

Directing: Just Tell the Story

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History: author; pageant masters/stage managers; end of the 19th C. – Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Germany, etc...

Director as:

- Psychologist
- Psychic
- Critic
- Designer
- Teacher/Communicator
- Casting Agent
- Practitioner

I. Psychologist

- A master of the human condition
 - Human experience = suffering/resolving suffering
 - Plays depict people in extraordinary circumstances
 - Drama is a story of human conflict
 - Rooted in human struggle: wants, needs, desires
 - Drive for response, recognition, adventure, security

II. Psychic

- Intuition, talent, creativity

III. Critic

- Play selection, analysis, interpretation
 - Frances Hodge analysis: *Play Directing*
 - David Ball: *Backwards and Forwards*
 - Read the play several times
 - Production style
 - Fit the designers to your work
 - Don't finalize designs too early
 - Read each character as though you were playing it
 - Don't over study
 - Identify the story's compelling question
 - Character is a result of his/her actions
 - The struggle is more important than the outcome
 - The end is in the beginning
 - Express the core of the play in a few words

IV. Designer

- Your place on the production staff

V. Teacher/Communicator

- With Actors
 - Character discussion is best done bit by bit, as the work demands

- Start nice, yet make a strong entrance
- The actor's first job is to be heard
- Sincerely praise actors early and often
- Talk to the character, not the actor
- Sit and read a scene before blocking it
- Do not expect too much too soon
- Never, NEVER bully
- Keep actors on their task
- Never express actions in terms of feelings
- Tell actors: "watch their eyes"
- Actors cannot judge their own performance
- Be decisive, yet don't "over" direct
- Give actors corrective notes in private
- Know your actors
- Don't give notes just prior to a performance or run-through
- Don't give the harsh truth; it's not what you say, it's how you say it
- Give bad news with "and," not "but"
- The entire cast should listen to notes
- Always walk through changes
- Don't play the end of the scene in the beginning
- Play against the given condition
- Be gentle when actors just get off book
- Ask often: "who are you talking to?"
- Anger is always preceded by pain
- Tell actors: "localize abstract things"
- Ask in later rehearsals: "do I believe it?"
- Consider late table work
- The actor's own personality is expected to be the core of each performance.
- Any attempt to make student actors more aware of their true self usually leads to worse rather than better performances. Most acting training of our time is not training; it is therapy.
- Director's goal: getting a good, complete, detailed, and alive performance.
- No director can force good performances to happen, no matter how talented you may be. You can encourage and establish the conditions that make them possible.
- Establish a sense of security. It is the security that the performer gets from knowing what happens next.
- Action is the foundation of the play. Physical action encourages the duplication of an emotional state.
- It is common knowledge that we can change our emotional state by changing our physical state. The difficulty is finding the "right" physical action for each emotion desired.
- The right physical action is the one that to the audience looks like an expression of the desired emotion. It is a partnership between actor and director, which begins with blocking. It must relate the character to the other characters and to the surroundings.
- Physical action also includes the physical action of speech. One can say a line in an infinite number of ways.

- Focus on the other. Actions are done to or with others; done on purpose. What do you want the other person to do? Stage and analyze simultaneously.
 - Reactions are the most difficult aspect of the acting performance.
 - Actors should concentrate on the NOW so hard that they stop thinking.
 - The paradox is that an actor can only “forget the future” when they know what the future is. Repetition should make them so secure about what must be done that they cease to think about it. Repetition makes the performer believe that things are going to happen as expected.
 - When it really happens, actors are so aware of themselves and all the other things around them that they feel like different people. At the same time, actors never confuse their personality with that of the character they are playing.
 - 3 things make the NOW happen in rehearsal: proper/repeated physical action, focus on the other, concentration.
 - Explain directions in terms of what the character is doing or saying.
 - Don’t tell the actor something is “wrong” unless you have an idea about what can be done right now to make it better.
 - Fix the important things first. Do it one more time!
- With Technicians
 - Cooperative effort, yet guide the vision
 - Responsible Crew Heads
 - The function of lighting is illumination yet can often replace scenery; don’t be intimidated by lighting.
 - Sound: avoid auditorium speakers; set up your own. Many sounds can be “live.” Microphones should make sound clearer, not louder.
 - Music: pre/post show; transitions; underscoring. Mood, familiarity, scale, unification, period.
 - Props and Furniture: don’t overdo. On loan, upholster, stock wooden pieces, useful. Personal props, accurate, simplify.
 - Costuming: importance of good costuming – quality makes the actor look better. Characterization, Period, Style, Completeness, Fit, Budget (simplify).
 - Makeup: should never be seen except on-stage. Don’t overdo age makeup. Don’t spray gray paint on hair. Let actors convince the audience of their age.

