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# LESS IS MORE

## Advice for first-time directors

BY LAURA WAYTH

THE FIRST SHOW I directed was *Godspell*. And I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't realize how many moving parts there were: rights, casting, staging, lighting, sets, props, costumes, and publicity. The project got too big too fast — too many bodies moving onstage (a cast of 22), too many technical requirements, too many costumes, and too many dance numbers.

I couldn't keep track of it all. I had difficulty keeping myself organized and understanding how one part of the process related to another. I couldn't keep all the different balls in the air and keep track of an ever-growing list of details.

I had made the wrong choice for my first directing project. Looking back, I realize it was too ambitious for my circumstances. It didn't succeed in my eyes, because I didn't yet know what questions I needed to ask.

The key to a smooth experience as a director is to ask the right questions. Directing a show can be a most rewarding creative endeavor, so to

help you make your first experience as smooth as possible, I want to take you through some important considerations.

### Think small to create big

As movies and TV shows grow ever more visually spectacular, it is important to keep in mind that a play can be small technically and, at the same time, big on ideas and impact. A play is essentially a story, and a story need not be technically complicated to be deeply affecting. Some of the most beautifully moving plays I have seen used bare stages, black boxes, minimal costuming, and simple lighting.

My favorite production of *Hamlet* involved actors dressed in black on a bare stage. It relied on its language to tell the story. One of the most funny and touching contemporary plays I have seen was a student-directed production of Adam Bock's *Swimming in the Shallows*, which proved

SUSAN DOREMUS

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*With a cast of four and minimal tech requirements, [title of show] (performed here by Thespian Troupe 3842 of Wabert Catholic H.S., Dubuque, Iowa, at the 2017 International Thespian Festival) exemplifies a good first directing project.*

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*Larger cast musicals like Godspell can prove overwhelming for the less experienced director. This successful production was performed by Troupe 4347 of Bishop Gorman H.S. (Las Vegas, Nev.) at ITF 2011.*

that a good script, small cast, basic set, and imaginative director can create something beautiful. Good theatre can rely primarily on the actors and the text to create an immersive reality for the audience. A play is not about its production values. It is about its story.

If you can choose which play to direct at your theatre, weigh this decision carefully. It must be both a story you *want* to tell and one you *can* tell effectively with the resources you have. Before you make your selection, answer the following questions.

*Do I love this play?* You will spend a great deal of time with this play, so it should be a story you deeply want to tell, in a world you can spend a lot of time in, day after day.

*Can I obtain the rights?* Always ask this right away. Unless the script is written by you or in the public domain, you need to obtain the rights to produce a show for an audience. Are the rights even available? If so, can you and your team afford to pay for them? Always make sure to specify all the terms and conditions of your chosen play with the publisher.

*Can I direct this play with the resources available to me?* To be fair, this question is more for the producer and the technical director. However, high school directors often take on those roles as well — or at least must plan a collaborative vision with such individuals. Whether running the show yourself or with a producer and technical director, take a realistic look

at your budget, your technical capabilities, and the number of people willing to commit to your team before you start. Do you have someone to provide and run lights, set, sound, and costumes? If not, an ambitious project like *Sweeney Todd* may not be the best choice. For your first show, I recommend a project that jumps off the page at you — and doesn't require complex design elements.

*How large a cast can my project accommodate?* Generally, the more characters you have onstage, the more problems you have to solve. It is wonderful to create casting opportunities for more people, but that may create more stress and labor — scheduling difficulties, staging conundrums, personalities, and other variables to manage. Larger casts can be wonderful to work with, but small casts (two to five characters) are an ideal starting point.

*Do I have the time to adequately rehearse this show?* Time flies alarmingly fast during rehearsals. How long is the play? How much time do you have for rehearsals? How complex are the staging demands? A one-act play is an ideal first directing project. It's meatier than a 10-minute play without being as overwhelming as a full-length. Should you wish to undertake a full-length play, look carefully at its scope and complexity. Plays with a small cast and minimal locations that rely on text and relationships are the best ones to begin with.

