Directing Plays, Directing People:

A Collaborative Art
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by Mary B. Robinson
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For Erik and Christopher, with love and gratitude.
MARY B. ROBINSON

In a career spanning more than three decades, Mary B. Robinson has directed more than sixty theater productions in New York City and around the country, and has taught directing at both the undergraduate and graduate level. In New York, she has directed at Manhattan Theatre Club (world premiere of Jeffrey Hatcher’s *Three Viewings* with Buck Henry), Second Stage (revivals of Michael Weller’s *Moonchildren* and Lanford Wilson’s *Lemon Sky*, with Jeff Daniels); Ensemble Studio Theatre (Jaclyn Reingold’s *String Fever*, with Cynthia Nixon); and Cherry Lane (Irene O’Garden’s *Women on Fire* with Judith Ivey). Her production of Barbara Lebow’s *A Shayna Maidel* ran for fifteen months Off Broadway at the Westside Arts Theatre. Regionally, she has directed such plays as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Misanthrope*, *A Doll’s House*, *Loot* by Joe Orton, *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel, *Third* by Wendy Wasserstein, *Dinner with Friends* by Donald Margulies, *This is Our Youth* by Kenneth Lonergan, *Angels Fall* and *Serenading Louie* by Lanford Wilson, and Edward Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo*, at theaters such as Arena Stage, Philadelphia Theatre Company, Seattle Rep, Actors Theatre of Louisville, South Coast Rep, Pittsburgh Public Theater, A Contemporary Theatre, Milwaukee Rep, Cincinnati Playhouse, Hartford Stage Company (where she was Associate Artistic Director), and Philadelphia Drama Guild, where she was Artistic Director for five years.

She was the first recipient of the Alan Schneider Award in 1987,
a national award in honor of the late director; she was nominated for a Drama Desk Award in 1986 for her production of Lemon Sky; and she won Philadelphia’s Barrymore Award in 1995 for Of Mice and Men. She is one of fifty directors profiled in the recent book American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century.

For the past fifteen years, she has taught directing at New York University (where she heads the undergraduate directing program at Playwrights Horizons Theater School), and Brooklyn College’s MFA Program. She has directed many student productions, including Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, Richard III, Troilus and Cressida and The Tempest, and Chekhov’s Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard and The Seagull, as well as Clifford Odets’s Golden Boy, Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, and Alice Childress’s Wedding Band, at New York University’s Graduate Acting Program, the Juilliard School, Rutgers University, Brooklyn College, and Playwrights Horizons Theater School (NYU).

For many years she was a board member of the labor union Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, playwright Erik Brogger, and their son, Christopher.
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Foreword

I’ve known Mary Robinson for 25 years. I’ve acted in three plays she directed. A couple of years ago, she gave me a draft of this book to read. I opened it and I promptly devoured it. What a thrill to discover that my friend who is such a gifted director turns out to be a thoroughly engaging writer as well.

Anyone who is interested in how theater gets made should read this book. Most especially anyone who wants to direct theater should read it. Using the same kind of precision and attention to detail that make her productions so very fine, Mary takes you step by step through the director’s process.

You feel like a fly on the wall as she finds her script, collaborates with her designers, casts her actors, confers with her playwright, runs the laboratory that is her rehearsal room, and at last leads her company into the theater through tech, right up to opening night and beyond. Along the way, she pithily quotes from actors, playwrights, stage managers, and designers who help illuminate her points or add a further dimension to what she’s saying.

I gained many new insights about how a director does her work, but just as often I found Mary articulating things that I knew deep down about what we theater people are up to but didn’t know that I knew until she said them.

I think this is an especially heartening book for fledgling wanna-be directors because of the picture Mary paints of herself as a young person struggling to get into show business. She is at once so eager, so determined, so enthusiastic, and so clueless. She re-tells with humor and pathos her early struggles, miscalculations, and disappointments. We watch tremulously as this indomitable, newly-hatched chick just keeps putting one foot in front of the other until all at once she starts to get somewhere. Mary gives a lot of useful advice not just about directing but about the hard job of becoming a director in the first place.

If you haven’t read this book yet, you have a treat waiting for you. If you have read it before though, I’m not surprised to find you here again. This is the kind of book that isn’t meant for reading just once. It’s a book a director should keep permanently on the shelf to return to when he’s stuck or when she needs to be inspired. It conveys so comprehensively what it is directors do and how it is they do it. The best thing of course would be to have Mary on-hand to advise you. But if you can’t have that, having her book is the next best thing.

~Cynthia Nixon
Standing in the back of the small college theater on the opening night of Chekhov’s one-act *The Marriage Proposal*, the first play I ever directed, everything clicked for me. I had a sudden revelation that I hope many people, in all walks of life, have the good fortune to feel: *This is what I want to do for the rest of my life.*

But *do what* exactly? How had I gotten from my decision to direct this play to the end result in front of me, with the audience responding warmly to my trio of actors as they romped their way through Chekhov’s farce? I really didn’t know—I had flown by the seat of my pants for the entire process. As I found out a few months later when I tackled Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, just because I had gotten lucky the first time didn’t mean I had any idea of what I was doing as a director. I didn’t know the answer to a fundamental question: What does a director do, and how does she do it?

In fact, I’d already done some directing many years before, though I wouldn’t have called it “directing” at the time. When the neighborhood kids and I put on skits for our parents, I took it upon myself to give instructions about who should enter from where and how we should get from one skit to another. “Why are you telling everyone else what to do?” one of my friends asked me accusingly. I blurted out the first response that came to mind: “Well, somebody’s got to!”—a true enough description of directing, but, as I began to realize in college, there’s more to it than that.

Theater had been a part of my life from my earliest memories. My mother was a passionate theatergoer, who took us to every theater experience she could find: local amateur productions and touring shows that came through nearby Philadelphia, Broadway hits and Off Broadway productions on our annual outing to New York City.

My mother’s enthusiasm for theatergoing was infectious. She relished every moment, from ordering the tickets, to talking about the production after seeing it, to reading the program cover-to-cover before going to sleep that night. “Look at those sour faces,” she said disapprovingly once about an elderly couple in the audience as we waited for a production to begin. “Why aren’t they excited to be at the theater?”

As an adolescent who loved acting, I encountered a director whose example I still treasure today: Lois Goutman, an inspiring and charismatic woman who’d toured professionally as an actress with a Shakespeare company, before leaving it to start a family and teach at the high school I attended. She
was drawn to an ambitious repertoire of Euripides, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Wilder, Ionesco, Beckett, and Stoppard—playwrights who all felt familiar to me a few years later when I began to direct. She directed their work with lucid simplicity, and the resulting productions had a clarity and passion that rivaled many of the ones I was in at college. To the extent that I had a role model as a first-time director, she was it.

My high school theater friends and I thrived in our tight-knit community. We not only acted in all the plays but also painted scenery, collected props, and made the costumes. At the Thursday night dress rehearsal, we applied thick “professional” makeup: orange greasepaint, brown eyebrow pencil, and (if we were playing an older role) silver hairspray that caked onto our hair and probably coated our lungs. We listened to Mrs. Goutman’s pep talk before our Friday opening, as she told us that if we reached our audience there would be no more wonderful feeling in the world. She was right. After our Saturday night closing, we gathered at the local coffee shop (still in our makeup and silver hair) and joked and laughed and reveled in the experience, until someone’s parents arrived to drive us all home.

At school on Monday, exhilaration gave way to letdown, as we resumed our real lives and made up the homework we’d missed. But we still had our collective memories and our memorabilia—programs we’d signed for each other, faded flowers from opening night, and photographs taken at dress rehearsal. Most of all, we had each other and the next production to look forward to and plan together. Under Mrs. Goutman’s tutelage, I first experienced the essence of collaboration in theater—the joy and trust and shared passion of collective storytelling.

But her magical example didn’t help me much when I turned from acting to directing midway through college and then decided to pursue directing professionally. By then, I’d taken courses in directing and mounted several more productions, so I had a better grasp of what a director does—but how she goes about doing it was much more complicated. My questions kept multiplying. Is a director a visionary leader, an auteur, or is she more like the coach of a team? How does she work with her artistic collaborators—designers, actors, and playwright? Does she need to have an inside grasp of what they each do, or can she direct them from an outside perspective? And how does she get started in the first place?

This was the question most on my mind as I finished college and made my way to New York City as an aspiring director. How does a director...
demonstrate that she can direct? An actor auditions for a role, a playwright has a script to send around, and a designer has a portfolio to show. A director only has her previous productions and her reputation, which I didn't have yet. I was caught in the catch-22 familiar to many young directors.

While directing plays that I essentially self-produced in very-far-Off Broadway spaces, I tried to find answers to all these questions by keeping copious journals about my work and by devouring books by directors who had gone before me. Shakespearean director Margaret Webster’s delightful autobiographies gave me hope that it was possible for a woman director to have a life in the professional theater, even though her second book was ironically titled Don’t Put Your Daughter on the Stage. She had directed the Shakespeare company that Mrs. Goutman had toured with in the 1950s, and, when I found out that she had died a few years previously, I felt as if I had lost a close older friend. Group Theatre director Harold Clurman’s book On Directing provided nuts-and-bolts guidance on the craft and terminology behind the work, and on breaking down and analyzing a play’s text. Clurman was in his eighties at the time and no longer directing, though I once had the thrill of showing him to his seat at the Manhattan Theatre Club where I was ushering.

But like many theater people of my generation, my primary inspiration was Peter Brook, whose ground-breaking production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream I’d seen while I was in high school. Now I read his book The Empty Space repeatedly, underlining different passages in a new color each time, and tried to apply his revelatory precepts to my own work. One passage I kept coming back to spoke of a fundamental truth about directing: that the act of making theater has to be based on constant discovery in order to be alive, and that the theater experience is an act of shared discovery, as Brook puts it, between all the theater-makers, and eventually the audience as well.

I saw several productions a week, from early work by the Wooster Group and Mabou Mines, to standing room on Broadway for $6. At the WPA Theatre, I saw a production of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, adapted by Edward Albee from Carson McCullers’s novella, and experienced a sense of life and connection that I realized I wanted to evoke in audiences myself, through my own work. I felt a profound empathy with the play’s marginalized, oddball characters, because the production had been so perfectly cast, and because each actor inhabited his or her character so completely. And this almost spiritual feeling of being in communion with
others extended not only to the actors and my fellow audience members while I sat in the theater, but even to the strangers around me when I took the bus home that evening.

In an effort to grasp how to evoke this magic through my actors, I contacted the production’s director, Stuart White, and asked if I could assist him on his next project. Stuart cast his productions meticulously, never settling for an actor who was just “good enough,” but searching for weeks, even months, for those actors who could truly move him with their personal connection to a character. He created an environment in rehearsal in which experimentation and risk-taking were encouraged, and he let the actors’ performances evolve organically over time, not worrying about results until as late as possible. But though I was able to put some of these lessons to use as I cast my productions with care and created a good atmosphere in rehearsal, I still couldn’t find the balance between giving the actors leeway for too long and expecting results too soon.

My consciousness of a director’s essential collaborators expanded beyond the actors when I began to encounter living playwrights for the first time. To get my foot in the door at the non-profit theaters where I hoped to direct, I read manuscripts of new plays submitted to them. Eventually, I landed a part-time job in the literary office at Circle Repertory Company, helping to schedule and cast the new play readings the theater mounted every week. I listened to the post-reading critiques led by artistic director Marshall Mason and gradually began to venture my own thoughts in these open discussions. I observed the development of new work by some of the theater’s playwrights, including Lanford Wilson, whose beautiful play Talley’s Folly, directed by Marshall, moved from the intimate Circle Rep space to Broadway, and won the Pulitzer Prize. But though this experience gave me a hunger to work on new plays as well as classics, I still didn’t grasp the playwriting process from the writer’s perspective.

Designers were another group of theater artists whose work inspired me but whose process I found mystifying. I got the chance to observe a director collaborating with major designers when I became the literary manager of the Hartford Stage Company, where the very young actor-turned-classical-director Mark Lamos had just taken over as artistic director. Although Mark was definitely a “visionary” director, unlike the more coach-like Stuart White, his collaborations with designers always evolved beyond his own early ideas. He and his designers approached a Shakespeare play like a brand new one, reading it closely with no assumptions, having
in-depth discussions about it, and eventually coming up with a bold central design idea that illuminated the world of the play. But, as with actors and playwrights, simply watching a director collaborate with designers didn’t mean I could do it effectively myself yet.

It took me many years to realize that the reason these collaborations were so elusive to me is that there’s no “one-size-fits-all” approach to directing. It’s a process that has to be created anew each time, based on the play’s requirements and the other theater artists involved—actors, designers, and playwright. And the process is constantly fluid: the play keeps revealing its hidden mysteries the deeper we get into it, and each theater artist needs a different kind of guidance from me every step of the way. But while I have to be a sensitive and flexible collaborator, I also have to provide strong leadership that gives everyone a sense of confidence that we’ll get there in the end. And I have to make sure that we do get there—although none of us knows where exactly “there” is when we set out.

But while I began to embrace the uncertainty I felt whenever I started a new project with a new set of collaborators, I still found it hard to grasp my relationship with the audience. I never felt I knew who they were or how to communicate with them, other than by simply directing the strongest, most compelling production I possibly could. This lack of connection to the people for whom the work was intended began to make me feel rootless, as my freelance career took me all over the country. I longed to start an ongoing dialogue with an audience as artistic director of a regional theater, which had been my long-term goal ever since I listened to non-profit theater pioneers Zelda Fichandler, Arvin Brown, and Michael Kahn at a college symposium called Regional Theater: Is it for You?—and decided that it most definitely was.

So I was thrilled to take on the job of artistic director of the Philadelphia Drama Guild, a former community theater which had turned professional twenty years previously. It was considered the city’s flagship non-profit theater, with a large state-of-the-art space and a subscription audience of many thousands. But though my five years there were artistically rewarding and our productions were generally well-received, I still found it difficult to connect with our audiences at a deeper level. Worse, I began to realize that I rarely felt that vibrant electricity and deep communion with others at our productions, which I long to experience myself as an audience member.

A big obstacle to this was our space, the 900-seat Zellerbach Theater on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. This theater was exciting
to be in when we had a show that sold out, such as our productions of plays by Shakespeare or August Wilson, but depressing to attend when it was only half filled, with a respectable-sized audience of 450 surrounded by 450 empty seats. “The energy from the stage drains off to the sides, because the theater is so wide,” veteran artistic director Zelda Fichandler observed when she visited. “The theater’s design is preventing the actor-audience connection from catching fire the way it should.”

But I also think, in hindsight, that I relied too much on the “If you build it, they will come” school of thought, believing that strong work would draw people to us in and of itself. It didn’t—or it did, but not in sufficient numbers. Our subscription audience felt vast to me as I tried to reach out to them in all the standard ways, but they weren’t vast enough to keep the theater afloat. Single ticket sales, though often good, were unreliable. Our cash-flow problems eventually closed the theater.

Ironically, I had a much stronger sense of the community the theater had generated after it closed, when individual audience members wrote to me to express what our work had meant to them. “We have a heartful of memories from your tenure here,” said one; while another began with the phrase, “I have been a participant at your theater...” and went on to describe her relationship with our productions. As I read these, I was much more tangibly aware than I had been of a group of individual participants making up the audience, instead of the seemingly monolithic mass I encountered at post-show discussions. Directing a play, I’d come to realize, means being the leader of a group as a whole, but also having strong one-on-one relationships with each person involved. I think now that if I had spent more time and energy getting to know many of the distinct individuals who made up our audience they would have felt an increased sense of connection and community—as would I.

My need to be part of a community through my work led me next to teaching, which also suited my new role as a parent. And this led me right back to my initial question: What does a director do and how does she do it? My student directors at New York University and Brooklyn College were just as eager for definitive answers as I had been at their age, and I found it hard to convey to them just how complex and fluid it all is. I struggled to articulate the more intuitive aspects of directing, the nuances of each of a director’s working relationships, and the balance between collaboration and leadership. So I began to write, at first for students and aspiring theater artists, but eventually for a wider audience of theater lovers as well as
As I wrestled with these questions about a director’s role and identity, another one occurred to me: Does being a woman color my perceptions as a director in some way? In my early years, I resented this question and gave the standard answer: “I’m a director who happens to be a woman.” Many years and many productions later, I feel much more accepting of the fact that, of course, it does color my perceptions—as do many other things about me, such as being a parent. The individual way each of us as theater artists perceives the world is one of the most valuable things we bring into the process, and is something to be embraced, not evaded.

A perceptive theater critic at the Philadelphia Inquirer once observed that it’s apparent in my productions that what interests me most are the relationships between the characters—something I hadn’t realized until he pointed it out. And it’s also what fascinates me about the process of making theater: the highly collaborative nature of it, those intense and ephemeral connections we forge with each other as we grope our way forward, searching for the most exciting, compelling, and memorable way to bring a play to life for its audience—our ultimate collaborators.

Looking for a way to bring those other “characters” in this story to life—the playwrights, designers, actors, artistic directors, stage managers, and dramaturgs on whose work mine depends—I had in-depth talks with more than thirty theater artists who offered their own perspectives on the collaborative process. I found the stimulating discussions we had incredibly helpful and illuminating, and the chance to catch up with old friends and colleagues was one of the most enjoyable aspects of the writing process. These theater artists have spent their lives working on and Off Broadway and in non-profit regional theaters, often teaching and training the next generation as well, enriching the lives of many thousands of people through their exceptional work.

I decided not to interview other directors for this book since I wanted to express a personal and highly subjective point of view—my own. But I’ve tried to make it clear that this is not the final word on my own or anyone else’s process: it’s simply how I happen to approach theater-making at this time in my life, after years of trial-and-error, and it comes from wanting to create the kind of theater that I respond to as an audience member.

Most of all, I wanted to explore the question, What does a director do, and how does she do it? as vividly as I could. Since that moment at my first production when I realized I was a director, I haven’t found anything
in life (except having a family) that’s as much fun, as absorbing, and as life-affirming as directing plays. But I still don’t have a definitive answer to the question. I hope I never do.
Play and Playwright
Chapter One

The Play Chooses Me

“It’s my conviction that this play must be done today, and without that conviction I can’t do it.” – Peter Brook

FUNDAMENTAL RELATIONSHIP

Back when I was an eager young director looking for my next project at the Hartford Stage, I read the stage adaptation of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and was bowled over by it. I felt as if it reached out and grabbed me, demanding that I create its world and tell its story. It was as if the play chose me rather than vice versa—a sensation I’ve heard many other directors describe as well. It became the top priority in my life from the time I read it until it opened eight months later. I threw myself into the pre-production, design, casting, and rehearsal processes, caring desperately about every aspect of it, longing to move other people as much as I’d been moved by the play when I first read it. Though I could tell it was reaching people during previews, I still felt sick to my stomach on opening night because it wasn’t quite everything I’d hoped it would be, though it came very close.

About five years later, I had the opposite sensation at an opening: a bewildering sense of detachment as I watched my production of Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The acting was strong, the design was beautiful, and it was clear and well-staged. But the production lacked something essential that I hadn’t brought to it: the director’s passionate need to bring the play to life.

A prestigious regional theater had chosen the play for its acting company and offered me the job of director, but I hadn’t cared for it when I read it. The story, the characters, and the world of the play didn’t speak to me, although the idea of directing a Tennessee Williams play was appealing. Because I needed the job and the credential on my resume, I said yes, reasoning to myself that I’d grow to love it when working on it. But that didn’t happen. Instead, I felt as if I was punching a time clock
while I methodically conducted design meetings and ran rehearsals. The production was solid, audiences and critics were polite, but people weren’t moved by it. I’d had a couple of huge, disastrous failures by that time, but somehow this was much more depressing. With those fiascos, there was passion and heartbreak and anger, but my feeling now was flat and tepid. The production was uninspired because I hadn’t been inspired by the play.

I learned from that experience that my fundamental relationship as a director is with the play itself. The whole complex structure of collaborations is built on that foundation, and if it’s shaky or hollow my work with everyone else will suffer as a result. I can’t inspire my collaborators—actors, designers, and eventually the audience—if I don’t draw continual inspiration from the play.

Of course, with both those productions, I started off in the enviable position of being offered a play to direct in the first place. But one big difference was that at the Hartford Stage, I would have either directed Of Mice and Men or another play of my choosing, since I was on the artistic staff and shared the responsibility of selecting the season. At the other theater, if I hadn’t said yes to the project, it would have gone to someone else and I wouldn’t have had that directing job. Professional directors (and actors and designers too) wrestle all the time with the question of whether to work on a play they’re lukewarm about, or forgo a job they need to make a living. But an actor doesn’t have to love an entire play to connect with a character, just as a designer can often find interesting challenges in his work, even if a play as a whole doesn’t inspire him. The director’s role is different: she’s responsible for the whole production, not just one aspect of it, and she has to fire everyone else up with her passion for it. It’s very hard to fake that, and it’s wearing on the soul after a while. Peter Brook says it best: “It’s my conviction that this play must be done today, and without that conviction I can’t do it.” (1)

In some ways, this decision was easier before I began to get paid for my directing work: back in my early Off-Off-Off Broadway days, my projects were always a labor of love. At the Hartford Stage, once I’d been there a year or two, I was guaranteed a directing slot and it was simply a matter of persuading artistic director Mark Lamos to let me direct the most exciting project I could think of—not a difficult task since he was an inveterate risk-taker. But when I started freelancing, the dilemma of when to say yes and when to say no to directing a particular play could be agonizing.

I was lucky to come on the scene when so many strong non-profit
Theaters were mounting productions around the country, which greatly increased my opportunities. Harold Clurman, talking about the slim pickings in the Broadway theater in which he worked most of his life, wrote in the 1950s, “The director chooses what he can find.” (2) But very often, it wasn’t as clear-cut as falling head-over-heels in love with a play or feeling indifference or outright dislike of it. Those were the easy calls. There have also been plenty of times in my life when I liked a play but had reservations about certain aspects of it, something I could say about most of the new plays I’ve directed. But new plays carry their own special set of circumstances: they evolve as a director works on them with a living playwright. What about an existing play, either classic or contemporary, that I have a chance to direct? What goes into that decision?

Reading and responding to a play is a highly intuitive process, like so much of directing. But breaking it down, I’d say that the characters, story, play-world, and language have to speak to me in some way for me to feel an urgent need to bring a play to life onstage. If the play’s characters come alive for me when I read, if I sense that there are many layers and depths to them that the actors and I will find together, that’s a huge plus. If the story is a compelling one that I’m eager to tell, if I feel an impulse to create the world of the play, and if the language has a personality and a voice that I respond to, I’m ready to make the commitment. I don’t have to understand every aspect of it yet—some of my most exciting challenges as a director have been with plays that took me weeks and months to fully grasp. But I do have to be eager to live with a play, to welcome its becoming a significant part of my life—my real life as well as my work life—for several months.

And real life does enter into the decision: whether I direct a play or not is often a personal choice as much as a professional one. When I was in my twenties, theater was my life, and I often felt as if everything around me was in black-and-white except when I was directing, when it would blossom into full color. But later, when I had a much fuller personal life and became a parent, a play had to be extraordinarily compelling in order to take me away, emotionally and sometimes physically, from my family for a month. One of the reasons I began teaching was so that I would no longer be dependent on directing as my chief source of income and could pick and choose projects more selectively.

Sometimes, this leads to my not directing for a longer period of time than I would like. Then it becomes a question of identity: I feel like myself when I direct, as people do when they’re engaged in work they feel they...
were born to do, and too much time spent not directing makes me feel empty and unfulfilled. It’s a pendulum that swings back and forth all the time, and getting the balance right is often challenging. But one thing that hasn’t changed in all my years as a director is my sense of discovery on first reading a play that I connect with deeply, and my excitement at the prospect of directing it, whether it’s in the immediate offing or not.

Student directors sometimes say to me, “I’m not crazy about this play, but I want to direct it because I have all these cool ideas about what I can do with it.” But if a director is more excited about her preliminary ideas than about the play itself, she shouldn’t direct it. I need to look up to a play, to feel inspired by it, not to think that it won’t be something worth seeing unless I impose my own ideas on it. Plus, it will put a damper on my collaborations with designers and actors if I start our design and rehearsal process with fixed ideas that I won’t allow the others to challenge with their own instincts and impressions about the play. And if I do let go of those ideas, I’m stuck with a play I may not really like.

There have been times I’ve agreed to direct a play I didn’t love because I thought I could make up for my lack of connection to it through my work with the actors. That’s one of the reasons I said yes to Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. And there’s no question that having actors who do love the play, and whose work I admire, can go a long way towards off-setting my own reservations. But my direction of a play can’t go very deep unless it’s truly personal and committed. There are many times in rehearsal, in the early days and late run-throughs, when the director’s job is to rally the troops around the Greater Cause of the play. I can’t be that full-throated cheerleader if I don’t believe in that Greater Cause myself.

**A MUTUAL VALUE SYSTEM**

Sometimes, my admiration for a particular artistic director will affect my decision about whether or not to direct a play I’ve been offered—this was yet another reason I agreed to take on Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. “If I say no, will he ever ask me to work at his theater again?” I ask myself while wrestling with this decision. And like most directors, I do a certain amount of “pitching” to artistic directors I want to work with, as I try to create opportunities to direct plays I love at a theater run by a person I know will provide the right kind of support.

The relationship between myself and the artistic director is a crucial one. He makes the commitment to entrust the play to me, and I
make the commitment to bring it to life at his theater. Like all my future collaborations, the operative word here is trust: the artistic director has to trust the play in my hands, and I have to trust the artistic director’s knowledge of the production’s context—the theater’s personnel, space, and audience. Many artistic directors are directors themselves and have a first-hand grasp of my upcoming challenges. “My collaboration with a director is as a facilitator, and I try to offer people what I want myself,” says Ted Pappas, Producing Artistic Director of Pittsburgh Public Theater, “which is very free rein about who I work with.” But the artistic director doesn’t completely cede control to me on these decisions: we collaborate on the selection of the rest of the artistic team, choosing some designers who are new to me but have worked at the theater, and some that I’ve developed a strong relationship with but that are unfamiliar to the artistic director and his production manager. It’s the same with casting, a long, involved process that often affords me the chance to establish a connection to an artistic director I don’t yet know well. “You develop a mutual value system and a vocabulary” for working together, says Sara Garonzik, Producing Artistic Director of the Philadelphia Theatre Company, about how the long days of auditions can forge a strong bond. “We make the decisions together, but I let the director lead the way with both selecting designers and casting,” she adds. “It’s important to empower the director.”

**INTUITIVE RESPONSES**

In the early days of knowing I’m going to direct a play that excites and challenges me, I walk around feeling as if I’m secretly engaged. I can’t predict exactly how it will go from here, but it feels right. Already the question of which actors and designers I might work with on the project fills me with anticipation. But before I go into auditions, or meet for the first time with designers, I need to have a window of time in which my relationship to the play is still private. Much as I’m looking forward to these future collaborations, I have to first shore up and deepen my own connection with the play, without the noise and excitement of interaction with others. It’s like the first phase of a marriage, before the kids come along.

I start with my intuitive responses. In *On Directing*, Harold Clurman shares his early pre-production writings, which he titles “random notes,” or “first impressions.” Eventually, he gets around to hard-core script analysis: tracing every character’s journey in the play and articulating each one’s spine or super-objective, as well as the spine, theme, and style of the play.
itself. But it's those early jottings, sometimes just phrases or strings of words, that still make such compelling reading. My early impressions have become the essential foundation of my own pre-production work.

“What do you see, and how does it make you feel?” a longtime colleague of mine, designer Michael Krass, continually asks his students—and that's how I try to first connect with the text of a play. What comes to mind visually as I encounter it, what's my emotional response to the characters from scene to scene, what parts confuse or excite or move me? I read the play again, I put it away for a while and let it work on me, then I reread it several more times, responding to it on a yellow legal pad with questions, exclamations, random words or images that occur to me while I read. Occasionally, I'll note a connection to my own life, or something I empathize with strongly. Often, I'll simply copy down a line that jumps out and makes a strong impression on me.

I know from experience that my early impressions are fleeting and ephemeral, soon to be crowded out by a more analytical left-brain as opposed to right-brain grasp of the play. I have to make sure I carve out the time to feel and dream and reflect and free-associate about a play. Like every collaboration I have, with designers, actors, and playwright (when the play is a new one), I have to keep my logical mind and my inner editor on the back burner for now, to let my instincts come first and blossom fully, in order for the work to be fresh and personal.

But does a director set out to discover the truth of the play itself, or the truth of her own response to the play? A student once asked me that question, and I think it goes to the heart of what a director does, in pre-production and beyond.

My answer was, “Both—and you can't separate the two.” Every time I reread a play I'm going to direct, I make discoveries about it that any alert and sensitive director would have, but I also have revelations that are unique to me personally. My own connection to the play is different from any other director's and will lead eventually to my own production, just as each of the actors I cast and designers I choose will bring something special to his or her role. This doesn’t mean that my conscious goal is to impose my own stamp on a play or deliberately leave my directorial fingerprints all over it. But by the same token, I won't simply “let the play speak for itself,” as the saying goes. As Peter Brook puts it, “If you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then you have to conjure its sound from it.” (3) So as I work to conjure the play's
sound, my own personal “key” to it opens it up in unique ways.

Eleven years after my first production of *Of Mice and Men*, I directed it again, stepping in for someone who was suddenly unable to direct it at the Philadelphia Drama Guild. I still found the play extremely moving, but for new reasons. As a single twenty-nine-year-old feeling somewhat rootless, I'd been touched most of all by the longing of the characters to establish a home for themselves. But my connection to the play evolved over time, and, as the forty-year-old mother of a toddler, I was most struck by the central relationship between George and Lennie, with its complex mixture of love and frustration. These two keys to the play led to two quite different productions, with new design, casting, and acting choices. I wasn't striving for difference for its own sake. In both productions, I was just as intent on serving Steinbeck's play as in mining my own response to it, and the play itself hadn't changed. But the director had.

**THE ABSENT PLAYWRIGHT**

As the director of a play whose author is either dead or absent, what's my responsibility to the playwright? Do I even have one?

I see the writer not so much as someone I have an obligation towards, but as a person I want to get to know better, as I would if I were working on a brand new play. Reading other works by a playwright and finding out as much as I can about his life is always illuminating and sometimes inspiring. In the months before I first directed *Of Mice and Men*, I set out to read everything John Steinbeck ever wrote. I devoured all of his other books and his massive collection of letters, as well as several biographies about him. I made a side trip to the Salinas Valley when I was in California and saw where Steinbeck grew up and where the play takes place. I began to get a cumulative sense of his voice, his values, his championship of the oppressed, and his love for the land in which he was born and lived most of his life. All of this informed my work, often in subliminal ways, throughout the design and rehearsal process.

I once asked a teaching colleague why he thought our students weren't more curious about the writers whose plays they were mounting: why, for instance, wasn't the student who was directing an early one-act by Federico Garcia Lorca intent on finding out all she could about this writer's extraordinary life? “Because Lorca's dead,” he answered—at least, he told me, that's what *she* would say. But as I got to know John Steinbeck, he didn't feel dead to me—he felt like my most fundamental collaborator, whose
need to write the play sharpened and deepened my own need to direct it.

While I personally can never get enough of a playwright’s life and work, I find there is such a thing as too much research in other areas. “I’m headlong into pageant wagons, booth stages, and liturgical dramas, and feeling panicky,” I wrote in my journal about my obsessive research on the origins of the medieval mystery plays I was preparing to direct at the Hartford Stage. And this research didn’t release my imagination, but instead kept it earthbound through much of the production process. The same usually goes for critical essays, at least the ones that treat a play as a work of literature instead of the blueprint for a production. I once discovered a cache of 400 years of scholarly writing on Twelfth Night while I was doing pre-production work on it, but as I dutifully plowed my way through everyone else’s opinions about the play my own personal response to it began to dry up. The night before I began rehearsals for a production of Shakespeare’s King John, someone gave me the dictionary-sized, footnote-crammed Variorum edition of the play, and I stayed up late poring over it, feeling as if I hadn’t studied for an exam.

I also don’t like to read up on past productions of a play I’m going to direct. Many directors do, and some college courses insist on it, but personally I find it counter-productive. I’m certainly curious, and occasionally I’ll dip into a review or two, but those immediately put me into a comparative, even competitive, frame of mind: Oh, so-and-so did that with his production of this play—I’ll never think up anything that brilliant. — He did what? What a terrible idea—my production’s going to be much better! This attitude certainly doesn’t enhance or illuminate my own relationship with the play at this delicate stage.

ENTER THE DRAMATURG

During this pre-production time, when I’m reading and rereading the play and sorting through mounds of research, I begin to share my responses and half-formed ideas with the production’s dramaturg. What exactly a dramaturg does on a production (and how to pronounce the Germanic title—with a hard “g”) is unclear even to many people in theater, probably because the dramaturg’s role varies considerably depending on the needs of the production and the director. On a new play, the dramaturg works closely with both writer and director, serving as a sounding board and editor as the playwright keeps writing and revising. But with an existing play, she becomes my guide and filter as I sort through all the reading and
research, and also a confidante when I first share my early ideas.

Over time, this relationship evolves and deepens. Dramaturg Vicky Abrash, with whom I worked for four years at the Philadelphia Drama Guild, describes the dramaturg as “an ally who is dedicated to fulfilling the director’s vision and all that it can be.” Besides the usual dramaturgical tasks of doing research and writing program notes, Vicky always came to design meetings of productions I directed, to the point where her presence was indispensable. Hearing that she would be absent at a critical meeting, one of the designers said, “Oh no—what are we going to do?” And my ruminative conversations with her at the early stages of pre-production work on a classic play sometimes made me feel almost as if I was talking with the writer himself. She was an ally not just to me, but to the play. While I wrestled with my early conceptual ideas about it, she invariably helped me understand “where those ideas can be taken further and where the play resists them,” as she puts it.

FINDING THE PLAY’S MOTOR

Interaction with the dramaturg leads me to make the critical transition from private reading and reflecting to talking with others about the play—a necessity at this stage of things. I always feel disconcerted by the question What’s your vision? about a play I’m about to direct. It makes me think of heavenly choirs and bursting beams of light, rather than the slow and steady illumination of the play that starts now and will continue all through the design and rehearsal process. The question even feels intrusive: I don’t like condensing my complex, personal response to the play into a few sentences, let alone sharing it with others at this stage. Part of me would love to stay in this private, free-associative time forever.

But it’s incumbent on me to be able to speak about the play to other people with eloquence and precision. It’s a big part of my job all through the process: when I’m trying to persuade an artistic director to mount a play I love; when I’m guiding the design process as we make choices about the play’s world; when I talk to my ensemble of actors at early rehearsals and late run-throughs. I’ve got to translate what Peter Brook calls my “formless hunch” about the play into a clear and passionate expression of “why the play must be done today.” (4) I need to be able to articulate what questions it raises that I’m excited to explore as I get to know it better, and also what I hope the experience of it will be for an audience.

This means moving beyond my intuitive early impressions into some
nitty-gritty script analysis—something I put off doing for as long as I can but which is very satisfying once I make myself buckle down to it. The only way I can articulate what the play is truly about is to read it through multiple times, from the perspective of one character at a time while I try to identify each one’s journey, as well as one scene at a time while defining each one’s event. I come up with the most active verbs I can; I look for the play’s motor, what propels it forward, while I write down my thoughts. I search for the common thread of each character’s arc and the essential, below-the-surface story of the play. I fill many pages, and eventually I force myself to put my conclusions into one sentence: what Harold Clurman calls the play’s spine, a term he adapted from director Konstantin Stanislavsky. Different directors have different words for this, but “spine” has always worked for me because it evokes a living thing of many parts, whose backbone gives the being shape and coherence and the ability to move forward. Clurman always gives the spine an infinitive verb that connects to every character in the play, such as “To possess the farm” (Desire under the Elms), or “To win the fight of life” (Golden Boy). Like the director’s “key” to the play, a spine is open to interpretation. When I directed Golden Boy, I was more moved by the characters’ struggles than by the question of winning, and the spine I chose was “To fight through every obstacle toward a better life.”

Once I’ve identified the spine, I fold up the notes and put them in my file on the play. This analysis isn’t my production Bible, and I often don’t refer to it as I begin the actual work of directing the play. Having a grasp of the play’s spine is important in later design meetings (which often happen in tandem with this pre-production work) and in early and late rehearsals. But the point of such exhaustive script analysis really isn’t so much to have it to refer to later on, but to get to know the play as thoroughly as I can now, to grasp it as clearly as possible in two dimensions, before all the three-dimensional discoveries occur.

As Peter Brook says, “However much homework a director does, he cannot fully understand the play by himself.” (5) A play reveals itself, says Margaret Webster, referring to her production of Hamlet, “in a hundred new ways, as the words became people and the design grew alive and moved.” (6) Any pre-production conclusions I draw will be tested, and any early ideas I have will evolve, when I start to work with living designers and actors.

But when the play itself is new and still evolving, and the playwright is my chief collaborator, then the central question is not What impels me to
bring this play to life? but What exactly is this play, and what does it want to become?
Chapter Two

What Does It Want To Become?