VI. Casting Agent

- It’s key to your success
 - Directing is mostly casting; can you work with them?
 - Don’t expect the character to walk in the door
 - Put actors at ease but don’t befriend them
 - Audition Methods: Resume, Interview, Monologue, Cold Readings, Improvisation
 - Access to the script must be fair; all auditions must be open and public; have scripts on hand, schedule enough auditions, announce everywhere.
 - The most demanding roles aren’t always the biggest.
 - Chemistry of the cast; schedule conflicts; never cast someone who didn’t audition; fairness; personality of actors; avoid disruptive actors; may need to play beyond their age.

- Blind casting is essential! Exception: when gender or ethnicity is a part of the plot; it must be accepted.
- If you double cast, you need to rehearse twice.
- Understudies rarely work, yet be prepared for cast replacements.
- Kill the star syndrome early.

VII. Practitioner

○ The Inside Scoop

- Every scene is a chase scene/contest
- The strength of the characters' wants equals the strength of the play
- Every actor has a tell
- If a scene isn't clicking, check the entrance
- Blocking problem?
- Tension, urgency and satisfaction
- Match the vocal energy
- Watch for actors who drop end lines
- Avoid using your cool
- Great moment? Do it again
- Some moments should not be repeated
- Avoid long scene changes
- Find: what the actor is fighting for, the moment before, humor, discoveries, opposites, each moment of Communication, what each character is right about and what the other character wrong about, the most significant moment of Importance, the events that happen that change relationships, how Place affects behavior, each character's Role in the play, the name of the Game being played, moments of Mystery and Secret. (Michael Shurtleff)
- Selective Realism: you don't always need walls
- Good design is not always expensive design
- Be careful of "concepts:" directing the play through the scenery and costumes rather than through the actors and words
- Comedy: if you try to be funny, the less funny you are. Trust the script; play the reality of the moment; timing is everything –you need to feel it.
- Fights require extra rehearsals; safety first. Guns should look and sound real

○ Basics

- **JUST TELL THE STORY**
- Don't always connect the dots
- Keep the audience guessing
- Don't try to please everybody
- You can't have everything
- Don't expect to have all of the answers
- Don't be a lazy, ignorant director
- Don't change the author's words
- It's not about you
- Look like you know exactly like you want

○ Rehearsals

- Read-through: no brilliant speech, don't let the actors mumble through, talk/questions after, mark the beats

- Rehearsals need discipline
- Keep to the schedule; update IF needed
- Don't call actors you don't need
- Say thank you
- Include the crew
- Re-read scenes before rehearsal
- Treat difficult moment as discoveries
- Don't work on new material when cast is tired
- End rehearsals on an upbeat note
- Avoid letting others see a late rehearsal
- Roughly an hour of rehearsal time for each actual minute of performance; less with experienced casts; more with large casts.
- 6-8 weeks for a full-length play, before dress rehearsal; Mon-Fri.
- Schedule rehearsals often; 3 hours; evening are more productive than afternoon; afternoon eliminates many.
- Due to conflicts, scenes can be blocked out of order.
- First meeting: Introduce, distribute scripts, plot, characters, designs, rules, schedule, costume measurements, read through (value).
- SM: tape floor, rehearsal props/furniture.
- Stages: Blocking, Understanding, Memorization, Development, Integration, Dress Rehearsal.
- Blocking: essential blocking, broad action, clarify meaning of lines. Explain markings, set model, correct mispronunciations, don't worry about characterization or emotional expression yet, repetition is important, actors must write it down, block for 2 hours then run the scenes, correct mistakes immediately.
- Understanding the Show: clarify, modify and reinforce blocking and business; develop each actor's understanding of the role; encourage the process of memorization; more concentrated; shorter scenes for longer periods; maximum remembering time is 5 days; maximum concentration on one scene is one hour; call people only when they are needed; scripts in hands; interruption okay; analysis should only be done in the context of physical action; deal with lines and business simultaneously; offer concrete actions; run-throughs.
- Memorization: ¼ to 1/3 of show each night off book; no interruptions; call line; wording must not be changed; actors who won't learn lines can be replaced.
- Development: 2 full weeks; heart of the rehearsal period; smaller units; scenes in sequence (?); If not working, ask – Am I asking the actors to do the wrong thing? Have the actors assimilated the activity yet? Is there something mechanically wrong with the activity? Rehearse with props and costumes early; shoes and skirts are critical; sometimes you must wait for the set to be completed; take breaks to avoid mental fatigue; every actor should have performed role acceptably at least once.
- Integration: 1 ½ to 2 weeks. Establish a sequence of concentration so actors' activities begin to gel; solve all technical problems. Expand sequences to run complete acts; schedule a couple "worst scene" nights; complete run-through before 1st Tech; no prompter; free to react. Tech: 1st Props, 2nd Scenery, 3rd Costumes, 4th Lighting and Sound, 5th Makeup; separate rehearsals for crew.

