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**Methods of Teaching Theatre: A Teacher**  
**Toolkit**

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# METHODS

of Teaching Theatre:

## A TEACHER TOOLKIT

Matt Webster



Theatrefolk®



Methods of Teaching Theatre: A Teacher Toolkit  
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Published by Theatrefolk Inc.

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# ○..... INTRODUCTION

Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain! —Oz, *The Wizard of Oz*

Good teaching is magical, and theatre teachers are all about “the magic.” Theatre students talk about their favorite classes, and their favorite teachers, with the kind of excitement usually reserved for a famous performer or a special event: “It was amazing!” “I had so much fun!” “Time just flew by!” To these students, the *product* of the lesson was so effortless and engaging that it might as well have been created by magic.

However, as any magician will tell you, magic doesn’t happen “magically.” Magic happens through a lot of careful planning and hard work. The same is true in the drama classroom. It takes a lot of thinking and preparation to make classroom “magic” happen. For theatre teachers, the *process* of skillfully preparing to teach a lesson—from concept to analysing your space, articulating objectives, and assessing outcomes—is where the real magic happens! But like any good magician, you never want your audience to see how the magic is made.

That’s what this book is about—how the magic is made.

This book is all about what’s behind the curtain of a well-run drama classroom, as well as all the preparations, planning strategies, and teaching tools that new teaching “wizards” have at their disposal to help them seem all knowing and all powerful, even if they are fresh out of wizarding school.

There are a lot of challenges that come in the first few years of teaching, especially for new theatre teachers, including non-traditional teaching spaces, entire classes of students who have no interest in theatre, a lack of a standard curriculum, and creating objective assessments for subjective materials, just to name a few. This book will help you anticipate the preparations you will need to address before a student ever walks into your classroom and the kind of philosophical questions you need to ask, and answer, as you begin your teaching career.

This toolkit examines four fundamental building blocks of teaching: Classroom Setup, Classroom Management, Lesson Planning, and Assessment. It also provides you with tools and activities that will help you integrate these fundamentals into a drama classroom. If you are a new teacher, or are still in your teacher training, these tools will provide you with a lot of supplemental, practical information that will help you prepare for your first few years of teaching.

These are tools that may be new to you or that you have never seen used before. This is especially true if you have had great theatre teachers yourself. Those teachers worked hard to hide the person behind the curtain while getting you to focus on the magic of the lesson in front of you. But now *you* are in charge, *you* are going to be the wizard, and you need to know what is really going on behind that curtain. So get ready: as we say in the theatre —“Curtain going up!”

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# ○..... WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

Begin at the beginning. —*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll

Congratulations! You have landed a job as a theatre teacher. Contracts have been signed, administrators have been met, and calendars have been distributed. You are ready to start! But where do you start? How do you start? What is the first step on this thousand-mile journey?

Lewis Carroll had some very good advice when he said, “Begin at the beginning.”

The problem with that advice is that for new theatre teachers, there are a LOT of beginnings. So what beginning do you begin with? Classroom rosters? Classroom rules? Curriculum writing? While all of those items are important, and all of them are needed to prepare for *what* you teach, they all can, and will, change depending on *where* you teach. And that will have a direct impact on *how* you teach. So since the where affects the how and the what, that's where we should begin—your classroom space.

# ○..... **CLASSROOM SETUP**

## OVERVIEW

Experienced teachers know the arrangement of their classroom has a significant impact on how successful their classes will be. This includes the seating arrangement of their students. From entering the classroom, through bell work, lectures, and group work, the layout and organization of a classroom will dictate everything from transitions to discipline and everything in between. That's why veteran teachers know it is vitally important to configure their workspace in the most effective and efficient way possible. New teachers eventually learn these lessons as well, usually as the result of a lot of trial and error. By starting with the hows and whys of utilizing your teaching space, you can avoid many of the common pitfalls that come with setting up your classroom.

Planning and organization are the keys to a smooth running classroom, and theatre teachers are no exception when it comes to needing to be well-organized. But teachers of theatre frequently face an additional challenge: non-traditional teaching spaces. Theatre teachers are often required to teach in a variety of non-traditional classroom spaces such as theatres, lobbies, chorus rooms, cafeteriums, and gymnasiums. Before students first step into your teaching space, it will be helpful if you have planned for the different configurations of your classroom prior to students using it.

