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Notes from the Field
Directing When You Are Not a Director: A Creative Process

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As theatre practitioners, audience members entrust us with the valuable asset of their time. They give us hours of their lives that they will never get back in exchange for the possibility of a transformative theatrical experience. When creating college theatre, we have an academic responsibility to the students working on the show, but more than that we have an opportunity—an opportunity to offer up an experience that entertains, enlightens, and fills an audience with knowledge about how to live a little better in this world. And the one person who leads that experience from start to finish is the director. Directing, with all its potential and responsibility, is a commonly required duty for theatre faculty, regardless of their training or experience. While it can be a pleasure for some, faculty members who are not trained as directors may view it as daunting and not be aware of how to take full advantage of this exciting artistic opportunity. I have prepared the following Notes from the Field in an effort to keep unseasoned faculty directors from becoming overwhelmed, and to aid them as they approach the invigorating task of directing a play.

Note that this is a "crash course" that lays out only some of the methodologies available to directors, but by following this guide, you will have a solid foundation and can then move on to craft your own approach. For more information, I encourage you to read the full texts I reference throughout the article. *A Sense of Direction* (1984) and *The Director's Craft* (2009) by William Ball and Katie Mitchell, respectively, are particularly good resources for new directors. So as to be as applicable to as many readers as possible, this Notes assumes that the play is a traditional, published work; that there is no dramaturge assigned to the production; and that the playwright is not available as a resource.

The Creative Process

The *creative process* refers to a course of action that anyone producing a creative act must go through, both internally and externally. Traditionally, it can be broken down into five distinct steps. As defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1997), those steps are: preparation, incubation, inspiration, evaluation, and elaboration (79). You must go through all five of these steps, and each one leads to the next. I use these steps as a framework for what follows, and as we move through the process I will lay out what directing-related information you must acquire along the way to achieve the most successful production possible because good directing is more than just making a rehearsal schedule and playing onstage traffic cop, although it is both of those things as well. Good directing is doing research (preparation), giving yourself time to have ideas (incubation), fully understanding the play (inspiration), rehearsing effectively (evaluation), and then bringing all those ideas fully to life (elaboration). Allow me to walk you through this process, creative step by creative step.

Step 1: Preparation

Csikszentmihalyi describes *preparation* as “becoming immersed, consciously or not, in a set of problematic issues that are interesting and arouse curiosity” (79). For directors, this can be translated as “researching the play.” Specifically, it is research that leads to a deeper understanding of the text, which will lead you to a plan of attack for approaching rehearsal and technical production.

While there are many ways to perform this research, detailed below, the most important thing that any director, but especially a new one, can do to help make his production a success is to start early. The more time you give yourself to work, the more research you can do; the more you research, the more you will understand the play; and the more you understand the play, the more your subconscious can do the work of being creative and give you ideas about how to direct the production.

Read About the Play

Start your research by attempting to discover what the originating impulse was for the playwright. This will tell you much about what the play is trying to communicate. You should also read a few other plays by the playwright. Often, themes that are in one play will appear in another; thematic patterns will emerge and the playwright’s style and worldview will come into focus. For example, Neil LaBute’s *The Shape of Things* and *Fat Pig* both center around young men struggling, and failing, to authentically redefine themselves as adults. Understanding this will not only alert you to this recurring theme in *Reasons to Be Pretty*, but will also point out how significant it is for the protagonist of this play to be successful at his self-reimaging.

Next, research the time period in which the play is set. The further away from the present day that the setting is, the more research you need to do to achieve accuracy (for example, cultural references, set references, and so on). But even more importantly, you need to understand *why* the story is set in that specific time period. Assuming that the playwright has infinite freedom to set her story anywhere in time and space, why did she set her story when and where she did? Also, you should understand the time period in which the play was written, which can differ from the time in which the play is set. For example, a director researching Author Miller’s 1953 play *The Crucible* would benefit by learning about the McCarthy communist hearings of the 1950s, as well as Miller’s role in those trials. This research reveals much about the themes present in the play, despite it being set in 1692.

There are many ways to do this and what you research will vary from play to play, but your research should always be useful to the production, either from a technical or acting standpoint. Do not get lost down a rabbit hole of research that is intellectually stimulating, but will not help you direct the show. If you are unsure where to begin, take a tip from Mitchell’s *The Director’s Craft* and make lists of facts and questions (11). List everything on one page that the play’s text tells you is a clear fact (for example, that act 2 begins in late December), and on another page anything that is less clear (for example, how much later does act 3 take place?). Now you know what you do not know about the show, and that is a great place to start.