- Dress Rehearsals: A true dress is not a tech; intense, uninterrupted, concentrated repetition; notes after (as brief as you can be) – praise all eventually, oral comment with written note (?); 3 dresses are best; Block Curtain Call at 1st Dress; Director then bows out – no stage managing, calling cues, etc; open and close building; establish positive environment-check costumes, help with stage fright; relaxation/traditions/stay in character. After show – make students get out of costume before they come out front (and fast); photo call in Dress; thank all; make sure all strike.
 - **Communication:** exercises to bring actors “out of their heads” and “back to the moment.” How do we make it truthful? – pretend! ILLUSION of reality. The best way to deal with the illusion of reality is through a question. (Do you know what I mean?) – Larry Hecht, Denver Center Conservatory
- Blocking
 - If it moves, the eyes will follow
 - Every object tells
 - Love triangles
 - Few actors on stage? Keep them apart
 - Imbalance adds interest
 - Choose a facing angle
 - Stand up, yet don’t stand still for too long
 - Sit down if you’re up to it
 - If the actors are interested, the audience will be too
 - Listening is active
 - Character reactions should be outward and active, not inward and passive
 - Turn your back, yet give your actors face time
 - Style has its reasons
 - Use costumes and sound for specific reasons
 - Acting solutions are always better than technical solutions
 - All dramatic action is both defined and revealed by a process of change.
 - Blocking is the way you visualize your analysis of the script.
 - Blocking translates your verbal analysis into a physical world the audience can see and hear.
 - Blocking provides the practical foundation on which the actors build their performances.
 - Any change in the course of the action should be accompanied by an equivalent change in the visible activity on stage.
 - It is far easier to go in with a plan and then modify it than it is to make it all up in rehearsals.
 - Emotional changes are visibly expressed by changes in the physical relationships of the people on stage.
 - Relationship changes are shown through distance, or change in movement or attention.
 - Authority: show dominant, subservient or equality through stage positions/focus.
 - The unexpected: dramatic power in moments of the greatest intensity.
 - Groups: isolation vs. physically integrated.
 - Do not have actors move around in the same way all of the time.
 - Repetition: only when author does it on purpose (ex. first and last scene).

- Theme and Variation: alter arrangement when author indicates to do so.
- Blocking should illustrate that relationships have developed.
- Exteriorize all choices made by the characters: audience must see the nature of the choice, the character deal with the choice, and understand the choice when it has at last been made.
- The chooser should be placed between the choices.
- Movement: appropriateness, scale, tempo.
- Make the action clear, then worry about the stage business.
- The blocking should focus the audience's attention; audience wants to see and hear.
- Mix up the various methods of blocking simply for the sake of variety.
- The director determines the style for the performance.
- Formality may be forced on you by scenic limitations.
- Casual staging tends toward a crowded or complicated stage.
- You have eyes, ears and imagination: USE THEM.
- All blocking must clarify the moment to the audience. Ask: Is this working?
- Two-person scenes: use distance to establish the relationship; push-pull.
- Encourage picturization over and around obstacles
- Encourage space separations between characters via the use of different planes, levels, and body positions
- Look for intimate climactic picturizations and encourage actors to touch one another
- Create different character-mood-intensity levels for each character
- Encourage variety of gestures
- Vary the use of triangles, and use them often
- Encourage the liberal use of hand props as connected to subtext
- Balance the stage
- Exploit contrasts in levels
- Exploit the extremes of the stage floor

Works Consulted

- 1) Audition, by Michael Shurtleff
- 2) A Practical Handbook for the Actor, by Melissa Bruder, Lee Michael Cohn, Madeleine Olnek, Nathaniel Pollack, Robert Previto and Scott Zigler (students of David Mamet)
- 3) Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays, by David Ball
- 4) Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style, by Francis Hodge
- 5) Play Directing in the School: A Drama Director's Survival Guide, by David Grote
- 6) Notes on Directing, by Frank Hauser and Russell Reich
- 7) Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World, by Susan Letzler Cole
- 8) Play Direction, by John E. Dietrich and Ralph W. Duckwall
- 9) Directors on Directing: A Source Book of the Modern Theater, by Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy
- 10) Organizing and Managing the High School Theatre Program, by James R. Opelt
- 11) Fundamentals of Play Directing, by Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra

Communication Exercise– Do You Know What I Mean?” – Larry Hecht, Head of Acting, Denver Center Theatre Conservatory

Put your students in groups of two. Have them create a six-line nonsense scene. For example:

Person 1: Hi.

