

Seven Steps to Successful Skits

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A group of boys on stage or around the campfire are putting on a skit. Most of them are inaudible. Those you can hear forget their lines. The punch line is smothered in the actors' giggles. Then there is an embarrassing silence before it dawns on the audience that the thing is over, and a patter of polite applause begins.

You've seen it, I know. It was my troop putting on a skit! After a couple of "bombs". I did a little research and asked some local drama people for advice. The suggestions I received should make our future skits more successful.

1. Provide only an outline, not written lines. The book *Arranging Plays for Children* advises you simply to sketch in the outline of a play or skit. Children are natural actors who will happily improvise lines, and it really doesn't matter if they use exactly the same words each time. In fact, this takes away the pressure to be "correct" and reduces anxiety. The words become the child's own words, and he will remember them more easily.

2. Hold real "auditions". Bryan Way a noted British drama instructor says it's a good idea to do some speech training. Often, neither children nor Scouters realize the effect a roomful of people or a crackling campfire and wind in the trees will have on acoustics. A skit that sounds fine in rehearsal can be lost in performance.

One way to practise projecting the voice is to have your actors rehearse standing five or 10 metres apart so that they have to "call out" to each other. Another method is to rehearse outdoors, with someone standing 15 or 20 metres away from the group to check sound levels. Your actors need to learn to project their voices without shouting. Most children can do it easily, and these kinds of rehearsals may encourage them.

3. Deliver the punch line. Parents at the "bombs" I mentioned earlier told me that the boys came through loud and clear, except when it was time for the punchline. Was it nerves or excitement that made them mumble their delivery from the back of the stage? I don't know, but now that I'm on watch for the problem, I can work to help them correct it. I will be sure the actors move upstage, face the audience and deliver the punchline clearly.

4. Keep props to a minimum. The play's the thing and, for kids, the props often get in the way. I once saw a group do *The Box Factory* having each Cub carry a real cardboard box. The rustling, fumbling, and dropping of boxes interfered with the skit.

English teacher Mary Burrige of Thorsby Jr. High School reminded me that, if props are absolutely essential they need to be big enough that the audience - including the people at the far side of the campers or in the back row of the hall - can see them. Homemade caricature props are usually effective.

5. Use a dramatic punctuation mark to end the skit. I recently watched a student production where the performers just got up and walked off stage. It left the audience wondering whether this was part of the show, the end of the performance, or a sign that all of them had suddenly taken ill. At the time, we weren't at all sure that applause was appropriate but an alert emcee managed to smooth out things.

When I mentioned the experience to drama teacher Laurie Putrice of Breton High School, he suggested that the problem would not have come up if the group had simply taken a bow before leaving.

6. Position the action. Too often, children forget they have an audience. They talk to each other instead of to the audience. They turn their backs and the audience can't see important gestures or props. You need to remind them frequently with questions such as: "How will you stand so that the audience can see what you're holding?" or "Will anyone know what you're doing if you stand behind Simon?" Generally, questions like these are better than directions because they make the performers think about their actions and the reasons for them.

7. Be prepared for the unexpected. Children are unpredictable. "You never know what the munchkins are going to do," said Gerry Prost, a drama teacher at Thorsby High School. "They love to ad lib. You really have to keep your ears open to hear what they're saying.

And he's right. Here's a case in point.

As the innkeeper, the boy had only one line in the nativity play.

"No room at the inn!" he told Mary and Joseph gruffly.

They asked again.

"No room at the inn!" he repeated forcefully. Joseph explained that they had travelled very far and were very tired, and that Mary was about to have a baby.

There was an unrehearsed pause. "You can have my room. Mary and Joseph," blurted out the little innkeeper.

A teacher with her ears open closed the curtain.

I'm sure nobody was upset by the changed ending. I'll bet there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Greybeard is the Scouting name of 1st Thorsby Troop Scouter Tom Gray, Sunnybrook, Alta. Try his tips when you help your members prepare entertainment for a family or group party next month. In the Skits cut-out on page 35, you'll find Two Original Christmas Skits by Greybeard to get you going.