## It's all in the casting

Once you pick a project, it's time to find your cast. There is an old theatre saying that 90 percent of directing is casting, and I know this is true. Hav-

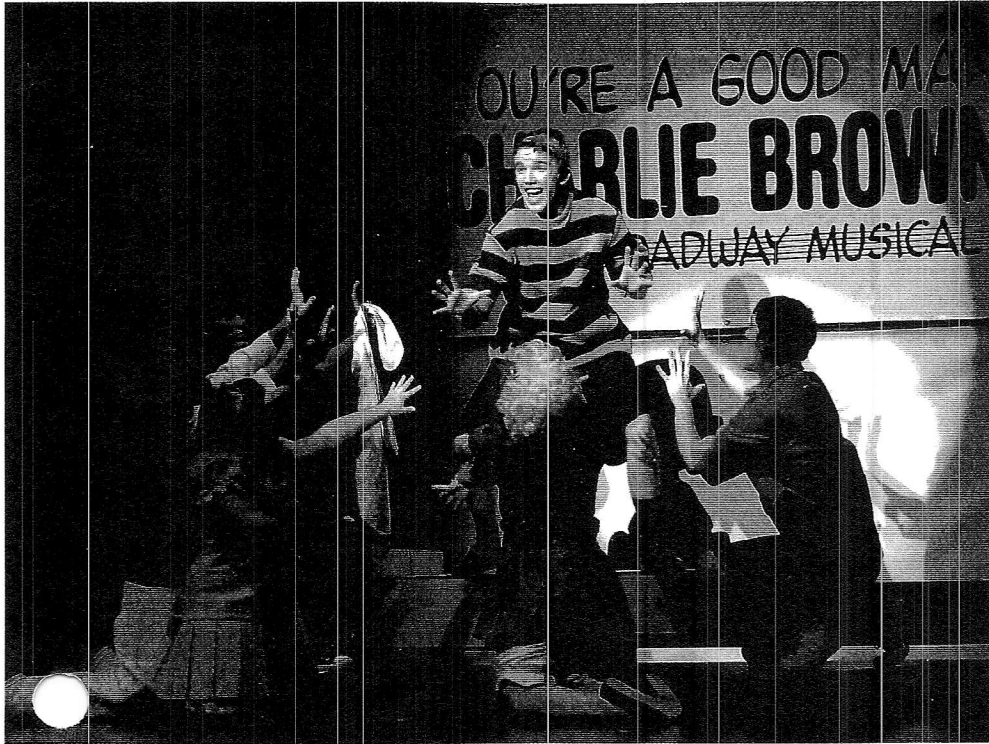
ing the right people in the right roles with the right chemistry will help to make your directing time a joy. Ask yourself the following.

*What kind of an audition will most effectively identify what actors are best for each role?* Do you need a preliminary audition where actors perform monologues, or would it be better to have them read from the script? Having potential actors come back to read together from the script may help you to visualize how they will partner onstage.



*You don't need intricate set pieces to tell a story you love, as seen in this ITF 2016 production of Peter and the Starcatcher from Troupe 1539, Edina (Minn.) H.S.*

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R. BRUNN

*You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown features just six familiar characters and simple visuals. This show was performed by Troupe 5006 of Olathe (Kan.) South H.S. at ITF 2010.*

*Should I cast my friends?* It can be tempting to work exclusively with people you know and enjoy working with. Ask yourself how open you are to the unknown. Sometimes the best person for the role is someone you've never met. It's a gamble, but it may be one worth taking.

*Are my selected actors reliable?* Many professional directors say they would rather cast a reliable actor than a super-talented wild card any day. Actors who always show up and do their work enable you to do your work and keep the project on schedule.

## Create a unified vision

Once you have selected your project and cast the show, the meat of the

creative work begins. You now have two equally important goals to juggle: serving the script as you bring the play to life and running organized rehearsals that help you support that mission.

Before starting rehearsals, read the script several times. Write down any images or thoughts that strike you as interesting. After several readings, summarize the play. If you had to tell a friend what this play was about and why it was important, how would you do that in one sentence?

