Directing: An Art Taught Through Trying

Kuyper Scholars Independent Study

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Abstract: In co-directing two shows at the K-12 school I graduated from, in reading three texts written by long time directors, and in discussing my findings with Dr. Ter Haar, I gained a theoretical and an experiential understanding of play directing. In comparing the directing styles I read about in the texts to the styles I found worked best for our particular cast, I found that directing in a school setting is an entirely different challenge than directing in a professional setting, as a school director must focus on creating learning experiences to developing his or her students as human beings in addition to developing them as actors. In co-directing two shows at my K-12 school, I learned how to put this student-centered approach into practice.

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The summer following my freshman year of college, I was not only back in my hometown under my parents' roof, as is typical for many college students, but I was also back under my elementary school's roof, co-directing two theatrical productions with the director I'd been working under since the third grade: Mr. Mark Settje. For our cast of twenty-nine middle schoolers, we spent three weeks putting together the musical *101 Dalmatians Kids* compiled by Disney and Music Theatre International. For this performance, we used a proscenium stage, full costumes/make-up, full choreography, and pre-recorded CD accompaniment. Further, this performance was a dinner theatre, so parents enjoyed catered BBQ as they watched. For our cast of twenty-five high schoolers, we spent two weeks putting together the play *Crushed* by Don Zolids using the same stage repainted, simpler costuming that students provided for themselves, and ice cream refreshments instead of a full meal, since we chose to set the show in an ice cream parlor. Both shows ran for two consecutive nights, nearly selling out each performance. Everyone involved, from actors to directors to parents to administrators, was pleased with the experience as a whole.

Before beginning this summer's rehearsal sessions, I did some reading on directing. Prior to this experience, I only knew the acting aspect of theatre, having spent very little time in the technical or directorial realms. This reading, therefore, formed the basis of my background knowledge on directing and gave me a firm foundation to build on as I practiced it myself.

However, reading about direction does not a director make. In his book *Play Directing in the School*, David Grote explains, "Like all crafts, directing is best taught by doing. Experience is the best teacher" (1). In working with Mr. Settje all summer, I underwent the experiential learning so necessary to developing my own skill as a director. Perhaps it was observing Mr. Settje as an equal instead of as a student, or perhaps it was having conversations with him about his teaching/directing experiences late at night after our students left, or perhaps it was taking the reigns and coercing children to embody my artistic vision – most likely, all these opportunities combined immersed me in this experiential learning. In synthesizing both my learning-by-reading and my learning-by-doing, though, I found that the two don't overlap entirely. Most of the books I read before beginning focused on directing in a professional realm and, in my summer directing experience, directing professionally and directing in a school setting are two entirely different challenges.

When working in a professional setting, a director's goal is to create a stellar performance, exhibiting high quality acting, using exceptional set/light/prop/sound/projection design, and drawing in large audiences to create more revenue. The director must use all available resources to present the most surprising, the most touching, the most hilarious, the most spectacular show possible. In a professional setting, theatre is about entertainment and thought-provocation.

When working in a school setting, though, everything shifts. Rather than working towards an exceptional performance, directors and cast members work towards creating a meaningful learning experience for everyone involved, particularly for the students. If a remarkable performance is also achieved, that's wonderful! The primary goal, though, is to create space for children to explore their own identities, explore each other's understandings, and

explore the world's workings. In a school setting, theatre is a developmental tool, aiding the process of growing multifaceted individuals.

For example, when selecting a show for a professional theatre company, a director must first find a story that he relates to. If the piece doesn't speak to the director, he won't be able to orchestrate it in a way that speaks to anyone else. Long-time director Mel Shapiro explains, "I see myself on stage no matter what the play is because I have related to it through facets of my own life experience, I have been guided by an inner voice, which is my intuition, and have staged the play from the fantasies of my own imagination" (Shapiro 8). A director must love the show, since he'll be immersing himself in it for the entire production period. One a professional director has found a number of pieces that he finds important personally, he then must select one based on its marketability. He must consider what is going to grab his audience most, what is going to sell out shows. This piece, the one that's powerful in personal message and in audience appeal, is the piece that the company will stage.

When selecting a show for a school performance, though, directors must first pick a piece that won't offend administrators, parents, or students. It's important to consider that, as a teacher and a director, a school director not only represents the theatre department, but also the school as a whole. Therefore, a school director must pick shows that hold to the school's overall vision, focusing on what's wholesome to build up students as competent and happy individuals (Grote 17-22). This means that a director must know the cultural context she is working in quite well. For example, because Frontier Academy exists in a 36% Hispanic community where gang violence runs rampant, Mr. Settje could never put on a production of *West Side Story*. Further, because most Frontier families are incredibly conservative and incredibly religious, doing a show like *Guys and Dolls* toes the line. In an after-rehearsal conversation, Mr. Settje explained, "When

selecting material to perform, if it feels wrong, don't do it. It's better not to risk anything. You're working with students, and you're helping to form the people they'll be when they grow up. Don't take that lightly." Students look up to teachers tremendously. Thus, the way a teacher approaches controversial content, the way a teacher decides what's acceptable and what's not will often be adopted by students as well – what a serious responsibility for teachers in every subject area!

