



Tips for new directors

A veteran's guide to successful storytelling

BY MICHAEL DAEHN

IF YOU'RE A RELATIVELY new theatre teacher and haven't had much directorial experience, it might not be clear to you exactly what a director contributes to the creation of a successful stage work. Simply put, directors tell stories. A more detailed description might be: A director is the individual who, after much research, reading, and planning, conceives and develops the boundaries of a unique world within which a playwright's story and ideas will come to life. In the process, the director determines which character, plot, or design elements need to be emphasized so that a production's spine, or central idea, is communicated to an audience.

To draw this artistic blueprint of the world of the play, the director collaborates with designers, music directors, a choreographer, actors, and technical staff. To share her vision and inspire the production's creative team, she uses poetic images, lines from the script, musical riffs and lyrics from the score (if it's a musical), and any other means at her command.

In a professional production, as opening night nears, the director re-

fines the show with the actors, design team, and technicians, and then usually moves on to the next project. The stage manager runs the actual production from opening night until it closes.

Directing a high school theatre production is another matter. Even if you've only directed a few shows, you already know that your work is never done. You coordinate auditions, rehearsals, and production warm-ups, solve production problems on a daily basis, and usually see most of the run (if you're not fixing box office snafus or wardrobe malfunctions).

What I'm going to do here is present a few points every new director ought to bear in mind before stepping into the role of storyteller. I'm not suggesting what I have to say is the last word on directing a stage play—this is just to get you to start thinking about the basics. For more in-depth directorial advice, check out some of the texts included in the sidebar on page 27. Here's my to-do list, more or less in chronological sequence.

Pick your play with your cast and audience in mind. When you're

considering plays to stage, you need to take into account your students' educational needs and the nature of your audience. So, as much as you may have always dreamed of mounting the first Beckett or Pinter festival in your school district, please keep that dream in your sleep. Start by doing a careful assessment of the capabilities of your casting pool. Do you have students with lots of experience doing a wide range of work, both straight plays and musicals? Or is your program relatively new and undeveloped, with students of little or no acting experience? What are their technical capabilities and experience? And so on. You also need to take into consideration your own experience, or lack of: do you really want to take on the complicated challenge of a full-length musical, for example? And, finally, what is it you're trying accomplish educationally? Do you want to show your students what it's like to work in a large ensemble, or would it make more sense to break them into groups for an evening of small-cast short plays?

Along with your students' needs and abilities, you need to choose stories that will engage the folks who fill your seats. They are the ones who pay your much-needed ticket revenues, drive your novice actors to rehearsals, and

Master storytellers at work: director Vance Fulkerson (in stripes, top photo and bottom left) leads rehearsals for *Hairspray*, in preparation for International Cast production at the 2008 Thespian Festival; and Holly Stanfield (in red sweater, bottom right) works with two principal actors in the 2007 International Cast staging of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

provide support in general for your theatre program. They deserve some entertainment value.

Read your play the right way.

By this, I mean the way you listen to your favorite tunes—over and over again. Good directors get to know their plays extremely well by reading them frequently and with purpose. Each reading should focus on a specific element. One time it's entrances, exits, and possible staging; another is to find key events or character subtext; a third might be to read aloud for rhythms and pace considerations; a fourth to explore the arc of story and characters alike; the fifth, for whatever reason you think is necessary.

Do your homework. We have all had a research assignment we procrastinated on and ended up with a less-than-desirable project as a result. To create a world, you need to know a lot about it. That means serious research—online and off—of the cultural, historical, and behavioral aspects of your chosen script through written, visual, spoken (such as dialects and class-generated language), or musical sources that will help you imagine and share the playwright's story. Your homework or the lack of it will serve as either an inspiration or an obstacle to your company. The more thoroughly you describe your world vision of the play, the easier it will be for them to help you create it.

Here's an example of the kind of research I mean: In the summer of 2004, I directed a production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* at the American High School Theatre Festival in Edinburgh, performed by Senator Joseph McCarthy's hometown high school in Wisconsin, Appleton West. We set our deconstructed production in 1954 at the height of the House Anti-American Activities Committee hearings. Our rehearsals required a keen understanding of both local and national politics, the social etiquette of the 1950s, and the era's cultural icons (many of which permeated our Jasper Johns-inspired set). As director, my extensive research was crucial toward our company's ability to immerse themselves in what

otherwise would be to them a vague, foreign world—one that would be very difficult for audiences who lived through these events to believe.

