

# TECHNOLOGY SHOCK!:

## How computers found their way into our Middle School Production

■ By **Russell Bell**

When I got a job teaching Middle School Drama at the American School of Bombay, I wasn't quite sure what to do. I had been an actor and a writer in Los Angeles for several years, but I had never taught Drama before. ASB, however, trusted me with the position. Not only that, they asked that I bring in Middle School productions that would motivate the students and invigorate the Drama programme. I had no idea where was I going to find productions like these.

I immediately began reading musicals and plays and emailing friends. Unfortunately, most everything seemed either written by adults for adults or the pieces seemed to 'young' to engage Middle School actors. And anyone who has ever worked in the Middle School knows that Middle School students have their own, unique perspective. They aren't interested in 'adult' things and they definitely aren't 'children'.

I decided to do what I've done several times since - I asked the students. I put together an after-school group of students interested in writing a play and asked them, 'What do you want to write about?' The ideas they came up with were incredible. Our first student-written production was a murder-mystery spoof that took place in Hollywood. It was filled with hilarious characters and had a detailed plot that would have made even Hitchcock turn his head.

Our production this past year, however, was even more inventive. The writer's decided they wanted to write a fantasy. I asked them where should this fantasy take place. I explained that the setting for a fantasy is just as important in the development of the plot as are the characters. Well, they thought about it. Our school is a one-to-one laptop school. We communicate via email. We use laptops in every class. We basically eat, sleep, and breathe computers. It was no surprise then that they decided the fantasy should take place in the Internet.

We decided not to worry about the almost immediate question - How were we going to do this? Instead we plunged



ahead with the script. Our main character was to be a Middle School student who loves computers. I had to smile as I looked at many of the writers in the room. They, of course, were describing themselves. They decided the hero wanted desperately to be popular, but just couldn't seem to break into that crowd. One day he meets a strange old man who gives him an unusual device. It's this device that sends our hero, his best friend, and several of the popular kids into the Internet. In the Internet they travel through Facebook, Youtube, and Amazon. They change people's profile pictures, eavesdrop on video-chats, and are attacked by Barbies and Pop-up Ads. They finally end up in the White Spot, the center of the Internet, and must face the evil villain who has captured them all. In the end, it is up to our hero to save them.

The script was exciting, funny, and sure to be popular with the student and adult audience. As we finished our script, however, that question raised its ugly head once again - How were we going to do this? The year before, we had done a variety show at our school and had projected videos and images onto a screen behind the performers. I felt we could do something like this for our play. We could project the web pages and videos onto the screen behind the actors. Of course, I knew we couldn't go directly onto the Internet during the production. That would be asking for a disaster. Instead we had to create 'fake' web pages ourselves, but how?

Again I turned to the students. As a Drama teacher only semi-literate at computers, I've learned that all computer



questions need to go to the students. I presented them with our challenge. We have written this incredible script about students lost in the Internet and now we need to bring that reality to life. We need to create the Facebook pages for our characters. We need to create google searches, video-chats, and animation. Some of our characters get trapped in Web Pages and Youtube videos. How will we create those? I turned all of this over to the students and they went to work.

What was incredible was that instead of having carpenters create flats and the students cover themselves in paint in an attempt to emulate Michelangelo, our sets were being created on the computer. Students were able to design entire backdrops in the course of a single rehearsal. Most of the web pages were created using Photoshop. The students took snapshots of actual web pages for the basic structure and then changed the pages to meet our play, adding photos of our characters, adding and changing the content, etc. Several students created actual Facebook pages for the characters in our play and had them send each other messages. One student used Power Point animation and photoshop to create the effect of our hero seemingly changing Facebook photos with a simple wave of his hands. Other students cropped photos of our actors in order to permanently 'trap' them in the Web. In the end, we had over 150 computer-generated sets that not only looked professional, but could all be changed with the simple click of a computer key.

