

Key Concepts

Stagecraft

All plays must create a visual and aural theatrical world when they are performed – the world that is seen, heard and experienced by the audience. When a play is produced it is the director's job to establish this world with a company of actors, along with the technical skills of lighting, costume, make-up, set and sound designers.

Stagecraft refers to the techniques and forms used to physically stage a play, but the writer can employ their own stagecraft by writing STAGE DIRECTIONS. These are the indications or instructions the writer gives in the text about physical action, sound or visual effects, costume, set design, etc, which indicate to a director how the play might be staged.

Some writers give very detailed and specific stage directions indicating how they want the play to be designed – its look, sound and feel. Others choose to keep stage directions to a minimum and let the director make those choices. This might include William Shakespeare's infamous stage direction from *A Winter's Tale* for the character Antigonus: 'Exit, pursued by a bear'.

Either way, it's important that playwrights understand stagecraft so that their intentions can be easily understood by directors, and that it would be physically possible to stage their play. Stagecraft is also another way for the writer to create meaning in their play. For example, symbolic meaning can be contained in something as small as a single prop, or the way a character enters or exits a scene.

Group Exercise

Stage direction from

What are they Like by Lucinda Coxon

Lights up. A circle of shoes on the floor, widely spaced, neatly arranged in pairs, pointing towards the centre – five pairs of men's, seven pairs of women's. They might be formal or utility wear, but they are the shoes of people aged over thirty. In the centre of the shoe circle is a large cardboard box. We cannot see inside it.

Twelve performers enter, stalk in an insistent rhythm around the shoes, eventually stopping, each in front of a pair. When the moment is right, they step into the shoes. The shoes (and thus, characters) and the performers do not need to share a gender. Nor do the shoes have to fit.

How useful do you think these stage directions are for a director?

Are they easily turned into physical action, imagery, sound, or other design elements?

Do they indicate mood, tone or theme of a scene or of the play?

Once all the shoes are on, the circle becomes ominously energised. Something is about to begin.

Stage direction from

Socialism Is Great by Anders Lustgarten

1967. A torrent of kids pour onto the stage, waving huge red Chinese flags and pictures of Chairman Mao and Little Red Books and banners with Cultural Revolution slogans on them (e.g. "Socialism is Great", "Chairman Mao is the Red Sun in our Hearts", "On No Account Forget the Past.") The impression should be of joy and excitement and passion and zeal, not of 'brainwashing' or violence. At the head of the tide is Zhang's dad, aged 15.

The Director

Directing as we understand it today is still a relatively new phenomenon – before the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the job of the director was done by producers (or actor/producers such as Shakespeare) and was more managerial than artistic or creative.

Nowadays the role of the director goes beyond the merely technical aspects of staging a play, and is also about interpreting the script and finding ways to create meaning, tone and focus. In other words, the director makes creative choices about the script that inform the production as a whole.

The relationship between director and writer is therefore a very important one.

Discuss this quote:

'The Director's Role: You are the obstetrician. You are not the parent of this child we call the play. You are present at its birth for clinical reasons, like a doctor or midwife. Your job most of the time is simply to do no harm. When something does go wrong, however, your awareness that something is awry – and your clinical intervention to correct it – can determine whether the child will thrive or suffer, live or die.'

Frank Hauser, *Notes on Directing: 130 Lessons in Leadership from the Director's Chair*

Watch the filmed interviews with Nicholas Hytner, Director of the National Theatre: <http://bit.ly/1r00A0q>, and the Platform discussion with Nick Dear and Danny Boyle: <http://bit.ly/VNvyLu>. Afterwards, share your thoughts about them with the group.



Stagecraft as Story

The decisions directors make about how a play is produced create meaning for the audience beyond the actual text itself. Directors or playwrights may often choose to reinterpret a classic story, or update and subvert an existing play in a new production to create an alternative meaning.

For example, Edward Hall's theatre company Propeller regularly produces exclusively male acted productions of Shakespeare plays. In 2011 Femi Elufowoju directed an all-

female production of Joe Penhall's play *Blue/Orange* at the Arcola Theatre, transposing the three male characters into women.

In 2012 the Royal Shakespeare Company's Gregory Doran staged a production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, set in contemporary Africa with a company of black actors.

In 2013, Nicholas Hytner directed *Othello* at the National Theatre, transposing the original setting to a contemporary army barracks, and the social and political context to a war

Discuss This



These questions refer to the stagecraft section

What do you think these directorial choices might add to an audience's understanding or experience of these plays?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of reinterpreting a play in a new way for a specific audience?



Why does this sort of thematic reinterpretation happen often in the theatre but rarely in the cinema?

What might this tell you about the potential of theatre as a social or political art form?

