



# Advanced Directing Tips

*Directing tips for directors and students to survive the process!*

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## 1. Observation, networking, and professional development

- a. See as many productions as you can, the more you see the more you learn.
- b. Network with drama teachers in your area and around the area you will find lots of folks who love to help.
- c. Attend TETA TheatreFest, SummerFest, Capital Conference, and UIL Student Activity Conferences

## 2. Script Selection

- a. Pick good literature.
- b. Pick something that fits your student's numbers and something they like.
- c. Pick something that fits your tastes and abilities.
- d. Pick something that fits your production budget.
- e. Pick something that fits your community standards and tastes.
- f. Do not pick a play just because it won state OAP.

## 3. Pre-production

- a. Make sure you have reserved your facility for the entire rehearsal and performance period.
- b. Get your production dates cleared by the principal and on the school calendar.
- c. Make sure you schedule enough time for rehearsals, running out of time before the first performance is one of the worst things you can do.
  - i. Each show will demand different amounts of production time.
  - ii. Be careful of too much rehearsal time, you don't want to burn you actors out before the first performance.
  - iii. Pull back rehearsal time during OAP season when you start advancing, keep them fresh!
- d. Do your director's homework before the first rehearsal.
  - i. Sets, costumes, blocking, sound etc. All of this does not have to be complete before the first rehearsal but you should have a firm grasp on your show concept.
  - ii. Look at other productions – Google it

## 4. Casting your play

- a. 80% of a director's work is done if they cast the production successfully.
- b. Casting for type or skill
  - i. Your best bet is to cast for skill, your skilled actor; even though they might not be exactly the perfect type will always pull through for you.
  - ii. Casting an actor that looks the type will many times cause you many extra hours of work because of their lack of experience and skill.
- c. Cattle call and call backs
  - i. Cattle call one minute monologues are great because it weeds out those that really don't have the work ethic to go through the process and it gives you a chance to see the actor at their best with something they prepared for you.
  - ii. Call backs are great for reading from the script. I do not like cool readings; I like the kids to have prepared cuts to read. Many actors do not cold read well at all.

## 5. Relations to Actors

- a. Fear – The primary enemy of creativity
  - i. It's the job of a director to help the actor overcome fear.
  - ii. Actors will relinquish their fear when they see the director does not terrorize, victimize or humiliates actors during the rehearsal process.
  - iii. Actor will be at ease and work better with a director once the actor and director have established an alliance.

## 6. Failure

- a. The greatest fear an actor has is the fear of failure in their part.
- b. Failure is the threshold of knowledge.
- c. Failure is a necessary and important part of the creative process – A director MUST encourage it and reward it
- d. If actors fear failure their creativity is seriously impaired they will not grow.
- e. It's okay for the director to show the actors that they can fail and learn too.

## 7. Praise

- a. The director must understand that to an actor praise is like food, the actor can't live without it.
- b. A director must discipline himself to praise actors often.
  - i. Directors are always working against time and trying to fix problems but take time to give the actors general praise:
    1. "You're doing nicely," "This scene is coming along," or "It's a pleasure to work with you."
  - ii. Praise doesn't have to be for any specific achievement, but it lifts the actor's spirits and causes him to flourish.

## 8. Questions

- a. Directors thrive when they put their ideas in the form of questions to actors, this help the actors to come up with their discoveries.
  - i. "How can we improve this? How could we clarify this? How could we get across the idea that she is looking for help? How could we simplify this entrance? What is your objective is this scene?"

## 9. Learning Process/Rehearsal Structure

- a. Each rehearsal can be broken down into three phases.
  - i. The Discovery Phase – where the actors and director discover new things about the scene, accumulated effects of previous work on the scene, effect of actor's recent homework, and the effect of the time lapse since the last rehearsal.
    1. It is important that they first time through a scene there be no interruption, with interruption it is very difficult for actors and directors to make new discoveries.
  - ii. The Working Phase - take the scene and go through it slowly bit by bit, making suggestions, asking questions, trying business one way and then another, working your way gradually through the scene only once, but very slowly.
    1. This is the longest part of the rehearsal.
    2. During this phase you never go back to the beginning and start over.
    3. End this phase about 10 minutes before the end of the scheduled rehearsal period and move to the final phase even if you are not finished with the entire scene.
  - iii. The Pattern Setting Phase – begin at the beginning of the scene and go through to the end of the scene or the place you stopped working in the previous phase. Let the actors run through it without stopping no matter how terrible it may be.
    1. This is the phase where the actors are setting the pattern they just learned in the second phase.
    2. The director will give notes and a little praise at the end of the scene run through.
- b. Work you way through each scene of the play in this method. Move on to a new scene at each rehearsal until you are ready to run the entire show without stopping.