Determine the voice of your play.

Figure out what you want your company's production to say to the audience who will experience it. That means you need to know what your central message or spine is throughout the entire creation process—from first production meeting through opening night. Anything that helps to tell that story ought to be included while, at the same time, you should be careful to discard things that are either not relevant or potentially confusing to an audience.

Here's an example of the latter: The director of a production of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians* might want the audience to believe every character is capable of being the murderer, so she emphasizes the potential for evil in every character in the play. Such a directorial choice might achieve the director's intent but only by ignoring the script's equally compelling romantic, heroic, and even comic storylines. Another director discovers a comic moment in rehearsal, perhaps a hiccup or burp or passing of gas, which could easily translate into a modest, very enjoyable laugh once the production opens. Unfortunately, the mistaken belief that this moment can grow in comic size or become a running gag or motif throughout the production often intrudes on a play's dramatic rhythms. To perhaps gain a few laughs, the story itself is put on hold and never quite reaches the emotional peak it could have attained. Again, it is important we keep our eyes on the directorial prize—a clearly realized and understood, audience-engaging, dramatic story.

Cast the right students in the right roles. Good casting is crucial, and sometimes the most difficult part of your directing experience happens at auditions. My philosophy is to match the personality of the student to the role. Pay attention to who the tension-releasing comics are and put them in your comic parts. Watch carefully to see who's nurturing the other frightened actors: cast them in the soothing

caretaking character roles. A reading is a reading, but if you know what lives at the core of each character in your play, you can link those roles to students who project those very same qualities.

Know your story backwards and forwards. Before you can allow your actors the freedom to explore the world of the play, you must possess a clear understanding of the play's structure. For instance, is it linear, with one event leading to the next in chronological fashion? *The Crucible* is a good example, as are the musicals *Grease* and *Hairspray*. Or is your chosen play an episodic or "string of pearls" work, in which scenes are presented in a disjointed sequence, such as *The Laramie Project* and *Godspell*? Either structure requires that you do a careful analysis of every dramatic action and event that occurs in the entire play.

One type of analysis is called backwards and forwards. It's a strategy developed by the director David Ball to help directors gain a clearer understanding of each progressive step of a play's story and relationships. To use this system, you start at the end of the play and work toward the beginning, listing every dramatic action and its cause backwards. Ball calls this process the "trigger and heap" of each event. Ball teaches that a dramatic action is comprised of two events: a trigger and a heap. Each heap becomes the next action's trigger, so that actions are like dominoes toppling one into the next. His theory is, by preceding backwards, trigger domino by heap domino, there can be no accidental detours since we already know how the story ends—a much sounder approach than heading in from the beginning of the play.

Similarly, Ball's idea of a forward event refers to those moments in the play that grab an audience's attention and make them want to keep watching. For example, the lights go out and we hear a shot and scream. We want to know who's dead, who did it, and to find out if anyone else is in danger. In *Hamlet*, the ghost is mentioned repeatedly before he speaks. By that time, we're dying to know what he's going to say to his son. Those are re-

Questions for actors during moment-to-moment rehearsals

These are some of the questions I ask my actors when we're breaking down the individual moments of a play. In some cases, one question leads to the next. This only a starting point—you can tailor your own questions to the needs of your students and the play.

1. What do you want from the other partner(s) in the scene?
2. What are you going to do to get it? What are your tactics?
3. How can you make that choice clearer/larger/simpler/bolder?
4. If that approach didn't work, how can you make a more successful adjustment?
5. What is the very specific relationship between you and your partner(s) at this very moment?
6. What are the "operative" words or phrases for you to emphasize in this line if you wish to accurately communicate your intention?
7. How can you set your stakes higher for your character and the scene?
8. Can you find some of the opposite in your character? (For example, a sympathetic aspect of the villain or a flaw that makes the hero less perfect and more human.)
9. What part of the backstory (character history fashioned from text and informed imagination) informs your character choices or motivations during this moment?
10. Are you listening intently to your partner or are you trapped in your own head?
11. Can you take a more or less direct approach to pursuing your intentions?
12. What's the subtext in the line you're reading, and what is your real intention when you say it?
13. What's your inner monologue while you listen to others in this scene speak?
14. How would your character find and use humor or charm in this stressful scene, using the text and given circumstances you have to work with?

