35th Annual Illinois High School Theatre Festival

Executive Director 2010 - Exit Report

Submitted by Karen M. Hall

To begin with, words cannot adequately express how proud and grateful I am to this committee. While our motto was to leave this Festival a little better than we found it – I believe we exceed that standard. Every committee brought great energy and commitment to the process. It is through everyone’s creativity and diligence that we were able to create such an A MAH ZING event.

Here are some reflections on our past year together:

FESTIVAL THEME: Master Class

I think this was a great jumping off point for this Festival – we were able to incorporate it in many ways and it gave us a chance to try something new at this year’s Festival. The Master Classes themselves were well received by the Festival attendees. It wasn’t an easy process to create this from scratch but we made it through in one piece. There were 20 classes offered – almost all reached their registration capacity. Providing small stipends to the presenters worked wonders to encourage some interesting people who might not normally come to Festival to come share their talents with us. In hindsight – it would have been nice to have gotten this organized more along the lines of our original deadlines. Also – there could have been more tech master classes. And it would have been beneficial to find more ways to encourage people to go observe a Master Class even if they weren’t taking one.

REGISTRATION: The new registration policy was a welcome addition to the Festival. While a few of the veteran schools were originally a bit miffed at the idea of having to turn ALL of their materials in for their registration # to be assigned – at least we were getting their materials in a more timely fashion. One or two more years of this and I think there we be no more complaints. Don’t change it back – both Conference Services at ISU and Conferences & Institutes at U of I really need this policy.

It’s time to look at new forms and web-based registration. The old File-Maker files aren’t serving us very well any more – and we are the only client who uses them at ISU. Work with ISU as they get their new registration software to ensure a smooth transition.

BUDGET: We were able to keep very close to our budget – there were only a few small surprises along the way. A suggestion for the future – you must think ahead about every line item and make adjustments accordingly in March – otherwise you are stuck (sort of) with what you have. Two places to take a look at: Festival Program and Food for the Committee. We are bursting at the seams with a 60 page program. I would like to have had space to adequately describe all of the Master Classes and presenters but we did not have the budget to cover it. Also – add some money to the budget for the Festival Committee meals. The Festival should be covering lunch and dinner on the Thursday of Festival for the committee. It’s too hard for us to get away to eat and bringing in a meal would just be a good thing all around.

OPENING CEREMONY: Was a big hit with students and sponsors alike. Seth Rudetsky’s Deconstructing Broadway show was a great way to kickoff the Festival and set the tone for the theme of the weekend. He also taught two Master Classes Friday that were a big success. He also had a blast performing for and working with our students. As he left he wanted to know about other opportunities like our Festival because he really felt like this was such a good experience for kids. He also gave us a nice shout out the following Monday in his Playbill.com column.

TECHNOLOGY / WEBSITE: We tried to make this more user-friendly this year and I think we succeeded. It was much easier to navigate and we posted a lot more information there for sponsors. The more we can infuse technology into the Festival the easier it will be for us to do our jobs. Amber Patterson found a way for us to send bulk emails very quickly (24 turn-around) to sponsors. It was very handy to use to promote the Master Classes and to remind sponsors of deadlines. If all of the databases could get cleaned-up – this could be used for other committees as well. The Long-Range Planning Committee must continue its mission to provide a new website for the Festival. This is a necessity.

ITA POLICY CHANGES: There were many new policies this year – all of which helped make this Festival easier to run. It was hard to get some of them up and running at first but once we did they were extremely helpful in establishing some clear guidelines on how some important Festival business should be run. The long-range planning committee should continue their work.

FESTIVAL DONATIONS AND ADVERTISING: The All-State had a number of donors this year as did the Festival. Designlab built an entire light lab for workshops and Master Classes that was located in the Ballroom. Insider’s Entertainment donated the DJ services for the dance and Illinois Thespians sponsored two Master Classes. We had a number of requests to put ads in this year’s Festival book as it was done last year at U of I. However, we were not able to follow-through on this because it was too last minute. There needs to be some clear standards established as to what kind of acknowledgement needs to be made for people who donate services, money or goods to the Festival. There hasn’t been in the past. I found myself scrambling at the last minute trying to find out what had been done previously and there were no clear guidelines. Set those in March and include them in the Exhibitor mailing in the fall so donors know exactly what their donation will get them. Also – ITA has now established much clearer procedures for when the Festival receives donations.

