

The Power of Ten: Directing Workshop Notes
Saturday, December 5, 2015 (Mary J. L. Black Library)

Facilitator: Debbie Patterson

The director's job:

Most unnecessary person in the room.

Stand in for the audience.

Help the actors. You aren't leading them, you're directing them. Let them lead.

Support the playwright.

All you have is your words. Be clear. Be prepared. Listen.

You don't need to have all the answers. You can take time to decide. But not too much.

Welcome all ideas.

Praise all your collaborators.

Love the play.

Love the actors.

Respect the crew.

Honour the audience.

Preparation

Read the play. Repeat. Make notes.

What is this play's gift to the world?

Why does this play need to be done?

Why here? Why now?

Focus on what you connect with in the play, overlook its faults, build on its strengths.

Identify the driving question in the story. What keeps us wondering what's going to happen next?

Read as if you were playing one character. Do this for every character.

I like to block the whole play on paper. Then allow actors to do what they want. If we run into trouble, I have a plan.

Casting

Is 90% of the job. The actor brings their whole life experience to the role.

First read thru

Watch your actors, not your script. Make notes.

After the read (not before), talk about your take on the play. (ie. The answers to the questions above.)

Offer each actor specific praise.

Table work

Mark the shifts in the script (sometimes called beats). This will help you block the scene.

Read until you feel a shift. Then stop and discuss.

Discipline yourself and your company to talk in terms of "What" not "How". What do we learn?

What is driving this moment? What does this character want? What are the obstacles?

Avoid discussion of staging or line readings (never give a line reading!!!!)

This is also where you can make sure the actors know exactly what they're saying. Make sure they know the meanings of the words, what the references are in the script, etc. Get the facts.

Blocking

Read the scene before blocking it.

Every scene is a chase scene.

Characters move on beat shifts, when their intentions or their tactics change.

Look at bodies in space. Use your intuition.

We move towards the things we want and away from the things we don't want. (nice/nasty)

If it's really nice or really nasty we move more and faster.

If our response is a secret we move less directly.

Sometimes we move away from what we want in order to tease or psych out our scene partner: to get the other character to move towards us.

Work scenes

Praise your actors. If they're not doing what you want yet, praise them for doing it.

(ie. I felt like you had a secret that you were keeping from her. I like that! Can you do that more?)

Keep them on task: What do you want? What are you doing to get it? Is it working? What's the obstacle? What's your target? How are you using your words to change the world?

NEVER TALK IN TERMS OF EMOTIONS. Reassure your actors that you will never ask them to achieve an emotional state. If you really think the play demands it, you need to work with the actor to get there authentically, but keep the intended result to yourself.

The only exception: do talk in terms of what your character wants the other character to feel.

Identify moments of "crunchiness": whenever the actor or action is unclear or insincere, whenever the actor is coming at it from the outside. Acknowledge that the moment is not yet working and discuss it in terms of given circumstances, what the character wants, and "as if". Offer anecdotes, or elicit them from the actor. The cause of crunchiness is never "bad acting", it is a lack of clarity or understanding of the moment and connection with that concept. We can address this together. Take the blame yourself whenever you can.

Remind actors to play the contrast: find the child in the elder, find the vulnerable in the powerful.

Remind actors to play against the condition: to play drunk, try to look sober. To play sleepy, try to stay awake.

Humour: it will be funny if the actor is truthfully pursuing their objective. Make the stakes higher. (pro tip: stakes get higher when the distance between the good outcome and the bad outcome gets bigger.)

Sex and violence

Need to be choreographed and rehearsed like a dance.

Build it up/put it together

Warn your actors before you attempt to run big chunks. "Tomorrow we'll run all of act 1."

Be patient.

The actors need to feel the shape of the whole piece. Let them run it many times before the audience sees it.

Give notes after the run, not before.

Be careful of drawing attention to something magical that is happening. You could kill it.
When scheduling permits, work bits before the run, not during notes.

