Serving all

BY SUZI ZIMMERMAN

WITH MOST CURRICULUMS, varying ability levels offer such a challenge to teachers that classes are divided into learning groups for effectiveness. Educational theatre, on the other hand, is unique in that it offers many varieties of activities under one curricular umbrella. As we all know, students may write, act, direct, or work on a number of crews, both technical and creative. Because there are so many different jobs, there generally is something for everyone. This may be why theatre has also become very attractive to students with what are often called “learning differences.”

Take Shane, for example. A fourteen-year-old high school student, Shane suffers from severe cerebral palsy and is confined to a wheelchair. He cannot control his hands and legs; instead, they frustrate him because they often jerk out of control unexpectedly. He tilts his head to power his wheelchair, pressing different pads to command direction.

On top of that, Shane cannot speak. Instead, he aims a reflective laser dot at a receiver on a computer attached to his chair above his lap. After a moment of concentrated effort, the computer attempts to understand him, and between Shane, his computer, and the people around him, small bits of uncertain conversation are possible. When his computer or his wheelchair fails him, as is often the case, he loses his ability to communicate or move on his own.

Shane selected drama as his elective, so you can imagine my surprise when this disabled student first rolled into my classroom. Perhaps some would have reacted with im-
Patience, requesting that he take a more on-level class. But I was pleased, seeing this as an opportunity to learn something new myself. Together we would find a way to both teach and learn about theatre from a variety of new angles.

During a game in which students mimic each others’ sounds and movements, the class hesitated for fear they would hurt his feelings if they mimicked Shane. On the contrary—he was excited that was able to get them to do what he wanted them to do without using his devices. Shane, a natural-born performer, was taking the class on a great adventure.

Every student has a right to learn and every teacher has a duty to teach, regardless how much additional effort may be required. I had to work extra hard to discover new ways to teach him, but everyone benefited.

Aside from the moral obligation teachers have to all students, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that if a program or activity receives federal financial assistance, it must grant equal access to people with disabilities. This includes all public schools and many private ones as well. To add further teeth to this commitment to full access for all students, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits disability-based discrimination in public entities. This ensures that all students have equal access to educational choices.

First steps
Making a commitment to special needs students is not easy. Any teacher who is considering accommodating such students in a mainstream theatre class should be aware at the outset how much work is involved, and how much it might change what you and your students will do in class. For more thoughts on these considerations based on my personal experiences, see the sidebar on page eight.

There are a number of organizations that work specifically with disabled actors, and they can all be excellent resources. You should begin by finding out whether or not there are any professional or community theatre groups in your area that have a history of this sort of inclusion. Here are three well-established national organizations that you can contact for help:

- Theater Breaking Through Barriers (formerly Theater by the Blind), 306 West 18th Street, #3A, New York, NY 10011; www.tbtb.org.
- The National Theatre of the Deaf, 139 North Main St., West Hartford, CT 06107; www.ntd.org.

For information on teaching in a special needs theatre program a good source is Sally Dorothy Bailey’s text *Wings to Fly*, and Adam and Allee Blatner explore non-competitive role-playing in their book *The Art of Play*.

The first step to take in your own school is to talk to the school’s special education advocate about any student in your classes with unique needs. Advocates should have students’ educational histories specifying what works best for each learner. Most usually know what the student’s general limitations are and can offer very specific information such as which resources to use and which volunteers to call.

If a student’s needs have not been identified, it will be up to you to start the referral process with the advocate. The sooner something is determined, the sooner you can receive assistance meeting those needs.

I’m going to review specific concerns regarding different kinds of special needs students in a moment, but first I want to address general safety issues in the spaces where you conduct classes and rehearsals.

Before you bring any special needs students into your theatre classes, take a safety inventory of the theatre areas where students will be—the classroom, stage, shop, costume lab, make-up rooms, and any other space you and your students use. Request repairs for all potential hazards. Obviously safety is important for everybody in your program, but in this inventory keep the unique limitations of your special needs student in mind.
Consider, but do not limit yourself to, the following:

Is the floor level? Any unevenness can be dangerous to a blind student or someone in a wheelchair. Remove unnecessary rugs.

Do all electrical sockets and switches have safety plates?

