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A Letter to the Players

From Playwright Kevin M Reese

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You, my friends, have been blessed!

You have the opportunity to entertain a child/family audience. You are being given the chance to teach, influence, entertain, and befriend children in a way even their own parents cannot do. They have--or soon will-- deliver their children to your performance space and entrust their imaginations into your care. What a blessed responsibility you have!

Don't worry, though. I'm sure you have had sufficient rehearsal, have your lines down, and are fully aware of the awesomeness of your endeavor. If this is true, you will do fine (if this is not true-- shame on you).

Please remember two things:

1. You have been given the awesome responsibility of influencing our audiences of tomorrow. Chances are good that you are the very FIRST exposure some of them will have had to live theatre. They are coming from a recorded film society: TV, video, film. Hopefully, they will connect with something during your production that will bring them back into the theatre at another time for another experience.
2. When we perform for kids, what we are doing is gently holding their imaginations in the cup of our hands. We tell them: "Trust me. Let your imagination come for a ride with MY imagination and I promise you I'll take you on a wonderful trip. We'll have fun and I'll show you some wonderful things you may not have seen before and tell you some wonderful things you may not have heard before. All you have to do is trust me, I promise I won't let you down." Then we proceed to perform for them and more importantly, we proceed to PLAY with them-- not FOR them or TO them or LIKE them, but we play WITH them.

Soon everything is going well: we're having fun, the kids are having fun, the adults are having fun. We're being very good stewards with their imaginations.

But then something goes wrong. An actor loses concentration, gets tripped up by a response from the kids, drops character (a felony in children's theatre!), or any of a number of things that can shatter their willing suspension of disbelief. And you know what happens? We lose them! It's like we open up our hands and let their precious imagination fall flat on the floor and we say "Ha-ha, fooled you!" It will take at least ten minutes of flawless performance to get them back into the groove of the show (that is, IF they decide to give you a second chance -- sometimes they don't). Even then, they may only observe the show and not trust you enough to let themselves become caught up in the magic again. We are in the business of nurturing these precious imaginations. They are the theatre-goers of the future. They are the CEOs, the teachers, the actors of tomorrow. We must help them learn the importance of their imagination.

I have been involved with children's theatre for only a short time-- twenty years-- but I have noticed a few things that are very unique to this form of theatre.

- It is a fatal mistake to have the attitude that performing for child/family audiences is something actors are resigned to who can't get a "real" acting job for adults.
- Children are the most rewarding of audiences. They are at the same time the most forgiving and the most demanding.
- More time than not, the "willing suspension of disbelief" you have to conquer-- is your own. The kids' abilities to do this are WAY beyond yours.
- I would much prefer a not-so-skilled actor whose love and respect for kids comes across in his/her performance than a Tony-nominated actor who can't connect with them heart-to-heart. This is not something an actor can be taught-- they either "get it" or they don't.

I have seen over a hundred productions of my shows around the country, from full-blown professional adult companies to amateur church theatres using actors as young as eight years old. I don't care how experienced the actors are or how much money is spent on the technical side-- what I care about is whether the kids in the audience are having a good time at the theatre. Because if they have fun, your production is a success-- whether there were dropped lines and flubbed entrances or it was flawless-- and those kids will be back, to see another of my shows or even a more advanced or challenging show. That's why I do what I do. And that's why I'm glad you are doing what you do!

Have a great time-- and break a tooth!

ESAD*,

Kevin

PS: I'd love to hear from you about your experience. Feel free to email me at any time.
My personal email address is: kevin@kmrscripts.com

* I am not at all a superstitious person, but during my training a long, LONG time ago, I enjoyed the tradition of saying "break-a-leg" before a show. Legend has it that all theatres are "haunted" by the spirits of its past performances and actors. For some reason, all that energy that was focused on performances has become re-focused as mischief by the spirits. If they find out there is a show to be presented, they will do SOMETHING to thwart an actor's plan for a flawless performance. That is why actors say "break a leg" instead of "have a good show" -- they're trying not to let the spirits know a performance is planned (we won't get into why a spiritual being, that can transmutate between spiritual-physical planes, can't look in the audience and see people watching actors on a stage!). Anyway, we always tried to come up with different ways to say "break a leg." That is where ESAD came from. It's a very vulgar phrase that you'd think would be said to a mortal enemy-- not someone you're about to "share the boards" with. Without too much elaboration, it means:
"Eat ... (poison) ... And Die.