—M.D.

ally effective forwards. Directors must identify and clearly shape each of the forwards in their plays to keep an audience engaged.

Shape your space on a stone soup budget. As a director in a school theatre program, one of your challenges is determining how to produce a play on a minimal or non-existent budget. It's possible to tell a story in any space with minimal or no scenery as long as your actors are invested in the work. If that happens, your audience will commit to the story as well, bringing with them the capacity to imagine locations and effects far greater and grander than any designer can create. Look at Shakespeare's plays. His language conjures such highly descriptive images, that the scenes could be clearly visualized in the mind's eye of groundlings and aristocracy alike.

Create a ground plan for your set. The plan should include, per the demands of the play, the arrangement of walls, doors, windows, and other architectural elements (such as fire-

places and bookshelves), along with furniture placement. This schematic, whether you sketch it out on notebook paper or create it on your laptop, is an organic part of the dramatic action. It is the scenic designer's guide to the world you're trying to communicate and a map for your actors learning the rhythms and behaviors of the story. For instance, entrances and exits must be situated to accommodate the significance and timing of the entrances and exits of key characters. Furniture should be arranged and clustered into multiple playing areas (not just center stage) so the staging is constantly fresh, not static. A set design forcing the actors to repeatedly move in a figure-eight fashion simply draws attention to the pattern, not the actions being played or the progression of the story.

Here are three other things to bear in mind when formulating your ground plan, and for that matter, when you begin blocking your play:

- Use levels to help establish relationships. A standing actor draws

more focus than a sitting one; a seated character draws more focus than three standing ones because of the contrast. Finally, actors standing on boxes or platforms draw more attention than those at stage level.

- Stage your scenes at appropriate focal points. Remember that downstage right—the closest area to the edge of the stage, from the actor's right, facing the audience—is the hottest spot. This is true because that's the way we read in the West, from left to right. So if a character has a pivotal moment in a play, you might consider staging it down right. Downstage center and downstage left are the two next-most prominent focal points to place your actors. Upstage left is the area of least emphasis for audience attention. Center stage is the safest and most emotionally neutral onstage area as it is equally distant from all others and halfway removed from the audience.

- Establish several "emotional" acting areas to keep the staging dynamic. Perhaps certain areas have special im-

portance for individual characters (their comfort, guilt, terror zones). Perhaps, for example, a grandfatherly figure has a personal oasis with furniture like an old recliner or a wall filled with photos of departed loved ones.

Use your blocking to help tell the story. A master storyteller grabs the attention of his audience, unfolds the sequence of events with increasing urgency, drives the dramatic intensity of the story to an amazing or amusing climax, and concludes with a philosophical or emotional resonance that leaves the audience wanting more. Of course, it's not as easy as it sounds, but this is your recipe if you wish to be a successful director. A major part of that recipe is the approach you take to blocking your play. Here are two blocking issues to consider:

Staging. How you arrange people and objects to the space should reveal the nature of relationships between characters and make your story both clear and interesting. The use of triangles in staging a scene with more than two characters creates a sense of dramatic tension and, generally, moving actors along diagonal lines (up left to down right, for example) creates more interest than movement in straight lines (up right to down right and up center to down center, for example).

Group pictures. Aristotle considered spectacle one of the fundamental theatrical elements, and it's more popular than ever today. It's very hard to explain how one can create a sense of spectacle onstage (though I'm sure you can find a suitable description in one of the sidebar texts). The best suggestion I have is to view great art. To immerse oneself into the world of Brueghel's hardworking peasants, Hogarth's spoiled elite, Benton's cowboys of the Wild West, or Hopper's lonely late-night diners is to get lost in an alternate aesthetic vision that has much to teach a theatrical director. I've found that the more I dissect and analyze the stories told through all the composition choices made by the world's great painters, the easier it is for me to create similarly expressive pictures onstage.

