

KEYS TO A GREAT ASSEMBLY

I have been on stage for over 15 years and I have performed about 100 shows a year specifically for schools for nearly seven years. Throughout my travels I have been to the tiniest back rooms of VFW halls to huge auditoriums and casino ballrooms. One of the frustrating things for me as a performer is the number of problems and pitfalls that could be avoided with just a little thought and planning. It is equally frustrating for the audience, regardless of age, to be put into a situation where they cannot possibly be expected to gain any knowledge or entertainment because of simple disregard for their environment. So below I have listed some basic considerations that will help make my show work in your venue. These are somewhat specific to my theatrical one-man show "Dirt", but there are principles contained which apply to all events where there is a speaker and audience. These may seem rudimentary but, trust me, they unfortunately need to be emphasized and repeated.

1. A Stage. There needs to be a clearly defined and clearly visible area that is only for the performers. If there is a band concert or school play going on some movement of chairs, music stands, and set pieces may be necessary.
2. No gymnasiums. A gym is where you have a pep rally. A gym is where you scream, yell, and run around. It is not where an audience gathers to listen and watch a theatrical event. My show rarely has the same impact nor am I ever totally comfortable as a performer in a gymnasium. Can I make it work it? Maybe...if you:
 - i. Have everyone seated on one side
 - ii. Use chairs instead of bleachers if possible and don't ever expect students to sit on the floor. Have you ever sat for an hour on a bench? You would be insulted as an adult if someone expected you to be comfortable on a bleacher or wood floor so why do you expect listening and attentive behavior from young people if put in the same situation.
 - iii. Have good acoustics and a decent sound system. I would say this occurs in about 10% of gyms that I have been in
 - iv. Control the lighting. I do not do a speech. I do not do a presentation. I am doing a SHOW. A play. When you ask the audience to see a play they must "willfully suspend their disbelief." This is why cinemas and theaters turn out the lights when the show begins. Imagine going to see a movie and they leave the lights on the whole time? The audience should be dark the stage area should be lit.
3. A decent sound system. Has your school's sound system been there since the Eisenhower administration? Yikes! I personally travel with my own wireless mic and mixer so I just plug into whatever PA the school provides. All I require is a standard microphone cable (XLR or 1/4") and a power supply for my system. It can be helpful to have a custodian or AV person available to help me get things set up if the soundboard is hidden or complex.
4. The performance or stage area should be lit so the person performing can be seen. Including facial expressions. The audience area should be dark. Remember we are creating that old dramatic idea of the "willful suspension of disbelief." Again, it can be helpful to have a custodian or AV person available to help me get things set up if the lighting board is complex.
5. When seating the audience give them plenty of time to transition classes to the show. The show "Dirt" is an hour long. If you block only an hour of time and it takes 10 minutes to physically seat the audience that leaves me only a maximum of 50 minutes.
6. Teacher & Student Behavior. I can count on one hand the number of behavioral problems I've had in 6 years. Regardless of that, please make sure the teachers or administrators sit WITH the audience. Also, please do not allow teachers to have their laptops flipped open working

on stuff during the show. Its disrespectful to the performer and it sends a mixed message to the students.

7. Have a teacher or administrator introduce the assembly. There needs to be someone to set the tone. Even if you are planning on students introducing me personally, a teacher or someone in authority needs to address the audience to settle things down first.
8. Do not allow a free-for-all as the students are being seated. I am always bummed out when I see students running into the auditorium. Yelling across the building to their friends. Throwing things. Kicking their feet up on the chairs. Standing around the back wall. I guarantee if you allow the students to transition like this it will take at least 10 minutes to get them settled down and ready for a show.
9. If the auditorium has a band or music rehearsal space nearby please do not allow the band to rehearse during the show. This may seem comical that I have to write this...Trust me. Its happened. A lot. Recently the audience and I heard all of Beethoven's Ninth during a show. Drums, Tubas, Gongs and all. Not one teacher or administrator asked the band to stop.
10. Please do not allow school announcements during the show. Its a bummer when I reach a poignant moment in the show and the moment is lost to "THERE WILL BE NO SOCCER PRACTICE TODAY" blaring from the speakers.
11. Do not allow students and teachers to leave before the end of the show. The show is meant to be seen in its entirety. The stories and messages are all tied up and come together rather powerfully as the show builds to it's climax and end. Also, it is distracting to the audience and myself to see people walking around and doors opening during the show. I can understand that some students have work-study or commitments. Simply have them sit toward the back and leave in an inconspicuous way if needed.
12. Create a good "vibe" before the show. Try not to yell at the students or (the worst) call them "boys and girls" before the show. Keep things upbeat, respectful, and try not to telegraph to much about the show or throw me under the bus. Examples I have experienced. "OK settle down...You know kids...Every year thousands of young people DIE because of drugs and alcohol...And now please welcome your speaker..." One time, I was doing a show before a prom and the principal did this. "Before we begin I need to announce to all Juniors going to the prom that because of financial mistakes you all owe an additional \$200 in fees for your prom." How do I, as a performer, follow that?
13. In closing, the following is what I personally require for equipment:
 - 3 chairs
 - 1 small table or desk
 - 1 bottle of water
 - Extension cord or power supply
 - 1 WIRED microphone. I will plug my sound equipment into the existing sound system through the provided microphone cable input. XLR or 1/4" will work.

I hope this helps you plan and I look forward to a great show in your community.

-John R. Morello

