***THEATRICS
Thoughts on Directing***

[**return**](http://users.tru.eastlink.ca/~brsears/theatre/thea.htm)

A group of people enter a room and watch a smaller group of people pretend to be something they are not; they watch people 'play'. If, for even a small while, the audience believes in the story they are watching, believes that the concerns and feelings of the players are real, then the play has succeeded. This is the essence of theatre.

Toward this goal, the actors must believe in the play and the characters they are playing. This belief can then be shared with the audience. The principal participants are the actors and the audience. The director and the technical crew provide the support that they need. However, it is the actors who make the production come alive, or not. One of the biggest mistakes that directors can make is to go into the rehearsal process knowing exactly what they want, and expect to see, as the final result.

What then is the role of the director? First, the director must know and believe in the play. The script must be good. No amount of talent on the part of the cast or crew can save a bad script. The director should know the play, should study it and should be highly motivated to do the play. The director must do his or her homework. The more ideas the director has on design, staging, character, stage business and all the other aspects of the play, the better.

But here's the irony. The director must be prepared to abandon any of these ideas at any time. The play will evolve from the collective creativity of all the participants. Directors with tunnel vision are not just stifling the creative impulses of the actors; they are missing the opportunity of discovering some exciting possibilities.

Peter Brooks, in his book, *The Empty Space,* tells us that the play development process can be divided into three stages. The first stage is:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **DIRECTOR** | **<=>** | **SUBJECT** | **<=>** | **DESIGNER** |

Here the director presents his or her vision of the play, the subject, to the set, costume, sound, lights and other designers. This must be done early to insure that everyone understands the intentions of the director in regards to the play. In amateur theatre, and sometimes in professional as well, the director takes on many of these roles personally, especially the ground plan of the set, which cannot be separated from the blocking of the play. Although part of this should be done before rehearsal has started, much of the design will evolve during the rehearsal process. For example, costumes must fit the character and the characters may not be fully developed until well into rehearsal.

It is traditional that the director has the final authority in the selection of the stage manager, especially in amateur theatre. This job is extremely important. When the run of the show begins, the director is no longer directly involved in the production. The stage manager calls the cues for the show and oversees all aspects of the production except the management of the house. The stage manager is often the only person in the crew who has been to most of the rehearsals. When a judgement call is needed, such as a missed cue line for a sound or light cue, the stage manager is the person best qualified to make the instant decision needed. The stage manager provides the continuity between the rehearsals and the productions. For this reason, it is extremely important that the director and the stage manager have a good working relationship. When the play goes into performance, the stage manager is charged with trying to maintain the interpretation of the show that has been achieved by the director and cast.

The single most important job of the director is the casting of the play. Some people have described it as eighty percent of the job in terms of the final effect on the play. This is true. A good cast can make a show, but if you cast poorly your work will be frustrating and the outcome will be in doubt. Once the play is cast, the director must impart to the cast his or her vision of the play. It is important that the director and cast share the same basic interpretation of the play. Is it a comedy? Is it a farce? Are the characters deep and meaningful, simply caricatures or somewhere in between? What is the theme of the play? What is its predominate element? Does the play have a moral? These matters must be understood from the start.

The next stage is:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **ACTOR** | **<=>** | **SUBJECT** | **<=>** | **DIRECTOR** |

During the rehearsal process, the director represents the audience. The actors cannot get outside themselves and watch. Even with video equipment they cannot easily place their work in context. The actors now present the subject (the play) to the director and modify this presentation based on feedback from the director. Actors cannot be fully creative until certain technical matters are worked out. The play must be blocked and the actors' lines must be learned. Good blocking emphasizes the players' characters and motivations. It drives the story line forward. When dealing with new actors, some of this time will be used in teaching basic movement, stage awareness and other technical aspects of acting. If these matters are done early enough in the rehearsal process, there will be time to work on the scenes.

If production time comes near and the actors are still uncertain about their lines or if the blocking is not done, then an important opportunity has been lost. This is the opportunity to allow the play to grow. At this point the director's homework will pay off. He or she can provide ideas on stage business, possible humour and so on. However, it is important that the play develops its own identity. The actors will perform the show. They must convince the audience. To do this they must believe in what they are doing. The actors are the best source for creative input. Of course, it is good that the director is well prepared because ideas will often be needed. But the same director must be prepared to abandon these ideas when the ideas from the cast are better. This will happen often.

A director will sometimes see that an actor's idea simply does not work. That is one of the reasons that a director is needed. A director can guide, try to convince and suggest but, in the end, if the actor does not believe what he or she is doing, then neither will the audience and nothing is gained. If an actor makes a suggestion, it should be tried. If such suggestions are ignored, then the actors will stop making suggestions. Again, there are lost opportunities. If a cast member asks a question, it must be taken seriously. The question usually indicates an unresolved problem. When in doubt, try different ideas. Often 'doing' accomplishes more than 'talking'.

When doing scene work, the director has an important duty. It is to be sure that the actors understand the motivations, or objectives of their characters. Sometimes a lot can be accomplished by asking the question; "What does your character want to do? (or have happen?)" These motivations should be expressed in their most basic form. A common method of rehearsal, when doing scene work, is the three-step method. First, the scene is run once through without stopping. During this run the actors can try any ideas that they might have. The director can take note of any ideas that he or she may have. Next, the scene is run stop/start trying ideas, working on motivations and making changes. Last, the scene is run once more, without stop, to set the changes in the actors' minds.

As the play nears production, it is important that the director does not accept anything less than an actor's best. The actors must experience the appropriate emotions and not just indicate or demonstrate them. Actors will often shy away from a complete commitment to their parts because such a commitment is a very intense experience. The director will now need to focus on the pacing of the play, concentrating on cue pick up, finding the places where the scenes build and encouraging a high level of energy. In amateur theatre, the director may also wish to remind the cast of certain technical and ethical matters. For example: handling laugh lines, voice projection and the seriousness of upstaging or dropping character.

There is often very little time to join the technical cues to the play, especially in amateur theatre. The technical rehearsal will run more smoothly if a dry technical rehearsal is held first, without the cast. Here, the director goes through the cues, one at a time, explaining them carefully to the crew. The technical rehearsal itself is run stop/start with the director in charge. The remaining rehearsals, including the dress rehearsal, are also run by the director. However, the director should start to withdraw from active involvement after the first technical rehearsal. The final dress rehearsal should not be stopped for any reason. Notes can be given and technical problems noted after the rehearsal.

A well directed play should not appear to have been directed at all. The play should appear spontaneous. It should have its own internal energy and drive. Near the end of the rehearsal process, very little new business should be added. The notes to the cast, given at the end of each full rehearsal, should become less specific and more general. I feel that a director needs to have acted, at least a few times. As I have stated, acting is intense and it is not a trivial matter to 'play' in front of a group of people, mostly strangers. A director must be able to fully empathize with what an actor is experiencing. When the production starts, the director has no specific duties. However, it is important that he or she continues to offer encouragement and support to the cast.

The last stage is:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **ACTOR** | **<=>** | **SUBJECT** | **<=>** | **AUDIENCE** |

These are the performances. The audience has now replaced the director. True theatre is now being done. Three of the French words that mean: rehearsal, performance and audience literally mean: repetition, representation and assistance. In many ways this tells the process better than the English words. The audience provides the assistance needed to transform the performance into real theatre. The actors give the audience the assistance they need to, just for awhile, believe in something beyond their own lives. However, it is the actors and the audience who create theatre. The director simply helps.

 ***Brian R Sears***

# THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The director has two basic responsibilities: (1) to bring about a unified vision within the finished production, and (2) to lead others toward its ultimate actualisation. To meet these charges, the director must organize the realisation of his or her vision. The director must decide upon the interpretation to be given the play; work with the playwright (if possible), designers, and technicians in planning the production; cast and rehearse the actors; and coordinate all elements into the finished production.To decide upon interpretation, the director must analyse the script to discover the play’s structure and meanings. Without understanding, the director cannot make choices. He or she seeks to know what the play is about and to understand each character in terms of both the script and the demands that character places upon the actor. The director must be able to envision the play’s atmosphere or mood and know how to actualise in terms of design and theatrical space. And, finally, the director must be able to see the play in terms of both physical and verbal action.Before rehearsals begin, the director meets with the designers. At this time, the director not only gives his or her vision, but also listens to ideas. This highly creative intercourse results in a compromise which often is better than the original vision, for creative ideas interact with other creative ideas. Ultimately however, the director decides upon the interpretation to be used. The director may have specific requirements that would need to be presented to the designers before their work begins. The director must be aware of actor movement when viewing a design. Also, the director must have an idea of what kind of lighting would help enhance the mood of the production.When casting a play, the director is aware of the physical demands of a character. Physical appearance must fit the character and must also be seen in relation to other characters. The director also tries to discern acting potential. In his book, Theatre, Robert Cohen describes traits that a director often looks for:Depending on the specific demands on the play and the rehearsal situation, the director may pay special attention to any or all of the following characteristics: the actor’s training and experience, physical characteristics and vocal technique, suitability for the style of the play, perceived ability to impersonate a specific character in the play, personality traits which seem fitted to the material at hand, ability to understand the play and its milieu, personal liveliness and apparent stage “presence,” past record of achievement, general deportment and attitude, apparent cooperativeness and “directability” in the context of an ensemble of actors in a collaborative enterprise, and overall attractiveness as a person with who one must work closely over the next four to ten weeks.The director’s most time-consuming task is to rehearse the actors. The director must be organized, for he or she focuses the entire cast during this time. The director’s medium is the actor in space and time. Space is defined by the acting area and the setting while time is defined by the duration of the production and the dynamics of the drama The director must be able to see the actor as a person and strive to draw out that person’s potential. Consequently, the director constantly must be sensitive to both the needs of an actor and at the same time think of ways to meet those needs in positive ways.Directors tend to follow an established process during rehearsals. Initially, the director usually has the actors read through the script. The read-through allows the director to discuss his or her vision, character motivation, and interpretation which will help the actors begin to see their characters in terms of a unified understanding. The director then blocks the actors. Blocking are an actor’s basic broad movements which serve as the physical foundation of the actor’s performance. The director indicates movement such as entrances and exits and positions actors onstage. Often, this step takes preplanning. During this stage, interpretation begins to be worked out, for blocking is linked to a character’s motivation to move or position.The next step would be to work on detail, which helps an actor discover his or her character. Detail includes working out stage business, which is an actor’s small-scale movement. For instance, making coffee, answering a phone, putting on shoes, or adjusting a tie are pieces of stage business. Hopefully, the actor will originate much of his or her own stage business.Motivation and detail continue while time is spent devoted to lines. Interpretation of dialogue must be connected to motivation and detail. During this time, the director is also concerned with pace and seeks a variation of tempo. If the overall pace is too slow, then the action becomes dull and dragging. If the overall pace is too fast, then the audience will not be able to understand what is going on, for they are being hit with too much information to process.Also, eventually, the actors will need to be off script. Once off script and the lines are memorized well enough that the actor is not thinking “What is my next line?” then the rehearsals enter into a very rewarding stage of development. For actors cease to read their part and truly make it living. They also discover new avenues of interpretation once off script.Late in the rehearsal process, the director often has the actors run through the production. A runthrough gives the actors a sense of continuity from one scene to the next. At this stage, the director usually does not stop the actors but takes notes to give after the scene is finished.Nearly all elements of the production — actors, scenery, lights, sound — come together at the technical rehearsal. The stage manager, prop crew, running crew, light and sound board operators all rehearse their various parts to play. Hopefully, light and sound cues will be set before the first technical rehearsal begins. A dress rehearsal is a technical rehearsal with costumes and makeup. At this time, the director must give over the production to the actors and technicians. The final dress rehearsal should be the same as a performance.Nobody is more useless on opening night performance than the director. The director’s job is over at this time and is often lost and feeling alone. The best the director can do is to wish people well, sit, watch the performance, know every flaw during that performance, and sweat it out.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|   |   |

 |

Professional, nonprofessional, educational, recreational. Doesn’t matter. Directing is not easy. The director is the leader, the visionary, and the person that gets blamed if the final product is garbage (ways to recognize if your show is garbage: 1) people leave at intermission, 2) your dramatic high point gets laughs, 3) it’s described as “cute” or “nice”, 4) your audience tells you it sucks, 5) your mother tells you it sucks, and worst of all 6) your audience has no opinion). Focus and preparation are key. Talent doesn’t hurt.

But remember, all of this preparation and work goes into producing a show that will be performed in front of an audience (size doesn’t matter – an audience is an audience). Give your audience credit. Allow them to do some work, use their imaginations, and think a little. Don’t give it all away. Some of the most important lessons that I’ve learned are listed here – my 7 tips to remember before directing your first play.  And if you stick them, it should be a smooth ride. Good luck.

 **1)      Casting is 90% of everything.**The right people, in the right roles, will eliminate most of the artistic problems. Look for features in your actors that embody the characters they will play. Do not cast to type – that’s lazy and will lead to shallow performances – but find parallels between the actor and the character. You’re taking this person and basically commissioning him or her to give birth to a brand new human being. Your cast needs to feel as passionately about their individual characters as you do about the entire play. And it’s the director’s job to guide them all through the journey.