• Are set pieces stored in a stable fashion? Again, this is important to all students, but a handicapped student will be at greater risk if items are stored haphazardly. Props piled too high or even too deep can create undue risk. Shelving units should be attached to walls, and be especially aware of anything protruding from walls or hanging from the ceiling.

Place safety cages around makeup lights to prevent burns.

Water heaters should be set at a temperature that cannot scald.

• Is there a safe ramp or lift for wheelchair access? Remember, there must be safe, equal access for all students.

Take special precautions anywhere there is potential for a fall (such as your orchestra pit).

Educate your non-disabled students on theatre safety and on working with whatever disabilities are present on your team or in your class. While all should be educated, do not make students responsible for other students. For reasons of liability, always request adult supervision of disabled students if safety is an issue (backstage, for example) and if you cannot be present.

It may also be necessary to address your disabled student’s emotional comfort and security. Talk to her about her expectations and about what she is comfortable discussing regarding her differences. Some disabled students do not want to talk about the subject at all, while others will feel awkward if it is not discussed.

Working with visually impaired actors

George Ashiotis, co-artistic director of Theater Breaking Through Barriers, has been acting most of his adult life. At eighteen, he joined The Lighthouse Players, a theatre company sponsored by the New York Lighthouse (the original Lighthouse for the Blind in the United States). He advises directors with disabled actors to think beyond plays in which the characters are also disabled.

“In so many plays that employ characters with disabilities, it is used as a metaphor,” he says. Instead, Ashiotis suggests that handicapped actors also need to experience mainstream roles in order to grow.

A visually impaired actor will be able to participate in both your class and your production fully. The biggest challenges are getting written information to the student and ensuring his safety.

All written work will need to be transcribed into Braille or available as a “book on tape” (or on CD). Ask your librarian or special education advocate for help locating appropriate materials for your visually impaired students.

Here is Ashiotis’s advice on working with a blind actor:

1. Avoid casting your disabled actor in a play about disabilities; instead allow them to grow by casting them in non-disabled roles in which their handicap will not be an issue. (For example, you obviously don’t want to cast a blind actor as a photographer.)

2. Many blind actors have access to Braille printers. Contact your play’s publisher and request an electronic copy of the script so that your actor may print it in Braille. If the publisher will not supply the copy, find a volunteer to transcribe the play.

3. If an actor has been blind from birth, he may need help with facial expressions, which are learned.

4. In class, games in which actors must mimic what they see will not, of course, work for the blind actor. Modify these games for your entire class if you have a student who is visually impaired.

5. In rehearsal, remind students to reference props. For example, instead of saying, “What are you doing with that?” say “What are you doing with that knife?”

In addition to Ashiotis’s advice, other things you can do with visually impaired actors include:

• Allowing the blind actors to write and perform their own scenes.

Working with hearing-impaired actors

It is important to be aware that deaf people do not consider themselves disabled any more than an English-speaking person in a foreign country would consider himself disabled. Angela Farrand of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. stresses that deaf people simply speak a different language, American Sign Language. “Other than the fact that they can’t hear,” she says, “they function just like hearing people.”

A more significant issue for deaf actors is speaking. Those with hearing impairments have a difficult time reproducing sounds. Not every sound in a word has a visible movement to accompany it, so it is difficult for a deaf person to mimic, an important element in language development. Some deaf actors are also uncomfortable with how they think others will judge the way their speech sounds, so they choose to have an interpreter speak for them. “It’s a personal choice,” says Farrand.

She continues by saying that often a teacher will want to learn more about how to teach a deaf student, but they are afraid to ask that student to explain what he needs. Instead, they go to the principal or other teachers. “Ask the student how to communicate with her,” says Farrand. “Everyone is different, so there isn’t one answer that will work for everyone.”

Certainly, you will want to work closely with the student’s advocate on your campus to ensure that you stay within the scope of the educational plan created to support her success. At the same time, remember that your student knows herself better than anyone else. She will tell you how to communicate with her, what she’s comfortable with, and what she cannot do.

Why must a deaf actress be in a show about deafness rather than just being the bright private investigator who happens to be deaf? The trend is changing. Deanne Bray won the title role of Sue
Thoms, F.B.Eye (a Pax cable network series), a character who was not originally intended to be deaf. Bray, who is mostly deaf but can hear some voices with the help of a hearing aid, won her role over a number of hearing actresses. Her deafness was minimally incorporated into the story (her character can read the lips of suspects under surveillance, and so on), but it is not “the story.”