The week before our production, ASB hosted a TEDx event in our auditorium. A professional crew was brought in to build a twenty-foot tall screen onto which huge

videos of the presenters were projected. The effect was absolutely incredible. And better yet, all the projections were done from the rear, allowing live presenters to stand before the screen without creating any shadows. I immediately asked my Principal and Tech Team if we could do the same with our production the following week. My Principal had already read the script and was eager to help our student writers and actors achieve their vision. He agreed and the question of 'How were we going to do this?' was finally answered.

Needless to say, the technical rehearsals were especially complicated. Not only did we need crew members on lights and sound, but we needed a computer operator as well. We then needed to take the extra time to rehearse moments in which all three elements – lights, sound, and digital background – came together to create the 'World of the Internet'. Up until now, our young actors had been like movie actors working in front of a green screen, with only the 'idea' of the web pages projected behind them. In fact, some of the actors told me later that they had been a bit skeptical that the concept would actually work. Now, however, they were able to see the characters Facebook pages, react to the video-chats, and truly see profile pictures being changed. I could sense an increase in the excitement as the cast and crew were finally able to visualize the reality of our Internet world. This show was actually going to work!

The final production was a success! Everyone in the audience, from third graders to adults, not only enjoyed the story and the characters they were enthralled by the digital effects. As I sat in the audience nervously biting my nails, one young writer who chose not to act in the play leaned over and said, 'It looks exactly like I imagined. It's incredible!' He smiled, bursting with pride. His vision had been achieved.

I've since used student-created projections in our black box theatre and have found them to be easy ways for the students to enhance their productions. All of us use computers throughout the day to enhance our lives. At ASB we use computers in our school to enhance the learning experience. Before coming to ASB I never would have thought you can use computers to achieve your theatrical vision. I'm now a believer.



# REACHING OUT IN BAKU

■ By Jen Tickle

Azerbaijan is home to around 2,500 refugees, the majority of whom live within the city limits of the capital, Baku. Consequently, the UNHCR Centre for Refugee Women and Children is a busy and bustling drop in centre for women originally from Iraq, Afghanistan and Chechnya. The centre provides a largely men-free venue for conversation and classes as well as a small library and IT room. I first came across the centre when I took over as CAS Coordinator of my school. When Sevda, the centre's manager, found out that I also taught drama, she asked me if I could bring some students in to perform. A conversation with her and an expatriate nurse who volunteers at the centre led us to the idea of producing something on hygiene for the women who use the centre, as many of them lack a basic education in fundamental hygiene issues and preventable disease is rife within the community.

I took this idea back to my MYP5 drama class, who responded with cautious enthusiasm. The first task I presented them with was one of research. I had presented the task in role, as if I was from the UNHCR, and so they responded well to the need to make sure that what they created fitted within the aims and ethos of the organization who had 'hired' them. They also had to find out about their target audience. Who are these women, where do they come from, and why are

they living here in Azerbaijan? From this research, issues such as religion and language became apparent. Students quickly realized that many of their initial drama ideas, such as 'germ warfare' were entirely inappropriate for an audience who had all been through fairly traumatic war experiences. They were somewhat taken aback by the realization that their audience spoke at least three different languages; Russian, Azeri and Farsi, and we had only three students in the class who spoke Russian and two who had some Azeri. This had a great impact on their choices of styles of presentations and the types of drama conventions they used to present their material.

Barbara, our nurse, came in after a couple of weeks and watched the work in progress. The class was very worried that they were pitching the teaching at too basic a level and being patronising, but Barbara reassured them that it was not patronizing to realize that these women had been denied fundamental knowledge in the form of health education, because of the regimes they were living under and because of lack of educational opportunities. All of a sudden the MYP seemed rather a privilege. As Fidan said in her reflection on the project: "Why can't we, students in TISA, who are privileged enough to be studying here, share what we've learnt? When we went to perform for the refugees we didn't preach to them, we showed

