

The Role of the Performing Arts at TASIS

*By Todd Fletcher**

From the beginning, the arts have played a central role at TASIS. How could they not? Mrs. Fleming, the school's Founder, once dreamt of, and for a while even pursued, a career on the stage. And today, Chairman of the Board Lynn Fleming Aeschliman, a dedicated patron of the arts and the one-time manager of TASIS's traveling theater troupe The American Repertory Theater in Europe (ARTE), continues in her mother's footsteps as TASIS's greatest champion of the arts.

In a speech in 1993, Mrs. Fleming eloquently expressed her feelings about the importance of the performing arts in education:

For me, a love of literature, the arts, and the performing arts is the heart and soul of education, for it grows throughout our entire lifetime, keeping alive the excitement of learning, creating constant enrichment in our leisure hours and throughout our long golden years.

Mary Crist Fleming,
TASIS Founder

- The TASIS Mission Statement speaks of “a passion for excellence,” “creations, achievements, traditions, and ideals from the past that offer purpose in the present and hope for the future,” “an appreciation for beauty, and artistic endeavor.”
- The TASIS Paideia declares the school's commitment to “conserve and convey the rich inheritance of intellectual, social, moral, religious, and artistic wisdom of generations and centuries.” It reminds us that “beauty matters.”
- Campaign materials for the Palmer Cultural Center celebrate the “vital role of the performing arts in the academic and cultural life of TASIS” and how “the building's location in the center of campus exemplifies its importance in the daily lives of our students.”

We, the members of the performing arts team, have been brought to TASIS to build on the long tradition of the arts at the school. In order to succeed in our assignment, we must pay careful attention to a few basic concepts.

Fun & Meaning

Understanding the necessity for both fun and meaning in our work in the performing arts is essential to success. By “fun,” I mean just that: Fun! “Meaning,” simply put, is to be found in **stories, words, and music that our students can live with for the rest of their lives, material that contributes to their intellectual and spiritual development, pieces whose themes, messages, and morals can be referred to as the children grow into men and women.**

The problem is that more often than not, especially during the summer, we are so focused on creating fun experiences for the children, that meaning gets shortchanged. Fun alone is like a “sugar high” that, intense and pleasurable as it may be, doesn’t last very long and generally offers little to no “nutritional value.” That said, we’re working with children and teenagers, and they want, need, and deserve their sugar—their fun. The challenge... the assignment, dare I say, is to appropriately balance fun and meaning in all that we do.

I have no intention of dictating precisely what is meaningful and what isn’t. But I do feel that we should use every opportunity we have to convey to the students “the power of one,” what one committed person—even against incredible odds—can do to improve his lot, contribute to his community, or even change the world. The notion of “I am only one, but I am one” is incredibly profound for a young person who may feel powerless to make a difference in a world he considers indifferent to his needs and concerns. Celebrating through art the power of one person to make a difference may just light the spark from which a mighty flame will grow, a flame that may very well help a child find his way in what he may consider to be a cold, cruel world.

Process & Event

Process is all that happens during the rehearsal period. Event is the show. There are some people who get tangled up in process, usually to the detriment of event, sometimes going so far as to claim that the end results and whether the performers succeed or fail is insignificant. And there are others, generally those obsessed with the *event* of production, who couldn’t care less about process: all that the kids should be learning and experiencing along the journey. However, to be truly successful, we must appreciate the importance of both: process *and* event.

At TASIS, the perceived pressure to “deliver” can be so great that any sense of fun or meaning can go flying out the window. Under such pressure, we may find ourselves partially or even wholly disregarding process in order to deliver an event we hope meets the approval of those whose approval is desired or considered necessary. When this happens, we focus only on the big show and not on all that can and should be learned along the way. It’s not difficult (with even a little bit of imagination) to move children around a set like chess pieces and end up with a pretty picture that elicits applause. But how does that benefit the children? With fun? With meaning? No. When this happens, when children are manipulated like toy soldiers rather than collaborated with as artists, they lose out on the opportunity to develop an appreciation for language and text and song and combined artistic effort that is part and parcel of the theatrical experience. They miss out on the whys and wherefores. They miss out, in fact, on the most beautiful parts of the journey.

