

Learning the (directing) ropes

Working with student assistant directors

BY JOE DEER

DIRECTING RANKS AMONG the lonelier professions in the theatre. Not only is it typically a solitary, high-pressure role, but it's also difficult to gain experience in the field before making the leap into full-on directing. However, with the right collaborative approach, you can use student assistant directors to help them learn the ropes and to give you a hand with the nitty-gritty of the job and a shoulder to lean on when needed.

This article treats the directing process in five phases: conception; collaboration; rehearsal; production; and performance. The idea is to use student assistants for each segment of the process and to put your student director in the driver's seat along the way.

Conception

As the name suggests, this first phase covers brainstorming of production possibilities. This is when your creative juices get flowing and your fantasies take flight. All of that is based on careful analyses of the script and score. Some aspects of this can be mundane, but all are necessary to help you avoid painful errors later in the process. In most cases, you need to develop analytical guides, like those enumerated below, to direct and coordinate designers, the choreographer, the music director, and other core members of your production team. Although most directors do the early work alone, this is a perfect time to begin involving student assistance.

name

period



French scene breakdown

The French scene breakdown is a division of the script into units of onstage action marked by the change in the onstage presence of actors (i.e., the entrance or exit of one or more characters).

This breakdown often corresponds to shifts in dramatic action and major storytelling events. Alternately, you might break down the script into marked scenes and musical numbers, however such chunks of action are usually too large to be of practical use to a director.

Cast by scene/unit breakdown

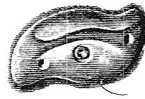
This breakdown is a grid representing units of action (including script page numbers, musical numbers in that scene, point in the story's chronology, location of that scene, and even scene titles) horizontally along the top, with character/cast names vertically along the left margin. This grid allows you to check off which actors appear in each scene and even which of their multiple roles they'll play in that particular scene, when needed.

Assigning these analysis tasks to students will help them start to see the architecture of the play, how much stage time different characters occupy, and the ebb and flow of stage time from shorter to longer scenes. These serve as topographical maps of the script, revealing to a student director how the production should appear. You can't effectively complete these breakdowns without gaining a much deeper understanding of your script and how it directs your show.

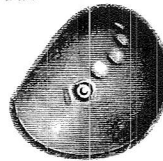
Director's brief

Many directors create a short essay for designers, collaborators, and themselves as a point of reference during production. This director's brief (as the British call it) describes important

themes and ideas that matter to you, images you have in mind, story ideas, stylist impulses, central conflicts, and anything else you need to express. It's the place where you organize the many impressions and intentions you have for the show. It becomes a touchstone for you to reference throughout the production process, so it should be carefully developed. Importantly, it



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describes your sense of the dramatic action of the story, including what happens to the central characters over the course of the story and how they're changed by the events of the play. It's not a plot synopsis but instead an action analysis. I encourage you to have your student assistant — and possibly other students such as your stage manager — create an original director's brief. Read this, provide feedback, and do not hesitate to incorporate their best ideas into your production. Be sure to acknowledge those ideas that resonate with you and to immediately discuss those that don't.

Collaboration

Design meetings

The collaboration phase of production involves meeting with designers

and other artistic players to determine the visual world of the story, how you imagine the musical numbers unfolding, ideas about characterization and storytelling, and anything else you'll work on together before rehearsals begin. While your assistants may not be active decision-makers, they can certainly observe these meetings and possibly offer good ideas. This is a great time to discuss the practical reasons for scenic and other design choices and the reality of your production's limitations regarding space, time, skilled help, and budget. It is from these limitations that some of your most imaginative ideas will spring.

Casting

The second part of this process involves auditions and casting, which completes your team of creative collaborators. You can take full advantage of your assistants as your casting team. Have them traffic those auditioning in and out of the space, read script sides with actors, and keep track of headshots, résumés, or audition forms. The side-benefit of this is that they begin to see what works well in auditions from an actor's and from a director's perspective. One important aspect of directing is creating a positive, supportive atmosphere where actors feel comfortable and encouraged to do their best. Related to this, keep sensitive and potentially confidential conversations about casting, levels of talent, and the like between faculty members only. Sometimes you need to hold private meetings without any students present.