Keep it real. Your job as actor coach is to inform your actors when they're listening and responding to each other in the moment, playing the intention of a scene, and making bold, interesting choices. It's also your responsibility to take them to task when they're doing the opposite. Specific and honest choices are always the most effective ones you can encourage an actor to make. Audiences will relate more on both a personal and dramatic level to characters who are willing to reveal themselves through authentic choices. Your blocking with either help or hinder that process. Be aware.

Make every moment matter. One of famed acting teacher Sanford Meisner's often-repeated phrases was, "Every little moment has a life of its own." What I think he meant was that every scene must be taken apart and rebuilt slowly through an exploration of each single moment that passes and every action each character makes. Those moments might be physical actions, dialogue, or even pauses filled with silent communication—all are equally essential to developing the arc of the story. Each moment triggers the next and relationships shift, a progression that continues until the end of the story. A good director sets aside an adequate amount of rehearsal time for this stop-and-start discovery sequence. You and your actors might pause after every few lines to talk about what adjustments need to happen to make those moments clearer and more effective. (See the sidebar of questions for actors during moment-to-moment rehearsals on page 24.) These rehearsals are often the most artistically challenging and exciting part of your story-assembling process—and indispensable to the clarity of your production.

Find the humor. In his amazing primer on acting, *Audition*, Michael Shurtleff says, "Humor is an attitude, a survivor's way of looking at life. It's not about telling jokes." If humor is present in our most dramatic real-life moments, why wouldn't it be included in every play you direct? A script's humor might not always be immediately apparent; sometimes a laugh is hidden under the

surface of the lines or discovered only in the context of how a scene is played in rehearsal. But the humor is always there, and you must find it if you expect your story to ring true.

Pick eight to ten framing moments. When I do my preproduction analysis, I identify eight to ten major framing moments in a full-length play and two to five in a shorter work. These are the moments that should stand out in the audience's mind as they connect the storyline you're constructing for them. Each of these events or moments will require more emphasis in rehearsal. They invariably include the earliest moments of a play, when you need to grab interest, and the last moments, which need to resonate past the final curtain. Sometimes scenes stand out because they include moments of high passion or conflict, or because of the visual images you generate. Other times, a framing moment occurs because of a particularly imaginative piece of business, a climactic dance or song, or a demonstration of artistic virtuosity.

Find the rhythm of the play. Every play has a rhythm built into its structure. For instance, when do people speak soft or loud, fast or slow? When do they overlap and why? What's the melody of these words in the speaking? How will they work to help each character get what he or she wants? What does this story require in terms of changing tempos? If you don't know a play's beat, you run the risk of racing past some key moments and crawling too slowly over some others.

Develop an edge. There is something special about the work of certain directors, a personal style that transcends mere storytelling. These stage artists easily shift from one interesting world to another, their characters always seem to make brighter, bolder choices, and their stories are told in unusual or unexpected ways. For some undefinable reason, their stage pictures linger in the mind, and you enjoy thinking about the work long after it's over. These directors don't approach storytelling timidly—they have an edge. You have one, too. The more plays

you direct, the finer that edge will become. Better get to work and start telling your stories now.

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Further reading

On Directing, by Harold Clurman (Macmillan Publishing, 1997)

The Dramatic Imagination, by Robert Edmond Jones (Theatre Arts Books, 2004)

The Viewpoints Book, by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau (Theatre Communications Group, 2005)

Directors on Directing, by Toby Cole and Helen Chinoy (Macmillan Publishing, 1986)

Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style, by Francis Hodge (Allyn & Bacon, 2004)

Fundamentals of Play Directing, by Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra (Thompson Learning, 1989)

Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays, by David Ball (Southern Illinois University, 1983)

Creative Play Direction, by Robert Cohen (Allyn & Bacon, 1983)

The Empty Space, by Peter Brook (Touchstone, 1995)

Originally published in the quarterly journal *Teaching Theatre*. More info: Schooltheatre.org