“Any director working with a writer needs to be a tactful, low-pressure guide, and an enormous appreciater of what’s done.”

– Michael Weller

MAKING IT WORK

When I was twenty-two years old, trying to get my foot in the door at the non-profit Off-Off Broadway theaters where I hoped to direct, I took on the task of reading the accumulated “slush piles” of unsolicited scripts from hopeful unknown writers. There were huge stacks of unread plays in every literary department, sometimes covered with dust from weeks of sitting on the shelves. I was completely untrained for this work, but since most of the scripts weren’t very good it didn’t demand much more than common sense, along with the ability to not get too depressed about all the people writing plays that would never get produced.

Gradually, as I began to get the hang of it, I started to make a meager living as a freelance reader for five different theaters. I made my way through as many as thirty scripts a week, typing up reports on each. I read plays all the time and everywhere, on buses and subways, in coffee shops and laundromats. One evening, I inadvertently dumped a script into a washing machine along with my clothes, put in detergent, and started the wash cycle before realizing what I’d done. I retrieved the script and dried it off, read it, and returned it to the theater, explaining the circumstances to the amused literary manager. A few weeks later, I found the script at another theater, its stiff wavy pages still a little soapy around the edges. It was funny, but there was a poignant side to it as well. The writer obviously hadn’t been able to afford to make a fresh copy to send out, and the same reader (me) was about to reject the same script.

The plus side to all that reading was that whenever I occasionally read a script by a writer of real promise, I experienced a new kind of excitement as a director: something sharper and more immediate than my deep longing to direct all the plays of Shakespeare. My glowing reports for these
few plays rarely led to their being produced at the theaters where they'd been submitted, but on my own I contacted the writers and got to know them. In time, I was working with some of the playwrights whose scripts I had discovered, directing readings and workshops of their plays. I started to work part-time in the script departments of several non-profit theaters, eventually becoming literary manager at the Hartford Stage, and the first full productions I directed there were new plays by some of the playwrights I’d met along the way.

But as a young director, my focus was always on getting the playwright to rewrite according to my specifications, not on being a sounding board for what he was trying to do. How do we make this work? I would ask myself about an early draft of a new play, instead of What does it want to become? I behaved like an auto mechanic with a car that wouldn’t start, as I once heard a writer describe a certain director’s approach to new plays. I would request lines to be cut and scenes to be rearranged, and I didn’t hesitate to tell a writer when I thought something was just plain wrong. I was looking for results, the way I was from actors and designers as well as writers back then.

It seems to me now that I often treated a new play as something that needed to be put into my dramaturgical washing machine, into which I would pour the prescribed amounts of shaping and editing, watching in satisfaction while some of the rough edges that made it unique were washed, rinsed, and spun out of it.

**LISTENING TO THE PLAY**

One of the reasons my early work with writers was so result-oriented was that my first contact with playwrights came through the producing theaters where I worked. I got away with making such exacting suggestions because the writers hoped for a full production if they rewrote according to my (and the artistic director’s) specifications. While we made no promises, I’m sure the signals a hopeful playwright received was that if he just made these changes we would make a commitment to producing the play. As playwright Neal Bell says about his working relationship with the artistic personnel at non-profit theaters that produce new plays, “It’s hard to separate the organic need to rewrite the play from the hunger to be produced.”

I did appreciate the fact that playwrights (along with actors) put themselves on the front lines in a more vulnerable way than I did as a
director. This was a lesson I’d first grasped on seeing that recycled script, and it was reinforced when I tried to write a play myself in my late twenties. I did this not because I had anything to say, but because I thought I could write a better play than most of the ones I was reading. I never felt any passion as a playwright, and I couldn’t shut off my inner director telling me *it doesn’t work* as I wrote. Eventually, after several years of sporadically working on it, I finally finished a draft and put together a reading. This turned out to be an excruciating experience, and it made me realize in no uncertain terms that directing, not playwriting, was my calling. But my admiration for those who *could* write plays increased exponentially as a result.

So I settled into the role of dramaturg and director and got to experience the act of writing a play vicariously as several playwrights (including the one I married, Erik Brogger) let me into the early stages of their process. And it was that identification with the writer, seeing what he goes through from beginning to end, that gradually enabled me to let go of the *make it work* controls and instead try to help the playwright discover what the play wanted to become. I learned how to “listen to the play,” as Neal Bell describes this process since, as he says, “what’s in the play isn’t necessarily what you had in your head.” As Erik observes, “Sometimes there are secrets in the play the playwright may not even be aware of.”

How does the director help the playwright “listen” to the play and discover where it seems to be pointing? How do they work together to develop it from a two-dimensional script that can be read to a three-dimensional experience that can be lived through?

It’s a complex, multi-layered process, and it’s by far the longest collaboration the director has—it can easily take several years for a play to make the transition from page to stage (if it even gets there at all), as opposed to the couple of months a director usually works with designers and actors. When Erik and I were working to develop his play *A Normal Life*, based on short stories by Delmore Schwartz, he gave me scenes from the play as he wrote, and we talked about it at all hours of the day and night. When he finished a first draft, we held a cold reading in our apartment as actor friends of ours read it aloud over pizza. Later, we traveled to Seattle to work on it for a week at A Contemporary Theatre (which had commissioned it), with a cast the theater had chosen for us. These actors and the theater’s dramaturg asked many penetrating questions as we read and reread the play; when not in rehearsal, Erik developed and revised some scenes and cut others. I put in some very minimal staging at the last minute, and we had an informal
talk with the small invited audience after our reading presentation. The week’s work, culminating in the staged reading, gave us information about the play as a three-dimensional experience that fueled its development all the way through the play’s opening night in a full production in Seattle seven months later.

Most directors mount hundreds of staged readings of new plays in the course of their professional lives, and there’s an immediate gratification about it that can be very satisfying, once the cast is assembled (usually the hardest part of the process). Often there’s only time for one intense rehearsal; the actors work instinctively because there’s so little time for talking, and the playwright revises right there in the room. There’s no one way to approach a reading—each one is different, depending on the needs of the play—but details such as which stage directions should be read and which can be acted assume monumental importance. Someone who doesn’t read these well can ruin an otherwise good reading of a new play. I’ve had stage directions readers who seemed to think they were the most important character in the play and others who were tentative or inaudible. New pages come in at the last minute, still warm from the copier, and are read in front of a lively and engaged audience just an hour later. The actors fly by the seat of their pants, and the audience uses its imagination. Sometimes, a staged reading is a far more exciting experience than the subsequent full production.

All directors are hungry for good new plays to work on, and most playwrights are just as eager to work with a smart director who can guide their play through a process that enables them to develop it towards being production-ready. As might be expected, an important bond is often formed between playwright and director during this process (even when they aren’t married), as together they raise the play from its infancy to a point where, they hope, it can connect with an audience in full production. But this long and in-depth collaboration does beg the question, Whose play is it? The simple answer is that it’s the playwright’s: he is the actual author and he holds the rights to the play, except when the director and playwright form a co-authorship agreement. But when the director’s contributions are far more than directorial, when she nurtures, guides, and even inspires, when she reads drafts and puts together readings and develops a deeply symbiotic relationship with the writer and the play, shouldn’t she have some guaranteed involvement in the play’s future, as its director?

Almost every director who’s been in this position wants that guarantee;
almost every playwright worries that to give it would risk the play’s chances for production, by tying it to a specific director that a producing theater may not want to hire. At a recent meeting of my professional union, the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, dozens of young directors brought up this issue and asked if there was any way to prevent a theater from hiring a more well-established director to mount a play they themselves had spent years helping to develop.

The only way to do that is to tie the playwright to the director up front: to ask the writer to sign a formal collaboration agreement. Though these agreements often happen at the highest level of production, especially on musicals, young and unknown playwrights are often loath to sign them. So are some directors—and I count myself among them—who don’t want to get the collaboration off on the wrong foot, with what feels like a prenuptial contract. The problem with these agreements is that if a producing theater doesn’t want to hire the director who helped develop the play, the playwright is the one who will be responsible for buying the director out.

But the director doesn’t want to be bought out—she wants the chance to direct this play she’s poured herself into. She’s thinking partly of her career, of course: directing a new play that gets attention can propel a young director forward just as it can a young playwright. But her investment in the play is by now far more than just professional—she’s made a commitment and put many hours into the relationship. It seems patently unfair that a third party, a producing theater, can turn that bond into painful heartbreak.

Some years ago, I helped develop a new play called Roosters by Milcha Sanchez-Scott at the Sundance Institute. I agreed to work on it even before I read it, eager for the opportunity to co-exist with other theater people in the mountains of Utah for two weeks. I opened the play nervously when it arrived in the mail a few days later and was instantly captivated by the world the playwright had created, the gorgeous language, and the delightful characters. The play was written in the vein of “magic realism,” a style I’d never worked in before, and I was amazed at my dumb luck in being given this beautiful script to work on.

“Magic” was the word that kept coming back to me as Milcha and I hit it off and worked together in a perfect environment for the playwriting process: fresh air and stunning scenery, eager and talented actors, and no performance pressure. After an initial informal reading of the play in the living room of the ski chalet where we were staying, she retreated to her room and began to work on the scenes she wanted to rewrite, which she
would pass along to me to read and respond to at odd hours of the day or night. Once, she worked on a fight scene by improvising it in her bedroom as I watched, using her pillow as her scene partner and then writing it down afterwards while I helped her remember what she and the pillow had said and done. When she was stuck, we went for long walks together and talked about the play and life in general. We assembled our group of actors whenever she had a scene she felt ready to hear aloud, and when she was holed up in her room for the day the actors and I did improvisatory work based on the characters’ lives. Sometimes, we shared these exercises with Milcha; sometimes, I simply reported to her what discoveries we had or hadn't made. We had the usual single intense rehearsal when the new draft was complete and shared the work with a delighted audience of other theater people, who were also in residence at Sundance, working on other plays.

A small New York theater wanted to produce the play that fall, and Milcha and the artistic director took it as a given that I’d continue on as director. But the play had generated some buzz as a result of its time at Sundance, and a much larger organization, the Public Theater, read the play and became involved as co-producer. Suddenly, my relationship to the play was in jeopardy, since Joe Papp wanted to bring his own hand-picked director into the project. Milcha went to bat for me, talking with me nightly as we tried to strategize a way for him to hire me. She got me into an interview with Papp, who was polite, but clearly wanted control over this important choice, which meant a brand new director. Ultimately, we had to face the fact that Milcha had no real leverage with him. Though I fantasized about her threatening to pull her play if he wouldn’t hire me, it wasn’t something I ever seriously wanted her to try. I lost the play to another director of Papp’s choosing and went through a heartbreak I wouldn’t wish on anyone—but one that I know young directors experience on a regular basis.

“What can I do?” former directing students of mine frequently ask me. “How can I prevent this from happening to me?” My reluctant answer is that there are usually no guarantees when a director embarks on helping a playwright develop a play. But what the director can do is foster a collaboration that is so strong and so essential to the playwright that he will do everything he can to persuade a producing theater to keep the director, if and when the play is chosen for production. And most important of all, I caution these young directors, for professional and for personal reasons, don’t let losing this battle destroy your relationship with the writer. Life is
long, much longer than a single production (though it doesn’t feel like it at the time), and life in the theater is never linear or predictable. Milcha and I stayed in touch and a few years later I directed another play of hers at the Philadelphia Drama Guild.

MAKING THE COMMITMENT

But not all my collaborations with playwrights have followed this long and symbiotic development process. Sometimes, I’ve been asked to direct a full production of a new play that’s already been through a series of readings and revisions. The advantage of being in this position is that heartbreak is forestalled—at least for me, though not for the director who helped develop the play. The disadvantage is that, instead of experiencing a gradual and organic process with the playwright, I have to jump into the deep end of the pool and make a commitment (or not) based on a small amount of information—the script itself and a meeting.

This decision feels even more momentous than making up my mind about directing an existing play, since it’s just as important that I connect with the writer as with the script. I encounter the play first, clicking open the e-mail attachment or tearing open the priority mail envelope with keen anticipation. If I fall in love at first sight, as I did with Roosters, or if I’m disappointed by page 10, my decision is clear. But usually my response is more complicated: I’m excited by the play’s potential, but I have a lot of questions about it. I’ve read many plays that have vivid characters, an interesting premise, an evocative play-world, and an original voice, but whose story, or whose characters’ journeys, feel as if they need further work. But those develop naturally in the course of rehearsal, and my ability to guide that process so that it benefits the play depends not so much on the play itself as on whether or not the writer and I seem to be a good collaborative match. So there’s a lot riding on our first meeting, which is really a mutual job interview between the playwright and myself.

The artistic director is sometimes there when we meet. Acting as a sort of matchmaker, he’s asked me to direct the play, contingent on the playwright’s approval. Often, after he introduces us and we all chat for a while, he leaves us together to see how we hit it off one-on-one. I convey my excitement to the playwright about the writing and share my more detailed responses to it, and the playwright asks me who I might see in the cast or how I might envision the physical production. I ask about the play’s genesis; he asks me where I think the writing needs further work. We’re both careful
to keep this discussion in theoretical mode, rather than speaking in the future tense.

If we hit it off, we’ll make the commitment; if we don’t, we probably shouldn’t. Meeting Barbara Lebow, whose play *A Shayna Maidel* I’d loved on reading, I discovered a woman whose sense of humor I responded to instantly. When she got to her feet to demonstrate a hilariously over-the-top curtain call bow made by a high-maintenance actor with whom we’d both worked, I was sold, feeling instinctively that our shared values would see us through the challenges ahead. When I met the author of *Echo Boy* (not its actual title), a play I’d had only a lukewarm response to, and then felt uncomfortable with the playwright’s opinion that it should be directed exactly as it had been in a recent regional production, my instincts told me to turn the job down. But I wanted my work to be seen at the up-and-coming New York theater where the play was being mounted, so against my better judgment I took it on. I had a miserable time, and rather than using it as a showcase, I tried to keep people away from the production. But in retrospect, I learned a lot: I’ve never since worked with a writer with whom I didn’t feel a real rapport.

It’s also not fair to the play itself if I agree to direct it when I have such an ambivalent response, because the resulting production can be destructive to its future chances. A play with a track record can survive the wrong director; a new play often can’t. Playwrights are well aware of this: “One of the definitions of a classic is that no matter what dumb stuff you do to it, you can’t kill it,” says Jeffrey Hatcher; while Neal Bell feels that “When the director doesn’t trust the script, he works in an oppositional way.”

But at least I’ve had the opportunity to read the play. The playwright will have to decide about the director based partly on what he knows of his or her work, but mostly on his own instincts at that high-stakes first meeting. How does he make that decision? What is the writer looking for in a director? Playwrights have various answers to this question, but with a common thread:

“Someone who is simpatico and who gets my script.” – Jeffrey Hatcher

“I’m interested in what impressions the director has, what he was struck by, what his personal take on my play is.” – Erik Brogger

“I’m looking for a good listener.” – Mary Gallagher

“I want to get a sense of whether I trust the director to be open to the experience and to the discoveries that are going to be made along the way.” – Neal Bell
CRUCIAL FOUNDATION

My early process in preparing to direct a new play in a full production is similar to my work on an old one. I read and reread it and jot down my impressions; I immerse myself in the play’s world and in other works by the writer; I get to know him and find out what led him to write the play—but in person, instead of through a biography. Sometimes, the playwright serves as my guide to another time or a different culture. Barbara Lebow led me into a wealth of literature in the form of personal memoirs about Jewish life in Europe before, during, and after World War II, when we began to collaborate on A Shayna Maidel. Milcha Sanchez-Scott introduced me to a rich panoply of visual art that had inspired the world of Roosters. Philip Kan Gotanda gave me fiction and non-fiction books to read about the ordeal of Japanese-Americans in internment camps in the 1940’s, when I was preparing to direct his play, The Wash (a production I never got to do because I was unavailable after it was postponed). Interacting with the specific works of art that had inspired these plays wasn’t just dramaturgical research to me—it was a chance to experience first-hand the early sources of these authors’ creation. It was a way to sensitize myself much more fully to the playwright’s need to write the play, and a means of building a crucial foundation in my collaborative relationship with the writer.

I approach actual script analysis with a new play earlier than I do with an existing one, because the playwright is usually eager to hear what specific questions occur to me as soon as possible, once I’ve traced the characters’ journeys, found the event of each scene, and worked to uncover the play’s spine. I always start with the assumption that the answers to my questions are there, either in the text or between its lines, but there are times when our discussions reveal something new to the writer and open up possibilities in his mind that he might want to explore. But how these potential revisions are addressed is up to him, not me. If he wants to attempt a scene revision now, I’ll read it eagerly; if he wants to wait until we’re in rehearsal, I’ll go along with that; if he decides to listen to my questions and not act on any of them, that’s fine too—though I will probably reiterate those questions down the road, if the rehearsal process bears them out. As Michael Weller articulates the director-playwright pre-rehearsal relationship, “Any director working with a writer needs to be a tactful, low-pressure guide and an enormous appreciator of what’s done.”

“Alchemy.” – Donald Margulies
But even though I’ve learned to back off and be that low-pressure guide, sometimes I still have trouble suppressing my inner control freak, the voice that keeps whispering, *Here’s how to make it work.* Working with a playwright recently, my early questions about a character whose journey I had trouble following, and a penultimate scene whose event I couldn’t discern, triggered new ideas for her, and she began to rewrite immediately. But when, feeling pleased by how receptive she was, I offered to get specific about which lines might be cut in a scene we both thought needed trimming, she said “No thank you,” politely but firmly.

As Mary Gallagher says, “You don’t want anyone to give you a solution, but to raise issues and ask questions.” Dictating shuts off possibilities, but raising questions leads to groping our way forward while we search together for something we can’t quite define yet.

All the theater artists I collaborate with will do stronger, fresher, more personal work if I can motivate them, guide them, and hopefully inspire them, rather than simply saying “Do this.” This holds true with playwrights, actors—and my next set of collaborators, the play’s designers.
Designers
Chapter Three
Collective Baptism

“Design, like acting, has to come from within, and if you don’t have a response to a play it’s not going to look right.” – Allen Moyer

ASSEMBLING THE TEAM

I never worked with designers in my early, formative years. Directing plays in tiny Off-Off-Off Broadway theaters located up three flights of stairs in grimy parts of Manhattan, I did it all myself. I came up with my own sets and ground plans, hauled a few pieces of furniture to the theater with a borrowed car, and decided with the actors what clothes they should wear from their own wardrobes. The stage manager and I lit the show with the limited range of options provided by the theater (usually light bulbs in coffee cans and a few clip lights, with a couple of real instruments thrown in), and somebody did me a favor and made a tape of the sound I asked for. All those years when I was gaining valuable experience working with actors and playwrights, designers weren’t even part of the equation. So it was a real shock to find myself, at the Hartford Stage in my late twenties, suddenly paired with some of the best designers then working in theater. I had no idea what to do with them. Of course, I was thrilled that I finally had designers, plus a budget, a theater with scene and costume shops, real lighting instruments, a master electrician, and someone else to collect the props. I was awed by the beautiful designs that made their way onto the stage, in productions directed by artistic director Mark Lamos. But I couldn’t grasp the process by which they arrived there, even after sitting in on a number of Mark’s design meetings. So when my chance came to direct, I alternated between bossily telling the designers exactly what to do and meekly deferring to their expertise.

I vetoed all the wildly imaginative possibilities suggested by the set and costume designer of The Mystery Plays and steered us towards my original (and much less exciting) idea of medieval authenticity. But that
same year, presented with the opportunity to direct the Los Angeles-area premiere of Lanford Wilson’s *Angels Fall*, I approved the first sketch and ground plan the set designer sent to me after just a couple of long-distance phone conversations. I realize now that both the dictating and the abdicating were products of my insecurity.

It never even occurred to me back then to meet with more than one designer at a time, until each was very far along in his individual process and there were tangible things (such as color) that we needed to agree on. Having three designers all in the room with me at once at early meetings would have been terrifying. What if they all liked an idea and I didn’t, or I had an idea that none of them liked? It would be three against one, and I would have even less control over it all.

But every once in a while, I had a longer and more collaborative process with my designers, when my strong feelings for a play inspired me to keep searching past early or pre-conceived ideas that I knew didn’t go deep enough. When I first directed *Of Mice and Men*, the set designer and I spent several weeks trading responses, photos, and images. Slowly, a shared sense of what the world should feel and look like emerged and evolved into the design. Over time, I realized that not only the process but also the resulting design was better if I relaxed more, if I remained open to all possibilities, and if I trusted my relationship to the designers and to the play.

In his classic book, *The Dramatic Imagination*, designer Robert Edmond Jones (who collaborated with both Margaret Webster and Harold Clurman) talks of the need for a designer to “live in a play for a time, immerse himself in it, be baptized by it.” Without this immersion in the play, Jones writes, “We are all too apt to substitute ingenuity for clairvoyance.” (1) I think, at its best, a design process is actually a collective baptism by the play, with the director and all the designers together letting the play pour over them while they respond to it over a period of time. The more designers in the room in those early meetings, the more rich and fertile the process becomes. And the longer the meetings can stay ruminative rather than decisive, while the team keeps reading and rereading the play, the more the eventual designs will be clairvoyant rather than clever, illuminating the text of the play rather than being imposed on it.

I finally became a permanent convert to a long and collective design process during my tenure as artistic director in Philadelphia. I invited set designer Allen Moyer and costume designer Michael Krass (each of whom I’d worked with before) to design *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which
turned out to be one of those magical productions in which everything clicks. After that, the three of us vowed to keep working together indefinitely, and Allen suggested we ask veteran lighting designer Arden Fingerhut to collaborate with us on our next project. She’d been an inspiring teacher of Allen’s in graduate school, and she was a proponent of a fully collective process. So, with some trepidation, I asked all of the designers to come to the early meetings. Then I discovered what I’d been missing all those years.

Immersion in a play with this group of designers was thrilling. Each was as invested in the design as a whole as in his or her own area of expertise, and each also brought something unique to the process in terms of perspective and personality. Allen was good-natured and open-hearted, completely comfortable sharing early and unformed ideas with us; Michael was the sharp questioner whose favorite word was *why*?; and Arden served as a somewhat older wise counselor who shed light on it all, figuratively and literally. Our dramaturg Vicky Abrash entered the mix as well, keeping us on track and providing perspective. If anyone in the group had to miss a meeting, the rest of us felt incomplete. Our collective imagination was much more fruitful than the sum of its parts—and certainly each of those designers was a highly talented part. The designs that emerged were bold and striking, but they always grew out of the play itself and provided a world in which the actors and I could explore and make discoveries.

Our collaboration turned out to be short-lived. Arden died of cancer in 1994, at the age of 48. The Philadelphia Drama Guild closed due to financial problems, and Allen and Michael each went on to high-profile careers, while I began to focus on teaching. But, though circumstances prevented our continuing on as a group beyond the handful of productions we did together, those few years enabled me to experience what I still consider an ideal design process. There was no turning back to my old ways after that.

Most directors, like me, find a team of designers with whom they work off and on over the years. It’s enormously satisfying, in the transitory world of theater where each production disappears after its limited run, to have a sense of continuity with the same group of people, taking off in new directions while building on the foundation of earlier projects. But it can also be very exciting to bring together a new group, to see what its chemistry is and where its dynamics might lead.

What goes into the selection of designers? Some considerations hold true for all directors: knowing and responding to a designer’s work—from
past productions, a portfolio, or a website—and finding out from other directors that a designer is a good collaborator. But since my own epiphany, I also need to know that a designer has the time and the appetite for an in-depth group process.

Time can be very hard to come by, and even when there’s a will there’s not always a way. Talented and in-demand designers sometimes aren’t available to meet as a group, what with the costume designer in fittings for another production and the lighting designer off at tech rehearsals in a different city. Plus, deadlines from theaters who want plans and sketches as soon as possible put pressure on everyone to skip the early, more ruminative part of the process and fast-forward to the results. Those of us who believe in a collective design process have to be enormously resourceful in order to wring enough time and face-to-face group meetings out of the confining circumstances in which we often find ourselves.

Also, there can be inner obstacles when the process is slowed down and stretched out. Not all designers are used to working in this way; I certainly wasn’t as a young director. As veteran designer and design teacher John Conklin observes, “In some ways, I think you need technique and training to move slowly without people getting bored and wondering ‘Can’t we just decide what we’re doing?’”

**SAYING ‘YES’ TO EVERYTHING**

So how do we move slowly without getting bored and wanting to fast-forward to a result?

Starting off the process is always challenging with a new group. Some designers are probably waiting for me to make some sort of definitive statement about the play’s world or story as I see them, which will lead us all in a specific direction. But since I want to keep these early discussions as intuitive and free-associative as possible, I talk instead about what first grabbed me about the play, what impels me to direct it, and what I hope the audience will experience. And gradually, as I share my own emotional and visceral responses, others begin to do the same. This is crucial to the design process, since “Design, like acting, has to come from within,” as Allen Moyer says, “and if you don’t have a response to the play, it’s not going to look right.” One impression leads to the next, and gradually the talk flows much more freely. Structure isn’t necessary—in fact, it can be an impediment—and what guidance I supply is purposefully light-handed.

In order to make sure that we don’t land on any decisions before I feel
we’re ready to, I want all the ideas that come up in this early immersion to be given equal enthusiasm and weight. The answer to the question What if we did this…? is always, Yes, that’s great—and another possibility might be… Michael Krass calls this free-associative way of working, in which everyone welcomes and feeds off everyone else’s ideas, “Saying ‘yes’ to everything.”

Images can galvanize this early part of the process, especially if some of the designers are not as verbal as others. Photographs and paintings can become an evocative means of communication as we embark on what John Conklin calls a “non-verbal, non-textual, non-contextual discussion.” And just as one person’s verbal idea leads to the next one from somebody else, images spawn other images, until we begin to have a rich visual sense of the world of the play. As costume designer Jess Goldstein says, “Whether it’s a sketch or a photo from a magazine or historical research, if you’re both looking at the same image, just to see what your different takes are tells you so much.”

I try to create an environment in which the designers can go out on a limb without fear of being judged or being wrong. “If you’re going to be cautious and start second guessing yourself, you’re not going to be honest,” says lighting designer Brian MacDevitt. “If it’s a safe situation, you can have a bad idea.” When the atmosphere for this collective immersion is relaxed and comfortable, everyone feels empowered to jump in fearlessly with whatever means of expression he or she prefers. Impressions, questions, responses, images, and ideas start flying thick and fast around the room, and the proverbial fly on the wall wouldn’t be able to discern which is the director and which the set, lighting, costume, and sound designers.

Young and less experienced designers sometimes become nervous with a wide-open collaborative process. They expect the director to have some ideas set and certain answers up front, just as some young actors would like to be told early on how to play a role. They find the same sense of safety in a hierarchical system that I did as a young director, and they often have to be nursed along a bit, reassured that answers will be forthcoming eventually, just not yet. But designers who have been at it a while know first-hand how stimulating a long collective process can be. “It just makes for a richer conversation,” says John Conklin, “with different viewpoints and different ways of thinking that grow out of each other.” And, according to lighting designer Ann Wrightson, “All the designers bring different sensibilities to the table, not just their own discipline. You derive inspiration from all quarters. The more talk, the better the design.”
I find this part of the design process absolutely delicious. Watching and listening while designers open up huge art books with colored tabs marking the images they want to share, or dig out folders filled with photographs torn from magazines and spread them on a table, I feel as if I could stay in this part of the process forever.

But of course, it all does have to lead somewhere eventually. Sooner or later, after two or three or six meetings, concrete design ideas have to be put forth, in the form of preliminary sketches and rough models. The designers will need to “sub-contract” (Michael Krass’s term), each focusing on one area of the design. But first, we have to stand back, look at all the ideas we’ve thrown against the wall, and see what’s stuck. “Everyone can jump in and stir the soup, put something into it,” says Brian MacDevitt, “but at a certain point the director’s job is to strain it.”

“Soup-straining” means capturing and highlighting the ideas that feel most right for this production—and also, articulating why they’re right, which is often much harder to do. In a sentence or two, what’s come out of all the free-associative talk and evocative images? Assuming we’re all gravitating towards one design approach, why this design instead of that one? If no specific approach has yet emerged, how can I articulate the play’s world and story in a way that can lead us towards a design? Coming out of the wide-open process we’ve had so far, it’s essential that I make sure we’re all about to head in the same direction before each of the designers sets out on his separate way. So I make sure that I say, and everyone hears, what I think the play is about, what its motor is, what drives it forward—its spine, as it’s evolved in my consciousness through these meetings and through the ongoing script analysis I’ve been doing in my solo time with the play.

Even the most collaborative designers want leadership at this stage. “I like democracy in a design process, but I don’t want to be the president,” says Allen Moyer. Luckily, I do want to be president of the design process, especially when I have such a talented cabinet.

THE PLAYWRIGHT WEIGHS IN

What about when the play is a new one? Is it beneficial for the writer to be involved in the early part of the design process?

For me as director, the short answer to the question is Yes. If all the different viewpoints in the room contribute so much to the design, then of course we should include the voice of the play’s creator.

But actually, it’s more complicated than that. The playwright is
different from everyone else in the room: she’s not responding to the play—she already wrote it. The free-wheeling, saying ‘yes’ to everything part of the process can be dampened by the presence of a nervous playwright wondering to herself, They’re not going to design it like that, are they?—or maybe even voicing her concerns out loud.

Some directors exclude the playwright from the design process altogether, because they think the visual aspects of a play are the sole province of director and designers. But playwrights are not just wordsmiths: they see compelling images as they write, sometimes weaving these into the play overtly, sometimes as metaphors. I think we’re limiting ourselves if we don’t find ways to mine a playwright’s visual imagination, including her in at least some early meetings. The question is how to sound her out so that we feel inspired, not restricted, if the playwright has strong ideas and opinions.

All this depends partly on the playwright herself, and I’ve worked with writers at both ends of the spectrum: with some who offered very little input at early design meetings, whom I had to coax out of their shells, and with others who told the designers and me exactly what the design should look like, whose involvement I had to curtail. Most writers fall somewhere in between, and all have different needs. Some feel it’s very important to be a presence at the initial design meetings, in order to say within rough parameters what the play should feel like, while others only want to see early sketches of sets and costumes before certain key decisions are made. I try to adjust the process for each writer’s inclinations, to the benefit of the design overall.

Being left out of the design process altogether doesn’t sit well with any writer and isn’t constructive in the long run. As one playwright says about an early experience with a high-profile director, “My voice was not heard, and, in an effort to be a good collaborator, I abdicated in ways that I normally wouldn’t.” Cutting the writer out of the process can limit the design, and lead to ongoing feelings of mistrust between playwright and director.

But tensions can arise even when the playwright doesn’t feel the need to be included. I once worked with a writer who told us to go ahead and meet without her since she was out of town, then had serious misgivings about the design approach we came up with. We had to figure out whether to throw the design out and start over, persuade her to accept it, or try to address her concerns while we kept working. We eventually did the last, to nobody’s complete satisfaction. The design we ended up with would
have benefited from her presence in the room early on—not to dictate the design, but to inform the process.

The eventual design of the play won’t (and shouldn’t) be an exact replica of what the playwright had in his head while he was writing the play, but it needs to be influenced and inspired by those images, even as it grows beyond them. And, actually, the playwright should be a strong presence in the design meetings even when he’s not in the room, whether he’s living on the other side of the ocean or dead 400 years.

The most essential inspiration in the design process is always the play itself. Just as we need to listen to the playwright’s living voice speaking directly to us when working on a new play, we need to constantly reread an “old” play throughout the design process, as we keep getting a closer and clearer grasp of it. The best designs come directly from the spine, the central themes, and the strongest metaphors of the text of the play. Of course, all of these are open to interpretation, which is why a long collective immersion in the play is so essential—and so exciting. Now we’ll begin to see the fruits of this immersion, as we enter the “sub-contracting” phase.
Chapter Four

Sub-Contracting The Design

“If I know what the play’s about from those early meetings, then I know what belt to choose eight weeks later.” – Michael Krass

MINIATURE WORLD REVEALED

I always feel both eager and nervous when I arrive at the design meeting in which we’re finally going to see a rough model of the set. Deliberately postponing results until we’ve talked about the play at length produces a certain pressure when the design does appear. After all the sharing of images and early ideas, identifying the spine, looking at preliminary sketches, the unspoken feeling now is, Well, this better be good!

The set designer pulls the model out of its opaque plastic bag, saying, “So here it is. It’s very rough, of course.” He places a rectangular cube, made of thick black cardboard, on the table and puts miniature set pieces into the space. Little homemade figurines made out of thin cardboard, with pennies attached to their feet to weigh them down, stand in for the actors so we can grasp the scale. We all gaze at it silently for a while, standing to look at it from a bird’s eye view, sitting to see it from the perspective of the audience. It reminds me of the dollhouse I had when I was six, or the castle with knights I got for Christmas a few years later. No matter what the model looks like, I get a childlike thrill at the thought of playing with it now and having it turn life-sized in a few months’ time.

The path from our discussions about the play to the model is sometimes linear, sometimes not. In an early meeting for Of Mice and Men, I spoke of how moved I’d been to see the actual land in the Salinas Valley that Lennie and George long for so deeply, and the set designer said, “Hmmmm…dirt.” The model (and set) was a huge slab of real earth, with minimal pieces to define different locations. When I co-directed the nine-play cycle The Greeks with Mark Lamos, our early design meetings usually took place in view of a construction site across the street, and, after a number of meetings talking about the force of implacability in the plays (among other things),
set designer John Conklin came in with a rough model featuring the huge concrete retaining wall that had seeped into everyone’s subconscious.

At other times, the basic idea behind the set is unpredictable. On A Midsummer Night’s Dream, we talked in early meetings about the two worlds of the play and how the uninhibited nature of the woods is the underbelly of the repressed and formal court. I had no idea how this would translate into a set, but Allen Moyer came in with a rough model of an elegant room with tall, mirrored walls, which split apart into dangerous-looking moveable mirror-shards to represent the woods. It was a complicated idea made simply and powerfully concrete in a way I never could have predicted.

But what if the model is a disappointment in some way, or if at this meeting there is no model? What does the director do when the set designer says, “I wasn’t ready to come in with a model yet,” or when the model is unexciting or confusing?

It’s like an actor who won’t make a choice in rehearsal—or who makes the safest, least active choice imaginable. I can’t act his role for him, and I can’t design the set. But just as I can begin to get much more specific in my guidance of the actor, I can galvanize the set designer into making a clear, bold, focused choice. What’s the essence of everything we’ve discussed so far? What’s the world of the play, in one image? What’s the story of the play, in one sentence—again, what is its spine? If there’s no model, I make sure we have a discussion based on these questions that will lead to one in the next meeting; if there’s a model that’s problematic, those same questions will propel the next part of the process as we work with what we have. The discussion so far, and the presence of the other designers, are essential in our ability to move forward from here.

But even when we find ourselves looking at a model that captures the essence of the play’s world, there’s still a lot of work ahead and many practical questions to be asked. Does this wall here go all the way offstage? How big is this entrance? How does this set piece get onstage? Questions turn into suggestions: What would happen if we...? Did you think about maybe...? Can we try...? The set designer takes fresh pieces of cardboard and bends them into new shapes, removes walls, and changes backgrounds, responding to our suggestions. Sometimes, these ideas are new ones he hasn’t thought of; but often they’ve been tried by him and discarded as he worked to get to this stage. But he shows them to us anyway, so we’ll have a first-hand sense of why he moved beyond them.

All the designers contribute to this process, and it’s a test of the set
designer’s ego, or lack thereof, as he pulls apart his model to try out other options in the collaborative brainstorming that ensues. Allen Moyer always comes to this meeting armed with scissors, tape, and extra cardboard, and tries out any idea that we throw his way. He never says “No, that won’t work”—he always shows it to us so we can look at and discuss it. It’s a deeply satisfying time of the process, as we build our little world together.

Occasionally, I’ve worked with a set designer who was protective of a model and treated it as sacrosanct. This slows or even stalls the process. A talented graduate design student came up with a striking idea for the overall approach to our production of *The Cherry Orchard*, but then refused to work on it in more detail. She shrugged off all my questions about how a certain scene might be staged or entrance could be made, behaving as if it was a solo installation piece rather than a space in which a group of actors would tell the play’s story. I finally had to pull rank and insist that she keep working on it, calling in her teachers to back me up. Looking back, I realize that fear, that old enemy to the creative process, was probably driving her intransigence, just as it fuels the actor who refuses to try different choices in rehearsal.

Another set designer with whom I worked on a new play skipped the rough model phase entirely due to time pressures and deadlines and went straight to a model that was exquisitely built and beautifully painted. The set contained a strong central idea, but I still had my usual queries of *What would happen if we...?*—and her answer was always, “I tried that but it didn’t work.” I wanted to see these adjustments on the model so I could grasp *why*, but for understandable reasons she was loath to pull apart her very finished piece of work to show me the other options she’d tried. Eventually, I decided to take her word for it. Lack of time, that other enemy, won out in the end.

