

# Directors Anyone?

This is an article promoting the book *Notes on Directing*. All theatre students can learn a lot from these mistakes. When acting students "direct" each other or give each advice about scenes or monologues, I often hear them giving emotional directions.

## "The 12 Biggest Mistakes Directors Make"

by Frank Hauser and Russell Reich, co-authors of *Notes on Directing*

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RCR Creative Press, New York, New York

Learning from one's own mistakes is an important component of getting better at any craft. Better still is avoiding the mistakes in the first place — recognizing where others have commonly stumbled and then detouring around.

Here, then, in no particular order — gleaned from observation and from hard-earned personal pain from which we want to spare all others — is a compilation of common errors in action or perception committed by directors of all stripes...

### **Giving emotional directions**

Imagine yourself as an actor being told to "be angry," "be disappointed," "be sad," or even "be awestruck." Is there a greater guarantee of an insincere result?

Instead, get the actor's attention off himself. An action is not an emotion. Give him something fun and interesting to *do*. Occupy him. Vividly describe the circumstances he's in and the challenges he faces. Set a goal for the actor. Give him a stake in what's happening on stage.

Paul Newman once said that the best direction he ever got was, "Crowd the guy."

### **Applying style without reason or intention**

Elements of style are best applied with intention, purpose, and meaning — not as ends in themselves.

A character in a Restoration drama, for instance, bows with open palms extended away from his body to demonstrate he has no weapons. Ironically, this may also indicate he still wants them, needs them, or has them hidden somewhere, so beneath the benign courtesy lies a simmering threat. A woman waving a perfumed handkerchief desperately as she speaks does so to hide her atrocious breath. Without intention, style is empty.

## **Criticizing and bullying actors**

Too many directors choose shouting or sarcasm or, worst of all, imitation to cover up their own ignorance about what to do or say. They figure if they're intimidating enough it will keep everyone on their toes. While this technique will often get a laugh, it will just as surely make an enemy.

It's all-too-easy for an actor to feel he is getting it all *wrong*. Rather than criticizing or controlling through intimidation, try sincerely praising actors early and often. Instead of correcting them all the time, get into the habit of frequently telling them what they are doing *right*. Francis Ford Coppola reportedly directs this way; he only says what he likes: "That was terrific!" or "Let's see more of that!" Let that be your model.

Also, be sure to tell your actors whenever they look good on stage. They'll trust you more knowing you are concerned with their appearance and dignity, and it will free them to go about their duties with less self-consciousness.

## **Failing to include all the actors**

Surely you know that in the theatre, silence is invariably taken for disapproval. Be sure to include every single member of the cast in your note sessions.

And when you make a change, it is not enough simply to discuss a new idea or change prior to performing it. Even the smallest business must be walked and spoken through on stage and in character prior to running it in front of an audience. You cannot know all the possible consequences in advance. Good actors do an enormous amount of internal work based on the circumstances you and the script have set up. If you change those circumstances you must give ALL the actors the opportunity to adjust. And don't forget to include the stage manager, who will likely be responsible for directing replacement actors and, in your absence, ensuring the show runs as you intend it to.

## **Being lazy**

No actor likes a lazy director, or an ignorant one. You should certainly know the meaning (and the pronunciation) of every word, every reference, and every foreign phrase.

Also, be decisive. As the director, you have three weapons: "Yes," "No," and "I don't know." Use them. Don't dither; you can always change your mind later. Nobody minds that. What they do mind is the two-minute agonizing when all the actor has asked is, "Do I get up now?"

## **Using nudity to indicate inner nakedness and vulnerability**

Some sincere directors seem to be addicted to getting actors naked on stage, all the while denying the prurient interest of it all. It's all very self-justified, flimsily defended as art.

But beware the naked truth. Earnest nudity imposed by sincere directors is rarely the reliable conveyer of inner emotional nakedness and vulnerability they suppose it is.

More typically, when the skin makes its appearance, the audience is ripped from the world of the play along with the clothing. The audience is deposited in a prurient inner world far from the plot. Their eyes no longer watch the eyes, mouths, and hands of the performers, but are diverted, no, *riveted* to other body parts. The audience and the story often become lost to each other.