## 10. Avoid rehearsal interruptions whenever possible.

- a. When a director repeatedly interrupts, stopping and starting, frustration builds up in the actor.
  - i. For short scenes remember changes and adjustments and give them to the actors after the scene is over

- ii. For longer scenes or acts take notes and give them after.
  - 1. Don't like taking notes have your stage manager or a tech person sit next to you and dictate the notes to them.
- b. After the show is blocked and put together it is very important to run the entire show through without interruptions or the actors will never develop the proper rhythm for the play.

### 11. Avoid "let me show you" and line-readings

- a. Avoid showing the actors how to do something or reading it for them word for word but help them to discover what you want on their own.
  - i. Ways to coach them are:
    - 1. "place more stress on this word," "frame this idea," "feature this word," This phrases is difficult for the audience to understand."
    - 2. Another method is to paraphrase the line, giving it the precise expression that you are seeking, but not using the actual words.
    - 3. Sing it, whistle it, paraphrase it or describe it, just don't do it for them.

### 12. The Golden Key to Drama (Wants/Objectives)

- a. Wants. Wants. Wants or objectives are what create drama. Wants are what give life to the character. There are two kind of wants.
  - i. Nouns – Bob might want a wife, a motorboat, a moment's peace. Nouns are weak and difficult for actor to play.
  - ii. Verbs – Bob wants to earn enough money to by a motorboat, to win Mary's heart, to eliminate the distraction to his peace of mind.
    - 1. To win, to earn to eliminate much more actable than nouns
    - 2. A skilled director always helps actors to state their wants as verbs. What does Bob want to do?
      - a. Frequently recurring actable verbs: I want to convince, encourage, prepare, enlighten, get even, overwhelm, reassure, bombard, suppress, belittle, lambast, help, seduce, ignite, build, hurt, awaken, mock, crush, inspire, destroy, incite and tease to name just a few.
- b. Refinement
  - i. I want to . . . . WIN (verb) . . . . Gloria's (receiver) . . . . admiration (desired response)

### 13. The quest for the objective

- a. Is the director's main purpose. He/she helps the actor choose actable objectives and then encourages them to play it with all their heart!
- b. Relentlessly and continuously the director should ask the actor "What is your objective?"
- c. Refuse to take an adjective or noun for an answer.
- d. The director is there to persuade the actor away from the representation on the feeling and into the experience of the feeling itself.

### 14. Having trouble finding the objective use "get" and "make"

- a. These two questions require an answer from the actor, and the answer has built into it the three components needed for the most effective statement of an objective. The answer must contain a verb, and receiver and a desired response. I am trying to CONVINCE BOB to LEAVE WITH ME.

## 15. The Rehearsal Process

### a. Preproduction homework

- i. Period where the director begins to conceptualize the production.
  - 1. Set, lights, sound, costumes, etc.
  - 2. Research the time period and style of the play.
  - 3. Research the playwright by reading other plays, novels, reviews.
  - 4. Research other productions of the play by looking images from other productions (Google it).

### b. Text Preparation

- i. If you cutting a play it is best to have it prepared and ready for the actors for the first rehearsal.