**2)      Know the script better than you know yourself.**This is your world now. You need to eat, drink, breathe, and sleep the script. When one of your actors (or crew members, or patrons, or your mom) asks you any questions about the play, *you need to know the answer*. What does this word mean? Why does this happen? What was the playwright’s frame of mind when he wrote this? Should I blah blah blah? Anything. Obsess over the script. Have the answers. Research the historical time period. Know the story like it’s your own life. Know the characters better than you know your closest relatives.

**3)      If you don’t have a solid vision right away, no one else will, either.**You’re telling a story. Know the who, what, when, where, and why. But most importantly, know *how* you’re going to tell it.

**4)**      **Consider a rehearsal as a laboratory: hypothesize, experiment, repeat.**
Rehearsals are the bubbles where the real magic happens. Rehearsal is where characters are built, relationships are formed, and the stage turns from elevated wooden plank into a living, breathing universe. This is the place to take risks and try everything. Encourage the actors to push themselves and explore the characters and themselves. Tell them to go as far as they feel comfortable going, and that you’ll bring them back if they stray. Respect, comfort, and a creative atmosphere will make rehearsals the most difficult, yet most rewarding of experiences.

**5)      There is no “I” in “theater”. There is no “I” in “team”. This is not a coincidence.**Theater is collaboration (even Shakespeare did it). Be easy to work with, listen to everyone, and give praise when it’s deserved. If you want an actor or other member of your team to try something different or go in a different direction, approach the issue with respect. Yes, you’re the leader, but if your team doesn’t respect you, or worse, hates your rotten guts, the show will suffer. You have surrounded yourself with creative, intelligent people – rely on them to help you out. If they share in your vision and they feel motivated to perform and create, they are your best resources – and their age doesn’t matter**.**

**6)      Get off book as quickly as possible. It won’t be pretty.**
No matter how experienced your actors are, the first rehearsal off script is scary (and could border on disastrous). Encourage (demand) your actors to begin memorizing their lines immediately upon receiving their scripts. You can’t build character if your actors are still *reading*. They’re distracted because they’re *reading*; internalize the character, then build upon it.

**7)      Mind the budget.**Sets, costumes, performance royalties, printing costs, theater rentals, rehearsal space, equipment rentals, and other, unforeseen costs. It may be someone else’s responsibility to deal with the money, but your artistic choices need to fit into the budget. This is harder than you may think.

First & foremost, the director should be very clear about what the story and characters are. Unlike actors, director should be close to all the characters equally no matter how small that character is. A director can’t be biased about a character or a scene. Its like being a seasoned Chess player. For a seasoned player all pieces are equal & can be sacrificed if they serve the ultimate goal of winning. A director should have the same approach towards scenes,dialogues and characters. My general approach is as under:-

1. Once you have read a story and feel connected enough to the storyline, you should decide on the scope of the play. Note that stories might be more detailed or longer but a play will have a limited time. Not everything written in the story would appear in the script of the play. In movies , the editors take care of it during post production but in plays it has to be done in advance.
2. Choose the cast (assuming you are involved in the casting) according to your impression of the particular character. Look for the physical traits which are not defined in the character descriptions but would help in presenting your interpretation of the character. e.g. if the story says “Hitler was a fierce warlord”, we generally assume that Hitler would be a tall, well built person with a lot of visible scars . But we know he wasn’t. So the interpretation of characters is very important.
3. Allow your actors to express their characters in the way they understand it. This helps in the creative process as you may get some additional perspective.
4. last but not the least, Do a full dress rehearsal. This allows you to see the technical issues while on stage like lighting,sound, timing, etc. During the rehearsals, try to observe it as an audience and evaluate if the story is conveyed with the same spirit as you wanted to.
5. To fix a deadline for the Performance
6. To watch a few plays near the local nearby place to get the pulse of the audience
7. To design or find a writer to design the theme of the Play
8. To find few interested people and doing a small discussion on what are the pros and the cons
9. To make a 10 pointer scene by scene division of the theme
10. To write the talkie portion
11. To Cast Appropriate People [ Dedication should be given the first priority ]
12. To have a line run [ Play Reading ]
13. Blocking the Play [ Creating Movements ]
14. Design the Set [ The Background of the Play ]
15. Compose Music [ Either search it from the net or compose your own or find a person who is interested to compose it for you ]
16. Design Lights according to the blocking
17. Market your play 30 days before the date of performance
18. Have a technical run [ An entire rehearsal which should be done as if it is a real play , time the play and see if it has any lags as per the total timeline set by you ] two days before the final performance and invite few people who have not been a part of this until this moment as an audience
19. Set up the stage 4 hours before the time of performance
20. Let the actors feel the stage and lights along with the music [check all light changes ]

One, train and study the fields of acting, directing and art. Do enough acting to know what actors need to give a performance. Two, study the play, its topics and themes, the author and his/her other works. Then, determine the theme, purpose. essential tone of the various acts, scenes, moments, interactions, et al. Find sub-plots and subtexts, especially in the relationships between characters. Develop a concept for the piece that will inform your decisions about the acting, scenery, costumes, lights, sounds, et. all. Meet with producers and designers to share your ideas and see if they are practicable given budget and resources. Make necessary compromises. Break the script down into small bits and create a schedule that will allow you to build the show slowly and deliberately, building smaller moments together into the whole. Cast with care, not just for talent and type, but for temperament, availability, team dynamics and work ethics. Come into each rehearsal with a plan for blocking and stage pictures, but be flexible and accept the good ideas of the cast. Work collaboratively with actors and technicians, creating an atmosphere of acceptance, encouragement, support and exploration, but know what serves the script and doesn’t and maintain vision and control. Help train the cast and crew to get to a place where they own the the play and your vision of it, then step away with trust, love and gratitude. This is, of course, an oversimplification and specific to me.

You’ll hear many things from the audience as they leave the theater, but you’ll never hear anyone say, “I wish that play was longer.”

I’ve seen and been in scores of theatrical productions. The one thing that is common to every production that wasn’t good was the feeling that it was too long. This ranges from feeling a bit uncomfortable in the seats, to the feeling that you’re being held prisoner.

Almost every actor I know (including myself) almost instinctively wants to linger over their lines, and enjoy every possible pause, whether indicated in the script or not.

One of the best pieces of advice I got from an acting coach was, “unless it says ‘pause’ in the script, don’t. If you absolutely must have a pause, you may choose to have one and only one per act.”

As a director, part of your job is to drive the time out of the production. Most characters on stage have somewhere they want to be, and part of their motivation should be to get out of the scene and off stage.

“But won’t this lead to ‘gabbled lines’, and people not understanding what’s being said? Maybe, but part of acting basics is to be able to enunciate clearly and be understood at almost any speed. Also, the audience doesn’t have to hear exactly every word to understand what is happening.

This also applies to theater tech as well. Don’t have a 10 second lighting fade when four seconds will do. Don’t have a scene change that takes more the 30 seconds (most professional shows I’ve seen are doing them in under 10 seconds).

I recommend that directors have a speed through at least once a week during rehearsals. Strive to get the running time of the play to one minute or less per page.

For an example, watch the movie “His Girl Friday”. It’s a 120 page script they do in 92 minutes. It cooks!

Remember, it’s always easier to slow a show down than get it faster.

The best directors I’ve worked with guided the performances with the gentlest of hands.

Rather than telling your actors straight-up what they need to do, drop bread crumbs for them. Frame the conversations you have with them about narrative and character so that they arrive at the conclusions you desire (or at least in the ballpark) rather than bluntly telling them what their conclusions ought to be. Sometimes, they may find things you didn’t know were there.

Make it your goal to have your actors say on closing night: “Yeah (DIRECTOR) is nice and all. But he didn`t really do much.”

The rehearsal room is where all the director’s preparatory hard work pays off and is their opportunity to experiment with and explore the text using their skill and creativity, together with that of their actors. Some directors have a particular style or method of working, utilising the theories of specific practitioners such as Konstantin Stanislavsky, or Bertolt Brecht, while others will borrow from several theorists, or adapt their working methods according to the play they’re directing. […]

The majority follow a fairly loose pattern of working, in which emphasis is placed on understanding the text – especially important if working on period plays where the language patterns and vocabulary are not the same as we use today – exploring and establishing the relationships between the various characters in the play, and seeking out the meaning and emphasis in terms of the dramatic action of the play.

### Proxemics

Proxemics means the position of people in relation to each other onstage. It works closely with characterisation and a relatively new science known as kinesics, which is the study of movement and gestures, and the meanings these can have in terms of personality or character.

The position of people in any group is significant – it tells you a lot about their relationships – and this knowledge can be used when exploring spatial relationships onstage. Where a character stands and with whom or away from whom all has a relevance to what is being conveyed to an audience, in terms of the relationships being established. This should also be considered in terms of the character’s relationship to the physical space he or she is in.

Simply by arranging bodies in a physical space, a director can imply connections, weaken or strengthen the relationships between characters, create tension and heighten or supress mood and atmosphere. By arranging characters differently within a space, different things are implied.

This awareness is combined practically in the process known as ‘blocking’. Once a fairly perfunctory process of telling actors where to enter and exit and where to move onstage, today’s directors take a more holistic approach, exploring movement as part of a journey the actors go on as their characters develop.

### Blocking

Traditionally, the stage space is divided up into sections and referred to in shorthand, for ease of use by actors and directors and simple recording by stage management. The layout is assigned from the audience’s point of view.

Movement will almost always upstage dialogue and stage movement is a powerful creator of meaning. In most twentieth-century and contemporary plays this movement onstage is justified by character motivation or intention. It is the job of the director to marry the character motivation that the actor feels is appropriate with the visual needs of the scene.

A director needs to consider sightlines – that is the view from different parts of the auditorium when watching the play. If the audience can’t see key moments of the play they won’t understand it. Blocking makes sense of the relationships between characters and helps create focus for the audience, showing them which action in a scene is important.

### Planning a rehearsal

Whatever the approach, for the next two to three weeks the director and cast will embark on an adventure, breaking down the play to explore it for meaning, subtext and motivation. While each actor is on a personal journey of exploration with their character, the director must retain an overview and draw them all into a coordinated whole that will make sense to an audience and entertain them too.

### Production meetings

The production team, which comprises the designers, a stage manager and other personnel as required, such as a composer, a movement director, a vocal coach or a puppeteer, meet regularly with the director to discuss the progress of the production, agree deadlines and resolve any problems that occur. A director does this in addition to the rehearsal commitment, often having to meet at the end of a long day of rehearsal, or in lunch hours.

### Run-throughs

By the third week of rehearsals, actors will have learnt their lines and begun to run through the play on a regular basis. The director does this gradually, building scenes, then sequences of scenes, and finally running the whole play, so that actors get a sense of the overall rhythm of the play and how to pace themselves through it.

For the director this is a testing time. It is the last opportunity to alter or revise any aspect of the production and the point at which they can gauge whether what they set out to achieve at the start has been realised.

Directing Plays explores both the theory and practice of directing plays, with particular emphasis on textual interpretation. Don Taylor guides the student through the complex process of choosing a play, the working partnership of director, playwright and designer, the delicate matter of casting a play, the rehearsal process and everything which needs to happen before the production is up and running.

# Directing

The Director has the ultimate responsibility for the artistic elements of any production, directly controlling the actors and indirectly controlling all the other aspects of the show, through the respective members of the production team. It would be useful if any director had some experience in all areas of play production, but in amateur productions that is a utopian ideal.

## Selecting A Play

A lot of thought has to be devoted to making the right choice of production. The main factors to consider are the available talent and the potential audience. Whilst many suggestions of ideal plays will be offered, a director has to be convinced that the play is right choice. In any event you will need to read a play thoroughly before even considering short-listing it. You can obtain catalogues from the major [play agents](http://www.dramainfoweb.co.uk/pages/agents.html) with précis of their scripts to help you make your selection.

Consider the number of characters in the play. If you have a large number of actors a play with more characters may be appreciated to give as many as possible a chance to act. However this will make it more complex to direct and keep track of what each person is doing.

Many directors feel more comfortable directing specific types of play; comedy, drama, farce or another style. Hopefully reading several styles of play will help a director visualise the possible problems and benefits. Some drama groups only perform specific types of play or alternate between dramatic and comedy productions, so your audience may be expecting a murder mystery and be disappointed if you offer them a farce.

Directing a comedy or farce isn't funny... it's as much hard work as a thriller or serious play. Just because the cast and crew are falling about laughing at rehearsal does not mean your audience will too. You have to be just as careful and patient whatever genre of play you are tackling.

You can not rely on directing a play that you have seen elsewhere, at least until you have read it. However much you enjoyed the production, it may have been because the director managed to gloss over an imperfection in the script, that may have escaped your notice. Take into account current tastes and trends, what you enjoyed a few years ago may not have the same significance today.