Theatre teachers must also plan for *how* their classroom will be used. The theatre curriculum covers everything from acting to history to design/tech. It also covers playwriting, analysis, and dozens of other potential topics. Over the course of a week, a theatre teacher's lesson plans may include lectures, rehearsals, research (with technology), small-group work, and large-group performance. Each of these activities requires a different classroom configuration to allow for maximum efficiency and supervision.

In addition to all these factors, another element to keep in mind when setting up your classroom is your students. Where students sit, and with whom they sit, has a major impact on your classroom. Everything from tempo, discipline, supervision, and even transitions and noise control will be affected by your seating chart. It is crucial to control the seating in your classroom as a function of the overall management of your classroom.

Finally, maintaining a properly supplied and organized workspace can make the difference between success and failure in the classroom. Many brilliant lesson plans have suffered for lack of a pencil.

This section will provide you with information and exercises designed to help you supply your classroom, organize your students, and plan for the many ways your space can be reconfigured based on the unit or lessons at hand.



## PREPARING YOUR SPACE

The setup of your classroom sets the tone for your class and directly affects discipline. If your classroom feels chaotic, it will undoubtedly lead to chaos. That is why it is so important to plan ahead and prepare the space BEFORE students interact with it. Students need to know from the moment they walk into your class that no matter what physical space the actual room is, it is, first and foremost, a work space. It is important to set this tone immediately, because as soon as students walk into a classroom that is set up like an amusement park, they will infer that this is a place to play, not work. Your job is to make sure they understand that the drama classroom is a work space and should be treated like any other serious work space—with respect. So to begin with, ask yourself **“What do I need to do to make this space a fully functioning, fully work-based drama classroom space?”**

This is a deceptively challenging question, because classrooms vary in size, shape, and location. For each class, you need to determine how you will create spaces for actor training, individual and group work areas, and a specialized performance space. You also need to determine the configuration of student seating: is it at desks, a circle of chairs, fixed seating, or no seats at all?

### Theatre Classroom

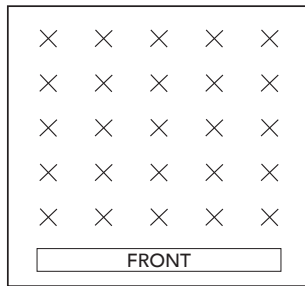
If you are lucky enough to have a dedicated drama classroom that includes seating, stage, storage, and rehearsal spaces, it's still a good idea to arrange, and rearrange, the areas based on your particular curriculum. Create configurations of your classroom space to accommodate lectures, group work, desk work, rehearsal, and performances. Then create a transition protocol for students to shift from one configuration or area to another. Dedicated transitions are what keep kids on tasks and prevent the class from descending into chaos. More on those later. Train your students to recognize each configuration, to correctly arrange each configuration, and, above all, to respect the space no matter what configuration it's in.

Here are some examples of typical drama classroom setups:

### Rows

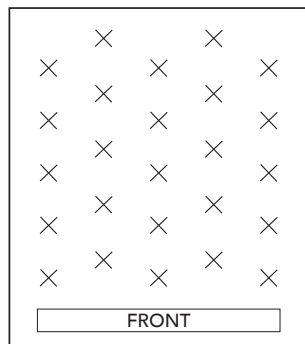
Rows are typically the default configuration for classroom teaching, and seats can be set up in either straight or offset rows. While these arrangements are both simple and popular, there are pros and cons to both of these styles that you should consider as you are preparing your classroom.

