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As with any competition, there are a number of rules and regulations that must be enforced, although the biggest of all is the term - each school has a certain amount of time. The show itself has 40 minutes left; if the school exceeds that time even for a second, they are disqualified. In addition, schools are allowed five minutes, during which time to erect their kit before the curtain rises, and five minutes to demolish after the curtain falls. Again, if any limit is exceeded, the result is disqualification. This year, nine host schools: Bonnie Eagle High School; Brewer's High School; Caribou High School; Lawrence High School; MDI High Schools; Medomack Valley High Schools; Mount Blue High School; Scouhegan High School; and Thornton Academy. There are two levels for participating schools - one for larger and/or more established programs and the other for new and/or smaller programs. Parts in each tier considered the best judges for each region will then move on to the state competition, which will be held on March 22 and 23. The Class A State Competition will be held at Camden Hills Regional High School; The Class B event will take place at Ellsworth High School. In the past, I have been fortunate enough to serve as a judge several times at these competitions, both at the regional and state level, although not for several years. Worse luck for me, because as an art lover in general and theater in particular, there is nothing so inspiring as watching young people come in their own and take the power of the stage. And it's not just the students. There are dozens of invested and inspiring teachers and administrators guiding these teens on their respective trips. These are educators who carry a deep and unchanging passion for what they do, helping to expose students to theatrical magic. It is a commitment that is sometimes difficult and often stressful, and yet they lead, leading these former thespians forward with grace and ingenuity. As part of the coverage of the event, I turned to a number of nearby high school drama directors who have a single in this year's competition. Each of them - Deb Hammond of Bangor High, Rich Kimball of Brewer High, Jasmine Ireland of Ellsworth High and Katie Toole of Hermon High - shared some of their feelings about their current single-issue, their history with the Maine Drama Festival and what the festival means to the hundreds of students who participate each year.

- TME: How long have you been directing the eponymous film for this event? Deb Hammond: I've been doing this for eight years. Rich Kimball: This is my 20th year of directing singles and my 25th year of doing drama at Brewer. We do a lot of shows, but single is always the highlight of my year. Jasmine Ireland: I have been directing one act for EHS since 2007. Hey, Katie Toole: This is going to be my fifth year. Maine Edge: Tell me about the show that you're doing for this year's competition. Toole: This year we will screen from Epic Proportions, a full-length farce by Larry Cohen and David Crane (one of the creators of Friends). We often choose a one-to-one scenario of the game, which can be executed in its entirety, but this year we received permission from the publisher to play parts of a longer play that we liked. It's about what would happen if DeMille's biblical epic films were stymied by deep insolvency. Indeed, we are talking about a couple of brothers who stumble into the world of cinema, acting as superfluous. Kimball: We're doing a show called Widows and Vegetables by Michael Scanlan. This is a commedia dell'arte piece that is a very stylized form of theater. There are stock symbols that have become a standard part of modern comedy. For example, Mr. Burns's character on The Simpsons is a direct descendant of Pantalone commedia. It's a fun part with a lot of physicality, but also a very challenging task for high school actors as they try to play these broad types and incorporate traditional movements and styles. Ireland: This year we will produce the Little Prince, who I adapted myself from the book by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. TME: Describe the standard process for compiling your show - choosing a script, listening, rehearsing, etc. how does it work for you? And what is the total timeline? Kimball: I usually start looking at show opportunities in the fall when I know what we have for talent. I try to choose something that will work with the people we have and better demonstrate my abilities. It's like being a coach... you can't run the same system year after year, regardless of the staff. You have to be flexible and ready to play to your strengths. We auditioned in early December and started rehearsals soon after. Like any other principal, we are constantly working around schedule conflicts because students who do drama tend to participate in everything—music, athletics, student council, jobs--- this year our students have done a lot of work on their own, in style research, watch some videos, and they all learned their lines very early in the process, making leadership that much easier. Toole: I've been reviewing scripts for a year, based on the recommendations of colleagues or an interesting review I could read. I have theatre classes sometimes to read variations together as a class. I have discussed with students many times that I would like to find texts that will challenge them and build new skills that they cannot get other opportunities for work. There is no same pressure to use titles that are recognizable to the audience as it might be if we had to fill our seats to raise funds, so everything goes: classic, modern, theater for a young audience. We made Shakespeare, we put our actors in deep space, and last year we even went metaphysical with Thornton Wilder. Students appreciate that can sink your teeth in, characteristic of exercise, and we skate on the floor a lot. You will love it. In the fall I will decide on a text with my main based on the expected resources. It is also important that the text meets community standards and represents the school well. Usually we have scheduled our auditions for December or early January when we are working on our musical until November. Then we will rehearse 3-5 times a week, mostly on weekdays, 2-3 hours at a time. In the beginning we take the time to analyze the script and do exercises to create an esprit de enclosure. Often I invite a guest speaker or do