

SATIPS

Support and training in Prep, Primary and Senior Schools



One of my guilty pleasures is reading the Daily Mail. It has an easily accessible app and there is always at least one or two articles that give me a chuckle. At the beginning of December they laid waste to the Nativity, in similar vengeful style to their customary shredding of Immigration or Brexit. One of the many headlines that caught my eye was, "Away in a Danger! Schoolchildren forced to wear safety helmets during their nativity play over health and safety issues." I immediately chuckled indulging a secret delight at the folly of it all. It certainly revived many memories of my own children's nativities and those that I have had the fortune (or sometimes misfortune) of directing or overseeing.

The unbridled excitement of being cast in your first performance is generally enough for the children, who have no real comprehension, and therefore, no issue with the size of their role. Sadly that is frequently not the case with the parents. It is often viewed as rather a pinnacle in the alpha mother's career when one's daughter is cast as Mary in the school nativity. Every other mother regards her with envy and for the entire fortnight leading up to the play she walks tall in the parking lot. Usually the mother of Mary helps out with the make-up and can be found booking her seats in the auditorium weeks before opening. She is easy to spot during the show as she (and her daughter) mouth their way through the whole performance.

I saw this pride when we were informed that my child had been granted this honour, and upon receiving the notification, my wife grew at least an inch. My daughter had other ideas, however, and declined the role in lieu of being (the back half of) the two-part donkey, a role which she still regards twelve years later, a much cooler part. My wife was crushed as she relinquished the mother of Mary role to another parking lot prima-donna. She hardly had a right to complain, as she herself was cast as Mary in her school nativity, and attending a small, rural school in Zimbabwe where boys were not to be talked to, she, mid-performance, turned and punched her helpful Joseph causing the whole play to stop. This poor boy's crime? He obeyed the teacher's instructions and lovingly put his arm around Mary to help her to the stable. What a pity that poor Joseph was not fitted with a safety hat (and visor)?

Another headline referred to the snapping of photo's during performances. Was the complaint

laid on Mumsnet from an aggrieved Mary deprived mother who resented the photographic reminders? Perhaps her fears that it be posted on social media would ruin her story, "Please, whatever you do, don't tag me in the picture of Amy as the Donkey!" While her argument about posting pictures certainly had its merits, and she was in fairness requesting permission first, it certainly did still feel like sour grapes. The Information Commissioner's response to the idea of a photo ban? "Bah Humbug' to a bit of festive fun!"

The early exposure to performance is one of the many educational merits of the Nativity play. The age of the participants is probably the reason for most of the hilarity. In my time as a teacher I have been asked a number of times to assist in the Nativity, either giving advice or direct help. Recently, I have chosen to stay away from the process as much as possible, but still find myself strangely drawn to the final product. The plot line of the Play That Goes Wrong is quite naturally repeated in almost every Nativity. It has the slapstick without the careful planning and choreography. Possibly the hard hats are a necessity! My son was once guilty of initiating a crying frenzy that set off the entire cast of his pre-school. He went from happy and smiling to crying in a fraction of a second, and within moments the whole front row followed suit, then those behind him. When I asked for him to demonstrate leadership, that was not quite my idea, and as the drama teacher with high expectations for my son, it must have been my fault.

One of the reasons for the humour behind the Nativity, is the children's remarkable ability to alter things in such a way that they find it acceptable. "Children seldom mis-quote. In fact they usually repeat word for word what you shouldn't have said." They also have no qualms about loudly reminding the poor child who fumbles, or booting the one in front who forgets to walk forward, or elbowing Johnny Who Cannot Sing in Tune. The reputation these poor children establish in their first year unfortunately follows them through school.

At my current school, the Nativity is a traditional affair, with an antique electric star that was crafted decades ago by the Carpentry department. While this might be fitting, I still watch petrified as it is hauled up in front of the compulsory star curtain every year by

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the maintenance department. I am certain it will explode mid-performance one year, faulty electrics melting and fusing under the stage lighting. That said, it is, a wonderful opportunity for the boys to have their first break on the school stage, but it is definitely remembered for what goes wrong, not for a masterpiece of theatre. I am haunted by memories of angels in dresses sitting unrepentantly legs apart, boys earnestly picking their noses, or fiddling with things they should leave alone, and every year a different boy, wig slightly awry, dressed as Mary. The age range is slightly higher than the usual five year olds and they are able, at least, to sing in time if not in tune.

The story is always a traditional one, with no contemporary references. There is a camaraderie that is shared across the year groups by the previous Marys, Josephs and donkeys. They weigh up their performances against one another's, and openly compare notes. I have occasionally wondered if there are better places to start a child's involvement in Drama, but in reality this story has it all, a naive but beautiful heroine, a devout loving man beside her, a nasty baddie with Darth Vader-like tendencies, the catchy (popular) tunes, and of course the 'aaah moment' with the baby and the lambs. It cannot get better than that! There are hundreds of variations available free on-line and best news of all, you still have a whole year to put it together.