

Director's Notes

*Notes by Scott "Q" Marcus on how to fully harness the engagement of *Never After Happily**

***Never After Happily* is unlike any other play.**

It is a unique form of theatre that combines audience interaction, actor improv and a standard play into a fresh and exciting form of entertainment that prides itself on demolishing the fourth wall, as well as blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, entertainment and engagement.

Whereby most plays consist of an audience entering a theatre, finding seats, waiting patiently for the performance to begin, and then sitting passively as the actors perform in a box in front of them, *Never After Happily* is a distinctly different, interactive experience beginning from the moment the patron reaches the theatre.

Part of the reason *Never After Happily* works so well is that it allows the audience to play with the actors and immerse themselves in a world of fantasy and whimsy from the minute they arrive until they bid farewell as they leave (which is past a "reception line" of the actors who, after their curtain call, sing and dance their way down the aisles into the lobby).

To accomplish this, it is essential to set expectations by disrupting the usual pre-conceptions the audience members might have. Breaking down these expectancies of what one "normally" gets in a play—in a **safe and good-natured manner**—opens them up to a willingness to experience—and engage in—all that is happening around them, providing for a more immersive event, additional fun, and an extra enthusiastic response for the actors, who of course, give back multiplied.

Setting the Groundwork for Success

It starts at the beginning.

As actors are cast, they are informed of the expectations. Special attention is paid to actors who feel comfortable breaking the fourth wall and who will not feel disrupted by unexpected audience engagement, which will happen frequently. An actor whose comfort zone requires strict adherence to the specific words of the script or detailed blocking will not be comfortable in this environment.

Although the director has the final say and is responsible for the overall vision of the performance, an atmosphere of supportive exchange between the director and the actors is encouraged. Many of the best, funniest, and most powerful moments of *Never After Happily* were born from contributions suggested by the actors. *Providing a safe atmosphere for them to express concerns and ideas is essential to fostering a better experience for them as well as for the audience.* The expression, "the best directors don't always come up with the best ideas, they simply recognize them" cannot be emphasized enough. The director must abide by the creed that s/he will always give credit to the cast when things go well and take the blame when they do not.

Warm-up exercises before each performance need to be fun. In addition to—or eventually instead of—the usual series of repeating tongue-twisters or playing traditional "actor warm-up games," the cast would often end warm-ups with five to ten minutes of high-energy improvised dancing and bouncing around the stage and theater to favorite songs, suggested by the cast (i.e. "YMCA," "Living on a Prayer," "Bohemian Rhapsody," etc.). Not only did this generate a further sense of camaraderie, but infused the cast with the energy necessary for any good performance. In addition, it was just plain fun!

It is also important that the lobby of the theatre is decorated to transform the environment into a playful area.

We did this by:

- Putting up twinkling lights and LED candles
- Tossing fake flower petals on the floor
- Creating a red “carpet” (made of paper) from the door to the auditorium
- Purchasing a full-size pumpkin carriage cardboard cut-out where audience members could take pictures of themselves “inside” the carriage. (There was also a sign on the cut-out that read, “Share your memories: #neverafterhappily”)
- Putting a sign over the box office that said: “The Magic Window: Ask and Ye Shall be Granted Admission.” (Patrons with questions were pointed to the box office and told, “Approach the magic window and be granted admission.”)
- Adding a scent of vanilla, gingerbread or cinnamon in the lobby
- Ticket takers, volunteers, ushers and box-office personnel were encouraged to dress in fantasy costumes. They were also provided with magic wands, glow sticks, finger puppets, plastic tiaras, and other toys that were handed out to audience members who showed an interest. (Note: noisemakers and whistles were tried also but became too disruptive during the performances so those are discouraged.)

Once the house opens

Actors are advised to be ready and in costume by the time the doors open. In most plays, once the house opens, the cast is told to be quiet backstage. That is NOT the case with *Never After Happily*. Rather, cast members are encouraged to go into the lobby and engage (in character) with audience members.

Some of the ways this occurred:

- Doc stood on the street and greeted passers-by and patrons with “Hi-ho, hi-ho! Welcome to our show!” Further conversation was encouraged.
- Card Girl held up the “Applause” sign as cars drove by, which generated multiple car honks and lots of applause. (It also helped generate publicity for the play.)
- Wolf taught people how to howl and encouraged them to join in whenever there was howling in the show. Furthermore, as cast members milled about with the audience in the auditorium, Wolf (or other characters) would randomly howl and other cast members would all chime in. Audience members soon picked it up and would not only get involved in howling, but many times started the howling themselves.
- Ella talked to audience members about how she could rewrite their life stories.
- Hank, dressed in a tacky set of Groucho Marx glasses and a beard played with audience members.
- Priest sought out couples (or strangers) who might want to be “married” and conducted silly ceremonies in front of others. The “happy couples” were rewarded with candy rings and a fake marriage certificate to take home.
- Young Charming introduced himself to the audience members and did his signature, “Hey, how you doin?” And finger guns.
- Pictures were encouraged with the cast and audience (before and after the play.) Many people were excited to do so.