- ii. It's important that the cast read the full length play, I do this as a group because individually they will not do it. Reading the entire play gives the cast a better understanding of the play.
- c. **The First Reading**
  - i. Have the actors in a circle on the floor or at tables.
  - ii. Don't allow the actors to act, all they need to do is read the play to get a sense of the play. Do not worry about correct pronunciation of words or sentence structure that will all come later. If everyone begins to act they will try to out-act each other or justify their role to other actors and then nobody listens to the play. NO ACTING, just reading.
- d. **Sitting Rehearsal**
  - i. This period can be for about 3-5 days beginning right after the first reading rehearsal, keep the actors seated. Before actors get on their feet they need to explore the script and their character.
    - 1. Establish eye contact with other characters, moment to moment truthful talking, correctly pronounce names, resolve uncertainties of off stage life, where they come from and where they are going after making an entrance or exit, when to come on and off stage, knowing which scenes they are in.
    - 2. Establish age for each character and their past relationships. The actor is encouraged to think in the form of a biography.
    - 3. Sketch in objectives by asking broad questions like; "What is the objective in the scene," or "what is he/she going for?"
    - 4. Keep your words in question form; this will force your actors to think and to speak to you.
- e. **Blocking (patterns of movements of the actors on the stage)**
  - i. Make sure the actors understand the ground plan, tape it on the floor so they understand where doors, windows, etc are located.
  - ii. Begin blocking 3 to 5 days after your table work or whenever your table work is completed.
  - iii. Do you dictate blocking moves to your actors?
    - 1. NO, try to never tell an actor what to do or where to go but lead him through questions to make his/her own discoveries.
    - 2. Start with the script, it will give you lots of good clues where to start blocking, but you're not bound by it, do your own thing.
    - 3. Allow the actors to try new things, this may or may not work but they will know when it doesn't work because it will feel awkward to them.
      - a. If an actor makes a choice that is not good, ask them "how does that feel?", and most times they will say "it doesn't feel right" that is because it doesn't look right either.
        - i. Let the actor try something different but guide them through questions, don't tell them where or what to do.
        - ii. If you have an actor that just is not giving you what you want your very last resort would be to tell them directly what to do.
      - b. Don't be afraid of organic blocking, if it feels right, many times it will look right to the audience.
  - iv. Have actors write down their blocking in their scripts with a pencil, this will help them remember it and not slow down rehearsal by not knowing their blocking.
  - v. **USE VARIETY IN YOUR BLOCKING**
    - 1. Variety in levels, use diagonals, avoid straight lines, use triangles with three or more people, balance the stage (don't use just one part of it), avoid playing scenes upstage if possible, keep your actors open (45%).
    - 2. Get your actors to touch as much as possible
    - 3. Downstage center is the strongest position on stage.
    - 4. Upstage left is the weakest position on stage.
    - 5. Facing full front is strong, full back or profile is weak.
    - 6. Elevated positions take focus.
    - 7. Crosses from up-center to down-center are powerful.
    - 8. An individual standing separated from a group has focus.

- 9. Symmetry connotes formality or ritual.
- vi. Picturization (stage pictures) is an aspect of blocking that intensifies storytelling values.
  - 1. Picturization is reinforcement, by position, of all relationships, so that even a deaf person could follow the action clearly by watching the movements, the positions, and the gestures.
    - a. A man carrying the limp body of a baby connotes a parent bearing a dead child.
- f. **Memorization**
  - i. Actors can't really begin to work until they free themselves from their scripts. The sooner you can get your actors off book (lines memorized) the better off you will be.
  - ii. Set a deadline and stick to it, it might be hard but after a few rehearsals of calling "line" over and over they will get it.
  - iii. I have found that when I have my seniors pick the lines off date that they are always about a week to a week and a half earlier than I would have given them.
  - iv. You need to have your actors memorized at least two week before their first performance.
- g. **The working rehearsal**
  - i. After the lines have been memorized directors can really go to work testing and retesting the objectives.
    - 1. Call each scene up and work on it in the three phases discussed earlier.
      - a. Try your ideas, try the actors ideas and together, suitable and appropriate decision are made.
    - 2. Working rehearsals should be fun and playful; this is where creative and new ideas will flourish. This is the most creative time for both actors and director.
    - 3. With the working rehearsal a sense of through-line begins to come into the scene and the play.
- h. **Run-throughs**
  - i. Running the show without stopping.
  - ii. Give your actors a few days notice to let them mentally prepare.
  - iii. It is very important for the actors to NOT stop and for the director to NOT stop the actors.
    - 1. Directors give your notes at the end of the run.
- i. **Notes**
  - i. When giving notes, give them fast and keep the short. If your notes are too long the rest of the cast will lose focus and will not be paying attention when you switch to another actor.
  - ii. Ask an actor if they understand, if they do, keep it short and move onto the next note, if they do not, spend more time explaining the note.
  - iii. Save enough time at the end of your rehearsal period to get through you notes.
    - 1. There have been times when I ran out of time and I saved my notes for the beginning of the next rehearsal.
  - iv. Mark each note off as you give it because directors have a tendency to skip notes when they look up and down from their notes to the actors, or maybe that's just me??
  - v. Have the actors keep a notebook with all their specific notes. They should take their specific notes after each run-through rehearsal, performance and contest.
  - vi. Notes that an actor keeps repeating can be given in one or two words (projection, keep open, open your mouth, articulation etc)
- j. **Dress Rehearsal**
  - i. Get you cast into costume as soon as you can, it will make all the difference helping them with their character.
  - ii. The sooner you can work out problem areas for each costume and fix it the better.
- k. **Technical Rehearsal (not OAP)**
  - i. This is the period where all technical elements are added (sound, lights, special effects, etc.)
  - ii. Start and stop method – begin the play and stop when you get to a light or sound cue that is not working and take time to make the adjustments needed.
    - 1. This rehearsal may be long and tedious and might stretch out over two or more rehearsal periods.
- l. **Technical Rehearsal (OAP site rehearsal)**