Art and Music

A research method I employ is reviewing music and visual art from the time period in which the play was written, as well as when it is set. Art does not exist in a vacuum; it is always reacting to what is happening in society. Often, what one artistic medium is responding to (painting, for instance) is reflected in the other artistic media of the time, including playwriting. Keep any of this relevant visual research and share it with your design team. If possible, bring in music that, to you,

feels representative of the show. The goal is to get everyone at the first production meeting on the same page about the kind of show you are creating, and images and music can be more effective at conveying complex ideas than long speeches. In his *A Sense of Direction*, Ball suggests going so far as to pick one image that *is the play* for you, and "limit the production of the play to the colors, the textures, and the tone of that picture" (34). I use this method often to ensure that all the visual elements in my productions feel unified.

The Predominant Element

Once you have done all of this homework, you will have discovered new layers in the story that were not apparent upon first read. Now that you understand what the play is and what it is trying to communicate to an audience, it is time to focus on how your production will honor that. Some good advice about this also comes from Ball's book, where he implores directors to decide what the "predominant element" (27) of their script is. He offers five options: plot, character, theme, spectacle, and language. In essence, Ball is encouraging directors to decide what the strong point of their script is and focus on that. While plays can offer a bit of all five of these elements, especially plays by Shakespeare, knowing where your limited resources and time need to be focused before you begin production meetings is essential. For example, if your show is driven by deep character relationships, put your main effort into developing those, as opposed to, say, the show's special effects.

The more preparation you put into directing your play, the more efficient you will be during the other four steps in the creative process. Identifying the play's predominant element is especially important: this will help you make an appropriate rehearsal schedule, and will ultimately guide your artistic team to create the production you have envisioned.

Step 2: Incubation

Incubation is time spent *not* thinking about the play. During this time, your subconscious wrestles with all of your research and bounces that information off of everything you encounter in your everyday life. The goal of incubation is to make room for the third step in the creative process: a moment of *inspiration* about the production that will help to make your show better.

Everyone's incubation methods will be different, but it is most important that you give your subconscious weeks and months to incubate—not days and hours. In the professional world, a few months is considered the least amount of time a director needs to prepare for a production, and some directors begin a year ahead of their first rehearsal.

Actor Incubation

Keep in mind that your actors are also going through the creative process and will need to prepare and incubate. A big mistake that is easy for new college directors to make is calculating rehearsals based on weeks, instead of hours. A professional playhouse typically uses three to five weeks to rehearse a production, and so a lot of new directors allocate a similar number of weeks for their rehearsals. However, equity houses are utilizing seasoned professionals and forty-hour workweeks, while a faculty member will almost certainly be rehearsing for just a few hours in the evening with student performers who have a number of demands on their attention outside of the production. The latter situation leaves less room for the actors to move through their creative process, and thus demands an extension to the overall number of rehearsal weeks.

A fully professional playhouse uses between 120 and 200 rehearsal hours, depending on the size of the show. Yet, I know faculty members who have attempted difficult plays with only fifty rehearsal hours, spread out over four weeks. This small amount of time for actor incubation, inspiration, and evaluation (discussed further below) is undoubtedly a contributing factor to the sometimes wide gap in quality between professional productions and college ones. Set your cast up for success by calculating the amount of time you need using actual rehearsal hours.

Step 3: Inspiration

Inspiration is the part of the creative process where, after having filled your head with research, an idea surfaces. This idea may come almost immediately while you are researching, or many weeks later. No matter when your ideas come, put them to paper so that you will not forget them; but do not marry yourself to them right away—not every idea is a good one. But even poor ideas can lead to really useful ones, so write down all your inspirations as they come, whether they seem practical or not.

Understanding Action

While inspiration will strike about a variety of production elements, there is one specific element you should be sure to focus on—the events of the play. A play is made up of events; and events are made up of actions, performed by the characters. In a good play, these events are arranged in such a specific order that no event can happen without the previous one. The direct link between events is not always obvious, but the play is not laid out randomly, and is at its most effective when the events are fully realized, in order. If you are having trouble discovering the link between one event and the next, take a tip from David Ball's *Backwards and Forwards* (1983), where he suggests reading the play backwards to help point out the direct cause and effect of the actions that make it up (15).