#### Straight Rows



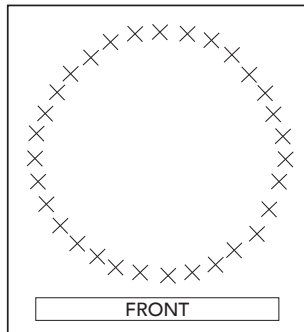
Seats in straight rows is the quintessential classroom setup. In this configuration, all the chairs or desks are lined up facing the front of the classroom with aisles between each row. While this configuration is the simplest to set up and easiest to maintain, it also creates an obvious set of problems. Having your classroom setup in this way makes it hard for students in the back of the class to see what is going on at the front. Likewise, it makes it difficult for the teacher to see what is happening at the back of the room. Students with bad intent will quickly figure this out and attempt to exploit this lack of supervision for their own gains. If you set up your classroom in this way, you will need to frequently move up and down the aisles to make sure students are engaged in the lesson and staying on task.

#### Offset Rows



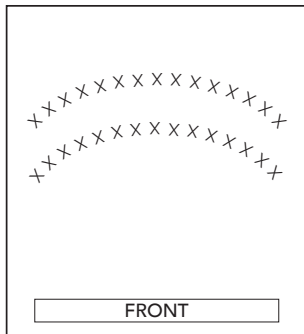
Quite a few discipline issues can be avoided if you offset every other row of chairs as you are setting up your classroom. This configuration makes it much easier to see and be seen by every student. It also provides more space around each seat, which allows you better circulation around your classroom. However, this configuration takes up more physical classroom space, so it may not be possible if you are dealing with a small classroom or a large number of students.

## Circle



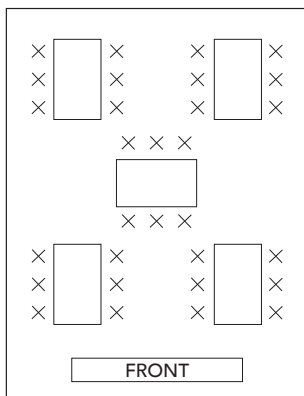
If you are participating in large-group work, such as a classroom discussion or script reading, it is useful to configure the classroom into a circle. This allows students to see one another without having to contort themselves, and it allows you to scan the entirety of the class at a glance. This allows for maximum interaction between students while still maintaining physical control of the classroom. The downside of this configuration is that when you address the class from inside the circle, you will always have your back to someone. To remedy that, you will need to be in constant motion. This can become quite tiring and disorienting, and it is why you want to keep your lecture-based instruction to a minimum in this configuration.

## Semi-Circle



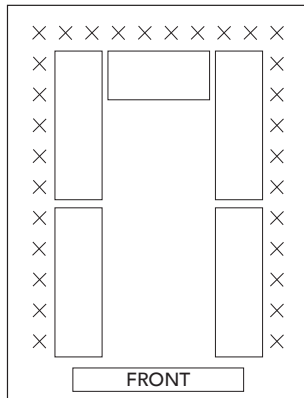
Placing your seating into offset semi-circles is a good option when you have a large space to fill. By bending the edges of your seating area down towards the front, you have a better chance of reducing distractions by compelling students to focus on a limited, controlled teaching space. This configuration also brings the outside edges of your seating closer to the front of the room for better supervision. This configuration is also useful for students observing and giving feedback to performers during the rehearsal process. It is less formal than a true performance setup, but still requires the audience to focus and the performer to acknowledge their audience.

## Work Tables



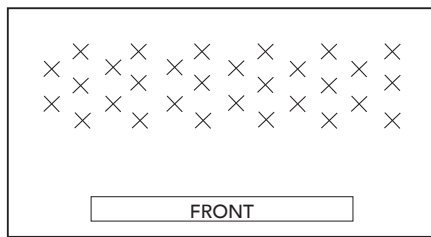
Whether you have tables in your space full time or just bring them out for certain portions of the curriculum, you will need a plan for how to arrange them in order to maximize efficiency and minimize distraction. It is also entirely possible that you will have more students than table space so you will need to put some thought into your seating plan. In addition, who sits at each table is just as important as how many sit at a table and in what configuration. Finally, you will need to make sure that you have enough room around each table for you to circulate and supervise. Don't forget that the footprint of each table and chair grouping roughly doubles in size when students are sitting in the chairs (as opposed to the chairs tucked in under the tables) so be sure to take that into account.

## U-Shaped



A U-shaped configuration is a good hybrid when you have to accommodate both tables and chairs. Setting up the furniture in this way allows you to model or demonstrate in the central area of the U and gives students table space to take notes or draw. This setup is not ideal if you are teaching a more lecture-based lesson that involves students seeing the board or a media display. Students on either side of the U will be blocked from the board which can lead to frustration or disruption.