actions related to setting up a script for more information. In later weeks we are working on accuracy because with a show that has a strict deadline, the potential for errors and injuries really needs to be minimized by having a safe show that works like a clock. On all this all the work that needs to be done to go from a naked scene to a production that will transport the audience: building and searching for props, creating a set. When the school is empty during the February holidays, it's a valuable time to do things (this year we made up about 20 hours between rehearsal and stage art). Most of the cast and crew put in time outside of rehearsal to help with the process. Ireland: To be honest, every year the process is a little bit different. I had seasons when I knew what I wanted to do years ahead of time and started in September and then events like last year when we started rehearsing one show, got the right pulled and had to start over in January! One thing that is consistent, is that my choice of script is always based on two things: that I'm passionate about this story, and that it will showcase the core group of actors that I know I'll have. Usually we start rehearsals right after the Christmas break. TME: What are the things you love about this contest? What things you want can be improved? Kimball: It's a great communication experience for students (and adults) and it's so much fun to be in a festival setting with other young people who are talented and passionate about what they do. What can be improved? I would like to see the focus on acting. Some schools have budgets and staff to create amazing and highly professional sets and complex lighting areas while other schools rehearse in gyms, cafeterias and classrooms. An adult can design and build a beautiful set and lighting plan that will definitely add to the overall impact of the production as it is performed. Acting, as soon as the show begins, is in the hands of students. For me, it has to be what's judged. At the same time, there are very talented theatre students, and I would not like to close their efforts. It just becomes difficult to determine what made by students and what was done by adults. Hammond: I like the fact that students get a chance to see other schools that share love Theatre. I think the biggest drawback is that it's competition, not just theatre celebration. Because it's a competition, I think it forces the process, so it seems to be less intelligence. I love that kids get feedback and that they get to ask questions of the judges. Last year students were not given time to ask questions and it really bothered me. I'm glad they brought that aspect back. Toole: I love the festival aspect. If you can forget for a moment that only one school from each class can go to the next level, this is the most valuable educational opportunity in the theater that we have every year. I don't need to push students to analyze, compare and contrast: they do it automatically because all they want to do is talk about what they've seen. We see a huge variety of productions over two days, each with different approaches, and each one teaches us something about performing or scenic or dramatic literature we didn't know before. Students love to meet theatrical children from other schools, and they openly admire the achievements of their peers. And like I said, there's no part of the production that students aren't involved in - it's ultimately run by them (no adults can help during the performance itself), they learn a lot of new skills and they have a strong sense of ownership of the product. Because of all this, it can be a little difficult to balance the festival against competition. There are moments I would like the festival to be just an exhibition of everyone's work with award-winning feedback. But the competitive aspect is very motivating, so I wouldn't want to lose that. I want the general public to know more about the festival and make time to visit - there is always a lot to see and appreciate because the show is very polished. Skip the binge watch because it will be there when you return - you can binge-watch 8 or 9 plays in one weekend rather than Ireland: I love being able to get to see the weekend theater with my students. There are so many great learning moments! It's also nice to be able to spend some time with colleagues at the event. There are very few of us theater educators in the state, so I think we often feel isolated (i.e. I don't really get to department meetings ;) What do you think should improve? I think some of the rules are a bit strict. However, our program is known to push the envelope, and has a few rules in its honor (laughs). Unfortunately, there are so many opportunities for full disqualification. TME: There are some significant logistical hurdles that need to be cleared - deadlines for tweaking and demolition and a hard cap on the length of the show. Do you remember any particularly creative ways in which you tackled these obstacles, either for this show or the previous one? Ireland: Yes! My creativity Genius! They have engineered all sorts of amazing things over the years. I think I'm thinking. The favorite will always be the pool that we created for Metamorphosis. We had to fill the pool with more than 125 gallons of water in five minutes. Joe Lewis, our stage designer managed to make a drilling rig filled with gravity. I went down to the pool and boomed - the audience got to watch it fill up. It was a really incredible moment. In addition, our technical team has its own set of rehearsals each year in order to choreograph and practice tuning and demolish. Hammond: Yes, sometimes you have to be creative. We have two giant trees this year to make sure we can transport them, get them to the facility's host site and make sure they are light enough for children to be able to handle them... was a challenge. I haven't had a technical director, for the most part, in the past, but I have one now and it was absolutely amazing. Kimball: We tend to keep our sets pretty simple, so we've never been against time limits on this, but we've got right on edge a few times with the show's 40-minute limit. For several years we built and rehearsed escape plans. One of them, during the Complete works by William Shakespeare, saw the stage manager work on with seconds to go, announce that she had almost enough of the show, and call for blackouts, just before we crossed the limit. The ultimate escape is to give our