Tech

Everything will take a step back when the actors first have to incorporate costumes, props, lighting, etc.

Be patient

Last spit and polish

When a scene isn't working:

look at the moment before,

find the fun,

ask if the choices you've made are really supported by the text.

Consider an overlap rehearsal to address comfortable listening/polite speaking. (more info below)

Consider a fuck run to engage the actors' passions/feeling centre.

Consider the What game if an actor isn't using her words.

Other stuff

Working with new scripts

Identify when the text is unclear. Help the playwright make it clear by asking questions.

You are the midwife, recognize that the playwright is doing some really difficult, painful labour.

Working with designers

Be clear about the world you are wanting to create. Do not let a questionable costume design go by. You need to advocate for your actor. Don't let the design get in the way of the story. Be very judicious with projections!!! The eye follows movement. Don't let moving images steal your audience's attention. Don't show us a picture of a setting that we could more richly and effectively imagine.

Transitions

Try to move the story forward with the transitions. Blackouts are deadly. Scene changes, well choreographed and well lit can be golden.

SM/director relationship

Nurture this. The SM is your most trusted confidant, your backbone, your better half.

Bibliography

Notes on Directing by Frank Hauser and Russell Reich

A Sense of Direction by William Ball

Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus by Marina Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd Williams

A Practical Handbook for the Actor by Melissa Bruder, Lee Michael Cohn, Madeleine Olnek Nathaniel Pollack, Robert Previtio and Scott Zigler.

Overlap rehearsal

Have the actors sit on the floor in a circle. You should have the script in front of you, but the actors shouldn't.

Tell them that this is an exercise in listening. Have them play the scene without blocking but with full intention. As soon as they hear the information they need in order to respond, they should begin speaking their next line. If the other character is still in the middle of talking, they may have to fight for control of the conversation. One character may choose to give up or cede control. The interrupter may want to repeat their first few words to make sure their scene partner hears what it is they're trying to say.

Remind them that this is not an Italian run. It's not a memory exercise, it's an exercise in intention and listening. It will help your actors to think faster and to stay active and engaged during long moments where they have no lines.

You will discover very quickly who has been doing their performance by rote because they won't be able to remember their lines. If this happens, do not shame the actor. Congratulate them on their ability to pull the wool over your eyes. Only very intelligent actors can do this. Then let them know that this is a gift, this exercise has revealed to them a terrific area for improvement. Encourage and support them through the rest of the rehearsal process as they attempt to embody the text, to engage the whole self, not just the brain.

As the actors work through the play, you should be taking notes in your script about the sections that you feel benefit from aggressive overlapping. The actors will feel it too, and are usually very excited about being able to incorporate overlapping in the performance.

If we're really pursuing our objectives, we are not patient. We interrupt, we repeat ourselves, we are rude and impolite.

The what game

The "what game" goes like this:

Actor: Mary had a Little Lamb.

You: Who had a little lamb?

Actor: *Mary* had a Little Lamb.

You: Mary had a little what?

Actor: Mary had a Little *Lamb*.

You: Mary had a big lamb?

Actor: Mary had a *Little* Lamb.

You: Mary rode a little lamb?

Actor: Mary *had* a Little Lamb.

You can also ask actors to work a scene repeating their scene partner's line back as a question.

Prospero: Canst thou remember a time before we came unto this cell?

Miranda: Can I remember a time before we came unto the cell?

Prospero: Canst thou remember a time before we came unto this cell? I do not think thou canst,

Miranda: You do not think I can?

Prospero: I do not think thou canst, for then thou wast not out three years old.

Miranda: I wasn't three years old then?

Prospero: For then thou wast not out three years old.

Miranda: Certainly, sir, I can.

Prospero: Certainly you can?

Miranda: Certainly, sir, I can.

Prospero: By what?

Miranda: By what?

Prospero: By what? By any other house or person? Etc.