

## SOME THOUGHTS ON SCRIPT CUTTING

by Carol Dietmeyer and Debra Luloff, Owen-Withee High School, Owen, WI

Even before ordering a script, it is wise to read all script descriptions carefully in the catalogs. Most do give time length and character information (number of males and females, variable cast, etc.). Use these, and the knowledge you have of your students (numbers, abilities, etc.) when finally deciding on a script for your production.

When reading an ordered script for the new season, it is, of course, preferable to choose a script that doesn't need cutting. However, if you are really taken with a script and need to cut it due to time constraints or content matter, you need to understand that you run the risk of:

1. Destroying the playwright's intent
2. Destroying the intrinsic rhythm of the play
3. BEING SUED!

Given the above, and if the script is REALLY what you've been looking for, you may decide to cut because the play is too long, there are too many characters, you are short on cash, a little of the writing is weak, or there is some objectionable material for your age group, community, school, etc.

When it comes to actually cutting the script, read the play enough times so that you have a good grasp of the play and how it works before you begin to cut. You MUST know the function of each scene, character, and speech. Then you need to do the following:

1. Read the play aloud, INCLUDING the stage directions in order to get a rough timing.
2. Read it again -- see how much script five minutes is so you have an idea of how many lines of dialogue you need to delete. Try NOT to have to cut more than ten minutes if at all possible.
3. Do your cutting BEFORE YOU CAST A PLAY!

Please remember that each choice has consequences which you must be prepared to accept. So before you begin to cut, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the final DRAMATIC result I am after?
2. What do I want the dramatic impact on the audience to be?

No two people will have the same answers to these questions, but you MUST answer them before you begin.

What do I cut? There are five possibilities in deciding what to cut within a play. They are:

1. A scene
2. A character
3. Dialogue within a scene
4. Lines within a single speech
5. Business within a scene

Some of the questions you will want to ask yourself when you look at the possibilities might be:

1. If you pull out a scene, have you tampered with the ending? Cheated the audience out of a foreshadowing event or plot advance? Character delineation? Have you destroyed the interior rhythm of the play?
2. If you eliminate a character, have you seriously changed the author's intent? Have you changed the balance of the play? What is lost to the play with the loss of that character?
3. If you cut dialogue in a scene, what happens to the rhythm of the scene? Of the play?
4. If you shorten an individual speech or eliminate it, what have you done to that character and his/her relationship to the rest of the characters?
5. If you delete business in a scene, does that interfere with character interpretation? Have you deleted an important clue in exposition?

Once you've accepted the consequences of your cuts, make them and read the play aloud again to see how it flows. If you are content with it, cast it and block it, but before the cast memorizes it, get a colleague (preferable more than one!) to come into a rehearsal and watch and listen. Ask him/her to make notes on any questions regarding story line, character development, and anything else that crosses their minds.

Often the cast themselves will see any problems with these concerns even when you yourself do not see them. (These are their characters, remember!) Do NOT hesitate to ask the cast if they see any problems. Then, if you do need to make any other changes, you have done so before the cast has memorized lines and/or become too familiar with the blocking.

Once the play is memorized, have someone else do the prompting and YOU watch and listen to the flow and the visual continuity. Does everything seen and heard on the stage make sense? if not, why not?

