

Directing Kids

**A Comprehensive How-To Manual
for Directors of Plays and Musicals
with Casts of Young People
from a Veteran Drama Teacher and Director**

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INTRODUCTION

This book is intended for three audiences. First, of course, it is intended as a guide for the director who has little or no experience directing plays and little or no experience working with young people. But I suspect there are relatively few folks like that contemplating directing a play with young people. The vast majority of people who are approaching their first play with kids are either experienced teachers without directing experience or experienced directors who will be working with children for the first time. This book is also for you. If you're an experienced teacher you may find yourself skimming over some of the material about discipline in rehearsals and managing kids (but do read it, because there are some things that work better in the classroom than they do in the rehearsal hall). If you're an experienced director you may find some of the material about composition and blocking and crafting scenes less interesting (but again, read it anyway, because young actors have particular strengths and weaknesses that are very different from professional actors or even from amateur adults). Whatever your experience, I think this book will really help you to do the best by your young cast—and they deserve nothing less.

First of all, congratulations! You're about to have a fantastic time. Directing young people can be one of the most rewarding experiences in the theatre. I started out planning to be a director of professionals. I trained with professional directors and took courses in professional directing. I took my first job directing kids not because it was a chance to work with young people, but because it was a directing gig—but I was instantly hooked. Sure, directing professional actors allows you to get a level of polish and sophistication out of a script that you'll never quite reach with amateurs. As an artist it can be very satisfying to direct a really perfect work of art, and you'll never quite get there directing young people. But for me the rewards greatly outweigh such concerns. A director of seasoned pros will never experience the kind of awakening I see every day. Professional actors don't have those wonderful "a-ha!" moments when they discover some new ability, grasp a new concept, or make a step forward. (At least, they don't have them as often.) I get to have the satisfaction of watching my young charges grow as artists and discover themselves as people. I *know* I have materially impacted their lives. Nothing can touch that. And as far as feeling fulfilled as a creative artist goes, I have come to regard teaching itself as a creative art. After all, I'm helping these children grow—their emerging talents and personalities are due in part to me. That's a legacy to rival any work of art I might create. Besides, I have never felt that limitations of the kind one encounters when directing young people need necessarily impede creativity. It takes creativity to *solve* the problems. It takes creativity to figure out how to make *Camelot* work in a cafeteria. It takes creativity to come up with choreography that looks great even on untrained dancers. After that first experience, I've rarely gone back. Of the well over 100 productions that I've directed, I can count the professional productions on two hands—not because I can't direct pros—not because the jobs aren't there—but because I'd rather be doing what I'm doing. Nothing tops the feeling when the show is over, and it was great, and the kids *know* it was great. Nothing even comes close.

So, you've decided to try it. I have high hopes for you, and here's why: The very fact that you are reading this book sets you apart from the majority as a responsible person who really wants to do the job well, and who, as the philosopher put it, knows what you don't know. Nothing frustrates me more than the way some people assume that directing a play is something they don't need to learn how to do. The theatre is sort of the ugly stepsister of the arts in many schools. Principals who would never in a

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million years hire a band conductor solely on the strength of the fact that she played clarinet in high school think nothing of choosing a play director solely on the strength of the fact that she played Ado Annie in high school—yet directing a play is every bit as specialized a skill as conducting an orchestra. It certainly helps if you've been onstage yourself—in preparing for a directing career I made a point of acting fairly regularly even though it was never my intention to become a professional actor—but acting is not directing, and acting experience alone, even under very good directors, will not prepare you to direct. Many—I sometimes fear most—school plays are directed by people with no formal training as directors, and virtually no really relevant experience. It's not their fault. Many of these folks are thrown into the job half against their will because "someone has to do it," and they may not even realize there is anything to know. I wrote this book in large part because I wasn't seeing any good books on directing that focused particularly on working with kids, and because, to be blunt, I was appalled by the quality of direction I was seeing when I attended school or other youth theatre productions. It used to make me mad at the directors themselves, but I've come to believe that most really do have their young casts' best interests at heart, and are trying their best—they just don't get much help. I'm hoping this book may be a small step towards changing that. The book is for you, if you're a beginning director of theatre with young people, but it's really for the kids themselves. So thank you for wanting to learn.

So What's a Director?

At first that sounds like a dumb question, right? Everybody knows what a director is. But if you ask most people—even most amateur actors—what a director *does*, they're sort of stymied. "Well, you know, she, like, directs the play." But if you're going to take on the awesome responsibility, you need a better answer than that.