- i. This is a timed rehearsal it is NOT about doing a run-through of the show, it's about making sure your set is spiked on stage, light and sound levels are set correctly, scene changes are rehearsed and checking actors vocal projection levels.
  - ii. Cue to Cue – Run the first line before a cue through the end of the cue, set the level or light fade time and then move onto the next cue.
    - 1. Your stage manager should be onstage with a script directing the cue to cue because the actors will be out of rhythm with scenes move so fast.
    - 2. Make sure the stage manager leaves enough time for the actors to get reset for the next cue.
  - iii. It is important for actors to hear what the auditorium acoustics sound like so they can adjust their projection to it.
    - 1. Circle your actors around the auditorium with one actor down stage center have each actor say a line and then have the circle rotate so that everyone says a line down center and everyone hears the projection level of a line from every point in the house.
  - iv. Spike your set last because you might miss place something if you do it first and it is a real pain to pull up the tape and redo it at the last minute.
    - 1. Plastic sheet spike technique.
      - a. Buy thick painters plastic from your hardware store.
      - b. Duck tape enough of it together that will cover the area of your stage.
      - c. Put your set on it, spike it, then cut out the spike tape marks leaving a cookie cutter of your set on the plastic.
      - d. Fold it up carefully and when you get to your site rehearsal the first thing you do is roll out the plastic and spike. This only takes a few minutes and you're spiked.
      - e. Make sure you plastic is the correct size for the stage you are going to be performing on.
- m. Final Dress Rehearsal**
- i. All elements of the show, costumes, lights, sound, etc. should be in place and the show should be preformed exactly like a real performance.
  - ii. Invite an audience to come and watch the final dress, it will give the actors the feeling of real performance and they will need to adjust to audience reactions to the show. NEVER SEND YOUR ACTORS TO THEIR FIRST PERFROMANE WITHOUT HAVING BEEN IN FRONT OF AUDIENCE FIRST.

## **Directing tips from several award winning Texas UIL one act play judges.**

I ask several state level judges to give me their top five list of things that directors need to focus on. Most of the ideas below will work for any production and some of them are specifically for UIL OAP contest plays.

1. Scenery/set--using furniture to suggest walls rather than flats, as well as knowing that you don't always have to use the unit set platforms to create levels.
2. Setting light/sound levels during the rehearsal.
3. Taping off the contest stage measurements on your own rehearsal space to get used to the size.
4. Using the plastic cheat cover to place furniture.
5. Teach Acting--getting realistic actions/reactions from every character.

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1) Variety (in pace, vocalization, characterization, etc.) Audiences see too much of the same at all levels. It's all the same speed. It sounds the same, looks the same. Hard to see "individual" characters. Often times, the whole show is just flat lining even when the kids know their lines and blocking and the tech is working. It's just flat for 40 minutes.

2) Diction. I could give the same three notes before shows ever even begin and not be far from wrong. SLOW DOWN. OPEN YOUR MOUTHS. FINAL CONSONANTS. I also think that over-emphasis on words causes an equal number of problems. Pronouncing "a" and "the" with long vowel sounds and hitting the pronouns in a line. Awkward. No one speaks that way.

3) Blocking. It needs to psychologically fit what is happening in the script and on the stage. I see major conflicts enacted by two actors sitting calmly at a table. Or the person losing the power in a scene is the one stomping around. Pursuit. Retreat. Chase. Pick one that fits the situation. And of course, stage pictures -- triangles, not chorus lines, head levels, etc. Basic, but overlooked time and again.

4) Research. Students often have no idea what words mean that their character is uttering. Sometimes directors don't know. I see shows where it is obvious that no one has done any background work on the period of the play, much less the playwright or the characters or anything. It just screams at the audience that no one is working with any accurate information.

5) Attention to Detail. Yes, it matters. Last minute scavenging for props and such on the way to the contest shows a lack of care and commitment to the production. Elizabeth Proctor should not have a bright green plastic broom from Wal-Mart. A sheet looks like a sheet, not a tablecloth. I guess it is about consistency more than anything. You don't have to spend a lot of money to make a show look well-staged and well-thought out. Iron the wrinkles. Put the kids in shoes, not socks. Have real apples in the basket, coffee in the pot and a cord on the phone. You know what I mean.