## Performance



Some classrooms are large enough to have a dedicated performance space. Oftentimes, these kinds of spaces have raised platforms to delineate the performing space, and seating for this configuration is usually a pretty straightforward audience-facing-stage format. However, if your classroom has no devoted performing space, you will need to create the spaces to accommodate both the

actors and the audience. Depending on the amount of space you have to work with, it may be challenging to divide your classroom into the necessary performance and audience spaces. This means that one space may have to be less practical in order for the other to function. A lot of students in a small space means that your "stage" space might only be a few feet deep. Conversely, a performance that features a lot of actors may require the audience to stack their chairs and sit on the floor.

## The Tape Trick

For a theatre teacher, it is a fact of life that the seating configuration of your classroom will perpetually change. From day to day, and sometimes even lesson to lesson, you will need to change the setup of your room. Some days you will need your chairs in rows, and on others, you will need your students in a circle. Some days you might not need any chairs at all! This constant rearranging of furniture can lead to a lot of lost time and disruption if you don't have a way to get the seats where you need them as quickly as possible. Thankfully, there is a simple and effective way to control seating transitions in your classroom. By placing pieces of tape on the floor that mark various seating arrangements, you can teach your students how to properly set up your classroom. In addition, you can use different colored tape to mark each of the different seating configurations (i.e., blue tape = homeroom, red tape = circle, black tape = performance), and better still, you can write a number (or letter) on the tape and assign a number to each student so they know where to sit.

## Non-Traditional Teaching Spaces

Unfortunately, not every theatre teacher gets to teach in a dedicated drama classroom. Because of the unique nature of our curriculum, we are often placed into “non-traditional” teaching spaces. Theatre teachers have been known to teach in such diverse spaces as a theatre stage, theatre wings, theatre dressing rooms, theatre lobbies, art rooms, music rooms, gymnasiums, cafeteria, cafeteriums, and gymnatoriums. Each of these spaces brings with it its own unique set of challenges in creating a functioning drama classroom space. Here are some potential spaces you may encounter in your teaching career and some thoughts on how to effectively set up these spaces.

### Traditional, Non-Theatre Classroom

In a traditional classroom, the setup is usually static. That means the space is typically limited, and once the seating is arranged, it isn’t expected to change. Usually in this environment, there are large desks arranged in rows because there is no consideration for movement or performance. Plus, there’s limited storage for props, costumes, and furniture. If you are assigned to one of these classrooms, you need to determine the most effective way of setting up your space. You need to ask a lot of the same questions you would ask for a drama classroom: Should you put the seats in a circle? Two rows of semi-circles? No seats at all? Traditional rows? If you have a classroom with seats at tables, can you rearrange the tables and still have enough seats for your students? Where will you configure rehearsal and performance spaces? How do you rearrange the classroom for design and research days that require technology and table work? And how do you account for the transition to the next class who will be doing something completely different? Planning for your students to transition from configuration to configuration will alleviate discipline issues and wasting time, as we will talk about later in this section.

### Theatre Stage or Wings

If you are teaching on a theatre stage, your students will be sitting in the house. This means you will have many more seats than you have students. Because of that, consider creating an initial seating chart and assign seating before students show up; otherwise, you will have students scattered throughout the theatre and discipline will be a challenge. Once you see how your students interact with the space (and with each other), you will probably need to adjust the seating arrangements, but nevertheless, it is important to have a plan in place for Day 1.

Another challenge of teaching in the theatre will be a lack of classroom materials. Typically, teaching in a theatre means you will not have a desk, a computer, a white board, or any other normal teaching supplies. That makes it especially challenging to use the theatre as a classroom. That's why it is important to make a list of what you don't have and talk to your administration before school begins (more on this later).

If you are teaching backstage or in the wings of the theatre, space becomes an issue in *addition* to seating, supplies, and technology. Not to mention the fact that there are so many places for students to hide! Keeping track of your students in a theatre space as a new teacher is a monumental task, and that's why you need to be prepared **before** students show up.

