

NATIVITY NOTES

HERE TODAY – GONE TOMORROW

We know that these days, often through no fault of their own, some children can't be relied on to turn up every week over a rehearsal period – or even to turn up for the performance itself! What can be done about it?

- The first thing to note is that there are usually *some* children who can be relied upon to turn up regularly. Choose a play that has a small number of main parts and give these to the children you feel sure will be at rehearsals and performance. Divide the other children into 'chorus' groups – one group for each of the minor characters. In this way, if one of the 'chorus' is absent the other members of the group can continue – and if someone misses a rehearsal, the rest of their chorus group can fill them in on what went on.

Some plays (cf *The Star and the Stable* in *The Star and the Stable* by Peter Jackson) are already written like this, but for others, you could adapt to make minor parts 'choral' – eg instead of Angel 1, Angel 2 and Angel 3, you could have Angel 1's lines spoken by an angelic group. You could make an interesting point by having a group to say the lines of the Wise Men: the bible doesn't actually say there were three of them – there could have been a whole regiment! (cf Matthew 2 vs 1).

- A different approach to the problem is taken in *Not Another Carol Service* by Susan Sayers. Rather than spread the preparation over a number of weeks she suggests having a workshop in the afternoon during which all rehearsals and other preparations take place and the performance follows on immediately as part of a short service to round off the day. It's all done in an afternoon, all children who stay the course are guaranteed to be there for the performance, and the job's complete by tea time!
- Another method might be to use 'virtual children' – record their voices, reading material they've worked on during Advent and play the recordings over photos of the children in tableaux projected on OHP or PowerPoint (make sure you have parental permission for all photographs, however: children should be not be named or inappropriately dressed and images should be destroyed afterwards – cf *Children First* p39). Alternatively, some adults could dress up and mime to the children's words.

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING!

They can be very trying – for the children as well as the adults – but rehearsals are important. It's not just a question of trying to make sure a large proportion of those involved know roughly what they're doing – there's the issue of real quality! The children deserve it, those who are going to see the performance deserve it, and the story deserves it. Being part of a quality team effort is a much more satisfying experience for children than shuffling around in an uncertain group of 'towel-heads' then beating a hasty retreat when an adult gesticulates violently at them from the pews with a mixed expression of fury and despair. Also, the standing of children's work in the church is raised no end by a quality piece of work.

So, how can the rehearsal process be made more than simple repetition?

- The first thing to say is that, despite my pleas for a quality 'product' – the 'product' is probably not the most important part of the exercise as far as the children's nurture in the faith is concerned – and we mustn't lose sight of nurture in all the busyness. Far more important than 'product' is 'process', and Vicki Howe takes this seriously in *Easy Ways to Christmas Plays*. In this resource, she structures activities into the preparation period so that each week the children get to explore some of the significance of the story as well as building towards the performance. Whether you are using Vicki Howe's plays or not, you could make use of this approach so that 'rehearsal' isn't limited to repetition.
- One of the activities that can help children really enter into the story is character work. There are a number of ways that you can encourage children to explore the characters in a story that could make a 'rehearsal' session more fun and meaningful. Here are a few suggestions:
 - pretend to be your character telling a friend about your birthday celebrations, your aged aunt, a recent Roman outrage
 - describe what your character was doing the day before the nativity, or the day after – or a year after
 - list your character's favourite – colour, season, food, activity etc
 - be your character talking about one of the props you use in the story – where and how you got it, what it means to you.
- Skills work can also be done via fun games, and this will improve the quality of other drama projects during the year. In terms of nurture, it can help children value and appreciate the importance of their bodies, express and respond to emotions and work in teams.
 - Body language is important, and the expressive use of the body is important for visually interesting and convincing drama work. Play various miming games in which children have to guess what each other are miming. The detail is important – what the hands and fingers are doing is as important as the arms. You can work on this by using statues as well as mime.

- Inappropriate facial expressions often undermine otherwise good performances – a fist shaking Herod who is grinning from ear to ear, for instance! Play games where children have to make a face appropriate to a character from a story and the others have to guess which character is being portrayed. Or collect names of emotions, write them on a sheet and get a child to make a face for one of the emotions – the others have to guess which one.
 - The voice is obviously a key tool in drama. To start with it needs to be audible. You could get children at either end of a room to shout out a line so that the children at the other end can write it down or repeat it accurately. Then get the children to lower the volume whilst still remaining clear – this will help develop projection, which isn't just a matter of shouting! Really forming the letters with their lips will help – they could try lip-reading in pairs.
 - You could play games using different tones of voice by getting children to read the same line as if they were bored, happy, angry, frightened, suspicious etc and get the others to guess which emotion was being shown.
- So much for the fun – there are also some less interesting but still important basics that you need to make sure you've covered
 - Make sure you get at least one practice in the place you're going to perform, so that you can check that the practicalities such as exits and entrances work – it would be a shame if Mary had to fight her way through a drum kit to get to the manger or the angels were grounded by a tangle of wires! (They should be taped down anyway!)
 - Make sure the children are clear where they've to stand – point out distinguishing marks on the floor, or put masking tape markers down. Nervous children have a tendency to sidle off to the back or the side of the acting space in the heat of the moment, and to stand in straight lines unless they're very clear where to go and have rehearsed.
 - Use props as early as possible in the process so that you can find out if they present any practical difficulties – can the first king manage to rearrange his robe to kneel whilst still holding a pile of gold wrapped boxes? Whose going to take the gifts out of the way while Mary and Joseph get ready to flee to Egypt?
 - Practice with the microphones if you're going to use them. Using a microphone is not as easy as it looks – the children need practice. Make sure any stand-microphones are at the right heights for those who are going to use them (and check them immediately before the performance – someone's bound to have altered them!)