But I’m not the only one whose thinking is expanded by seeing the set’s evolution from a sketchy idea to a three-dimensional model. So are all the other designers, who are just getting into the specifics of their own work. The set design is the biggest and most dominant aspect of the design—it creates the visual world of the play more than any other single element. It’s beneficial for everyone if the costume, lighting, and sound designers can witness and even participate in the set designer’s process as much as possible. As costume designer Michael Krass and sound designer David Budries (respectively) put it:

“If I’m not there while it’s happening, I’ll know the result but not the instinct that led to it. When people define their instincts, then I know what
I’m doing.”

“Knowing what motivates every aspect of a design is very powerful. You always find that subtle things inform you.”

It usually takes several more sessions to work through and make adjustments to the set. Sitting down with the script again after first encountering the model and working on the ground plan, my mind races with movement and stage pictures as the play truly springs to life in three dimensions in my imagination. Getting back into the room with the designers and the rough model after a close rereading of the play, new ideas come into focus while together we work through the play, placing the set pieces and furniture into possible ground plans scene to scene, and start to brainstorm about scene transitions. Ground plans and transitions are intimately connected, since both are about storytelling, and some set designers are less interested in them than they are in the overall world of the play. I’ve come to realize that it’s my job as much as (maybe more than) the set designer’s to make sure that the ground plan of each scene will lead to exciting and dynamic staging, and that the transitions will move the play forward fluidly. I’m the chief storyteller, after all.

But there always comes a point when it’s best to leave some decisions to solve in rehearsal, as long as the set designer can draft the basic set and turn it over to the scene shop. There’s a danger that if we pin everything down too exactly now the use of the set will become overly explicit and tell the story of the play all by itself, rather than enabling the actors and me to make those discoveries when we rehearse. If every detail has been decided in advance, the design starts to dictate how it should be used, stifling our creative play in rehearsal like a playground monitor who sets too many rules. “What is necessary,” writes Peter Brook, “is an incomplete design, a design that has clarity without rigidity, one that could be called ‘open’ as against ‘shut.’” (1)

Good set designers understand how to “get far enough so you get the ‘good,’ but you haven’t been locked in,” as John Conklin puts it. Working our way through the play at a late design meeting for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Allen and I tried to come up with a strong visual ending to our first act, in which Titania leads Bottom off to her bower. As I moved the tree-mirrors into all sorts of possible configurations on the model, Allen made the suggestion that we’d probably come up with something much more inspired in the context of rehearsal than we could think of now, sitting in his design studio. “Don’t forget the actor factor,” he said.
TRIANGULAR COLLABORATION

In costume design, the “actor factor” is even more crucial. An actor’s performance can be inhibited by the wrong costume, just as it can be released by the right one. I once saw a college production of Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* in which Clytemnestra, played by a student of mine, was fighting an uphill battle with an awkward headdress, a long heavy train, and impossibly high heels. Her otherwise strong acting was diluted by movement which was studied and self-conscious, as she tried to maneuver herself so that she didn’t lose her balance and topple over. I asked her afterwards how she felt about her costume. “I cried when I first put it on,” she said, “but then I got used to it.”

A good costume designer embraces the need to collaborate with the actor and support his performance, while a not-so-good one treats the actor like an animated dress dummy. (Sometimes literally—a novice costume designer, when told that an actor’s hat was too loose-fitting, asked “Couldn’t he move his head less?”) As Jess Goldstein says, “What an actor looks like, and also what his or her approach to the role may be, could greatly affect the costume.” The more a designer takes into account the human being who will be playing the role, the better chance there is that the costume will enhance the actor’s work.

But the reality is that the costume designer usually has to turn in sketches several weeks before the first rehearsal, so that the costume shop can come up with a plan of how to build or assemble the costumes, based on the hard facts of schedules and budgets. Even a designer who is keenly sensitive to the needs of the actors wearing the clothes has to make some specific decisions about the character before the actor comes into the picture. Actress Jane Fleiss once told me, after describing a costume that she felt had been designed without taking her short-ish stature into account, “It’s the single most terrifying moment of the whole process for me, seeing the costume sketch for the first time.”

So how to reconcile the pressure of deadlines with the need to involve the actors? How can a costume, which is an extension of the character, be designed when the actor who will be wearing it hasn’t even started to discover the character on his feet yet?

The best way I’ve found to meet this challenge is to cast as early as possible and get the actor into the mix in any way I can. Because ultimately this collaboration is a triangular one, between myself as director, the costume designer, and the actor.
The costumes have to reflect the world of the play as all the designers and I have come to know it, and there’s a lot we can discern about the characters simply from reading the text closely. I’ve found that the best time to have an intense one-on-one meeting with the costume designer is towards the end of the casting process. We put our copies of the play, a stack of research images, and photos of the actors who have been cast or are in the running on the table and settle in for several hours. We talk about each of the characters one at a time, sharing impressions and images, referring frequently to the text, tracing the character’s journey in the play—and also speculating on what the actor who has been cast, or is likely to be cast, will bring to the role. He had an interesting sinister quality when he read that scene in auditions...—I think she’s right for the role partly because she exudes such warmth...—Let’s keep in mind that he’s quite tall... Sometimes, this discussion with the costume designer will illuminate for me who should be cast in a role; often, the decision of casting will inform the design.

Sometime in the middle of all this the costume designer begins to sketch, tentatively at first, then more assertively. More meetings follow, with the playwright if he is a presence in the process; we trace the journey of the character in the play through what he is wearing scene to scene, bringing the costume designs back into the full group meetings for the other designers to see and weigh in on. Very incrementally, the drawings evolve into full color renderings. Though some of these deserve to be framed and hung on the wall, not all costume designers draw well—some of the best ones prefer to work with collages for each character. As long as they communicate the ideas behind the design, it doesn’t matter to me what form they take.

But however and whenever the costume sketches or collages finally get turned over to the costume shop, there needs to be leeway within the designs for the actors’ discoveries in the first weeks of rehearsal. If the clothes are bought or pulled from stock, finalizing the designs will happen in the context of fittings, with the actors’ input. “When you get the actor in front of the mirror, in the clothes, that’s when the creative part really begins,” says Jess Goldstein, “because then you’re trying to make that costume, that thing on paper, become the three-dimensional reality on the person that’s intimately going to be wearing it and using it.” And even when a costume is built from scratch, it can still evolve organically in tandem with the actor’s work, if everyone is clear about priorities. When Michael Krass and I worked on A Midsummer Night’s Dream together, we knew what the visual world of the play and costume palette would be from...
the early collective meetings, and we went into rehearsal with costumes already designed for the lesser fairies: silhouettes of contemporary kids’ clothes in shades of black, white, and silver. But he held off on designing for Titania and Oberon until we’d had a chance to see the actors on their feet in rehearsals, physically beginning to embody their characters. The costume designs—which ended up as soft silk pajamas and robe for Titania, a lab coat with hard leather vest and pants for Oberon—were inspired by and designed for those individual actors. As Michael observes, “The challenge always is to dress the character and dress the human being—those are the two issues that have to be in balance.”

**UNIFYING ELEMENTS**

The ideas behind a lighting design are almost impossible to convey in advance, without using the actual tools in the actual space. A designer once showed me tiny, doll-sized gelled lights shining on a model, but the wash of light they created didn’t give me much information. Another lighting designer showed me gel colors she was planning to use on certain lighting instruments in a small book of samples, alarming me by how saturated they looked. I asked for something much more subtle, only to discover in tech what she’d known all along: that the original colors were more subtle when they had stage lights shining through them. The best we can usually do is to fasten on images and artwork that express a certain look we aim to achieve through lighting.

But if we can’t have practical three-dimensional things like models and swatches and renderings to work with, then it’s all the more essential to have the lighting designer be a fully integrated part of those early meetings. Some lighting designers prefer to wait until the set is quite far along and show up for the first time to view the model with a fresh eye that can provide everyone with new perspective. But personally, I think the lighting is stronger and better integrated if the lighting designer is a presence at design meetings right from the get-go.

This could be partly because lighting design has always been the most mysterious aspect of the design process to me. I never studied it in college—and I should have. My lack of a solid lighting vocabulary or technical know-how was matched by the awe with which I viewed beautiful lighting as both audience member and director. It seemed absolutely magical to me. Lighting designers, the practitioners of this magic, exuded a wizard-like aura at tech, mumbling a few words into their headsets and creating...
instant beauty onstage. When I first directed productions with real lighting designers, I abdicated completely and simply watched in amazement as they lit the show.

But working with several very accessible lighting designers, especially Arden Fingerhut, finally made this collaboration more user-friendly for me. Arden’s smart and humorous presence at all our early design meetings demystified her role in the design, and she stayed involved all through rehearsals, frequently calling me to find out how things were going. She came to working rehearsals, first stumble-throughs, and late run-throughs, and we talked about the play through many phone calls and over many dinners. Our transition into tech rehearsals was fluid and effortless, simply the natural extension of a conversation we’d been having all along, rather than the jolt it often is.

Though our work together was ephemeral, Arden inspired me by her holistic approach to lighting a production. Since that time, I’ve always tried to integrate lighting designers into our design process from the start, and over the years I’ve found their contributions invaluable in ways I couldn’t have predicted, going far beyond their designated role. I’ve had lighting designers who were instrumental in helping to get a stalled set design idea moving forward again, who were able to articulate the story and world of the play better than anyone else in the room, and whose ideas during early brainstorming sessions blossomed into essential elements of the overall design. And despite their overcrowded schedules, each designer relished the chance to be so involved. As lighting designer Pat Dignan says, echoing many, “A long process allows for more creativity. When you’re in on the creation of the piece as a whole, it gives you a chance to have a more unified production. And lighting is a unifying element.”

Sound and music are also unifying elements—ones that have become increasingly blended into one kind of design. Though music has been an integral part of theater since the dawn of time, sound design as an art form is comparatively recent. Thirty years ago, when I was first directing, there wasn’t such a thing: a technician found the sound effects and recorded the music for transitions and curtain call that the director had already chosen or worked on with a composer. But because of the technology developed in the last twenty-five years, along with the artistry of its best practitioners, sound design has become elevated to the level of the rest of the design and is regarded now as an art rather than a craft. Composers and sound designers in theater are more and more often one and the same person, and a “sound
score” is often written for a production, not just for transitions but also to underscore certain scenes. But to my taste, some productions are drenched in too much sound. Like the scores of certain movies that tell the audience explicitly what to feel, sound and music in theater are sometimes asked to do the work that the language and the actors should be doing, manipulating our feelings instead of permitting us to experience them ourselves.

Like lighting, sound and music can carry enormous emotional power, and finding the most effective way to use—and not overuse—them is a long and involved process. Often, the pre-rehearsal work is very comprehensive as we talk about every possible point in the production where we might use sound or music, coming up with many cues for the sound designer to make and pieces for the composer to write. But these need to follow and support the actors in their storytelling, not lead them. Later on in the process, when we begin to hear the sound and music in the context of run-throughs and tech, we usually have to refine and even strip away much of what’s been written. The best practitioners are completely up for this. “You have to trust your ability to bring things to the table,” says composer Robert Maggio. “I’m not too concerned if they’re not right the first time. The collaboration will bring more ideas.”

I often don’t include sound designers and composers in the early group meetings, since their contributions are aural rather than visual, and it’s hard enough to get three people into the room, let alone four. But sometimes after the fact, I feel there was a missed opportunity: who knows what other avenues we might have gone down if an aural designer had been a presence all along? Michael Krass says that he once asked to sit in on a director’s meeting with the sound designer, and what he took away from their discussion about the use of music to support the play’s journey was revelatory to him in grasping how to do the same with costumes. Sound designer David Budries agrees: “When you get a bunch of people in a room together, all of a sudden more ideas come. It doesn’t happen electronically—it happens face to face.”

**REHEARSAL-READY**

The day we share the designs with others is always a bit of a jolt. Suddenly, here we are in a room with the artistic director and the production staff, explaining what we’ve come up with. The production manager, costume shop supervisor, master electrician, and technical director ask down-to-earth questions about the renderings and model, poking and
An audience, and his insights are essential to listen to and process. We also need to hear from the playwright now, if the play is a new one. Even if he’s intermittently been in on the design process from the first, he’ll invariably have opinions, now that the designs are concrete, about the specificity of the costumes, details in the set, and the ideas for music during transitions.

But the biggest dose of reality comes when the cost estimates come back from the shops, and we inevitably find out that our designs are over budget. The production manager and technical staff have suggestions about how we can cut back on their expense by simplifying a set piece or eliminating something altogether. But what we need now is not so much a production meeting as yet another design meeting. The designers and I need to take a big breath and one giant step back. We need to process all of the questions, opinions, and suggestions—artistic, practical, and financial—and go back to the drawing board, to another design meeting in which we revisit our early conceptual approach. What’s the core of this design? What do we absolutely need to create this world and tell this story? We go back to our original talks, and once again to the world and spine of the play. Far from being a nuisance, this meeting can serve to strengthen and unify all the design elements. “If I know what the play’s about from those early meetings, then I know what belt to choose eight weeks later,” says Michael Krass. All the designs that emerge from this crucible will benefit from having been tested and challenged, and the sense of collective ownership of the entire design will only increase.

Once the designs are completed, on budget and approved, we have one more meeting before the first rehearsal, to fine-tune a few things. The designers and I look at the finished model of the set, with beautifully crafted pieces of tiny furniture, along with full-color costume sketches and swatches of material, or character collages with images of clothing looks and possibilities. We talk through the play scene by scene one last time,
discussing transitions as the sound and lighting designers ask questions. We find a few more solutions now, putting off others until we get into rehearsal. Often, I feel wistful at this meeting, knowing that this phase of the process is coming to an end, and my collaboration with these designers will soon be eclipsed by the immediacy of my work with the actors.

We’ve come all the way from tossing unformed ideas around a room to creating a full and rich world that is literally right at our fingertips. But it’s still in miniature and still inanimate, waiting for the actors to inhabit it. As we move the little figures representing the characters from scene to scene, I feel that same child-like anticipation I did when the model was first revealed. These tiny two-dimensional cardboard figures are going to come to life in just a few days.
Actors
WHY HOLD AUDITIONS?

I have something of a crush on talented actors—I have ever since I was a little kid at my first play, and it hasn’t abated with the years. And I don’t think I’m alone in this: most audience members, if asked about a memorable production they had seen, would probably talk first about the impression the actors had left on them—maybe one actor in particular, in whose presence they felt a sort of magic. This magic can occur with little-known actors as well as famous ones, so it’s not about celebrity worship. It’s deeper and more mysterious and is one of the central reasons we attend live theater.

One of my goals in casting a play is to try to find actors who will have that effect on the audience. Since magic is subjective and personal, this means that I’m trying to find actors who move and stir and excite me, in the hopes that others will respond similarly. But the search happens in decidedly skewed circumstances. Usually, the director-actor relationship starts with an audition—a very one-sided context from which to launch this collaboration. Everything about the audition process emphasizes the power of the director over the actor, from the small amount of time usually allotted each actor, to the set-up of the room, to the other hopeful actors waiting outside as the auditioning actor enters and leaves.

Auditions are nobody’s favorite part of the process, but most actors try to approach them with a positive mind-set out of necessity. “There’s no way it could ever be a normal experience—that’s a given,” says actor David Barlow. “You just have to accept the fact that you’re not necessarily going to enjoy yourself.” Some actors truly hate them: “I think they’re heinous,” says veteran actor Ray Virta. But there’s no question that it’s an unusual way of life. As a little girl once said when asked what her parents did for
a living, “My daddy’s an architect and my mommy auditions.” (And this mother was a successful working actor.) Day in and day out, actors have to put themselves on the line emotionally, and then have a thick enough skin to not take it personally if they don’t get cast.

Although I know there are some directors who like auditions, I’m not one of them. On the plus side, they do provide a chance to meet new actors and learn more about the play and the characters as I hear scenes read. But very quickly, I find them draining, because I interact with so many talented people whom I’ll have to end up rejecting, and nerve-wracking, because so much is riding on finding the right actors. Though I always approach the audition process with a sense of anticipation, I feel bogged down and confused after a few long and inconclusive days of it. In the middle of it all I have the nagging sense that I’ll never find the right actors for this production, and the fact that it almost always turns out well in the end doesn’t mitigate my constantly unsettled feeling at the time.

So why have auditions at all? Isn’t there another way to cast a play? If nobody likes them, why do we put ourselves through this? I’ve had many conversations with actors over the years outside of auditions, in which they expressed their convictions that an audition reveals very little about an actor. “What are you looking for exactly,” they ask, “a performance, a result, this early in the process?”

I don’t expect or want to see a performance, but I do want to see an actor’s initial instincts about a role—his first take on it, his early connection to it. Seeing the actor’s work elsewhere, working on another play with him, or having a discussion about the role in question are all helpful in making this hugely important decision, but there’s nothing like actually experiencing an actor in a role. Like many directors, I’ve sometimes cast roles without auditioning actors, when the actor I wanted was unavailable to audition or well-known enough to be in an “offer only” status. Usually, this has worked out well, but when it occasionally hasn’t, I’ve always felt that if I’d had the chance to see the actor audition I wouldn’t have mistakenly cast him. Flawed as they are, auditions are the best way to get as much information as possible about how an actor might be in a particular role. And essential as it is to establish a trusting and positive collaboration with each actor down the road, the needs of the play come first—literally.

This is especially the case when the play is a new one. Understandably, playwrights feel that getting the right actors is paramount when heading into a first production. “I’m not in any way laissez faire about the casting
process,” says playwright Keith Bunin. “It’s the most important decision you make.” Michael Weller is even more vehement: “I’ll pull out and jeopardize the production to get the right person. It has to be right.”

**CASTING BY...**

Most of the productions I’ve directed—both Off Broadway and regional—have been cast out of New York City, where there are literally thousands of actors whom we could audition. Occasionally, I’ve directed for an acting company or a university production, where the range of options is much smaller. In those contexts, I probably won’t get an ideal cast, but then again, it’s far less hair-raising when there are only three or four actors who are potentially right for each role than when there are hundreds. While sometimes that means forcing a square peg into a round hole, it takes a lot of pressure off the need to find the **exact right** person for each role. It’s like a jigsaw puzzle in which you know all the pieces are there and it’s up to you to make them fit, rather than the much more overwhelming needle-in-a-haystack search an open casting process often seems to be.

In New York City, the casting director becomes my joined-at-the-hip ally in the search. In this sometimes thankless but enormously important job, he does all the legwork to set up the auditions: he holds open casting calls, attends countless productions, keeps exhaustive files of actors’ photos and resumes, and cultivates relationships with actors’ agents—all so the actors the director sees will be pre-screened, narrowing my search time down to several weeks rather than several months. (Like all directors, I sat through many open call auditions when I was younger, seeing hundreds and hundreds of actors, and found them discouraging beyond words. The ratio of un-castable actors to good ones seemed to me to be about fifty to one.)

I supply my own lists of actors as well, from files, programs, old casting sheets, and actors I’ve worked with before. But it’s the casting director’s job to keep thinking, searching, and bringing in more actors for me to see until I say the magic words: “I think we’ve found him.” The casting director supplies the actors for me to audition and consider, and I cast them. There’s sometimes a misconception about this, possibly based on the usual program credit “Casting by...” Once, a reviewer of a production I’d directed praised the casting director for selecting such brilliant actors.
NEEDLES IN A HAYSTACK

Heading into the long audition process for a professional production, I have to be as specific as possible about the qualities I’m looking for in each role. Writing up descriptions of the characters for the casting director to send to agents and actors always feels reductive to me. I jot down banalities like “a strong yet sensitive forty-five year old man,” but what I really want to say is, “I don’t know what I’m looking for—I’ll know the right actor when I see him.”

Of course, I’ve thought a lot about the characters by this time, throughout my solo pre-production work and design meetings. But it always feels theoretical until I begin to experience living actors in the roles. Ultimately, what I’m looking for is not to find an actor who fits all the preconceptions on my checklist, but to be surprised, caught off guard, stirred by the connection between the actor and the character. I first realized how important my intuitive response to an actor is when I was holding auditions for Eugene O’Neill’s Hughie my first year in New York, in my apartment because I couldn’t afford to rent space. Though the cat wandered through the room and the phone rang twice while one actor, J. R. Horne, was reading, nothing could distract me from the urgent need I felt to work with him and see him play the role. (And it was J. R.’s work in The Ballad of the Sad Café later that year that led me to director Stuart White and made me tangibly aware of the power of an entire cast of actors whose connection to their roles can make a production a never-to-be-forgotten experience.)

Nowadays, the casting director brings each actor into the rented rehearsal room one by one, while I sit at a table surrounded by photo headshots with resumes stapled to them and xeroxed scenes from the script (or “sides”), which I’ve chosen for their ability to reveal as much as possible about the actor in the role. It’s up to me, as director, to establish a good atmosphere—and not just for reasons of common civility. A conducive audition environment will help get me what I want from the process, which is an actor who is relaxed enough to show me his best work. “If there’s a feeling of fatigue or boredom when you walk into the audition room,” says actress Maggie Lacey, “that’s just miserable.”

I stand to shake hands and greet the actor, acknowledging our acquaintance if we’ve met already, trying not to be too effusive if I know him well. He’s all ready to jump in and begin, and interacting with him too much—exclaiming how great it is to see him, or asking him how his kids are doing—is not helpful to his upcoming audition. (For a long time,
I thought that the friendlier I could be, the more at ease it made the actor. Eventually, an actor I knew informed me otherwise.) If the actor asks me if I have any thoughts or instructions before he reads, I’ll always say, “I just want to get a sense of what your instincts are”—which is the absolute truth.

I introduce the actor to the reader, who is sitting off to the side facing away from me, ready to read the lines of the other characters in the scene. They shake hands briefly, then the actor stands in the middle of the room, pauses, and focuses for a moment. He looks like a trained athlete poised to compete. He launches into the scene, referring to the script but finding the physicality of the character as well, sometimes only using the reader to play out his pre-determined choices, sometimes letting subtle things he’s getting from him inform what he does in the moment.

Readers in auditions are usually eager young actors themselves, who are looking for experience and a chance to become better known. They’re brought in by the casting director, and for the most part they read simply and honestly, realizing that their job is to feed the actor. But sometimes a reader can get carried away and do too much “acting.” While casting Of Mice and Men, I had a reader who, in the heat of the moment, jumped up from his chair, ripped off his jacket, and threw it to the ground to the bewilderment of the auditioning actor. Occasionally, I’ve had to give a reader some guidance between auditions about listening better and making eye contact with the actors. I’ve also had readers who were so interesting (in a self-effacing way) that I’ve asked them to audition themselves.

I watch, listen, sense, and respond, rather than analyze, during first auditions. I want to have a purely intuitive experience of each actor, as the audience eventually will. I try not to dwell on physical characteristics, but instead get a holistic sense of the actor in the role and how he seems to connect with it. Although for some characters (such as Josie in A Moon for the Misbegotten or Lennie in Of Mice and Men) there are specific physical requirements that are spelled out in the dialogue, most of the time an exciting actor can wipe out my visual preconceptions of a character. I watch how each actor connects to the reader, since I’m looking to create an ensemble of actors who are flexible, spontaneous, and generous, and who can respond to fresh stimuli, from each other as well as from me.

I don’t work with actors when I first audition them, because trying to figure out what direction to give them will put me into an analytical frame of mind—right where I don’t want to be, at least for now. The analysis can come later. Many directors I know jump in with guidance at first auditions,
and on the whole I think that’s what actors prefer. “Taking an adjustment from a director makes it feel like a more worthwhile event, more like a collaboration,” says Maggie Lacey. Ivar Brogger agrees that “When you go in and read and they say ‘thank you’ and you go, you feel as if you’re in a game of twenty questions. I could do it a hundred different ways.”

But my first response is not guided by what choices the actor makes, since everything is still so preliminary—it’s much more intuitive than that. It hinges on whether I feel the chemistry between actor and character is exciting, whether his connection with the role brings it to life in some unique way, whether he belongs in the play-world, whether when he speaks and listens he illuminates the text for me. In a nutshell, does the prospect of the actor playing that character capture my imagination? Unfortunately, most of the time it doesn’t, which is one reason I find the audition process so draining.

The actor finishes reading the scene, and there’s a pause. “Thank you—good work,” I say. We chat for a few minutes, about the play or about his past work or people we know in common, and then I say, “Thanks for coming in.” We both know that he probably won’t be getting a callback, and now he has to pick up his briefcase or backpack, or she has to retrieve her purse, and head out the door. “Good luck with the project,” an actor sometimes says on his way out, as a way of acknowledging I know you won’t be casting me, but I don’t hold it against you.

It’s harder with an actor I do know, or may even have worked with. If I can tell from her audition that she’s not right for the role, I don’t want to come off as more enthusiastic than I feel about her chances of being cast in this particular part—but I may have a strong feeling that we will work together again down the road. How to strike the right balance as we say goodbye? I don’t want to hold out false hope, since “actors go over an audition like tea leaves, looking for a clue as to how it went,” in the words of one, but I do need to maintain contact on a human level. It’s a real tightrope that’s difficult for me to walk at times.

**PERSPECTIVE AND SURPRISES**

“I’m feeling that swampy morass I always feel at this stage,” I wrote in my journal once after several long days of first auditions. “Callbacks always provide perspective, and often surprises,” I added hopefully.

Boiling down the list of possibilities to just several actors for each role feels like a healthy step forward. There’s a quickening of the pace, because
I know that every actor who comes in now might be the right one, and my job is to do everything I can to get as much information as possible about how he would be in the role. Is there another scene he should read this time that will let me see different colors in his work? Is there an adjustment the casting director can pass along in advance through the actor’s agent, or should I wait to work with him until I see him face to face? Which actor or actors should I read him with? Or should I continue to use the reader? The work of casting begins to feel far more creative and full of possibilities.

Sometimes, the callbacks bring surprises that aren't welcome. “All the girls who had seemed so right looked very wrong in the harsh light of callbacks,” I wrote once about casting a teenager in a new play. Casting Of Mice and Men, the actor that both the casting director and I had counted on from first auditions as our Lennie was disappointing in callbacks, and I realized that he had the right quality but was not as good an actor as my wishful thinking had led me to believe. The casting director didn't agree with me—she thought I should grab this bird-in-the-hand—but I insisted that we had to keep looking. So we did.

Occasionally, there’s an actor who is even more exciting at callbacks than she was at first auditions, who stands out so much above everyone else that the choice is obvious. But more often, I find myself watching a series of excellent actors, each of whom has a strong connection to a different aspect of the role. This one really gets the humor—that one is more grounded. This one has a strong internal life—that one is able to play very active choices. As I give them adjustments and new choices to try, the audition process begins to feel more like a mini-rehearsal.

But I’m much less able to articulate what I’d like the actor to try in auditions than I am in rehearsal, especially if I don’t yet know him. We have no relationship to build on at this point—we don’t know how to speak each other’s language. In rehearsal, with the actor cast in the role and with more time to work, there’s a healthy give-and-take while we keep trying different choices, zeroing in gradually on one that feels right to us both. But in this constrained situation where the power is all on one side, the actor feels the pressure of doing what I ask him to do to show he’s “directable,” just as I feel the pressure of communicating clearly and with precision what I’d like him to try. I’ve heard actors say, “He wasn’t specific enough,” when talking about a director for whom they’d auditioned, or “She asked for something different but didn’t say what,” or “He talked so much that I lost track of what I was doing.” I can say first-hand that those traps are all hard to avoid. But
even when I feel I’m communicating clearly, that doesn’t mean the actor will be able to process my direction on the spot. As actress Molly Regan says, “I’m so nervous that I can’t make an adjustment. It’s too early in the process. I’m listening so hard I don’t really hear.”

But still, we have to try. Callbacks are not just for my own benefit: if the play is a new one, the playwright is a major presence throughout auditions. If I know of specific concerns the playwright has about an actor I like, or if the playwright likes an actor I feel lukewarm about, my work with the actor at callbacks becomes supremely important. And the artistic director has to approve the cast as well. Often a director himself, he has his own opinions of what I should be saying when I work with the actors. An artistic director at callbacks once whispered to me about a young girl we were reading, “Can you get her to be less JAP-y?” I sat there wondering how to translate that remark into something actable.

Most directors pair actors off to read with each other in callbacks, in order to see who’s a good match with whom. I used to think this was a crucial step in making final decisions, but it has its drawbacks. The artificiality of the set-up works against it: since the actors don’t yet know each other, it’s sort of a shotgun marriage. It can also be strangely competitive, even when they’re not up for the same role. Ivar Brogger feels that “It’s awkward if a director is clearly more interested in one actor than another,” while actor Tommy Schrider observes, “You can get into a chalking up of points, like, ‘He’s getting laughs, I need to do something funny.’”

This dynamic wouldn’t exist in rehearsal, with everyone already cast, working collaboratively with each other at their own pace and in their own way. But with both actors uncertain of their future in the project, very often tensions prevail and neither actor does his best work.

If one actor has been cast, I may ask him to read with the actors who are still auditioning, to ascertain the chemistry and the give-and-take between them. Usually actors appreciate the chance to get a first look at their potential fellow cast members and volunteer their time willingly, without offering or asking for opinions. But sometimes their desires get the better of them. When I was casting Desire Under the Elms years ago, the actor who had already been cast as Eben turned to me after a very attractive actress with whom he’d had a great rapport had just left the room and asked, “Mom, can I have that one?” He got his wish.
AN UNSETTLED TIME

The whole process of casting is a long, drawn-out roller coaster ride—usually a month or more of list making, phone calls, writing cast breakdowns, choosing sides for actors to read, screening resumes, first auditions, callbacks, decisions, and waiting to hear if the offers are accepted. It takes at least as long as the rehearsal process, the reward at the end of this shaky and uncertain time. I always reach a point where I feel that it’s not worth it—that the joy of rehearsing a play I love with a wonderful cast couldn’t possibly make up for the constantly unsettled feeling I have these days.

This is especially true when we get down to the wire and we’re still not cast: then the temptation to settle on actors I don’t feel thrilled about is almost overwhelming. I once mentioned to a board member of the Philadelphia Drama Guild, where I was directing *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, that I still didn’t have any of the three leads cast two weeks before rehearsals. She looked so shocked and whispered “Oh, my God” in such horrified tones that I hastened to reassure her that I had actors I could cast, but that I wanted to hold out and keep looking.

Sometimes after callbacks, there’s more than one actor who could be thrilling in a role—a good problem to have, but a tough call to make. At times like these, when everything seems to be riding on an impossible decision, reading through the play again with both actors in mind often illuminates the choice for me. But finally, casting is a leap of faith I have to make. Usually, the leap seems obvious in hindsight, such as the time I cast a young unknown actress a year out of graduate school to play all the women’s roles (Eve, Noah’s wife, and Mary) in *The Mystery Plays* at the Hartford Stage. Angela Bassett delighted and moved audiences with her luminous performance, leaving me to wonder why it was ever a difficult decision. But there’s no crystal ball to see into the near or far future when making the casting leap.

Of course, all this is stressful. It’s by far the most consequential decision, or series of them, that I’ll make, beyond choosing to direct the play in the first place. But I’m not in this alone, lonely as the process of making these decisions often feels: the casting director, assistant director, artistic director, and of course the playwright (when the play is new, and sometimes when it’s not) offer support, suggestions, ideas, and opinions—sometimes opposing ones. Grueling as auditions often are, they do provide a certain camaraderie among the people in the room.
If the play is a new one, it’s imperative that both the playwright and I feel excited about every actor in the cast. I once cast an actor the playwright had major concerns about, and he spent the entire process trying to get me to turn the actor we had cast into the one we hadn’t. And once I let a playwright veto an actor I would have cast, but then felt constant frustration in the limitations of the actor we did cast—his first choice. After those experiences, I’ve always insisted on continuing to search if either of us feels real reservations about an actor.

At those times when the search continues until we’re frighteningly close to rehearsals, I begin to get so obsessed with finding the right person that I start to see the character when I observe people crossing the street. I want to go up to a stranger who looks perfect for the part and say, “Pardon me, can you act?” Actually, I once cast someone I saw crossing the street, but it was a dog—Candy’s old, decrepit dog in *Of Mice and Men*. I’d been through several days of auditioning young, healthy dogs who were completely wrong for the role, but whose owners were so eager for them to be in a play that they matted and distressed their dogs’ fur and, in one case, taught the dog to walk in a halting way. I was convinced I’d never find the right dog, but then suddenly he walked right across my path while I sat in my car waiting for a light to change. He was old, lame, and had a sweet face. The production’s dramaturg, who was with me, jumped out of the car and accosted the dog’s surprised owners. “Pal” was wonderful in the role, and well worth the wait.

The right actor always reveals himself eventually, if I’m resourceful and patient and refuse to give in to panic. I’ve never regretted waiting and continuing the search (though it can be agonizing at the time), but I have regretted casting hastily out of fear. When I directed Lanford Wilson’s *Lemon Sky*, I actually went into rehearsal without the crucial role of the father cast, settled on someone I had reservations about four days later, decided he wasn’t going to work out three days after that (he anticipated me and quit), and called an actor back in again whom I had previously ruled out. He gave a better callback than he had the first time, and was excellent in the role.

Sometimes, after the decision is made and the offer is out, the actor turns down the role, causing temporary heartbreak. I have to decide whether my second choice is also the right actor (though in a different way, of course) or whether it’s back to the drawing board. And I have to get “the one that got away” out of my head as quickly as possible and focus on what
a new actor could bring to a role.

But once I finally have my cast assembled in the rehearsal hall, it all feels exhilaratingly worth it. I feel like a parent at the end of a long and emotional adoption process—these actors, it seems to me, were the destined ones all along.
GETTING ON THE PLANE

The week leading up to the first rehearsal feels like the countdown for a month-long trip to a foreign country. Am I really all ready or have I forgotten something major? Is there anything else I can solve in advance, or is it better to start the trip and respond to things along the way? Hovering over it all is the thought that this time a week from now, five days from now, two days from now, I’ll be in rehearsal! As if normal time will stop and I’ll be in an alternate reality—which is often how being in rehearsal does feel.

The day arrives, and I head towards the rehearsal hall with the fatalistic feeling of getting on board the plane. (“I never come to a first rehearsal without feeling a panic-stricken impulse to rush to the nearest airport and take a plane to the South Pole,” writes Margaret Webster.) (1) I step into the caffeinated buzz of the room, and there are all the actors, each so painstakingly cast, sitting around a large folding table with their scripts in front of them. I’ve been longing for this moment throughout the murky weeks of casting, feeling as if it would never happen, and here it finally is. It’s Christmas morning and we get to open the gifts.

The actors are nervous too, but they mask it well as they fill out forms, introduce themselves to each other, and catch up if they’ve worked together before. The designers are clustered around the set model, holding sketches or taping renderings to the wall; some of them chat with the technical staff or with actors whom they know. The dramaturg organizes a large pile of books and articles on another table; the artistic director moves from group to group shaking hands; the wardrobe supervisor gets the actors’ measurements; and the theater’s administrative staff settles into a large circle of chairs on the perimeter and watches the proceedings.
The stage manager and his assistant preside calmly over it all, answering questions, directing people to the bathrooms down the hall, and pointing out the abundant food and coffee on a nearby table.

If the play is a new one, all the energy in the room revolves around the playwright. Dressed in nice clothes and looking a little sleep-deprived, he clutches his copy of the script like a life-line. Everyone in the room is keenly aware of his presence but tries not to focus too intensively on him, the way we pretend not to notice when a celebrity is in the room.

At the appointed time, the stage manager quiets everyone, the concentric rings of people introduce themselves by name and function, the artistic director says a few official words of welcome and support, people smile and laugh—and everyone turns expectantly to me.

How much to talk? What to say? From my days as Mark Lamos’s assistant director and dramaturg, I know first-hand that some directors can speak brilliantly about the play at first rehearsal, with passion and wit and inspiration. I can’t—it’s all so momentous that my nerves get the better of me. As a young director, I used to read my prepared notes in a dry and lecture-ish way, sensing everyone’s discomfort. Now I let myself off the hook and simply speak spontaneously and very briefly; the playwright does the same, if he’s there. But brief is OK, I now realize: “You might as well be speaking Greek to me,” says Molly Regan about her inability to process anything that is said on this fraught day.

Images seem easier for people to absorb than words. The designers and I share the visual ideas of the production, while the actors peer at the little set model on its table, and study the costume sketches when they’re passed around. I watch them while they imagine themselves into this world we’ve created, and I feel a profound satisfaction as the designers and actors come together and begin to interact for the first time.

There’s a ten minute break, and then we finally get to the main event: the first read-through of the play. Like most directors, I try to take the pressure off the actors with comments such as “Take it easy,” or “Just read it for the sense of it”—but the first read-through always seems to take on an unpredictable life of its own. Some actors read almost at performance level; others peer into their scripts and mumble; some glance self-consciously at the circle of listeners. “I always feel that everyone’s wondering how I got cast,” says one actor; while another maintains, “I don’t like it when people don’t give you anything in the first reading. You got the job—make some choices.” I’ve come to realize that this read-through contains very little
useful information about what sort of guidance each actor will need from me down the road.

So why do we put ourselves through it? Why don’t we do something else on that first day, like march around the room or have a party, as Peter Brook only half-jokingly suggests in *The Empty Space*?

