



REINVENTING FLASH THEATRE: Short Plays and Site specific Theatre by Jillian Campana
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■ By **Jillian Campana**



When I arrived at the American School of Bombay in August of 2007 to teach high school theatre I inherited a production dubbed “Flash,” which was to be performed in early October. “What is Flash?” I asked my principal, my new colleagues and the faithful drama kids. I had previously worked with actors and production teams who were assigned a play or various stimuli and then given a minimal time period in which to rehearse and put up a theatrical production, in a “flash,” but it turned out that ASB’s Flash was less a concept than it was a name. Flash at ASB was a term used to describe school bulletins, performances and projects that were short in length and internally broadcast. Flash Theatre had previously been student directed one acts for the high school community. “Where are the one acts performed?” I asked because in urban Indian megacities space is a commodity. And ASB was no different, with no theatre, large drama classroom or multi-purpose room. I was reminded of the old adage theatre practitioners are well aware of, “The less you have, the more creative you have to be.” I had met this challenge to be innovative many times throughout my career, and so I looked forward to seeing what inventiveness would grow out of these limitations.

I began to imagine the production

by looking at the terms *Flash* and *Environment*. Flash to me meant something that was quick, bright and explosive. Flash connoted speed and spark. Environment brought to my mind Richard Schechner’s “environmental theatre” and the notion of found spaces as theatre sites. With very little time and no theatre space, I began by asking the community why previous Flash productions had been successful and then reflecting upon what I wanted for my new thespians. The high school kids liked that the plays had been student directed and they also had a real connection to the name “Flash”. Teachers, administrators and parents liked the idea of short plays as rehearsal schedules could be more flexible. I myself wanted to involve as many students as possible and offer multiple performances so that the focus could be on process, even throughout the performance run. And so keeping in mind the community favorites of the previous incarnations, the spatial challenges and production limitations, and my own concerns and hopes for the program, I began to imagine a fast paced production that centered around the build of the school and included scores of students.

Working with *Flash* and *Environment* as performance concepts, some of my favorite 10 minute plays from David Ives and Actors Theatre of Louisville 10 minute play collections were conjured up. Aside from the explosively fast pace of 10 minute plays, multiple and complete plays offer numerous students solid roles complete with character arcs and many designer and director opportunities. For the settings I decided to capitalize upon the architecture of the school building - a narrow, 6th floored rectangle and keeping in mind Schechner’s environmental theatre, I hit upon the idea of making use of found spaces in

the building so that specific locations could become central aspects of the performance. To add to an atmosphere of rapid fire, and because a large audience would not comfortably sit in any of the performance area places, I thought to have the different short plays perform simultaneously and then divide the audience into several small groups which would then rotate through to watch all of the plays. I felt this would also benefit the actors as they would then have several chances to perform their work.

Once these decisions were made the logistics easily fell into place. With a group of dedicated students I chose 8 short plays and edited them so that they were each approximately 8 minutes long. We then matched the individual shows to 8 different campus locations to fit the setting of each piece. What evolved was the theatre extravaganza, “Flash Theatre: 8 in 8 at 8” which included 85% of the high school students showcasing their skills 8 different times in one evening.

Flash Theatre: 8 in 8 at 8: Eight “tour guides” met audience members at the entrance to the school. They introduced themselves and handed out different colored programs. Each guide wore a costume that coordinated with the color of the program. At 7:10 each guide and assigned audience group set out for a different one of the 8 play locations. When they arrived at their starting play, the guides introduced the piece and the audience settled in to watch. Approximately 8 minutes later the school bell rang and the guides lead their groups to their next destination to see the second of the 8 plays. We made sure to include 5 minutes in passing in between each play and if there was any empty time, the guides, who were familiar with all plays improvised for the spectators. In this manner each group cycled through the building following their guide and viewing 8 different plays in 8 different locations, all of which were

8 minutes long.

