

The Problem with Problem Plays

By
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STORY OF THE PLAY

Two writers poke fun of the pitfalls and perils of producing problem plays while *The Problem with Problem Plays* Players act out the comical conundrums. They explore the challenges of censorship, the madness of metaphors, and the awkwardness of adults who tackle teen dialogue. All is well and witty until unexpected guests and unearthed secrets send things amusingly awry. Realizing they have become trapped in a problem play of their own, the cast and crew must scramble to escape. Will they perish in the predicament or persevere and produce a positive payoff? This show features a gender-flexible cast which can easily be increased or decreased as needed. Performed on a bare stage. Running time of 25-30 minutes.

SETTING

A bare stage

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Widely flexible cast of 12)

KATE or NATE: Writer/Narrator.

MARTI or MARTY: Writer/Narrator.

PLAYER 1

PLAYER 2

PLAYER 3: Male.

PLAYER 4

PLAYER 5

PJ: The smallest Player, female.

PAT: Most perceptive Player.

MOM

PATRON

VIC or VICKI: Stage Manager.

The casting of actors is very flexible. Most characters may be portrayed by a male or female. Any pronouns in the script may be altered as needed. Although 7 PLAYERS are featured, the number may be increased or decreased if desired. Simply redistribute the PLAYERS' lines to best fit your actors' personalities and genders.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

First performed: December 5, 2013 at The Geneva School in Winter Park, Florida. *Michelle Alvarez (Director), Sally Park, Simon Lee, Anna Shriner, Charlie Classe, Lauren Chandler, Lily Tevebaugh, Brian Cavanagh, Ariel Hines, and Victoria Knight.*

First high school production: December 6, 2013 by Poinciana High School of Kissimmee, Florida. *James Thompson (Director), Brandon Schefstad, Daniel Pratts, Nicolle Guevara, Sara Ezzitouni, Justice Serrano, Alexis Pratts, Kristopher Lanier, Taryn Cooper, Ruth Forestal, Hannah Day, Joseph Way, Autumn Fountain, Grayson Henry, Steven Schefstad, and Clarisa Vazquez.*

The Problem with Problem Plays

(KATE and MARTI, narrators, enter. THEY address the audience.)

KATE: Good evening. We've written this show to discuss an issue of great importance.

MARTI: There is a proliferation of problem plays plaguing the planet, producing a plethora of problems for performers who present them publicly.

KATE: You can say that again.

MARTI: *(To KATE.)* Actually, I don't think I can. That's the first time I got it right all week.

KATE: A problem play is a theatrical piece concentrating on the moral dilemmas of characters dealing with topical, social issues.

MARTI: They are performed often, but sadly, not often performed well.

KATE: We have invited some special guests to help demonstrate the pitfalls of producing a problem play.

MARTI: Please welcome *The Problem with Problem Plays Players*.

(PLAYERS, PJ and PAT enter. They are a motley crew, clad in blue jeans and matching T-shirts.)

KATE: *The Problem with Problem Plays Players* are a group of actors, specially selected from the theatrical community to give us a variety of shapes, sizes, genders, and colors.

MARTI: And, this brings us to our first problem. Problem plays often require unique and specific casts which many theatre departments simply cannot provide.

(PLAYERS step up and address the audience.)

PLAYER 1: Our school canceled a play celebrating diversity after the director realized we all looked and sounded exactly the same.

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PLAYER 2: We performed a play that called for a Native American. We had to borrow an actor from another school. They sent us a kid with a really good tan.

PLAYER 3: I had the longest hair at my all boys' school. I played a pregnant teen, a homeless mother, and a nun addicted to gambling.

KATE: Some schools can handle casting challenges because they have terrific make-up and costume departments.

(Note: Feel free to alter the following lines so the spoken words create the biggest possible contrast with the actors' appearances.)

PLAYER 4: I convincingly played a grandmother when I was eleven.