Start with a seating chart and assigned seating, whether in the house or in the wings, so that students know where to sit, as well as what's off limits. In addition, if you configure the space and clearly demarcate the classroom area, teaching area, rehearsal area, and off limits areas, you can train your students from the first day of class on how they should interact with this space. If you establish this information on Day 1, you will prevent a lot of discipline problems later on.

### Gymnasium/Gymnatorium

If you end up in a gymnasium, you have all space and no structure. It will fall on you to create the structures of your classroom. Determining specific locations for seating, stage space, and work space will help with the functionality of that space. In a "gymnatorium," there will be a stage, but the stage itself is difficult to use as an actual stage because the "backstage" areas in a gymnatorium have often been designated "storage" areas and are jam packed with sports gear and materials dumped from all over the school. Decide if you will divide the large space into individual unique areas or whether you will simply use a portion of the space and rearrange it as needed. Be prepared for a lot of acoustic challenges in a gymnasium space since the sound will bounce off all the hard surfaces and voices get swallowed up in the cavernous space.

### Cafeteria/Cafetorium

Similar to a gymnasium, this utilitarian space presents a lot of challenges as a classroom. Again, you have a lot of space and little structure. You will need to put a lot of thought into how you want to set up your classroom and what kind of activities and assignments you give to your students. Seating will typically be cafeteria tables that are heavy and hard to move with a lot of space between the seating and the stage. The backstage areas here are also often packed with junk. The stage lighting is dim, but it is difficult to use the intended lighting because it is rudimentary with basic instruments and no gels. If you plan to have your students perform on the stage, either in class or as part of a public performance, you will need to pay special attention to sound and acoustics. The acoustics in cafetoriums are notoriously terrible. Sound is eaten up and trapped behind the curtains and proscenium, and even the loudest student is muted. In addition there is no masking between the kitchen space and the audience/stage space, so when the lunch ladies are setting up, it is a cacophony. If you are placed in a cafetorium, you will need to plan everything from taking roll to seating, curriculum, and transitions with flexibility in mind. Recognize that it will take time to establish routines and create structure. In general, this is one of the more active and challenging spaces in the entire school, so be prepared for a lot of distractions and interruptions.

Whatever space you're in, don't be afraid to change seating assignments once you get to know your students. Your goal is a fully functioning space and sometimes that means rearranging who sits where.

## SEATING STRATEGIES

When setting up your classroom, it is important to remember that laying out the physical space is only half the battle. Once your classroom is set up, it faces a daily assault by your students over its function and organization. Adding students to the mix will force you to question all your hard work and planning and may require you to scrap many of your preconceived ideas of how your classroom will function. That is why it is a good idea to have your students in mind when you arrange your classroom space.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to plan with your students in mind. To begin with, you can't plan for students you don't know! It's impossible to create a seating plan based on people you haven't met. In addition, even when you are dealing with students you have taught before, there may have been significant changes in their lives from year to year. Romantic relationships may have started or ended. Family issues may have occurred over the summer. Best friends may have had a falling out.

However, as the school year gets underway and you start to interact with your students, it will be easy to identify certain "types": Talkers, Attention Seekers, Invisible Students, Hiders, Distractors, Influencers, Leaders, Pleasers, and countless others. These students will naturally gather into groups or seek out solitude. They will look for the places where they are most comfortable or most noticed or most invisible. They will try to make the classroom conform to their needs or sphere of influence, both positive and negative. It is your job to identify, classify, and organize these students in a way that will neutralize the negative and magnify the positive.

All these interpersonal dynamics will have an impact in your classroom, and having a plan in place to deal with them when they arise will give you an advantage in maintaining classroom control. By creating seating charts, you have more control over organization and discipline in your classroom. And it is not just a matter of physical placement either. Who a student sits near, in addition to where they sit, has a direct impact on the overall dynamic of a classroom. In addition to helping control discipline, using a seating chart will also make it easier to incorporate students who are shy or reluctant to participate. Remember that students will exploit opportunities to avoid classroom activities or create their own distractions, and if you don't control the learning environment in your classes, your students will.

