to give a line that is not timed perfectly with the movements and spirit of the play. The effect of the whole play may be ruined if one character is not able to pick up his cues. Perfect memorization of lines is the best answer. The coach should therefore include a "cue rehearsal" for the players, having them sit in a circle and recite lines, one after another, as rapidly as possible.

8. The action of a play should take all the time necessary to make it natural, but it must not drag. The dramatic value of the pause to the action of the play is frequently not realized. A skilfully timed pause often conveys meaning to the audience before the word is spoken. Every pause must carry a meaning. This means combining pantomime with speech and tone for desired effects.

9. The players must listen to the director in order to get the right effects, for the director hears and sees the play in its unity and completeness, while each player has an undue sense of his own part. Each player should therefore give attention to the director in order to secure the proper mood, the proper tempo or pace, and the proper movement.

10. Those who are not reciting lines should be absolutely silent. Social chatting can be done outside. Unsought advice from visitors at rehearsals is rarely welcomed and usually out of place.
Some Traditional Rules of Acting

The following traditional rules of acting are taken from Milton Smith’s book already referred to:

“1. Make turns toward the audience. The face is usually more interesting and expressive than the back of the head.

“2. Stand, in general, with the down-stage foot (the one nearest the audience) back, and kneel on the down-stage knee. This tends to throw the face and the voice towards the audience, and as a rule makes better body lines.

“3. When two or more actors enter together, the speaker enters last. This allows the speaker to throw his voice forward, and not back, and allows the action to be forward.

![Fig. 6.—Principle of Draw-Center Front Curtain](image)

Simple draw-center curtains can be arranged quickly and effectively to be operated from one side of the stage.

“4. In general, eyes should be on the speaker [Fig. 2]. The tendency of an audience is to watch the center of interest for the actors, and this should in general be the speaker.

“5. Stand still, unless the part demands motion or business.

“6. Let the business precede the line a little. The eye is often more important than the ear.”

Secure Adequate Stage Facilities

Stage settings are used to make a play more beautiful, to make it more nearly real, to add the right atmosphere to its action, and to supply a fit environment for the characters. Scenery that is built to suggest an idea (Fig. 8) is often more effective than scenery that is too “real.” A ray of moonlight from a window is better than a stage moon (Fig. 11).

Settings may be made in several different ways. They may be composed of flats built on wooden frames and covered with unbleached
muslin or similar material, painted with a glue-calcimine mixture to represent the desired scene, then lashed together. Flats are usually about five feet wide. Some are built with windows and some with doors according to the requirements of the play. Regular doors and windows with frames which are detachable are often used and are fitted into spaces in the flats after the flats have been lashed together. Sets may also be made up of a cyclorama of mottled gray monk's cloth, outing flannel, or velvet to cover the sides and back of the stage.

FIG. 7.—METHOD OF HANGING CURTAIN CYCLORAMA
Gray curtains are adaptable to a variety of scenes, both interior and exterior, and may be used in conjunction with flats or independent of them.

FIG. 8.—A SIMPLE SETTING MADE WITH THREE-WAY SCREENS
Where quick changes of scenery are necessary and where lights are employed to create unusual effects, screens can be used effectively.
and suspended from battens or rods hung on ropes (Figs. 6 and 7). The curtains of these sets are often hung in sections so that openings can be made for windows or doors. They may be easily adapted either to exterior or interior scenes (Fig. 3).

*Lighting*, simply done, is often most effective. Most amateur stages have only single-circuit lighting systems. Where there are no overhead or footlights, strings of lights fastened to boards can easily be built (Fig. 9). The bulbs can be colored with prepared dye or may be put in small boxes behind gelatin color screens. Amber color gives the effect of soft sunlight. Blue gives the effect of moonlight. Red lights should be used sparingly and seldom alone. Red, white, and blue lights on separate circuits and controlled by dimmers can be regulated to give effects ranging from a glaring white light to dark, somber shades. If both overhead lights and footlights cannot be had, choose overhead lights. Side lights may be used to get rid of unnatural shadows (Fig. 10); natural ones are no cause for anxiety. Lights on the stage should be shrouded from the audience. Mirrors on the stage should be turned or smudged so as not to reflect light on the audience.

*Properties* should be kept to the minimum to secure the desired effect. The property committee should be careful not to clutter the stage with useless furniture. It is best to get only those properties that are necessary to the action and that will give the right impression to the set. The players should be expected to furnish only the properties they must have on their own person. The property committee must list carefully all properties for every scene, including personal properties, and then check over the list at the performance to see that everything is ready.