## Making Changes

Do not expect to change the script to make the play fit your facilities and performers. Usually a male or female actor can be used for a supporting role (like a bar tender or waiter/waitress) who does not have any bearing on the overall plot, and change "he" for "she", etc, where needed. You can change stage directions, costumes and the staging, but not the spoken words in the script. Sometimes a playwright will make a specific requirement in the script; you must comply with this requirement or choose another script. You can approach the agents for permission to make specific changes, but it may take some time for the agent, publisher or author to make a decision.

## Venue

In amateur theatre details like selecting the venue and production dates are often dealt with by the committee of the society, unless the director has a special reason for performing in a specific location. Usually you will expect to perform in a theatre, town hall, drama studio or a similar performance space that is likely to have at least some of the essential facilities you will need for a play. Some more adventurous directors may have other ideas, like performing in an unusual location not usually associated with theatre, or even outside. You have to remember that if you plan to perform somewhere not equipped for theatre use it will undoubtedly involve a lot of additional planning and effort to arrange things like the staging, seating, changing rooms and an adequate power supply for the lights!

## Cast and Crew

Once the play is chosen the director has the initial responsibility for selecting a cast and stage crew from the volunteers and conscripts available. Auditions often take the form of a reading part of the play, to give prospective actors an idea of the story, followed by individuals reading selected parts of the play that will give the director an idea of how they will perform.

Amateur groups often have members who regularly carry out some of the backstage duties, as some of the technical aspects tend to require a bit of more specialist expertise. However this makes it easier for the director, who can rely on these individuals to be competent backstage. The director will need to confer with all the backstage people to co-ordinate their activities.

## Rehearsals

Rehearsals will usually take place in the evenings but not necessarily on the stage that will be used for the performances, so with the assistance of the set designer and stage manger, the director needs to make sure the cast know where the entrances are and where significant features like furniture will be. Hopefully you will be able to mark the floor with electrical tape to indicate walls and other features and use chairs and tables to represent furniture.

As an aid to deciding who needs to be at a rehearsal and make it easier to schedule rehearsals if certain people are likely to be unavailable on particular nights, plot a chart showing when each member of cast is need on stage.

Many amateur groups fall into the trap of spreading rehearsals over too long a period of time, sometimes up to three months. It may seem that you need the time to rehearse but the extended period gives the cast a false sense of security. They feel they have plenty of time to learn lines, so spend weeks rehearsing with their script in one hand whilst fumbling with props in the other hand. It is almost impossible to act and learn stage moves without first having learnt the script!

The inflection and timing of each line of dialogue is important, as too is the facial expression and physical reaction of each member of the cast to their counterparts.

As rehearsals progress the backstage departments will start to make an impression on the production. Hopefully some of the set will be available to give the actors a feeling for the space they will be working in. Props and costumes will also help, even if these are only temporary items, until the actual finished versions are available. The directors' responsibility only ends at the dress rehearsals, when the stage manager will run the production as if it were a performance.

### Blocking

Back on stage the director will have to concentrate on making the stage directions in the script feasible on the stage at their disposal. Some scripts will have very few stage directions, so it becomes the directors job to decide who stands, sits, moves when and where. At the same time making sure that the actors can be seen, heard and understood. In fact anything the cast do on stage relies on the directors' ability to move and position them, known as blocking, to give the required effect.

### Grouping

Grouping of actors will also help project their character and relationship with other cast members. For example, keeping one member of the cast isolated from the others will give the impression of their remoteness or detachment from the others.

### Working with Props

One of the most difficult tasks to achieve on stage is handling objects. Something as simple as pouring a cup of tea becomes complicated and problematic. The properties people need to make sure that the tea pot and cups are carefully arranged, in the same layout every time, so that the actor can apparently effortlessly pick up the tea pot and pour, whilst remembering dialogue and showing interest in their fellow actors. Even simple everyday tasks can be surprisingly tricky in a stage environment.

It is almost always essential that actors use their upstage hand (i.e. the hand that is furthest away from the audience) if they are making a gesture or picking something up. If they use their downstage hand they stand a good chance of becoming hidden behind their hand or the item, as it is nearer the audience and therefore larger in perspective terms.

**Director's Goals**
The stage director's role is one of the most recent additions to the central team of interpretive artists who bring a play to life.  The director's job as described here has existed for just over a hundred years.

The director's goals are to provide the central interpretation of a playwright's text and to coordinate or unify all other artists' work.

A director's interpretation of a text can also have one of two goals:  he may choose to create an interpretation that is as faithful as possible to a playwright's intention, or he may choose to bring his own vision, usually inspired by a writer's text, to the stage.  In the first case, which we can call **editorial directing**, a director looks to the text to determine all questions of performance style, thematic emphasis, visual style, and character definition.  Such a director seeks essentially to make his own work invisible, much like an editor works with a novelist before it is published.  In the second case, which we can term **creative directing**, the director functions somewhat like the playwright: she is also a primary artist and might extensively revise or cut a playwright's text.  Communicating her interpretation of the text to the audience is her primary goal. This is often seen with classic plays, like Shakespeare's, which have been produced many, many times. Sometimes a theatre company creates a performance piece without a playwright at all, leaving the director to fulfill the usual playwright's function of structuring the performance piece.  Even when the most editorial of directors intends to faithfully produce a writer's intentions on the stage, a director makes many interpretive decisions based on the director's aesthetic sensibility and experience, the styles and expertise of the other collaborative artists, and the specific audience for which the play will be produced. After all, the most historically accurate production possible of, for example, a Shakespeare play can never reproduce the original audience with its expectations, experiences, and world view.

The director's interpretation is often called a **production concept**.  The production concept is an analysis of the text that determines how it will be brought to life:  the director will emphasize certain **thematic material**, interpret **major characters and** **relationships**, determine a basic visual and sound **environment**, and select a performance **style** with his production concept.  The director who is working with an existing text will develop his production concept before the first production meeting with other visual and aural artists and before casting actors.  If the actors and designers will be helping to create the text, then he may finalize a full production concept later in the production process.

The director fulfills her second goal by **communicating the production concept to** **the other artists** and then using her concept in directing and approving the other artists' work. The production concept is presented to designers, who will create the play's visual and aural environment, at the first production meeting, and is usually communicated at least in part to actors at an early rehearsal. Some directors work more collaboratively than others; a more collaborative director may involve designers and actors in determining a final production concept. However, the director must define a production concept because other artists need it in developing their own artistic goals for the production. The  production concept defines the artistic limits, or sets the **rules of the fictional world**, for a given production; when all artists work within the production concept defined by the director, the production will have a **unified or coherent effect** for the audience. If a certain designer's or actor's work does not fit within the director's concept, then it will not cohere with the work of the other artists. If such a problem arises, it is the director's job to work with the artist to alter her interpretation until the entire production gains coherence.

**Director's Tools**
A director's tools are the **text** and the **other artists**.  The director is unique among the theatrical artists in that her **work will be seen only indirectly** on the stage.  The director's interpretation of the text will be embodied by actors translated into sights and sounds and movement by the designers.  The coordination of actors' and designers' work is vital to a fresh and clear theatrical interpretation, but all of the choices made by the director throughout the production process will be literally carried out by other artists, not the director.

In **creating a production concept**, the director uses several intellectual and practical tools:  literary and theatrical text analysis, knowledge of the theatre space, knowledge of designers' styles, perhaps knowledge of actors' strengths, knowledge about the intended audience, as well as his own broad experience of performance styles. Many of these tools can only be gathered through practical experience.

In **carrying out the production concept**, the director uses essentially the same tools.  However, in the production process, a director who also has practical skills in costuming, set construction, lighting, sound, and acting will find this knowldege useful in making decisions about how to coordinate all of these elements.  Therefore, the director must have some experience in all areas of theatrical production. The director spends the majority of his time working with actors in rehearsal, therefore extensive experience as an actor or working with actors is essential. The director must be able to communicate ideas about the text in terms that the actor can translate into stage action and thus communicate to the audience.

Because of the essentially collaborative nature of the theatre and the fact that all of the director's work is mediated by other artists before it reaches an audience, a director requires a third, related set of tools.  The director must possess **management skills**. Management skills include inspiration, clear communication, collaborative abilities, ensemble building, and organization.

**Direcor's Processes**
The director's process extends from the selection of a play for production through to opening night.  The director works closely with all members of the artistic staff and some members of a theatre's administrative staff, but the bulk of his time will be spent working with actors on the text in rehearsals. The second largest amount of time will be spent in analyzing the text, which is a process that continues and evolves throughout the production process and often involves extensive research.

A director and play may be brought together in a number of ways: if the director is a member of a theatre's artistic staff then he may select a play himself or in consultation with the governing artistic and financial bodies of the theatre; he may be hired by a company to direct a play chosen by that company; or, he may select a play and then seek producers to fund the production or an existing company to sponsor his work.

No matter how she has been hired, the director's next step is to **work with the** **text**.  She will analyze the plot, characters, themes, style, diction, environment, and actions. She will envision and hear parts of the play in her head. She will consider the audience for whom the play will be presented and ask herself what in the text will be most exciting and pertinent to that audience, and also to herself.  This analysis and imagining will lead the director to a production concept.

The **first production meeting** is where a director communicates the production concept to set, costume, lighting, and sound designers, stage managers, producers, technical directors, and publicity managers.  A more collaborative director will seek feedback, clarifications, or revisions of her ideas from the designers.  The producers, who provide the necessary funding and want to see a production turn a profit, might also provide input.  The technical director, who will be responsible for building scenery and other effects and is usually familiar with the special needs or problems of working in the theatre space, might provide valuable advice to designers at production meetings.  Publicity managers also use the work of the director and designers, presented in production meetings, as they develop marketing strategies for a production.

At an early meeting, the production staff must establish a **production schedule**, which sets deadlines for design approval, deadlines for set and costume construction, dates on which the lighting crew works in the theatre, press release deadlines, program copy deadlines, and dates of technical and dress rehearsals.

At **subsequent production meetings** designers will present sketches or samples of their ideas.  The director's job is to coordinate and refine the designers' artistic ideas so that the resulting production will cohere. The director approves final design plans, usually presented in the form of renderings, or detailed depictions of a set, costume, or lighting effect as an audience member will see it.  Production meetings typically occur at least **weekly** during the play's rehearsal process. Thus, as the director shapes the play with the actors, she informs the designers of developments at production meetings.  In turn, the designers can respond to changes in interpretation of the play or to new practical needs.

The director may **cast** **actors** in a variety of ways.  She may hold auditions and select a cast herself, or she may be working with a company of actors who must be cast in the major roles, or the producers may already have a star cast in a major role, who may then have input into which other actors are cast.  Depending on the play's producing organization, the director may have to cast all Equity (professional, union) actors contacted through their agents, or a certain number of union actors, or be restricted from using Equity actors at all.

In professional theatre, the director usually hears actors present **monologues** of their own choosing at an initial audition and then holds **call-backs** for actors whom she thinks she may cast.  At call-backs the actors read from the play text, either **cold readings**, meaning unprepared, or with time to prepare their characters, called **prepared readings**.  Many directors structure auditions according to their personal tastes or the unique needs of a play;  for example, a director might ask actors to **improvise** or tell a story in an audition.  For musical theatre, an audition typically consists of a monologue, a song, and a dance audition. Actors may audition privately in individual sessions, in small groups, or all together -- often referred to as a **cattle call**.

Once the play has been cast, it enters **rehearsal**. The director is responsible for scheduling and structuring each rehearsal. While each director will run rehearsals in her own unique manner, there are several categories of rehearsal that illuminate the director's process of working with actors; a typical progression is from reading, to blocking, to character building, to refining, to technical, to dress rehearsals, and finally to previews and opening night.

At a **reading**, the actors may simply read the play or they may analyze the text and characters as they read.  In **blocking** **rehearsals**, the director sets where and when actors move on the stage.  By this time the director will have a groundplan from the set designer, which is a scale drawing of the stage from a bird's eye perspective; it indicates where all walls, doors, furniture, platforms, stairs, or other scenery is placed. The stage manager usually places tape on the stage floor to indicate the boundaries of the set pieces for the director and actors to use while blocking. Some directors encourage actors to improvise blocking based on character motivation in the stage environment, finalizing blocking much later in the rehearsal process. In
**character rehearsals**, actors work intensively on their characters.  These rehearsals will often be held with small groups or individuals, and the actors will depart from the playwright's text in order to flesh out their characters. The director clarifies points of character, orchestrates relationships among characters, and ensures that characters fulfill their structural purposes within the text.

Once the whole play is blocked, characters defined, relationships among characters developed, and the shape of the play determined, the director changes his focus. In early rehearsals he was often focused on minutiae: a character's reaction at a specific moment or a bit of stage movement. Now the director must shift his focus to the shape and movement of the overall production and the effect it will have on an audience member seeing it for the first time.  In **refining rehearsals** the director may work on pacing, comic timing, transitions among scenes, heightening climaxes, or shifting the tone of scenes.  Since refining rehearsals fall later in the rehearsal process, when the play is usually being rehearsed off-book and as a whole, with **work-throughs**  -- which stop and start to address problems -- or with **run-throughs**,  the director is able to see the overall shape and to put himself in the shoes of an audience member.

