

3 Directing

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Of all of the collaborators who create live theatre, the stage director's contribution may be the least visible and least understood. The playwright's words can be heard or read. The producer raises and spends money. Designers create costumes, scenery, lights, and sound. Actors create a direct and immediate relationship with the spectators. All of these are easily visible and apprehended as separate components. The title of director *sounds* important. But what exactly does he or she do?

Simply put, the director is the "captain" of the collaborative team, responsible for all artistic aspects of the production. He is the person who makes sure that all of the pieces are put together to make a coherent, effective, and entertaining artistic whole. Above all, the director provides the overall artistic vision for the production, organizing and leading the entire collaborative process to ensure that the production is artistically unified according to this vision. In this capacity, the director stands in for the audience throughout the preparation and rehearsal of the production; he is the spectator's eye.

If the playwright is the author of the words on the page, we can consider the director as *the author of the production*. He does not "author" its *pieces*, but rather uses them to "write" the staged production. While some directors are more authoritarian than others, the best encourage the full creative powers of all of the artists involved. The collaborative director leads, coaches, encourages, cajoles, and mentors, but trusts and respects the artistic processes of each of the teammates. The collaborative director does not force results, but guides the process according to his or her vision for the production.

In practical terms, the director's main functions can be broken down as follows:

1. Interpreting the script and developing a vision or concept for the production.
2. Working with the design team to develop the visual, oral, and spatial world of the production.
3. Casting the actors.
4. Rehearsing the actors.
5. Integrating all of the elements into a unified whole.

The Development of the Modern Director

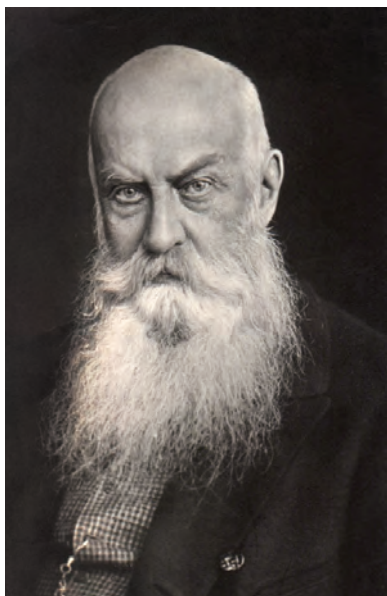
Directing as a completely separate function is a relatively recent development in the history of the theatre. In all theatrical traditions, someone has usually been on hand to supervise the process of preparing a play for performance, running rehearsals, and coordinating the various elements that make up the theatrical event. Often the playwright or a leading actor carried out these tasks. Rehearsals were often short and cursory. Even when a person was specifically designated as being in charge, his or her duties were much more executive than artistic.

Most historians locate the emergence of the modern theatre director with the rise of realism in the late nineteenth century. This took place in the context of rapidly changing social and artistic norms. However, some of the changes (both social and theatrical) associated with the birth of modern directing had been evolving for some time. Beginning in the eighteenth century, powerful actor-managers such as Britain's David Garrick (1717–1779) effected great changes in production and acting styles, calling for longer and more thorough rehearsals and greater attention to detail in all aspects of production. But for most actor-managers, the primary concern was to use plays as vehicles for their talents, not to faithfully execute the playwright's intentions. They were actors first and objective interpreters second.

When pressed, most historians will name Georg II, the Duke of the German state of Saxe-Meiningen (1826–1914), and his collaborator Ludwig Chronek as the originators of modern directing. Unlike the actor-managers, Saxe-Meiningen and Chronek neither wrote nor acted in the

productions they created, but supervised the proceedings from the viewpoint of the audience. They were meticulous in their preparations, and each production was the result of a strong artistic vision. Beginning with their tours of Europe in the 1870s, the Meiningen players became famous for their historical accuracy and attention to detail. They were particularly lauded for the intricacy and realism of their crowd scenes.

In the late nineteenth century, great social changes blasted conventions and inspired great changes in art, including theatre. While the Meiningen players performed mostly classics and heroic melodramas, a new form of drama arrived in Europe. Developing from a concern with social issues, this new drama sought to portray the truth of human behavior and interaction. It came to be known as realism and its first great dramatists were the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen and the Russian Anton Chekhov. Inspired by the work of Saxe-Meiningen and motivated to create new theatrical methods to bring the plays of Chekhov to life, Russian actor/director Konstantine Stanislavsky put the actor's truthfulness at the center of his theatrical practices. He and other directors of realistic drama understood the importance of detail, specificity, and the absence of false notes on the stage.



The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in 1914.