*Costumes* must be suited to the play. They have two functions: to complete by color, contrast, harmony, and line the
stage picture; and to reveal by skilful adaptation and association the characters themselves, their caste, age, time, taste, and relations to other characters. Actors should “look the part.” Materials need not be expensive. Muslin, sateen, silkaline, tobacco bunting, flowered prints, cotton flannel, and burlap are often used. These may be dyed to suit special needs. Colors and lights should be planned together. Costumes need to be used frequently in rehearsals.

Make-up is important but not always essential. The make-up committee should study methods and look for pictured examples of good make-up. They should procure materials necessary and keep them in a tin box. A clear visual image of the character to be portrayed should be kept in mind, and the possibilities in the face to be made up must be carefully noted. Two methods are used, the dry make-up and the wet.

For a dry make-up apply a bit of cold cream; line the eyebrows, eyelashes, and necessary wrinkles with dark brown; rouge lips and cheeks; and dust on dry powder.

For a wet make-up bare neck and throat, place protective cloth over shoulders, wash the face, apply a thin film of cold cream and then grease paint, exaggerate hollows with a dark blue or brown smudge and
high places with a light pink juvenile grease paint, line the eyelashes, darken or alter the eyebrows as needed, rouge lips and cheeks, being sure that cheek rouge is well blended into the flesh colors, and dust on powder until greasy effect disappears. For indicating age use appropriate ground, use less rouge, mark "crow's-feet" around the eyes, exaggerate forehead and face wrinkles, darken the hollows of the face, whiten the eyebrows and temples, then dust on appropriate powder. Beards, mustaches, and eyebrows may be fashioned from raveled-out crepe wool or hair and attached with spirit gum.

Make-up materials include cold cream (theatrical), comb, hand mirror, scissors, cheesecloth, rubbing alcohol, spirit gum, crepe hair, light and dark dry rouge, baby talcum brush, powder puffs, tubes of ground or grease paint, liner sticks, face powders (theatrical), nose putty, and black wax. Drug stores in the larger cities carry make-up materials.

Information About Play Production

To get further help in the production of plays visit your library; write to publishers for lists of books and catalogs; and make inquiry of the Library Extension Division, State Library, Springfield, Illinois, from which many of the following books may be borrowed, and of the Extension Service of the University of Illinois, which will be glad to furnish further details about obtaining books. Following are some books that will prove helpful.
Acting and Directing

*The Art of Play Production.* By John Dolman.
*Technique in Dramatic Art.* By Halliam Bosworth.
*Footlights Across America Towards a National Theater.* By Kenneth Macgowan.

*How to Produce Amateur Plays.* By Barrett Harper Clark.
*Acting and Play Production.* By Andrews and Weirick.
*The Art of Play Directing.* By George Bernard Shaw.

Stage Setting


*The Scene Technician's Handbook.* By Philip H. Barbour.
*Stage Scenery and Lighting.* By Selden and Sellman.

Costuming

*Costuming a Play.* By Elizabeth B. Grimball and Rhea Wells.
*Stage Costuming.* By Agnes Brooks Young.

*A Book of Dramatic Costume.* By Dabney and Wise.

Make-up

*Make-up.* By John Baird.
*Time to Make up.* By Richard Whorf.

*The Art of Make-up.* By Helena Chambers.

Lighting

*Scenery and Lighting for School and Little Theatre Stages.* By Samuel Selden.

*Stage Lighting.* By Powell and Fuchs.

Business and Organization

*How to Make the Little Theatre Pay.* By Oliver Hinsdell.
*Little Theatre Organization and Management.* By Alexander Dean.

*How to Advertise a Play.* By Frederick G. Johnson.

Books of One-Act Plays

*One-Act Plays by Modern Authors.* By Helen L. Cohen.
*Twelve One-Act Plays.* By Walter Eaton.
*Representative One-Act Plays by American Authors.* By Margaret Mayorga.
*Appleton Book of Short Plays.* By Kenyon Nicholson.
*Twenty-Five Short Plays (International).* Edited by Frank Shay.
*One-Act Plays for Stage and Study.* Edited by Barrett Harper Clark.
*Five Plays.* By Lord Dunsany.

*Some Short Plays.* By Lady Augusta Gregory.
*Carolina Folk-Plays.* Edited by Frederick Koch.
*Representative One-Act Plays by Continental Authors.* Edited by Montrose J. Moses.
*Ten Minute Plays.* Edited by Pierre Loving.
*Fifty Contemporary One-Act Plays.* Selected and edited by Frank Shay and Pierre Loving.
*Portmanteau Plays.* By Stuart Walker.

Books of Full-Length Plays

*Modern Continental Plays.* (22 plays). Edited by S. Marion Tucker.

*Chief Contemporary Dramatists, Series 1, 2, and 3.* Edited by Thomas H. Dickinson.
*Representative British Dramas, Victorian and Modern.* Edited by Montrose J. Moses.
*Representative Continental Dramas, Revolutionary and Transitional.* Edited by Montrose J. Moses.