Additionally, teachers must consider the specific restraints their possible cast presents (Grote 14-15). How many actors will try out? Would a smaller show be better? How many will stick with it? Should we do a musical? How many of my strong actors can also sing well? Should we pick a show with a lot of males? A lot of females? Are most of my actors also involved in other activities, limiting our rehearsal time and the time they'll have to memorize lines outside of rehearsal? Is a full show possible, or should we do a one act, a Junior, or a reader's theatre? For example, *Guys and Dolls* would not be a feasible show for Frontier Academy's context because our department is composed of primarily female actors with strong singing voices and a few male actors who can't sing confidently – we did it anyways in 2012, and it was not our best performance. A show like *Quilters* would be more appropriate for our situation, as it would grant more girls an opportunity to be onstage while also showcasing their high points. Not only must a school director choose a show specific to the cast, but he also must create a rehearsal schedule specific to his students. Mr. Settje, for instance, never schedules rehearsals on Wednesday nights because many of his students attend Wednesday night youth group at their respective churches. Additionally, aside from dress rehearsal week, he never schedules rehearsals for longer than two and a half hours at a time, as we attend a college preparatory school with far more homework than the others schools in our area. Because he hopes that children are invested in their

homework and in their church activities, as these activities are all a part of developing well-rounded students, Mr. Settje also chooses to do Broadway Junior musicals instead of full-length shows. The complexity of these pieces better suits our context while still giving students stage time, which is the best teacher. Ultimately, rather than simply choosing a piece that he's excited about, a school director has to choose a piece that best serves the school community, especially the students, and can be done in a limited time frame, basing his decision primarily on societal receptivity and realistic cast demographics.

At the same time though, a piece must be "hard enough" (Grote 15) to challenge students both in their acting abilities and in their understanding of humanity. A vital aspect of theatre is lost when a script is picked solely because it'll be easy to perform and easy to get clearance for. Teachers have the opportunity to meet students in their self-discovery, to guide them through the process of deciding what's good, what's valuable, and what's true. When teaching theatre, a subject that inherently deals with what it means to be human, this opportunity is heightened. Thus, if a piece contains some questionable content, it might actually prove valuable to perform than to avoid. Grappling with that content in a theatrical, fictional setting could prove more beneficial, more safe for students than grappling with it in reality. I acted in a coming-of-age piece my senior year that dealt with the realization that the world isn't as simple as children think it to be, verbally touching on substance abuse and teenage sex. It was a heavy piece that challenged us as actors, but it also put some audience members, including Mr. Settje, in a state of unease. Nonetheless, the conversations I had with my fellow classmates about what is right, what is wrong, and how we should live while trying to distinguish between the two helped build us as human beings. Most audience members were touched by the piece, as it forced them into similar questioning. I'd argue that the piece was perfect for our context, as it helped develop student

capabilities while also speaking truth to instead of merely entertaining audience members. Ultimately, unlike show selection for a professional company, show selection in a school setting is a very subjective task, as the director must carefully consider the context the show will be produced and performed in.

Once a show is selected, a professional director would delegate tasks to each of his or her designers, splitting technical responsibilities amongst the team as a whole. A director, then, would focus on just that: directing. Similarly, a choreographer would choreograph, a scenic designer would conceptualize and actualize the set, a lighting designer would arrange lights, a dramaturg would check for historical accuracy, etc. Everyone would use their skill sets and their resources fully, and a notable performance would result.

In a school setting, however, the director will often have to wear many of these hats. Mr. Settje, for example, served as head director, scenic designer and constructor, lighting designer, box office organizer, and food coordinator for both shows. For the middle school musical, the orchestra teacher served as our vocal instructor and choreographer. I floated between all these roles, assisting with a little bit of everything, including running light and sound board simultaneously during each performance, but primarily focusing my energy towards directing and choreographing. Schools simply have more limited budgets than theatre companies and, therefore, can't recruit people with the necessary skill sets to work on their productions, leaving most of the work to a single director. As I helped Mr. Settje with all the technical endeavors he usually completes on his own, I fully realized that running a school theatre program truly requires *all* of a director's time – Mr. Settje and I were in the gym for more than eight hours a day at times, and only two or three of those hours were spent with students. This time excess

seems like a negative component of school directing, but I truly think it's a positive. What's better than pouring one's entire self into something and seeing it grow in the smiles of children?