Here is Farrand’s advice on working with a deaf actor:

1. Keep in mind that other than the fact that they cannot hear, your deaf actor functions just like everyone else.
2. Avoid working overhead while any deaf actor is on stage. In hearing theatre, the words “heads up” warn actors that there is movement and potential danger overhead. This may be the only difference between your hearing and non-hearing students in regard to theatre safety.
3. Deaf actors who are signing need to cheat out toward the audience slightly more than normal, especially if someone is speaking for them and needs to see their signing or if there are deaf audience members. Leaning a bit toward the audience may not look natural at first, but with practice, naturalness can be achieved.
4. It won’t work in every instance, but if possible, include the person speaking for the deaf actor in the scene, rather than perched to one side.
5. In class, avoid games in which sounds or even mouth movements are involved. Focus instead on anything visual; pantomime is always a great option.

Here are a few other things to bear in mind when working with deaf actors:
- Train hearing actors to watch and listen to the actor, not the interpreter.
- Allow actors to write and perform their own scenes.
- Keep in mind that activities that work with hearing-impaired actors may not be appropriate for visually impaired actors.

Working with mobility-impaired actors

As long as strenuous movement or athleticism is not required by the script, what is to prevent your physically impaired actor from playing just about any part? Remember, you are not asking your audience to believe Anne Frank was in a wheelchair. You are asking them not to care because it won’t make a big difference in the outcome of the story. We sometimes ask our audience to suspend their belief long enough to accept a fifteen-year-old in a wig as a seventy-five-year-old man. We can do the same thing for handicapped actors playing lead roles.

Your set will obviously be one of the first things you will need to consider when casting mobility-impaired actors. If you use any kind of unit set with pre-built ramps, those ramps were probably not built with wheelchairs in mind. The slope will very likely be too steep, putting your actor at risk of injury. The common acceptable ratio for the slope of a wheelchair ramp is 1:12, meaning for every one inch of rise, you should have twelve inches of length. Most unit sets have a rise ratio of 1:4 (that is, three inches of rise for every twelve inches of length), which is too steep a slope for an actor in a wheelchair. A ratio of 1:8 (eight feet of ramp for each one-foot rise) would likely be acceptable if your actor has average upper body strength. A ratio of 1:6 (six feet of ramp for each one foot of rise) would be acceptable if your actor has a motorized chair, if he has an assistant to help maneuver him up the ramp, or if he possesses exceptional upper body strength. For more information on ramps and slopes, see the Americans with Disabilities Act website at www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada.

Stage and set areas traveled by an actor in a wheelchair will need to be at least 36" wide. Areas in which turns must be made require a space 60" square. Also, all surfaces (including backstage) must be free of abrupt rises and obstacles. In order to accomplish this you may have to purchase an industrial cable cover. These are heavy duty mini-ramps designed to cover cables that have to be routed across a traffic area. They work better than taping the cables because they are sloped on both sides. They’ll also increase the lifespan of your cables by protecting them from heavy traffic and keeping them from getting tacky with tape residue.

As with blind and deaf actors, allow mobility-challenged actors to write and perform their own scenes. Be sure to explain fully all physical activities to your disabled actor; if he is mature, he will likely tell you point-blank whether he feels he can or cannot participate. He may even be able to suggest modifications. Monitor younger actors who may be tempted to risk their own safety. With younger, less self-assured students, it will be up to you to assess their strengths when choosing physical activities.

Working with speech-impaired actors

Unlike other disabilities, many speech impairments are correctible or improvable with time, speech therapy, or new technology. Theatre seems to be a great avenue for these improvements. Jane Fraser, president of the Stuttering Foundation of America, says that when an actor memorizes lines, he no longer has to search for the word. Sometimes the process of “word retrieval” or finding words is what exacerbates the stuttering. She adds that this may be why people like James Earl Jones can successfully and smoothly deliver a speech in character even though they may still stutter when speaking spontaneously.

