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How to talk design

Good results depend
on clear communication

BY SEAN O'SKEA

AFTER A YOUNG designer has studied the techniques of his or her particular design area, there is still an essential skill to learn. In some ways it may be more important than drafting, patterning, color theory, fabrication, wiring, and all the other things students spend so much time practicing. I'm talking about talking: collaborative communication with directors and other colleagues during the pre-production process. It's a critical piece of the designer's work that's not always a part of our training.

As in any field, a young theatre professional will encounter colleagues with a wide range of experience. Any director worth the job will be creative and hard-working and will have the best interests of the production at heart. Unfortunately, many directors are not trained to think visually as part of the design team. They

may possess brilliant insight into a play's text and may coax astonishing performances from their actors, and yet struggle with their designers. Some directors actually approach production meetings with dread. It's part of your job as a designer to minimize these difficulties.

At the same time, you must also pay close attention to your fellow designers around the table as well, even if you think the discussion at the moment has nothing to do with your design area. Catching the importance of an offhand comment from one of your design colleagues to the director

The 2013 production of Emil and the Detectives at the National Theatre in London, directed by Bijan Shelbani, with set and costume design by Bunny Christie, lighting by Lucy Carter, and projections by 59 Productions.

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might save you all hours of frustration later on. For example, set and costume designers need to follow any discussions involving shoes and the stage surface: if the set designer is planning on wide-gap planks, and the costume designer has all the women in spiked heels, there is going to be trouble.

Fortunately, communicating well with your fellow designers should not be difficult so long as you are attentive, understanding, and willing to compromise. Learning to work with directors takes more practice. As you progress in the field, you should find yourself matched with experienced and brilliant directors more often—but early on in your career, most directors will fall into three basic groups.

Those in the most desirable group, falling in the middle of the design-savvy spectrum, are confident collaborators. These directors have a strong understanding of the text and an overall vision for the play's staging. Typically, they have ideas about your part in the production, and if you're lucky, they will offer you visual images, references to film or television, historical research, even a piece of music or poetry they feel somehow communicates the themes and moods of the play. Pay close attention to these gifts. Skilled directors also tend to be eager to hear your ideas about the play and your design area. If you are prepared with well-thought-out ideas and supporting reference material, you might inspire the director to adopt your view of the world of the play—or at the very least, your ideas will mix with the director's to create an exciting design concept. These directors are gold. Work with them whenever you can.

The directors on either side of the "sweet spot" take more effort on your part. On one side are directors who may be wonderful with actors but are not visual people, so they have a very difficult time leading the design side of the production. Such a director might say something like, "I don't

know, make it look good." As long as the director from this group is willing to work with you, the communication tools in this article will be extremely useful. But beware: the easy-to-please director can be a pitfall for a young designer. Without guidance from above, you might be tempted to take an easy solution instead of the best or right solution. You might also have to defend your design against a budget-conscious production manager or technical director. That's harder to do if you're going it alone.

In particular, watch out for the "I'll know it when I see it" director. This director is unable to communicate to you what they are looking for and is asking you to generate perhaps dozens of renderings or sketches until you hit upon what they want. There are ways to save yourself enormous time and frustration when working with the "when I see it" director. More on that in a moment.

At other extreme is the "make it look like this" director. You might be handed photos of the Broadway production and be told by a director, "This is what I want." This type of director is forcing you to plagiarize others' work in order to satisfy them. Even if it is not an image of someone else's design, a director might show you a photo of a sculpture or a building and ask that you make the set look just like that. Perhaps the most dangerous directors of the "look like this" type are the ones who initially give you freedom to create your own design and then, throughout the process, ask you to make changes that slowly steer you into recreating others' work. Fortunately, this worst-case director is very rare—and many inexperienced directors who fall into the "like this" category do so unintentionally. They might feel they need to offer design guidance, and all they can come up with is photos of previous productions. With good collaboration skills, you should be able to convince a director that together you can discover an original approach to the production.

One other type of director you might encounter in the "like this" category are directors who have staged this particular show several times before. In regional theatre, it's not unusual to work with a director who has traveled around the country mounting productions of the same show many times. A company has likely hired the director specifically for their experience with this show. They will have strong opinions about your design simply because they know what has worked before. You need to respect their experience and not re-invent the wheel, but usually, with good communication, you can find room to make your own mark on the design.

At the table

Of all the meetings you will have over the production process, the first design conference may be the most important. Don't let this meeting, so far from the stress of tech, be just a casual chat and an exchange of contact info. If you and your colleagues can clarify with a director ten key questions at that first meeting, you will get the production off to a running start.

Top ten questions to have answered by the end of the first production meeting:

1. Why is the director taking on this show? The reason might simply be pragmatic—the producing theatre needed a director, and she was available. Nothing wrong with that, but make sure you learn early if there are other reasons. Did the director choose this play? If so, why? Does it fit into a larger season with a particular theme? Does it commemorate an anniversary?