Not only do schools have less monetary resources, resulting in more work for an often-undervalued director, but schools also have less spatial and material resources. Our summer shows, for instance, filled the house for each performance, but our playing space couldn't exactly be termed a "house." Being a charter school, we don't have an auditorium of our own. Thus, our performances took place in our elementary school gym on a makeshift stage that Mr. Settje built from plywood. Our audience members sat in folding chairs around classroom tables spread over the basketball court. Lights and speakers were secured to volleyball poles and basketball hoops. Also, our "gym" is actually an abandoned carpeting warehouse, lending to a less than professional space with less than ideal acoustics – and sometimes less than ideal visitors! During our closing performance of *Crushed*, a bat somehow found its way into our playing space, circling over audience heads and shrieking as actors tried to ignore the disruption. Further, our theatre department doesn't have a scene shop stocked with tools and materials; rather, we use and reuse materials from previous shows, constructing in a mobile storage unit in the prairie behind our playground. Though we were privileged to design our own stage layout for *101 Dalmatians*, we didn't have the budget or the time to build another one for *Crushed.* We were then forced to adapt the script for the stage layout we were given. This was more of a challenge, almost like writing a sonnet: one must make art within the given constraints of a given form presented by our lack of a scene shop. Neither do we have a costume supply of our own; rather, we rent discounted items from Disguises, a costume company based in Denver. Most of our props are donated from theatre families during spring-cleaning season or obtained at thrift stores before being refurbished.

All of this to say, school directors must work with what they are given, using a little extra creativity than professional directors with legitimate budgets to make performances possible. Because school programs make a lot of what little they're given, the school theatrical environment is often an inauthentic experience, as it differs so much from a commercial theatre environment. This lack of professionalism, though, doesn't necessarily matter. The reason for school theatre isn't to give students an immersion in "real-world" theatre, but to give them a collaborative, rewarding, learning experience. Besides, "Good play direction is defined by the play, not by the budget or the building in which the play is performed" (Grote 1). Stretching resources and working with constraints certainly teaches students to use their imaginations, thus accomplishing the school director's primary goal and resulting in a "good play."

Directors must especially keep this goal in mind when working directly with students. From the moment students walk into the audition room to the moment the curtain closes, it's important that a director maintain an accepting environment. Not only should students feel free to take risks, to try new character choices, to approach new topics with their peers, but they should also feel free to do so with their director: "Theatre is the place where disparate egos come together and work off each other's creativity to make a successful show… The director is very instrumental in setting the tone and atmosphere of the workplace" (Shapiro 76).

Fostering a creative environment begins with warm-ups. The type of activity a director chooses will set the tone for the rest of the rehearsal. Choosing an upbeat, game-like warm-up will spike and sustain actor energy; conversely, choosing a focused, breathing activity will set an introspective tone for character development activities. This was an area I became especially accustomed with, as Mr. Settje allowed me to lead warm-ups before nearly every rehearsal. For example, before working on choreography for the opening and closing songs of *101 Dalmatians*

Kids, we would have the kids ready their vocal chords by singing rounds with accompanying hand/facial gestures, such as "I Like the Mountains" or "One Bottle Pop." Before gearing up to block the final scene in *Crushed*, which was a highly energetic exchange between an overly sentimental high school boy and a not-having-it high school girl, we'd do physical and vocal warm ups like 007 Bang. Once students get into the rhythm of the song or the rhythm of the game, their physical and vocal energy builds, preparing them for an engaging rehearsal.

A school director, then, must select specific games that, while also setting the appropriate tone for the remainder of the rehearsal, will also build a sense of camaraderie amongst cast members. Oftentimes, warm-ups will be the only time all cast members are working together on a single activity, as most scenes will be differentiated between specified characters. Warm-up activities must be carefully selected to draw all the students together around a single goal, just as they should be when completing their diverse tasks for the show at large. This means that a school director must select games that get everyone involved, that everyone understands and feels comfortable with. The activities that I lead with most success included: Czechoslovakia, Shake Weight, Koonja, Pass the Sound in Motion, Pass the Clap, and Hippity-Bippity-Bop (see my best practices list for explanations of each activity). In choosing games with appropriate tones, the ability to build community, and middle/high school appeal, our cast felt prepared for the rest of rehearsal and uninhibited enough to take risks onstage.

After a cast is warmed-up, it's time to move into the meat of the rehearsal: blocking, teaching blocking, and reinforcing blocking, all the while developing characterization. Some directors prefer to block out all scenes ahead of time, visualizing each beat and drawing it out on a groundplan before rehearsal begins. Other directors prefer to work scenes as they go, conceptualizing and creating as actors recite lines in real time (Shapiro 148). I tried both

techniques this summer, planning beforehand for *101 Dalmatians* and working on the spot for *Crushed*. I found that I prefer a combination of the two approaches. Going into each scene blindly is too much pressure, as I had a limited amount of time with my students and couldn't think fast enough to evaluate my options and finalize decisions within the allotted rehearsal time – my indecisive, over analytic self needed to have some idea of what best served the show beforehand! However, I also found that, when working with students, nothing ever goes according to plan. Grote asserts, "In the course of any rehearsal period, [a director] will probably change at least a third of [the] original blocking. Much of what [he or she blocks] on paper simply will not work when there are real people wandering around on the stage" (56). My experience certainly agrees with Grote's conclusion.