Find Out More

More info on Rory Mullarkey here:

<http://bit.ly/S6JZkK>

<http://bit.ly/PFD4Ay>

The Role of a Theatre Director

<http://bit.ly/Szm2Yo>

<http://bit.ly/QETQyL>

Suggestions For Further Reading

The Crafty Art of Playmaking by Alan Ayckbourn

The Empty Space by Peter Brook

The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre by Katie Mitchell



Group Exercise



The Grandfathers (2012) by Rory Mullarkey

The final draft of UK national servicemen took place in 1960 but in many countries across the world thousands of young people are still called up by law to serve in their nation's armed forces. Is this a valuable rite of passage, or is taking up arms something that should only be done by choice? As a group of young army cadets completes 547 days of mandatory service, we watch them attempt to find their place in the system, form a community and ultimately create bonds that may save their lives in physical combat.

Inspired by the system in Russia, *The Grandfathers* is a visceral, physical and fast-paced new play about training young people to fight.

1. Read the scene straight through once or twice using volunteers from the group to read the different roles.

- As you read each scene, jot down any images or sounds that came into your mind. Can you visualise the action of the scene in any way?

2. Discuss the following questions:



- What do you think the writer's intentions are in this scene? What is he trying to say, show or explore? What would you identify as the key themes of the play?
- Do you think there are any clues in the written text as to how the play should be staged, or do you think the writer has left space for a director to physically interpret the text?
- What potential for stagecraft can you identify in these scenes?
- How would you go about staging the play? Brainstorm with the group the choices and decisions you will need to make as directors to put the scene up on its feet. Think about the following things:
 - The design of the stage
 - Music, lighting, costume and props
 - The physical arrangement of the actors – who is on stage at any one time, how they are standing in relation to each other, what they are doing with their bodies when speaking or not speaking lines of dialogue
- Who you might cast to play the parts. For example, would you choose a specific gender, ethnicity or age group to add a layer of meaning to the text?



3. Watch the video clip of the performance of this scene at the National Theatre in 2012:

<http://bit.ly/1B0mUcf>

- Compare and contrast this version with your own as discussed in the group.
- Do you think the production does the script justice? Does it embellish, enhance, clarify or focus the meaning you identified in the text?
- What would you do differently?
- Now think about your own play. How much stage direction do you want to give in the text? How much potential is there in your play for a director to make a physically exciting production from it? How will you go about indicating your intentions regarding tone, theme, style and design?

Extension Exercise 1



Choose one from the following list of plays. Think about how you would change or transpose the original story into a new stage version, with the aim of making it more meaningful to a contemporary audience. You may want to link the story to real social or political events in recent history, or invent your own context. Write a detailed paragraph outlining your new setting, world, characters, time and place.



Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare <http://bit.ly/iVht4N>

Oedipus Rex by Sophocles <http://bit.ly/13U0Luc>

The Beggars' Opera by Bertolt Brecht <http://bit.ly/laJbi0>

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde <http://bit.ly/W6EdW>

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov <http://bit.ly/7h7twm>

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett <http://bit.ly/libWI>

Extension Exercise 2



Writing Stage Directions

Following these two basic rules will keep your script tight and help prevent you from using unnecessary stage directions.

1. Avoid using a stage direction to tell an actor what they are thinking or feeling – the dialogue should infer the emotion. Try not to overuse adjectives like angrily, despairingly, joyfully to describe how a character/actor delivers a line. Remember you can also use punctuation to indicate intention.

Example: Jane and Oscar are in the middle of a row.

JANE: (angrily) It drives me mad when you do that.

Is the angrily necessary? If extra emphasis is needed could you replace the adjective this way:

JANE: It drives me MAD when you do that.

OR

JANE: It drives me mad when you do that!

2. Make sure that your stage directions can be ACTED by an actor.

Think about this stage direction: Helen slaps Oscar across the face.

Is this a physical action that can be easily performed by an actor?

What sort of emotions does it infer on Helen's part?

Now think about this stage direction: Helen feels betrayed by Oscar and wants to take revenge on him for cheating on her.

Is this a physical action that can be easily performed by an actor?

If not why not?

Does it tell us an interior thought or feeling?

How and why is an interior thought different from a stage direction?

How might you externalize that interior thought or feeling in dialogue or a series of actions?

Practice Exercise

Choose two characters from your play – or invent two new characters for the purposes of this exercise (or use Jane and Oscar.) Give them a name, age, gender, etc.

Write a short scene in which the two characters express love for one another without using any dialogue. The idea is to

indicate their emotions entirely in physical action described in stage directions.

You can choose ONE prop from the following list to use in your scene:

A bottle of water

A book

A mobile phone

A piece of jewellery

Once you've done this, rewrite the same scene using ONLY dialogue, and no stage directions. Afterwards think about where a stage direction is absolutely necessary to make the scene read clearly.

Now write a third version of the scene – you are now allowed to use dialogue and ONE major stage direction only.

Compare the three scenes and discuss which works best to convey your intentions with the scene.