On the other hand, it is essential that those in the arts at TASIS accept as non-negotiable a polished and appropriate production, an event. Dance exercises, musical scales, theater games, and even intense and satisfying rehearsals are wonderful and an important part of “process.” But if that process doesn’t result in an event, then a tree will have fallen in the forest, and no one will have heard it. That audience-less tree falling (process) may be wonderful, elegant, beautiful, and fun, but our art is a public art and requires the collaboration of an audience. Theater at TASIS is not one long

workshop. It is work towards a high-quality production. In other words, we must smell the flowers, take in all the sights along the path, and experience all we can as part of the process, but at the same time we must neither dawdle nor allow ourselves to lose sight of the event that is the destination of our journey.

Joy

JOY! Yes, JOY! Fun + Meaning + Struggle + Success = JOY! Providing children opportunities to experience joy is really what we're after, isn't it? One experiences joy neither by participating in a process that has been all fun and games, nor by participating in one that is laden with meaning but light on fun.

Joy ensues when the students have enjoyed the process (even if only in retrospect), have done something meaningful for themselves and for their audiences, and can revel in the triumphant event of production. Joy doesn't ensue when it's been all easy going.

As John Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, says: "We are designed for the climb, not for taking our ease, either in the valley or at the summit." We would be remiss—even in the summer months—to let our students while away the hours, taking their ease.

Joy results when students have been stretched and challenged, when they've discovered that they are capable of more than they had previously imagined possible: "Yippee! I did it! And people like me; they really like me!" That's joy.

Unfortunately, in a world where immediate gratification is the goal of most as well as a handy way for teachers to appease, calm, reward, or win the affection of students, it is difficult to find situations in which the experience of real joy is even a possibility. It is our challenge and responsibility to create just such situations and opportunities through art.

Students as Collaborators

Central to the concept of joy is the full participation of the individual. We should, therefore, whenever possible, collaborate with our students, inviting them to contribute to the creation of the material, direction, set design, etc. This sort of collaboration has several benefits. Most importantly, it engages the students more than would be the case were we simply to dictate what they are to say or do and when and how they are to say and do it. It gives them a sense of ownership that comes from true contribution to a project or process. It also gives them an opportunity to exercise through their own creativity their own "power of one" to make a difference. It will give them an opportunity to contribute. Even when time is tight, we must always consider the collaboration of our students an important part of the process, seeking their participation in every aspect of our productions.

Language

While we in the performing arts must strive to provide an undiluted theatrical or musical experience for our children, we must also remember that language learning continues to be the primary focus of a child's experience in our programs. Consequently, except in special cases, our productions and classes are meant to be a means to the end of language acquisition. As such, the primacy of the word—whether spoken or sung—must be neither forgotten nor neglected, as language should take precedence over other artistic considerations. **Due to the amount of time and energy necessary to get the language up to the level we seek, not to mention the constant repetition of the words and lyrics that will be required of our students, it is crucial that the words we choose are worthy of this great effort, appropriate to our ideals, and in furtherance of our mission.**

We resemble in some ways a performing-arts camp, yet although music, dance, attractive sets, costumes, sound, projections, lights, and general razzle-dazzle are pleasing to the eye and important for maximum effect, our emphasis must be squarely on language. If that means having students sit motionless on stools and recite brilliant verse, then so be it.

Life Lessons

Though it might be fun to imagine otherwise, we must acknowledge that almost none of our students will pursue a career in the arts. On the other hand, the child who won't at some point in his life find himself standing before a classroom or a boardroom with the need to be persuasive and exude confidence will be the exception.

What we do is about much, much more than just putting on a show. We teach skills that can serve a student for a lifetime. We stimulate imagination and the making of creative choices. We foster the development of cooperation and collaboration among people who may not like each other. We teach empathy and understanding. We give children an emotional outlet for their many daily frustrations. Whether through an elegant monologue, a surprising cadenza, a vibrant pas de deux, or even a valiant attempt, we help students discover and learn to appreciate what is beautiful in the world, beautiful in others, beautiful in themselves.

At the Grand Opening of the Palmer Cultural Center, Headmaster Michael Ulku-Steiner shared his own take on the idea of how fun plus meaning can be greater than the sum of its parts.