One way to approach this challenge is to be "hands off" in the first few weeks of the school year and allow students to sit wherever they want, with whomever they like. During this time, take note of the pairs and groups that begin to form and look for students who are actively trying to hide, disrupt, or distract. Also keep an eye out for students who are focused, connected, and enjoy your class. You can utilize those students later to counter the disruptors and the wallflowers. After a couple of weeks, you can create a seating chart that takes into account all the personal and social dynamics of your classes.

However, keep in mind that seating charts are not set in stone! If your first effort doesn't create classroom harmony, or if the social fabric of a class changes (for example, they get too comfortable with a readjusted seating arrangement and become overly chatty), rework your seating chart to address these issues. Do this as many times as you need until the pieces fall into place and balance is achieved.



## TRANSITIONS

As you are planning your classroom space and imagining its usage, put some thought into transitions. A transition is a shift from one style, space, or subject to the next. Transitions are the spaces *between* lessons. It is the potentially unstructured time when students are entering your classroom or rearranging the classroom space or shifting gears between lecture and performance. It is during these transitions that the greatest opportunity for disruption occurs, and if you haven't trained your students on how to properly transition from one classroom mode to another, it is easy for them to lose focus—and for you to lose control. However, like so many other aspects of the drama classroom, putting structures and expectations in place will eliminate the empty spaces where chaos likes to grow. Here are the three most common transitions that can lead to turmoil in your classroom and the simple solutions you can utilize that will help keep students on task:

### First Five/Last Five

These are the times when students are transitioning into and out of your classroom.

#### Problem

In the first five minutes, students are bringing into your classroom the energy from previous classes or lunch or the free-for-all that is the hallway between classes. In the last five minutes, they are digesting the day's lesson and are either reviewing the highlights of your class or are gearing up for what comes next in their schedule. In either case, students get loud and unfocused, and if you don't address this transition time, your classes will start and finish in disarray.

#### Solution

Students need to be given structured activities during these times.

As part of the "entrance procedure" of the first five minutes of your class, students are assigned "bell work" (a "bell ringer" exercise or writing a journal entry). Ideally, when students enter your classroom, there is a prompt on the board that they are required to respond to in writing. Students are given a set amount of time to complete this assignment, and these responses are calculated into their daily grade (participation or otherwise).

In the last five minutes, students are given a self-reflection, self-assessment, or exit slip in which they respond in writing to the events of the day or answer a question that is relevant to the subject and topic covered. These reflections can either be compiled into their journals or handed to you on a slip of paper as they exit the classroom. Once again, these responses count toward their participation grade.

## Activity Shifts

These are the gaps that occur in the time it takes to shift between activities in your lesson plan.

### Problem

When you finish one portion of your lesson, it takes time to shift gears and get set up for what comes next. This could include the need to set up videos or technology or shift from a lecture to group work. In any case, when your attention shifts off your students and onto an auxiliary task, it opens the door for student disruption.

### Solution

First and foremost, be sure you are prepared for class! Make sure you have plugged in or charged up technology, cued up video, printed and collated handouts, and done all the leg work necessary for your lesson to be executed smoothly. The more prepared you are, the tighter the transition and the less chance there is for students to cause problems.

When shifting the structure of your lessons, make sure students know your expectations and the procedures they are to follow when a shift occurs. For example, when students are shifting from lecture work to group work, make sure everyone has an assigned group and that they know where those groups will be working. Also, let students know what materials they will need during this portion of the lesson, and make sure they have everything they need *before* the transition begins. To keep things tight, give students a limited amount of time to complete the transition and be ready to work in their groups. However, keep this time reasonable: the time limit should encourage your students to move with purpose, not to run recklessly around the room.

## Changing Spaces/Locations

These are the times when you are rearranging the space or moving to a new location all together.

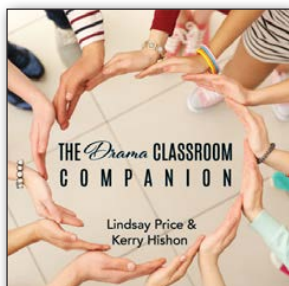
### Rearranging the Space

#### Problem

The space needed for a history lecture or design assignment is different from the space needed for rehearsal or performance. That means, on a typical day, theatre teachers usually have to either rearrange their teaching space or move to a different space altogether. Either way, it causes a lot of commotion and disruption in your classroom.