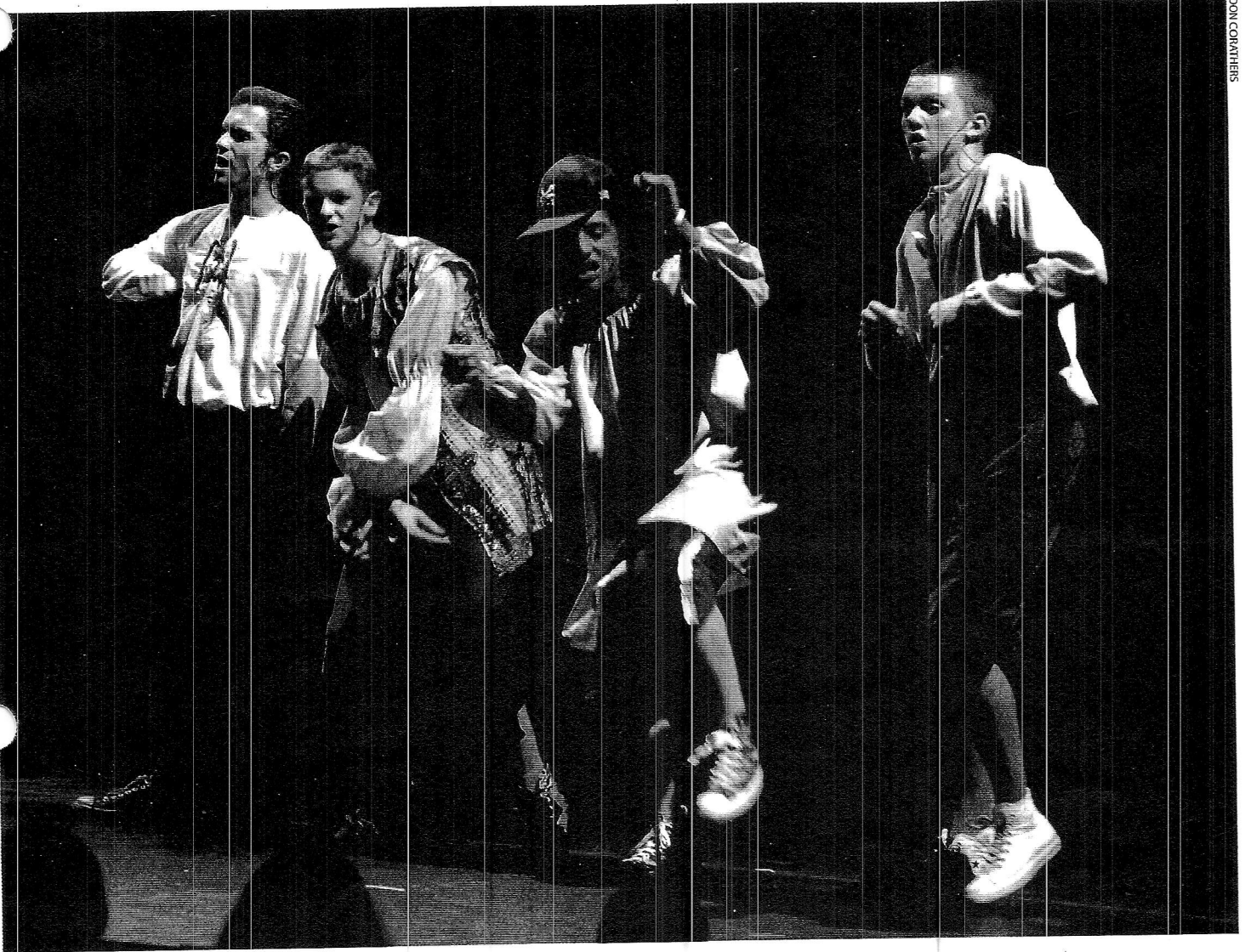
Next, break the script into scenes. If there are no designated scenes in your play, find logical divisions – a change in the topic of conversation or the entrance of a new character. Write one sentence to summarize what each scene (or division) is about and why it is important to the overall action of the play.

Decide what the “world of the play” is. Is it a light, comedic world or a dark, troubled world? What “rules” will you, the director, impose or honor in this world? For example, do characters who aren't speaking freeze while another character delivers a monologue? Do characters only use the stage or do they move into the audience? When creating conventions like this, use them consistently.