As actor Billy Zane (a TASIS alumnus) said the other night, the school musical is the foundation of all professional theater work. "Never are the stakes so high," he said. "You're performing for your friends, your parents, your teachers. And you're not quite sure yet who you are and who you can become." Billy's right - and from those high stakes come the high rewards of self-confidence, self-possession, self-knowledge.

Mrs. Fleming, who understood from the beginning that the arts belonged at the center of the school's curriculum, wasn't alone in believing in the educational power of artistic beauty. The first Academy of the western world

was Plato's, in Athens. That school founder wrote "The most effective education is that a child should play amongst lovely things."

We should not forget that the sense of play is essential and not mere diversion. It is an essential ingredient of a school designed to produce creative problem-solvers for the world, community-minded entrepreneurs, leaders who take with them into the world a bone-deep sense of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Inclusiveness and Appropriateness of Material

The TASIS community is one comprised of people from all over the world, people of different ages and with different beliefs and traditions. Just as we must constantly strive to be as inclusive as we can and cast the net as far and wide as possible when recruiting performers and backstage workers, we must also think about inclusiveness when choosing what to present to our audiences. It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that a single audience may include 4-year-olds, 18-year-olds, parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. And though we can't be expected to target our work to the 4-year-olds in the audience or to the 80-year-olds, for that matter, we must always respect our participants and our audiences, making our best effort to present work that is entertaining to all and ethically offensive to none. Our choice of material, and what we choose to focus on within that material, signals clearly and unambiguously to the children in our care what we as adults believe is important.

The Five Es: Ennobling, Edifying, Enriching, Enjoyable, and Entertaining

Creating and producing work that is ennobling, edifying, enriching, enjoyable, and entertaining would seem to make perfect sense for a school. The problem is that much of the material available to or interesting to students and teachers does not meet these criteria.

It is therefore important actively to search for appropriate material. It's out there; it just needs to be found. Some may say that our charges aren't interested in material that's ennobling, edifying, and enriching, but I strongly disagree. They are not against the Es. They are more likely—and rightly so—against being preached at or lectured to from the stage. It is our task to find suitably ennobling, edifying, and enriching material, then wrap it up in projects that are enjoyable (for the participants) and entertaining (for the audience).

These last two Es—enjoyable (for the participants) and entertaining (for the audience)—are equally important, for they are essential to the fun in "fun and meaning." When I speak of "enjoyable productions," I am again speaking of process. An event may be terribly meaningful and important, but if the process is not enjoyable, the experience will likely leave the participants with a sour taste in their mouths, perhaps turning them off to theater or music or dance forever.

If one were to heed all of my advice and neglect the importance of creating work that is entertaining for audiences, the result would be a failed production. It's a challenge to create a show with children for children. It is a monumental challenge to

create a show that is entertaining for adults obliged to watch other people's children perform. That, however, is where we set the bar, and creating work that is appealing to children as well as to adults with no previous connection to the performers is the ultimate test of the entertainment value of our productions.

Hard Work

An excellent performance often seems effortless, which is precisely as it should be. However, art that seems effortless requires hard work, and for this hard work there is no substitute. It is an indispensable part of the process and, perhaps, even a prerequisite for a child's experiencing the sort of joy of which I've spoken and about which I feel so passionately.

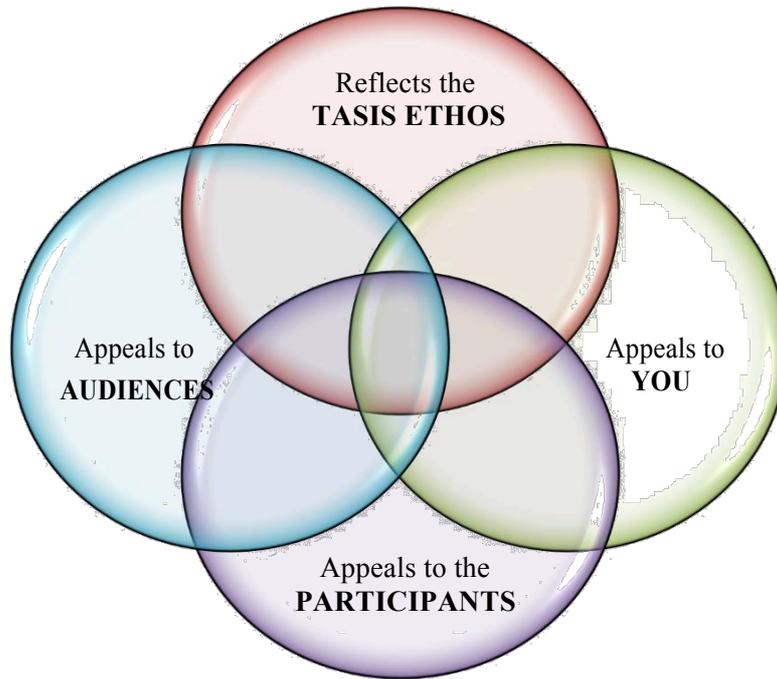
Make no mistake. We aren't doing our students any favors by keeping them happy with short-term fun and immediate gratification while "protecting them" from hard work. I will be the first to say that there is a role, a need even, for "fun for fun's sake" in a child's experience at TASIS. But we must rely on and have faith in our colleagues charged with leading games and activities to provide this sort of unadulterated fun while we, the performing-arts team (both teachers and counselors), focus on *joy* and laying the groundwork for success in later life through the combination of fun, meaning, and hard work.