You probably find that many students—even those without impairments—take your class because of its therapeutic value. Those with shyness hope to learn to cope with it and become more outgoing, and many who are not comfortable with their speech become involved with theatre as a means of surmounting the annoying problem. Even if your actor cannot overcome his impediment, acting still offers an opportunity to communicate freely to an approving audience. For this reason, the director must not allow teasing or comments that would make any student feel insecure. This is especially true of those struggling to overcome an impediment.

Work with your school’s speech therapist to discover which techniques work for students with speech impediments, what the immediate and long-term goals for each might be, and what role you can play in the process. In some cases, this
may require some modification of the assignment or the grading rubric.

Because each speech impediment is unique, there is no one activity or set of guidelines that will work for all; teachers must address each students’ needs with a personalized plan. In most circumstances, speech-impaired actors will be able to do scene work. Vocal warmups before rehearsals are particularly helpful. It’s also important to teach your non-speech-impaired actors to be patient, supportive, and understanding and never to mimic or torment speech impaired actors.

**Working with developmentally delayed actors**

Because there are so many levels of ability and such a variety of disorders, working with developmentally delayed actors may be your greatest teaching challenge—and your most rewarding. Impairments in this category affect a student’s ability to comprehend the material, to retain it, and to apply what they have learned. In many cases, the student’s ability to socialize and work alongside his non-delayed peers becomes another obstacle for the theatre teacher. Whereas most of the other actors with disabilities will merge into groups successfully, oftentimes your student with moderate to severe mental impairment will not.

As always, talk to his advocate about his specific abilities. Perhaps the student can read, but memorization is out of the question. Modify your assignment to allow the student to use his script on stage. If the student is not a reader but communicates well, work with having him listen to recordings, improvisation, and pantomime. If he is severely disabled, allow him to perform using a type of self-discovery. This means allowing the student to create a performance based only on what he can do and having nothing to do with the other students’ goals. This may mean singing nursery rhymes, dancing, experimenting with rhythms, a loose form of pantomime, telling a story, or whatever allows the student to express himself in front of an audience.

Jaron was a severely developmentally delayed student in my theatre class. He could write his name, but it required a great deal of encouragement and an entire sheet of paper. His speech was mostly clear, and he loved to talk and tell anyone who would listen about his most recent vacation and his love of rock and roll music. He could not read or memorize, but he could sing and dance, and his enthusiasm was contagious.

I had Jaron in a theatre class with a number of regular education students. I knew of his love for music, and when it became apparent he would not be able to fully complete the same assignments the other students would, I quickly made adjustments. While the others rehearsed duets, monologues, and other mainstream acting events, Jaron created lip synchs to songs from a Disney CD or his favorite rock songs. While they were blocking, he was decorating a box with strips of brightly colored paper and a glue stick. While they were polishing, he was making a mask or a hat.

He loved seeing the others perform, and he became an appreciative audience member and critic. His classmates returned the favor when Jaron performed, clapping wildly afterward. He glowed and smiled from ear to ear as he took his elaborate bows. If the performances were stretched out over several days, he performed his as often as he wanted, and often his special education team of teachers would come to watch.

Working successfully with Jaron was one of my biggest challenges. I was constantly on my toes keeping him on task with something that I hoped would hold his attention for longer than a few minutes. I realized it was worthwhile when I received a note from his parents saying that he never talked about a class as much as he did theatre and that it had replaced his Disney World vacation as the main topic at dinner each night.

Again, because there are so many levels of impairment, you will want to consider each developmentally delayed student individually when selecting activities. Many will be able to participate in all of the classroom’s games and exercises. At the same time, you will have some students who will find even the simplest games an extreme challenge. Activities that focus on mimicry are probably your most suitable choices.

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In the end, the process of inclusion of special needs students in theatre classes is simple. Let disabled actors act. Theatre is therapy. It is art. It is education. View each unique learner not as an impossibility but as an opportunity. Encourage them to explore non-disabled roles, and challenge the audience to see beyond the actors’ differences. You, the director, hold the key to the world of theatre exploration for all your young actors. Unlock and open the door to performance and self-expression, and accept your role not as just the teacher, but as one who still has great capacity for learning.

Suzi Zimmerman is a freelance writer and teacher living in Plano, Texas. Her book Introduction to Theatre Arts 2 (Meriwether Publishing, Ltd) includes additional activities and resources for actors with various disabilities. For more information on Zimmerman and her work visit www.suzizimmerman.com