I CAN'T FIND A THING TO SUIT!

Just because there are lots of published Christmas plays doesn't mean to say that you'll find one that's just the right length, has just the right number of parts, hits just the right note or simply inspires you all (and if you're all bored with it before you start, then you've got a real uphill struggle ahead!) Why not consider creating your own? (You could even print it off and sell it in aid of church funds!)

A great way to make the preparation for the Christmas play a nurturing experience for the children is to give them some input into the content. Ask them what message they would like to express in the play and how they would suggest going about it. With their inspiration and your practical expertise there's no knowing what you might come up with!

If you don't want to turn a whole play over to the children, you could leave one scene for children's input. A good idea to be found in the Easter resource *This Man Called Jesus* by Eleanore Jeans (published by Barnabas) is to collect children's thoughts on what happens in a particular scene in the story then read them out as 'voice over' whilst a tableau or other visual is presented.

Preparing the tableau itself can be a good way for the children to explore their feeling about a story – what characters do they think are important to have in the scene, and why? Or if you are going to tell a story in a series of tableaux (like a comic strip) then they can decide which are the important scenes to depict – and again, that all-important question, why?

If you are going to 'go it alone' – here are some ideas you could consider for subject matter:

- just do a bit of the Christmas story perhaps concentrating on the perspective of one character or set of characters. Carols can be a good starting point (eg 'While Shepherds Watched' in Peter Jackson's *The Star and the Stable*)
- dramatise a carol that's not about the Nativity – eg 'Good King Wenceslas'
- look at stories and traditional tales set around the Christmas story like the story of St Francis creating the first Crib Scene or the legend of the fourth king
- tell the story of a contemporary family or group of people at Christmas time – after all, that's what *A Christmas Carol* is (the characters were contemporary when Dickens wrote it!)
- you could actually do an abridged version of *A Christmas Carol*!
- adapt the narrative from some other book or story with a message about Christmas (eg *What a Party* in *Children's Talks with Puppet Sketches 2* by John Hardwick – don't forget, you can turn a puppet play into a play for people!)
- abridge and adapt one of the older published plays (twenty years ago the publishers regularly produced scripts that were like small books – you're unlikely to want to put one of them on, but the story line could still be worth using)

- you could go even further back in history and look at adapting the plot of a Medieval Mystery Play, or something like the poem 'The Guest' in *Together for Christmas 2*, (CIO Publishing, 1982).

Some practical tips if you're creating your own script, or if you're trying to work out whether a published resource is likely to be do-able:

- keep the script brief, use short lines, simple vocabulary, and short sentences – and make sure there's not too much for any one character to learn
- a narrator, reading from a script can help the narrative along without anyone having to learn long speeches
- rhyme and rhythm make things easy to learn – rap is a popular form
- use other popular forms, particularly from TV – an interview is a good way of getting information across, and if the interviewer has the questions on a clipboard, then lines don't have to be learned
- the use of tableaux or mime with voice over cuts down the burden of line learning
- avoid too many entrances and exits
- humour is good!
- music is good too – but be wary of the technical demands! Songs used in local schools can be useful between the scenes (but check performance copyright) or make up your own words to well known tunes (cf *Nursery Rhyme Nativities* by Brian Ogden).

AND FINALLY ...

- If you're using a published script, contact the publisher to check whether you need a licence to perform it. Do this **STRAIGHT AWAY** in case there's any problem or the process proves complex!
- If you want to do something *really* revolutionary this Christmas, you could cast boys as angels! My son would be delighted if there were a few more people in the world who knew that his name – Gabriel – is male!

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Brandon, Andrew (et al) : *Oh No, Not the Nativity*, 1998, Scripture Union
- Cary, James: *Virtual Nativity*, 1999, Kevin Mayhew Ltd
- Hardwick, John : *Children's Talks with Puppet Sketches 2*, 2004, Kevin Mayhew Ltd
- Howie, Vickie : *Easy Ways to Christmas Plays*, 1998, Barnabas
- Howie, Vickie : *Story Plays for Christmas*, 2005, Barnabas
- Jackson, Peter : *The Star and the Stable*, 2005, Kevin Mayhew Ltd
- Jeffs, Stephanie : *Practical Wayw to Christmas Plays*, 2001, Barnabas
- Johnson, Mark & Helen : *Are We Nearly There Yet ?* 2002, Out of the Ark Music
- Ogden, Brian: *Nursery Rhyme Nativities*. 2002, Barnabas
- Sayers, Susan : *Not Another Carol Service*, 1996, Kevin Mayhew Ltd
- Wheeter, Cathy: *All the Angels Sang*, 2003, Kevin Mayhew Ltd
- Various Authors: *Christmas Wrapped Up!*, 2003, Scripture Union
- Various Authors: *Prasie God! Jesus is Born!*, 2006, Abingdon Press

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