

The Understudy

by Brad Francis

Director's Notes pg 54

Pastor's Notes pg 55

GENRE: Drama

SYNOPSIS: Mitch, the understudy for the lead in a community production of Hamlet, finally gets a chance to be the lead but hasn't learned his lines.

TIME: 8 minutes

CAST BREAKDOWN: 3M, 1F

THEME: Knowing scripture; Preparedness

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: Psalm 119:1-16; Psalm 119:105-112; Ephesians 6:14-15; 1 Peter 3:15-16; Matthew 25:1-13

CHURCH YEAR SEASON: Any

SUGGESTED USE: Sermon Starter

CHARACTERS:

MITCH—plays Reynaldo in Hamlet, but is also understudy to the title role; thinks he is wasted in the small role/understudy

ANGELICA—the director of Hamlet

DAN—plays Bernardo, a small role in Hamlet

GENE—plays Horatio; an experienced actor

PROPS: Couch, chair, bottled water, Hamlet script

COSTUMES: Nice clothes for Angelica. The rest should be in costume for Hamlet. Although there are countless modern productions of Shakespeare and productions set in virtually every time period, it may help your audience if they are dressed in something approaching Elizabethan dress.

SOUND: Four wireless microphones; SFX: cell phone ringing

LIGHTING: General stage

SETTING: Backstage at a theatre

The Understudy

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Guess You Had To Be There

Actors love scenes about theater, but be wary of inside jokes that only a drama crowd will get. The various roles in Hamlet and theatrical terms (including 'understudy' itself) may not be common knowledge to your audience, so be sure not to take anything for granted and don't rush the delivery. It may even be helpful to put on an 'advanced screening' for a non-theatrical person before the scene officially hits the stage, just to be certain that no important details get lost in the shuffle. This can ensure that the message and humor of the skit come through loud and clear, and nothing seems rotten in Denmark...

Application

The writer actually envisions a number of possible applications for The Understudy. At its heart, the script is of course about preparedness, and could be used as a sermon starter for a message about Jesus' parable about the ten virgins waiting for their bridegroom, or Peter's exhortation to always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us. Mitch took his 'role' for granted, didn't prepare, and is now facing the unpleasant consequences.

The scene was also written, though, to encourage scripture memorization. The author writes, "I have noticed more and more people who come up through the local church have very little Bible knowledge, much less actual memorization. The point of the drama is clear: if you never learned it, then you won't have it when you need it. Without knowing Scripture, how can we possibly expect to really live a godly life?"

A Little Known Fact

As of the writing of The Understudy, Arne Duncan is the Secretary of Education. Depending on the date of the performance, a quick Google search may be

needed to update this tidbit for accuracy.

Playing It Straight

It's been said that "art begins with the slightest of touches", and sometimes the safest way to handle a comedic scene is with kid gloves. The situation of The Understudy is funny without being ridiculous, so there's no need to go overboard in the portrayals of any of the characters. These aren't cartoons—they're the kind of people we might encounter in any drama group (including our own). Mitch is a tad self-important and the unfortunate fate that befalls poor Angus is ironically funny, but nothing that happens in the scene is outside the realm of possibility, so keep it real for maximum effect. If the situation becomes larger than life, we might miss the down-to-earth moral of the story.

Men In Tights

Regarding costumes, as the writer notes, Hamlet need not be set in the Elizabethan age. In modern theater, productions of Shakespeare have been set in practically every time and location on the planet (and even other planets), so don't feel pressured to spend a lot of time or money tracking down Elizabethan costumes.

On the other hand, if you choose not to go Elizabethan, it's probably best to have the players in something contemporary (i.e. black turtlenecks) in order to avoid confusion. Having the lines about Hamlet delivered by actors dressed as ninja turtles may be funny to the drama team, but will make no sense to your audience, and will risk losing them entirely.