Before you begin rehearsals, you should know why each scene, and the events within that scene, exists, and how the scenes serve the larger story. What information is delivered during these scenes, and how important is that to the overall plot? Not everything that happens is equally important, and knowing the difference is a good way to keep storytelling clear. For example, the scene where Hamlet kills King Claudius is arguably the most important in *Hamlet*, with all the previous plot elements leading to this culminating event. And so this killing, and the actions leading to it, should be staged in such a way that the audience understands its import.

Sometimes, why a certain scene exists and what event takes place in it is not apparent to a director; in fact, the better the writer is, the more effort is usually required to completely understand a scene. Do not give up. In my experience, the more obtuse a scene is on first read, the more important that scene tends to be, with the exchanges among characters often serving as a microcosm of the play as a whole. So keep rereading your script in the weeks leading up to rehearsal to allow inspirations to strike to deepen your understanding of the text.

Step 4: Evaluation

Evaluation is the part of the process where you throw all of your ideas against a wall and see what sticks. As mentioned earlier, not all of your inspirations based on research and careful script analysis are going to work outside of your imagination. While it is most efficient to evaluate your production ideas away from the theatre, often you will not be able to tell if an idea works until you have actors trying it out. This brings us to the subject of rehearsals and how to schedule and run them effectively.

Rehearsal Schedules

The first thing to understand about a rehearsal schedule is that it is a living, ever-changing part of the process. So do not make the entire thing at once: you cannot see the future and will not know what issues need to be addressed. Make your schedule, with your stage manager, one week at a time. The stage manager can help you watch out for actor conflicts and keep you up to speed on approaching technical deadlines. Second, do not call the entire cast to rehearsal every night; only call the actors you need. This keeps up the morale of the cast and makes it clear that you respect the actors' time. Third, try to give yourself a full week of rehearsals with all the technical elements in place. Such elements often take longer than anticipated to implement, and your actors need to adjust to working with full tech as well. For more detailed information about the rehearsal schedule and what it should and should not entail, check out Michael Bloom's *Thinking Like a Director* (2001, 210).

First Reads

Your first rehearsal will probably include a table read, where the entire cast reads the show out loud. Do not expect your cast to act during this first rehearsal because this can lead actors to make arbitrary choices before they have done the necessary script analysis, which, in turn, creates performance habits that need to be broken and replaced as their character work deepens. I ask my actors to not even read their own roles during the table read, allowing them to observe someone else speaking their lines and offering them an objective view of how their character behaves.

Do Not Be the Water

In rehearsal, the goal is to create a safe landscape for your actors to take risks in because it is in the rehearsal hall where they will be evaluating their own inspirations. To this end, you never want to win a fight with an actor about how he should explore his character. Even if you win the fight, you will still lose the war by shutting him down from making daring choices in the future. Let him try his idea and see what can be discovered. If the actor was good enough to cast, he will probably realize that his choice is not working and adjust it on his own, or better still, his choice may lead the team to a related inspiration that better serves the play, but neither of these positives can happen without allowing the actor to freely explore.

When directing actors, think of them as a rushing river trying to find the ocean. While you can guide them there using as winding or direct a path as you see fit, resist the urge to become the water yourself. If you impose a strong choice on an actor, instead of guiding him to one, know that it will fade and become mechanical, since its impetus is rooted in the actor's desire to please you rather than his own understanding of the scene.

When you do deliver notes to actors, keep them brief. It is common for new directors to over-explain their thought process, providing interesting though needless information (which comes from all of that research). For example, if the note is "cross stage left," then that is all you should say. The actor is attempting the herculean task of becoming someone other than himself, so do not bog him down with information about how the light is brighter there, or about how his cross creates a better stage picture, or about the subtextual implications that this cross brings to the scene—he just needs to cross. Years of over-talking to actors has taught me that a single, excellently crafted note of just a few seconds will go further than a lengthy explanation.

Get a Second Opinion

As you move through the rehearsal process try to keep your perspective fresh to help with your evaluation. At the beginning of each rehearsal week, try to watch your show as an audience member would see it—for the first time. To help with this, invite members of the design team and trusted colleagues to attend your rehearsals and offer feedback once you have moved into full runs. This is a common evaluation tool in the professional world, with even the best directors benefiting from a fresh set of eyes.

