

From the AACT Knowledge Base

How to Stage an Effective Curtain Call

It's a pain to stage, and often is left until the last possible moment. But your production's curtain call is far too important to be treated as an afterthought. On the contrary, it deserves the same creative thought and planning as the play that precedes it. After all, it is the final stage picture the audience sees before it leaves the theater

It also signals the end of this particular theatergoing experience, acting as an important transition between the world of the play and the real world to which the audience is returning.

And, of course, it gives the audience a chance to show its appreciation for the performance as a whole, and to individual performers in particular.

Understanding these three elements is essential to creating an effective curtain call. So are these five rules of thumb: keep it brief, keep it moving, keep it building to a climax, keep it interesting, then clear the stage. Here's how you can put these rules into action.

Keep It Building

Generally speaking, the script dictates the order in which the actors appear, from the least important characters to the most important. Often you'll find that during the course of rehearsal, the relative importance of characters to the production becomes clearer--a good reason for waiting to block bows until the last run-through before technical rehearsals.

Begin by grouping together all those with no lines or without distinguishing characters--the chorus in a musical, for example, or the townspeople in *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Next bring on the bit players--those with one or two lines--again as a group.

Follow with the supporting players, in groups of two, three, or four related characters.

Finally, the lead players, giving each a solo bow, working toward the central character. If there are two central characters, as in *The Taming of the Shrew*, bring on the two actors together, then let each take a bow, first to the other, and then to the audience.

Finally, have the entire company take a bow, and close the curtain.

Keep It Moving

Overlap all stage movement. An individual or group walks quickly downstage to receive applause, and as soon as they are in position and begin bowing, the next group or individual should begin its way down, and so on with each successive bow. This may take some rehearsal, but the result is worth it. The energy on stage will be matched by that of the audience.

Movement is especially important in a musical, where bows normally have their own music. A good musical director will have additional music ready, but it's better if the cast keeps on track. Rehearse bows to the music, so the actors know their cue. That way, if someone slows down, the next person can pick up the pace, knowing where their bow should begin in the score.

Keep It Interesting

Creating an effective final picture means paying attention to how people are grouped on the stage.

Build the stage picture throughout the call, adding groups and levels from backstage to front. If there are platforms or stairs, place actors on them after they finish their bows. This not only adds variety to the picture, but lets the audience see everyone on stage.

You also can use groups to underscore the ensemble nature of a show. For a production of *Morning's at Seven*, a director blocked everyone to enter at the same time. Two family groups stood or sat on their respective back porches and steps; another pair sat on a stage-left stump, while another stood stage right. No one was center stage. This kept the focus on the ensemble, and still allowed the audience to applaud.

However, if you're building to a final solo bow, such as in *Hello, Dolly!* or *King Lear*, design the curtain call so the groupings gradually frame a downstage center position, into which the lead actor walks. (Make sure the character merits this focus. Otherwise a sense of anticlimax will ruin the effect.)

The group bow at the end of the curtain call should be rehearsed so everyone bows as one. The simplest method is to trigger it by someone in the front row who is visible to everyone on stage. This person begins by first tilting his head back slightly, so when he bends forward, the rest of the cast is with him.

In a musical, the cast also should acknowledge the conductor, who then asks the orchestra to stand. The cast should join in the applause for the musicians. A final group bow should follow to re-frame the stage picture.

Get Off the Stage

Keep curtain calls as brief as possible. The audience wants to acknowledge the performers, but it doesn't want to make a night of it. Besides, clapping for more than a few minutes is tiring. Even if the audience stamps, applauds, and continues to yell "Bravo!", fade the lights, drop the curtain, bring up the houselights, and go home. You've earned the rest.

Curtainless Calls

Blocking most curtain calls is fairly straightforward. However, some situations present special challenges.

For example, if your play is presented without a curtain, creating a stage picture must be done in full view of the audience. Even if the cast returns in a blackout, they can be seen getting into position.

The curtain call for *Morning's at Seven*, described earlier, was done without a curtain. When the lights came back up the cast entered from the various houses or from off stage. In a production of *She Loves Me*, the director had the lovers walk off the stage, arm in arm, followed by a slow fade except for a single street lamp illuminating the exterior of the perfumery. As the lights came back up, the cast returned to the stage through the perfumery door to accept the applause.

For *Once Upon a Mattress*, a director kept Winifred asleep in bed, with the returning cast forming a picture around her. Prince Dauntless made one last futile attempt to awaken her. Illuminated by a follow spot, she attempted to sit up, then sank back in sleep, to much applause (and laughter).

In each case, the curtain call's blocking was suggested by the set itself, providing an satisfying conclusion to the performance. Look to your own set for similar ideas when staging a curtainless call.

True to Life

In general, actors should take the curtain call as themselves, not as their characters. As a director has told us, "The play is over. The characters no longer exist."

This said, it must be acknowledged that some plays may call for a different approach. For a production of *The Crucible*, the director felt uncomfortable in bringing back John Proctor just after he had been executed. Instead, she posed the cast in related groups, then opened the curtain, with each group silhouetted in the harsh light of a separate spotlight. They remained motionless for the final picture, underscored by the sound of drums; then the lights faded and the curtain closed.

In a production of *Suddenly, Last Summer*, however, a similar approach backfired. The shortness of the single-act play and the enigmatic nature of the final line left most members of the audience puzzled. They didn't applaud because they didn't know the play was over until the houselights came up. There was no transition from the world of the play to the real world, cheating both audience and actors of needed closure. Bows would have helped.

Whatever your choice, make sure *all* players appear either as themselves or in character. In a production one of our editors saw recently, everyone took bows as themselves except for one actor. By staying in character, he seemed to be begging for attention. ("Hey, remember me? I'm the crusty old guy with the limp!")

Final Thoughts

1. Keep the Focus. Audiences sometimes respond more to effort than artistry, and some players may receive a bigger hand than their work deserves. For example, a cute player can get a bigger hand than a more competent but restrained lead. And actresses who cry or die onstage often get more than their share of applause. Supporting players with flashy roles may get a bigger reaction than the leads. If you think this may be the case in your production, and want to give everyone in the cast equal recognition, you can: a) present only a company bow; b) block the cast into large groups of related characters and have each group take a bow together; or c) put the audience favorite in a group of three featured players.

2. Plan carefully. Even spontaneous displays such as presenting flowers to the leading lady or calling the director onstage for a bow should be planned. In fact, prepare and rehearse *anything* that takes place within the existing curtain call time.

3. Stick to your guns. Because of the obvious order of least important characters to most important, not everyone will be happy with their lot. Don't change the curtain call to placate an actor, however. Explain the order of the bows, perhaps, but let it go at that. And don't change the curtain call once it's blocked and set. The cast doesn't need new blocking after opening night.

4. Put some teeth into it. For some reason, many actors don't smile during bows. Perhaps it's modesty. Perhaps it's fatigue. Whatever the reason, remind them to keep smiling. The audience wants to believe that all of those on stage have enjoyed themselves. Smiles encourage more applause, too.

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