DESIGNLAB LIGHT LAB: This was a welcome addition to the Festival. It did provide excellent opportunities for our students that they normally don’t get at the Festival. But be aware that it was not an easy process. Jessica Buczek and I spent a large amount of time working through the details with the company. Designlab has also stated that it would like to continue hosting the light lab at future Festivals and has asked for the right of first refusal if we would like another lab next year and in years to follow. I have told Larry Schoeneman at Designlab that this is a promise I could not make but it is one for future Executive Directors to consider.

FESTIVAL DATABASES: We have lots and lots of lists. And it’s time to consolidate them and make them up to date. Exhibits, Play Selection and Workshops could really benefit from some attention to these.

FESTIVAL EVALUATIONS: We have received some good feedback from all of the people who filled these out. Please take time to read what Conference Services has compiled for you. A suggestion for next year: Carve time out at the September meeting to create the evaluations you want to use at the Festival. When we got around to this after the Thanksgiving meeting we did not have enough time to give this very important task our full attention. Also - organizing this task is something that the Executive Direct elect might want to take on. After all – the feedback received is really for the benefit of their Festival.

MAILINGS: Our publications looked nice this year, especially with the Festival logo. Please take a look at the ITA suggestions for editing timelines. The ITA rep needs to be included in the process sooner and be sure to clarify what they what their role is to be – a final look to give their stamp of approval or do they actually want to help with the editing process. We weren’t expecting Mel to want to help us with the editing this winter so our quick turn-around to the printer was a bit of a surprise to her. It’s also time to rework the Exhibitor mailing. It’s hard to follow and confusing as to what you actually are registering for (auditions, exhibits, and workshop presenter) and how many people you get for what amount of money. And there are some inequities as to who needs to be an ITA member and who does not.

COMMITTEES: I was so proud of the work that each and every person did. You are all true MASTERS☺ Each committee’s exit report truly reflects their opinions of their work on the Festival. Please take note of their successes and their suggestions for improvement. I will only offer a few brief comments about each group.

All-State: The All-State production of Urinetown was a pleasure to observe throughout the entire process – from the first day of auditions to the final unloading of the truck Sunday afternoon at Maine East. The staff worked hard to keep the lines of communication open and put students first – not their egos. Judy Klingner and Mark Begovich make some excellent observations and suggestions in their exit reports. I concur with Mark that the All-State account needs to come with a debit or credit card that the producer has control of. It gets too difficult to keep asking the ITA Treasurer for checks every weekend. And when the Treasurer is no longer in close proximity to the rehearsal site it will become even more difficult.

Auditions: This ran very smoothly this year. We had one of our largest groups of auditionees ever. Thanks to a great tone and great organization they stayed on schedule and many of the college reps gave great praise to Laura/i - that’s Laur**a** Gilbert and Laur**i** McCleneghan - for their work – saying that it was the best run audition process ever.

Exhibits: This was also a great success. Returning to the Ballroom layout from 2006 was a help. We had a number of new Exhibitors this year. Jessica Buczek and Brian Alexander did a great job trying to find new vendors and worked hard to get previous vendors registered on time. I will echo the statement in both the Exhibits and Workshops exit report – the closer these two committees work together – the stronger they will be. The signage in the Ballroom can be looked at for future Festivals. It was hard to tell where to enter the line for the swap desk and we were mobbed on Friday morning.

Hospitality and Mentors: Many thanks to Judy Swiger for all of her hard work. The new sponsors seemed well prepared for the Festival and Judy graciously answered their questions along the way. Judy has some great ideas to use for next year’s new sponsors. There were a few comments that the spread in the Hospitality Room isn’t as nice at ISU as it is at U of I. In some ways I would concur. This is a budget issue – we got what we could for what we had budgeted. I would have raised that line item had I realized what the cost would have been to make it match the spread at U of I.

Play Selection: Kudos to Jeremy Morton and Kevin Phelan for all of their hard-work. They did an excellent job organizing and running this extremely difficult task. The way they infused technology – especially Google docs and Google forms – into their work really made some excellent changes in the efficiency of this committee. I believe this was the committee that made the most changes to the way it is run and it did so for the better. We do need a downstate Regional Director for the future.