Appealing as that thought sometimes is, it would feel to me like going to the ocean ready to swim and then only dipping our toes into it. It may be a shock to the system to dive in and read the whole play through, but it’s a bracing one. Better to immerse ourselves thoroughly in this new element now, even if we become breathless and flail around while we do. We’ll have plenty of time to come up for air and do some swimming in the next couple of days and weeks.

When the play is new, this first read-through of the entire script is an essential step for the playwright, as he hears it read by the actors he helped to select. Most of the time, he listens with his head buried in his script, making an occasional note; the actors glance at him, wondering what he’s thinking about their work. A century ago, the playwright used to read the play aloud to the cast and director at first rehearsal: the grainy black-and-white photographs show Anton Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw, sitting at a large table holding the script open, surrounded by well-dressed actors posed in positions of attentive listening. I’m sure they felt the same unnerving sense of “being on parade” (as one actor puts it) that we all do.

We have a short and unstructured talk after the reading, the actors elect a deputy, and we head home, usually long before the time listed as “End of Day” on the stage manager’s schedule. “I love the sociability of the first day,” says Molly Regan, “but I leave feeling overwhelmed at all the work that has to be done. I’m caffeinated and sugar-shocked and on information overload.” And Boris McGiver feels that “It’s like going on a first date—you have to get through it to get to the second one.”

If the play is a new one, the playwright and I head out for an after-rehearsal debriefing over a cup of coffee, which will soon become a ritual. We talk about the actors and share new insights we each had about the play itself from the read-through. I often have a slightly lonely feeling after the first rehearsal of a previously-produced play; but when the playwright’s there, I have the prospect of a creative partner who will be at my side nearly every step of the way.
SOMETHING LARGER THAN OURSELVES

There’s a sense of relief in the air the next day, when we traipse into the much-less-crowded room for our second rehearsal and settle into our working home for the next three or four weeks. We sit around the table, usually in the same spots that we started in yesterday, with sharpened pencils, coffee cups, and water bottles on hand, and open our copies of the play again. Everyone has bound his or her script in a personalized way, ranging from black thesis binders to leather portfolios to brass fasteners.

We read, we talk, we laugh, we share insights and anecdotes. We raise a ton of questions: what happened before the play began, and between scenes? Who are these characters to each other, in the past and the present? Some of the answers are contained in the text, but many are interpretive choices that we’ll come to gradually. There’s a raw energy and eagerness to these early days as we inch towards a deeper grasp of the play, and the strangers who just met each other yesterday inch towards a collaborative relationship with each other. You can almost hear the subtext: everyone is wondering, “Who are these people and what’s this experience going to be like?”—what one actor calls “the unspoken assessing of everyone else.”

“Table work” is the term usually given to this period of rehearsal, before we get on our feet—a term I dislike because it sounds so dry and analytical, as if we’re studying the play rather than gearing up to inhabit its characters and its world. In fact, it’s up to me to ensure that table work doesn’t get too analytical, but instead has the spontaneity and playfulness and life that I want the eventual production to have. Like the host of a party, I have to be careful not to dominate or micro-manage everyone else’s interactions. While moving us along and keeping us focused in this initial phase of the work, I have to give everyone enough room to begin to discover and connect with each other, as actors, as characters, and as human beings.

We talk a lot about the play itself: our individual responses to it, what it means to us, why it speaks to us. The talk I avoided giving at the first rehearsal is threaded into these early days, as I share my passion for the play and my need to direct it in more depth and detail. Actors are eager for this: “I want to know what’s important to the director, why he wants to direct the play, why the playwright wrote it,” says Janet Zarish, “things that lift you into a larger world, a vision.”

We evoke the world of the play constantly. The designers have left by now, but the dramaturg is with us the entire first week, feeding our imaginations with stimuli of all kinds, while we try to grasp the play-world
tangibly and imagine ourselves into its midst. Sometimes, this means entering into a past time: when I directed Of Mice and Men, the stark and tactile quality of the photographs and articles about migrant workers in the Depression were so visceral that the world seemed to form itself around us. But the complex world of Alice Childress’s Wedding Band took more time and effort to assemble imaginatively. Each of the actors read a chapter of a non-fiction book about the Jim Crow South just after World War I and shared their responses to its powerful and harrowing stories with the rest of the group. If the play requires accents, this is the time to fold a dialect coach into the mix, along with DVD viewing and field trips—which are also a great way to enhance the sense of community we’re gradually beginning to feel.

Sometimes, we need to focus like a laser beam on a play’s language. A Shakespeare text will be clear to an audience only if we ourselves have a meticulous grasp of what it all means. That has to start now, before we’re on our feet. But like everything else in so-called table work, trying to figure out Shakespeare’s exact meaning, down to specific phrases and word choices, has to be fun, exciting, and juicy—an enjoyably challenging puzzle we’re collectively trying to solve rather than a burdensome chore before we get to the “good part.” It’s up to me to make sure that every phase of rehearsal is the good part.

If the world of the play has been created by the playwright out of whole cloth or based on a skewed reality, we try to grasp its rules and behavior, in a rehearsal-long process that will eventually result in our production’s style. “Style to me is just the adopted manners of the society you’re dealing with,” says classically-trained actor Ray Virta about the relationship between a play’s world and this much-misunderstood term. “Style is only about the world you live in,” Janet Zarish agrees, making the distinction that “You don’t put on something—you go into something.” Rather than imposing a style onto a play, we all set out to discover it in the course of the rehearsal process, starting in these early days of immersion. “Style” doesn’t preclude truthful acting, talking and listening, connection with others; in fact, says veteran actress Patricia Conolly, who has worked with Tyrone Guthrie and Laurence Olivier, “Style is more connection, if anything—so that you’re all connected by invisible threads, to the world of the play and each other.”

Throughout this immersion in the play’s world, the production designs are our constant allies: the sketches and images and research and set model give us a large visual world we can enter into, even as we continue to

Immersing Ourselves in the Play
fill it out. Knowing that the furniture in Joe Orton’s Loot had been designed all on casters, so that it could spin out of control as the play itself spins into dizzying farce, helped the actors realize where we’d be heading stylistically once we got on our feet. The size and starkness of the set design for The Greeks helped us grasp the plays’ raw power, while the human detail of the costume sketches kept us grounded in their humanity.

The goal of all of this immersion into the text and play-world, all of this life and laughter and emerging collaborative relationships, is to form a communal bond with the play. We all have our individual connections to it: mine has had the longest gestation period, but each actor also has a special link to the play, through his or her own character. But now I want to make sure we all have a collective grasp of it, passion for it, and need to bring it to life. As Ivar Brogger says, “We’re all better off if we’re serving something larger than ourselves.”

Establishing this dynamic now is essential for later on, when individual egos have to be put aside in order to serve the play: when it’s not a matter of my idea vs. your idea, but what our production of this play wants to become. And ultimately, what we’re trying to do is grasp the playwright’s vision, in a way that’s unique to us personally, as individuals and as a group. When the play is not a new one and the playwright isn’t there, we try to bring him into the room in any way we can: through sharing what we know of his need to write the play and through an increasingly close and comprehensive grasp of the text we’re bringing to life. My need to direct the play may be what brought everyone into the rehearsal room in the most immediate sense, but the playwright’s need to write it started it all. It’s crucial that we not lose sight of this, even when the writer is not physically present.

FROM THE HORSE’S MOUTH

When the playwright is present and the play is a new one that’s still evolving, we have the exciting possibility of posing our questions directly to him, so that “He can tell you what the play’s about—just right there from the horse’s mouth,” in the words of one actor. But actors are usually more eager for this kind of exchange than writers are: many playwrights (though not all) are a bit wary about discussing their need to write the play, or what they feel it’s fundamentally about. Writers tend to be more engaged in talking about the characters, though even in this area they sometimes back off. “Some playwrights are full of opinions—they’ll give you the last time you had a manicure,” says Molly Regan about the variety of ways writers
respond to the actors’ bombardment of questions. “But some will say ‘You know more about her than I do.’” There’s also a wide range in between, such as a playwright I worked with once who wanted the actors to create their characters’ past history themselves, but couldn’t stop herself from saying “No!” loud and clear when two actors mused aloud about whether they’d had a past romantic relationship. One playwright, echoing several others, says that when answering actors’ questions, he makes up a lot of the characters’ background on the spot. “I think it’s incumbent upon me to be available to the actors,” says Jeffrey Hatcher, “but table work is exhausting for the playwright because it’s all talk.”

But writers thrive on simply listening to the play again: leaning into the script, doling out small cuts and changes, taking notes about sections to work on at home or discuss with me later. “Just hearing it is invaluable,” says Neal Bell about how the actors’ instinctive early choices begin to transform the play into a three-dimensional experience. “Actors understand how a play works in a way that I can’t.”

The actors and I pencil in the changes we get from the playwright with a sense of anticipation about more rewrites to come—some of which we think we can spot ourselves. At some point in these early days, an actor will invariably say, “I don’t think this line is clear—couldn’t I say this instead...?” Sometimes, the suggestion is nuanced and perceptive; sometimes, the actor asks for a revision that is too bald and obvious. But insightful or not, I think it’s too soon for this kind of exchange. As Mary Gallagher says, “There’s at least a week when the playwright needs no suggestions. I need to hear them do it the way I wrote it and let me figure it out.”

An important part of my job, in facilitating communication between the playwright and actors, is to make sure everyone has the time and space to do his or her own work. “It’s the director’s job to not let the actors rewrite the play in the room,” says one playwright, a sentiment shared by many. But I also need to hold off on the playwright’s request for me to correct something the actor is trying that he regards as wrong, but which I see as a natural part of the experimental, trial-and-error process of rehearsal.

Some directors don’t let playwrights and actors talk directly to each other. I don’t subscribe to that because if I were to lay down that law, or even micro-manage their interaction by telling them what they can and can’t say to each other, there’d be an unhealthy tension in the room. But even with no constraints, the rehearsal environment is often more intense and less playful when the play is new and the playwright is present. This is
partly because of the playwright’s eagerness for us to get to the next stage of things, but also because we’re all so aware of the high stakes of this first-ever production.

AN INKLING OF THE JOURNEY

Even when the playwright is not there, there can be a disparity in the room between the talkers and the non-talkers, between the actors who love to discuss everything thoroughly and the more pensive ones whose work is internalized. In the early days of rehearsing Kenneth Lonergan’s This is Our Youth for a production in Philadelphia, two of my actors in this three-character play were eager to jump in with ideas and speculations, while the third would usually answer “I don’t know” to the questions I raised—meaning, I came to realize, I don’t know yet. “Sometimes I feel like I can’t talk so much till a little later,” Maggie Lacey explained to me more recently. “I start to mess up my own process if I say too much too soon, with an analytical English paper approach.” But some actors find that talk nourishes their instincts: as David Barlow, another actor in the same production, says, “I like sitting around a table and really talking but not making any decisions—batting the text around, not to hone in on results so much as ideas and associations.” When I directed Lemon Sky, Jeff Daniels was by far the quietest actor around the table, tolerating but not participating much in all the talk about past lives and shared history, which clearly stimulated the other actors. This contrast in actors’ approaches is apparent in the early days, and it’s a precursor of the entire process, when different actors thrive by working in different ways. So, now as later, it’s up to me to orchestrate this time so that it works for both: for the extroverted actor who wants to air his thoughts, and the introverted one who needs time to process all the stimuli. I have to let the talk flow, while making sure that it doesn’t get redundant or judgmental or overly analytical.

Because, while our connection to the play is becoming a collective one, each actor’s way into his or her character should be as private as he or she wants it to be. “There’s no linear process of how you crawl into a character,” says Janet Zarish. “It’s different every time, because some characters you connect to more than others.” Although I’ve given a lot of thought to each character’s journey in the play as I did my pre-production script analysis, I usually don’t talk about it in these first days of rehearsal because it can lead to the “analytical English paper approach” many actors guard against. Some are curious to hear my thoughts on their character’s
arc, as long as it’s only speculative and doesn’t preclude new discoveries or dictate how they have to play the role. “If it doesn’t have a responsibility to it, then I love it,” says Janet Zarish. “But if it tells me something about what I have to do, then I get really angry: you’ve got a picture and I have to fill that picture.” The bottom line, for many actors, is timing: “In the first week of rehearsal, a stated arc won’t fit me,” says Jane Fleiss. “In the third week, it helps everything fall into place.”

Some directors skip the table work phase of rehearsal and get the actors onto their feet with the text immediately, on the first or second day of rehearsal. There’s something to be said for this—it eliminates the danger of too much intellectualizing and forces everyone to go with instincts. This approach makes sense with certain kinds of plays, such as farces or some experimental new work in which the physical life is arguably more important than the text. But I find that a rich character-driven play always benefits in the long run if we take our time and get to thoroughly know the language, the characters, the play-world, and each other before we add the next dimension of being on our feet. “I do feel there can be too much talk at the table,” says Molly Regan about the difficulty of striking the right balance. But, she goes on to say, “I like table work when the scenes are elusive, cryptic, or thorny.”

“Table work constantly feeds my imagination,” says another actor—and that’s what we’re aiming for all along: table work that can invest the actors’ upcoming physicality with a lot more juice than if they got on their feet right away, with only a very sketchy sense of what their characters are saying. Letting the actors digest the language first makes for more exciting physicality down the road.

When is the right time to leave the table and get the actors onto their feet? Any time, without the text. Physical exercises to explore the characters or the play-world can be an exciting counterpoint to text work on the first or second day of rehearsal. But with the text, it usually takes three or four days for the actors to get grounded in the play, for its language to become more fluid in their mouths and its circumstances in their psyches. “It depends on the script,” one actor says, “but, if it’s stylistically demanding, it’s a relief not to have to think yet about what my arms and legs are doing.”

But when an actor’s arms and legs and entire body begin to become engaged physically, when a moment is so real to him that he has to reach out and grab another actor or pick up a tissue box on the table to stand in for an essential prop, then I know his character’s needs are ready to propel
him onto his feet. “It’s a purely visceral feeling,” says Tommy Schrider about the urge to get up, “when I feel I have an inkling of the journey, when I have the gist of each scene and how together they form the character’s story.” Or, as another actor says, “I know it’s time to break away from the table when I can’t stand being there any longer.”

We put the table away, and the actors sit in a circle and read the entire play through one more time without stopping. Sometimes, I enlarge the circle of chairs and suggest they experiment with physical proximity or distance while they read. I watch their connection with each other, their emerging physicality, their new impulses and discoveries coming out of these days of reading, talking, and bonding. This read-through is far more lively than the first one just a few days ago, and it’s illuminating to hear the whole play again in its entirety. “Table work” has yielded us some exciting moments, an overall passion and drive, and a sense of the characters’ roots. I’m starting to feel the rich life beneath the play’s surface that I long to experience as an audience member.

Now we’ll be moving beyond the comfortable confines of the table and chairs and adding the challenge of another dimension. But as Molly Regan says, “Table work never really stops—it just changes location.”
Chapter Seven

Getting It On Its Feet

“I love just moving for a while—moving and moving and eventually finding it” – Janet Zarish

PHYSICALITY VS. STAGING

The rehearsal space looks completely different when we arrive on the fourth or fifth day. Chairs and table are off to the sides, and the floor is covered with tape of all colors, representing the three-dimensional parts of the set. We stand around on the edges and watch while the stage manager and his assistant put the finishing touches on lines and stripes that define the playing space and what’s within it. It looks like a sports arena, and I feel like the coach of these players.

In the next couple of days, we’ll be putting the play “on its feet,” but right now I have only a very sketchy idea of what that might look like. The designers and I have come up with a carefully thought-out ground plan (or a number of them, if it’s a multi-scene play), which we hope and expect will lead to staging that’s dynamic and compelling. I have a few half-formed pictures of entrances and key moments in my mind. But the physical life of the play, and its eventual staging, will only really begin to take shape when I start to work in real time with living actors.

We sit and read the scene we’re about to work on one more time to familiarize ourselves with it again. I explain all the taped marks on the floor, using the model of the set as a reference. We joke and stall as long as we can. Finally I say, “OK—should we start? Everybody have their scripts?” The stage manager sits expectantly at a table facing the space, with a sharpened pencil poised over a copy of the ground plan, opposite the first page of his script. The actors have begun to get physical already, during the last read-through without the protective barrier of the table, or through the off-text exercises I do with a young or student cast. But it’s one thing to be physical in a circle of chairs or a wide-open space—it’s another thing for them to find themselves on the actual ground plan with scripts in hand. Now they
have to talk the talk and walk the walk at the same time. For some reason, this feels impossible at first, like the pat-your-head-while-you-rub-your-stomach challenge we used to try as kids. “I get on my feet and I feel like an alien, like I don’t belong in this world,” says Tommy Schrider about this moment in the process. Lizbeth Mackay agrees, “It’s just so awkward! The table is safe—I want to hang onto it and my cup of coffee forever.”

I always feel thrown as well by the new configuration of the workspace. Suddenly, the actors are up there on a taped ground plan of the set, and I’m out here, sitting in for the audience. Even if the distance that separates us is only a few feet (and it’s rarely more in the usual cramped rehearsal space), psychologically it’s a big gulf. It’s a very tangible reminder that audiences will be seeing this in a few weeks, and the urge to get results right away can be hard to resist.

But if I can create an environment in which we first explore physicality, and later on set the actual staging, we’ll make unexpected discoveries and the end results will be all the richer. If the actors have a vivid grasp of the play-world and a preliminary feel for why their characters enter into it—what they need from each other in the most immediate sense—the raw physicality that will occur spontaneously will be much more exciting than what I might have cooked up at home the night before, staring at the script and a ground plan.

So rather than doling out staging, I help the actors get grounded in this time and place in their characters’ lives, suggest a way to start the scene, and then turn them loose and see what happens. I watch what they’re doing and try not to think about “fixing it.” Instead, after they’ve gone through it once, we go back and experiment with immediate prior circumstances (what happened just before the scene began), with entrances, and even with the ground plan. Sometimes, I’ll throw a suggestion at them that contains a physical prompt. But it’s way too soon to call any of this staging.

Physicality and staging are related, but they’re not the same. Physicality is activated from within by the actor; staging (or blocking) is imposed from without by the director. Physicality is usually intuitive, raw, and messy, while staging answers to needs of clarity, composition, and stage picture. Physicality opens up possibilities, but staging determines interpretation. Later on in the rehearsal process, when I solidify the staging, my raw material will be the actors’ physicality from these exploratory rehearsals. But the staging follows the physicality, instead of leading it.

Most actors thrive on this early physical freedom. “I love just moving
for a while,” says Janet Zarish, “moving and moving and eventually finding it.” Molly Regan says that, during the early days of being on her feet, she wants to be given the leeway to gradually find her relationship to her surroundings: “What does everything in the room mean to me?” “There are some roles you have an innate feeling for,” Tommy Schrider observes about his need for breathing room in these first walking-and-talking rehearsals, “and some you have to find more gradually. You wait for those moments of clarity and inspiration in the doing of it, while moving in the space.”

Actors making discoveries on their feet for the first time balk at being hemmed in by overly proscriptive staging so early in the process. “When the staging gets too specific too soon, it drives me up a wall, because I don’t know what I’m doing yet,” Molly Regan states, echoing many. “It has to be found gradually, through trial-and-error.” Yes, it can look chaotic for a while, but then “messiness can make things electric,” says David Barlow. And electricity, not tidiness, is what we're trying to generate.

This trial-and-error way of approaching staging is comparatively recent. Up until about forty years ago, a director thought up all the staging of a play well in advance of the first rehearsal and recorded it in his script, often down to the exact line on which an actor should make a move, and when and how he should pick up a prop. All of this was given to the actors in the first days of rehearsal, when it was duly noted in their scripts and memorized along with their lines—subject to change, of course, but considered the director’s province as the text was the playwright’s. Harold Clurman used to plan the staging on the blank pages opposite each page of the script, with three columns recording the characters’ “actions, adjustments, and activities,” as he termed them. Margaret Webster wrote about her fear of losing her prompt-book for Hamlet prior to rehearsals, in which all her preliminary ideas including staging were recorded, and how just a week into rehearsal all those moves had been written into the actors’ scripts.

Defining the staging when we’re first on our feet would certainly provide everyone (myself included) with a comfortable safety net, a sense of security that we have solid ground beneath our feet. But comfort doesn’t lead to exciting theater. Risk and uncertainty are more apt to do that, difficult as it is to live with them at the time.
TO STAGE OR NOT TO STAGE

As a young director, it took me some time to have the confidence not to stage right away. When I started directing in college, I thought I was supposed to be the unquestioned authority who told everyone where to go and what to do, a sort of auteur who had all the answers up front—a role that scared me because it never fit with how I actually felt. I staged plays meticulously in the first days of rehearsal with pre-determined moves (which my equally inexperienced actors didn’t seem to mind) and spent the rest of the rehearsal time correcting line readings and asking for more energy. I think most laymen picture a director in this way. Non-theater friends of mine have always asked me, “So have you thought up all the staging yet?” when I’m about to go into rehearsal.

But a year out of college, when I was directing my first New York production (a short two character piece I’d adapted from the works of Shaw, in a directors’ festival I paid $25 to participate in), one of my actors told me that I was being too dictatorial, that she wanted time to explore and experiment before we set the staging. Because I was in awe of this actress, who was three years older than me and had been a star in our college theater department, I backed off completely. I let her find both staging and acting choices on her own, giving her very little guidance, physical or otherwise, until late in the process. Exciting things began to happen, and I realized the possibilities of this way of working.

But when I tried to work the same way with Shakespeare’s Coriolanus a few months later, the work was disjointed and literally all over the map. Each actor explored physicality in his own way. Some would charge around energetically, some would remain very still and rooted, and some would wander dreamily through the space. To make matters more complicated, I soon realized that not all the actors wanted this freedom: some preferred to be staged by me up front and then find their own creative leeway within that framework. This was more apt to be the case with older actors, raised in the traditional way of rehearsing a play, than with younger ones, I noticed. But even the actors who were most eager to find their own physicality would sometimes get stuck and suddenly look at me in frustration, as if I wasn’t doing my job. I stepped in, gave everyone line-by-line instructions about where to move, and ended up with a very conventionally staged production.

I finally began to find the balance between giving the actors too much freedom and exerting too much control when I directed Eugene O’Neill’s
Why I had suddenly become such a martinet. The trick in first putting any of the big group scenes in the third week, the actor playing Othello asked me only the six leading actors for the first two weeks, and, when I began staging, why the actors kept distracting me with their own ideas, until I realized that a more organic process of finding physicality and the choreographic method of staging worked best for each segment in the play, cleaned up some moments and clarified others. But the raw material I used in this staging had all been generated by the actors, while I guided them towards high-stakes needs that led to dynamic interaction with each other. The staging, though simple, was organic, and it had a visceral excitement and surprise to it that was a direct product of our work together.

My problems with Coriolanus had something to do with the nature of the play: a multi-character epic, as opposed to a small cast psychological piece. The more actors there are onstage, the more I feel the need to loosely stage something first, and then explore within that framework—although I tried for years to apply the more organic method to large cast scenes and plays. Working on Iphigenia in Taurus, part of the nine-play cycle The Greeks, I tried everything I could think of to physically activate the nine actresses in the chorus without actually staging them. Eventually, my co-director (and boss) Mark Lamos stepped in at my request and effortlessly choreographed them into patterns that told the story powerfully. I learned from Mark how to quickly put a multi-character scene on its feet, and then work out the details more organically in subsequent rehearsals.

For the most part, actors who want leeway to explore still accept this more choreographic way of working. “You always have to stage large cast scenes up front, and then change them eight times,” says one actor; although another maintains that even in crowd scenes, if everyone knows what his or her character is trying to do, “your job is simply to herd the cats.” But both the actors and I sometimes find it difficult to switch gears between the more organic process of finding physicality and the choreographic method of staging—especially when a play has different scenes that call for both approaches. Staging the complicated banquet scene in Macbeth, I wondered why the actors kept distracting me with their own ideas, until I realized that their input was the consequence of the collaborative environment I’d set up. In a production of Othello, I had the luxury of working on small scenes with only the six leading actors for the first two weeks, and, when I began staging the big group scenes in the third week, the actor playing Othello asked me why I had suddenly become such a martinet. The trick in first putting any
scene on its feet is to find the balance between too much control, which limits the life onstage, and too much leeway, which will generate life but no framework in which to hold it.

Sometimes the pendulum swings too far, towards either control or leeway. Working on the highly-charged final scene of a new play, in which all five of the play’s characters are present, I was so focused on putting it sketchily on its feet so we could begin to work within that framework that I missed a crucial moment found instinctively by the actors playing the two main characters. They both felt they’d had an epiphany and turned to me to help them identify what they’d discovered. But I’d been so intent on the staging that I hadn’t seen what had happened between them. I realized I should have approached it as a more intimate scene and let the staging remain messy for a while.

Sometimes, I’ve given the actors leeway, and then realized we were going down a path that wouldn’t help us find the play’s style. Putting Joe Orton’s dark farce *Loot* on its feet, my approach veered back and forth between too little guidance, which led to naturalistic choices from the actors, and too much control, when I staged them rigidly in over-the-top physicality that wasn’t especially exciting or funny. Eventually, as they became more grounded in the play’s extreme circumstances, they began to push the envelope themselves and generated hilarious stuff, which I edited and shaped later. This also could have happened with early off-text work to establish a physical vocabulary that the actors could then have used spontaneously, on their feet with the text.

Fights and lovemaking onstage have their own special challenges. For obvious reasons, I can’t let the actors be completely spontaneous when we first get on our feet with them. Actors have their own built-in protective mechanisms when it comes to onstage intimacy. “I have a cold—can we just hug for now and kiss later?” is a request I’ve heard more times than I can count, and one that I’m always happy to oblige, since once they know their characters (and each other) better they’ll be far more relaxed about it. And when a scene calls for violence, I need to bring in the expert fight director and fold him into the mix early on as we begin to grasp the scene’s dynamics, so that the fight he eventually choreographs will grow out of the characters’ interaction, rather than being imposed on it. Violence and lovemaking both require an enormous amount of trust between actors, and that has to build up gradually over time. In the meantime, we sketch it out with a lot of playfulness and joking, all of which provides a healthy
foundation for the work ahead.

Part of the challenge is that there are as many different kinds of actors as there are plays and scenes, and different ones need different approaches from me. The ongoing process of figuring out how best to work with each actor is intense and draining, like a pas de deux that I have to perform simultaneously with every actor in the rehearsal hall. Plus, everything keeps changing, as an actor who was working independently one moment suddenly needs help from me. “Let’s see, what happens now?” I mused aloud once, while five actors and I worked our way through a complex scene in Brian Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa. “What happens now,” said one of the actors, “is the director blocks us!” She was kidding me, but she also meant it. So for a while I gave her staging and let the others find it more organically, until once again she wanted the freedom to find it herself.

But even at those times when finding the physicality is not so democratic, it’s important for me to stay open to what’s going on in the room in front of me. In my nightly preparation for rehearsal, I may think more visually about some scenes than others, but still I rely on actor discoveries in the moment to fuel my work. The more grounded they can all be in the space and what their characters need from each other, the more the early physicality (however it’s found) will be filled from within rather than imposed from without. Staging is invariably more exciting when found in the rehearsal’s heat of the moment, than in my solo work on the text.

In The Empty Space, Peter Brook tells of his attempts to work out the complicated staging ahead of time for a large group scene in his first Shakespeare production, Love’s Labors Lost. After giving the cast the meticulous moves he’d recorded in his script, nothing worked right the first time they tried the entrance, and he faced the choice of either putting them through the prepared moves again or improvising new ones based on what was happening in front of him. “I stopped, and walked away from my book, in amongst the actors, and I have never looked at a written plan since;” he writes. (1) Those lines are underlined many times in my copy of the book.

**THEIR FIRST DRAFT**

When the play is a new one and the playwright is part of the process, the early days of physicality are probably a good time for him to take a break from rehearsal. “It’s the equivalent of their first draft, and I wouldn’t want them watching me;” says Donald Margulies, agreeing about the need to give actors and director some time and space when they first get on
their feet. The writer has an image in his head of what it should look like, and this early experimenting doesn’t resemble it in the least. While some playwrights are relaxed enough to enjoy these awkward early days of trial-and-error physicality, and even gain insights from them, more often than not it makes the writer anxious and the actors self-conscious.

“We were just jumping in, trying to create behavior,” says Molly Regan about the first walking-and-talking rehearsals with the playwright in the room, “but we’d see the writer pacing back and forth, already knowing that’s not what he envisioned. And I had a sense of ‘Whew’ when he left.”

I feel a sense of relief myself, when we can work on our feet without the playwright watching and waiting to see some results. “She wants visible work, progress, moving forward,” I wrote once about a playwright who clearly wanted me to just go ahead and stage the damn thing. “And I see her point. But the actors are the ones who’ll be up there and they need a chance to get to where she already is.” Most playwrights understand and accept this. As Neal Bell says, “It’s important for the playwright to be at as many rehearsals as possible, though there’s also a time to go away for a while and let everyone play.”

But everyone has to play on a carefully thought-out playground, and finding exciting staging out of the characters’ needs and physicality depends on having a dynamic ground plan to work on. It takes me a couple of days to adjust to working in its actual scale with real human beings, instead of looking at little figurines on the model. Often, the ground plan becomes my scapegoat for the unsettled and awkward feeling of those first few days on our feet. Though the set designer and I have considered everything about it on paper and with the model, I’m convinced we’ve made a colossal mistake when I see it in action. I think it’s too big or too small, too flat or too deep, too cluttered or too minimal; the furniture feels placed wrong, the entrances seem to make no sense. Luckily, I’ve learned over the years not to call the set designer in a panic that first night but to wait a few days, and, like any new environment, the ground plan reveals how best to use it as it becomes more familiar. After we get through the entire play on our feet, there are always some adjustments that need to be made to it. The set designer comes in and watches us work so that he can sign off on the changes, or suggest different ones.

By the end of this stage of rehearsal (usually three or four days of quick and intense work), the play is roughly on its feet, if not exactly staged. The actors can now pat their heads while they rub their stomachs, walking
and talking in the space with more ease and confidence than they felt a few days ago. We’ve all acquired an essential three-dimensional sense of what’s happening in each scene, the characters’ basic needs and the scenes’ events. I have a firmer grasp of which scenes are apt to be the most challenging, and why, in the next phase of rehearsal.

What’s been generated is deliberately sketchy, as it would have to be, done at this quick pace and with actors still holding scripts. The stage manager has been busy recording all the “blocking” in those few intense days, copying down all the raw and impulsive physicality the actors discover and spontaneous physical prompts I throw at them. I’m tempted to tell the stage manager to lay in an extra supply of erasers, because everything will undoubtedly change many times as we now begin to work our way through the play again several more times, each time more slowly and painstakingly what we have now is the equivalent of a rough sketch, ready for layers of color, texture, and detail to be added to it. But the layering will happen in a decidedly non-linear way.
Chapter Eight

Conducting Experiments

“If you make decisions too soon, you’ll never find the values.”

– Molly Regan

“You have to have an adolescence with a new play—you have to reject it before you can embrace it.” – Judith Ivey

MINING FOR GOLD

The instincts of my actors are the sharpest tools I have, when I work to open up and dig into the play in the second week of rehearsal. No matter how well I know it or how much I study it at home, their work from inside the characters can illuminate aspects of the play that I can’t reach on my own, from my outside vantage point. This is not to say that my pre-production work doesn’t come into play in rehearsal—it does. But I have to make sure that I use it in tandem with the actors’ instincts, and that my pre-rehearsal ideas don’t stifle what’s happening in the moment. An actor’s impulses are fleeting, as are mine. They can easily be lost if we don’t seize onto them, try them out, and work with them as we enter this highly experimental stage of rehearsal.

My cell biologist sister says that scientists don’t always work from a hypothesis: sometimes, they simply embark on a series of experiments around a particular issue and “mine for gold,” as they call it. “If you form too tight a hypothesis, you might miss something really interesting,” she says. In the second week of rehearsal, I often put my pre-production hypotheses on the back burner for now, while the actors and I mine for gold.

We go back to the beginning of the play and work our way through it more gradually this time, stopping and starting more often as we experiment with the specific circumstances of each scene, what the characters need from each other, and how they go about getting it. We make no assumptions and try to stay open to each others’ impulses and ideas while we grope our way forward. And we acknowledge that, even though we’re approaching the
midway point of our rehearsals, nothing is definite yet.

But groping is not a very comfortable state of being, especially for a young director who hates to admit she doesn't have all the answers. Years ago, while paying lip service to keeping our options open, I would start defining and setting moments very specifically in the second week of rehearsal. I tried to inject meticulous detail into every scene in Of Mice and Men, to the utter exhaustion of everyone, myself included—always a sign that the work is on the wrong track. The stage manager suggested that I work more sketchily at this stage, but I shrugged her off. “We’re two and a half weeks away from tech rehearsals,” I told her, “there’s an enormous amount of work to do, and the actors can’t seem to remember half of what I give them anyway.” When one of the lead actors made the same request, I realized finally that they simply couldn’t retain all my detailed direction this soon in the process. They needed the time and space to find more on their own for now. When I gave them overall guidance, instead of meticulous instructions, the work breathed better and we all made new discoveries.

But just a few months later, directing the Los Angeles-area premiere of Lanford Wilson’s Angels Fall, I was again trying to pin down moments too soon, this time because a short rehearsal period on a high-profile production was making me anxious to see some early results. But one of the actors told me that my stopping him at practically every line made him feel tentative, and that a lot of the detail would take care of itself if we worked on longer stretches at a time. So I postponed my meticulous direction, and found out he was right. When the time came to work “moment to moment,” many of the moments I was trying to carve out earlier (and some that I wouldn’t have expected) had been found intuitively by the actors, under my less controlling guidance.

Later on in the process, “I don’t mind being told ‘this moment isn’t working,’” says Molly Regan, “but early on it needs to be large and general. If you make decisions too soon, you’ll never find the values.” Other actors concur. They feel that many directors are too quick to stop their exploration to tell them they’re going down a dead-end street, so to speak. As various actors put it:

“An actor’s wind is taken out of his sails if he’s not allowed to try things.” – Ivar Brogger

“I don’t want a director to be making choices for me before I’ve gotten to something myself. I want the spirit to be that we’re discovering this together.” – Tommy Schrider
“Sometimes an actor can try something that’s ultimately wrong, but there’s something in there that needs to be explored. It may not be the right choice, but I’d like to explore the impulse that led to it.” – Maggie Lacey

Groping towards the truth of a scene is a messy and often confusing process, but as director I need to have the confidence to loosen my grip on the controls, to allow the actors and myself to be in “a situation of unknowability,” in the words of David Barlow. Yes, the clock is ticking and looking at the calendar is scary, but definitive choices can and will come later. In fact, it takes the burden off all of us to acknowledge that no one is expected to have the answers yet, that the mysteries of the play have yet to reveal themselves fully, that everything is still an experiment. “I want to sense that things can open up and get dangerous and risky,” says Janet Zarish, “and that the person in charge is comfortable with that and welcomes it.”

So what is my role at this phase of rehearsals, once an early draft is on its feet, but before I zero in and make it all highly specific? How exactly does the mining for gold occur?

Essentially, I run the experiments. I make sure that the actors are grounded in the space and circumstances of every scene. I work with each of them while we try different needs (or intentions or objectives—what their characters want) and actions (or tactics—how their characters pursue those needs). I ask them to stay connected to each other, and I register when something alive and electric happens—when we strike gold. I listen closely to the text, respond to what I’m hearing and seeing, come up with suggestions for new experiments, and let them do plenty of their own. I often feel as if we’re not making much linear progress in this phase of rehearsal. It’s all highly intuitive. But then, so is good science, my sister tells me.

THE LANGUAGE OF VERBS

Needs—objectives—intentions—actions—tactics—active choices—positive needs—I feel like a broken record sometimes (and I know that analogy dates me) when I try to convey to my student directors how important these are. They’re how the actors and I communicate with each other; they’re the language of rehearsal. “But isn’t that just for naturalism?” students have asked me. But is there ever a character onstage, in any style of play, who doesn’t want something? The characters’ needs, whether they’re linear or absurdist or expressed in heightened language, are what drive the play—what provide it with a story. No needs, no story: it’s as
simple as that.

Of course, I was once one of those student directors questioning all that terminology. It simply didn't interest me: it was the actors' job, not mine, I thought, to figure out all that Stanislavsky needs and actions stuff. As director, I had a strong sense of what the tone or feeling of a scene should be, and I directed the actors accordingly, using adjectives instead of verbs. Often, I knew what they were doing wrong, so I would give them corrections, telling them to be “more intense” or “not so angry” or “more energetic.”

Then, about a year out of college, working as a directing intern for a production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, I had an epiphany one day at rehearsal. John Proctor was shouting at Deputy Governor Danforth in the courtroom scene, and I wondered why the director didn't just tell him to stop doing that and instead speak with the quiet intensity that (it seemed obvious to me) was called for. Then I realized that the actor would probably want to know why. The reason, I discovered when I thought about it, was that Proctor was trying to save his wife, and he couldn't achieve that by losing control towards the person he needed to convince of her innocence.