For example, when I was teaching my blocking for "Cruella's Scheme," I had to rework my preconceived plan as I taught it, employing both blocking approaches simultaneously. I had all the choreography, all the blocking worked out in my head before arriving at rehearsal that afternoon, and I was very excited to see my ideas embodied. I envisioned Cruella's motions with a lot of simplicity, including a few jazz squares and intentional paces as she sang. I wanted to push her to tell most of the story with her face and her voice, as I knew that Emily, the soon-to-be freshman actor claiming the role, could handle the challenge. However, the first few times I talked her through it, she looked at me with a blank expression and a bit of stereotypical teenage sass: "You want me to do what?" I was forced to be patient, allowing her to run the scene a few times to figure out how it felt on her body before I offered suggestions or changed it entirely. Each time she ran it, though, she seemed to get worse. Either my vision wasn't being communicated effectively or it wasn't going to work at all. And it wasn't just Cruella – Jasper and Horace were in this scene too, and all the blocking they executed looked sloppy, no matter

how many times I explained it to them. So, as we worked the scene together, I made some modifications on the fly to conform my plan to fit my specific actors.

I expressed my discouragement to Mr. Settje after rehearsal that day, and he offered sage words of encouragement: "Annie, this is a challenge for all directors at all levels. You get so attached to your concepts, and it's difficult to watch them fail. It's part of the job, though. Besides," he continued, "you had the fifth graders laughing like crazy with the bit at the end where Horace and Jasper fight for the final pose and Cruella eventually snatches it from them. If the kids are laughing on the first day, you know you've done something right!" Though the director is ultimately in charge of blocking, and though the director's blocking plan may be perfect in concept, if it doesn't fit his actor's bodies, it's useless. If the blocking doesn't feel natural for the students, it won't look natural to the audience, who won't react as the director hopes. A director should focus on telling a story well, not on unwaveringly holding to her original ideas.

Not only must a director remember that blocking is a dynamic process, but he also must remember that it's a collaborative process, too. In both professional and school settings, it's necessary for a director to relinquish some control, to allow actors to put their own creativity into each movement and claim the blocking as their own. For students especially, being allowed to make one's own decisions and discoveries about how a character moves forces an actor to take more ownership of the role and be more invested in the production as a whole.

With our middle school cast, Mrs. Spahr demonstrated this principle well. In the closing number of *101 Dalmatians*, for example, she left a few sets of eight-counts un-choreographed. Each actor, then, could choose his or her own dance move to fill that empty space, adding a bit of fun spontaneity to our rehearsal and to the final performance. She also listened to student

suggestions respectively while teaching her preplanned choreography, sometimes modifying it to incorporate student input. For example, during the song "Cruella De Vil," the students wanted to do a death-drop during the line, "… watching you from underneath a rock." This move was entirely impractical, as it took another eight-count to get all the students back on their feet, and it wasn't visually appealing either. Regardless, Mrs. Spahr let the students do it because it brought them joy and it reminded them that they were an important, valued part of this creative process. Yet again, Mrs. Spahr taught me that school directors make decisions to serve their students, not to serve the production.

With our high school cast, Mr. Settje demonstrated this collaborative-ownership principle exceedingly well. For most of the first week of *Crushed* rehearsals, Mr. Settje gave very limited blocking and, instead, fielded many actor questions/suggestions. At first, I criticized him for it. High schoolers are so much more opinionated than middle schoolers, and they'll try to take over the entire show if you give them too much freedom in creating their own blocking. The way I saw it and the way I'd read about in *Play Directing for the School*, Mr. Settje should be laying down the overall blocking, the overall direction of a scene's motion and then allowing students to add in smaller quirks and personalized stage business, such as texting or ordering more ice cream (Grote 72). Instead, Mr. Settje was passively observing as the students created their own scenes from scratch, and I couldn't handle the disorder of it all.

When I asked Mr. Settje about how he finds this line between allowing students to take ownership and being productive with given rehearsal time, he explained, "As a director, you have to be brave enough to work in the chaos [of allowing students to experiment], but firm enough to eventually make final decisions, knowing that you can't please everybody. Not every idea is going to make it on stage because that wouldn't be cohesive. But it's important to let

students share their own ideas, even if we don't keep them." Thus, Mr. Settje allowed his students to run through their scenes freely for a few rehearsals, as it granted them time to experiment and contribute without director influence. A few days in, though, after students had settled into consistent patterns, he began to filter through their art to create the final piece. When a student feels that they are contributing, they will care more, and directors and actors alike will be more pleased with the results. Chaos proves a perfect creative tool.

