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INTRODUCTION

Play directing can be an art, but like all real art, it is built on a solid foundation of craft. The craft can lead to the art, but the art itself can never compensate for lack of craft. So the director must be a craftsman first.

Fortunately, craft can be learned. Like all crafts, directing is best learned by doing. Experience is the best teacher.

Unfortunately, experience is also the slowest teacher. We get so caught up in our immediate problems that we haven't time to reflect, to consolidate, to theorize, and to revise.

This book is my attempt to organize what I have learned from some thirty years experience so that it can be used by other directors. Although the advice and procedures described can work at almost any level, the discussion is framed in the context of the school. I chose this framework for several reasons. First, this is the hardest place to direct a play. In a school, the director is not only a senior partner in a joint creative process but is also a teacher. You must not only stimulate creativity but also teach the participants how to use that creativity. In particular, you must work with actors who don't yet know how to act. You have a very small talent pool from which to choose. You have far more limited personnel resources than almost any other type of theatrical production. In most cases, in addition to directing the play, you must also be your own producer, designer, and technical staff.

Secondly, directors in a school situation have usually had very little training or preparation. You are always hired for some other reason and assigned (or allowed) to direct plays as an afterthought.

Because of this, most people in the professional theatrical world automatically assume that directors in the schools are incompetent. Many are, perhaps. But then so are many of the directors cluttering up the major stages of the world. Unfortunately, many competent teacher/directors share this opinion of themselves. They convince themselves that, since their actors are students and their budgets are small and no one in the local community cares about Art and Culture, there is no way they could put on good shows even if they learned to be the greatest play directors in history.

Which is my third reason for writing this book. There is no inherent reason why school play productions must be done badly. They can be done well, often very well indeed, if they are directed well. Good play direction is defined by the play, not the budget or the building in which the play is

performed.

There are, of course, a lot of other books about play directing, but these tend to fall into two groups. One group is textbooks, which tend to be so theoretical or generalized that they end up actually telling the potential director nothing that can actually be used in rehearsal. The other group is made up of theories and reminiscences of famous directors. These are certainly interesting, but they offer very little practical help, because they work only with the best actors in the best professional situations.

Books aimed specifically at directors of amateurs tend to be about “How to Put on a Play.” For the most part, they concentrate on quick and easy ways to do scenery, costumes, props, and publicity. They can help the practicing director, but they still aren’t really about actually directing a play.

This book tries to cover the actual process of directing a play, described not as theory but as a step-by-step sequence. It begins with the selection of the play and then follows each step of the rehearsal process. It gives considerable attention to some very fundamental, and often ignored, aspects of the craft of staging a play. For inexperienced teachers, it is also a detailed examination of the unique problems of the secondary school situation, with some theory and much practical advice about ways to get the most from student actors during preparation and rehearsal. For experienced teachers and directors, it is, I hope, also a stimulus and a reminder and a source of additional ideas or insights that could help lead to better productions.

Occasionally, the advice included in this book will sound dogmatic. If so, I can only apologize. Nothing in here is determined by theory. Everything is based on things I learned from that hardest of all teachers, experience. If I warn you against certain “mistakes,” it’s because I have already made that mistake, in some cases more than once. One of the reasons for writing such a book is to help other people avoid the problems of reinventing the wheel. Not everything I advise will work in every situation, but I advise them in the hopes of saving other directors from the pain of making mistakes they don’t need to make.

That said, the book will, I hope, speak for itself. But there is one last point I would like to add. Remember, whenever and wherever you are directing a play, at that time and place, you are the theater. In America, we think of the theater as Broadway, the regional theaters, maybe summer stock, and perhaps, very far away, the Royal Shakespeare Company. But most Americans have never seen a professional production of a play. If they have seen a play at all, it was almost certainly at a school. If it wasn’t at a school, it was at a church or a community theater, which also use amateur actors and in which the directors face exactly the same kinds of problems as

the director in the school. Almost all of our professional actors began in an amateur production as a teenager. It makes a difference whether you do a good job or a bad job. In many cases, it makes a much greater difference than it does on Broadway, for people who don't like their first exposure to theater rarely have a second. You are a real director, and you are an important director, wherever you are. So there's no reason why you shouldn't also be a good director.