Person 2: Hello.

Person 1: Nice day, isn't it?

Person 2: I didn't notice.

Person 1: Well, it is.

Person 2: Fine.

After they have memorized the scene, seat one pair facing each other.

- 1) Tell them to say their lines to each other
- 2) Tell them to say their lines to each other again, yet add “Do you know what I mean?” after they say their line. For example,
Person 1: Hi. Do you know what I mean?
Person 2: Hello. Do you know what I mean?
Person 1: Nice day isn't it? Do you know what I mean?
Person 2: I didn't notice. Do you know what I mean?
Person 1: Well, it is. Do you know what I mean?
Person 2: Fine. Do you know what I mean?
- 3) Now have them say their line, and **mouth**, “Do you know what I mean?” after the line instead of asking it out loud.
- 4) Now have them say their line, and **think**, “Do you know what I mean?” after the line. If it seems like they are indicating too much in this step, bring that to their attention, and tell them to further internalize the thought.
- 5) This time, give them a different sentence that also means, “Do you know what I mean?” Ultimately, a sentence would be chosen that makes sense for the character they are playing in a production/scene. For example:
Person 1: Hi. Doth thou comprehend what I have bespoken to you?
Person 2: Hello. Ya' dig?
Person 1: Nice day isn't it? Doth thou comprehend what I have bespoken to you?
Person 2: I didn't notice. Ya' dig?
Person 1: Well, it is. Doth thou comprehend what I have bespoken to you?
Person 2: Fine. Ya' dig?
- 6) Repeat steps #3 and #4 above with the new question in #5.

AT THIS POINT YOU HAVE JUST DEFINED CHARACTER.

- 7) We are full of questions. Our subtext is possibly more often in the form of a question than a statement. This also helps us give energy to the end of the line. So repeat the exercise with an essential action question for the six-line “beat.” Ultimately it should be a question that your character would want to ask in a production/scene. For example,
Person 1: Hi. Do you know you have a boogar in your nose?
Person 2: Hello. Do you know how much I love you?
Person 1: Nice day isn't it? Do you know you have a boogar in your nose?
Person 2: I didn't notice. Do you know how much I love you?
Person 1: Well, it is. Do you know you have a boogar in your nose?
Person 2: Fine. Do you know how much I love you?
- 8) Repeat steps #3 and #4 above with the new question in #7.

AT THIS POINT, YOU HAVE JUST DEFINED RELATIONSHIP.

9) Next, repeat your line, and add, “Did you say...?” after the Person 1 says his/her line, and then Person 1 adds, “Yes, I said...” For example,

Person 1: Hi.

Person 2: Did you just say, “hi?”

Person 1: Yes, I just said, “hi.”

Person 2: Hello.

Person 1: Did you just say, “hello?”

Person 2: Yes I just said, “hello.”

Person 1: Nice day isn't it?

Person 2: Did you just say, “nice day, isn't it?”

Person 1: Yes, I just said, “nice day, isn't it?”

Person 2: I didn't notice.

Person 1: Did you just say, “I didn't notice?”

Person 2: Yes, I just said, “I didn't notice.”

Person 1: Well, it is.

Person 2: Did you just say, “Well, it is?”

Person 1: Yes, I just said, “Well it is.”

Person 2: Fine.

Person 1: Did you just say “fine?”

Person 2: Yes, I just said “fine.”

10) Repeat steps #3 and #4 above for “Did you just say...?” and “Yes, I said...”

AT THIS POINT, YOU WILL NOTICE THAT THE CONNECTION HAS DEEPENED.

11) This time, simply have Person 2 say “what?” after Person 1's statement, and then have

Person 1 repeat their statement.

Person 1: Hi.

Person 2: What?

Person 1: Hi.

Person 2: Hello.

Person 1: What?

Person 2: Hello.

Person 1: Nice day isn't it?

Person 2: What?

Person 1: Nice day, isn't it?

Person 2: I didn't notice.

Person 1: What?

Person 2: I didn't notice.

Person 1: Well, it is.

Person 2: What?

Person 1: Well, it is.

Person 2: Fine.

Person 1: What?

Person 2: Fine.

12) Repeat steps #3 and #4, by mouthing, then thinking “what?”

THE ACTORS ARE INSTANTLY IN A RELATIONSHIP. THEY WILL BE MORE CONNECTED THE SECOND TIME THEY SAY THEIR LINE. THE FIRST TIME IS USED AS A “PREP,” AND THE SECOND TIME THE TRUE INTENT COMES THROUGH.