PLAYER 5: My wig and makeup effectively hide my freckles and curly red hair.

PJ: I'm actually a 200-pound, Asian-American male.

MARTI: Other schools are not so fortunate. In an attempt for authenticity, students are forced to make bold sacrifices for the sake of art.

PAT: I spent two years as a foreign exchange student in a tiny Mexican village, so I could convincingly play a Spanish transfer student who tries to adjust to a new school.

PLAYER 1: My director had me gain 75 pounds to portray a teen who was bullied for being overweight.

PLAYER 2: I was in the same bullying show. I lost 100 pounds to play the skinny kid who torments the overweight child.

KATE: Why didn't you guys just play the opposite roles?

(Beat as THEY both realize that would have been a much easier solution.)

PLAYER 1: *(Angrily bitter.)* Stupid drama teacher.

PLAYER 2: *(Sadly, to herself.)* I'm still hungry.

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MARTI: Another issue with problem plays is that the problems discussed often raise red flags with school administrators.

KATE: There is an endless parade of excuses for not doing a show.

(KATE walks past each player. She holds a sheet of paper as if it is a script. The PLAYERS lift and pass along a small red flag as they shoot down ideas. KATE grows increasingly upset.)

PLAYER 1: It's too depressing. Find something funnier.

PLAYER 2: It's too farcical. It doesn't address the issue seriously.

PLAYER 3: It's too adult. The students won't understand it.

PLAYER 4: It's too edgy. The parents won't understand it.

PLAYER 5: It's too political.

PJ: It's politically incorrect.

PAT: We can't talk about that on school property.

KATE: *(Unable to control her dismay.)* But the play is anti—

PAT: Doesn't matter. Better not to mention it and just hope the issue goes away.

(KATE puts the paper in her back pocket and walks sadly back to her side of the stage.)

MARTI: To get around the issue of censorship, authors of problem plays often write metaphorically.

KATE: The characters discuss one topic – usually a benign one – but the audience understands that the play is really commenting on a deeper and darker issue.

(PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 step forward.)

PLAYER 1: I can't believe I'm down to my last pack of baseball cards.

PLAYER 2: You wouldn't have any doubles you'd be willing to spare, would you?

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PLAYER 1: *(Holds up a card.)* I've got a minor league future star. It's not in mint condition, though.

KATE: In this case, of course, they're not really talking about baseball cards.

PLAYER 1: *(To KATE.)* We're not?

KATE: *(To PLAYERS.)* Not at all. The packs of cards represent packs of cigarettes. Your whole conversation is about smoking.

PLAYER 1: So this card represents a cigarette?

KATE: Exactly.

PLAYER 2: What's the symbolism behind it being a minor league future star?

KATE: I have no idea. *(To MARTI.)* You?

MARTI: Clueless. *(To audience.)* That's the problem with problem play metaphors. Sometimes the metaphor is stretched so far that it loses the audience completely.

(PLAYER 3, PLAYER 4, and PLAYER 5 step forward. They mime reading books. PLAYER 3 exits, not realizing he has dropped a piece of bubble wrap. PLAYER 4 picks it up, looks around nervously, then shows it to PLAYER 5.)

PLAYER 4: Jessie just left. He dropped this.

PLAYER 5: *(Studies it carefully. Alarmed.)* It's...bubble wrap. And half of it's been popped.

PLAYER 4: Do we tell him we found it? Do we tell his parents?

PLAYER 5: *(After a beat.)* You do what you want. I'm staying out of it. *(Exits.)*

(PLAYER 4 watches PLAYER 5 leave. She contemplates the next move. After a beat, she glances around to make sure no one is looking, and then slowly, nervously, pops a single bubble.)

PAT: *(To KATE.)* What's so confusing about that? The play is a metaphor about thrill seeking. The student destroying bubble wrap is an allegory for unnecessary risks: A careless destruction of that which is designed for safety.

End of Freeview

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