lighting operator the power to go on a blackout on our own if we get closer. Fortunately, we only had to do it once or twice in 20 years. Toole: I was lucky enough to work with students and technical directors who made a very smart problem solving. For Arab nights, we had a massive gazebo that could fold into this relatively small pile of 2x4s hinged - but was the gorgeous part of the set with smooth curtains when it was set up. For The Kaleidoscope, we wanted to have an unexpected transition from the interior of the space shuttle to the expanses of space after the explosion, and all this had to be presented on stage. Seven very brave young women all sat squeezed under a set hidden from the audience for the first part of the show and then lifted the pieces set away in the dark when the explosion occurred under a black light. Our students light and sound technicians have a great track record of creating a commendable atmosphere with these elements when the set itself is limited. With so many scenes in our current show, we had to consider a set that may seem very flexible and suitable for many different places, and I think we have achieved this, even with all the components somewhat simple. There's nothing more satisfying than when you run your load a couple of times and find that yes, you can actually get the whole show set up in less than five minutes. But before that, it's pretty hair-enhancing. Downloading out tends to go a little faster, but you don't want anyone hurt or anything to leave TME: How the competitive aspect of the event affects how you and your students are students work itself? What do you consider the most valuable/important takeaway for students in a competition like this one? Toole: I think the pressure you've been asked about may be the biggest impact. There is far more concern about whether we will meet all the rules to avoid disqualification than there is about how we will stack up against other shows, in part because we don't know what other schools will bring until we see them. Even with the standardization that the competition requires, the dramatic festival recordings are so different from each other, it's a bit like comparing apples and oranges. And it's rare in the real world that someone performs a play to compete, rather than just entertain and move the audience. So I stress with the students that you have to create a play that makes you proud, because even if all the schools in our class have got perfect scores, only one can go to the state level of competition; but everyone will have the opportunity to influence the audience of the festival weekend. Of course, this means that one of the most valuable takeaways I believe students can learn to take feedback kindly, and another to behave kindly: take care of the space we visit, and leave a positive impression with the hosts and other guests. In any theatrical production there are a number of other virtues that need to be recognized, including discipline, patience, humility, resilience and teamwork. All this is enhanced in the atmosphere of competition. Just as sporting events include talent and practicing specific skills, they also include the development of these critical character traits, and this is true in the theater as well. Kimball: Every time you judge art, it's a very nebulous thing. At the same time, our students understand and enjoy this aspect. Most of us are competitive in nature. Every year I try to emphasize that we do not compete with other schools, we compete with ourselves. Who knows what the three judges will love? We had years when we thought we killed him, but the judges, or even one judge, just didn't agree. On other occasions I felt we were solid but unspectacular and we won. The bottom line for us is, let's make sure we leave it all on stage. Make this the best performance of this show we could give, support each other, and entertain the audience. If we do that, everything else will be sauce. Ireland: Honestly, I don't know that I think the competitive nature influences the way we approach the job. However, the eponymous process itself is a chance to focus on direct play (rather than all songs and dances) with a smaller cast. This allows us time to do some really advanced actions and characteristics work. In terms of takeaways, there are so many, but I think students learning to critically analyze theatrical work and become discerning audience members is crucial, also always let them know that we don't really exist to do their best work. That's what I'm looking for from them, only the best job they can do. As long as they did, I'm happy. TME: Those who played host to these events - thoughts on the other side of things? Hammond: I didn't mind holding regional... although I had a new pair of sneakers and by the end of the festival, one of them was blown away. Ireland: We are actually the host state this year! Kimball: This is only our second time hosting. It requires a bit of negotiation with the actors because they love to walk down the road, staying in a motel, and all the connections, stories and memories that come with that. But it also gives us the opportunity to show our object and have the relative comfort of performing on our own stage. As for being a host, my OCD is a huge help! The key to this is organization and communication. I also have great people helping, like our technology teachers Andrew Maximic and Ginger Stoneton, who put together programs and tag names, Colette Sabbagh, who organizes our volunteers; Brady Harris, Jeff Farrell and John Filbrook, who take care of all the technical aspects; and Terry and Glen Holyoake, who serve as a link between the IPA and the school; and our students who all do extra responsibilities to prepare for the weekend. And some final thoughts from two of our interlocutors: Kimball: We put a lot of emphasis on high school athletics, but these students work just as hard, display as much teamwork, and do what many of their peers will never have the courage to do. It's no exaggeration to say that I'm inspired by them every year, and I really believe that we're seeing the best of Maine's young people at this festival season. Toole: Thanks for throwing a little light on a very cool thing that doesn't get a lot of press. (P.S. - This is The Theatre in Our Schools Month in Educational Theatre Association, a happy accident, otherwise.) maine one act festival 2020, maine one act festival 2019 results

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