In **technical rehearsals** the work of the actors is finally put together with the work of the designers. Usually scenery, lights, and sound are added first, reserving costumes for the **dress rehearsals**, which are typically the last couple of rehearsals before previews or opening night. A first technical rehearsal, or "tech", is often a **cue-to-cue**, or rehearsal which skips from one sound or light cue or scene change directly to the next one, leaving out all intervening dialogue.  The director's role in the technical and dress rehearsals is to observe and adjust how all of the elements fit together. Just before entering technical rehearsals, he usually sits down with the stage manager, lighting and sound designers, and possibly the set designer to set all cues and how they should be called by the stage manager. The stage manager marks in her prompt book when light, sound, and set cues should be called; whether they correspond to lines, movements, and music; how they correspond to one another; and how long they take. This meeting is often called a **paper tech**. Once in tech rehearsals, he may find that the scene changes are longer than expected and ask the sound designer for more music, or decide that the lights should not go to black between scenes but that actors should be seen by the audience as they move into place for the next scene, or find that the color of a light produces an unattractive color when it hits an actor's costume.  The director makes the aesthetic choices about how to reconcile such unforseen events during the technical and dress rehearsals.

If there are preview performances, as most professional theatres have, the director gets to make final adjustments to actors' performances and technical elements based on audience responses. By opening night, the director's job is done.  Often she will come to opening night to hear and see how the final product works in front of an audience, but her role is over once the play opens.

**Historical Conventions of Directing**
Until the middle of the 19th century, the job of director as described in the preceding sections did not exist.  One of the best explanations for the sudden creation of the director's job is that staging in past eras was highly stylized and regularized, as was set design and acting; in other words, each Greek tragedy looked and sounded approximately like others, and the same with each Restoration comedy.  However, once set designers began to create entirely new environments for each play, electric lights brought the job of lighting designer, and artistic movements began to define radically different goals for different theatre texts, the need for **a single, unifying artistic vision**, as supplied by a director, also arose.

Throughout theatre history, there has always been a figure who did some of the functions assigned to the contemporary director.  For centuries, either a company's lead actor or the playwright himself made whatever staging decisions were necessary. Theatre or company managers bought whatever scenery or properties were required by the current repertory of plays when they had the money for it. This was true both of the sharing companies of Shakespeare's time and the later companies managed by businessmen. Costumes were left to the whims and financial resources of the individual actors. Financial, more than artistic, decisions dictated what theatre companies purchased.  For example, in the 18th century, theatres across Europe began to attract patrons because of spectacularly painted scenery;  since opulent scenery brought audiences, companies began to hire designers who gradually replaced the older system of stock  scenery with scenery built and painted for a specific
production.

The German author Johann Wolfgang von **Goethe** was one of the first theatre practitioners to take decisive steps toward the art of stage directing.  In the late18th century, he assembled a company of actors at the small court theatre in Weimar. He greatly extended the normal rehearsal period for plays, from a week to at least a month. He coached each actor individually on his diction and character interpretation, and encouraged actors to create new characters for each play rather than repeat successful types of characters. Finally, he approached the stage like a canvas, composing the actors in each scene so as to fill out the three dimensional stage space; this replaced the older practice of actors standing front and center whenever they had a sizable speech. This is the first decisive step toward blocking as we know it today.

Two other Germans of the mid-19th century, Richard Wagner and Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, are usually credited with defining the director's role and accelerating the spread of directing among European and American companies. **Wagner**, who is better known for his work composing operas, also directed his own productions and designed and built a theatre to house his operas.  His major contribution to the development of directing is his concept of ***gesamtkunstwerke***, which translated literally means "assembled art work." From his experience of operas, Wagner saw clearly that each element of a production must support all of the others towards a specific overall effect on the audience.  Although actors and playwrights had relied on the work of painters and fashion designers for centuries, the idea that they should be an integral part of a theatre company and the process of play production was new.  Wagner articulated the need for a **central, unifying** **artist**, himself, to direct the visions of other artists in the opera.

**Saxe-Meiningen** produced plays with elaborately researched, **historically correct** details in **scenery, set dressings, and costuming**. Some other 19th century men were also interested in historically accurate productions, but the Duke had the time and money to work in detail.  More importantly, he applied the same detailed approach to his work with **actors**.  Building on Goethe's innovation of composing the stage picture, he made the **stage picture dynamic and extended** stage action **off the sides** of the stage into the wings.  He rehearsed his supernumeraries, who are actors with non-speaking roles in crowd scenes who had typically been hired off the street and put on stage with no rehearsal, and formed them into groups with a trained actor in each group.  In Saxe-Meiningen's productions, each individual in a crowd scene had his or her own character and each reacted and moved differently in response to the stage action around him. When the company toured Europe, starting in 1874, theatre artists were amazed at this new approach to staging and immediately adopted the Duke's ideas.

The early 20th century saw the rise of **auteur-directors**,  or directors who viewed themselves as a species of author, either writing their own texts or significantly altering a playwright's text to fit their own visions. These are an extreme example of the creative directors describe in part 1. Many auteur-directors also designed their own scenery and lighting, taking a desire for artistic unity to an extreme.  Perhaps the most extreme was Britain's Edward Gordon **Craig**, who not only radically adapted classical texts and designed his own productions, but also suggested that actors should be **übermarrionettes**, or superpuppets, responding entirely to a director's vision, without imposing any ideas of their own. In such an extreme viewpoint, the director becomes not the unifying artist of theatre but the only artist. Max **Reinhardt** introduced the idea of finding or building the right theatre for a production in the 1910's; he believed that we should not have a single kind of theatre space but many options so that a director might choose the most appropriate theatre for his vision of the play. Reinhardt staged plays outdoors, in sports arenas, in cathedrals, and in small and large playhouses.

Many 20th century directors have helped to define new styles of performance, which in turn increases the need for directors generally. Today many options exist for how a play should be produced and how the various elements of theatre should fit together, that the controlling vision has almost become a necessity. **Expressionism** in the 1920's opened up a new theatrical style, as did Brecht's **Epic Theatre** over the next two decades and**Absurdism** in the 1950's and 60's. These theatrical styles were defined by directors and critics in response to new theatrical literature; the best embodiment of the writers' texts required new acting styles and new relationships among performers, designers, and audiences.  Since the 1960's, some directors like the Polish Jerzy Grotowski and English Sir Peter Brook began to create theatrical effects with actors' bodies and voices instead of many technical effects, turning theatre away from illusion and spectacle and back to an experience of the imagination. This is called **poor theatre**. Today most directors use a combination of these twentieth century techniques as they find them useful in a specific production.

Over the last 30 years, some companies have moved away from the traditional view of directing because of its **autocratic implications**;  in such companies decisions are made collectively or by a governing group. Many of these groups also have had political or social goals, like women's theatres (At the Foot of the Mountain in Minnesota) or chicano theatres (El Teatro Campesino in southern California), and felt that the theatre's artistic structure ought to mirror the artists' ideals for larger social organizations.

**Musical Director**
The musical director works with the stage director in musical theatre productions or other plays with music. She works within the director's production concept for the overall show.
Her functions include teaching the music and coaching singers on interpretation, vocal technique, and the style of music. Musicals today are written in a variety of musical styles, often combining several styles in one show.  The musical director works with singers to **achieve the appropriate style**, whether it is jazz, classical, rock, or gospel. Many comic characters will also use a character voice to both speak and sing on stage. By coaching in rehearsals, she helps singers to create the **dramatic intent** of their songs. The musical director may work as the rehearsal **accompanist**, or another musician may be hired to accompany rehearsals.  The musical director is often responsible for hiring, rehearsing, and **conducting** the **pit orchestra**. In performance, the musical director may conduct the pit orchestra, may play keyboard or another instrument, or other musicians and a conductor may be hired for a show's technical rehearsals and run.

**Choreographer**
The choreographer works with the director in musical theatre or other plays that involve dance or stylized movement.  Some plays set in other time periods will have a **movement coach** who teaches movement appropriate to the time period that may or may not include dance.  The choreographer, like the music director, works with the director's production concept in staging dances.  He **selects movement styles** appropriate to the music and the director's concept, composes the dances, teaches them, and rehearses them for proper technique.  Unlike the choreographer working for a dance company, the theatre choreographer must consider the **dramatic effect**, the purpose of the dance within the plot, and the motivations of the characters involved when composing.

**Fight Director**
A final kind of director is the fight director. He is skilled and usually **certified in stage combat**.  Like the music director and choreographer, the fight director works with the director and follows her production concept.  Fight directors stage **hand-to-hand combat** as one might see in a western's bar room brawl, fighting with **historic weapons** such as the epee which is found in the final scenes of *Hamlet*, and fighting with **contemporary weapons** as we often find in a murder mystery.  Fight sequences are said to be "choreographed" and are **composed and rehearsed** move by move like dances.  Many period plays like Shakespeare's Hamlet require detailed period fight choreography in their climactic moments which must be minutely choreographed with lines and dramatic intentions.  Mysteries and action plays and movies often require extensive stage combat as well; consider the extensive chase sequences in movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

# Mis-directing the Play AN ARGUMENT AGAINST CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

# By Terry McCabe

#### Ivan R. Dee

**Copyright © 2001 Terry McCabe. All rights reserved.
ISBN: 1-56663-353-2**

Chapter One

**The Myth of the
Director**

Not long ago, a celebrated production of *Hamlet* featured, at the play's most famous moment, Hamlet spray-painting on a wall

TO BE / NOT TO BE

and then turning out to the audience and saying, "That is the question." Relating this later to an interviewer, the director congratulated himself on the choice: "It exploded the play in this wonderful way: everybody just laughed and got over it in a perfect symbiotic relationship."

    But what, precisely, is this moment in the theatre about? Surely the moment as staged is not about the play, not about the character's struggle at this point in the action. It is impossible to believe that Shakespeare intends the line to get a laugh. The audience laughs because it has stepped outside the play to admire the cleverness of the director.

    Radical reinterpretation, even reshaping, of dramatic texts is the big story in stage directing over the last few decades. The position of the director in the theatre—a job which was invented in only the last 125 of the theatre's 2,500 years of recorded history—has arrived at a point of central prominence, so even the play itself is frequently little more than a found object, with which the director combines other production elements to form his or her own theatrical statement. Many of the best-known American directors today—undeniably talented artists such as JoAnne Akalaitis and Peter Sellars—have built their reputations on just such an approach to directing. Many other directors who don't go as far as these two would nonetheless agree with them that it is the director who controls the play in production. One writer for a national theatre service organization describes the modern director approvingly this way: "Today, the director is even more firmly in command and frequently becomes the initiator, using *text*, music and visuals *as colors in the directorial palette*" (emphases added).

    The premise of this book is simple: directing that seeks to control the text, instead of subordinating itself to the text, is bad directing. I believe the director's job is to tell the playwright's story as clearly and as interestingly as possible. Period.

    If you are a director, your power in the theatre is such that it can be relatively easy to bend the play so that it fulfills some other purpose you have defined. It is, after all, your vision of the play that unites the production. You have ultimate control over all the show's elements. The other participating artists may well make vital contributions, but even the question of vitality is answered by you: those contributions that you feel enhance your interpretation are declared valuable and are incorporated; those that you feel deviate from it are cut.

    Given these facts, it is understandable that the line between serving the play and making it serve you can be blurred. After all, a bold reimagining of a given play can reinvigorate it and bring it home to the audience fresher and more powerful than ever. But the danger lies in how easy it is to have the audience's evening in the theatre be about the boldness, and not about the play. It's not always easy to see where the line between the two lies, but one thing seems sure: a tragic hero contemplating suicide should not get a laugh.

    The myth of the theatre director is that he or she is the *auteur* of what happens on the stage, just as the film director is the *auteur* of what we see on the screen. The myth is not true—cannot be true—and belief in the myth leads to bad directing and is therefore destructive of good theatre.

    The film director is properly considered the *auteur* of the film, its controlling intelligence and thus its true author, because the director stands at the point of intersection between the film and the audience. Film is a director's medium because the person filling that role makes the moment-to-moment decisions as to precisely what the audience will see and hear: from which angles to film, whether to shoot in close-up, which take to use, and so on. A film audience sees and hears only what the director selects for them.

    Live theatre, an actor's medium, doesn't work that way. The person who stands at the point of intersection between the play and the audience is the actor. The defining characteristic of live theatre, of course, is that it is slightly different every night, precisely because it is performed by live actors each time as if for the first time. The cast, not the director, is the play's delivery system. From performance to performance, unexpected nuances emerge, meanings deepen, actions become more specific. The director controls none of this: moment-to-moment decisions as to what the audience will see and hear are made by the actors in the course of each performance. This is neither good nor bad. It is simply the nature of the beast: live performance is the art form of the live performer.