Well, first of all, the answer is pretty different for a director in the professional world than it is for a director of young people, because directors of young people, even those working in huge programs with lots of colleagues, nearly always end up doing a whole lot of other things besides directing. (That's why, of this book's 29 chapters, only one of them is really focused exclusively on the craft of directing—though it is the longest one.) But let's start with the narrow definition. The stage director, as the position is currently understood, is a relatively new innovation in the theatre. Until the mid-nineteenth century, plays didn't really have directors in the modern sense. They had stage managers, who did a lot of the "traffic directing" now done by directors, but they didn't coach actors or worry much about visual composition. Sometimes the playwright would do some of that, but a lot of it was left to the actors themselves. The modern director came about as a result of attempts to make the theatre into a more "serious" art form, and the desire for productions that could realize a single artistic vision, the way a symphony or a painting does, rather than being a hodgepodge of sometimes competing visions. A modern director shapes everything the audience sees and hears. She doesn't do it all by herself, of course—the performers contribute their own artistic visions and interpretations—but ultimately, the director is responsible for the overall artistic impact of the play. She pays attention to the visual composition of every moment in the play, and to the way the performers move from moment to moment. She pays attention to the rhythm and timing of the dialogue. In collaboration with the set designer and the lighting designer, she conceives the environment in which every scene takes place. In collaboration with the costume designer and makeup designer, she conceives the look

of the characters. In a sense, a director is like a painter—except that she paints in four dimensions (time being the fourth) and her medium is human beings.

That's what a professional director (or, I should say, a director of professionals—technically, if you're getting paid to direct the play, you *are* a professional) does. And it's easy compared to what a director of young people must do. That's true in part because even those duties that are always associated with directing can be more challenging when working with young actors. For the most part, a director of professionals can tell his cast what he needs them to do and they'll do it—he doesn't have to teach them *how* to do it. But it's also true because a director of young performers is nearly always expected to do a whole lot of things that are not, strictly speaking, a director's job. At the very least, most directors of plays with young casts, in or out of school, are really also de facto producers. They're responsible for the budget (and they may also be responsible for finding the money). They're responsible for hiring or recruiting the rest of the creative team—designers, music director, choreographer, etc. They're responsible for organizing and conducting auditions. They're responsible for making sure the production is publicized. It's their signature on the royalty contract. In the professional world, these are all ultimately the responsibility of the producer—though the director may have final approval on hiring and casting.

On top of that, most directors of school plays end up doubling as one or more other members of the creative team. You may wind up designing your set yourself. You may end up serving as your own choreographer. I have occasionally served as my own music director—though I don't recommend it, if you have a choice, even if you're a perfectly capable music director. And even when you are able to find others to do those roles, you may have to exercise a whole lot more oversight than would be necessary with a fully professional team. Ultimately, the buck stops with you.

So, sound like fun? Actually, it is. Directing a play with young people is a whole lot of hard work, but it's totally worth it. I promise.

Don't Panic

There is a **lot** of material in this book. If most or all of it is new, you may be tempted to feel a bit overwhelmed. (Wow—I had no idea directing a play was so complicated! What have I gotten myself into?) Relax. While I honestly believe that every single tool, concept, trick and tip in this book can help you become a better director for your kids, it does *not* follow that you can't be a good one unless you can absorb it all. That would be absurd. It has taken me three decades to amass the experience and training I've tried to put into this book, yet I believe (and literally thousands of my former students will probably back me up) that I was a pretty good director even when most of that experience was still ahead of me. My very first show with young people made it all the way to the state level in the Minnesota high school theatre festival. And I'm not some super-genius. You can do it, too. The purpose of this book is not to transform you instantly into a 30-year veteran. Even if you don't absorb, or even understand, all of the principles of visual composition I discuss, you'll come away from that chapter with a better awareness that visual composition matters, and you'll be able to look at your stage picture with a more critical eye. Heck, if you're really new to the game, some of the tips and suggestions might not even make sense to you until you've got a few shows under your belt. You can come back to them. This book isn't intended to give you the right answer to every decision you'll have to make as a director, so much as to help you *think* about those choices in a conscious way. Where beginning directors (and even many experienced ones, if all of their experience is amateur and they have no training) fall

down is not so much in making bad choices—it's in making no choice at all, because they're unaware that there's even a decision to be made.