Whether a director is working off preconceived or spontaneous blocking, and whether a director is working in a professional or a school setting, a number of different principles come into play when filtering and finalizing. In essence, blocking is simply creating a "visual language" (Shapiro 11) in stringing together series of evocative images. Each motion that a character makes, each pose he/she strikes should reveal something about the character's motive and about where the story as a whole is headed. Shapiro explains, "Every human being wants something. Every character in a play wants something. What makes a play dramatic is the fact that what the character wants is obstructed by obstacles that he has to overcome, and those obstacles create conflict on stage. Obstacles can come from characters, from circumstances, or from within the character himself" (108). A director must create strong images that reveal these character objectives and obstacles, and the transitions between images must reveal the character's strategies to overcome obstacles and achieve the objective.

Not only must the blocking reveal each character's intentions, but it also must reveal each character's relationship to one another. In all circumstances, "a character moves to express a change," whether that refers to a change in the way he relates to himself or the way he relates to others (Grote 64). If a character is growing more uncomfortable with another character, their emotional distance should be symbolized in their physical proximity on stage. If a character no

longer agrees with what another character is saying, he should look away to symbolize their inability to see eye to eye anymore. The converse is also true. If one character is taking control of another, he or she should move up in elevation or the subservient character should move down a level, somehow representing the authority of one over another. Certain characters that are unwilling to change should always enter through the same door or stand in the same location onstage. A director should use these placements to communicate subconscious character roles to audience members, therefore allowing blocking to tell the story just as the text does.

This is a lofty ambition, though, and no director will be able to make every single piece of blocking perfectly motivated or perfectly symbolic, as the practicality of making the scene visible must also be taken into consideration (Shapiro 147). For example, when blocking for a proscenium stage, a director must be sure his actors are "cheating out," speaking to each other's shoulders with the majority of their fronts facing towards the audience and gesturing with their upstage arm (Shapiro 150). Even though they would never be motivated to speak like this in real life, this sort of blocking allows the audience to see as much of the actors' actions as possible. A director must also be aware of his or her sightlines, of which portions of the stage are blocked from audience view by set pieces, support pillars, other actors, etc. After all, "the purpose of being seen onstage is to be SEEN onstage" (Grote 73).

Beyond making sure that everything is visible, a director must also make sure that the slew of images making up the blocking are visually appealing. The overall composition of the stage should be balanced, but not symmetric; varied, but not random (Shapiro 155). Each character's placement on stage should tell the audience where to look, putting the focus on the most poignant part of the scene being played out (Grote 80). The characters the audience should be watching should be elevated, or moved downstage, or framed in an archway. The other

characters should be looking where the audience should, indicating focus with their eyes. The most important individual should stand separate of the line or the clump of less important characters.

Unless a director has a specific reason for doing otherwise, and unless that reason serves the storytelling as a whole, these ideas should be adhered to. However, these ideas are just that: ideas. In my blocking experience, I agree with Grote's assessment of the terminology: "I prefer to talk about blocking as a matter of basic principles rather than basic rules. Some things work for certain situations, others don't" (93). As long as a director is keeping the principles that most directors adopt in mind while discovering what works well for the particular show at hand, success is sure to follow. It's all about intentionally using one's imagination.

When blocking in a school setting, these same basic principles still apply. More often than not, blocking for a professional show should be identical to blocking for a school show, as students need to learn basic blocking principles as part of their development as actors. Sometimes, though, you must neglect these principles for the sake of the learning experience. For example, when choreographing the large-group numbers for *101 Dalmatians*, Mrs. Spahr didn't place students according to their characters' authoritative standing, nor did she place them according to their talent, putting the students that were more pleasing to watch front-and-center. Rather, Mrs. Spahr arranged her students by height so that everyone could be seen equally. In placing her students this way, she wasn't thinking about creating the most spectacular, wow-inspiring show – if she were, some of our less-than-coordinated soon-to-be sixth graders certainly would not have been placed as prominently as they were! Mrs. Spahr was instead thinking about giving each student an opportunity to be seen, and Mrs. Spahr was thinking about

pleasing our primary audience members: parents. In doing so, Mrs. Spahr had to sacrifice a little theatrical quality, but because she works in a school setting, she accomplished the ultimate goal.

Once all general blocking has been taught, it's time to being honing in characterization. In order for an actor's portrayal to be believable, the actor must identify his objectives, obstacles, strategies, and motives for himself. A director can guide students through this process, but he cannot complete it for them. It's often helpful to begin by asking each student to boil every scene down to one-sentence objectives (Rees and Staniunas 36). From there, the student must be able to identify the one-sentence motive behind every line, behind every stage direction. They must understand who their character is onstage and offstage, seeing the character as a multifaceted human being instead of a single character trait. Actors will sometimes oversimplify their roles, deeming their character only discontent, only kind, only patient, only hard-working, only evil, or only saintly. Every human being is harsh for a reason, just as every human being is compassionate for a reason. Similarly, even difficult-to-get-along-with people have redeeming qualities, just as seemingly perfect people have flaws. An actor has to find it all in order to play the character accurately and believably (Rees and Staniunas 125-127). There are many different methods of uncovering these underlying character elements, and I tried a number of them this summer.