We will succeed in this regard by teaching our students the power of sustained, focused effort followed by the thrill of a greater reward than is to be found, for example, on a shopping trip to Lugano. We are teaching our students concentration, commitment, and the ability to see that the reward at the end of the rehearsal period, the sense of joy underscored by thunderous applause for a job well done, is infinitely more pleasing than the pool of water at the end of the Slip 'N Slide.

Venn Diagram

When trying to explain to skeptical colleagues why I don't feel boxed in by the expectations the TASIS community has for us, I describe a Venn Diagram of four overlapping circles in which the individual circles contain

1. work that reflects the TASIS ethos as elucidated in the Mission Statement and Paideia,
2. work that appeals to you as an artist and teacher,
3. work that appeals to the participants, and
4. work that appeals to audiences.



In the intersection of those four overlapping circles, I mine for appropriate material. Incidentally, when drawn here, that intersection may appear small, but in the worlds of drama, music, and dance, it's enormous! Again, the material is out there. It's up to us to find it.

If after exhaustive search we still come up empty-handed, we must either create new material, commission its creation, or adapt existing material such that it is in line with TESIS standards and expectations. The creation of original theater and musical theater at TESIS has a long tradition. We should embrace and continue this tradition in all of the performing arts.

Final Thoughts

Like it or not, we must accept that at TESIS there are boundaries, bright lines which we are asked and expected not to cross. In order to be happy and succeed, we would be wise to focus on the vast, wide-open space *between* the lines and not fret about the possibilities that lay beyond them. As Orson Welles said, "The enemy of art is the absence of limitations." I happen to agree and feel that the extra time and effort put into selecting, adapting, or creating work worthy of the TESIS imprimatur will result in a level of artistry and effectiveness that may have otherwise eluded us.

I could be missing something, but to me, it's all really very simple. In fact, I am quite certain that we will succeed if we do nothing more than keep in mind the notions of *Fun & Meaning* and *Process & Event*. As long as we remain steadfastly committed to these concepts while never shirking from our responsibility to produce work that is *Ennobling, Edifying, Enriching, Enjoyable, and Entertaining*, we will, both as individuals and as a united team, flourish in our endeavors.

—Todd Fletcher

Former TESIS Summer Director for the Performing Arts, March 2012

***Biographical Note**

Todd Fletcher began his 25-year relationship with TESIS in 1988 as a counselor at the Château des Enfants summer program. He taught English, French and English music, and French and English drama courses. He created the Musical Theater Courses for the Middle School Program and TESIS Summer Program and taught in all three of the Lugano summer programs.

During his tenure, he directed nineteen productions of fourteen original musicals written for TESIS. These musicals, which have been performed both during the summer and academic year, include *MCF: What a Life!*, created at the invitation of Lynn Aeschliman to celebrate Mrs. Fleming's 90th birthday.

In addition to his career at TESIS, Todd has worked with immigrant children in Berlin's inner-city neighborhoods and with Israeli and Palestinian teenagers on the creation of original music-theater projects. He also worked at the Paris Opera, the Salzburg Festival, and for 27-time Grammy winner Quincy Jones.

Mr. Fletcher graduated cum laude from Harvard University, with highest honors in his field: Music and Dramatic Arts.