A Note About Personality

Movie stereotypes notwithstanding, there is no one kind of person who will make a good director. I have known directors who were former actors, with boisterous, outgoing personalities, and I have known directors you wouldn't notice in an elevator. But there are some personality traits that will make you much more successful, especially when you're a beginner. Fortunately, they're traits you can acquire (or, indeed, fake) if they don't come naturally. First and foremost, a director must appear supremely confident in his choices and in his ability. This is true for directors of adult professional actors, and it's even truer for directors of children. If you're a classroom teacher you already know that kids, like dogs, can smell fear or insecurity, and will exploit it even if it is in their own best interest not to. This might be your first time directing a play. You might be seriously afraid that you'll mess up, that you're not prepared, that you don't know enough—but *your cast must not know it*. (When I took my first directing job, I was—naturally—up front with the folks who hired me, and told them it was my first, but when working with the cast I invented past experience—talking about shows I'd worked on in other capacities as if I had been the director—so that they would not know they were being directed by a rookie. I'm not sure how ethical that was, but I know dozens of directors who did the same thing their first time out.) Every directing choice is subjective, and open to objection. If your cast perceives that you are unsure, they'll never stop second-guessing you, and you'll never get anywhere. Along the same lines, it is important to establish your authority. You can't be a "pal" to your cast. Again, classroom teachers already know this, but it can be a slippery slope for those who have not worked with large groups of kids. If your cast begins to see you as a peer, you won't be able to control them, which is not only a recipe for a bad production, but can be downright dangerous. I have sometimes been the only adult present at rehearsals with 100 or more kids. Democracy doesn't cut it—you must be a benevolent dictator.

On the other hand, alongside the supreme confidence you must exude must be an equal amount of abject humility. You need to be constantly open to new ideas. Nothing shuts a cast down faster than feeling like their input is not important. The theatre is a collaborative art form—you *need* the opinions and the contributions of others. One of my chief rules is "always have a plan, but never marry it." I am always ready to scrap my ideas when the cast comes up with better ones. Another way of looking at this aspect of a good director's character is to describe it as intense curiosity. A good director is interested in everything going on around him, because he understands that as good as his own ideas might be, the best ideas will be gifts from the universe.

Finally (and this trait is the hardest to acquire if it doesn't come naturally, but it's essential) a director of young people must have the patience of a saint. You *cannot* have a temper. I realize this flies in the face of all the stereotypes, but your cast is not a bunch of pampered professional actors who are paid to take your abuse—your cast is *children*. I don't care if you go home every night and punch holes in the walls to release your frustration. I don't care if your blood pressure is through the roof. You *must not* lose your temper and take it out on your cast—what we used to call "throwing an artistic temperament." As I'll discuss in the chapter about working with young people, I have fired people for doing this just once. Moreover, even if you never lash out at the kids, you'll find that a tendency to panic or "stress out" will prove a major stumbling block during your production week. Stereotypes or no stereotypes, the best directors of kids

are those who remain calm and stoic while the storm rages around them. And if that's not you, fake it. (Actually, research into affect and biofeedback suggests that faking calm is a good way to achieve actual calm—just as forcing yourself to smile will ultimately make you feel happier.)

Several Words About Words

This is a book for real people, not academics. I like to think I'm a pretty good writer but I refuse to worry about formal language. For example, I use, "young people" "young actors" "children" and "kids" interchangeably. (I remember fighting to use "kids" in my Master's thesis years ago—and losing.) I switch back and forth from directly addressing the reader in second person to describing my own practice in first, and from there to discussing the discipline of directing in third person. I use whichever form of address seems to most effectively clarify the particular point I'm making at the time.

I can be pretty blunt at times when discussing practices I abhor. Put it down to my passion for the art and craft of the theatre, and for the well-being of children. If I offend, I apologize.

There's a lot of jargon in the theatre, and some of it is pretty squirrely—it means something slightly different to each person. I've tried to define the terms I use, and then to use them precisely as I've defined them, but if you are working with other theatre artists, be aware that they might not always mean the same thing I mean by a particular term. (When a term is especially apt to have this problem, I have tried to indicate that when introducing it.)

Finally, our language has a shortage of gender-neutral pronouns. Formal writing rules say to use "he" when the gender of the person referred to is unknown, but I've never liked that. On the other hand, constantly saying "he or she" gets old fast, so I've chosen just to alternate randomly between the two. I have made no effort to alternate exactly—I've no doubt if you counted up all the uses of "he" and all the uses of "she," one would predominate—but if that means anything it's buried deep in my subconscious. I've also adopted the current practice of using the word "actor" as a unisex term, rather than using the diminutive "actress."