    Stage directors who attempt to be *auteurs* of the theatre are denying the nature of their art form. And so they give us productions that depend heavily upon "nonlive" elements such as videotape, recorded music, and elaborate technical effects. So they give us four-hour productions of plays that can be read out loud at a comfortable pace in two and a half. They give us productions that are about the directing, not about the play. They do all this because they are caught up in a myth that does not describe their reality. They should be making movies.

    This is not to say that the idea of a director reimagining a play is wrong. Not at all; it is what all directors must do each time they direct. No play comes to life just by being staged. Some plays get produced thousands of times; each good production is good because its director has imagined it as a specific, unique living thing. The distinction to be made is whether the director's imagining provides the audience with a new avenue into what the playwright has to say, or whether the director reduces the play to raw material to be shaped into what the director has to say. A look at two famous productions may make this distinction clear.

    Tadashi Suzuki's sublime production of *The Trojan Women* is set in a Japanese city at the end of World War II. A woman sits in a cemetery. Her family is dead, her possessions are gone except for a handful of items she has carried here. To help herself through her pain, the woman thinks about the characters in Euripides' play, and we see her live through their struggles as she enacts their story. The present-tense theatrical reality is that of 1945 Japan; the drama that unfolds is that of ancient Troy. The woman's body is inhabited by the spirits of the individual women of Troy. The characters are not played by separate actresses in this production but are channeled, one at a time, by Suzuki's actress, the great Kayoko Shiraishi. An astonishing moment in the production, and one that defines its approach, is the transformation of the woman from Hecuba to Cassandra. All she does is stand and remove her black kimono, revealing a white one underneath, but in the moment she goes from being an old woman to a young girl, from being heavy and weary with loss to being poised on the edge of a knife. Later, Andromache is raped, and her son Astyanax (represented by a cloth doll) is ripped apart onstage. Hecuba binds the child's severed arm to his body with her sash and covers the corpse with cloth. The woman, no longer one of Euripides' characters but now Euripidean in her own right, packs up her few belongings. In the play's final section, she berates Jizo, the Buddhist deity who is traditionally the Protector of Children, who has stood silently onstage since the beginning of the play, seeing everything and doing nothing.

    Suzuki has taken enormous liberties here. Aside from the setting and the central device of having the woman portray multiple characters, he has also altered key events in the play. Euripides does not have Andromache raped, nor does he have Astyanax killed onstage. Suzuki has replaced the play's opening scene between Poseidon and Athena, the gods Euripides indicts for Troy's devastation, with the silent presence of Jizo throughout the action. And he has completely eliminated the one scene in the original play that ties the action to the details of the Trojan War, the confrontation between Menelaus and Helen.

    None of this matters. The fundamental truth of Suzuki's production is the fundamental truth of Euripides' play. This is so because Suzuki did not take *The Trojan Women* as a means of making a comment on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The reverse is the case: Suzuki's production takes his country's agony as a reason to examine the universality of *The Trojan Women*. This modern Japanese woman explores an ancient Greek play as a means of transcending her own situation, and so she takes us with her. She moves outside herself into Euripides' tragedy. Because this is the action Suzuki gives us, his production is about the play: its subject is not the director's opinion of Japan's defeat but the playwright's compassion for those at whose cost victories are won. This is what *The Trojan Women* should be about, no matter where it is set or how it is done, which is why this production works. As with any great work of art, Suzuki's *Trojan Women* presents a set of specifics, which it transcends to achieve universality.

    Contrast this with what might be the most famous American "concept production" ever done, Orson Welles's groundbreaking 1937 production of *Julius Caesar*. By all accounts an exciting and bracing evening in the theatre, it is also clear that the production was designed to fit Shakespeare's play into the director's concept.

    Where Suzuki had taken care not to put the ancient Greek play into modern Japan in literal terms—his audience was not given a cast of Japanese characters with Greek names, but rather a Japanese character who reimagined an ancient Greek story in personal terms—Welles simply recast Shakespeare's Rome as Mussolini's: jackboots, modern uniforms, a musical score that quoted from fascist Italy's anthem. The play was made to work as a parable about the European dictators then moving the world toward war. Welles's biographer Simon Callow points out that this focus "meant that a great deal of the political complexity of the play was sacrificed...." He might have added that a great deal of the play's *dramatic* complexity is sacrificed by a concept that says, in effect, that the play can mean only this one thing. Welles's concept depended on keeping Brutus the sole focus; toward this end, he eliminated most of the role of Mark Antony, cut or greatly reduced certain other characters, streamlined the individuality out of the Roman mob, and at one point substituted some lines from *Coriolanus* that better suited his purposes. It is not simply that Welles edited the script extensively; Suzuki's alterations of Euripides are as extensive, and I have no complaint about them. Welles's changes would be fine too if they were done to provide a fresh route into Shakespeare's play.

    Such seems not to have been the case, however, judging from the reviews. Mary McCarthy wrote bitterly, "The production of *Caesar* turns into a battleground between Mr. Welles's play and Shakespeare's play.... If the classics are to play an important role in the American theatre, their contents ought at least to be examined." Most other reviews were favorable, but came around to the same admission. John Mason Brown raved about the production but allowed that "the play ceases to be Shakespeare's tragedy...." Brooks Atkinson's review was favorable but described the show as "modern variations on the theme of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*."

    The difference between this production and Suzuki's is that Welles does not allow his audience to establish its own connections to the play. If you and I are in his audience, whatever associations we might otherwise bring to *Caesar* are short-circuited by the director, who has made it clear that—at least for this evening—the play is only about a topic that Shakespeare cannot possibly have had in mind. To Welles, the script is as meat to the sausage maker: when he's done, the sausage bears little resemblance to the meat he fed into the grinder. Welles's *Caesar* is his theatrical statement about 1930s Europe; it limits the play. Suzuki's *Trojan Women* is his theatrical statement about Euripides' tragedy; it opens the play up. A world of difference lies between the two.

    *Creative* is a word that gets bandied about casually, as an approximate synonym for *artistic*. Strictly speaking, there is only one creative artist in the theatre. It is the playwright, the only one who makes something out of nothing. The rest of us—directors, designers, actors—are interpretive artists. We take what the playwright has created and demonstrate to an audience what we think the playwright's creation looks and sounds like.

    This demonstration, not the play itself, is what the director must control. The number of different artists working on a production requires a central organizing principle. Otherwise, if there are twenty people working on a show there will be twenty different demonstrations going on, and the show will be a mess. A unified production requires an ongoing conversation among the people putting the show together, in order to ensure that everyone is proceeding from the same principle and working toward the same goal.

    A director's proper function in the production of a play is to begin the conversation and then to guide that conversation to a coherent finish. "This is what I think happens in the play, and this is what I think that action means." The ability to make a clear and concise statement of this nature about a play is the essence of the director's art.

    We are told over and over that theatre is the most collaborative of arts; less frequently pointed out is that the director is generally the only person who collaborates personally with each contributor to a production. To a certain degree, in fact, the other individual collaborators are unaware of the precise contributions of some of their fellows until the work is seen onstage. The playwright, if present at all, may have little or no contact with, say, the lighting designer. The set designer may have next to no interaction with the cast, and so on. But the director collaborates with everyone.

    The director stands between clarity and confusion onstage, bringing focus to what would otherwise be a disjointed collaboration. His or her tools in this endeavor are two: the ability to understand the action of the play in its essential form, and the ability to make that action and its meaning uniformly clear to the disparate group of artists working on the show.

    The modern director who distorts the play is no better than Nahum Tate, Collee Cibber, or any of the other seventeenth-century manglers of Shakespeare's tragedies who substituted happy endings of their own devising for the tragic ones the playwright had thought sufficient. In their improved version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the play's final catastrophe is averted and the lovers survive. So does Cordelia in their corrected *King Lear*—and she marries Edgar and they go on to rule Britain together. These changes were made in order to—as the changers saw it—make the plays relevant to the audiences of their day. On one level they appear to have succeeded: their versions held the stage for a century and a half. But today we feel that their work violated the plays.

    The day may arrive when we feel the same way about, for instance, JoAnne Akalaitis setting *Endgame* in a cluttered subway station complete with a train, puddles of water, and rubble, despite the stage direction with which Samuel Beckett begins his script: "Bare interior."

    This book is an attempt to hurry that day along. It explores the questions of directing a play: analyzing a play's dramatic action and coming to a director's decisions about the script, and implementing those decisions in the director's work with designers and actors. It argues that a correct relationship between the director and the play must in turn affect the way a good director works with actors. It touches on related issues, such as the ethics of running an audition and why the director shouldn't work with a dramaturg, and so on. Throughout the book, the focus is on shedding the counterproductive myth of the modern stage director as creative *auteur*, and urging in its place a return to first principles: the idea of the director as the interpretive artist in charge of putting the playwright's play onstage.

# Directing Your Own Play; or “Don’t Do It”

<https://hedgerowtheatre.org/blog-directing-your-own-play-or-dont-do-it/>

Blog by
Playwright and Director Frank E. Reilly

Glibly stated, because, as the writer, each cut of precious dialogue is painful, but as the director you absolutely know this surgery is necessary if your play is to have a successful life.

I’m impossibly in love with writing and directing, the way I was with stage acting for many decades, but never had I experienced tackling the job of playwriting and directing together until this fine assignment at the Hedgerow with the world premiere of my play [*Post Haste*](https://hedgerowtheatre.org/master-performance-series-post-haste-june-2015.html).

At the beginning of my work at the Hedgerow I thought it would be a rather simple matter, after all the play was already written and accepted, after many iterations, and hell, I’ve directed a truck load of plays, so what could be so difficult I thought.

About two days into rehearsal my delusion was shattered into tiny pieces, all over the work table, pieces that were once my finished play.  Like some immense jigsaw puzzle it lay there disassembled as we began to cut, tape, eliminate, reattach one scene to another,  all accompanied by the author’s gritting teeth.  However, surgery was necessary if the patient, was to survive and have a successful stage life!

The idea is tackle the dialogue first and be merciless because, as the director, you know what is going to work on stage and what is probably not going to work, no matter how heartfelt is was when you were in the composing stages.

As I went through this process with the cast and dramaturge I began to relax (let go), gain trust, go with the flow, as the director’s vision became clearer with each adjustment.

With [*Post Haste*](https://hedgerowtheatre.org/master-performance-series-post-haste-june-2015.html) we had several problem areas that required accuracy; recording the mileage along the journey, the basis of the play, and the geographic tracking of said journey.  Consequently, whenever a change in the script was made we had to be certain that these two areas still made logical sense.  Not easy!

I say this because you can be sure someone in the audience will be tracking you to find the error, just waiting to “trip” you up!

Being the author you value every agonizing word, phrase, sentence you wrote at 3:00 AM and certainly don’t want to see it casually altered, or simply removed, simply because it hurts. However, you know, as the director, if you are responsible to put this play on the stage you have to be pretty sure it has good legs, and that those legs can walk.

**“Author as Director”**

Live theater is all about bringing reality to the stage, creating magic for the audience, an escape form their daily routines, and perhaps even elevating their consciousness.

Therefore, this “stuff that dreams are made of” must begin on the page, where the creative process is birthed, the mind free to say what it wishes, not to be hampered by social dogma, perfect grammar (that comes later) or personal inhibitions.

No one can assist you in improving this initial stage unless they have something in writing.  It all begins with you the writer before the process of preparing it for the stage can happen.

In summary, as the writer, I had to step away from this initial stage if I were to also direct my work, and not be afraid of criticism, but, rather, to accept alterations to the script as positive break throughs in preparation for clearing the script for the stage.

**PLAY DIRECTION I**

TEXT:

Catron, Louis E.  The Director's Vision.  Mountain View, CA.: Mayfield  Publishing Co., 1989.

OBJECTIVES:

 Techniques of play directing and stage management, with practical application of both.  The work focuses on the responsibilities of the director/stage manager, the process of selection, interpretation and preparation, the basics of composition and movement, and techniques for casting and rehearsing a production.   Attendance at plays and preparation of director's promptbook are required.
 Students of Directing develop the following competencies in Critical and Creative Thinking: ability to think actively, explore situations with questions, use reasons and evidence for explanations, view situations from different perspectives, discuss ideas in an organized way, and develop ideas that are unique, useful, and worthy of further elaboration.

REQUIREMENTS:

1.  ATTENDANCE AND LATENESS:  Students are expected to attend every class on time and contact the instructor prior to class should conflicts arise (as actors should do with stage managers).  Repeated lateness, as well as absences, will lower grades.

2.  WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS:    Students are expected to hand in well-written exercises that serve as a director's tools for play selection and analysis, actor observation, scene preparation, and production evaluation.  These exercises include play reports on five outside plays, fifty casting cards, and the director's prompt book for the semester project play and final scene.  See the Exercises Handout for more detailed explanations of the requirements.

3.  PRODUCTIONS:  Students must attend the current productions of plays at Theatre Arts and Dance.

4.  DIRECTING:  Students are required to stage one 30 second scene for composition, a three-minute scene for blocking (from semester play project), an acting exercise, and a final, fully memorized five-minute scene (from their semester project play).  Consult the Exercises Handout for details.