The Director and the Script: A Continuum

It is the primary function of the modern director to interpret the script and to develop an artistic vision or **production concept**. This fundamental approach based on their reaction to the script varies along a continuum. Using the faithful approach, the playwright is treated as the production's



In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, first presented in 1604, the Duke of Vienna is disgusted with the moral decay he sees with his people and pretends to take a leave of absence. While in disguise, he observes how his second-in-command, Lord Angelo, is corrupted by power. Director Ralf Remshardt moved the action to the 1960s *Mad Men* era in order to make the forces of control and freedom more accessible to a contemporary audience. Executing his concept, set designer Jamie Frank provided a set with a corporate space above and a background of advertising slogans below. The costume design by Erica Bascom provided a sharp divide between the bohemian citizens of Vienna and the suited figures that rule them. Photos by Jamie Frank.

primary creator. The director serves the dramatist and attempts to realize the play as literally as possible. Using this approach, the director retains the time and place exactly as described and follows all stage directions indicated by the playwright as closely as possible.

The translator approach is probably the most common in today's theatre. The director honors the spirit of the play as received but may depart from many of the specifics. Usually the original dialogue is left intact, but stage directions, the time and place of the action, and many other details may be altered. Productions using this approach are often based on a director's strong vision of the play. In this way, the production finds its own unique style.

Auteur is a French word meaning "author." In this approach, the script serves as raw material that the director feels free to shape and reshape according to his or her artistic intentions. At its most extreme, this approach uses the play as a jumping-off point, adding, subtracting, and rearranging text at will. Bear in mind that what we have illustrated is a continuum, and that the work of any particular director may be located at any point.

A Process for Directing

Although the directing process may widely vary depending on the material and the director's approach, most directors cover the same bases. The steps in the process, as described next, usually overlap to some degree. For example, the wise director is continuously analyzing the play in response to discoveries made throughout the process.

Analyzing and Interpreting the Play

While the director is ultimately responsible for the interpretation taken by the production, *all* of the collaborators we are discussing must engage in a close analysis of the script. In order to engage and utilize the creative powers of the design team, many directors involve them in the early stages of interpretation. Therefore, the earliest **design meetings** comprise a dialogue about the play. The discussion of the text led by the director must include practical questions. What are the given circumstances in this play? What is the play's central action? What is the main conflict? Which character is the play's protagonist and what is he or she fighting for? The director must lead a detailed analysis of the play's structure, the

characters in the play, the play's language, and the play's themes. What do we want the audience to go away *feeling*? What do we want them to go away *thinking* about? What does the play mean?

The discussion must also cover the play's genre, mood, and style. What is the world of this play? Is it primarily comic, tragic, dark, or light? Is it primarily realistic, or not? How do the characters fit in this world? This in-depth critical inquiry into the play leads the process into the next steps. Without a firm grasp on the play and a clearly defined creative vision, it will be difficult for the director and his or her team to maintain a steady course.

The Production Concept

The exploration of these questions leads the director to an interpretation, vision, or concept. The concept is often articulated in terms of an overriding metaphor. It can be articulated in the form of a verbal phrase ("a chess game" for *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Christopher Hampton), a painting or picture (Munch's "The Scream" for *Marisol* by Jose Rivera), or even a physical object (an early typewriter for *Machinal* by Sophie Treadwell). Concept metaphors can be augmented by verbal descriptions of the world of the play, by a picture or series of pictures, by sounds and music, or by a combination of these elements. However the concept is expressed, it needs to be vivid, motivating, and clear enough to put the whole team on the same page. The concept statement should also communicate the director's approach along the faithful-translator-auteur continuum, and determine such questions as the time and place of the action.

Working with Designers

Next, armed with the production concept, the designers explore the fundamental questions that will help the team develop the visual, aural, and spatial world of the play. These questions are based on the fundamental elements of design—color, texture, line, shape, mass, and rhythm. The members of the team also discuss practical and technical considerations—how many doors are needed, whether the radio needs to work, or how much movement the costumes allow. At each subsequent meeting, these artists present their written or visualized ideas to the director and to the other designers. The designs for the production thus develop as a give and take among the whole creative group.

Casting

Good casting is vital to the production's success and will make the director's job in rehearsal smooth and productive. Conversely, mistakes in casting can irretrievably harm a show. Therefore, it is imperative that the director have a firm grasp of the characters' personalities, their physical characteristics, and how they interrelate. The director should have a strong image of the characters but also remain open to what the actors who audition have to offer.



These are examples of headshots, representative photos that actors give to casting agents and directors. A résumé listing is attached to the back showing acting experience and special skills.

Rehearsals

The specifics of the rehearsal process and schedule may differ from director to director. They may also differ from production to production depending on the particular demands of the material and the length of the rehearsal period. The essential elements, however, are common to most productions. Although the order and duration of each element may differ, smart directors understand that, like design, rehearsal is a collaborative process.



In order for directors to tell actors where to move on stage in rehearsals, they must have a shared map to work from. A director might tell an actor originally standing “up left” to cross to “right center,” pause, and then end up “down center.” In order to make the process easier, blocking is given from the actor’s perspective.