In the second year of ASB's site-specific Flash Theatre, we revved the number up from 8 to 10 plays and called the show, *Flash Theatre: Take Ten*. Again, we used as many nooks and crannies on campus as fit our needs, from the basement storage to a school bus outside. Musicians were added so that live music entertained audience members as they roved from one production to the next and coffee, tea and snacks were served at each location when the audience arrived.

Guides were still used to help audience members get to their locations on time and together, but the directors themselves introduced their short plays and if time, were available for questions and comments at the end.

In the third year, Flash evolved to become *Flash Theatre: Around The World in 6 Plays*. Six different folk tales from 6 diverse geographical locations were adapted into short plays by students who had a faculty member serving as writing mentor. The tales selected were taken from a cross section of the globe and represented some of the home countries of the ASB community: Korea, North America, The Middle East, Scandinavia, South Africa, and of course India. Tents were erected outside in an effort to move audience members along more smoothly and quickly and quests were served a drink and snack created by a team of parents from the country whose tale was being showcased. We will see what Flash brings in 2011. The students enjoyed the playwriting process, but the strength of dialogue and plot in published plays is wonderful for young actors. The folk tales allowed for kids as young as 4 and 5 to come and enjoy theatre, but actors and directors love working with the mature plays and rich, sophisticated humor of an author like David Ives. One thing is for sure, everyone loves the roving, site-specific settings and the multiple short plays. Perhaps both the concept and name *Flash Theatre* will carry on and continue to evolve with the next group of ASB theatre teachers and students.

Simple Blueprint for an evening of short, site-specific, student directed plays:

Locate, edit and obtain rights to scripts:

- The Actors Theatre of Louisville has a series of amazing anthologies of



10 minute plays that they produce every year – one for 2 actors, another for 3 actors and yet another for 4-5 actors. David Ives is another wonderful resource for 10 minute plays, Samuel French and Dramatists Play Services now both have put out selected 10 minute play books and there are some very good 10 minute plays on-line through reputable websites such as theatredatabase.com. Students can also adapt or create their own plays from short stories, folk-tales or any stimuli offered. Content and language can be edited, the rights should be obtained, and *voila* – you have as many or as few good solid plays.

Solicit and choose student directors and designers:

- Choose and edit 10 minute plays. Put out a, "call for directors." Any high school student interested in directing a play can fill out a *director's intent form*. The form required them to: 1) sign a form committing to the Monday-Friday 5 week rehearsal schedule after school; 2) provide a short essay on why they wished to direct; 3) analyse and provide a short production proposal detailing how they might direct a specific scene provided to them; and, 4) since they were new to me I also asked them to list previous performance experience including classes, work in other performing arts and previous productions. Choose directors and assign plays based on their interests and abilities.
- Have directors come up with a metaphor and statement describing their assigned play. Put out a "call for designers" and again have interested parties fill out and turn in the *designer's intent form*. Once designers have been chosen, have



the director-designer pairs collaborate together to scout out locations on campus for their plays and to work toward building the look of the piece.

Hold auditions and cast student play groups:

- Have interested students sign up and then attend a 2-3 hour improvisational workshop. Because the time commitment is not as extreme as it is for full length plays, expect the number to be high. Improvisation is a wonderful way to quickly see a variety of different abilities in students. It also provides for a less competitive audition and enables directors to see many actors in a few hours. Ask the directors to take notes and list several actors for each role.
- Use the notes taken by the student directors as well as your own to cast. Try to give each director at least one actor they listed and cast younger or less experienced actors as "tour guides" to lead the small audience groups around the campus as they make their way from play to play.

Rehearse:

- Each play should meet 3-4 times per week for approximately 5 weeks. I assign each play a different classroom to rehearse in and try to make sure a faculty member is present. Faculty have been great about this. In general the student groups have been very motivated, internally driven by a love for theatre and externally motivated by a desire to create an excellent performance. I then have each play come to me 1-2 times per week to show me their work and to get feedback. I also meet individually with the directors to provide insight and offer guidance.