For *101 Dalmatians*, I was in charge of the narrators. Developing in-depth characterization for characters that serve mostly to give exposition? That's a challenge in and of itself. Developing characterization with soon-to-be-eighth-grade girls that are too cool to apply themselves and too insecure to take any risks is even more of a challenge. As their director, I decided to add a little more spunk to these expository roles, showing these girls that every role has potential and every role is important. My thought was, if the narrators play policemen and

dogcatchers, thereby reminiscing in telling the story to each other instead of talking at the audience, their roles would become significantly more fun and significantly more challenging. Each actor could create her own backstory, and the girls could collaborate to create their own group dynamic, adding a whole new dimension to the story. I could also choreograph some special, more challenging choreography for their group of five, as setting them apart during the large-group dance numbers would also give them something to be excited about.

I started by having these students work through the GOTE sheet Dordt College's theatre department uses. GOTE stands for goal, other, tactics, and expectation. The worksheet simply asks actors to work through a series of questions to identify their character motivation, as this motivation will inform the rest of their personality and physical trait development (an example is attached to the back of my portfolio, under the Best Practices tab). It's a simple, fun way to finalize some answers. Before they began, I reminded my girls that, while the script would have them say their lines simply for the sake of exposition, their characters are far more important, far more complex than that. When they go offstage, their characters do not cease to exist. Just because the script gives nothing in regards to who that offstage individual is doesn't mean that the actors can ignore their character's backstory; rather, the limited information found in the script makes the creative process all the more exciting.

After working through the worksheet, each girl had an interesting backstory and a solid foundation on which to continue character development. Anna was a policewoman who had quite a few run-ins with the law in high school. She went into law enforcement to get kids like herself on the right path. Jessica was a dogcatcher in her mid-thirties who lived alone in her downtown apartment. She adopted some of the friendliest dogs she captured to keep as company. These were wonderful, creative choices that showed so much promise.

Unfortunately, my actors never lived into that promise. Whenever I would take them out of large-group rehearsal to work on something specific, they enjoyed themselves tremendously. I was so impressed with their ability to pick up and execute choreography quickly, and I had so much fun laughing with these girls as we worked collaboratively. However, once we went back into large-group rehearsal to show Mr. Settje and the other students what we'd prepared, they ceased to enjoy themselves. Once onstage, the girls showed no emotion, no energy, no effort, no care. Even after countless notes and countless second chances, neither Mr. Settje nor I could get these girls to embody the character they'd created. For their group numbers, we couldn't hear them over the accompaniment CD – and I know they can be loud, as they're middle school girls who I've seen screaming through the hallways following class! We asked them to have energy. We gave them specific suggestions, such as "Walk with your head high," or "Carry your energy in your hands," or "Mimic my face when you say this line." We asked them to sing louder. We had them run the song without singing so that they could better memorize the choreography. We had them run the song while yelling, and we still couldn't hear them. Mrs. Spahr got up onstage to sing with them as a challenge for them to drown her out, but she alone drowned out the five girls combined. We gave them breaks to recuperate after slinging so many suggestions at them. We played theatre games in between scene work to give these girls a chance to let their guards down. We asked them why their character would say a specific line, and though they would give satisfactory answers, they didn't allow their understanding of the character to inform their performance at all. Through to the final bow, these actors were middle school girls playing middle school girls – too afraid of what everyone things to take any sort of risk.

It hurt my heart, really, because I was there not too long ago and I know all too well the pains of social ladders and needs to be accepted. The girls were too afraid of what their peers

would think to embody a character other than the one they play every day. I wish that theatre could prove their escape, their place where nobody would judge them. And the truth is? Nobody in the department would judge them for taking risks, for truly embodying their characters. Instead, we grow frustrated with them for being apathetic.

Once I realized that these girls weren't going to cooperate until they felt safe, I changed my tactics. Rather than working towards teaching these girls to be better actors, I simply tried to love them in their insecurities. Rather than critiquing everything they were doing wrong – because they were doing a lot wrong – I only encouraged them for the things they did right. Though this approach didn't bring about any significant changes in the scene itself, hopefully this was a starting point in helping these girls get over their insecurities and simply be their uninhibited selves, free to explore and take risks. This is the epitome of directing in a school system: allowing your students to give a mediocre performance if it means you can more fully focus on influencing their real character.