Promotions: Demetrios Pappageorge and Greg Chew did an excellent job this year. They really took the advice from the previous year’s committee and used that to help with their decision making. The logo looked fabulous on every item. Getting a good logo is the key to selling the merchandise. They sold almost every item – and imagine how quickly they would have sold out if all of the registered participants had actually been at the Festival.

Workshops: As always there were tremendous opportunities for each Festival participant. Andy Sinclair and Susan Gorman did a great job organizing this committee especially with the addition of the Master Classes at the Festival. They have offered some great advice in their exit report.

Student Committee: Jeff Graham and Tom Skobel did an impressive job heading this up this year. As I travelled the campus all weekend I noticed that this year’s monitors were some of the most dedicated and helpful people I have ever seen at the Festival. They did a great job organizing this very large task.

Graduate Credit: Thanks to Sandi Zielinski for organizing all of this and Cyndee Brown for being the spokesperson at Festival. There are some significant changes as to how this is being organized that have been coordinated by ISU and the ITA. It would be helpful to publish this next year more prominently in our mailings.

Historian/Documentarian/Box Office: As usual, Kurt Steinhauser was a wealth of information and graciously helps keep this Festival running. We tried a new procedure for ticketing the All-State this year by having the Box Office at Braden print out the tickets for us. I don’t know if it actually saves us time in the long run but I do know I am ever so grateful I did not have to put the tickets in order as we have had to do at previous ticketing parties. The satellite swap desk also continued to be a success this year.

ITA Liaison: Many thanks to Aimee-Lynn Newlan for all she does for the Festival. She really does keep the lines of communication flowing. She has submitted some suggestions for dealing with donors next year that should be addressed. Also – it is important to clarify with the ITA who should be ITA members and by what date should that registration be received. There are some grey areas here that need to be resolved for future Festivals.

Local Arrangements/ISU: The Illinois High School Theatre Festival is very lucky to have ISU Conference Services as its partner. They truly know how to make this Festival work. Amber Patterson and Teri Durango do such an exceptional job making this event happen for us. Their dedication and organization are phenomenal. I already miss my daily (hourly?) emails from Amber. Amber and Teri have submitted a very thoughtful exit report with great suggestions for improvement – please read through them carefully and act on their advice – they know what they are talking about☺

Executive Director Elect: Larry Williams was a true rock that I could lean on throughout this entire process. It is so important to keep those lines of communication open. I appreciate his willingness to collaborate on decisions that affected not just the 2010 Festival – but future Festivals as well. I wish you the best of luck next year. I hope you will find the process as rewarding as I did. And know that I will be a phone call away if you need me.

WEATHER: I save this gem for last. I admit – I am a bit of a control freak. And the weather was out of my control – which definitely threw me for a loop on Thursday. Thanks to everyone who helped keep me focused and calm and who let me know that things would be alright. I was very relieved when people started walking in the door around 4 PM on Thursday. I learned a few things in the process – most importantly - when your committee is as on-the-ball as this one was you can rally through any problems. We had two shows cancel and many workshops due to the handful of Exhibitors who cancelled. Having gone through this experience I do have a number of suggestions on how to handle this type of problem for future Festivals. We do need to make the cancellation policy a bit clearer in the registration materials. If the Festival is on – we don’t refund your money. I will write a detailed weather emergency guide for future Festival directors to consider. Most importantly – don’t let schools rely on IDOT for their road conditions information. It was the schools who used IDOT as their source of information that missed the most of the Festival. There’s a part of me that wants a do-over of this Festival without the weather problems just so all of those missing participants could see what an amazing event they missed.

To conclude, it has been my honor and privilege to serve as the 2010 Executive Director of the Illinois High School Theatre Festival. This event is so important for our students and it is our mission to offer them the best Festival experience possible. The Festival is only as strong as the committee who runs it – and this committee could bench-press 1,000,000 pounds with one hand tied behind its back. Each of you should be so proud of your contributions – you were all the true Masters of this Master Class. I learned so much from each of you and I am so thankful for all of the countless hours and immense talent you have so graciously given to the Illinois High School Theatre Festival. It is because of you that our students were able to – once again – experience an unforgettable weekend of Theatre.

Respectfully Submitted,

Karen M. Hall

Executive Director, 2010 Illinois High School Theatre Festival