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1. Profiles. Can not hear actors, they project to the wings when they stand in profiles.
  2. Placement of furniture on stage, upstages the actors.
  3. Standing behind furniture.
  4. Articulation
  5. Finding the humor in a drama, and vice versa. Helps in not playing the ending at the beginning of a play. Also shows versatility.
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1. Physicalizing the Action (I believe what you show me, NOT what you tell me.)
  2. Projection and Articulation (If I can't hear it or understand it, it doesn't matter what you say.)
  3. Don't block actors in a straight, horizontal line unless it's a kick line in Dreamgirls.
  4. Make STRONG choices and stick to them. (I don't have to agree with your choices but weak choices are boring)
  5. Above everything, make the story clear.
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1. Selecting the right the show for their students ability, look...trying to force a particular style of a show, maybe because they think it will win for them?
  2. Imposing a particular style on a show- yeah for taking a risk, but stay true to the script, less is more.
  3. Actors are not talking or listening. I miss actors looking at each other and talking sacrificed for pretty pictures.
  4. Basics of staging/blocking. Where are they coming from? Why are they sitting on the "established" coffee table?
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1. Know your community's standards (student teachers I worked with more often than not chose scripts with language, situations that got them into loads of trouble;
  2. Know your talent pool.....don't chose scripts that require more people than you can cast;
  3. Don't get too "experimental" with first shows.....chose scripts that will bring in audiences and get you support, then go off on experimental, obscure classics nobody wants to see;
  4. Teach the students to love and enjoy the "process" of creating a character and story, too many directors only aim for the final product and forget that the road to the final experience is what gives them the great end product;
  5. Never let the students forget that theatre is sharing with the audience....without them, you are only in rehearsals.....now, isn't all that boring enough lecture?
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1. Ends of Scenes: Novice directors end with dialogue instead of action
  2. Relationships: Allowing people to touch one another.
  3. Transitions: Novice directors don't use this as time onstage to help tell the story
  4. Group/Courtroom Scenes: Creating the energy of a crowd
  5. Lateral Entrances: Novice directors generally stage entrances efficiently instead of aesthetically
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1. Rushing! I know you have a 40 minute time limit, but unless you cut enough from the script, you won't have time to play the moments and for me, the moments are priceless. I want to be able to experience the joy, the sadness, the agony etc. along with the characters...and I can't do that if it's a race to the finish line. Create relationships with experienced directors who may be willing to loan you their cuttings!

2. Active listening! This means allowing your character to be "surprised" by what other characters say and do rather than anticipating it because you know what is going to happen. Characters should pick out the main word/phrase/action in the line/lines/actions prior to you that causes you to say/do what you say/do next and react at that point!!!. And it's usually not the last word in the line that comes before your line :-)

3. Levels/planes/stage pictures! Give the actors some variety so that what we see on stage is pleasing to the eye/helps the audience know where to focus/emphasizes an emotion, etc.

4. Don't play an emotion! The main one here is sadness/grief/crying/etc. It is immensely more touching to watch someone struggle with overcoming and overwhelming emotion than to just let them blurt it out...that's kind of embarrassing. If an actor/actress tells me that they cried real tears during a performance, I always say..that's fine, but what did your audience do...because if they didn't tear up, you didn't do your job!

5. Articulation and projection! There's a difference between yelling and projecting. Clear articulation...particularly with plosive sounds....will help your speech to be understood.

6. Ensemble! even if you don't say a word and your onstage for a few seconds, you have a purpose and if you don't do your job to the best of your ability, it will pull the entire show down. Every person--cast, crew, understudy--is just as important as anyone else

7. Prepare your kids for advancing and for not advancing. The joy of advancing and the pain of not advancing will diminish over time. The lessons that they learn from the teacher about how to handle both and the experiences they have with their show will last them a lifetime not matter what the judge decides.

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1. Trying to tell too much story in 39:59 minutes. Cut it so you can have moments.

2. Scene transitions. Whether music or lighting, there are ways to make it flow.

3. Kids must understand the message of the play if they are going to communicate it effectively. Take time to talk about the play.

4. Bring the lines and words to life. Characters must talk to one another. It's not words....it's meaning and subtext and connecting with one another.

5. It's not about the "trophy." Be proud that as a company you did the very best you could to tell a good story and entertain an audience. Not about "winning," but about accomplishing.

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