*Try to save your wife.* There was something much more powerful in the verbs try and save than in all the corrections and adjectives I habitually used when directing. *Stop shouting* would only lower the decibels; *Speak with quiet intensity* might manufacture the right result, but it would be empty unless the actor knew why. *Try to save your wife—Try to convince him of her innocence*—those were specific directions that would give the actor some leeway while he came up with his own ways to pursue them. Maybe it would result in him speaking with quiet intensity, but it would be his own quiet intensity, which he himself had discovered in the moment. Or maybe he would come up with something even more exciting while pursuing that need.

This epiphany also carried in it the seeds of another revelation that took me longer to realize: that a character doing something to another character is a low-stakes choice, and not nearly as compelling as a character needing something from the other. If a character is only doing something to someone, as the actor playing Proctor was when scolding Danforth, he can achieve it easily, while remaining distanced, uninvolved, even judgmental. But to want something from someone else immediately puts both characters in a more communicative relationship, because whether or not either one is successful in pursuing his needs depends on their connection. It forces an actor to try different tactics or actions, which leads to greater variety and
more interesting dynamics within the scene; and the unpredictability of the outcome raises the stakes for both characters, providing greater urgency and excitement.

For a while, this new way of speaking in rehearsal took real effort on my part. As with any foreign language in which you’re mentally translating while trying to express yourself, I was self-conscious and awkward with it at first. I had to use a sort of trick, in which I would rewind the result in my head, as I had with the scene in The Crucible, and ask myself why this choice felt right to me. I would try to put the image I had into words, which usually first came out as an adjective or adverb, and then I would translate that into a verb that I would suggest the actor try. In the actor’s hands, the verb evolved into something more personal and compelling than if I had simply dictated the result I wanted to see. Gradually, I realized that this new foreign language of verbs was coming to me more easily, and eventually I found it hard to speak in any other way, once I crossed the border of the rehearsal room.

**CONNECTION AND COURSE CORRECTION**

The famous phrase “Only connect” epitomizes for me one of the basic necessities of acting. I look for actors who can connect when I cast a play: to their characters, the play-world, the play’s circumstances—and each other. In rehearsal, I guide and facilitate their inter-connection, from my early around-the-table requests that the actors look up from their scripts in order to talk and listen, to my late preview note that they maintain eye contact at a crucial moment. Student actors especially need to be reconnected. Self-consciousness often makes them bury their noses in their scripts, and (once they’re off book) self-protection makes them turn away from each other at uncomfortable moments—exactly the moments when they should stay connected in order to live through the discomfort and act on it. That, not self-protection, is what makes a performance alive and compelling.

Even seasoned actors can become disconnected once they get on their feet, because of the juggling act of walking and talking. Usually, the communication returns once they get acclimated, but if it doesn’t, it’s up to me to restore it. An actor I worked with recently, who had been wonderfully communicative and sensitive in early table work, acquired such an ebullient energy when he got onto his feet that it began to feel as if he was saying words in the general direction of the others, instead of actually communicating with them. So my job was to remind him to really talk and
really listen, instead of just going through the motions. Another actor in the same production was a good listener but essentially passive, so I urged her to act on her own initiative more and play strong needs herself, while staying open to the others. A third actor had a tendency to play so-called “negative actions,” such as trying to drive someone from the room—low-stakes needs that, because of their lack of connection to the other character, don’t lead the scene into new territory and aren’t very compelling to watch. So we worked together to find positive ones, like making sure the other character hears what she’s trying to say—needs that attempt to increase the communication rather than end it.

Actors rarely object when I ask them to make these necessary course corrections. While they may be wary of a director stifling their impulses, they appreciate it when they’re given the guidance they need to stay on track while they work. “If I feel like I’m floating or drowning and the director says ‘Keep going,’ that’s annoying,” says Tommy Schrider. “I want to be prodded, and for a director to focus my energies.”

“No director injects a performance,” writes Peter Brook. “At best a director enables an actor to reveal his own performance, that he might otherwise have blocked for himself.” (1) Removing obstacles that block an actor’s instincts and ability to connect is a major part of my job in this phase of rehearsal.

OBOES AND VIOLINS

No two actors are alike, and it’s up to me to nurture each one’s unique connection to a role at this experimental stage, while making sure he or she is on track towards fulfilling the character’s function in the play. In a production of Shakespeare’s Richard III, which I directed at the Juilliard School, the role of Lady Anne had been double cast with two actresses who couldn’t have been more different from each other. One was girlish, sweet, and vulnerable, while the other was womanly, intense, and volatile. Given the situation, I wondered, should I “inject” their work and try to make them give the same performance, or should I guide them as each found her own way into the role? Luckily, the actor playing Richard was game and flexible, open to exploring the two different versions of the scene that would clearly emerge, if I gave these two contrasting actresses room to experiment.

We held separate rehearsals, and I asked them not to watch each other until late in the process. Lady Anne has only one major scene, which starts with her accusing Richard of murdering her husband and ends with her
giving in to his advances. One of the actresses (the sweet one) needed my guidance to pursue more active needs, to go after Richard more assertively—otherwise her giving in to him by the scene’s end would be too predictable, too much of a foregone conclusion. The other actress had no problem being assertive, but her eventual yielding to him was unconvincing. So my job was to make sure she was genuinely listening and responding to Richard’s pleas. Though the two versions of the scene we ended up with told the same basic story, the chemistry onstage couldn’t have been more different. The girlish Lady Anne seemed to be looking for a father-figure in Richard, while the more womanly one had a far more sexual need for him. As my directing mentor Mark Lamos once said about actors, “You can’t turn an oboe into a violin”—nor would you want to, for the good of the production. It’s up to me as director to enable everyone’s individuality to blossom fully, and to use it to its maximum capacity to tell the story of the play in as exciting a way as possible.

Just as there’s no “one-size-fits-all” approach to directing actors who may vary widely in age, training, experience, and personality, there’s also no one “right way” to direct one individual actor. Each time an actor approaches a new role, he goes back to the drawing board, and his process can change dramatically, depending on the role’s demands. When I directed Judith Ivey in Women on Fire, a one-woman piece by Irene O’Garden composed of twelve monologues portraying a wide range of characters, her work on each separate role was as different as the characters themselves. Some of them she approached from the outside in, jumping into the character’s accent and physicality, and then filling in the inner life; some she started with a quiet and nuanced grasp of the character’s needs, and then found the externals more organically. My direction of her was tailored to each separate process, and included helping her make the imaginary characters to whom she was speaking in each case as three-dimensional to her as if she was playing opposite another actor.

THE PLAYWRIGHT EXPERIMENTS

But the actors and I may not be the only ones who are experimenting. When the play is new, this time in the process can be enormously beneficial for the writer, while he watches us dig into and unpack each scene in the play, and tries new revisions based on what he’s seeing. If he’s been away for a while, during our first walking-and-talking rehearsals, he has new perspective on his return. But there are some playwrights who feel it’s
necessary for their own writing process to be there at every stage, including the awkward ones. “I’ve done the thing where I go away for a week after table work, and I find that actually that’s not helpful,” says playwright Keith Bunin. “You learn as a writer what’s wrong with the thing much more if you watch the actors struggling through a scene.”

I’ve never required a playwright’s absence, but I’ve certainly suggested it—not only to enable the actors to work more freely, but also so that they “can say things in rehearsal that I couldn’t say if the playwright is there,” according to Molly Regan. “I can express frustration, I can get it out in shorthand terms and don’t have to watch my syntax and be careful.”

“You’re robbing the actor of the process if the playwright hangs out all the time,” says Judith Ivey, who has both acted in and directed new plays. “If the playwright is sitting there, you don’t express ‘I hate this moment.’ You have to have an adolescence with the play—you have to reject it before you can embrace it.”

So this stage of rehearsals, past the awkward adolescence but before definitive choices are made, is the best time for the playwright to rejoin us—there’s still plenty of struggling for him to see while we work in our trial-and-error way. And it’s essential that I accord the writer the same space and time to experiment that I give the actors—that he too feels there is a safe environment in which he can grope his way forward and is not expected to produce instant results as he rewrites.

Maybe because the writer’s work is printed on the page, as opposed to the ephemeral work of the actors, I found it hard as a young director to treat it as something evolving rather than fixed. When a playwright brought in an eagerly-awaited revision of her final scene some years ago, the actors and I dropped everything we were doing to read it aloud—as we always do when a new piece of writing comes in. When the actors finished the scene, and the stage manager said, “End of Play,” there was a silence. “Well, I don’t think it works,” I finally sighed. The playwright was furious with me. “Do you realize you undermined it in front of the whole cast?” she asked me after rehearsal. “Now they’ll never trust it because they know that you don’t.” She was right. The public way I had completely rejected the revision forced her to keep writing without a real grasp of what it was she had just written.

But I’ve found it can be equally detrimental to praise a new scene too much. I’ve been known to gush, “You’re going to love this!” to the actors about a rewrite I’ve read in advance, only to realize afterwards that
it couldn’t possibly live up to my enthusiastic previews of it. The most helpful response I can have to a revision is not to either praise or damn it, but to acknowledge that it’s a good step forward and immediately begin to rehearse it while the playwright watches. That, much more than my critique, is what will get the playwright to the next stage of the writing, whatever that wants to be.

Showing is always better than telling, and light bulbs will go off for the playwright much more by being in rehearsal than by hearing about it after the fact. I once had a long talk with an absent writer, in which I spelled out as clearly as I could why her ending (always the ending, it seems) was problematic for us when we rehearsed it. “Does this make sense?” I asked her when I was done. “Well...only theoretically,” she answered. I realized that she had to be there; and sure enough, when she was able to see what I was talking about, it gave her new ideas about what to try next.

As the actors and I work our way through a new script, the playwright begins to see trims that can be made in the writing, sections that he needs to strengthen, endings of scenes that he can make more precise, and occasionally entire scenes that he decides to rewrite. Meanwhile, the physical, three-dimensional aspect of our work, the life the actors bring to his characters, gradually begins to replace the ideal version of the play he’s envisioned. But we’ll always be facing a little competition with it. “We hear a line of dialogue a certain way in our head, and see the movements and the patterns,” says Jeffrey Hatcher, acknowledging how strong that ideal version can be. “We’re open to the director and the actors coming up with something better, but we don’t want something worse.”

In mediating between actors and playwright midway through rehearsal, I need to find the balance between giving the actors the space to arrive at choices gradually and organically under my guidance, as I would with a previously-produced play, and accelerating the process so the writer can see what she’s got as soon as possible. As always, the guiding principle is What does the play need? Sometimes, the play needs something different from the playwright. If we just stage what the playwright envisions, she stands to learn less about her play than if we experiment with other possibilities.

“We want results right away,” Donald Margulies acknowledges. “We think, ‘Why can’t they just say it that way?’ Which is why a playwright shouldn’t direct his own work.”

But the mediating I do at this stage goes both ways, because actors
can have unreasonable expectations of the playwright too. The excitement of working on a new play sometimes causes actors to have sweeping ideas about how the writer should revise. I once worked on a new play with an actor who called me the night before we went into rehearsal, saying, “We don’t stand a chance unless the playwright does major rewrites as soon as possible.” We don’t stand a chance if this actor goes into rehearsal with that attitude, I thought, as I reassured him that she was eager to keep working on it but that we needed to give her the time and space to do so.

Some actors have sought one-on-one time with me during rehearsals to talk about aspects of the writing they have concerns about. While they can have useful insights, it’s far more productive to channel those questions into the rehearsal process. And it’s completely detrimental if they stop working on the play we have because they’re waiting to see the one they want. One actor, who felt that the writing of his character was weak, essentially refused to try anything in rehearsal—exactly the wrong way to help the playwright, who needed him to make active choices that could illuminate where in the writing she could strengthen his role further.

Halfway through rehearsals of Erik’s play A Normal Life, an actor had a major meltdown about something his character did which he found reprehensible. “I mean, I wouldn’t do that!” he kept saying, to which I kept answering, “But you do do that, or your character does, so let’s figure out why.” Finally, I called rehearsal to a halt, gave the other actors a break, and Erik and the actor and I had a comprehensive talk about the character’s journey. I thought we might have to replace the actor, but, after way too much time spent talking about it, he came around.

The bottom line is that nobody knows for sure what, if anything, the playwright will rewrite in the course of the rehearsal process, and we all have to go into the project committed to the script even if not a word is changed. Seasoned actors who have worked with new plays understand this:

“My job with a text, new or old, is how to make it work, how to make it real, as opposed to saying ‘Oh, I think this line should be cut.’ I’ll just keep saying it until the playwright makes that decision.” – Lizbeth Mackay

“Whatever’s on the page, it’s my job to find a way to make it work. Because it’s my butt up there, and I can’t be assured the writer’s going to change anything.” – Molly Regan

**DATES WITH THE SCRIPT**

On any play, new or old, we all have a contagious tendency to talk too
much in rehearsals: *Let's try this—No, what if we tried that?—No, I don't think that would work, because...* Sometimes, I tell my student directors that in the length of time it took them to talk and argue about what they thought they should try, they could have tried five different possibilities and debriefed afterwards. But as a director, I’ve sometimes caught myself doing the same thing. Talk is so seductive: it’s easy and enjoyable and safe. It’s much less risky to discuss something than to actually do it. But talking and arguing about the hypothesis is never as productive as conducting the experiment.

Talking *afterwards* is useful—up to a point. Young directors, who are attempting to be collaborative, often ask actors “How did that feel?” when they’ve just tried something. While the question is a genuine attempt to respect the actor’s process, actors often don’t know what they feel in the heat of the moment. It falls to me, as the observer of the experiment, to identify what happened—sometimes out loud, sometimes privately for myself, depending on the actor in question. An essential part of my job is to know when something seemed to work, and to grasp why, for future reference—but still to be open to pursuing other options for now. As Jane Fleiss says, “The important thing throughout is that the director sees what you’re trying to do, but that very often eludes you because you’re inside the character.”

It very often eludes me, too. At this stage of rehearsal, I begin to think about the play all the time, in rehearsal and out of it, waking and sleeping. Often, I forget an epiphany I had five minutes before, when I was making dinner or doing the dishes: *What was that idea I just had about that scene? It’s gone and I’ll never get it back.*

But invariably I will get it back, by sitting down and reading the play again. I have a ton of new insights in my solo time with the text these days, triggered by all the discoveries we’ve made in rehearsal. Sometimes, I can only squeeze in half an hour of prep time on the next day’s scenes late at night or on the subway on the way to rehearsal. But any quantity of time quickly becomes quality time at this incredibly fruitful phase.

But while I can always manage to zero in on a scene before working on it again, usually I don’t spend nearly enough time with the entire play. With all the demands on my time, it simply takes too long to read the whole thing through again, in a quiet place and frame of mind. A former directing student of mine once told me that he goes on “dates with the script,” setting time aside to go someplace quiet in order to reconnect with the entire play. He takes the script to the park, out for a cup of coffee, or to a museum, with
no agenda other than to just sit quietly and read it again.

If the relationship I have with a play before rehearsals begin is like the early days of a marriage before the kids come along, then it’s essential later to shore it up with private time away from the lively excitement of the rehearsal hall. Carving this out helps me to fall in love with the play all over again, with a more mature understanding of it. I see it in a new light because of my work with the actors, and come back into contact with them with a deeper, more rooted sense of my initial passion for the play itself.

PERFORMANCE PRESSURE

Looming over the last days of the second week of rehearsal is the fact that we’ve planned to do a “stumble-through” of the whole play to round out the week. When the stage manager and I made this calendar, the blank days leading up to this momentous event stretched out invitingly; now suddenly they’re gone, and we have to face the music and see what we have so far. It’s tempting to postpone the stumble-through until we have something that feels more coherent. But we’ll never get to the next phase of rehearsal if we don’t put ourselves through this first. Plus, the lighting and sound designers need to see where we are in our work, in order to move ahead with their own. If the play is new, the only way to gauge how the revisions fit into the play overall is to experience it on its feet in its entirety. So we stick to our schedule, take a deep breath, and put it all back together again in sequence.

It’s very raw, even messy at times. The actors are at that awkward half-off-book stage when they’re constantly calling for lines, much of the staging is still sketchy, and the whole thing is impossibly sloooow. But even so, if they dive in and really commit to what we’ve landed on so far, there’s something there to experience.

This is easier said than done, since the actors suddenly feel self-conscious with new eyes upon them. “The minute you add people who haven’t watched your progress, it’s performance pressure,” says one actor; while another maintains that “All discovery stops, and you start to push for what you think is going to be there.” But it’s not supposed to be a finished product. I have to forcibly remind myself of that, and refrain from making all sorts of disclaimers to the designers. And as lighting designer Pat Dignan says, “I like that it’s sketchy—it makes me feel like part of the process.”

The first stumble-through of a new play carries its own special anxieties. Does the writing add up? Does it fall apart? My usual nervousness at seeing our work in the raw is intensified by the complete unpredictability
of how the play itself will come across. But whether the experience is painful or encouraging or a combination of the two, the stumble-through gives the playwright and me a huge amount of information to process and enables us to move into a whole new stage of our collaboration.

The first stumble-through of any play, new or old, provides an early sense of perspective for us all, on the work that we have still to do, and on the overall story of the play. It’s my first time to really see it all in sequence, rather than read it or hear it, and I always learn from that. What exactly I’ve learned can be hard to articulate right afterwards, when we all feel as if we’ve just been through a life-threatening thunderstorm together. I congratulate the actors on getting through it, ask them to share any discoveries, and try to give them one or two overall impressions and insights. These can be hard to come by if I’m feeling shell-shocked: “I should have rallied the troops and said wise perceptive things but I didn’t feel up to it,” I wrote in my journal once after an especially chaotic stumble-through of a new play. On other occasions, I’ve talked too long and shared too many insights, and left the actors feeling overwhelmed. If the play is new, the playwright and I go out for a long, intense meal in which we try to sort through our impressions and observations—which is often hard to do without a good night’s sleep and a little more perspective.

We’ve conducted the mother of all experiments, and we’ve earned our weekly day off—or 40 hours to be exact, from Sunday at 6 until Tuesday at 10 when we start up again. But even one day away from the rehearsal space will provide the distance we all so urgently need. As we gear up towards even more detailed work on each scene, a big part of my job will be to provide as much perspective as I can, to stand back and see the forest as well as the trees, to articulate to the actors once again the basic story we’re telling, as it’s emerging from our rehearsals together. Reconnecting with my need to tell that larger story will enable me to choose the most compelling ways for the actors to tell it moment to moment, as I start to tangibly imagine the audiences who will be experiencing our work in way too short a time.
Chapter Nine

Making Choices

“You can throw me a big piece of blocking, even a result—as long as it’s later in the process.” – Jane Fleiss

MOMENT TO MOMENT

We all have a spring in our step when we return to the rehearsal room a day and a half later, knowing we’re entering a whole new phase of rehearsal as we go back to the beginning of the play again. “When you’ve had a run-through, you have a sense of accomplishment of having gotten through the damn thing,” says Molly Regan. “Now I want to know if my choices are believable, if they’re clear, if they tell the story we’re trying to tell, if the choice made in scene three fits in with scene four.”

The actors are eager now, even hungry, for my meticulous input: “When you’re off book, making choices, then it’s the right time for moments to be worked,” says Tommy Schrider. They’re more than ready for me to edit and select among our experimental choices, because I have a perspective from my audience vantage point that they can’t possibly have, living through the play as one of its characters. “I don’t always know which choice tells the story, and what story we’re trying to tell,” one actor reveals, while another says, “The more information I can get on how it’s being perceived, the better I can do my job.”

Having spent these first two weeks immersing ourselves in the world of the play and experimenting with what propels its characters, I now switch my perspective to that of an audience member experiencing it for the first time. While we work our way through each “beat” of every scene (a term apparently coined by Stanislavsky, who mispronounced the word “bit”), I stop the actors and try to define each moment as specifically as possible, before moving on to the next one. It’s intense, hard work for everyone. The early experiments, free from the pressure of having to find definitive results, have yielded some wonderful raw material, but now that needs to be developed, focused, clarified, and made specific.
Because I’m the third eye the actors don’t have, and because I’m the acknowledged arbiter of what’s best for the production as a whole, the actors rarely argue with my perceptions of their work. Sometimes, this involves my saying to an actor, “I know that’s what you’re trying to play, but that’s not what’s coming across.” Sometimes, it’s about serving the greater cause of the play (or the scene), when I explain, “I know that choice feels right to you, but the play needs something else.” Having groped our way forward collaboratively during the experimental week of mining for gold, the group dynamic now shifts, as my looser guidance evolves into extremely specific direction.

When I was a young director trying to work more collaboratively with actors, I found it hard to make this essential transformation from helpful guide to full-fledged leader. Because of my overly zealous attempts to give the actors freedom, we would pass the halfway point in rehearsal and simply continue the exploration, until it was too late. “To tell you the truth, I could use more direction,” an actor said to me late in rehearsal for Lorraine Hansberry’s *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*, my first full-length production with professional actors. Since there was so little time remaining, we never did manage to do the moment to moment work and the shaping that this actor and the others craved. They were stranded in a shapeless and over-long production that had raw life, but little clarity, precision, or cumulative impact.

But I’m not just looking for choices that are believable and clear and that serve the greater cause of the play (though those are essential); I also want our work to be *compelling*. The emotional impact a play has on its audience is just as important to me as telling a clear story, and I urgently want the audience to be as engaged and excited as I was when I first read the play and felt such a powerful need to direct it. It’s primarily for this reason that I’ve given us all such freedom to experiment in these first two weeks: all the teeming life and connections we’ve discovered will (I hope) generate the kind of electricity that I crave as an audience member when I go to the theater.

So while I keep asking myself the question, “Could I follow this story if I were seeing it for the first time?” I also ask, “Am I engaged and moved by it?” I don’t share this criterion with the actors. While I’m very apt to tell them, “This moment’s not clear yet,” I wouldn’t say, “This moment’s not compelling”—it would only make them self-conscious. If a scene isn’t grabbing me, then I need to figure out *why*, and give them an actable way to
address it. Usually, this has to do with needs that aren’t deep enough, tactics that aren’t specific enough, and stakes that aren’t high enough.

Sometimes, the early rehearsals haven’t shed much light on a particular scene, and often that seems to be the scene’s fault, not ours. In almost every play I direct, there are a couple of scenes that seem confusing to me, with no clear way for them to be played, even after the stumble-through. If it’s a new play, I have the option of talking with the playwright; but if the play is finished and the playwright isn’t there, I have to find a way to make these scenes as strong and compelling in performance as the ones that moved me at first reading. Working through the first scene in Act II of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* a few years ago, I became more and more confused as I tried everything I could think of, or that the actors could suggest, to make this disjointed scene come to life. I finally gave up for the day, wondering what my directing assistant (a former student of mine) made of my incompetence. But after a good night’s sleep and some more private time with the text, I realized I’d been overly focused on moments when the overall event of the scene still wasn’t clear to me or the actors. I came into rehearsal the next day and we solved it in about half an hour, making choices we all felt were right.

An actor in the scene, David Barlow, told me later, “I need to have confidence in my leader, but that doesn’t mean the leader can’t have a bad day.” I’ve had plenty of bad days, during this time when I’m trying to find definitive choices for each moment, each beat, each scene, before moving on. But, says David, “I’d rather the director admits that some answers are still out of our grasp, than create a haphazard rescue mission to ‘make it work.’”

How much of a discussion should ensue when the “right” choice is finally found? Not much of one, I think—too much talk about an exciting moment can flatten it. It isn’t helpful to the actors if I gush about their work: being told something is compelling, and why, can be as detrimental as being told that it’s not. “Don’t tell me that it’s funny or moving,” says Molly Regan, echoing a story about the young Helen Hayes, who could never recreate a magical moment in her first Broadway play because the critics had written so rapturously about it.

Later in the process, young actors often need me to help them realize what worked about a discovery they made along the way. But if I want them to recreate it and not just imitate it, I have to make sure I describe it in actable terms, using verbs rather than adjectives or adverbs. “You were
trying to get him to confess by seducing him” is helpful, while “You had this seductive look on your face and you spoke in this soft tone of voice” is not. But more seasoned actors can figure this out on their own: “I know why something works when it does,” Jane Fleiss says, “and I’ll be able to recreate it later, though maybe not with the same intensity or magic.”

**INTENSIVE REWRITES**

The stumble-through has also thrust the playwright and me into a new stage of our collaboration. For the first half of the rehearsal process, I’ve been the playwright’s sounding board, confidante, and guide. I’ve tried to conduct rehearsals that would be as productive for the playwright watching the play as the actors living through it. I’ve raised questions, not given directives. “It isn’t going to do any good for the director to tell me point-blank what to do,” says Mary Gallagher about the first half of the rehearsal process. “I want to hear things like ‘This is something that isn’t emerging yet,’ but not ‘Cut those lines, change that speech.’”

But just as my direction of the actors begins to get far more specific at this stage, so too my work with the writer gets more focused and intense, for the same reason: I have to start thinking about the audience and what their experience of this play will be. While I don’t dictate lines I want cut or speeches I want changed, I do begin to weigh in more forcefully with clear and definite suggestions. If we agree on what the issues are (this scene feels draggy, that moment isn’t clear), then the question is, will the solutions come through adjustments in acting, directing, writing, or a combination? This is no time for niceties: the writer and I give each other very specific notes in our quest for answers. She has new ideas for what I could do with the actors; I have new ideas for what she might try with the writing. We start to meet for coffee twice a day now, always with paper strewn across the table: newly printed pages of rewrites for me to look at in the morning before rehearsal, and scribbled notes we both have at rehearsal’s end in the evening. Our dog-eared scripts have been picked apart and put back together again with new pages many times by now.

While the actors are just as eager for the playwright’s revisions as they are for my meticulous direction, they can start to be on overload around now, if there are many rewrites going into a new play. My balancing act is never more challenging than at this time, when playwright, actors, and I are all zeroing in on our work, but when there is only so much new material the actors can absorb while they struggle to get everything
confidently into their systems. I often ask the playwright to put the small cosmetic rewrites on hold for now—tiny cuts and inserts, or little changes to a line’s rhythm. These are much harder for the actors to learn than the big rewrites. I once asked a playwright if she would consider a suggestion an actor had made that a long speech be cut by about half. The writer said (only half-jokingly) that she’d do it if I let her make the little adjustments she was dying to make throughout the play. We put the whole discussion on the back burner until later.

**ALL THOSE LINES**

Theater people sometimes laugh over the question non-theater people ask of actors, “How did you learn all those lines?”—the joke being that it’s only one small part of the work an actor does in embodying a role. But it’s a huge, and I think often underrated, step in the rehearsal process. As Lizbeth Mackay says, “When you’re completely sure of the lines, *then* you can play—I think an actor’s really creative only then.” There are directors who require everyone to be off book before the first rehearsal, but most actors find the lines hard to learn before they have a sense of why they’re saying them, what their needs are, and why they have to use these exact words to pursue them. And even after several weeks of rehearsal, it can be hard work, requiring a lot of homework and drilling.

There’s a very primal fear about being caught onstage with no idea what to say next—even people who have never acted in their lives have nightmares about it. Actors with large roles, long sections of text, and major responsibilities in carrying a play often struggle at this stage of rehearsal, which probably has as much to do with the pressure they feel about the role itself as the line load that goes with it. If I display nervousness and tension about these actors’ shaky grasp of the lines, that will only exacerbate the problem. Empathy, reassurance, and humor usually help—up to a point. But ultimately there’s only so much I can do: it’s the actors, not me, who have to learn the language and go before an audience. I can establish my expectations about when the lines should be learned, I can be calm and supportive for any actors who are struggling, but this work (unlike most everything else) is really out of my hands. Actors feel the pressure at this point in the process. “It’s going to be bad for a while,” says Ivar Brogger. “There comes a point in rehearsal when what we need isn’t a director, it’s a prompter. I wish we could take up a collection for $50 and the director could go shopping.”
For a while, there isn’t much spontaneity in rehearsal. Actors whose work so far has been wonderfully connected and intuitive now stare grimly at each other while straining to remember the lines. I can see them scanning the page in their mind’s eye to find the right yellow highlighted speech. Fluidity and momentum are gone for now, and the work is full of pauses while they search for their next line. So I try to go with the flow, or lack thereof, and work in a way that fits in with the actors’ struggles. The meticulous work that’s needed now anyway, repeating a beat of a scene and even its moments over and over while we adjust and hone choices, should also help the actors to get the lines into their systems.

On any play, new or old, there’s always a period of paraphrasing when the actors are struggling to get off book, but eventually the lines should be word perfect. When they’re not, and when the actor has a casual attitude about precision in learning them, it can drive the playwright crazy. As Michael Weller says, “Mozart didn’t say ‘Play something like D’—he said ‘Play D.’” And any actor who is good with language will agree. Says Judith Ivey, “When an actor says ‘Well, I’ve got the general idea,’ I want to say, ‘Do you know how long somebody worked to find that line? This isn’t random!’” The assistant stage manager or directing intern has her work cut out for her, taking meticulous notes about paraphrased lines for each individual actor and handing them out after every rehearsal.

But sometimes actors have illuminating questions about minute aspects of the writing that they may be more aware of than the playwright, since they’re now in the throes of line-learning. Most playwrights try to find a way to help the actor, who after all is the one who’ll be saying the line. “It’s as if a flutist says ‘It fingers better if I do it this way,’” says Michael Weller, who welcomes this kind of actor input. But, says another writer, Keith Bunin, “Usually you come to a third way. There are times when I say, ‘What are you missing? What would you say?’ And the actor gives you the thumping version, and you think, ‘Oh, I see what you mean—I can write that more elegantly.’ There’s nothing wrong with that,” he says, “as long as everybody’s being respectful of each other’s process.”

FROM PHYSICALITY TO STAGING

Finding precise choices in the moment to moment work includes finding precise staging choices as well—for which the actors are now more than ready. The early days of awkwardness when they were first on their feet are long past, and they now move with confidence, relating to each other
and to the space with ease and familiarity. Now that their hands are finally free of their scripts, we can get meticulous with props. Actors whose love scenes were tentative and polite in the early days of rehearsal have become far less inhibited with time, and I have more than enough to work with as I set their staging now. Fight scenes, which were sketchy and technical at first, can be choreographed in detail by the fight director, now that the actors have a sense of who these people are and why they become violent. Group scenes, which I blocked quickly the first days on our feet, are now worked on with a fine tooth comb, with much greater focus on the characters’ needs and tactics.

And now that specific acting choices are being found in the two and three character scenes, specific staging choices should be right at hand. When we find the right needs and tactics, we can find the right physicality—and vice versa. I remember the exhilaration my actors and I felt at the end of the third week of rehearsal for *Desire Under the Elms*, when I finally set the staging for a psychologically complex scene: it felt so effortlessly right that we couldn’t understand why we hadn’t stumbled upon it earlier. But of course, it was built on the weeks of work we’d done, experimenting with physicality as well as needs and tactics, uncovering layer upon layer of the scene, until finally we grasped it in all its nuance. At that point, the staging choices fell into place—staging we never could have found in the first week of rehearsal, when our take on the scene was still superficial.

Is pinning down all the staging absolutely necessary? There’s something thrilling about literally not knowing where a scene will go in performance, and I sometimes worry when I set the staging that the scene will freeze and become too predictable. But left to their own devices, actors wouldn’t form as compelling a stage picture as I’d like to see—nor should they be expected to, since that would involve observing themselves. Actors have a natural tendency to play a scene too close together, or too far upstage, or on a straight line, not wanting to upstage each other or be upstaged. Now, I need to step in and actually choreograph them, using their physical exploration as raw material. I need to grapple with issues of composition, visibility, and framing (which I deliberately left out of the earlier experimenting), in order to tell the story in a clear and compelling way, and for the space configuration in which we’re playing it (proscenium, thrust, or arena). The actors should be able to stay spontaneous within this framework, especially since they were instrumental in creating it.

As it happens, the few times I’ve tried to let some staging be fluid in
performance, the actors have balked. Once, during rehearsals for Of Mice and Men, I suggested we let a dog determine the staging of a scene: I wanted to let him wander around the stage as his fate is being discussed. But the actor playing the dog’s owner, Candy, was so nervous at the prospect of never knowing where the dog would turn up onstage that I dropped the idea, and we kept the dog tethered to a bed. But the dog still found ways to keep the staging (and the acting) fresh night to night: sometimes he tried to climb up onto the bed, requiring help from the actor playing Candy. On one memorable occasion, he stopped to pee in the doorway when he was being led out to be shot.

Sometimes, an actor needs my help in taking his physicality further through a bold staging choice. Actors who have to take huge risks in a play, physically and psychologically, need to be nurtured, supported, encouraged—and occasionally pushed. Some actors can throw themselves into large physical choices spontaneously while still staying connected and pursuing a need; others may be more tentative, worried that they will lose the thread of what they’re doing, or upstage everyone else. Often, I can see their impulse to throw caution to the winds, and it’s simply a matter of my giving them permission to go for it. At other times, I give them a physical prompt that may initially feel too big to them, especially in their reticent, just-off-book state. But this is the time to try large choices. The actors are ready, even if they don’t always feel they are. The safe environment that I’ve tried to create should make them able to take the leap of faith and go along with whatever I suggest. “You can throw me a big piece of blocking, even a result,” says Jane Fleiss. “You can hand me quite a bit, as long as it’s later in the process.”

I first discovered this in the midst of rehearsing The Greeks. “Can you kiss each other here—I mean, really kiss each other?” I asked the two actors playing the siblings Electra and Orestes in the heat of the moment in a rehearsal for Orestes, the penultimate play in the cycle. There was a pause, they looked at each other, said “OK”—and went for it. I think they may have been a bit taken aback by the direction: a few minutes later on a break, I overheard one of them jokingly asking another actor for a breath mint, saying, “I didn’t expect I’d be doing this today!” But they went along with the physical prompt in a way that opened up the scene in a whole new way for us. They were willing to jump in and try it, and ask questions later.

But I’ve also worked with actors who argued with me instead of trying something I asked to see, or made a deliberately half-baked attempt at it,
or stopped themselves halfway through and said, “This isn't working.” This impedes the rehearsal process. I need the actor to try my suggestions, just as the actor needs his own chance to experiment. It’s a two-way-street, and the actor has to trust my instincts the way I’ve trusted his. “It may not be the right choice, but I’d like to explore the impulse that led to it,” says one actor about experimenting—and I need that leeway too.

There’s always a temptation to resort to non-verbal communication and demonstrate for the actor. While I don’t give actual line readings (although there are some actors who don’t mind them), I know that often when I grope to find the right words for a stronger need I want the actor to try, or a higher sense of risk in the scene’s stakes, I become so impassioned that I begin to embody what I’m looking for, physically and emotionally. I don’t act it out for them, but I become what I want them to try as I attempt to explain it. This isn’t a conscious tactic, but it often works: when words fail, sometimes more intuitive forms of communication can land with the actor and break the logjam. Most actors welcome this. As Janet Zarish says, “Sometimes the way a director talks to you is more important than what she’s saying.”

BREAKDOWNS IN COMMUNICATION

What happens when an actor is truly intractable? What if he refuses to take my direction, at this stage in the process when we move from collaborative experimentation to actually making choices?

There have only been two times in my life as a director when I’ve decided to fire an actor, and they were surprisingly similar cases. Both actors resisted any and all suggestions I made for them to try, and each refused to talk about the problems we were encountering. Both times, the actor anticipated me and quit, just when I’d decided that we had reached an insurmountable impasse. In hindsight, I realize that what was fuelling both situations was fear—something that’s entered into almost every difficulty with actors I’ve ever encountered.

But most of the time, breakdowns in communication can be repaired “with a whole chunk of slow time,” in the words of Patricia Conolly, meaning a heart-to-heart, one-on-one discussion with the actor in question. This kind of candid, clearing-the-air talk is simply part of the fabric of the rehearsal process at times, along with all the positives, such as the intense bonding that usually occurs. I’ve had my share of these talks over the years, and, though they’re uncomfortable at the time, they’re always worth it after
the fact. As David Barlow says, “It’s great when there’s an environment when you can really talk to each other—when you don’t have to do an eggshell walk around each other’s egos and agendas.”

But though issues between myself and an actor are usually resolvable, problems between the actors are often beyond my control. Two actors playing husband and wife in a new play I directed nearly came to blows once, after days of escalating tension caused by her inability to learn her lines thoroughly and his unsympathetic response to the situation. I felt like a marriage counselor as I pulled them apart and spoke to them each privately, and their relationship (onstage and off) never fully recovered. With Desire Under the Elms, there was a thrilling chemistry between the two leads during the first two weeks of rehearsal, until suddenly one day they could barely look at each other. This new tension affected their connection while they worked, and, when a love scene we were working on that day began to get ugly, I had to sit them both down and lecture them about leaving whatever was happening in their personal lives (which I didn’t want to know, I stressed) at the door of the rehearsal room. They were subdued and chastened, their rapport returned (at least onstage), and I never did find out what had or hadn’t gone on between them.