5.  GRADES:  Final grades will reflect the student's ability to meet deadlines, complete writing assignments with thoroughness and imagination, incorporate lessons into practice, develop scenes with believable and theatrical behavior, and participate openly in class with thoughtful commentary, eager curiosity, and active listening.  Grade Scale: A = 90-100; B = 80-89; C = 70-79; D = 60-69; F = 0-59).

GRADE DISTRIBUTION:

 Composition Exercise 10 points    5 %
 Blocking Exercise and Groundplan 20 10
 Acting Exercise 10 5
 Final Scene  50 25
 5 Play Reading Forms (4 points each) 20 10
 Casting Cards 10 5
 Director's Prompt Book 60 30
 Attendance and Participation 20 10

  Total 200 points 100%

DAILY SCHEDULE:

Syllabus, Assignments, Resources, etc.

I.  DIRECTOR'S PREP:  RESEARCH, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION

Functions of the Director (Read Catron, Chapters 1 and 2)
Play Selection: Types and Styles of Plays
           (Hand in Play Report #1 - Summer and Smoke)

Play Analysis: Plot and Beat Analysis  (Chapters 3 and 4)
Play Analysis: Character (Chapter 5)

Play Analysis: Thought and Language (Chapters 6 and 7)
Play Analysis: Music and Spectacle (Chapters 8 and 9)
         (Hand in Play Report #2)

Researching the World of the Play and the Playwright
The Prompt Book (Chapter 10)

II.  COORDINATION AND PLANNING

Groundplans (Chapter 16)
Working with Designers

Composition for the Stage (Emphasis, Stage Areas, Body Positions)
Picturization, Unity, and Variety
            (Hand in Play Report #3 - Use Semester Play Project)

Composition Exercises
Focus and Aesthetic Elements of Composition

Principles of Stage Movement (Chapter 17)
University Day (No Class)

Blocking and Business  (Chapter 18)
Blocking Exercises
         (Hand in Play Report #4)

Stage Management

III.  WORKING WITH ACTORS

Casting (Chapter 12)             (Casting Cards Due)
Rehearsing with Actors (Chapter 14)

Coaching Actors (Chapter 15)

Acting Exercises
Improvisation     (Hand in Play Report #5)

Dress Rehearsals
Final Scene Presentations

Final Scene Presentations
Last Class - Evaluation     (Hand in Prompt Books)

Exam Period (8AM - 10AM) - Prompt Book Evaluations

The above schedule and procedures in this course
are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances

### Objective

Students will be introduced to the art of directing, playwriting and acting.

### Outline

#### Intro to Directing/Playwriting

* Introduction to the history of theatre
* Basic directing / playwriting skills taught via a fun and engaging method
* Being able to experience the role of the director / scriptwriter

#### Intro to Acting

* Involves training basic acting skills based on a proven system comprising of Stanislavski, Meyerhold as well as Physical Theatre work

### Outcome

#### Intro to Directing/Playwriting

* Students will learn script analysis, different dramatic elements, how to structure a play
* Students will learn directorial and design concepts, stage compositions and other directing techniques
* Students will get to work with actors and the rest of the artistic team during their work process and be able to direct / write a 5-minute theatre piece

#### Intro to Acting

* Students will learn the working process of an Actor under the supervision of a professional director, thus students are equipped with the necessary skills to be involved in a full scale production in the future
* Students will be able to act in a short skit improvised during the process

## Theatre Production IV: Directing

Theatre Production IV: Directing is a course designed to give students an opportunity to explore the art and the craft of directing. Students will spend the first semester studying directing styles, script analysis and the role of the director. The second semester will be spent working with beginning acting students to build directing portfolios and implementing fundamentals learned during the first semester.

The directing class is an opportunity for students to explore theatre as a collaborative art form, and they will be encouraged to work with their peers and establish good working relationships. Students will be expected to maintain a professional demeanor with fellow directors and actors alike.

            **1st 6 Weeks :** Who’s Who?

**2nd 6 Weeks :** Making a Book/Script Analysis

**3rd 6 Weeks :**Critiques and Styles

**4th 6 Weeks :** Scene 1

**5th 6 Weeks :**Scene 2

**6th 6 Weeks :** Scene 3

**Grading Policy**

            Daily Participation                              40%

            Projects                                               30%

            Journal                                                 15%

            Performance Critique                         15%

**Participation** – Will be calculated at the end of each week, the student will receive a total of 6 participation grades each six weeks. Each student will begin with a 100% participation grade, and points will be subtracted for disruptive classroom behavior.

**Projects** – Each six weeks will culminate in a project to be completed by the student in accordance with the grading rubric provided by the instructor.

**Journal** – Students will keep a daily journal, to be kept in the classroom, grades will be computed every six weeks on the basis of satisfactory participation in the journaling process.

**Performance Critique** – Students are required to attend one theatrical performance each semester and return a typewritten critique with an attached ticket stub or program. Students are encouraged to attend Cedar Ridge productions, but outside productions are also acceptable. Critiques are to be turned in within one school week of attending the performance.

**Materials**

            Composition Notebook

            Writing utensil and paper

            Student Calendar

This syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructo

**Directorial Concepts**

By [Elias Stimac](https://www.backstage.com/search/?search=&author=Elias%20Stimac) | Posted June 20, 2005, midnight

* Share:
* 
* 
* 
* 

When a theatre director initially considers a new production, he or she usually approaches it from a specific point of view. Then follows the task of translating it from that first idea to the final show. The take on it can be traditional or unconventional, subtle or outrageous, but it should never be boring.

Directors may also choose to change the time period the show takes place in, the location in which it is set, or even the age or race of the characters in order to bring new insights to the piece. Of course, changing or reworking scripted pieces cannot legally be done without the author's written permission. You can only experiment freely with material in the public domain -- that is, works no longer protected by copyright. The plays of Shakespeare, MoliĂ ̈re, and Chekhov, for example, all fall into this category.

All material published in the United States before 1923 is in the public domain. And, in general, American laws are more restrictive than other countries' laws regarding public domain. The rules for works published in the U.S. after 1923 are complicated, and the law has been revised several times, causing additional confusion. You can go to www.copyright.gov/circs/circ1.html for complete details on how to determine what is and is not still covered by copyright in the United States.

So as a director, how do you find a winning concept? Back Stage consulted with a group of working directors to get their ideas on the subject and their experiences from past assignments.

**Development Deal**

Often a director is brought in to help create a concept for a production that is still being developed. Such was the case with David Warren on "Drumstruck." An "interactive theatrical drumming experience" that enjoyed sold-out engagements in Johannesburg, South Africa, and Sydney, Australia, the show was in effect a concert presented on a bare stage when Warren was brought on board. Now a fully realized version will be making its American debut Off-Broadway at Dodger Stages, Stage 2 (www.drumstruckny.com).

Warren has helmed Broadway revivals of "Holiday" (which garnered an Outer Critics Circle nomination for best revival of a play) and "Summer and Smoke," Off-Broadway revivals such as "Hobson's Choice" (Lucille Lortel Award nomination for outstanding revival) and "Misalliance," and groundbreaking new works like "Matt & Ben," "Barbra's Wedding," and "Pterodactyls" (Obie Award).

The director came to this project with a background in classic and contemporary works that are, in comparison, far more conventional: "The show is literally unlike anything I've ever done before, because it is in fact different from anything else. There wasn't any precedent for it. But essentially, directing is directing, and the craft of directing is the same no matter what the show is. Interestingly enough, what I knew I could bring to the show and how I knew I could make it better was mainly as kind of an experienced director and not as a sort of musical consultant. That area of the show was so strong and powerful from the very beginning. What 'Drumstruck' needed was someone to help shape it and give it something of a dramatic through-line, which it now has, albeit a very subtle one. We also had to figure out how to design the show so that it would feel like a real evening in the theatre and not just a music event. So that's basically been my journey with 'Drumstruck.' "

Warren first saw "Drumstruck" in Australia: "The Dodgers had become very interested in producing it in New York, so they sent me to Sydney to see it. And I fell in love with it. I also felt like it needed me. I sat there watching the show, coming up with ideas. That's all I ever do. It's so rare when any director sees any show and doesn't sit there and just redirect the show. When I don't, I'm always thrilled because that means it's a great production and I can turn that mechanism off and be something closer to a normal audience member.

"But in this case I was specifically sent to figure out what the show would need, so I was clearly in working mode. And I got very excited about the project. Finding the solutions took a lot of meetings with the creator of the show, Warren Lieberman. We had a very intense week of throwing ideas back and forth. By that time I had done a lot of research about the music and history of South Africa, and so I had a lot of ideas about what text there was and how it could be improved and clarified. So we set out to rewrite the text and restructure the show and work through what the design would be."

The director knew that the show's bare-bones story line needed fleshing out in order to appeal to a more sophisticated playgoing audience: "The most important thing was figuring out a concept. I wanted to find out a way to string together the pieces of 'Drumstruck' so that they would add up to something. And one of the ideas that kept coming back to me was the importance of music in South Africa -- it is the glue that connects communities. Music has always served that function in that country. Historically, music in South Africa wasn't simply considered entertainment; it was how communities came together. And when I came to understand that, I realized what was so special about 'Drumstruck': Every night in the theatre, 400 people who don't know each other at all are united by music. Everyone is given a drum to use during the show. So the members of the audience all play their drums together, and they become part of the storytelling on stage. That seemed very powerful to me."

The sense of community he uncovered became the concept behind "Drumstruck." Once Warren hit upon that germ of an idea, the rest came easy: "What happens when you're directing a show is, once you have a basic idea, that idea then informs all your choices. You end up with a forest and not just a lot of trees. So we in effect built a community out of the audience, and watching it take place every night is very moving. To see people have that kind of fun, wild, emotional, cathartic experience with a bunch of strangers is amazing, and people really do walk out elated. There's something so visceral about what audiences go through each evening, because 'Drumstruck' is so physical. They play their drums and go into a 'drum zone,' a meditative place where they can free their minds. It's almost spiritual."

Warren worked with his design team to conceptualize the stage as well: "I suggested that we set the action in a traditional meeting place, and Warren Lieberman said, 'You want a boma.' It was an idea he had originally come up with but did not use. In every village in the bush in South Africa, the central meeting place is this circular fenced-in area called the boma. The fence functions to keep the animals out and keep the people in a protected area. In the middle of the boma is a fire, and people would play music and sing together around it. That's where the community comes together. So I said, 'That sounds exactly right.' Set designer Neil Patel and I began to research bomas and discovered that they're very beautiful. And so I think our set makes the audience members feel as if they're in the same place as the performers."

**Perspective**

Stephen Burdman has been directing for the past two decades, and his recent repertoire as artistic director of New York Classical Theatre (www.newyorkclassical.org) has included revivals of time-honored shows such as "The Feigned Courtesans," "The Winter's Tale," and "The Triumph of Love." This summer he has two shows in motion, literally: outdoor versions of "As You Like It" (through June 26) and "Scapin" (Aug. 4-28) that travel from location to location in Central Park.

The unforgettable experience of transporting a play -- and its viewers -- around woodsy locales is what sets this New York-based company apart from most groups: "Almost every show I do involves some integration of design and script -- a concept, if you will. I was very pleased with my production of 'The Winter's Tale,' which relocated a very difficult play into Central Park. In fact, we removed the winter from the play. And our production of 'Macbeth' also left many of our audience members thinking that they were actually in Scotland. Someone even described it [as] like being 'inside a movie.' "

Actually, Burdman hates the word "concept": "I focus on what the play is about, and as a little exercise I try to narrow this idea down to one word. And it is that word that forms the basis for my approach to the play. I have found that giving the actors and design team one word, rather than a concept statement, results in more-cohesive work on the part of my collaborators.

"For example, my current show, 'As You Like It,' is about perception. 'The Tempest' was about trust, while 'Hamlet' was about betrayal. The word I pick is unique to each production, and it may vary as I grow as a person and an artist. However, when I directed 'Waiting for Godot,' I failed in my attempt to get the play down to one word. After meeting for several hours with the dramaturg, we decided that it was six words -- 'searching for the meaning in life.' "

Sometimes an experiment with a classic may not work completely but will illuminate the script for a future production: "I once directed 'Twelfth Night' with four actors in 15 roles. This preceded the well-known Off-Broadway run of 'R&J,' which did the same thing to 'Romeo and Juliet.' Our 'Twelfth Night' was very grad-schooly, and though it was good for my artistic development, more importantly, I learned what not to do. My production in 2002, with a full cast, was much more solid."

Burdman cites three conceptual productions that have inspired him: "A few years ago, I saw 'Brothers and Sisters' from the Maly Drama Theatre [in St. Petersburg] as part of the Lincoln Center Festival. 'Bratya i Sestry' was successful in translating an epic story and personalizing it for the individual without ever losing sight of the big picture. The scenes alternated back and forth between large sequences and very small ones and took tremendous advantage of the audience's imagination.