Mandating the revelation of real life on stage *and* the repeatability of dictated, on-the-nose moments

You can't expect both. If you have skilled actors at work there will be some variations moment to moment and performance to performance that make it real and therefore subject to change. Expect and accept that.

Audiences come to the theatre because live performance -- at its best -- can make us feel more connected and alive, as if we are part of the important and real events occurring on stage *right now*. As in sports, it should feel as if anything could happen at any moment.

Such real and true moments can be a bit messy, unpredictable, wonderful, spontaneous, dangerous...and very difficult to repeat.

Rather than exerting your control over it all, dedicate yourself to keeping the life between actors alive. Don't micromanage. Decide what you will allow to live and flourish without all your potentially damaging or inhibiting intervention. As Elia Kazan said, "Before you do anything, see what talent does."

## **Using technical solutions when acting solutions will do**

The problem here is spoiling the audience. Hydraulics and turntables can solve certain problems, albeit in a kind of self-conscious and self-referential "look what we can do" kind of way.

Spectacle has its value, but when we wean the audience from simple human drama, we commit a kind of suicide. We disable the audience, and ourselves, from recognizing basic person-to-person connections, disconnections, and reconnections. It becomes instead all about the eye rather than the ear, about cleverness and money rather than wisdom and kindness. Remember that the audience has come to the theatre to *believe*, to respond to the magical words, "Once upon a time..." not to admire a laser show.

## **“Concepting” the play**

Directors need to stop coming up with "concepts" that mean omitting passages which don't fit, altering an emphasis for the sake of novelty, or twisting the writer's overt intention in order to bring out some hypothetical Inner Meaning.

In other words, directors should be more honest. Lloyd Richards said that if you continually find yourself itching to make changes to a script, consider whether you should give up directing and take up playwriting.

The current fondness for updating texts, Shakespeare, the Greeks, is basically a form of snobbery: "How amusing! They're quite like us!" As if there were anything to be said for dragging Medea or Hamlet into our appalling time. Contrariwise, if the plays are well presented in their own period we have the far more fascinating and educative experience of time travel, going back across the centuries and finding out how like them *we* are.

## **Thinking good art is whatever the audience cannot understand**

Too many audiences blame themselves for not following a story when their negative experiences may in fact be the result of directing that undervalues clarity. This misguided approach grows from a romantic and narcissistic notion that great ideas and those who think them are valued by the degree to which they're *misunderstood*. There are historical precedents for the suffering genius, but inverting this phenomenon and deliberately inducing confusion for self-promotional purposes is hardly the route to winning over an audience. Confused audiences may be lost forever, thinking theatre and art in general are not for them. This is a crime.

## **Neglecting the audience**

The object of the director's attention is, lamentably, often not the crowd in the seats, but someone else: the director's idol, a former teacher, colleagues, parents, critics... The real audience, of course, is the one showing up. They're paying money; they're in the theatre; they are ready for an extraordinary experience. Scratch on a director, though, and you'll often find beneath the surface that the last thing he or she wants is a relationship with this audience. There's a slight self-distancing that occurs. When directors do this, they are not likely to want to give much of themselves to the audience at all. Directors need to confront their personal feelings about their audience. To succeed, a director must love the audience and want only to give to those in it.

## **Lacking self-awareness and acceptance**

Young directors often don't know or accept themselves. This leads them to imitate the most notable stylist or theorist they can find...Brecht, Derrida...thinking they will inherit that style and the critical notoriety that goes with it, without realizing the unique experiences and struggles that the idols had to endure to become who they became. Robert Wilson's life, for

example, isn't mine and isn't yours. His unique approach, for better or for worse, arose out of his experience and unique personality and inclinations, which can't really be imitated productively. Better for the young director to develop a sense of legitimacy to his or her own experience and inclinations than try to borrow that legitimacy from someone else. Obviously, find out how *you* work best and do that: paraphrasing, playing animals, improv (short for "improvement," not "improvidence").

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*The book Notes On Directing, co-written by Frank Hauser and Russell Reich, reveals the rare artistic secrets of the director's craft. Drawing on years of training, decades of experience, and the distilled wisdom of leading practitioners, Notes On Directing is filled with enduring good advice expressed in assertive, no-nonsense language. With the impact of a privileged apprenticeship to a great master, it delivers what every director needs to know — and what every writer, actor, and audience member wants them to know.*

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