By the time the curtain rose, the audience was already having a good time and eager to play even more.

Once the curtain opens:

This part of Never After Happily is as important to its success as is the talent of the cast and directors!

That said, first and foremost, the audience must know what is expected of them. They need to know what they can—and cannot do. If they know that, they'll gladly play along.

NOTE: THE AUDIENCE MUST KNOW THIS IS A SAFE ROOM AND NO ONE WILL BE CALLED UPON WHO DOES NOT WANT TO BE! THIS IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE SUCCESS OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT!

Following was the order of events that we used once the curtain rose. It is ESSENTIAL that whoever “emcees” the prologue be comfortable with extemporaneous speaking and improvisation, can quickly respond to audience comments and is willing and able to “play” with them.

- As the house lights dim and the stage lights come up, I (as director) would playfully enter the stage from behind the curtain. Most of the audience was now familiar with me as I had been engaged with them before the curtains went up. I did the usual announcements reminding them to turn off their phones and informing them where the bathrooms were. All of this was done playfully, improvising often and responding to audience comments. It must be humorous and fun.
- The audience was told, “If it isn’t obvious already, this is not your standard play.” I expanded on that by impishly pointing out that we know they’re going to leave the theatre and talk about what they experienced. They’ll tell their friends. They’ll “rate and review” the play to those they talk about. I then pointed out, that we too will be doing the same thing about them. The cast will get together at the end of the performance and rate the audience, which we will then post on social media and Yelp. If they want a good review, there are some tasks they need to perform. I let them know that we’re “on your side. We want you to get a good review—so I’ll tell you how in a moment. But first ... ” (enter various members of cast as needed).
- Each night, Priest performed at least one “wedding.” These were pre-cleared with the audience members who would be called onstage. The guests were called up, several members of the cast came onto the stage, and the audience engaged in “singing” the wedding march. Other guests—who had been pre-chosen and were willing to do so—came onstage and blew bubbles. A few times, we had two couples. (Our Priest, who was excellent at improv did a “mix and match” with the couples.) The audience cheered. Participants were given candy rings. They returned to their seat.
- In her travels through the audience, Ella came across a few people over the run of the play who were willing to be “coronated.” They came on stage and were given a plastic tiara and a wand. They gave a (short) speech (no more than a paragraph or it can get out of hand).
- At that point, the cast cleared the stage, leaving me alone. I reminded the audience that this is not a usual play. We’ll perform but they have a role too. At that point, with some fanfare, I called out Card Girl who carried the “Applause” sign (with the “Boo/Hiss” sign on the other side). I explained Card Girl’s role and how she’ll introduce the various scenes. I also told them that periodically she would show them instructions in the form of signs, and we practiced getting them to respond to “Applause” or “Boo/Hiss.” Several attempts were made to get the audience as engaged and as loud as possible. Responding to extemporaneous behaviors from audience members became part of this routine. I reminded them that if they wanted to get a “10” on Yelp, they needed to be as loud and responsive as possible.

- I also pointed out that cast members will be coming from all directions and will interact with the audience, BUT if they don't want to have attention drawn to them, simply wave away the cast member, who will oblige. I tell them that we're aware that some people would be horrified if they got that much attention; they're not all ego-maniacs like those of us onstage—and it's totally fine. I tell them I want them to have fun and feel safe. << **NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THIS!**
- Before leaving the stage, I reminded them of the rules about the "Applause" and "Boo" signs and told them that if the cast is stomping, they can stop. When Wolf howls, they can howl. Be engaged when appropriate and the experience will be better with them in it.
- Finally, I close by telling them that for the next 75-90 minutes, they are in our hands. All their cares, problems, worries and troubles are gone. We have fairy dust and magic wands, and this is a world where happily ever after lives. I tell them that and close by having Card Girl show the "Applause" sign one more time and, before we leave, I would sum it all up by saying, "Thank you for being here. If you do your part, we'll do ours, and you will leave feeling lighter than when you arrived. With that, welcome to the magical world of *Never After Happily.*"

Exit. Lights up.