Communication issues between playwright and actors, or playwright and director, can also arise in this crunch time of making choices. While everyone acknowledges that the director runs rehearsal and the playwright’s notes for the actors should go through her, “You go outside that as you become comfortable,” in the words of one playwright, echoing many. By now, the comfort level is such that the playwright and actors are probably talking to each other frequently—sometimes very productively, at other times needing some translation or mediation from me. Often, I don’t disagree with what a playwright says to an actor, or even how it’s said (many playwrights have acted themselves and know the language of verbs), but I may have some reservations about the timing. I worked with a playwright once who always wanted the actors to be one or two steps ahead of where I thought they should be: she wanted to see nuance and detail in the second week of rehearsal, before the actors had had time to grasp the larger contours, and to see drive and momentum the following week, when we were still in moment to moment work. But actors are usually eager for whatever a playwright tells them, and whenever. “If it comes from the writer, it really does feel true,” observes Daniel Jenkins. “If it’s not useful to me now, I just kind of file it away for later.”
The only time I encountered insurmountable difficulties in this playwright-director-actor dynamic was when I was in rehearsal some years ago for *Echo Boy*, the new play I directed Off-Off Broadway that I should have turned down. The seeds of discord were sown before we even began. The playwright had had a successful production in another city, so we weren't just up against the version in his head: he was comparing us to a production that had already existed. “It’s really hard for me to watch all of you trying to figure out how to do the play,” he told me once, “when I know how it should be done from this other production.” Meanwhile, the actors had signed on expecting there’d be revisions and cuts at some point, and began to get frustrated when none at all were forthcoming because the playwright considered his work finished. The tension between the two factions, actors and writer (with me caught in the middle), built to the point where the artistic director and I felt it necessary to call a meeting where everyone could vent freely. That cleared the air and got people communicating better, but the playwright’s subsequent revisions were cosmetic, not substantive, and he never did like the performance of one actor in particular, convinced we should have cast the actor who’d played the role previously.

My own handling of this situation was ineffective, hampered (I now realize) by the fact that I didn’t especially like the play and had no rapport with the writer. Leadership requires passion, and that was an element that was completely missing in my relationship with play and playwright. And you can’t serve something greater than yourself if you don’t believe in it to begin with.

**INVASION OF THE SPACE**

Gaining in volume as this third week progresses is a refrain in my head: *They’re coming, they’re coming!* We’re heading towards the first big run-through, which will be attended by the designers, artistic director, and other colleagues. Though I always feel that we’re woefully under-rehearsed at this stage, I’ve learned over the years how essential it is to keep these worries to myself. Actors can sense a director’s tension, and what David Barlow calls “fear-based work.” It’s not good, he maintains, if “the underlying signal a director is giving out is that the Big Show is a week away, so c’mom people, get it ship-shape!”

Though I try not to let it become fear-based, the work does become more *time*-based. There’s an intensity in the rehearsal room these days, as I keep the talking to a minimum and we work with increasing efficiency. It’s
a big contrast to the far more relaxed feeling in the first weeks of rehearsal, when we were casting such a wide net while we explored every option. Now, we squeeze productive work into every last twenty minutes we can find, up to and beyond the moment when we can hear the group outside in the hall waiting to be let in to our run-through.

Dozens of people file into the rehearsal room, squeezing into every inch of available space on noisy folding chairs, equipped with notepads and a sense of anticipation—both of which I resent. I feel as if we've been invaded, taken over by outside forces, while the actors warm up and prepare in whatever semi-private corner they can find. It's a sort of preview for how I'll feel about the real audience, when my feelings of hope that they'll be moved by our work are shot through with defensiveness, as I wonder why we've put ourselves in this vulnerable position in the first place.

The actors take their places (fully visible, of course), the stage manager quiets everyone down, takes out his stopwatch, opens his script, and says, “Lights.” The actors perform—and it does feel like a performance now—with great bursts of adrenalin, obstructed every so often by the need to call for line. Occasionally, a run-through will go miraculously well, sometimes unexpectedly badly—but most of the time it's uneven, with some thrilling scenes, some confusing ones, and a lot that are just plain under-rehearsed. The people watching—the artistic director, dramaturg, designers, props and wardrobe staff, and running crew—laugh appreciatively, lean forward, sit back, yawn occasionally, and scribble notes. I find it hard not to be aware of their every move, reading significance into every note they take.

Even if nobody gave me any notes after the run-through (and of course a number of people do, as we enter into a whole new phase of collaboration), seeing it through the eyes of others is undeniably helpful. It forces me to stand back and observe it from more of a distance than I’ve been able to do so far. It makes me much more aware of the real audience that will be coming in about a week, and able to fasten on aspects of it that are still not clear to someone experiencing it for the first time. That in itself makes this run-through worth the dread it provokes. And the same holds true for the nervous actors: “It’s awful, but you learn a lot,” says one, acknowledging that “Sometimes my best work is done when I’m throwing up in the bathroom.”

The first public run-through is a huge rite of passage, the first step in the coming together of all the collaborators when technical rehearsals begin in the theater in a few days. There’s a sense of anticipation in the air,
an awareness that we’ll be moving on from this safe haven shortly, that once we’re in the theater, “It won’t be play practice anymore,” as Molly Regan puts it. In the short time we have left in the rehearsal room, we’ll focus on orchestration: pace, shape, fluidity, momentum, and cumulative emotional impact. I have my work cut out for me.
Chapter Ten

Shaping The Whole

“I need a director’s eye, their ability to shape it, pace it. I don’t mind a ‘louder, faster’ sort of direction—I want the shaping, late in the process.” – Lizbeth Mackay

CONDUCTING THE PLAY

My inner metronome is very sped up by now, and a good night’s sleep is hard to come by. The extra adrenalin is probably beneficial for these three or four upcoming all-important days. While I try to shape the work as much as possible before we get into the theater for tech, it becomes a physical workout as well as a mental and emotional one. I feel “the strenuousness of putting it all together,” as I wrote in my journal once, and the “muscular activity of getting my hands around it all.”

I sometimes feel like an orchestral conductor at this late stage, and I’ve been told that, when I watch run-throughs, I shift in my seat according to the play’s rhythms and mouth the lines along with the actors—something I’ve observed other directors do as well. There are times when I wish that I could conduct the play while it’s being performed, setting the tempo of each scene, threading the scenes together fluidly, and evoking the production’s cumulative impact from the actors as they journey through it. But my tools are verbal rather than physical, and my orchestration of the play happens between run-throughs instead of during them, in comprehensive note sessions as well as further scene work.

The public nature of the recent run-through has helped the actors and me rediscover the fundamental truth that we’re a group of storytellers, telling a story to an audience that doesn’t know it. Often, I reread my pre-production notes around now, to reconnect with my early ideas of the play’s story and spine and its characters’ journeys. These jottings give me a renewed sense of the larger picture, but my grasp of the play’s story has deepened through our discoveries in the past three weeks of rehearsal. I articulate that story as succinctly and as passionately as I can to the actors. Everything
we do now—clarifying each scene’s event and moments within the scenes, tracking the characters’ individual arcs over the course of the play—serves the purpose of making that overall journey come alive for an audience.

In purely technical terms, the story is probably taking too long to tell, and needs considerable tightening. Having picked the play apart, we now have to put it back together again. Actors often take brief (or not-so-brief) pauses before they speak when they are recently off book, giving themselves a moment to think of the next line, and these can easily become built into performances and start to feel like necessary transitions to them. Needless to say, too many pauses, even short ones, make a scene plodding and predictable to an audience, like a slow-paced tennis match filled with monotonous lobs rather than a variety of quick-thinking shots.

So I ask the actors to invest in their overall needs and let the high stakes of each scene drive them forward, trusting that the details will still be there, rather than dwelling on them. Some of the moments we’ve found may have to be sacrificed as I shape and edit, but most will be folded into the bigger goal of clarifying the event of each scene. “I direct for the smart people,” my early directing mentor Stuart White once said, when an actor asked him if the audience would register the meticulously crafted moments as they sped by so quickly. My job is to pace the play to keep the audience on the edge of their seats, because if they get ahead of us, we’ll lose them. With this all-important goal in mind, I may also have a sit-down speed-through of a scene, or even of the entire play; and from now on, I’ll take meticulous notes about dropped cues with every run-through and dress rehearsal. Pace doesn’t necessarily mean speed within the lines, since it’s also important that we not rush things and get ahead of the audience, and it includes strategically placed pauses, which provide contrast. But it’s an essential tool in our storytelling, and one that I have much more awareness of than the actors do, from my audience vantage point.

Even seasoned actors may need to be reminded of cue pick-up at this stage, though they do realize its necessity. “I need a director’s eye, their ability to shape it, pace it,” says Lizbeth Mackay. “I don’t mind a ‘louder, faster’ sort of direction—I want the shaping, late in the process.” But younger actors often don’t grasp how essential pace is: “I asked them to pick up the cues, but they didn’t want to,” a student director once told me about his equally young actors. When I was directing students myself recently in a Shakespeare production, I became enormously frustrated at pauses that I had spent days trying to eliminate. I had a talk with one of the lead actors,
to see if we could get at the root of it all. “It’s fear,” she finally concluded. “It feels safer if I take the pause than if I plunge in and respond immediately.” But of course, “safe” isn’t very exciting for an audience.

**GIVING NOTES**

The director’s transition to a sort of orchestral conductor is one the actors probably feel as well: now that we’re in this new phase of rehearsal, our work together is less collaborative and more about them following my lead. Note sessions are at the heart of this new dynamic. The physical set-up alone signals a changed relationship, as I face the actors as a group and give them detailed directives, checking the notes off a list as I go along. It’s a far cry from the everyone-around-a-table familial coziness of the first days, when questions arose for which no one was expected to have an answer yet. Now, I’m stating implicitly that I *do* have an answer, and here it is: *They won’t get the story of the scene unless you take more time with that line…— It’s better if you turn around as soon as he says that…— This moment needs to be a real contrast from the earlier one where…*

This doesn’t mean that I turn into a drill sergeant. Note sessions include a certain amount of give-and-take, when an actor needs further clarification or a brief discussion about how best to implement a note. Sometimes, a note turns out to be too complex to get across in this context, so I put it on the list of beats or moments to work on their feet before the next run-through. But I have to guard against talkative actors who might highjack the note session. Once, I worked with an actor who argued with every note I gave him, until I realized I had to pick up the cues on my own notes and launch into the next one, to another actor, before he had a chance to reply. Note sessions are the best way to get a lot of work done in a short span of time, and I have to keep them efficient.

There are always some sensitive notes that are best given in private, especially if they only involve one actor. And very occasionally, I’ve worked with an actor who appeared defensive about getting *any* notes in front of the entire group. An older actor once made reference to a “criticism” I’d just given him—a revealing word choice, I thought. But private note sessions tend to be less productive than group ones. Often, a problem that one actor is having can be solved through an adjustment made by another, or an individual note can evolve into something the whole cast should hear. One of the values of note sessions is the opportunity they give us to relate specific moments to the play’s overall story, and it’s counter-productive
if actors whisper to one another or send text messages during notes that seemingly don’t concern them.

At times, the volume of my notes is massive, and I worry that they’ll become overwhelming and impede the actors’ spontaneity. Their work is just beginning to regain fluidity and a sense of playfulness, and the last thing I want to see as I watch a run-through is that frozen look on an actor’s face as he tries to remember a note I’ve given him. Sometimes, I’ll preface a note session with a disclaimer, asking the actors not to worry if some of the notes don’t stick yet, or I’ll save some of my nit-pickier notes for later.

But good actors have an impressive capacity to absorb and implement useful notes, which should help them to connect the dots of their character’s overall journey and enable their performances to become more confident, fluid, and ultimately more spontaneous. Once, after a run-through, I gave note after note to one actor (which often tends to happen, not because the actor is doing bad work but just because he needs the most guidance at the moment). The actor sat silently looking down, not writing the notes on a pad or nodding in agreement. Finally, I asked him if he was getting too many notes at once. “Don’t mind me—I’m not sulking,” he said. “Just trying to process it all.” His next run-through was electrifying.

GETTING NOTES

Meanwhile, I’m on the receiving end of notes myself, meeting with all those people who were scribbling on their notepads during the run-through. While a certain part of me always dreads opening Pandora’s box and letting out all their opinions, I also keenly feel the need of their perspective. I want colleagues who haven’t been in the room all along to point out to me what still isn’t clear; I need a sounding board, or several of them, as I struggle for new ways to solve the challenges I know are remaining; and I’m eager for people who can reveal to me issues that I’m not even aware of in my myopic state. But this, too, puts a new wrinkle into my relationship with the actors, who are eager and also apprehensive about what those “outside” people are saying to me about their work.

The notes of the producer (or in the non-profit theaters where I direct, the artistic director) are the ones I usually hear first, and it’s hard not to feel a little twinge of anxiety when sitting down with the person who is, after all, the boss of the whole enterprise.

There’s a tendency to want to start the discussion with a big disclaimer: *Of course, I know we have to pick up the pace, find the overall journey, tell the*
story more clearly...—the list goes on and on.

But most artistic directors know exactly where we are in the process, and tailor their thoughts accordingly. They’re not going to give me “dead cow notes”—a term coined by a lighting designer I worked with once, about notes that are blindingly obvious, as in, “Are you planning to do something about that dead cow in the middle of the stage?” The most productive note sessions with an artistic director are fruitful discussions that enable me to go back into rehearsal with a renewed sense of the play overall and fresh ideas as to how to achieve what we’re after. The occasional unproductive one makes me feel chastised and discouraged, burdened with a slew of nit-picky notes I’m expected to address.

If the play is a new one, the playwright sits in on this conference, and some of the notes are about the writing. The artistic director is thinking about the audience even more than I am, and his suggestions for trimming, shaping, and even wholesale cuts are sometimes ardent and intense. “Please, I beg of you, make some cuts!” an artistic director once pleaded with a startled playwright, who was planning to make some anyway. The writer asked me afterwards if I thought it was “that bad”—which I didn’t. An artistic director is very aware of not having a hands-on role in rehearsal, and sometimes gets vehement in order to make his points in the brief windows of opportunity he has for input.

The dramaturg usually allies himself with the playwright, and provides much-needed support and perspective, both now and during the tumultuous days that follow, helping the writer to synthesize all the stimuli she’s getting from run-throughs and notes, while I get more focused on shaping and then teching the production. Sometimes, the artistic director and dramaturg have a perspective that I envy at this stage of things: “I felt almost jealous that he was able to see the big picture,” I wrote once about insights on a new play from a dramaturg, “while I’m struggling with where the chairs go and do we need real food.” The dramaturg can also be an invaluable sounding board about my work with the actors: “If you’re there all the time, it’s easy to get lost in psycho-dynamics and the fact that it’s hard to get two actors to talk to each other,” notes dramaturg Vicky Abrash. As one of my earliest collaborators, the dramaturg can bring me back to the driving principle behind the need to bring the play to life and help me see issues and problems in the light of the overall world we’re trying to create and story we’re trying to tell.

The designers can also help me reconnect to the larger view,
sometimes simply by their presence. Costume designer Michael Krass says that whenever he visits my rehearsals, I literally take several steps back from the action to get more distance (and perspective) on what the actors are doing. Though designers take plenty of technical notes at run-throughs, about props that need finding and quick changes that need solving, they also may have some penetrating insights about the work of the actors, or the play itself, if it’s a new one. Once, after a run-through at which the theater’s artistic director had very few notes for me, the set and lighting designers took me out to dinner and talked with great eloquence and sensitivity about the characters’ relationships. They felt I’d rushed the process with the actors and that there wasn’t much texture or depth yet in the interaction onstage. They were right.

Then there’s the huge volume of notes the assistant director, who’s been in rehearsal all along, has been scribbling furiously to keep from going crazy. In the days when I was an assistant, I used to become so frustrated with what I thought the director should be doing, but wasn’t, that on one occasion it took all my will power not to throw a cup of coffee at the back of his head. Of course, now I have far more sympathy for that director: you always think you know what needs to be done when you’re not the one doing it. While I’ve learned that it’s too time-consuming to listen to every single note the assistant has taken (I was up until 3 a.m. once listening to page after page of notes from two assistants), I find it helpful to ask for an assistant’s opinion on a particular problem I’m trying to solve, since he’s seen the various ways I’ve already tried to address it. Usually, this opening permits him to get in some of his other most urgent notes as well, and we have the first of a series of talks on the fly we’ll be having through tech and dress rehearsals and previews.

One person whose thoughts I often seek out around now is the stage manager, that quiet and supportive observer on whom I rely so much. With the cacophony of everyone else’s opinions clattering around in my head, it often helps to ask, “What do you think?” about a specific scene, an actor, or the process in general, at the end of a one-on-one scheduling session. The calm, pragmatic approach of the best stage managers is a wonderful tonic at this point, and trading impressions, reflecting on how things are going, and planning ahead with specific challenges in mind is always reassuring at this hectic stage, strengthening a bond that’s crucial in the days of tech waiting just around the corner.

Meeting with the actors after these sessions with others, I can
sometimes sense them wondering which notes are mine and which are coming from someone else. When I directed *Desire Under the Elms*, I made the mistake of telling the actors that a large overall note about our production’s style came from artistic director Mark Lamos, thinking he deserved credit for an illuminating thought that hadn’t occurred to me. The actors immediately became wary. “But what do you think, Mary?” one of them asked me, clearly speaking for everyone. I replied truthfully that I wouldn’t have shared this note if I didn’t agree with it. They still looked dubious, and I realized that it’s not good for the actors to feel there are too many cooks in the kitchen (with the exception of the playwright, who’s always the co-chef as far as the actors are concerned). Knowing that a note comes from the artistic director will only make them suspect I’m giving it for the wrong reasons, out of fear or a loss of confidence in the production. So now I make the actors’ sense of security my top priority, and take credit for everything.

**EYE OF THE NEEDLE**

While I have my hands full putting the whole production together, the actors are facing the prospect of going onstage soon in front of an audience, and their usual low-grade worries intensify considerably around now. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” a talented young actress despaired to me once, right before tech rehearsals. In fact, she *did* know what she was doing, but didn’t feel as if she did; and I’ve since come to realize that many actors, young and older, feel that way. If a role is especially demanding, their concerns can border on quiet terror. They may have gotten away with it in the past, they feel, but *this* time they’ll be found out. “You get to that point when you’re going through the eye of the needle,” says Ivar Brogger, “the last week of rehearsal, going into tech, there’s no turning back, and you haven’t solved everything. As that day approaches, I always think of working in the Post Office.”

So I need to try to assuage their worries by guiding them each through the eye of the needle, which means giving them as many run-throughs as possible, working efficiently and effectively on the sections that we still haven’t quite solved, and making sure we’re on the same page about their character’s overall journey in the play. Though it’s not possible to find a whole chunk of slow time to talk with each actor at this pressurized stage, I have to carve out brief check-ins with them, even if it’s in the hall on a break. Now that they’re fully inhabiting the characters and living through
the entire play, we can finally discuss the arc of each, as it relates to the story of the play overall.

As I watch every run-through and conduct every note session and scene rehearsal, I’m constantly articulating how the small moments, beats, and scenes feed into the larger journey, both of the characters and the play.

And as we continue to run the play and the actors gain in confidence, I ask each of them to go out on a limb, and do the most personal and risky work of which he or she is capable. This is my final chance, at least in this rehearsal room context, to really use the safe environment I’ve engendered. If an actor is on track but is playing it safe, I nudge him to jump off the cliff, while assuring him that his wings will work. “My willingness to take risks relies on a conducive, relaxed atmosphere,” says Jane Fleiss about the importance of feeling safe. Ivar Brogger agrees that this is the time to really go for broke: “There’s no such thing as acting that’s ‘too big’—just acting that’s not filled enough.”

If an actor’s work is big but not filled, then I need to find ways to help fill it. When I directed Nora (Ingmar Bergman’s adaptation of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House), my lead actress Jane Fleiss plunged in and took exciting risks right from the start of rehearsal. But when we moved into run-throughs, I realized that the final scene, in which she leaves her husband Torvald, wasn’t as compelling as it should be, because she was venting at him rather than trying to communicate—doing something to him rather than needing something from him. She made an adjustment, trying instead to get him to understand the depths of her anguish and despair, which Torvald desperately wanted to grasp. Because neither character manages to get through to the other one no matter how hard they both try, the scene became far more complex and moving.

I sometimes feel a kind of reticence when I ask an actor whose work is brave and personal to make these sorts of adjustments. But actors take risks with the understanding that I’m the third eye who will reflect back to them what’s coming across. “I need a director to tell me when I’ve gone too far,” says Lizbeth Mackay, “otherwise, I’m watching myself too much. You need to be able to make a jackass of yourself in rehearsal.”

When the play is new, the actors’ late rehearsal fears are often directed towards the script. “What I want to know is, what is this play about?” someone always seems to ask at this stage, when we’re all trying so hard to see the forest instead of just the trees.

Sometimes it gets blurted out when we’re working on an existing play,
but then there's always the sense that there's an answer to that question somewhere, even if it's out of our grasp for the moment. But with a brand new play with no track record, there's always the deep-seated fear that, actually, this play isn't about anything—or it's about so many things that we've got a chaotic mess on our hands.

I often come down with what I call the “new play jitters” late in the process of rehearsing a brand-new play—a sense of apprehension that this is a far more frightening thing we're attempting than putting on a tried-and-true play that's been done successfully by other people in the past. “I just want to get out of the woods here and work on a play that I know works,” I wrote in my journal years ago when I had a severe attack of this kind of anxiety. “I have a feeling this one could, but I can't find the damn key or something. It's there somewhere, I've just got to believe that,” I told myself, somewhat unconvincingly.

Of course, the new play jitters is a highly contagious disease—the “What is this play about?” question is one form of it—and I have to make sure I keep these failures of nerve to myself and lead the process with all the apparent confidence that I would if we were rehearsing a play with a track record. I need to act calm and in control, even if I don't always feel that way. What propels me past this unnerving stage are my collaborative relationships—the bond I feel with the actors, designers, and, when the play is new, the playwright. We're all in this together.

On our final day in the rehearsal room before tech, we run the whole play again.

Nearly all of the people attending have seen it before, which takes some of the pressure off. The actors are more confident, the play has shape and drive, and the story emerges more vividly. “You did wonderful work on that last scene,” an artistic director told a playwright and me once, about a section we hadn't touched since she last saw it, but which had been affected by the new-found sweep of the whole.

Of course, there are still moments we haven't solved, scenes that need further work, questions that still remain. As we debrief after this final pre-tech run-through, I reassure the actors that we'll keep working to find solutions. But the shaping and orchestrating of the last few days have paid off in a momentum and cumulative impact that puts the details in perspective. The space definitely feels too small now—the actors are bursting its seams, which is as it should be. I can sense how eager they are to get into the theater, onto the actual set and into their costumes.
But there’s something about the raw, human, *alive* quality of what we’ve experienced in this room that we need to make sure we don’t lose. We’ve all been involved in productions when the actors did their most exciting work in this final run-through, in rehearsal clothes and with tape on the floor, and what followed in the theater was anti-climactic, at least in terms of the electricity generated between actors and audience. As we add the design elements, it will be my job to integrate them fully with the actors’ work (and vice versa), to orchestrate the whole so that the design not only doesn’t eclipse the acting, but helps to take it to the next level. The life generated in this little room has to be created anew in the theater, and then deepened and made even more passionate.
Everybody At Once
Chapter Eleven

Putting It All Together

“A lot of the first day of tech is about establishing the vernacular.”
– Roy Harris

“I don’t want line readings from the director.” – Brian MacDevitt

THE ULTIMATE TEST

On the day technical rehearsals were to begin for a play of his, Erik called me with some disconcerting news: nobody knew where the director was. Instead of arriving at the theater ready to lead everyone into tech, he had simply vanished. I commiserated and offered reassurances that he’d be back; and sure enough, a few hours later, the director turned up and apologized, and work resumed. But I can’t say I was shocked by this episode. I recognized the impulse all too well.

Even when a production is going well, fantasies of disappearing around tech time float into my mind: of getting on that bus that’s going to the Cloisters in upper Manhattan, or offering to switch places with my lawyer friend whose office I’m passing on my way to the theater. The day I was supposed to start tech on *The Mystery Plays* at the Hartford Stage, I had to resist the powerful urge to get into my car and drive west until I got to Nebraska.

Tech is by far the most daunting part of the entire process. If directing a production is a series of tasks performed in collaboration with others, the sheer volume of those tasks and number of those others can feel overwhelming when we head into tech. I go from working mostly with one set of collaborators at a time, to working with everybody at once. Plus, there’s a tangible reminder of our upcoming collaborators, the audience: here we are in the theater, there are the rows of seats they’ll be occupying, and we damn well better have something *good* to show them in a few days. And while we have all the ingredients ready—the set up onstage, the lighting instruments hung and focused, sound and music cues set, and the
actors eager to get into costume and experience this new environment—the act of putting it all together will be more than a little complicated.

If only tech were simply a matter of pouring all those ingredients into a big wok and stirring. Instead, it involves hundreds of decisions, large and small, to be made along the way. Each decision will affect the overall production, some in a big way, and each has to be made with other people, designers and stage manager and actors and crew. How can I keep my own vision clear and focused, and make sure we’re performance-ready in a few days, while responding to everyone else’s needs and input? Tech is the ultimate test of my ability to balance leadership and collaboration.

Arriving early at the theater on the first day of tech, I feel bombarded by stimuli.

There’s the set up on stage: that dollhouse-like miniature, the little model that we played with in design meetings and consulted frequently during rehearsals, is now all grown up and life-sized. Lights are going on and off, the sound of electric tools fills the air, and amplified music (often loud rock unrelated to the production) pours from the speakers.

There are people everywhere: sweeping the stage, walking around with lists on clipboards, talking to each other on headsets, up on ladders refocusing the lighting instruments, sitting in front of computer screens at the tech tables set up in the audience.

Walking onstage to get a closer look at the set, I’m blinded by the lighting instruments. I go backstage and encounter prop tables off to the sides with brown paper taped to them, on which somebody has traced the props and labeled where they should each go when not in use onstage. The wardrobe crew is setting up the quick-change areas, tiny semi-private spaces with hooks on the makeshift walls, a blue-gelled clip light and a mirror so the actors can quickly check themselves before re-entering for the next scene.

Backstage, the actors are in their dressing rooms, personalizing them with framed photos of their loved ones, unpacking their make-up and hair products, maybe having a late costume fitting. Everyone has a task to perform but me, and unless somebody needs my input on something, I don’t have much to do or a clear place to be until we start officially. I head back to the audience and take a seat in the middle, close to the lighting and sound designers’ and stage manager’s tables. More than any place else, this is where I belong for the next several days, watching the stage, roaming up and down the aisles and moving side-to-side, while I confer with all the
designers, the stage manager, the assistant director, the dramaturg, and (if the play is a new one) the playwright. These are the people who become my web of collaborators as we begin to combine the ingredients.

Getting started always seems to take forever. The stage manager (who officially runs tech) has to take the actors on a tour of the labyrinthine backstage, stressing safety issues; introductions of the backstage crew and the light and sound board operators need to be made; and though we have a game plan for the first cue, there always seems to be some specific delay that prevents us from diving into it. The composer needs to shorten the first music cue so it’s the right length, glow tape needs to be placed strategically for the actors to enter in a blackout, a key prop is missing and has to be located. As we sit with the house lights on, I can’t imagine actually ever being in the midst of tech, with a darkened auditorium and the actors up on stage under the lights, moving through the play.

But suddenly, here we are: house-lights to half, music or sound cue up, house and pre-set out, dim shapes and sounds onstage while the actors place themselves in the blackout, lights up, sound out, and the first lines of the play are finally spoken. The designers and stage manager and I all breathe a sigh of relief, and then start to figure out how what we just saw could be improved. “Hold, please,” the stage manager says to the actors (the first of hundreds of times she’ll be using that phrase)—and we’re finally off and running.

COMMUNICATIONS SATELLITE

On my first full-fledged tech in professional theater, I couldn’t adjust to being in the driver’s seat. I hadn’t always had that problem. Directing in college, and in tiny makeshift theaters in New York in my early twenties, I found tech exhilarating. There seemed to be no hierarchy to speak of: I pounded nails and hung lights with everyone else, and the act of putting it all together seemed like an extension of the “Hey gang, let’s do a show” spirit that fueled the whole enterprise. But a few years later, going into tech for the play Achilles (one of the four plays I was directing in the nine-play cycle The Greeks), at the state-of-the-art Hartford Stage, was another matter entirely.

Four designers and their assistants, a cast of thirty and a crew of about the same size, and a stage manager who was clearly exasperated by my lack of professional experience, all waited for me to talk them through the first cue. I’d watched my co-director and boss, Mark Lamos, run tech
masterfully many times before, on huge classical productions with large casts and bold designs. He worked in a painterly way, sitting up in the last row of the audience and clapping his hands when he wanted the action to stop, telling the lighting designer what look he was after and calling out instructions to the actors. He was intent and focused and seemed to know exactly what he wanted.

But I wasn’t Mark, and his approach wouldn’t fit me. And I certainly didn’t know what I wanted, except to be back in the quiet and safety of the rehearsal hall. Somehow I made a few suggestions about opening light and sound cues (I have no memory of how), and tech began. The actors moved through the play and I watched, overwhelmed by the stunning costumes, striking lights, and powerful sound. I struggled to respond to what was onstage, but it all looked and sounded so spectacular to me that it was hard to stand back and sort it all out. Eventually, I was able to focus on a lighting cue that seemed to be off in its timing. I mulled it over for several minutes, and finally suggested to the stage manager (not realizing that I should also consult the lighting designer) that it could be called at a slightly different point in the scene. “Why didn’t you tell me at the time?” she demanded. “We’re way past that cue.” She went back to talking to other people over her headset, and I had the nightmarish sensation of failing miserably, and very publicly, at a test in a language I had never studied.

It got better. On a break, the sympathetic production manager sought me out and suggested I should claim my place in the sun more. And gradually, as we worked our way through that long tech, I began to process things a little more quickly, asking to stop when we were still in a cue, not long past it. I shed my apologetic demeanor and wasn’t so hard on myself when I didn’t know immediately how to solve something. I realized that I didn’t have to have all the answers right then and there. I just needed to state the problem clearly to the right people, and then we would put our heads together and try to solve it. And I learned how absolutely essential it is to the tech process that I have a good relationship with the stage manager—something I’ve had on nearly every subsequent production I’ve directed since that first trial-by-fire.

This collaboration usually builds slowly and steadily during the weeks in the rehearsal space, and is often wordless: he glances at me in warning that we need to take a break in a few minutes, and I sense his attention and support as the actors and I struggle with a challenging scene. He helps me schedule the next day’s scenes at the end of each rehearsal, and shares his
perceptions of the actors’ work if I solicit them from him. Gradually, we build a deep sense of mutual trust, and in tech time it comes to fruition. If we keep communicating well (“A lot of the first day of tech is about establishing the vernacular,” according to stage manager Roy Harris), if we take the challenges on one at a time, and if neither one of us tries to dominate the process, tech can be as enjoyable as it was when I was a kid making theater on the cheap.

Technically, the stage manager is in charge of tech: she’s the conduit through which everything has to flow. She sits at a large table in the middle of the darkened auditorium, a small light illuminating her prompt book while she methodically records the placement and timing of the sound and light cues one by one, telling the actors over the “God mike” (which reaches everywhere in the theater) when to pick up the scene so we can see a cue, and when to stop again so we can work on it. She’s the “communications satellite,” as one stage manager put it—literally, the hub of it all.

But (as I gradually realized on that production of The Greeks), I’m still in charge artistically. Tech is not just technical: every decision we make is an artistic one, and every choice we arrive at will affect the audience’s experience of the show. We’re trying to put the production together in a way that will not only be technically fluid, but compelling moment to moment, building towards a cumulative impact. If either of us is too possessive of tech, if the stage manager feels that it’s all her time or I feel it’s all my time, as opposed to our time, then our ability to work together will be seriously impeded.

At the first scene transition on my early production of Of Mice and Men, the stage manager rose from her seat to object when I began working with the stagehands, costumed as ranch hands, whose job it was to change set pieces in silhouette during the play’s transitions. The stagehands were under her supervision, not mine, she told me, and it was up to her to tell them where to go and what to do. Yes, of course, if they were backstage, I countered—but since they were onstage, it was up to me to choreograph what the audience saw. On hindsight, we were both right—it should have been a collaborative effort. This particular turf battle was due to our mutual youth and inexperience.

“Staking a claim or becoming territorial during tech is the opposite of good theater,” Roy Harris maintains. “Because the whole process is so collaborative, I don’t see any one part of it as mine—and I see all of it as mine.”

I’ve discovered that the only thing that gets a seasoned stage manager
really ticked off is being left out of the loop, not being informed of decisions that affect her work. When I worked with the actors once on re-staging a scene, while the stage manager was involved with a lighting crisis (an instrument had crashed to the ground), she let me know afterwards how unhappy she was to find out about the new staging, which affected the calling of a light cue, in a preview that night.

The stage manager and I should respond to each other’s needs fluidly and symbiotically, sensing together the pace at which we should work through tech, with input from the lighting and sound designers as they build and change cues. My own inner metronome has varied through the years. I went from a tendency to let tech happen swiftly around me while I watched from the sidelines, to micro-managing and trying to perfect every last moment and cue, to acquiring a sense of when to stop and work meticulously and when to move on (for now). And seasoned stage managers know when they need to request extra time to practice a complicated cue, and when to let it go until they can call the whole show in real time and see where the problem spots are.

Most stage managers have an innate sense of timing in calling cues, and I’ve learned to let my guidance be general at first, before stepping in and giving them detailed instruction. There’s an orchestral conductor in every good stage manager, and all those weeks of listening to the play in rehearsal and grasping its nuances pay off now. “I always like the director to let me call the cue wrong once or twice,” says stage manager Renee Lutz. “I know where a cue should land, and I hate to be told ‘Call it a beat and a half later’ on the first pass. Fine tuning things takes a couple of days.”

ILLUMINATING THE STORY

Meanwhile, the lighting designer sits at a separate tech table, gazing alternately at the stage and at a computer screen with impossible-to-decipher numbers, occasionally glancing down at some sheets of paper which are equally inscrutable. He speaks over a headset, to his assistant sitting next to him and to the lighting board operator in the booth, in highly technical language: “Number 15. Up to 60. Down to 40. Record.” Instantly something beautiful happens onstage. The combination of technical mastery and consummate artistry propels me back into my tongue-tied state of awe as a fledgling director, responding on a purely aesthetic level.

Which is why it’s so essential for us to have already had a meeting where we talked in depth and detail, after the lighting designer has seen a late
run-through in the rehearsal space but before tech begins. More important than all the pre-rehearsal discussions, or our hasty attempt to touch base before he turns in his light plot (way earlier than either of us would like), this meeting can take into account what’s actually going to be happening onstage—how the actors and I are using space and time to tell the story of the play. “Make sure you have this meeting!” I always tell my student directors; yet recently, I neglected to have it myself and paid the price. Our seasoned and gifted lighting designer was in on early discussions, came to many rehearsals, and seemed to know exactly what he was doing, but then I noticed in tech that his beautifully bold and striking lighting often wasn’t illuminating the story that was unfolding onstage. In the middle of tech and dress rehearsals, I would sit behind him and whisper, “This takes place in late afternoon,” and “This scene is the turning point of the second act”—insights that would have been much better shared a week earlier in a long leisurely meeting than in the intense environment of tech.

These few days of tech are the lighting designer’s equivalent of the early weeks the actors and I had in rehearsal—his time to experiment with an idea, discard it, try something else, make spontaneous discoveries in the moment—and I need to give him some creative space. As lighting designer Pat Dignan puts it, sounding like an actor in early rehearsals, “I want the director to tell me early on when it isn’t quite right, but also why. It’s about communicating what the purpose of it is, not “That cue should be two seconds faster.”” Other lighting designers agree. “I want the emotional tenor,” says Ann Wrightson, “not all the nuts and bolts;” and Brian MacDevitt is even more blunt: “I don’t want line readings from the director.”

**MULTI-TASKING**

But while the stage manager and the lighting designer are my lynchpin collaborators in tech, I’m working on many levels simultaneously, and with everyone at once: fixing a piece of staging while a light cue is being written, asking the sound designer or composer for some different options while the costume designer is trying a new color on an actor, talking with the set designer about sight lines while the stage manager and board operators coordinate a sequence of cues they’re about to try, sensing when we can move on and see how it all works together in the first dress rehearsal, and when we need to hold everything and get it right this very moment.

It’s the epitome of multi-tasking, exhilarating when it’s going well, overwhelming when it’s not. I can feel the difference physically, as well as
mentally and emotionally. When the designs and the collaborations are all on track, my many trips from the tech tables to the stage to the extreme side seats and back again feel like a series of graceful dances in which I constantly have new partners. When it looks all wrong and there are tensions in the air, I feel stuck, confused about whom to move to next to solve a particular problem, and unsure that we’ll be able to interact productively when I do.