Step 5: Elaboration

Elaboration is also sometimes referred to as "perspiration" because it is the step in which all of the hard work lies. Elaboration encompasses everything that must be done in order to bring creative ideas to life, and the largest directorial task that this applies to is making your technical concepts (lighting, sound, and so on) work onstage.

I will address this shortly. But first, it would be misleading to leave you thinking that the creative side of your journey is at an end; the creative mind rarely operates in such a tidy fashion. As Csikszentmihalyi states: "A person who makes a creative contribution never just slogs through the long last stage of elaboration. This part of the process is constantly interrupted by periods of incubation and is punctuated by small epiphanies. Many fresh insights emerge as one is presumably just putting finishing touches on the initial insight. . . . Thus the creative process is less linear than recursive" (80). In directing terms, this translates to *never being afraid to start over*. While opening night may be tomorrow, there is still a rehearsal today where almost anything can happen. The best directing advice I ever received came to me when I was a new associate artistic director. It was close to opening night of my first production for the company, and I was relaying all the problems I was having to my artistic director: "This actor isn't responding . . . that costume is late . . . I worry this blocking isn't right," and so on. And all my boss said in return was: "Fix it!" No matter what problem I brought before him and no matter how little time remained, this was always the reply. Those two words gave me permission to break from the invisible chains of directing convention and begin anew with my actors. I called extra rehearsals to throw out old, broken ideas and try new ones—and I'll be damned if the show was not better because of it. I encourage you, new director, to never be afraid to restart this creative process.

Tech Week

One of the most laborious times for a director in the production of a play is *tech week*. This is a period of time when your technical artistic team brings its work to the stage. Be aware! It can be a depressing time for directors because acting work, which has probably been the focus for many weeks, goes out the window, replaced with light-cue misfires, speakers that mysteriously refuse to work, and props that are discovered to be all wrong. Do your best to combat this in two ways. First, have a paper tech a few days before tech week begins. A *paper tech* is when you and the design team sit with the stage manager and move through each cue (light and sound) on paper, one by one. This gets everyone on the same page about what is expected and how your stage manager will call the show. A paper tech nips a lot of would-be problems in the bud and ensures a much smoother experience once you are in the theatre. Second, plan for a cue-to-cue without actors. Getting as much tech done as possible without actors onstage will limit actor frustration and remove pressure from you to concentrate on performance.

As tech week draws to a close and opening night approaches, the demands for your time and attention will grow. Simultaneously, your production, which previously existed as an ever-morphing

idea, has now taken permanent shape (and it is rarely the exact shape you were imagining at the start of the process). All of this can cause directors to feel nervous, overwhelmed, and even want to "throw in the towel." Expect this and overcome it by focusing your work on the predominant element you decided on during the research phase. Allow what makes this play great to determine how to best spend your few remaining rehearsal hours.

Beyond the Creative Process

Step 6: Be Gracious

Once the show opens, you will engage with the press, fellow faculty, and family members, all of whom may openly critique your production. No matter what the reviews are and no matter from whom, take the advice of playwright/director David Mamet from his book *True and False* and just say "Thank you very much" (47).

Theatrical productions are never finished; at some point, the work just stops and the play opens. I encourage you to give yourself a pat on the back for accomplishing a great creative and organizational achievement. If you are unhappy with elements of the final product, try to figure out what you can do next time to create a more satisfactory result. Do not blame your cast or crew. And when speaking with others, focus on what went right about the process. Telling audiences and critics how certain actors were better in rehearsal or that some technical elements were never fully realized is rude, will reflect poorly on you, and could keep others from wanting to work with you again.

To Review

When you research early, give you and your cast enough time to have good ideas and understand the play, rehearse effectively, and stay focused on what makes the play great, you can be confident that you are producing the best show you can. Are there other ways to direct? Certainly. However, these principles are a sound starting place for any beginner. And the guidelines I have laid out will definitely make for an easier time of directing than if you were to go blindly into rehearsals with a loose idea of learning on the job.

I hope that all new faculty directors take the task seriously and view their productions as more than just a place where students can practice their craft in front of an audience. As I stated at the opening of this Notes, directing is both a great responsibility and a great gift. It is a chance to teach audiences about themselves and the world they live in. And that is an opportunity that any creative artist should jump at.

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