# Teaching Resources

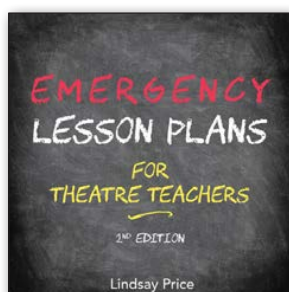
Quality resources to use in your drama classroom



## The Drama Classroom Companion

*The Drama Classroom Companion* is filled with articles and exercises to build the skills needed for theatrical performance as well as real world skills like creative thinking, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

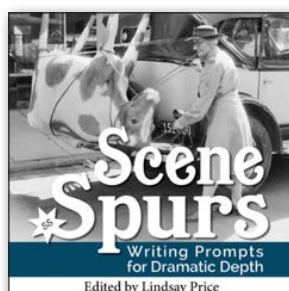
[theatrefolk.com/companion](http://theatrefolk.com/companion)



## Emergency Lesson Plans For Theatre Teachers

*Emergency Lesson Plans For Theatre Teachers, 2nd edition* gives you the tools and resources you need to confidently leave your class in the hands of a substitute teacher. Customize your lesson plans to suit the specific needs of your class when you can't be there.

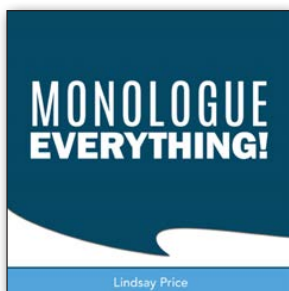
[theatrefolk.com/elp](http://theatrefolk.com/elp)



## Scene-Spurs: Writing Prompts for Dramatic Depth

*Scene Spurs* is a collection of photo-based writing prompts developed by playwright Lindsay Price. The set includes 35 different Spurs along with an instruction guide to integrate them into your drama classroom.

[theatrefolk.com/spurs](http://theatrefolk.com/spurs)



## The Monologue Everything Program

Want your students to write their own monologues? Have you tried to incorporate monologue units into the classroom with less-than-satisfactory results?

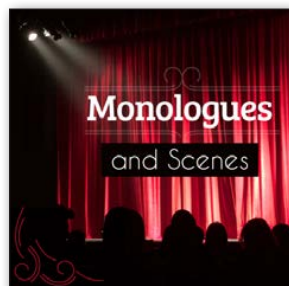
[theatrefolk.com/monologue-everything](http://theatrefolk.com/monologue-everything)



## Practical Technical Theater: The Complete Solution for Technical Theater Classrooms

This series of instructional DVDs is perfect for the teacher who feels more at home with a prompt book than a hammer, and would welcome a new, visually oriented teaching tool for their tech classes and production crews.

[theatrefolk.com/ptt](http://theatrefolk.com/ptt)



## Monologue and Scene Collections

Whether it's for classwork, competitions or auditions, these collections of student-appropriate monologues and scenes can help you find what you're looking for.

All monologues and scenes come from published plays and include running-times, descriptions, character notes and staging suggestions.

[theatrefolk.com/collections](http://theatrefolk.com/collections)



## The Student Director's Handbook

Help students take their show from first audition to opening night with *The Student Director's Handbook*. This easy-to-use ebook is full of guidelines, tips and templates designed to help students create a vision, circumvent problems and organize rehearsals on their way to a successful production.

[theatrefolk.com/student-director](http://theatrefolk.com/student-director)



## Write Your Own Vignette Play

Your students want to write and perform an original play. You want to include a playwriting unit in your program. But where to start? What if your students have never written a play before? What if you've never written before?

*Write Your Own Vignette Play* will answer all your questions and more

[theatrefolk.com/write\\_vignette](http://theatrefolk.com/write_vignette)



## Competition Material

Plays, monologues, and scenes for drama competitions including royalty information and exemptions.

[theatrefolk.com/competition](http://theatrefolk.com/competition)



[www.theatrefolk.com/resources](http://www.theatrefolk.com/resources)