Transitions between scenes are a critical test for a director in tech—a test I didn’t prepare for enough in my early years of directing. I would put off thinking specifically about them until we got into the space, by which time it was far too late to make them fluid and compelling. The cumulative sweep and emotional impact of the production would grind to a halt while the audience gazed at an ill-thought-out-and-executed transition. A delightfully comic scene in Twelfth Night in which an ecstatic Malvolio ended up swinging in the garden was followed by the clunky removal of the swing; the horror of Banquo’s murder in Macbeth was undercut by the laborious placement of the table and chairs for the banquet scene that followed. The time to figure out those transitions was at a design meeting when we were all gathered around the model and miniature set pieces, and could have incorporated our transition planning into the design itself.

On the other side of the coin, when I was directing Desire Under the Elms, I made the decision when I first read the play to do all twelve scenes with no intermission, and keep the story going during transitions, which would reveal between-scenes events such as lovers coming together and a baby smothered quietly by a desperate mother. I worked from early on with the actors, a composer, and the costume designer, choreographing the actors’ movement, making suggestions for the feel of the music, rehearsing the costume changes that would occur onstage and in character. By the time the lighting designer saw a run-through, the transitions were an integral part of the production, and she sculpted the bodies in space beautifully with light. The transitions helped to sustain the play’s escalating tension, and I was as proud of what happened between scenes as I was of the scenes themselves.

In hindsight, maybe I was a little too proud. I’ve seen productions in which the transitions were so spectacular that what came between them paled in comparison, when it seemed as if the director was more interested in the music and lights and choreography of his own creation, than in the human interaction through language provided by the playwright. While transitions offer the director a wonderful opportunity, the best ones support and illuminate, rather than eclipse, the actors and the play itself.
A VITAL TIME

What about the actors: how do they cope with tech?

After four weeks of the increasingly intense, hothouse atmosphere of the rehearsal space, actors relish the chance to be left alone for a while, to adjust to their costumes, their props, the lighting, and the new space, while I work with the designers and technical crew on the production that surrounds them. As various actors describe it:

“I love tech. It’s scary, but I love it because the focus is not on you.” – Molly Regan

“It’s a good time to explore because the pressure’s off.” – Ivar Brogger

“It’s a crucial, vital time to make discoveries.” – Maggie Lacey

As a young director who was far more comfortable with actors than with designers, it took me a few years to realize that this is not the right time to go onstage and discuss motivation. Instead, I need to make sure that all the technical and design issues surrounding the actors are solved in ways that make them feel safe and secure. It’s a time to fix the staging in a scene so it plays better in the space, to ask for the costume to be adjusted so an actress can make her quick change more easily, to request extra glow tape on the edge of the step so an actor can enter safely in the blackout. It’s to the actors’ advantage that I move us through tech efficiently and thoroughly, getting to a full dress rehearsal run-through with costumes as soon as possible. “I get restless when tech goes on too long,” says actor Tommy Schrider, “when there’s too much time between the last rehearsal hall run and the first dress—especially with the first preview coming up.” I want the actors to begin the process of reclaiming the play as soon as possible, which is another reason to not dwell obsessively on every detail during tech, but to solve some of them in note sessions later.

In some theaters, the costumes don’t make an appearance until the second day of tech, or even the first dress rehearsal, because they’re still being worked on or because the costume shop is concerned about all the sweat that will drench them during these long days of stop-and-start tech. I find this policy frustrating, especially if there are transitions to rehearse which require onstage costume changes or quick changes backstage. But being in civvies for the first days of tech does give the actors (and me) a chance to get used to the new design elements more gradually.

When they do get into costume, it’s one more thing for me to try to respond to without being overwhelmed. Watching the actors begin to
inhabit their clothes, as they walk around onstage between cues or discuss a tight sleeve or a loose hem with the costume designer, is mesmerizing to me. Suddenly, the actor is very visibly the character, and when an actor in costume approaches me with a question I feel somewhat amazed, as if a fictional character in a novel is asking me for directions.

No matter what I'm working on in tech, I'm always very aware of the actors, when they're dealing with new challenges in the design or when they're simply in a holding pattern. I watch them talk with each other onstage—commenting on the costumes, or simply chatting in blue jeans and T-shirts—while they wait long minutes for a complicated series of cues to be worked out by the designers, stage manager, and myself. Sometimes, their inaudible conversation is deep and intense, seemingly quite personal; sometimes, one of them shares an anecdote and the others burst into raucous laughter. I feel a twinge of sadness at not being involved in those conversations myself. My bond with the actors is starting to be loosened, as I observe them more and interact with them less.

Close to the end of our tech for Othello, the actors struggled with lines in the fast-paced scene in which Iago kills Roderigo and wounds Cassio on a dark street. One of the actors asked if they could stop and run the lines; the lighting designer said she could use the ten minutes to build the cues to the end of the play, so the stage manager asked his assistant to come onstage with the script. The actors sprawled around the set in costume, drilling the lines with quiet intensity, while the lights around them changed. The set designer consulted with the props person about Desdemona's bed; the costume designer and wardrobe supervisor discussed Othello's upcoming quick change; the stage manager wrote the last sound and music cues in her script while talking to the composer over her headset.

Watching from the back of the theater, I felt an intense connection, not only to all of these people working towards a common goal, but to all the other theater people who had mounted their own productions of Othello over the past 400 years—and, by stretching my imagination a bit, to those who'd be doing this when we are long gone.

The lighting designer recorded the last cue, the actors finished their line-through and stood up with renewed energy, and the stage manager said, “Go ahead, please—from the top of Act Five scene one.”
Chapter Twelve

Complete Team Effort

“Dress rehearsal is great if you have the shoes.” – Ivar Brogger

A BUMPY RIDE

Arriving at the theater for the first dress rehearsal, I have battle scars from the last several days of tech: chapped lips, exhausted eyes, and bruises on my legs from bumping into the arms of seats in the darkened auditorium. But it’s a new day, and I’ve got a fresh yellow legal pad and black Flair pen—essential tools for the upcoming couple of days. I know I can do this, as long as I stay calm and focused and no one gets sick or injured.

(Knock on wood, I’ve been very lucky in that regard, with the exception of my production of Macbeth. In the first several minutes of tech, the lighting designer fell off the stage and broke his foot, and the actor playing Duncan cut his hand and sprinkled real blood all over the floor.)

As I settle into a seat behind the tech tables, my assistant offers to take notes for me, but I decline. He’ll be needed in the front row with a script, ready to give the actors a line if they get lost. Besides, the physical act of writing will give me something to do as I embark on this bumpy ride, sitting in what feels like the back seat of the car.

The stage manager calls places, the dress rehearsal starts, and sometime later it finishes. I sit in the back and scribble furiously, and by the end of the two or three hours I have pages and pages of messy, emphatic notes.

Every once in a while, I experience a strong first dress rehearsal, with design and technical aspects only needing some fine-tuning, and actors already back in the groove and well on their way to being audience-ready. But more often than not, it feels like a rough first draft. “It was very rocky,” I wrote despairingly in my journal after the first dress rehearsal of Of Mice and Men. “I frequently couldn’t see people, it looked boring and remote, the blocking was awkward and static, the piece had no flow.” Apparently I expected the first dress rehearsal to be smooth, visible, audible, and exciting. I’ve long since learned better.
How could it be, at this point? It’s the stage manager’s first stab at calling the whole show in sequence; the lighting designer’s work is still sketchy; the sound cues need volume adjustments; the music transitions aren’t quite the right length; some props are still being worked on; there are staging and sight-line issues to be solved; and the costumes seem to be wearing the actors rather than vice versa. The actors themselves are marking the play, not living through it. And that’s a good dress rehearsal!

So, we go to work. I focus on technical and design issues, not acting ones. The actors don’t need detailed notes from me—they need me to solve the tech problems so they can feel fully confident out there, and they need to get into another dress rehearsal as soon as possible. The more times they can get the whole play under their belts in this new environment, the sooner they’ll reclaim the production as their own.

Every minute counts. While the actors get out of their costumes, the designers and tech staff and I go over our notes and make a plan about what we can accomplish before the next dress rehearsal, which we want to have just a few hours from now. While the actors and I debrief backstage in the green room, the lighting designer and his crew are rewriting cues, the sound designer is cutting and pasting on his computer, and the costume designer and wardrobe people are rigging costumes for faster quick changes.

The crew and designers keep working over the actors’ dinner break; and when we start up again, we quickly solve some staging problems and then rehearse whatever transitions are crying out loudest for help. We plunge into another dress rehearsal at the last possible minute and finish just as the day officially ends at midnight.

This time, the play begins to emerge again. The story is becoming clearer and more supported by the design, and the actors are even doing some acting. We’re on track, but there’s a still lot more to do.

NOTES AND CHANGES

The playwright (if he’s there) has been sitting around for several days of tech and dress, and by now he’s thoroughly antsy and nervous about the impending arrival of the audience. He and I go over his own pages of notes, both large (I don’t find her convincing in that scene, or Can we cut all the music cues?) and small (The rhythm of this one line is off, or That light cue feels too fast). He sits in on my sessions with the actors, and I fold his notes for them into my own. The dramaturg and assistant director also have notes they want to share with me, and I’ll listen to them when I can. But there are
only so many hours in the day, and only so much I can absorb at 12:30 a.m.

Then there are the artistic director’s notes. Often, these are just about small details, but sometimes they come in the form of large and forceful suggestions, about an actor’s entire performance or major aspects of the design. Daunting as this is, it’s exactly the right time to get any big, radical insights that those of us down in the trenches may not be able to see. The artistic director’s notes about the actors finally enable me to stand back and view what they’re doing from a distance, which, because of my myopic focus on tech and design, I haven’t been able to do lately. And, most especially, now is the time to put in any sweeping changes to the costumes, props, or set pieces—solid things which the actors have to get used to as they wear, handle, and touch them, as opposed to lights and sound, which are more ephemeral and can evolve more gradually over time. Plus, out of our remaining couple of dress rehearsals, one will be a photo call, so the closer we can be to the eventual look of the show by then, the better.

Some actors balk at the huge adjustments they may be asked to make to new design elements. “We can’t use these pieces of furniture—we’ve rehearsed for weeks thinking we’d have something completely different!” several actors told me when I directed *Twelfth Night*. But it was only now, in the theater (and prompted by the artistic director), that the designers and I clearly saw that some changes were necessary. “What’s more important,” one of the actors asked, “the look of the show or our ability to act it confidently?” “Both,” I said, as I tried to carve out more time between dress rehearsals for them to get used to the new pieces.

It’s even harder for the actors when their costumes, extensions of their characters, are changed just as they’re getting used to them. At the first dress rehearsal of *The Mystery Plays*, I could see that our costume choices were too authentically medieval, too unimaginative—too brown, according to artistic director Mark Lamos. The designer, who’d wanted to be more fanciful all along but had been restrained by my caution, cheerfully ditched everything and brought in new clothes: brightly colored pants, high-top sneakers, patterned shirts. The actors were completely thrown, because the new costumes seemed to require a more presentational acting style from them. And they were right—the acting was also too brown, I realized. In the cozy confines of the rehearsal room it felt right; in the large thrust theater, it was clear that we needed to make more playful and extroverted choices.

With just a few days between dress rehearsals and during preview
week to rehearse every scene all over again, and redefine our entire stylistic approach, the new costumes goosed us all. They gave us something to aim for: a style that was rooted in the reality we’d found, but that was more physically and emotionally extreme. I prodded and cajoled and pushed and applauded the sometimes reluctant actors every step of the way, grateful at all times for the ally I had in the designer and the costumes themselves. “Dress rehearsal is great, if you have the shoes,” says Ivar Brogger—but if you don’t, or if your shoes are drastically altered to something you never anticipated, it can be a very unnerving experience.

FULL-COURT PRESS

Between each dress rehearsal, I find a few minutes to touch base one-on-one with the lighting designer. Subtle internal light cues will take a couple of previews to perfect, but now’s the time to get at the overall look and feel of a scene, its beginning and ending and the transition following it. I still don’t give “line readings” to the lighting designer. But just as I get more hands-on with actors as rehearsals progress, I’m getting much more specific in my response to the lighting I’m seeing what I’m seeing, now that the designer has had some time to achieve what he’s after.

Lighting the actors is often a source of tension. The lighting designer, backed by the set designer, wants a scene to be dark and atmospheric; I want the mood, but I also want to see their faces. And if I can’t see the actors, I often can’t hear them either, especially if it’s challenging language, such as Shakespeare. When I directed Othello, we all huddled around the lighting designer’s tech table for long minutes, while she tried to find a solution to a night-time scene that would please everybody. “No, that’s too much light!” the set designer would exclaim, while I would counter, “Well, can’t you keep the general lighting dark, but give me a little more just on the faces?” “But the faces keep moving,” the lighting designer protested. As I recall it, we found a middle ground, keeping the mood, but lighting the actors better; as the designers remember it, I pulled rank and made her light the whole scene more brightly.

Tackling the transitions, getting them to the point where they keep the storytelling flowing forward, is often our number one priority between dress rehearsals. And there’s something glorious in the full-court press, complete team effort of this work. It’s collaboration at its best, as everyone in the theater contributes something, and everyone has ownership in the whole transition—stage manager, designers, actors, board operators, and
even the backstage crew.

“That looks great, Mommy!” my then-eight-year-old son called from the back of the theater where he was watching tech, when the first complicated transition in a production worked perfectly on the first try. But that was the exception rather than the rule, because the crew kept making mistakes during dress rehearsals as they grappled with two turntables and a lot of moving scenery. “This is unacceptable,” I exclaimed to the stage manager; “I need to meet with them.” But by the time we sat down with the stagehands a few hours later, I’d cooled off and regained perspective. Rather than scolding the crew as we’d planned, the stage manager and I stressed how important the transitions were, asked them what they thought was causing the problems, and brainstormed with them about solutions. From then on, there were no more major mistakes, and I realized (not for the first time) that feeling a sense of ownership in the production is just as important for the tech staff as it is for the artists involved.

Sleeping during tech week is less than restful, and even when I’m unconscious I never feel very far away from all the challenges. In the midst of dress rehearsals for The Greeks, with some major staging problems still to be solved, I dreamt all night long of hopping little figurines around the model of the set, which in my dream was draped with strands of fettuccine (my dinner earlier that evening). It was a relief to wake up the next morning.

At 8 a.m. on the second day of dress rehearsals, I collect all the messy pages of notes (my own and others’), open my dog-eared script, and take up a clean yellow pad. I consolidate the notes and copy them over in my neatest handwriting, make a list of what we need to rehearse onstage before the next dress, and consult the script when something confuses me. Going through it all methodically in chronological order calms and focuses me. Somehow, the act of organizing everything onto clean pages, actually making a plan, is vastly reassuring and gives me a feeling that I have some control over it all. I relish the quiet environment, which reminds me of my pre-production time. I enjoy the lack of any collaborators, except for the script and the pad, which don’t get tired or defensive or have feelings.

There’s a finite amount of time until the next dress rehearsal, and I use every minute of it: giving extensive notes, fixing staging, tightening transitions, rehearsing the beginnings and endings of scenes. The scheduled photo call is necessary but frustrating.

The actors are right on the verge of having the first fully confident dress rehearsal since we moved into the theater—and there’s a photographer (or
several of them), clicking and whirring away, making full concentration impossible. If he can get away with it, the photographer eases his way into the playing space, trying to get extreme close-ups of the actors in intense and photogenic moments. A couple of times, I’ve eased myself into the space right behind him, tapped him on the shoulder and silently ushered him back to the seats.

The photographer doesn’t count as an audience, because he’s there with a job to do. But his presence gets us used to the idea that we’re just about to cross a major threshold. He may laugh at times, or tell me afterwards that he found it moving, or studiously avoid saying anything. He’s a preview of the real audiences we’re about to encounter, less than twenty-four hours from now at our final dress rehearsal, with an invited audience in attendance.

The next day, whether we run the whole show again or focus on bits and pieces, the clock ticks inexorably towards that event. I pick up the pace as I try to get through my to-do list, with the feeling that I’m cleaning house and preparing a meal before a very important party—and I’m ambivalent about the guests.

“Don’t you want to stage the curtain call?” the stage manager asked me recently, when I dismissed the actors for their dinner break a few hours before the invited dress rehearsal. No, I don’t, I thought to myself; but I took them through a quick group bow that looked as hastily thrown together and provisional as it was. I was playing down expectations, feeling in denial, even resentful, about the intrusion about to happen that evening. And I realized how ironic it was that these feelings were all about the audience—the very people (along with the actors) whose presence makes live theater exist.
Audience
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHARING THE WORK

“In previews, the great luxury is seeing how things work in front of an audience.” – Daniel Jenkins

“I feel like such a naked nerve, as if I’ve had my face peeled.”

– Neal Bell

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Twenty or thirty people file into the theater and scatter themselves in the front bank of seats, between the stage and the tech tables, which are halfway back in the audience. Stagehands are checking the props onstage, ladders are off to the sides, and crew members are talking on headsets to each other. There’s very much a sense that the space is still ours, not theirs. The only concession to these newcomers is that the empty coffee cups and containers of half-eaten food have been thrown out.

Who are these people? On closer inspection, I can see that they’re friends of the actors, maybe a specially invited community group or an Introduction to Theater class.

They sit in separate clumps, and they don’t come close to filling the theater—not that we would want them to. Somebody (the artistic director or production manager, not me) welcomes them, and plays down expectations by explaining that this is still a rehearsal, that the lighting and sound designers will be working on cues, an actor may call for a line, we might have to stop and fix things. “You’re the first group of people who will see this work,” this person concludes, “so thank you for helping us enter this last stage of our process.” OK—this doesn’t feel too threatening. I can handle this.

The actors may start off tentatively, seeming a bit underwater. The audience is unsure of how to respond, and also a little nervous about what might go wrong. But a short way into the play, both sides begin to settle into the experience. I can sense the actors’ growing awareness that they’re telling
a story to a new group of people, and I can feel them making discoveries as a result. The audience relaxes as they begin to go along for the ride, listening intently and laughing at surprising times.

I have a lot of epiphanies myself, sitting behind everyone and seeing it through their eyes. I realize that an actor needs to slow down a moment to make it register, that the storytelling could be clearer in one scene and the staging sharper in another, that an actor has to have higher stakes here for a stronger payoff there. But as I take my usual large volume of notes, I can feel that something has definitively changed, now that it’s not just me and a few others watching. Looking at the actors’ relieved smiles when they take their makeshift bow at the end of the evening, I can tell that they’re beginning to move out of my orbit and into the audience’s.

Backstage, the actors are eager to share their impressions of the evening and to hear what I thought about it. We laugh and chatter excitedly in the greenroom about near misses and technical mishaps, lines that suddenly weren’t there and rescues that had to be made by fellow actors, unexpected responses from the audience to certain scenes. Did you believe the laugh you got when you said...?—Thanks for saving my ass when I forgot ...—Did you see me trip on that entrance?! I share a couple of overall responses, but my detailed notes will come tomorrow, along with further scene work. Both will be fueled by what we learned this evening from our unofficial first audience, these assorted people who are way more important to our journey with this play than they’ll ever know.

The actors seem more settled and relaxed the next day, having been inoculated by this first contact with an audience, but I’m much more nervous. The invited dress could have gone disastrously and it would have been OK—we’d have lived up to the low expectations we set. But tonight’s audience paid for their tickets (discounted for previews, but still expensive), and we’d better deliver for them. I try to channel my anxiety into a really productive rehearsal, but if anything threatens to derail it, my nerves come to the surface. “You’re tense,” a lighting designer said to me once, as I pushed us through a long list of scenes that needed work. You’re making me tense, I thought, by spending too much precious time fixing light cues. I enlisted the stage manager to help move us forward faster.

Fifteen minutes before the rehearsal ends, I stage the real curtain call, as opposed to the makeshift one we used last night. This also makes me tense, since I worry about whose egos might be bruised by the order of the solo bows. Should the leading lady bow before or after the leading man? If
it’s an ensemble show, should we just do a company bow? Should this older actor bow last, out of respect for his many years’ experience? I’ve planned it on paper this morning and drawn diagrams for myself—the only time in the process I do this, aside from transitions—and I simply need to push through it and not dwell on how it will be interpreted by the actors. We rehearse the bows twice and break for dinner.

Immediately, a clean-up crew descends on the theater. Ladders are put away, tech tables are hauled out, and people scour the aisles with plastic garbage bags, collecting stray belongings and days of detritus. Whose backpack is this?—Mary, are these your glasses?—I found a pad of notes under this seat—is it yours?—Is this someone’s script?—I’m putting your coat in the greenroom, OK? I ask the designers if they have dinner plans, and we leave the theater to the whir of several vacuum cleaners erasing the traces of our long days of inhabiting this space. From now on, it belongs to the audience.

A few of them have arrived early and are already in the lobby when I return to the theater at 7:25 to check in with the actors backstage before the stage manager gives them their half-hour call (union rules forbid the director to be backstage after that). I knock on the dressing room doors and call out “Have a good show!” to each of the actors. Some of them emerge in order to ask me one last question about a note I’ve given. This isn’t an evening for hugs—we’re all too focused on what lies ahead.

The number of people in the lobby keeps growing. There are elderly couples looking at the actors’ photos, groups of middle aged women lining up for the ladies’ room, younger people getting coffee from the concession stand. I wander around for half an hour, not able to alight in any one place, finding solace in talking to the designers, who have also been uprooted now that their tech tables are gone. If the playwright is there, I have to play down my own anxieties since he’s probably even more nervous than I am. At 8:00 or a little before, we all take our seats in the last row, the lighting and sound designers on headsets with their laptops open so they can keep working discreetly. The stage manager is up in the booth, getting ready to call places. I study the audience, while they read their programs and chat with each other. What are they expecting? What will they think of it? Why does it suddenly matter so much to me that they’ll like it? As the lights go down and the performance begins, I have intense feelings of eagerness and dread, neediness and resentment, all at the same time.
ONE-NIGHT-ONLY COMMUNITY

My complicated feelings for the audience when I direct have always puzzled me. I love being an audience member when the play and production are both extraordinary—it always reminds me of why I wanted to make theater in the first place. Years ago, the profound sense of connection I felt to the actors and audience at The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, which extended to strangers on the bus home afterwards, crystallized for me what I wanted to evoke through my own work. Watching a beautiful new play such as August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone years ago, or Lynn Nottage’s Ruined more recently, makes me feel blessed to be present in the world and at this theater in this moment in time. Seeing a stirring production of a Shakespeare play, I’m struck by how alive he seems because of this communal act 400 years after his death. And maybe it’s because I know first-hand what theater can be at its best that I feel so nervous that we’ll somehow fall short on making that same kind of experience for this audience.

Part of my nervousness is that it’s out of my hands now, at least for tonight—it’s up to the actors and audience to form that bond, that connection, that one-night-only community that is all the more intense because it’s ephemeral. That sense of community is especially thrilling when the audience isn’t homogenous: when there’s a connection between the young students seeing Shakespeare for the first time and the lifetime theatergoers who are familiar with his plays; when there’s a bond between the African-Americans in the audience who love August Wilson’s work because he speaks to their experience and people like me who are gaining entry into a world we don’t know so well. When we all laugh as one at a marvelously human moment, or when the collective silence grows through a riveting scene, I’m aware of my connection not just to the actors and the play but to the people sitting all around me. I’m surrounded by humanity, and we’re all bound together by an intense common experience. That simply doesn’t happen at the movies.

But there’s a flip side to this feeling of life and connection that great theater generates. At a bad movie, I may feel annoyed, perplexed, even disgusted—but nothing deeper than that, because those actors aren’t there in the flesh. But at a bad theater experience, I am horrified, mortified, profoundly depressed—because it’s live. Watching actors right there, in person, acting badly right this minute, or struggling with a bad play or bad direction, is excruciating. As a theatergoer I know once said about watching a terrible production, “I sat there and felt the will to live draining out of me.”
I want desperately to create the kind of theater that makes people feel more alive, not less so. But I know from a lifetime of theatergoing that what we experience usually falls between these two extremes. As a theater professional, I can get something out of those middling experiences, as I discover a new theater artist or support a friend’s work.

Plus, my tickets are often free, or at least tax deductible. But most audience members work a full day before coming to the theater at night, pay far too much for their tickets (and possibly a babysitter, parking, and a meal as well), and then have an experience which doesn’t transform or transport them. After the huge commitment they’ve made, no wonder they’re often disappointed.

But sitting in the back of the theater watching the first preview of a play I’ve directed, it’s hard to remember the audience’s commitment because I’m so intensely aware of ours. I know what this work means to me, and to my collaborators—I feel all the time and passion we’ve invested in it—and I want it to be equally meaningful to them. Then I see someone stifle a yawn in the middle of a scene, and I’m filled with a sense of futility. And if it’s difficult for me to be there, it’s much worse for a writer whose play is encountering an audience for the very first time. “I’m so conscious of every cough and tittering and rustle of chair that it’s very hard to experience the play,” says Neal Bell. “I feel like such a naked nerve, as if I’ve had my face peeled.” And Michael Weller feels as if “There’s ice in my stomach.”

Even when the play clearly is reaching the audience, when the hoped-for bond is forming between audience and actors, it can still feel oddly anticlimactic to me. I’m pleased and relieved, but I don’t quite know what my place is in it all. I’m in the audience physically, but I’m not of them. I’m emotionally with the actors, but they’re up there and I’m out here. And it’s not that I want to be onstage with them right now—perish the thought. It’s more that I miss the excitement I felt in the rehearsal room and the intense days of tech and dress, when I had a more direct involvement in it all than I do now.

The actors don’t miss those days—they live for this moment, and all their work is geared towards it. “I love previews—that’s the point of it,” says Boris McGiver. “You add the fuel and send it down the runway.”

Others agree:

“In previews, you make something, and the audience informs you so much. It’s a different energy between an empty and a full theater.”

– Tommy Schrider
“In previews, the great luxury is seeing how things work in front of an audience.” – Daniel Jenkins
“Previews are a great learning tool because the audience teaches you the play.” – Molly Regan

That’s the healthiest way for me to see the preview audiences: as people who can teach me more about the play. I’ve been standing in for them all this time, creating the production I’d want to see if I were in their shoes. But now the guesswork ends; now we’ll find out what actually connects with them and what doesn’t. They’re my final collaborators, as I work to make what I first read and loved on the page a fully three-dimensional experience, that (I hope) will move the audience as much as I was moved when I first encountered it.

LEARNING TOOL

At times, this collaboration reveals unpleasant truths. “They just kind of sat there,” I wrote about the audience at the first preview of The Mystery Plays. “I got very, very worried that this whole thing will be a huge flop and everyone has known it all along except those of us closely involved. Will anyone ever like it but me?”

Sometimes, the audience tries to become my collaborator more directly. During the intermission of a preview of Tina Howe’s Painting Churches, which I directed in Cincinnati, a man sitting next to me noticed my note-taking and asked what my connection was with the production. I told him, dreading what might come next. “Oh—going to make some changes, huh?” he asked, referring to my notes. “It’s not bad,” he went on. “A little slow.”

But preview audiences can bring pleasant surprises too. My rehearsals for Angels Fall in California were fraught with difficulty, as several of the actors challenged me at every turn. But after the smooth first preview and strong audience response, they were suddenly ready to follow wherever I led. It helped that several of their spouses had been there and gave their stamp of approval to the production.

I always get nervous when I hear that an actor’s partner or spouse is attending a preview because I’ve heard stories about actors who totally changed their performance based on notes from a loved one. But if an actor gets validation, or the right kind of constructive criticism, it can make his performance stronger. The night after her boyfriend saw Othello in previews, the actress playing Desdemona gave a lovely performance,
with great simplicity and depth of feeling. I asked her if her boyfriend (who was a fine actor himself) had said anything to her that had affected her work. “Yes, of course,” she said. “He knows my work well, and calls me on my bad habits.”

Every once in a while, the first preview is the most exciting night of the entire production for me. As Iago’s wife Emilia began to confront Othello in the final scene of the play, I watched as members of the audience leaned forward, held their collective breath and vocalized their responses. I flashed back to when I first saw the play as a student, and remembered how moved I’d been by the same scene. For a moment, I forgot that I was the director and watched as if I’d never seen it before. I absorbed the electricity being generated and the greatness of the play itself, and experienced a high I almost never reach during previews.

IN THE HOT SEAT

Those magical moments when the audience response is so powerful that I can actually give myself over to the experience are even more intense when the play is brand new. “PEOPLE LOVED IT!!!” I exclaimed into my journal after the first preview of the first new play I directed in New York, Buddies by Mary Gallagher. “The applause went on and on, they cheered, the cast took a second curtain call!!!” (I found out afterwards that most of the audience were friends of the cast.) “Before tonight, we didn’t know how people would respond to it—now we do,” I wrote after an enthusiastic reception of the first preview of Erik’s play A Normal Life, which I directed in Seattle. Too excited to sleep, he and I climbed a hill behind the theater late that night and looked down on the glowing lights of the city.

And then sometimes the opposite happens: the audience doesn’t seem to know what to make of a new play, or even displays outright hostility to it. Then the new play jitters come back in full force. I have to tamp down my own fears for the sake of the playwright, whose primary feeling is, “Oh man, I really fucked this up—and I hope there’s time to fix it,” in the words of Michael Weller. At times like these, my admiration for the playwright shoots sky-high. As members of a preview audience at a post-show discussion tried to articulate what had confused them, I watched the playwright sitting onstage next to me listening and taking notes, and felt relieved and also guilty that I wasn’t the one in the hot seat.

The playwright and I talk continually: during intermissions, over meals, late at night over the phone, early in the morning, on rehearsal
breaks during the day. I listen to him while he sorts out his own impressions, he listens as I give him my feedback, and we both try to put it all in the perspective of the bigger picture. It helps enormously if there’s a long preview period. With enough time to process everyone’s notes and opinions, and to watch the play a few more times while mulling them over, the playwright can come to his own conclusions about what to cut and what to revise. In New York City non-profit theaters, the preview period is usually three weeks or more to allow for this, and the play doesn’t open officially to the critics until it’s more than halfway through its run. But with the four or five previews usually allotted at regional theaters, the pressure is on the writer to make changes immediately.

However a new play is received by its audience, the artistic director is sure to have his own forceful notes. These are not only about cuts (something we can almost count on getting), but also larger concerns, such as a character’s journey in the play or whether the story is clear at certain points. After our first preview of *A Normal Life* in Seattle, the artistic director and dramaturg rolled out a huge suggestion they had held off on making until the time seemed right: that Erik cut the last scene entirely and rewrite the penultimate scene so that it could end the play. The idea was a good one, but with only four previews remaining until we opened, we had to figure out how to do it, practically speaking. Erik stayed up all night writing, and we had something solid to present the cast with the next day at noon. They took it in their stride, we rehearsed it several times, and put the new ending in with surprising smoothness that same night.

The actors are in the hot seat almost as much as the writer, since they’re the ones performing the new material, usually with only a day’s rehearsal. At a second preview once, the actors were word-perfect on all the many changes we’d put into the script that afternoon, but the playwright and I watched in horror as several memory lapses occurred with lines that *hadn’t* changed. “It’s harrowing,” says Lizbeth Mackay, “but it’s exciting—it really keeps you on your toes.” Daniel Jenkins agrees, and says, “If you’re going to bitch and moan about line changes, don’t do new plays—do something else.”

Each day is a never-ending succession of unbinding scripts and inserting new pages, reading them around a table, asking and answering questions, and putting the new material on its feet. Sometimes, we read scenes that the playwright decides to work on further and put in later, and there’s always the question of how much new material the actors can absorb...
and perform that evening in front of an audience. Big changes tend to be easier for them to incorporate than small ones. A brand new scene that clarifies a character’s journey is far more welcome to them than tiny little word changes in the middle of a long speech. “I spend the first half of the scene worrying about whether I’ll get the change right,” said an actor to me once, “and the second half relieved if it’s gone OK or kicking myself if it hasn’t. I never feel as if I’m actually in the scene.”

**FINAL PUSH**

Next to the roller-coaster ride of new plays, you’d think working on a tried-and-true play in previews would be tame by comparison. But as director, the glaring spotlight is fully on me if the production isn’t working. I don’t have the camaraderie of the writer, as we commiserate and laugh together and stay up late making plans about what to do next. After the not-so-great first preview of my production of *Macbeth*, following a difficult and injury-filled tech week, I felt lonely and exhausted as I longed for a partner to help me sort out what was wrong, as well as a few days off to recover and regain perspective. But with only four previews before opening, I had to plunge in again the next day and use the precious hours remaining to fix what I could. Dramaturg Vicky Abrash became an all-important sounding board for me during previews on that production as I prioritized what to work on when. And in the midst of changing nearly everything during preview week of *The Mystery Plays*, I had a two-hour phone conversation with the dramaturg on Thanksgiving morning, running ideas by her and brainstorming how to make the massive alterations I had in mind.

I try to back off gradually from the actors during previews, to take fewer and fewer notes, to stop micro-managing and give the play fully over to them. I can see them gaining confidence nightly, as contact with the audience teaches them the shape of the play and their own journey in it becomes more and more viscerally clear in their work. “I know what I need to do,” says Janet Zarish about finding her own way during previews. “The director is giving you notes that you really would find on your own if you could fly.” Nit-picky notes can hold the actors back when they try to remember them in performance; taking a few minutes of rehearsal to let them try a note onstage will give them a useful muscle memory that evening.

Rehearsing *Of Mice and Men* years ago, I kept giving pages and pages of notes right up until the last minute, even reworking the last scene a few hours before opening.
Finally, the actor playing George turned to me and said, “I don't want to rehearse anymore.” I realized he was right—we'd long since reached a point of diminishing returns. Now I call the actors in for only a couple of hours on the day of the opening, for minimal notes and a line run-through. As the actors gather in the green room and begin saying the lines of the play quietly, with the assistant stage manager following along in the script, a Zen-like calm descends. I finish writing my opening night cards and leave them off in the dressing rooms.

I feel as if the actors are going on a trip I myself won’t be taking. It’s as if I’m seeing them off on a plane to a foreign country, or saying goodbye to them as they leave for college. The playwright feels the same way: “I can’t get to the promised land myself,” Neal Bell once told me about the difference between an actor’s experience of opening night and his own.

I’ve already said goodbye to most or all of the designers, whose work is finished sometime during previews and who need to move on to their next assignment, as they piece together a living by doing multiple productions each year. I miss them—I wish they could be here tonight. But then, I feel superfluous myself by now. It always strikes me, in the hours before the opening, that I could walk out the door and disappear, and the show could still go on. Now it’s up to the actors—and, of course, the audience.
Chapter Fourteen

Opening And Aftermath

“I feel, ‘Dude, go home—it’s ours now.’” – Tommy Schrider

NOT A REAL PERFORMANCE

As the opening night performance approaches, there’s a high-pitched excitement backstage. People roam up and down the halls making last minute deliveries to each other’s dressing rooms, which are festooned with flowers, balloons, bottles, cards, and silly gifts thematically related to the play. It’s fun, but it all feels a little premature to me. I can’t help wondering, shouldn’t we be celebrating afterwards? Let’s get through the evening first.

Apparently, most actors feel this way too. “I hate openings,” declares one actor. “Too much pressure, and Christmas! I have enough to worry about without the cards.” “False audience, false expectations, critics—opening nights aren’t real performances,” says another. “It’s artificial,” says a third. “And all anyone’s thinking about is the press.”

I tend to be fatalistic about the press, but I sure would love tonight’s performance to provide me with a sendoff I can feel good about. I know from experience that the opening night is usually an ordeal to be lived through instead of a “real” performance, but I still have fantasies that it just might be a triumphant culmination to the whole process.

Every once in a while, I get my wish. This is especially satisfying when the road leading up to the opening has been rocky. After all the stressful reworking of the design and acting during previews for The Mystery Plays, the production on opening night worked like a charm and the audience embraced the show. And I’ll never forget the tumultuous ride leading up to A Normal Life’s opening in Seattle. An elderly actress had forgotten her lines at the final preview, and as a result we had a fraught rehearsal on the day we were to open. An actor stormed off to his dressing room, the actress was in tears, and the other actors were shaken. Why do we do this to ourselves, I kept wondering in the course of that long day, while I tried to contain the damage; Why are we in this profession where there’s such a
risk of public failure and humiliation? My answer came that evening, in the form of a seamless, confident performance from the whole ensemble and an extraordinary audience response.

But I’ve also had openings in which awful technical mishaps occurred, reminding me of the clips of weddings on America’s Funniest Home Videos in which the groom faints at the altar or the bride falls into the cake—except that they weren’t funny at the time. At the conclusion of a love scene in Jaclyn Reingold’s String Fever, with the New York Times critic in attendance, the lyrical Bach cello music for the transition as the couple walked off to the bedroom became static and distorted and then cut out abruptly.

In the opening scene of Of Mice and Men, while George and Lennie built their campfire and talked about the peace and quiet of their surroundings, a speaker suddenly let off a loud screech and then what sounded like an explosion. On the day of our big marathon of The Greeks, in which all three evenings of nine plays were performed in succession, Clytemnestra slipped in a pool of blood on her entrance after killing Agamemnon, and fell flat on her butt. Of course, these kinds of occurrences always feel far more horrific to me than to the audience, who are experiencing the production for the first time and take them with a grain of salt. They may even think they’re part of the show. “That was daring,” a woman was heard to remark in the restroom at intermission, about Clytemnestra playing a scene while sitting in a pool of blood. They make good stories later, but at the time, as I pace in the back of the theater, I feel as if my life has been shortened by ten years.

