

Reaping the Rewards of Entering Festivals

By Rick Kerby, Producing Artistic Director, Manatee Players, Bradenton, FL

The first question that comes to my mind when thinking of festivals is “why?” Why would I put myself and our theatre company through the angst, nervousness, stress, time commitment, and substantial financing it takes to get involved? Then I remember the rewards.

Theatre by nature is a bonding experience. That experience is magnified when you step outside your home turf. You start to add layers of experience and I’m talking more than just travel nightmare stories. You begin to find an appreciation and understanding of the work by other community theatres from across the country or even the world and... you get to meet the talented people behind those productions. You get to share stories and best practices. There is just nothing like being in an environment where everyone involved understands your passion. And of course... lots of social time and laughter. The friends you make on this exciting journey become lifelong allies.

And finally, there is nothing that brings your own community together like cheering on the home team. The excitement and pride felt by a community supporting their local actors as they go off to represent THEM is infectious. Your town will feel a true communal investment in the process and your theatre can reap the benefits of a little time in the limelight.

Now that I’ve convinced you, how about a few tidbits I’ve learned from my own experiences?

1. Stop thinking like a community theatre and start thinking like a touring company. Assign tasks like designating a company manager or committee to assign carpooling, investigate hotels, make room assignments, check registrations, and arrange transportation. Even theatres lucky enough to have full time staff can feel overwhelmed by the many details.
2. Take your show on the road. Seek out another space to practice how you will transport, load in your set, fit it into the 100 square foot space, set it up, spike it, break down and load out. When I have chaired or served as commissioner for festivals, I can always tell the companies who have skipped this important step. This can also be a great opportunity as a fundraising showcase which could expand your normal patron base and help defer the costs of participating in the festival process.
3. Make assignments during set up. Make sure everyone knows exactly what their job is during the 10 minute set up, even if it is just to wait and do nothing. People wandering around looking for ways to help are no help. Have a designated person to count bodies once set up is over before calling time. This is especially important with large casts. I have experienced companies that have called time and then had an actor who was out of sight setting up a prop or costume walk back to the box.
4. Dummy proof your set up. Nerves and adrenalin can lead even the most veteran actors to make mistakes. Label prop bins that go to stage right or stage left to make sorting them quick and easy. If there are multiple costume changes inside your show, plan to save space for costume racks with labels for each side of the stage.

5. After set up, take a breath. Your time stops and won't start again until all actors are at places, your tech crew is ready, and the first moment that takes us into the life of your show begins. I have seen too many companies run to places as if they are in a race and then start their show with a panic energy. Think of the timing as:
 - 10 minute set up. Stop.
 - Go to places. 60 minute performance. Stop.
 - Return to box. 10 minute break down. Stop.
 - Adjudication.
6. Prepare your cast and crew for adjudication. You want your company to approach this part of the process with appreciation of the adjudicator's insight and give due respect. Although there is no rule, I always instruct my cast not to make comments during adjudication unless specifically addressed. Also, take a pad and pencil to make notes of suggestions and even to remind you of the compliments made. It all happens so fast that you will be inclined to forget details.
7. Keep your home patrons engaged and take full advantage of the free press. Invite local reporters to travel with you, schedule daily call in updates to local radio and newspapers, assign cast members to be photographers and blog reporters, encourage cast and crew to make social posts.
8. Enjoy your moment in the spotlight and make the most of it.

Rick Kerby has directed three Manatee Players productions that advanced to the national AACTFest, plus two that advanced to regional level in non-national years. He serves on the AACT Board and Festival Commission, and has chaired four Southeastern Theatre Conference (Region IV) festivals and five Florida Theatre Conference festivals.

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