Not every characterization process is so difficult, though. In fact, most character-building experiences are the liveliest part of rehearsals, in my experience. When working with the high school students in *Crushed*, the students did a lot of their character development without being directed simply because the process excited them so much. Nathan, a student playing a geeky high school boy who allows the popular girl to use him because he has an incurable crush on her, added something new to his character every day. One day, he started staring longingly and petting his arm after Allie, the popular girl, took her hands off it – it was hilarious! Another day, he added a slight pause before he agreed to help proofread a letter she was writing to the new boy she liked, adding a pained facial expression in the silence before he agreed – it was heartbreaking! Angelo, a student playing an overly sentimental high school boy, also improved

his character every single day. He went from speaking his lines so quickly that audience members could hardly distinguish his words to speaking them slowly and with more deep breaths, adding sporadic fits of tears in between beats. Shalya, a girl playing a psychotic high school senior acting on her raging hormones in a way that wasn't helpful to society at large, grew more and more crazy with each run through. Neither Mr. Settje nor I told these students to add any of these quirks; rather, they emerged naturally out of the actors' own work in understand who their character is. This is the most rewarding part of the production process: making discoveries and working to incorporate them into the play itself.

As a director moves through the blocking and characterization processes, it's important to give actors feedback on their vocal clarity, physical clarity, commitment, depth, variety, pace, believability, and overall performance in the best fashion possible. Communication between directors and actors is essential to any performance, professional or educational. The two parties must work together collaboratively to tell the story, and if a director cannot communicate her vision clearly and respectfully, nothing productive will result. Actors are making themselves vulnerable, pouring their own creativity into their role. A director should never insult or scrap the work actors have already put forth, as that will make actors afraid to try and prove counterproductive; instead, a director should reform what actors have already created, working collaboratively to achieve the best produce possible. Thus, just "as important as knowing *what* to say to actors is *how* to say it… Finding the balance between explaining and inspiring, between being firm and being gentle, between being precise and being flexible is an art form in and of itself" (Rees and Staniunas 1).

Sometimes, these respectful requests require a lot of rephrasing. Giving notes is a matter of getting to know one's actors and how they'll best hear what the director has to say. For

example, the phrases “Take a risk,” “That choice is too easy,” and “Give yourself permission,” all communicate the same idea: the actor needs to commit more to his or her role. Different actors will respond more affirmatively to different phrasing, though; one may better understand the first while another may better understand the third. Similarly, when helping an actor develop stage presence, offering a slew of tips will accomplish the same goal as rephrasing: “Establish a strong base, feet planted firmly, with a sense of connection to the ground.” “Keep your body open, rather than closing off or protecting yourself.” “Let full breaths drop into your body; breathe from your diaphragm.” “Establish clear eye contact with those you are speaking to.” “Release excess tension, focus your energy on communicating and affecting those around you” (Rees and Staniunas 83). One of these tips will do the trick, but a director must find the right one for her specific actor. Regardless of whether a director is rephrasing an old tip or offering a new note, he must be specific. General remarks about the performance as a whole aren’t tangible enough to make a difference. When a director points to a specific moment or a specific line, though, communication becomes clearer. Thus, a director must constantly be engaged in trial-and-error, specifically trying to find the proper wording to communicate and achieve the desired outcome.

If a director has honored her actors’ contributions and laid out her expectations in the most articulate manner possible, it’s time to test the actors’ understanding of the show, working back through their characterization to reveal why a character should respond a certain way. If an actor understands the reasoning behind a specific note, he’s more likely to understand how to execute the note, too. For example, if an actor seems to be having trouble with vocal portrayal, a director shouldn’t tell him which words she wants emphasized and which she wants ignored. Instead, the actor and director should talk about the overall and underlying meaning of each line.

Then, the actor will figure out how to deliver the lines himself, thereby adding another dimension of authenticity to the play (Rees and Staniunas 44).

Not only must notes be spoken with the right words, but they must also be spoken at the right time. A director must always give notes when her actors are receptive, and this time varies for each cast. It may work bet to give notes at the beginning of rehearsal instead of at the end, so that actors are fresh and more removed from their last performance, allowing for a more objective perspective. It may work best to send notes in an email for everyone to look over, or it may work best to post notes on the callboard for actors to rip off for themselves. It may work best to have the stage manager give notes instead of the director, making the suggestions seem more universal and less like personal preference. This summer, I found that giving modification-focused notes as we progressed and giving encouraging notes at the end of rehearsal worked best for our teenage cast. This way, students made changes while the content was fresh on their minds, and everyone left rehearsal on a high note. The timing of these notes was key to creating an environment conducive to growth.

The princesses in *Crushed,* for example, were all very inexperienced soon-to-be-sophomore actors who required a lot of notes. It wasn't that they weren't willing to apply themselves, as had been the trouble with the narrators from *101 Dalmatians*; rather, these girls didn't know how to apply themselves, and they needed more individual work time than we could allot to them. Oftentimes, while Mr. Settje was working on the larger scenes with the lead actors, I would take the princesses aside to work on their scene, having them try various inflections, various gestures, and various characterizations until we found one we all could agree on.

This specialized work time was always enjoyable, but it wasn't always easy. It took a lot of coercing to get Cyan, the sophomore playing Snow White, to try some of my suggestions.