Rehearsal

Probably the longest phase of this process, rehearsals offer a number of useful and potent learning opportunities. I recommend you use student assistants in at least the following ways.

Note-taking

Directors often debate whether or not to look away from the action in rehearsal to write down a note. With an assistant at your side, notepad in hand, you can simply whisper shorthand comments to your scribe without missing a beat of the action. The student assistant will get a running lesson in observing and responding. You can later review the notes and select what points to make after the scene is done. Never is this more useful than when you begin doing full run-throughs of acts or major scenes. You might even discuss the notes, to make sure they are understood, then let your student give some notes. The process of communicating a note with approachability and specificity takes practice. You can always jump in and clarify, as needed.

Deck stage management

We often have stage management teams that are short-handed in helping restore props and scenery, setting up and striking rehearsal furniture and props, etc. Student assistant directors can be useful for those tasks. Plus, it keeps them aware of the physical aspects of a scene.

Social media management

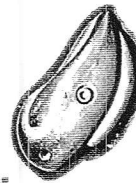
Almost every production or school theatre program launches social media outlets galore. Among Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, you can generate a good deal of advance publicity and buzz about your show. Try tasking an assistant with managing social media content. I encourage you to make sure the message is clear, safe, and approved. If you want to promote “something secret happening in the play,” you can do a murder mystery clue sequence. You can do interviews with individuals in the cast, show

glimpses of impressive musical numbers, and present other great ideas your students will come up with. If you have more than one assistant, I recommend rotating these jobs to give everyone a chance to try them all.

Production

I’ve never been through a tech and dress rehearsal process when I didn’t wish I could clone myself to address the many areas of production that require simultaneous attention. Well, congratulations! You’ve just been replicated, thanks to your assistants.

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Tech and dress rehearsals

Student assistants become minions, able to pursue smaller tasks or disperse to give notes to different groups while you wrestle with the bigger dragons of your production. Student assistants can also transcribe and distribute your notes through email or traditional bulletin boards, ensuring that no important notes get lost, while sparing you the late-night typing.

As you work with lighting, sound, costume, and scenic designers, be sure to let assistants shadow you

and overhear the artistic discussions of how cues evolve or costumes are adjusted.

These small details in a production are where you leave your directorial fingerprints, and your budding directors need to develop the vocabulary and interpersonal communication skills that every great director needs to discuss design.

Performance

While good directors work to become “obsolete” by the time a show opens, there’s still a lot of monitoring and nurturing of student performance once a show has gone before an audience. Experienced educational directors know that students often make huge leaps once they’re in front of their friends and family. Usually, these are positive steps. Occasionally, though, they leap in unproductive directions. So, having your students take notes during performances can help them to develop a nuanced sense of storytelling and acting and to articulate their observations.

Assistant directors can stay connected to the company in other ways, as well. You can have them lead pre-performance warm-ups, greet patrons in the lobby, usher VIPs to seats, and even give pre-show welcome speeches.

Post-mortem

Once the production closes, the set clears, and the dust settles, you can gather your team of assistants for a post-mortem evaluation. I suggest giving assistant directors a series of prompts to write or talk about with you.

What are your biggest takeaways from the process?
What rehearsal moments stick out in your mind?

How has your understanding of the director's responsibilities changed over this process?

What was your favorite assisting role in this process? Your least favorite?

If you could go back and redo any part of the process differently, what would it be? Why? How would you change it?

These prompts not only provide insight into your students' thoughts, strengths, and challenges but also provide feedback on your directing.

As I said at the start of this article, directing can be a lonely profession.

Working with assistants can make it less so and can give you some rare and helpful perspective on your process.

To follow up on their experience assist-directing a production, allow your assistants to test out their newfound knowledge. If you have multiple assistants, one idea is to produce an evening of one-act plays next, directed by them. Have them select short plays — or even one longer play with multiple scene divisions — and task each assistant with taking one play or section to direct.

They'll each do their separate preparatory analysis, director's brief, and sample design collaboration. (Keep this minimal.) They'll audition and cast (with your assistance), rehearse the play, and help guide the performance, with you observing and giving feedback privately.

Directing a play or musical can be one of the most satisfying experiences a theatre artist can undertake. With a little clever marshaling of your forces, both you and they can grow and succeed in ways you might never have imagined.