"Robert Lepage's 'The Dragon's Trilogy' was able to stage events that cannot be accomplished in a traditional venue by using symbolic techniques, such as a chase around a Quebec city accomplished using only shoes and a shoebox. They also 'delivered' a baby on stage -- quite magical.

"Finally, it was the late great John Hirsch who reinterpreted 'Coriolanus' in light of the Oliver North trial in the late '80s. The production starred Byron Jennings at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego. Dakin Matthews was unforgettable as the Southern senator and war veteran Menenius. Hirsch also made extensive use of television screens by creating mock TV news reports, filmed by an actual TV anchor, that appeared on 50 video monitors between scenes. When Coriolanus speaks to the Romans, Hirsch transformed the address into a press conference with live video feeds."

Burdman advises directors to "listen to how you feel about the work first. Then translate those feelings into ideas and words that can be transmitted to your designers and actors. A concept is only as good as its realization, and many directors have great ideas that need to be integrated on all levels of production, not just the scenic and costume design."

**Other Directions**

Edward Einhorn has directed for 13 years and lists among his favorite productions "Fairy Tales of the Absurd," "Rhinoceros," and "Richard III." His upcoming projects include directing his script for "Unauthorized Magic in Oz" (a puppet piece being staged at St. Ann's Warehouse) and organizing a festival called NeuroFest. To Einhorn, a director's concept is "an approach to interpreting the text. In an ideal world, a bold concept illuminates the text in a way that a more straightforward rendition might not."

He imposed a stirring concept when he directed Shakespeare's "Richard III": "I had all his murdered victims -- even those he had murdered before the play began -- stay on stage after he murdered them, watching him as outraged ghosts, until they came to him in the dream in the fifth act and finally participated in killing him during the climax. Their presence added to the sense that his fate was the result of the accumulation of his crimes." Some of Einhorn's concepts have literally spread out into the audience: "In 'The Good Woman of Setzuan,' in the spirit of Brechtian alienation techniques, I invited the audience to speak up and interrupt the play at any point if they disagreed with what was being said on stage. I encouraged the actors to do the same, which they did, even to the extent of questioning whether they themselves agreed with that directorial approach. And in Richard Foreman's 'Lava,' I used no actors. I just had an audience, whom I would direct in a performance of the play on the spot."

Kate Marks has written and/or directed many plays in New York over the past eight years, most notably with the Looking Glass Theatre. Her script for "Flyers and Other Stories" is being produced as part of the Midtown International Theatre Festival this July. She also had the chance to stage "The Odyssey" at the Baracke Theatre in Germany.

Marks defines a director's concept as "the vehicle used to tell the story." She feels her most successful application of a concept to a production occurred when she directed "Bumping Umbrellas" by Kymberly Harris Riggs, which dealt with themes of seduction: "To heighten the language and tension in the play, the actors did tango-based movement while speaking the dialogue." The most outrageous or unexpected concept Marks ever applied to a play was when she directed a production of "Romeo and Juliet" "in which our only prop was a rope made out of bed sheets tied together. The rope was constantly changing in form and function according to the needs of the play. For example, as Juliet left the party scene, she walked the rope like a tightrope up to her bedroom."

Ted Sod is a 16-year veteran of staging theatre productions. His credits include the recent run of "The House of Blue Leaves" at T. Schreiber Studio, "Scarlet Sees the Light" for the 2004 New York International Fringe Festival, and "Agnes of God" at the George Street Playhouse. His idea of a director's concept is "something that enhances the text rather than just showing off." He successfully staged the French play "L'Histoire du Soldat" in a church: "We used the venue as a sort of jungle gym. We got into a little trouble with the church group for what they viewed to be sacrilegious behavior around the altar, but I reblocked it and they seemed appeased."

Glory Sims Bowen has been directing for over a decade and has tackled such classics as "The Snow Queen" and "The Tempest" with fresh treatments. She will be helming "Measure for Measure" in the coming months. She feels that a director has the responsibility to know his or her audience as specifically as possible: "Directors need to make a production hit home for the type of audience that will be viewing it. However the director decides to do that is his or her concept. I would approach directing a show differently depending on who may be attending and where it was going to be done."

One of her recent favorite concepts was for Shakespeare's "The Tempest": "We did the play with a lot of gender-bending, which has been done before, but I think we did it in a unique way. For example, we had Caliban played by a whiny, childlike blond girl pitted against a more confident, womanly Prospera. We also made Ariel and the air spirits more prominent by having them on stage the entire time, intertwined amongst the trees. The spirits had numerous dance numbers and created more visual imagery for the play. You would forget they were there. And then they would begin moving for the transitions between scenes. This helped create the spooky yet magical aura of the island."

**Adaptable Bard**

As suggested by the examples above, no writer is adapted more often than William Shakespeare. The Bard is perhaps the one playwright who has intrigued, encouraged, and even defied directors to come up with ever-evolving conceptual approaches, simply because his scripts seem to work no matter where or when you place them. That is why you might see a version of "Hamlet" in space, "Much Ado About Nothing" placed in the Roaring '20s, or "The Merry Wives of Windsor" set in the South (as in the case of the recent Off-Broadway musical adaptation, "Lone Star Love").

David Warren opines that Shakespeare's plays almost demand a strong concept: "Of course, I think his plays work if you do them in what we would consider a traditional way, although I don't think anyone knows what that means, because they were done traditionally in Elizabethan clothes regardless of the period of the play. I think the plays work if you do them in Elizabethan clothes, or if you set 'Antony and Cleopatra' in ancient Egypt -- either way it works if the concept is strong. But because the plays are so powerful, and so poetic and abstract, they leave a lot of room for high concept. Such a concept would not undermine the play the way it would a more recent script, or a play that is still part of our cultural reference, like Philip Barry's 'The Philadelphia Story.' It would be risible to change the period of 'The Philadelphia Story,' because the play's power comes from the very specific world in which it's set."

Proving his point, Warren updated "Twelfth Night" to great acclaim by giving it a cinematic spin: "I updated it in the sense that I found a physical world for the play that wasn't explicitly where the play was written. I set the show in the 1960s and referenced Italian films, such as those directed by Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni. That was my one foray into high-concept Shakespeare. For years I had been obsessed with the Antonioni film 'L'Avventura,' and I was thinking about it as I was reading 'Twelfth Night.' I actually had a year to prepare for the production, so I just kept reading it and reading it with no pressure to start solving it right away. And one day as I was reading it, the opening scene from the Antonioni film -- which was set on a barren island off Sicily -- popped into my mind, and I saw it as the place where the shipwreck should take place and what Illyria could look like."

Burdman's proposed concept for "The Comedy of Errors" would take the show to Wall Street: "The play is so focused on the transaction of currency -- and the transaction of love -- that I would like to give it an environmental staging in the lobby of one of downtown's big financial buildings. I would be interested in using an elevator or escalator as one of the entrances and exits." Marks has an athletic take on one of Shakespeare's most produced masterpieces: "Make the forest floor of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' a trampoline!" And one day Bowen would like to direct "Romeo and Juliet" with Romeo as a good ol' Texas boy and Juliet as a wealthy Arab. But an overall concept would take more time to develop.

Einhorn is inspired by the possibilities offered by "The Winter's Tale": "I would love to take 'Winter's Tale' and split it into its two parallel sections. The first would be a tragedy and the second half would be a comedy called 'Spring Story.' It would be cast among the same group of actors, which tells the same basic tale. The split would happen when the bear runs across the stage." And Sod's favorite Shakespeare works are the later plays, including "The Winter's Tale," "Cymbeline," and "The Tempest." He says, "I would love to do a site-specific 'Tempest.' Staging it on an actual island where the survivors of the shipwreck come onto the shore could be marvelous. Lee Breuer did something unique with helicopters in the park in his 'Tempest' -- but I wish the royals had actually parachuted onto the Delacorte stage."

Not to overlook more-contemporary works, Marks would like to stage "Our Town" with puppets, and Sod would recast "Gypsy" with a black or mixed-race Rose, June, and Louise. "But I don't think the authors would allow it," he laments. So he'll just have to wait until "Gypsy" goes into the public domain -- in 2054.

**Advice and Ideas**

To summarize, there are many ways to reinvent plays with a directorial concept. Here are just a few to get your creative juices flowing:

- Use nontraditional and multiracial casting.

- Set the play in a different time or era.

- Set the play in a different place or location.

- Change the sexes or ages of characters.

- Stage the show in a unique theatrical venue (outdoors, in the round, or in an unconventional or site-specific space).

These ideas work best when you are inspired by the material you are directing. But what if you are assigned to stage a play that does not prompt a clear-cut directorial concept or simply does not speak to you? You don't necessarily have to take the job, but if you're willing to give it a try, you may want to employ one or more of the following activities to spark your imagination:

- Put together an impromptu reading, offering no direction or guidance. You'll be amazed at what actors can come up with from a simple read-through.

- Read other plays by the same author, which will give you a larger appreciation for and wider perspective on how the play fits into the writer's body of work.

- Go see a different play or movie, taking the ideas of your current project with you to the Cineplex or theatre.

- Analyze other plays by coming up with concepts for them and then see if you can apply one of those ideas to your current show.

- Envision how a famous director would stage the show, then take your cues from that style until you can adapt them and make them your own.

- Place the material in a contrasting genre; see how the script stands up to a Kabuki or film noir treatment, for example.

- Envision the show with an all-star cast, which may help you see it in a new light.

- Ask fellow directors what their takes on the material would be, which will serve as a sounding board and could lead to brainstorming ideas.

- Research what other directors have done with the material in the past, from reviews and online sources.

- Think of the craziest concept you can imagine, something you would never normally consider. If nothing else, it may lead to more-practical ideas.

As for final words of advice, Bowen offers, "Sometimes simplicity is best when it comes to concepts. I also believe that a director's concept should aid the production and make it more accessible to the audience. I try not to get in the way of what the author is trying to say." Marks agrees, reminding directors to "find a concept that serves the story and gives the actors something specific to play." Sod thinks a concept should illuminate the text: "Don't choose something just to be novel. I'm always hoping that there is logic to the conceptual choices I make -- that they come from the text and enhance the world of the play, not distract from it." And Einhorn cautions, "If you aren't interested in the play, don't do it. If you are, use the concept to communicate what it is about the play that you love."

It is your job as director to interpret the play an

d in collaboration with a

production team and actors to convey your interpret

ation to the audience. A

director needs strong, clear ideas about the play b

ecause there are a large

number of choices to be made. Key decisions include

:

What performance space best suits this play?

Who should be cast in the main roles?

What style of production will this be?

Should this be a ‘classic’ treatment of the play, o

r a radical,

new interpretation?

When and where is the play set in terms of period a

nd

location?

What are the play’s main themes and issues?

What is the mood or atmosphere of the play and how

should

it created?

Which characters should the audience sympathise wit

h?

What should the actor/audience relationship be?

Should some actors multi-role the characters or sho

uld there

be an actor for each role?

How should the design features be used in performan

ce?

How should the actors be directed?

Discuss the above with a partner and write notes on

your discussion ideas.

riting, Directing, and Producing a Stage Play

Submitted by [Site Admin](https://litpick.com/users/authenticated-user-administrator-member-site-admin-underwriter/site-admin) on Sat, 06/11/2016 - 6:39am

Writing, Directing, and Producing a Stage Play

By [Joan Donaldson-Yarmey](https://litpick.com/author/joan-donaldson-yarmey)

Last winter I took my writing in a new direction. I attended a two-day play writing course. By the end of it I had adapted a short story of mine, which had won first place in a flash fiction contest in “Ascent Aspirations Magazine,” into a half hour stage play. In the spring I entered my play in the Fringe held here in Port Alberni, B.C. This summer I produced and directed my play on stage in front of an audience. In the process, I discovered this is not an easy thing to do.

I needed a male and a female lead actor, and I asked two people who had been in plays in our local theatre before. They agreed and I gave them each a copy of the play. We met and had a run through with us discussing how we each saw the characters. Their interpretation of their character's actions and attitude were sometimes different from mine, but, other than a few places where I felt a certain delivery was needed, I let them decide how to play the part. Through our many rehearsals with the props, which my husband, Mike, was in charge of, the characters evolved and took shape as we discovered better ways for them move, react, and relate.

I also needed actors for a party scene, and I approached people I knew and/or worked with in my quest. Even though I told them that they would only be on stage for less than five minutes, that all they had to do was listen to the male actor brag about how good he was, and that they had no lines, many gave a flat no, explaining that they could never get up on stage in front of an audience. Some agreed, so I gave them the times of our next two rehearsals. Most of them never showed up. I kept asking people: my cats' vet, the owner of a new store in town, the person who donated some props. But I only had the same two people show up for any of the rehearsals, and it looked like Mike and I would be making our acting debut. I was beginning to worry. Maybe I would have to drag up some of the audience members.

On the evening of the first presentation, two people who had attended rehearsals, two actors in another play and I made up the attendees of the party. For the Saturday matinee the partiers were: one of my three regulars along with two members of my dragon boat team, the two actors from the other play, a theatre volunteer, and myself.

