

## TEACHING EXPRESSION USING MELODRAMA

**AGES:** Middle School, High School

### DESCRIPTION

To teach students how to express emotions onstage by identifying and practicing these emotions, investigating examples of melodrama and eventually writing and rehearsing an act in a melodramatic style.

### MATERIALS

- Journals, pencils, paper
- Prop, set, costume pieces (can be brought in by students)
- A video of a typical melodrama (ex: "Dudley Do-Right", silent films, Royal Shakespeare Company's, Miramax's film *Nicholas Nickleby*)
- Tv/Monitor/VCR or DVD player

### FULL LESSON PLAN

- Students will be informed that they will be writing and acting in a melodrama as well as creating the script for that play.
- Ask the class if they have seen a "Dudley Do-Right" cartoon from the *Bullwinkle and Rocky Show*, a silent film where the actors use their bodies and faces to convey information to the audience, or a classic "cliffhanger" serial. It is not necessary for students to have seen these; you should, however, have at least one example of the genre to show the students.
- Explain that all of these are examples of melodrama and explain what melodrama is (theater style popular in the 1800s in America, tales of good vs. evil, hero/heroine good and pure of intent while villains are bad/merciless/evil, exaggerated and showy, may seem silly now etc.)
- Show a short video/dvd that demonstrates this style. Ask students to watch for actions that look unnatural/exaggerated and to jot them down. Where the characters scared? Mean? Overwhelmed? Happy? Perhaps have some of the students model what they saw.
- Explain the nature of actors from that time - their classical training, use of body language as a form of expression. Have some movements and emotions expressed (and see if the students have any further ideas):
  - 1) *Grief*: head down, shoulders rounded, hands cupped the face. Raising the shoulders up and down, with a sobbing noise, is optional.
  - 2) *Fear*: face turned to the right side, with the right hand to the mouth, fingers curled under touching the top of the palm.
  - 3) *Horror*: eyes wide, mouth open, both hands to the cheeks with the fingers extended.

4) *Fortitude*: body straight, chest up, hand to forehead, with the palm facing the audience and fingers curled slightly.

5) *Love Expressed (Male)*: chest held high, right hand crosses the chest and rests on the upper left over the heart, then opens out to the right and the loved one.

6) *Love Expressed (Female)*: chest held high, head cocked a bit to the side, opposite leg goes out with foot pointed, hands under the chin, fingers entwined and bent at the first and second knuckles (almost praying), hands go toward the loved one, smile on face.

7) *Evil Planning*: one eyebrow up, the other down, a grimace on the face and hands rubbing together, if its a really good plan, then the fingers twiddle.

8) *Evil Sneaking*: shoulders hunched over, arm raised to cover the nose on down, eyes free to shift around the room, legs bent on the cross of the stage.

9) *Pride*: chest up, hands with knuckles to both hips, legs slightly apart, a balanced look.

10) *Anger*: both hands shoulder high, eyebrows pushed toward each other, face tense with a grimace, hands in tight fists.

11) *Overwhelmed*: chin up bringing the face to look up, one arm dropped limp to the side, the other hand open with palm towards the audience on the top of the forehead.

- Explain how actors of that time were given "lines of business" - cast as a certain character type (villain, hero, old man etc) - and how they learned to speak, walk, dress and behave as this character type.

- Ask students to think about elements that are needed to write a play (plot, setting etc) and that there must be a conflict that may or may not be resolved.

- Break the class into groups and assign a writer (records information), director (oversees production/keeps on task), composer (writes music), spokesperson (reports group activities to the class) and a designer (costumes/props/set pieces). All other group members are actors (roles above can act as well).

- They should then outline a short melodramatic skit, identify its characters, describe its setting, write dialogue and actions - perhaps improvised first and then solidified through use of the acting style gestures they learned earlier.

### **Assessment:**

Collect the copies of scripts/worksheets for a paper record of the group work. If possible, videotape the performances. Assess:

- Styles that were used in the presentation
- Music, where appropriate
- Cooperation within group
- Props, costumes, set pieces
- Emotion using melodramatic gestures and facial expressions