

## Chapter Ten

### Directing Theatre

by Debra Bruch

Ultimately, theatre needs three elements: actors, play, and audience. But for theatre to actualize its potential, a person would need to impose his or her point of view that would penetrate all aspects of the production. That person is the director. A director is needed for any situation, whether it's a staged reading to a congregation, a reader's theatre performance at reunion, or a full theatre production. A director is not only in charge of all aspects of production, as an artist he or she has a vision that ties all performance elements together.

While directing as an art truly came into prominence during the late nineteenth century, a director in one form or another existed since the classical Greek era. In ancient Greek theatre, the didaskalos, meaning teacher, instructed the performers. The Medieval age employed stage managers called conducteurs de secrets. Shakespeare may have directed his company at the Globe Theatre during the Elizabethan age. And Moliere coached his company.

From 1750 to 1850, the manager/director or actor/manager/director came into prominence. Forces which helped shape the need for a director at this time are public interest in antiquarianism, the development of scenery and scene shifting, and the focus on production over playscript. In *Directing the Play*, Cole and Chinoy further explain this era as a preparation for the director's domain.

As production more and more usurped the power once held by the play itself, they perfected the implements with which the director would work -- the rehearsal, the coordinated acting group and the external paraphernalia of archaeological sets and authentic costumes and props. Their activities revealed the creative contribution to be made by a single autocrat in charge of production.(1)

The director as a separate and important entity impacted the theatre world in 1874 when the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen toured Europe with his troupe of actors. The tour showed theatre artists the value and artistic opportunity a director could have. For six years prior to the tour, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen implemented basic directing principles which continue to be used, if modified, today. His principles included intensive rehearsals, the demand for disciplined and ensemble acting, historically accurate sets and costumes, extensive use of stage business, the directorial need for vision and total control over all aspects of the production, and the value of minute detail.

Overall, the practices implemented by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen continue today. The director has two basic charges: (1) to implement a unified vision within the finished production, and (2) to lead others toward its ultimate actualization. To meet these charges,

the director must organize the realization 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 analyze 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 actualize 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 promotes his or her vision, but also listens to ideas from the other artists. 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. For instance, a thin Falstaff would probably not work well. Physical appearance must also be seen in relation to other characters in order to perceive that person's suitability to the ensemble as a whole. 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.(2)

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.(3) 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.

(1) Cole, Toby and Helen Krich Chinoy, eds. *Directing the Play* (1953)

(2) Robert Cohen, *Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1988) 455.

(3) Cohen 458.

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