One thing I did learn was that for something like the Fringe where plays are being presented one after the other, having a lot of props is not a good idea. Because I was showing a story instead of telling a story, I had over forty props, some large ones being: fridge, stove, desk, computer, sewing machine, two chairs, table; smaller ones being: duster, broom, envelope, paper, boxes, material, pens, wine bottle and glasses, and many more. The play after me had only two tables, two chairs, a laundry basket and some beer bottles. Another play I watched had some tea cups and teddy bears.

On the first evening there were going to be four separate plays, mine being the first. That was perfect because it gave us time to set up our scene. However, at the end, we had to get our props off stage so that the next play could set theirs up before their showing. Our actors became stage hands and things disappeared in a hurry. The same happened on Saturday afternoon.

The important thing I learned was that while I had written the words, I was at the mercy of the actors to show up for the rehearsals, learn their lines, and speak those words on stage. My female lead was off book (I did get to know some of the lingo) quickly, but the male lead found it harder to remember his lines. He also missed some of the rehearsals.

Putting on a stage play isn't like making a movie. You don't get to go back and redo a scene. When asked, the way I put it is, “Opening night did not go as rehearsed.” To be honest, it wasn't even close. The male character kept forgetting his lines or changing them, which threw the female character off, as well as the lighting guy and Mike who had to operate a smoke machine.

The Saturday afternoon presentation went better. He still missed many of his lines, but the audience laughed when they were supposed to and they understood, and laughed at, the twisted ending. I was elated, and hearing that laughter made the whole process worthwhile. And I do believe I will try another play for next year, but I will keep the props to a minimum and have the actors tell the story instead of show the story.

While there were many mishaps and problems getting my play to the stage, the most memorable is about our wine bottle. We needed a wine bottle for the opening scene, so I rinsed one out and filled it with water. We used it for our first on-stage rehearsal and left it along with our other props for our full dress rehearsal the next evening. When I went to find it for that rehearsal, it was gone. We searched everywhere and couldn’t find it, so we used a beer bottle in its place. We laughed and hoped that the person who made off with it hadn't decided to take it as a hostess gift to some fancy dinner. I found another wine bottle for our opening night. At the end of the evening I discovered our first bottle by the back door, empty. That person must have thought it was the weakest, worst tasting wine ever made.

I’m often asked, “Is directing a solo show different than directing regular plays?” And I’m tempted to say something snarky like, “Yes, when you direct a solo show you work with one person and when you direct other types of plays you work with a bunch of people.” But, in fairness, I think there’s more to it than that.

When you direct a solo show, as you would with any play, you attempt to tell a story the best way you can—you try to make it compelling, entertaining, meaningful, impactful, moving. You apply the same skill sets you’ve amassed over the years to make sure the piece is staged well and the performance feels spontaneous, alive, and authentic. But with a solo show the director plays a much stronger role in the development of the piece as a dramaturg, editor, acting coach, advisor, sometimes therapist and general liaison between the audience and the writer/performer. I’m going to break down my process of working on solo shows as best as I can.

The first thing I do is go over the story structure with the writer. I look at the beginning of the show to see if there’s a “hook”—some people call this an “inciting event.” A good hook grabs the audience’s attention and gives them a sense that something significant is going to happen. I also make sure the piece has a compelling “main event”—a climactic occurrence at the end of the story. This main event, or climax, serves as the target. In a sense, the whole show is a setup for this event. A great climax makes the piece worthwhile. Conversely, a main event that’s just so-so can be highly problematic. Wimpy climax? Wimpy story.

With a solo show the director plays a much stronger role in the development of the piece as a dramaturg, editor, acting coach, advisor, sometimes therapist and general liaison between the audience and the writer/performer. 

After looking at the overall structure, I zero in on the little stories that are told along the way. I work with the writer to make sure each little story has its own mini main event. Strung together, these mini main events lead up to the climax of the larger story. They comprise the building blocks of the narrative.

With the story structure intact I move on to the next phase of development—something I call “mirroring”—where I serve as a mirror for the writer. They perform sections of their piece for me and I mirror back what I’m getting from the writing. I basically outline the experience. For example, one of the solo shows I directed was Mike Birbiglia’s *My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend*. At one point in the show Mike tells the audience about an incident at a carnival ride when he tries to get his first kiss. He describes how he desperately wants to impress this girl, so he takes her to a carnival. At the carnival he eats a bunch of junk food and then climbs aboard a ride called, “The Scrambler.” He gets sick and tries to get The Scrambler operator to stop the ride. He does not succeed and ends up throwing up all over his date.

When Mike first told me the story I laughed hysterically. I told him, “Here’s what I get from that: You were desperate to get your first kiss. You took this girl to a carnival. Along the way you ate a bunch of cotton candy, popcorn, and peanuts. You took her on a ride called The Scrambler. You got scrambled. You tried to get the operator to stop the ride to no avail and you threw up all over the girl. I also get that your first attempted kiss was a disaster and you were humiliated beyond belief. And I get that you were shy and not exactly a smooth operator.” I asked Mike if that’s what he intended to get across. *It was*. I asked Mike what he wanted to accomplish in that section of the show—*to get across why he is really uncomfortable with first kisses.* Perfect*.* Now that we knew the story was clear and served its function well, we could, with great confidence, put it in the show. Incidentally, The Scrambler story has a clear main event—Mike throws up!

As the developmental process continues, I flag any redundancies. Repetition can make a story feel like it’s spinning its wheels.

I look out for anything that’s predictable. I have found there is a direct correlation between surprise and impact. The greater the surprise, the greater the impact. If the audience gets ahead of the story and sees what’s coming before it happens, they tend to check out (space out, snooze, wander). Like when someone tells you a joke and you figure out the punch line long before they get to it.

If I’m confused about something in the story—a line or a series of lines—I’ll tell the performer that I don’t get what s/he’s talking about. The writer and I will discuss possible writing alternatives. If the writer is stumped as to how to clarify things, I pitch possible suggestions. I take great care to make my suggestions diplomatically. I never assume that my suggestions are good and should be used. I often preface my suggestions with language like, “This may be a silly idea, but…”  or “Here’s an idea I have—of course, I’m not suggesting you use my words. If it makes sense to you, you’ll find your own way of saying it.” Sometimes the writer will take my suggestions and sometimes they won’t. I never fight for my ideas. I think it’s essential that the writer’s own voice and vision drive the work, not mine.

As the piece gets refined (i.e., the story becomes clear and well-crafted), I start to address conceptual issues. I speak with the writer about how we might stage the piece. What could the design elements be (sets, lights, costumes)? What would best serve the play? I make sure, as best as I can, that every design element is justified and helps maximize the story’s impact. I never do things just because they would be “cool”—although God knows I’ve been tempted. When I was working on Martin Moran’s *The Tricky Part*, Paul Steinberg, a genius designer came up with this idea of the set being a giant campfire—logs twelve feet high and three feet around leaning in a teepee. Martin, in this plan, would sit in various nooks and crannies of the campfire sculpture and tell his story. I believe the design was inspired by the seminal event in the story that occurs at a camp. When I saw the model, my first response was “That is totally cool!” I built a mock-up in a rehearsal room out of chairs and tables and had Marty do a portion of the piece. It became clear very soon that, as awesome as the idea was, it was in some way distracting and ended up giving too much weight to certain story elements. So, we scrapped it. Paul came up with a gorgeous simple surround (made of cork) that served the piece much better. Ultimately Martin simply sat on a stool and the only other furniture on stage was a small end table with a framed photograph on it. If a piece calls for more elaborate scenery and staging then I go for that. All design decisions are guided by the needs of the story.

Another phase of the process is shaping the performance. In a solo show, the performer is often talking with the audience. I do my best to make sure the actor is indeed spontaneously talking with the people in the room, not talking “at” them. I think of it as conversing. This may involve writing adjustments that make the text feel less “written” and more “spoken.” I often employ basic acting techniques that loosen the performer up so that the performance is less planned and more free. In pieces that are autobiographical and nonfiction, nonrealistic performances can undercut the authenticity. In other words, the hammy actor says something like, “And then this amazing thing happened.…”  and I think, “Really? I dunno. I don’t completely believe you’re really talking to me right now, so you’ve kinda lost a little credibility there. Maybe it was not so amazing after all?”

The last phase of the process is presenting the work to audiences whenever possible. In a solo show the audience is like another character. The writer needs audience feedback to let him or her know what works and what doesn’t. What’s getting across? What’s funny? What’s boring? What’s confusing? Does it seem too long or too short? Typically, writers take what they learn from audiences and rewrite accordingly.

After going through all these phases of development, the piece is ready for presentation—unless it sucks, in which case, it’s ready for the recycle bin.

There are a few other peculiarities to solo show development. Throughout the process I act as a sounding board. Often writers need to express concerns and ideas they have. I attempt to create a safe space where the writer can communicate with me without any fear of judgment. Sometimes I’ll get calls in the middle of the night…

“Hey, are you up?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think of this idea? I think I should do my entire show naked while riding a unicycle.”

“Um…cool…let me think on that.”

No matter how absurd the idea may seem to me, I try not to shoot it down right away. Sometimes the writer needs the freedom to go down paths that are wonky at best. I believe that cutting off creative impulses prematurely can breed fear and inadvertently inhibit the writing potential.

Sometimes a writer needs to express deeply personal feelings. I have on many occasions had a writer bare their soul to me. Sometimes personal writing digs deep and I feel it’s my job to create an environment where a writer can explore anything they want. In this sense I treat the developmental process as a sacred act. As I write this I am sitting in the middle of India, so sacredness is on my mind.

I hope these thoughts are useful and I wish you the best in all that you create!

Namaste.

It happens to every director whether they’re a neophyte, a mid-career professional, or a sage veteran. At some point in time, you will find yourself stymied by the fact that you can’t seem to connect with an actor on a specific point, can’t discover the solution to a problematic moment, or are at a loss at what to say regarding a specific challenge. Here are three tips for stage directors who have run into a problem section in a play that they have no idea how to fix.

## Identifying the Pivotal Word

If an actor is saying a sentence or phrase and there’s no commitment in how they are saying it, then chances are they’re not sure what that text means or why it is being said. There are many ways to find those important elements that will ultimately give meaning to a line. One

Identifying the pivotal word may offer a solution.

technique is to identify the pivotal or operative word that energizes that line or phrase. Most often it’s a verb, noun, adjective or adverb. But it could be any word in a sentence or phrase.

Have the actor say that pivotal word in a manner different from how they have been saying it and in a way that’s dissimilar to how they have been doing it. Before asking them to do this, discuss the word and why it may be pivotal, its various meanings, and where it sits in the specific speech. You may discover that energy that you need to give the line meaning and importance.

## The Trouble Step

Reading the scene without stage movement may allow you to discover the staging through the energy of the words.

When you are dancing with a partner you may utilize something called a trouble step. You use the trouble step when… well… you run into trouble. That is when you’re on the dance floor with others and you find yourself hemmed in. When executing the trouble step if you are leading, you lean forward and then back, staying in the same spot while guiding your partner forward and back. You are moving without moving through the crowd and are, in essence, biding your time. The trouble step buys you time and allows the logjam of bodies that have trapped you to clear a bit so you can once again move around the dance floor.

The directing version of the trouble step is used when you find that your staging is in some manner convoluted and confusing. In other words, the movement of the actors is muddling the meaning and effect of the moment. The trouble step for directors involves having players stand in one place and say their lines, allowing the words they are saying to do the work.

Thus, in employing this technique, you would ask the actors to go back to a specific section of the script and request that they not utilize their blocking this time around. Tell them to take any energy that was being used in the blocking and to infuse it in their lines. Have them play the scene, stop, offer some notes regarding what you saw and heard, and then run it again without movement. You may do this as many times as you feel necessary. Once you’re satisfied with the energy of the lines go back and have the actors rehearse the scene with movement. Tell them that they may do anything they want in the scene. Chances are you’ll see a few movements and moments in this new version that you can use, work, and refine.

## Go to the Other Extreme

This is one extreme, what is the opposite?

Is a scene totally frenetic, being played low key, very intensely angry, broad slapstick, or being played in some other type of definable and describable manner? If that’s the case, find a moment in the scene where you feel it is becoming false, stale, or ineffective and have the actors go to the opposite end of the spectrum utilizing a new emotion, intensity, tempo, rhythm, pace, etc. Although you may not end up playing that section in the new manner, it may offer you and the actors insights on how to find more variety, nuance, and energy.

## Simple Solutions

The tips designed to offer solutions to stage directors in this piece are fairly simple and, yet, they are effective. Often, simple is the way to go. Focusing on one element, using a specific technique, or isolating a moment can make all the difference in a scene and in your production. Successfully directing a play involves creating thousands upon thousands of individual moments that eventually flow together at alternating, shifting, and changing rhythms, tempos, and paces.

Directing is about bridging gaps between physical action and spoken language, actor and text, and script and production. Once all of those bridges are in place, you’ll have a show that runs on its own energy. The challenge, excitement, and joy of directing is working towards that end with your actors.