Also before starting rehearsals, create a calendar. If you know an organized person to help with stage management tasks, even better. Mark your performance dates and any technical and dress rehearsals you may want. Then work backward to determine how many rehearsal hours there are.

Next, review your script to ensure it will be explored, blocked, and rehearsed fully by opening night. For example, if your play has eight scenes, commit the first week to

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staging and running three scenes. The following week, tackle another three scenes and run them in addition to the scenes you worked on the week before, and so on. Look at the whole picture, then break down your weekly and daily tasks. As you parse the play into conquerable rehearsal nuggets, you will be grateful you were wise enough to choose a play of manageable length and scope.

Starting rehearsals is always hard. I recommend using the first rehearsal to unify your cast and team. You can start with ensemble games to get things going, or you can jump into a table read of the script with

the actors, so you can all hear the play together.

As you move into daily rehearsals, review each scene carefully before you begin, so everyone understands the characters and their actions. Make the best use of your actors' time by only calling them to rehearsals where you are likely to work with them. Though you should come with ideas about staging the scenes being rehearsed, remain open to ideas that surface as you all play. Also make sure to give actors ample time to run and rerun what you create together. Running and rerunning the work is the best way to make your actors

*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) is a low-tech parodical survey of the Bard's plays written for three actors, in which the director or stage crew can become involved. Troupe 3627 of Mountlake Terrace (Wash.) H.S. performed the show at ITF 2009.*

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comfortable and to solidify the show. ally, give your actors plenty of advance notice of when you would like them to have their lines and blocking memorized.

## Stay on track

With any show, there will be times when you feel that rehearsals are going great — and times when you are afraid you may have to cancel the production. About two weeks before the show opens, I usually fear I have created something absolutely dreadful that should not be viewed by any discerning human. It happens every time. This is normal. Uncertainty is a necessary part of the creative process, so expect it. The following are questions for those moments of doubt.

*Am I telling the story?* Check those one-sentence summaries you made for each section. Does the staging

and acting tell that story? If you aren't sure, ask someone unfamiliar with the story to watch rehearsal. What don't they understand? What questions do they have? Sometimes, a small adjustment is all you need to make a scene work, perhaps something as simple as moving your actors farther apart or getting rid of that bag of Doritos that has made the scene about eating Doritos instead of about the story. Keep track of the big picture and adjust details that distract from it. Every storytelling problem is solvable, but it begins with identifying the problem.

*Is there anything I need to let go?* Sometimes one idea or moment just isn't working and you need to release it for the sake of the whole. Perhaps it's a staging idea that was so cool in your head but doesn't quite match up to that vision in reality. Letting go of a beloved detail can


be one of the most difficult (but one of the most necessary) things for a director to do.

When I directed the musical *Hair*, there was one moment I imagined with a beautiful snowfall. In my head, it was poignant and touching, but it was a technical nightmare. Instead of a gentle, fluffy snowfall, we had clumps of white plastic that fell with a thud. I decided we couldn't afford to spend time on "the snow problem." If a detail isn't crucial and can't be easily fixed, it's best to let it go. Releasing my vision of that moment was difficult, but it allowed me to focus on the overall wellbeing of the show.

*Is my cast having fun?* No one can have fun every minute of rehearsal, even in the best productions. Overall, though, is your cast having a good experience? If they aren't, how can you redirect the energy? Does one actor need some one-on-one attention so they feel more valued? Do you need a rehearsal where everybody wears funny hats to bring joy back into the process? I did exactly that while directing the comedy *Anton in Show Business*. At one point, my cast was no longer having fun, nothing was funny anymore. Funny hat day (the Viking helmets were my favorite) brought a sense of play back into rehearsal and the show was once again fun — and funny. What can break the stress and get your actors playing again?

## Final thoughts


Every director has their own style, but each one faces the same challenges: the script, the schedule, and the available resources. The plan and questions outlined above can help you focus the creative and material elements to create stronger, more compelling productions. Though we are often encouraged to "think big," we don't have to be so literal. Simplicity can effectively deliver a big message with great elegance. Less really can be more. ▼



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