Cyan's passion for theatre and for Frontier's theatre community was evident, but she lacked the self-confidence to wholeheartedly give herself over to her role. I'd give her very specific notes, and she'd commit to them at first, but always shy away soon after: "Cyan, leave your hand on your head until the end of your line." Two words in, though, she'd let her hands hang at her sides again. "Cyan, please yell your line." She'd yell the first word, but revert back into her dim, monotone voice again for the rest of her words. No matter how much time I spent with Cyan individually, I could not improve her action because she was unwilling to cooperate with me. I could lead her to water, but I couldn't make her drink.

I could, however, salt the oats and make her thirsty by working with her in a way that was fun for both of us, a way that showed I respected her as an actress and as an artist. I'm afraid that in trying to teach her, though, I came across as nit-picky and poisoned the oats instead. All of my critiques had discouraged her, leaving her to believe that she could never perform in a way that pleased me. Yes, her scene was rough and all my suggestions were warranted. Regardless, Cyan needed me to stop critiquing and, instead, remind her that I only nit-pick because I see potential. So, after the princess group recombined with the cast at large and after Mr. Settje gave Cyan the same tips I had, I took a moment to encourage Cyan in front of the entire cast: "Cyan, know that we keep working with you on such minor details because you are doing a good job, because what you're doing is already remarkable and because we see the potential to make it even more so, okay?" The look of relief and the slight smile this simple, one-sentence public affirmation sparked made the entire summer worthwhile for me. Especially in a school setting, where developing students are already so fragile, it's important to consider actors' feelings when giving notes.

Did Cyan's scene ever get any better? No. Even though we continued to work it through opening night, it still wasn't where we directors wanted it to be. What was important, though, was that Cyan experienced what it's like to try to create the director's vision, and she experienced a little piece of the world outside her comfort zone. Further, I learned that directing is a balance between actualizing your concept and allowing actors freedom to be comfortable; I learned to critique while also honoring my actors' effort, no matter what the outcome. The actor needs to be taking some risks and working into unknown terrain in order to grow, but sometimes too much pushing will cause the actor to retreat from theatre instead of diving into self-discovery. Theater is collaboration, which means that theatre is also compromise.

This sort of respect for actors' emotional states is still applicable to a professional setting, but not to the same extent that it is in a school setting. A professional director should rarely relent because an actor is uncomfortable with a specific note. In fact, Shapiro argues, "Compromise should results as something you've gained, nothing that's been lost. Compromise should mean you've given up an idea, but got a better one in return. The other person's way of doing something was 'righter.' But if a solution does not propel your thinking in that 'righter' direction, you shouldn't use it" (137). Again, the idea of actor-director compromise showcases the difference between the goal of commercial theatre and the goal of educational theatre: the first only compromises for the best ideas for the sake of the show, whereas the latter compromises for the sake of students' emotional wellbeing.

Once opening night hits, a professional director will be "fired," so to speak. At that point, no more changes should be made and no more direction given. The director can simply relax, watch the show with the other "fired" designers, and be pleased with a job well done. During the show, a school director has the same opportunity to relax as a profession director does. Before

and after the show, though, a school director needs to be backstage with her students. After the show, a director's role is mostly logistical, as she must congratulate her students, make sure costumes are put away correctly, and assure that each child ends up with the proper family. Before the show, though, a director's role is more parental.

At Frontier Academy, we have a tradition of allowing both the director and the senior cast members the privilege of a speech before the show begins. The director's speech usually serves to express his pride in the cast's efforts and encourage each actor to give his or her all onstage. The seniors' speeches, then, grant the graduating students an opportunity to express their gratitude and say their formal goodbyes. This tradition is always an emotional one, which proves that the ultimate goal has been accomplished. These students have developed a community, as they've invested themselves in learning what it means to be an actor and what it means to be a human together. These students have developed deep friendships, as they've had meaningful discussions and produced meaningful art together. It's beautiful to see how theatre can draw the "misfit toys," as one of our assistant directors used to term us, together into a supportive, exploring, discovering, creating, and sharing body. That's the power of theatre, and that's especially the power of school theatre. That's what makes all the time and effort worthwhile.

In all, directing in a school setting adds an extra complexity that directing in a professional setting doesn't have: directors must first and foremost seek to create a meaningful experience for audience members, parents, administrators, and – most importantly – students. Whether that be through selecting an appropriate script, creating rehearsal schedules that allow for other student activities, using time/money/human resources effectively and creatively, blocking in a way that makes all actors feel valued and respected, working through

characterization in a way that highlights key human themes, giving only the notes that will truly help students, or congratulating students on a job well done, this goal must be prominent. This is no simple task, but when executed to the best of one's ability, immeasurable reward results. I loved getting to speak into these kids' lives, getting to collaborate with them in creating something meaningful. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to co-direct with Mr. Settje, and I'm so grateful for all I've learned in the process.

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