But the opening nights that still give me nightmares are the ones when the audience response was flat and there was no electricity in the theater—just a lot of dead air.

“It was a total fiasco tonight,” I wrote about a new play I’d directed which had had deceptively good audience response at previews. “They were almost completely unresponsive, and the actors got unnerved—they slowed down and pulled back. Really one of the worst nights I’ve ever experienced.” And it didn’t end there. At the opening night party afterwards, somebody on the theater’s board of directors hated the play so much that he sought me out to scold me, telling me that this kind of work could close the theater down. He also accosted the playwright and even the actors, I found out later.

Sometimes the performance is everything I could wish for, but the audience is not. Halfway through the strong opening night of Desire Under the Elms, I began to notice a restlessness from the audience that seemed
contagious. “Coughing, shuffling, shifting, endless dropping and retrieving of programs, and then unbelievable traffic coming and going,” I wrote later in my journal. In fairness to the audience, this was an intermission-less show and they probably needed a break; but at the time, all I could focus on was how disruptive they were being to an evening that had started off so well. When a young man stood and stepped over two rows of seats and then exited in full view of the audience and actors (we were in a thrust theater so everyone could see everyone else), I’d had enough. I raced out to the lobby and confronted him furiously, telling him to stand in the back for the rest of the show instead of reclaiming his seat. Later that evening, I was chagrined to meet him at the cast party. He was the nephew of one of the actors.

Sometimes one member of the audience can derail the whole experience for everyone else. During the first scene of my production of Donald Margulies’s Dinner with Friends in Philadelphia, a hearing aid went off, making a loud, continuous, high-pitched sound for about ten minutes. The artistic director, production manager, and I went up and down the aisles trying to find the culprit, incredulous that the person’s spouse or neighbors hadn’t asked him to turn it down or off. The actors realized they couldn’t be heard and didn’t know whether to stop or keep going; one of them forgot her lines and had to be rescued by the others. I went up to the booth to consult with the stage manager (something I would only do in an extreme emergency), and we decided to stop the show at the upcoming scene change and make an announcement over the PA system. Just before we reached that point, the hearing aid was switched off. But the performance couldn’t get back on track. For the rest of the evening, the audience was distracted and distracting. I stood in the back and took them in: “Some snoring, yawning, sighing, and, I could swear, farting,” I wrote later, “and one woman noisily opening a package of crackers. I felt like throttling all of them.”

I’m not proud of my intense dislike of certain opening night audiences. I realize it has to do with my vulnerable state of mind. I have no control over anything by now, least of all the audience. I’m going away tomorrow, and I already miss the actors, with whom I’ve had such an intense relationship these last four or five weeks. If I feel their work is not appreciated by my replacement, the audience, I get angry on their behalf, like a parent who feels that no boyfriend or girlfriend is good enough for her child. While I know that life moves on, and children become independent and form new relationships, I get upset if the new spouse behaves badly at the wedding.
Sometimes, there’s a surreal aspect to these nights. Throughout the hugs and gifts backstage, the sitting through the show feeling naked without a notepad and pen, the celebration afterwards, the glad-handing at the party, I don’t feel entirely like myself. It’s a sort of out-of-body experience that I float through, maybe as a kind of defense mechanism. But one opening night was decidedly an in-body experience for me. Sitting through my production of The Misanthrope in Philadelphia, my son, who was born two months later, kicked excitedly for a longer period of time than ever before. For once, I had an opening night in which I could put the production in perspective, with a vivid reminder that there is life after a show opens—literally.

RETURN TO REAL LIFE

When lay people ask me, “Don’t you have to be there every night during the run?” I find myself wondering who’d go crazy first—the actors or me. The actors need some breathing space, as do I. The day after the opening, I feel a huge sense of relief that I don’t have to go to the theater today or tonight. I can return to my real life, satisfied that I did the best I could. The kids are all grown up and my parenting is done.

But as evening approaches and I prepare dinner for my family, my mind is at the theater. At 7:00, I picture the crew setting up for the show; at 7:30, I know the actors are arriving for half hour; and at 7:55, the audience is settling into their seats. I keep expecting the phone to ring with an urgent request from the stage manager: “Mary, get down here—we need you!” At 8:30, I realize that’s not going to happen, and at 10:30, it sinks in that, for the first time, they’ve gone through the entire play without me there. It’s a profoundly ambivalent feeling.

Doing a thorough cleaning the next day, I tackle the clutter of yellow pages of notes I’ve been taking since tech began. Fix this—Re-stage that—Re-do lighting in this scene—a few days ago, this all felt like life and death to me. Now, I consign everything to the recycling bin and set about running errands and returning phone calls.

A week ago, I was working intently with the costume designer, making sure an actor’s clothing was exactly right for a certain scene, while digging in the basket of unsorted laundry for something to wear myself. Four days ago, I was rehearsing a highly nuanced moment between two actors, trying to find exactly the right way to tell the story of these characters’ relationship, while too distracted to have a real conversation with my own husband and
son. Two days ago, I was striving for maximum clarity and precision in the make-believe world we created; now I settle back into the rich messiness of real life.

It’s a very strange feeling to go so quickly from being keenly needed by a group of people to not being needed at all. In my early years of directing, when theater was my whole life, the abruptness of this separation caused me to have a recurring dream every time I finished a production. About a week after an opening, I would dream that I was giving a party for the cast and absentmindedly went into my bedroom and fell asleep. A little later, in my dream, I woke up with a start and rushed out to the living room, apologizing to the actors and asking if there was anything I could get for them. “Oh, Mary,” they said, “we didn’t realize you were gone.”

STAYING IN TOUCH

But I don’t completely lose touch with the production during the run. As long as it’s running, no matter what else I’m doing, I always feel as if I have one ear cocked in the show’s direction. I get nightly emailed reports from the stage manager, about the size and quality of the audience, the weather, the show’s running time, and minor mishaps, such as a dropped line or a cold that works its way through the cast. I exchange occasional emails with actors or send one to the cast as a whole. I try to stay in touch with what’s going on without hovering.

The question of whether or when I should see the show again is always in the back of my mind. When I work at a regional theater, this question is often moot: the morning after the opening, I get on a train or plane and travel several hundred or several thousand miles back home. But if the production is in the same city or within striking distance, there’s an expectation from everyone that I’ll stop by at some point. Emails from the cast begin to say things like, “When are you coming back?” and, “I think you’d be pleased with how much the show has grown.” This always piques my curiosity. Will I be pleased? What exactly does “grown” mean? What’s changed in my absence? Of course, because it’s a living work, I expect and hope that new discoveries will be made once I’m gone. I also know it can’t have changed too much, because it’s the stage manager’s job to keep the production in consistent shape. But after a couple of weeks or a month (depending on the length of the run), I decide to return to get a first-hand look at what they’re talking about. Plus, it would be nice to see both the show and the actors again, now that I’m past the intensely vulnerable stage.
caring of about it all so much.

Walking into the theater is a completely different experience than it was during previews or opening. I’m far more relaxed, mingling comfortably with the audience before the show and at intermission, and even going so far as to sit in the middle instead of standing in the back. I have a tiny notepad on hand in case I need to take notes surreptitiously, but I rarely use it. I simply sit and take it all in, for the most part enjoying myself thoroughly. Technically, the show has become so smooth by now it’s almost maddening. I think back to those hours and days of rehearsing complicated transitions, involving moving scenery and multi-part music and lighting cues and backstage quick changes. All that effort we expended to keep the show moving forward seamlessly now looks completely effortless. I know that the best direction should feel inevitable, as if there’s no other way to do it. But part of me wants to stand up and proclaim to the audience, “Do you know how hard we worked on the thirty seconds you just saw?!”

The production has a lived-in feeling, like a comfortable article of clothing, and I marvel at the confidence with which the actors move through the scenes, especially now that I’ve forgotten most of the lines I once knew by heart. Their work is tighter, and their rapport with the audience is stronger. They’ve lost a certain edge they had at the opening, simply because they’re no longer nervous, but they’ve gained greater depth and connection. They’ve also found some moments that I realize now we never quite got right in rehearsal. Like a proud parent, I’m happy at what they’ve achieved without me, but I also feel an inner satisfaction that it’s partly due to the kind of rehearsal process we had that they’re able to keep growing in their roles.

But there’s always something I’d like to keep working on, if I could. Maybe an actor has found a new choice that’s on the right track, but which I would work with him to tweak further if we were still in rehearsal. The question now is, do I engage with him about it, or simply let the production belong to the actors at this point?

The actors are excited to see me when I go backstage afterwards, but I always get the impression that they want validation (which I’m delighted to give them), but not further direction. Some of them do ask casually, “Any notes for me?”—but it doesn’t seem like the right time to give them, standing in the hallway and talking on the fly.

“I feel, ‘Dude, go home—it’s ours now,’” says Tommy Schrider, echoing many other actors, about his relationship with the director after a show.
opens. It feels almost presumptuous to weigh in on the actors’ work, when they’ve been here every night and I haven’t. “The play has been forged in the crucible of the actor-audience relationship,” according to Ivar Brogger. “I know this part, I know this guy—I feel, ‘Who are you to tell me?’”

If something is off-track in a major way, of course, it’s my responsibility to set it right. A week or two after Of Mice and Men opened, I saw a performance that felt slick and mechanical. Since the production depended on the absolute integrity of every actor onstage, I was very alarmed. I sweated over several pages of notes, which I posted on the backstage bulletin board, addressing both the production overall and details scene to scene. A few days later, I went back and was relieved to see that it had regained its honesty and authenticity. In hindsight, I wonder if I just happened to catch it on an off night and then on a good night. A production is a human endeavor, after all, subject to mood swings.

It can be difficult to give an actor a major note during the run. When I directed Othello, I took the actor playing the title role out for lunch, with the intention of talking to him about how his performance was in danger of becoming too emotional and over-the-top in certain scenes. As we sat there talking about all he’d been through since the opening, which included being briefly hospitalized for a respiratory condition he hadn’t had time to take care of during previews, I couldn’t figure out how to say to him, essentially, “Now, here’s what you’re doing wrong...” Towards the end of lunch, I made an awkward speech about the need to channel his emotions into the language, while he nodded politely. I saw the show again a few more times—sometimes he seemed to have taken the note, and sometimes it got away from him.

“I don’t like to be told the whole performance is off track,” says Molly Regan, “but if a director says ‘The stakes aren’t high enough,’ I like that—because it keeps it alive, gives it a little goose.” Others agree with this distinction. “It’s fine when the director says, ‘Here’s what I’m seeing, here’s what the audience is experiencing, I’m wondering if that’s still telling the story properly,’” according to Boris McGiver. “But not when he says ‘Don’t do that.’”

Some actors relish new insights and ideas about their work. “I don’t mind getting later notes because I try to think of it as a never-ending discovery,” says Maggie Lacey. “I love the collaboration and I want it to go on.” Some even want to keep rehearsing.

When I directed Cynthia Nixon in String Fever, she asked me to come
back and look at a moment in a scene in which she felt a speed bump, as she put it. We solved it with a new piece of staging, which pleased both of us—me, because it was good to feel needed again.

Comedies have their own special pitfalls during the run of a show, because the actors gradually begin to know where the laughs are apt to come, and there’s no way they can put the genie back in the bottle and wipe that information from their minds. “We start to think, ‘If you liked that, wait till you see this!’” says Molly Regan about the temptation to manipulate an audience that’s prone to laugh. Returning late in the run to see a production of mine, I was shocked to discover that the audience apparently thought the delicate comedy I’d directed was a rip-roaring farce. They laughed so long and hard throughout the show that the actors had to hold for the laughs over and over again, and the thread of the play kept getting lost. Out of the four-person cast, two of the actors were milking the humor, and one had rebelled at the laughter and gotten quite dark and sinister. Only one was doing exactly what she should under the circumstances: connecting with her fellow actors more deeply than ever and making the stakes even higher for herself. Of course, her performance was not only the most truthful, but also the most genuinely funny of all of them. Since there was only one performance left, I kept my concerns to myself, although I’ve heard of at least one director who’s given the cast notes after a show had closed.

High stakes, deep needs, and real connection are what keep a show fresh, whether it’s a comedy or a serious play. When the actors can keep those elements alive for themselves, night after night, week after week, and even month after month, the production will stay strong, though any actor will say that those stakes, needs, and connection become harder to recreate over time. Even the stage manager, whose job it is to keep the production in shape after the director leaves, feels this way: as Roy Harris says, “You get a little numb in a long run.”

**BIRTH OF A NEW PLAY**

When the play I’ve directed is a new one, I go back much more often, to keep it in shape as it gets seen and reviewed and considered for further productions. And unlike the actors, who would just as soon not see me so much after the show opens, the playwright remains my close partner throughout the run, long or short. Needless to say, this partnership can be strengthened by good reviews and strained by bad ones. “Well, I guess I’ll just have to direct it myself someday,” the author of *Echo Boy* (the Off-Off
Broadway play I should have turned down) said after reading some not-great notices of our production.

Actors don’t tend to read reviews, afraid that something said in them (positive or negative) will affect their performance, but playwrights usually do—as do I. Reviews can affect the long-term health of any production, in terms of ticket sales and actor morale, and, if the play is a new one, they can affect its future life dramatically. When a new play I’ve directed gets a bad review, I’m deeply disappointed; but then I think of the playwright—I’ve only worked on it for three or four months, while he’s poured several years of his life into it. “I’m upset for him, but selfishly very relieved for myself— guiltily relieved, as if I’d ducked a bullet and he’d been hit,” I admitted to my journal after reading a review of a new play which the critic disliked, while complimenting the actors and my direction. As I realized long ago when I tried it myself, it’s much harder to write a play than to direct one.

But if the reviews of a new play are positive, the satisfaction is enormous. The playwright has published validation of his work that his agent can send to potential future producers; and when the New York Times critic likes what he sees, the play will probably get published and go on to have a life in regional theater. I’ll never forget the feeling of having finally arrived, the first time a new play I’d directed was reviewed in the Times. Every time I saw someone reading the arts section of the paper that day, I felt an inner glow: So many people reading about our success! I’ve since discovered the flip side of that feeling, when the Times review is bad. I want to snatch the paper away from the reader and throw it in the trash. So many people reading about our failure!

And it does seem, with a new play especially, that audiences are affected by what the reviews have said, and arrive knowing they’re expected to laugh or be moved or turned off by it. When some friends gave me their responses after seeing a new play I’d directed, their not-very-positive comments almost seemed to quote the reviews that had already come out. “It’s like having a child of whom you’re immensely proud,” I wrote at the time, “and having people tell you it’s a slow learner or not very attractive or whatever. It’s tough.”

In some ways, it’s tougher, because at least you can protect and nurture a child through life’s early challenges. With a new play, once it’s open, there’s only so much you can do to shield it from the world’s harsh glare, and it’s hard not to second-guess yourself. “I wake up at 5 and think like crazy,” I wrote in my journal during the run of a not-well-received new play. “I have
words going through my head, sounds, lines from the play, all mixed up. I think if the run were over I might stop fretting.”

But looking back at the new plays I’ve directed over the years, my favorite (and least favorite) experiences often have little to do with how the production was received by critics and audiences. The collaboration with the playwright is what’s most important to me, both during and after the production’s life. I’ve directed well-received new plays that I look back on with ambivalence because of tensions with the playwright that were never resolved; and I’ve also had glorious collaborations leading to lifelong bonds, which couldn’t be severed no matter how negative the press or audience response. I’m still a close friend and sometime collaborator with the writer of the play whose opening night went so badly that we were yelled at by a board member at the cast party—an experience that makes us laugh in shared horror now when we remember it together.

KEEPING IT FRESH

I’ve only directed one production in the commercial arena that played for an open-ended run: Barbara Lebow’s *A Shayna Maidel*, a play about a family uprooted by the Holocaust. But I found its fifteen-month run Off Broadway to be a mixed blessing.

Working on it up until the opening was surprisingly relaxed, considering what was at stake: we could either close in a week or have a healthy long run, depending on how it was received. But we managed to keep that uncertainty out of the process, and together created an experience that felt quietly powerful.

After its strong opening night and positive reviews, the playwright, the actors, and I gathered in a spirit of giddy celebration, congratulating each other on what looked to be a good long run. But we also talked candidly about the dangers ahead, of the actors getting too knowing about what will move the audience and playing for the pathos, just as in a comedy they start to play for the laughs. The actors’ work was beautifully calibrated at the time of the opening, but we knew it could slide into sentimentality and self-indulgence without their being aware of it. We all agreed that I would come back as often as I could to monitor things, and that the stage manager and assistant director would keep them on track when I had to be away on other directing jobs.

But it was hard work for us all to keep it in shape for its year-plus run. After about two months, I could sense the actors’ understandable need
to keep surprising themselves in scenes that were so familiar by now that they could say the lines in their sleep. As they tried to find new meaning in old moments, pauses crept into their work, slowing down the overall pace and telegraphing what was going to happen next. When the audience was especially moved at something, they would come dangerously close to milking it, just as we had all feared.

I met with them as a group, I met with them one-on-one, I gave them notes every way I knew how, but that still didn't address the fundamental problem built into a long run: that after several months it can begin to feel simply like repetition, and it's hard to keep making new discoveries. Some actors moved on to other jobs, and the strong replacements helped the veterans to keep it fresh. But when the producer consulted me about a list of possible star replacements whose presence might keep the show running, many of them completely inappropriate, I found myself thinking, “Why are we trying to put it on life support—can't we just let it die a dignified death?” Eventually it did.

**VANISHING ACT**

But usually closing performances don't feel like a death so much as a disappearance—now you see it, now you don't. The actors pull out all the stops, determined to go out on a high note, and the theater hums with that sense of connection I always long for, augmented by the audience's awareness that they're the last people who will ever see this production. The actors' faces betray their feelings at the curtain call, and they hold hands a little more tightly as they bow, applaud for the audience, and put their arms around each other as they exit. Backstage, there might be a quick cup of champagne and a short speech of thanks by the artistic director, then we make our goodbyes briefly with promises to stay in touch, and walk out the stage door to our separate lives.

My script gets put on the bookshelf along with dog-eared copies of all the other plays I've directed, the reviews go into a file, and a production photograph or poster might get hung on the wall. My scribbled early impressions of the play, sketchy ground plans, and opening night cards all go into a file with the play’s name on it and put into a box in the closet. Like the audience, what I take away from each production I've directed over the years are memories, some that make me laugh, some that still embarrass me, and many that fill me with joy and longing.

A few years ago, I was sitting on a park bench on a beautiful spring
day with playwright Neal Bell, while we wondered aloud to each other what we had to show for all the years we’d each poured into the theater. Not money, obviously—as Robert Anderson said, “You can make a killing in the theater, but you can’t make a living,” later adding, “Though if you’re lucky, you can make a life.” But what was that life we’d each made? It was alternately thrilling and scary, satisfying and heartbreaking—but what, after all, was there about it that was concrete, that we could actually grasp?

It dawned on us that the answer was sitting right there with us. We had each other, and each of us had a web of working and personal relationships with many other people who love the theater so much that they spend their lives in it. And my own individual web, I realized, doesn’t just include those people with whom I collaborate now, in the present. My life in the theater has bonded me to my high school theater teacher Mrs. Goutman and my own directing students; to mentors like Stuart White and Arden Fingerhut, who are no longer here, but who have inspired the work of myself and others; and even to audience members, like the woman who called herself a “participant” in her letter to me, or the students who wrote to tell me what they loved about my production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* many years ago, who are now in their early thirties and may soon be taking kids of their own to their first Shakespeare play.

This web of relationships, stretching back to the past and into the future, means more to me than a keenly-felt blessing in the present—though it certainly is that. In a profession in which what we make has a finite life-span and then disappears forever, it’s a glimmer of something truly eternal.
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My fifteen-year long service on the board of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society enabled me to hear and participate in some fascinating discussions about the challenge of articulating exactly what a
director does. These talks led me to realize that I wanted the book to be read by a wider audience than just theater students and young directors, and the questions raised by this inspiring group of theater artists contributed greatly to the writing. As it happens, I’m going off the board just as I complete the book, and I’ll miss those stimulating monthly meetings and my compatriots there, especially Karen Azenberg and Laura Penn, more than I can say.

Lauren Glant read a draft of the book with meticulous care, giving me a generous amount of her time and her keen editorial skills, while I wrestled with the challenge of making it something that a wider audience might want to read.

Irene O’Garden gave me comprehensive and detailed notes, and helped me recover an optimistic outlook at a time when I had my doubts about the book’s future. Gay Reese gave me great advice about selecting the right adjectives and getting rid of adverbs.

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~Mary B. Robinson
Brooklyn, NY
November, 2011
Theater Artists Interviewed

**Actors**

**DAVID BARLOW** appeared in *Victory* and *Scenes from an Execution* at Atlantic Theater, *Horizon* at New York Theatre Workshop, *Andorra* and *Saved* at Theatre for a New Audience, and *Romola* and *Nijinsky* at Primary Stages. Regionally he has acted at the Hartford Stage in *The Crucible* and the Philadelphia Theatre Company in *This is Our Youth*, among others. His original show *La Party* played at the Public Theater’s Under the Radar series, Austin’s Fusebox Festival, and toured to various theaters throughout the U.S.

**IVAR BROGGER** has appeared on Broadway in *Blood Brothers*, *The Father*, *Pygmalion*, *The Devil’s Disciple*, and *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and Off Broadway in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud 9*. Regional work includes four seasons at the Guthrie, and also the Goodman, Yale Rep, Williamstown, and the Old Globe, among many others. Television credits include recurring roles on *The Agency* and *Invasion*, as well as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment*, and he has appeared in the films *Dreamgirls*, *Little Children*, and *Oceans Thirteen*. He teaches in the Theatre Department at Chapman University.

**PATRICIA CONOLLY** has worked on Broadway, in London’s West End, with the Royal Shakespeare Company, at the Chichester Festival Theatre with Sir Laurence Olivier, in Paris with Peter Brook, with Ellis Rabb’s APA/Phoenix Company, at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, and at the Stratford Festival in Ontario. She has played many leading Shakespearean roles, as well as Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*, and Jocasta in *Oedipus the King*. She has also taught and directed in Boston, San Diego and New York.

**JANE FLEISS’** Broadway credits include *Fifth of July*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *I’m Not Rappaport*, *Strange Interlude*, and *Search and Destroy*. Regional credits include leading roles in *A Doll’s House*, *King Lear*, *The Seagull*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Molly Sweeney*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Television appearances include *ER*, *Without*
a Trace, and Judging Amy. She teaches at the Art of Acting Studio in Los Angeles, and her own professional class “The Workshop.”

JUDITH IVEY won the Tony Award as Best Supporting Actress for her performances in Steaming and Hurlyburly. Other Broadway credits include Park Your Car in Harvard Yard, Precious Sons, Blithe Spirit, and Follies. She recently portrayed Amanda Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie in New York and Los Angeles. Her directing credits include the musical Vanities and Carapace, for which she was nominated for a Bass Award. Her many film and television credits include Flags of Our Fathers, The Devil’s Advocate, and Designing Women.

DANIEL JENKINS has appeared on Broadway in Mary Poppins, Wrong Mountain, Big, Angels in America, Billy Elliot, and both the original Big River, in which he played Huck Finn (and was nominated for Tony and Drama Desk Awards), and the revival, in which he played Mark Twain. He has originated many roles in new plays in New York and around the country, working at the O’Neill Center’s Playwrights Conference, Actors Theatre of Louisville, and the Sundance Institute. His films include O.C. and Stiggs and Tanner ’88, directed by Robert Altman, and he has appeared on many television shows.

MAGGIE LACEY made her Broadway debut as Emily in Our Town, with Paul Newman. Other Broadway credits include Inherit the Wind and Dividing the Estate. She played Elizabeth Robideaux in Horton Foote’s masterwork The Orphans’ Home Cycle at Hartford Stage, and appeared in Kenneth Lonergan’s This is Our Youth at the Philadelphia Theatre Company. She was the co-creator of Big Times, directed by Leigh Silverman.

LIZBETH MACKAY has appeared on Broadway in All My Sons, Doubt, The Price, Abe Lincoln in Illinois, The Heiress, Death and the Maiden, and Crimes of the Heart, for which she won a Theatre World Award, as well as an Outer Critics’ Circle Award and a Hollywood Dramalogue Award. Off Broadway credits include Durang, Durang and Tales of the Lost Formicans among many others, and she has worked at regional theaters around the country. She has appeared on all the television shows that film in New York City.

BORIS MCGIVER has acted in War Horse and Hapgood at Lincoln
Center Theater, and *Desire Under the Elms* on Broadway. Off Broadway credits include *Andorra* and *Cymbeline* at Theatre for a New Audience, *Lydie Breeze* and *The Devils* at New York Theatre Workshop, and *Book of Days* at the Signature Theatre. Television appearances include *The Good Wife, John Adams, The Wire, 30 Rock*, and numerous times on *Law and Order*.

**MOLLY REGAN** has been a member of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago since 1985, has appeared in many productions there, and has been nominated for the Jefferson Award four times, winning for her performance in *Another Time*. Other regional theaters where she has worked include Williamstown Theatre Festival (nine seasons), McCarter Theatre, and Hartford Stage. On Broadway, she has appeared in *August: Osage County, The Crucible, and Stepping Out*, and her film credits include *Pollock, Radio Days, Bullets Over Broadway*, and *New York Stories*.

**TOMMY SCHRIDER** has acted on Broadway in *War Horse* at Lincoln Center Theater, and Off Broadway in *Septimus and Clarissa* for Ripe Time at the Baruch Center for the Arts, *Close Ties* at Ensemble Studio Theatre, and *Macbeth* at Theatre for a New Audience, among others. Regional credits include *Battle of Black and Dogs* at Yale Repertory Theatre, *This is Our Youth* at the Philadelphia Theatre Company, and shows at Williamstown, Actors Theater of Louisville, Syracuse Stage, Portland Center Stage, and five seasons at Berkshire Theatre Festival. TV credits include *Medium, Numb3rs*, and *Law and Order*.

**RAY VIRTA** has played Romeo, Macbeth, Torvald, Orsino, and many other major classical roles at theaters around the country, and received the 2002 St. Clair Bayfield Award for Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Pearl Theatre Company. His Broadway credits include *A Man for All Seasons, A Naked Girl on the Appian Way, Democracy*, and *Inherit the Wind*, and he has understudied for *Arcadia, Boeing-Boeing, The Real Thing*, and *Betrayal*. He is currently on the faculty of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy.

**JANET ZARISH** is an actress, teacher, and director. She is the Head of Acting at the Graduate Acting Program at New York University, and teaches Shakespeare at the Shakespeare Lab at the Public Theater. She also directs at...
the Juilliard School. She has originated roles in plays by Wendy Wasserstein, David Mamet, Terrence McNally, and Shel Silverstein, appeared in *Miss Julie* and *An Enemy of the People*, and she was in *Other People’s Money* at the Minetta Lane. Regionally, she has worked at Hartford Stage, Long Wharf Theatre, McCarter Theatre, Seattle Rep, and ACT. Her films include *Object of My Affection, Malcolm X*, and *Mystic Pizza*, and she has appeared in over twenty television shows.

**Playwrights**

**NEAL BELL**’s plays include *Spatter Pattern, On the Bum, Raw Youth, Two Small Bodies*, and *Breaking and Entering*, all of which were first produced by Playwrights Horizons, and *Monster* and *Therese Raquin*, which were first produced at Classic Stage Company. He is the recipient of many grants and fellowships, and was given an OBIE Award in 1992 for Sustained Excellence in Playwriting. He teaches playwriting at Duke University.

**ERIK BROGGER** is the author of the plays *A Normal Life, Copperhead, Strangers’ Ground, The Paranormal Review, The Basement Tapes*, and an adaptation of Ostrovsky’s *Diary of a Scoundrel*, which have been produced at the O’Neill Center’s National Playwrights Conference, ACT in Seattle, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, the WPA Theatre, the Philadelphia Drama Guild, the Village Gate, and the Bush Theatre in London. He was a co-founder of the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis, and teaches Playwriting and Creative Writing at Hofstra University.

**KEITH BUNIN** is the author of the plays *The Busy World is Hushed, The World Over*, and *The Credeaux Canvas*, all of which were originally produced Off Broadway at Playwrights Horizons. He is also a screenwriter, and was a writer for the HBO series *In Treatment*.

**MARY GALLAGHER** is the author of the plays *Father Dreams, Little Bird, Chocolat Cake, Buddies, Dog Eat Dog, Love Minus, How to Say Goodbye, De Donde?*, and *Windshook*. Her work has been seen at Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Hartford Stage, the Alley Theatre, the Vineyard, Ensemble Studio Theatre, and the Public Theater. She wrote the screenplays
for Nobody's Child (co-written with Ara Watson), Bonds of Love, and The Passion of Ayn Rand. She has taught playwriting and screenwriting at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

JEFFREY HATCHER’s plays include Three Viewings, A Picasso, Scotland Road, Turn of the Screw, Tuesdays with Morrie (with Mitch Albom), Neddy, and Compleat Female Stage Beauty. They have been produced at the Manhattan Theatre Club, Yale Rep, the Old Globe, Minetta Lane, South Coast Rep, Intiman, Seattle Rep, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Milwaukee Rep, and Philadelphia Theatre Company. He wrote the book for the Broadway musical Never Gonna Dance, and the screenplays for Stage Beauty and Casanova.

DONALD MARGULIES’s play Dinner with Friends won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. His other plays include Time Stands Still, Brooklyn Boy, Collected Stories, Sight Unseen, God of Vengeance, What's Wrong with this Picture, The Loman Family Picnic, Found a Peanut, The Model Apartment, and Shipwrecked! An Entertainment. He has been nominated for a Tony and five Drama Desk Awards, and has won two OBIE Awards, two Los Angeles Drama Critics' Awards, and the Lucille Lortel Award, among others. He is an adjunct professor of English and Theatre Arts at Yale University.

MICHAEL WELLER’s plays include Moonchildren, Fishing, Loose Ends, The Spoils of War, Split, and 50 Words, and his screenplays include Ragtime and Hair, both directed by Milos Forman. He has been nominated for an Academy Award and won an Outer Critics Circle Award. He is the co-founder of the Mentor Project at the Cherry Lane Theatre.
Designers

DAVID BUDRIES is a free-lance theatrical sound designer, who has worked at the Hartford Stage, McCarter Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, Trinity Rep, Alliance Theatre, Center Stage, and Yale Rep. He has also worked in other media, including concerts, puppetry, radio production, location recording, and music CDs. He is Chair of the Sound Design Department at Yale University.

JOHN CONKLIN has designed sets and costumes for plays on and Off Broadway, and at theaters around the country, including the Public Theater, Arena Stage, the Goodman, the Guthrie, American Repertory Theater, and Hartford Stage. He has also designed opera in New York (Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera), and in cities across the U.S. and around the world, including London, Paris, Stockholm, Munich, Amsterdam, and Bologna. He received the Robert L.B. Tobin Award for Lifetime Achievement in Theatrical Design from the Theatre Development Fund, and he teaches design at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.

PAT DIGNAN has designed lighting for Three Viewings at the Manhattan Theatre Club, and Women on Fire and Fugue at the Cherry Lane, as well as numerous seasons for the Young Playwrights Festival. Regionally she has designed lights for I am a Man at the Goodman, Dancing at Lughnasa and Othello at the Philadelphia Drama Guild, Pterodactyls at the Huntington, and Seven Guitars at the Pittsburgh Public Theater and Center Stage. She has also worked with choreographers Karole Armitage, Lucinda Childs, and Yoshiko Chuma at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Joyce Theater.

JESS GOLDSTEIN designed the costumes for the Broadway productions of The Merchant of Venice, Jersey Boys, Julius Caesar, Brooklyn Boy, Sight Unseen, The Rivals (for which he won a Tony Award), Take Me Out, Love! Valor! Compassion!, and many others. He has worked at numerous Off Broadway and regional theaters such as the Public Theater, Lincoln Center Theater, La Jolla, the Old Globe, Goodman, Hartford Stage, Mark Taper Forum, McCarter Theatre, the Shakespeare Theatre, and Arena Stage. He is an adjunct Professor of Design and Resident Costume Designer at the
Yale School of Drama.

**MICHAEL KRASS** has designed costumes on Broadway for *After Miss Julie*, *The Constant Wife* (Tony nomination), *After the Fall*, the revival of *‘night, Mother*, *Twelve Angry Men*, *Reckless*, *Hedda Gabler*, *A View From the Bridge*, and *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, among others. His Off Broadway work includes world premieres by Edward Albee, John Guare, Kenneth Lonergan, David Rabe, Christopher Durang, and Alfred Uhry. He has also designed costumes for Campbell Scott’s film of *Hamlet*, and the opera *Pelleas and Melisande* in St. Petersburg. For many years he taught and was Head of Design at Playwrights Horizons Theater School, a branch of New York University.

**BRIAN MACDEVITT** has won five Tony Awards for Best Lighting Design for the productions of *Into the Woods*, *The Coast of Utopia*, *Pillowman*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Book of Mormon*. Other designs include *Fences*, *Urinetown*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *The Color Purple*, and *Love! Valor! Compassion!* among many others. He has worked with dance companies such as American Ballet Theatre and Baryshnikov’s White Oak Dance Project, and has won OBIE, Lucille Lortel, Outer Critics Circle, and Drama Desk Awards. He has designed at the Metropolitan Opera, and teaches lighting design at the University of Maryland.

**ROBERT MAGGIO** has composed incidental music for productions such as *Dinner with Friends*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Take Me Out*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Laramie Project*, at theaters such as Yale Rep, Philadelphia Theatre Company, People’s Light and Theatre Company, and Shakespeare Santa Cruz. His orchestral, vocal and choral music has been performed around the country, and Albany Records released a CD of his recent choral works. He has also composed for ballet and modern dance companies, and he is the Chairman of the Department of Music and Theory at West Chester University.

**ALLEN MOYER** has designed at theaters and opera houses across the country and around the world. His Broadway credits include *Grey Gardens* (Tony nomination), *The Little Dog Laughed*, *The New Century*, *Reckless*, *Twelve Angry Men*, *After Miss Julie*, *Thurgood*, and *The Constant Wife*. Off Broadway he has designed for *Lobby Hero*, *This is Our Youth*, *A Picasso*,
The Dying Gaul, and Passion Play, among many others. He has worked with choreographer and director Mark Morris on Orfeo ed Euridce at the Metropolitan Opera, and designed The Mother of Us All at New York City Opera. In 2006, he received an OBIE Award for Sustained Excellence in Set Design.

ANN WRIGHTSON’s recent work as a lighting designer includes A Prayer for Owen Meany at the Denver Center Theatre Company, The Unmentionables at Yale Repertory Theater, Souvenir at the Lyceum Theater on Broadway, and Man from Nebraska at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. She has also worked at the Guthrie Theater, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and many others. She was nominated for a Tony Award for her work on August: Osage County, a production which traveled to London, Sydney, and on a National Tour.

Stage Managers

ROY HARRIS has stage managed twenty-one productions on Broadway, and over forty Off Broadway and regionally, by playwrights Jon Robin Baitz, David Lindsay-Abaire, Donald Margulies, Theresa Rebeck, and the late Wendy Wasserstein. These productions have garnered Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critics’ Circle, Lucille Lortel and OBIE awards. He teaches graduate stage management at Columbia University, and is the author of five books, including Conversations in the Wings and Eight Women of the American Stage.

RENEE LUTZ has worked for many years as a stage manager in New York and around the country, at theaters such as Theatre for a New Audience, the Public Theater, Goodspeed, Manhattan Theatre Club, Playwrights Horizons, La Jolla, and Berkshire Theatre Festival, as well as the Royal Shakespeare Company. She is the longtime resident stage manager of the Barrington Stage Company.
Dramaturgs

VICTORIA ABRASH has worked as a dramaturg at Second Stage, Manhattan Theatre Club, the Women’s Project, the Philadelphia Drama Guild, and Ping Chong & Company. She teaches dramaturgy at Playwrights Horizons Theater School (a branch of New York University), and the New School.

Artistic Directors

SARA GARONZIK has been the Producing Artistic Director of the Philadelphia Theatre Company since 1982, and has introduced more than 140 world and regional premieres to the Philadelphia area, including new work by Terrence McNally, Jeffrey Hatcher, Christopher Durang, and Bill Irwin. In 2007, PTC opened the Suzanne Roberts Theater, a state-of-the-art facility on Philadelphia’s Avenue of the Arts. She has served on many panels for foundation and government arts funding, and is the current President of the Board of the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, a Board Member of the Arts and Business Council of Greater Philadelphia, and is on the Mayor’s Advisory Council.

TED PAPPAS has been the Producing Artistic Director of the Pittsburgh Public Theater since 2000, where he has staged a wide range of work, encompassing many Shakespeare productions, contemporary plays (including the American premiere of Alan Ayckbourn’s RolePlay), and musicals. Prior to this, he worked as a free-lance director and choreographer at the Public Theater, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Goodspeed, New York City Opera, and on and off Broadway. He has worked as a choreographer on Saturday Night Live, and is the past president of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, a national labor union.
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