2. How does the director feel about the play? This is a tough one. Here you must listen closely and be part detective, part psychologist. In most cases the answer will be fairly neutral—the director likes the play and is eager to work on it. However, a director might be intimidated by a play, especially if it is a classic or a challenging new work. Or this might be the director's favorite play and they have been waiting years to get

the chance to do it. Occasionally you might work with a director who actually is disdainful of the play: Is the director a scholar of this playwright's works? Does the script hold personal importance to him? Each scenario brings interesting collaboration challenges.

3. What does the director think the play is about? What are the themes she wishes to focus on?

Most directors should be able to answer without effort. You may spend less time discussing a screwball comedy than Shakespeare, but don't assume you know the answer. Is *Romeo and Juliet* about young love, or is it about rash actions leading to disaster? There might be a dozen or more perfectly valid thematic statements about a particular play, and no one design is going to work for all of them.

4. Who is the play about? This is the script analysis you've studied in school—protagonist/antagonist and all that. Again, this is the director's specialty, and a good one will make it clear, but if you're unsure you need to ask. This question of "Whose story is this?" has particular importance for costume and lighting designers.

5. What is the director's vision for the "world of the play"—in other words, how does the director feel about the mood and tone of the setting? It is essential that everyone leaves the first meeting with a clear understanding of this answer, even if the answer is, "the concept is fluid and may change." If the director and you and your colleagues all have different ideas about the look and feel of the show, there will soon be headaches.

6. What are the given circumstances of the play, and does the director intend to make changes? For a contemporary work, it's unlikely the production will ignore the text's answers on this—most of us wouldn't put *Hairspray* anywhere other than 1960s Baltimore—but for classics, directors frequently adjust time and place. The director will obviously

make this clear, but a change of setting makes question five all the more important. For example, declaring that the play will be set in "Victorian England" isn't enough: is this a world of velvet and crystal or bricks and soot? If the director is calling for a change of place and time, then you need to ask question 6.5—*why?* The answer might be "Just for fun" (unlikely), or that the director believes the change of setting will lend a fresh take on the play or help the audience better understand its themes.

7. What moments does the director see as pivotal or climatic? What is the specific moment of the climax of the play—a scene, a line, a word? Be careful here, as the true dramatic climax can be easy to miss. It might not be the moment when the gun goes off but instead the moment when the character *decides* to fire the gun.

8. How does the director see movement in the play? This covers a lot, from acting style to scene shifts. Is the play claustrophobic or expansive? Is it busy and frantic or slow and stately? What is the tempo of the play? This will obviously affect all design areas. Plays with a lot of comic acrobatic movement will need different costumes and scenery than quiet, intense psychodramas. Sound and light designers must understand this tempo and movement question long before they begin drafting their plots.

9. Is the director concerned about any staging, effects, or content? Is there a particularly difficult scene shift or costume quick change? Does the text call for a special effect that might be tough to achieve? Is there nudity or a particularly violent scene that should be approached carefully? The earlier these things are discussed, the sooner you can work solutions into your design.

10. Does the director have any specific staging in mind? If so, get as much information as possible. This is probably the most important, frequently unasked question at that first design meeting. For example, if

you ask this question and the director answers, "Well yes, I'd like to see Oedipus bursting out of the palace doors clutching his bleeding eyes and then stumbling down the steps to fall at the chorus's feet," then the set had better have palace doors that swing outward and are capable of "bursting through" and stairs wide enough to fall down and a level space at its foot large enough for the chorus. The costume needs to allow for this fall and the stage blood the director has in mind. The lighting designer had better think about backlighting upstage of the doors or at least some kind of special to highlight this dramatic moment. And what sound do those doors make? What sound accompanies our king's great fall from power?

This last question cannot be stressed enough. If you and the director never discuss one another's pre-existing visions for particular staging, then there is likely to be disappointment on opening night. The director might have been excited by your set sketches and renderings and given you the green light without ever noticing the absence of palace doors and steps until it's too late. The director might not even know why she's dissatisfied with your set once the actors are on it. "It's fine, I guess," might be the director's final judgment, when the only thing wrong is that she didn't get to stage her "fall of Oedipus" moment, because the question was never asked at the beginning.

Don't forget to express your own ideas and concerns as well at your first design meeting. If *you* have staging ideas, now's the time to share. Use the power of your pencil—a quick thumbnail sketch can do wonders. Listen carefully to your colleagues as well. You might be able to offer an easy solution to one of their problems, and if the director agrees, that's one less thing to worry about.

You should aim to be a collaborative partner with the director in this process, but you cannot ignore a director's clearly stated requests. It's

fine to come to the second meeting with images or sketches illustrating your own alternative idea, but only after you have addressed the director's.

Communicate artfully, early and often

When working with difficult directors, the best strategy is to be thorough with your questions—and listen closely to the answers. For example, when working with the “I’ll know it when I see it” director, be as specific as you can. If you show your director a rendering for Lady Macbeth’s costume and he says that’s not what he’s looking for, ask what it is in particular he doesn’t like: “Are the boots too big?” “No, I love the boots.” “The skirt? Is it too short or tight?” “No, I think the skirt is fine...” This discussion might continue for a few minutes until you discover it is simply the color of the outfit the director is reacting to negatively: “Yeah, the red is just a bit too much, maybe if it were deeper burgundy, almost black.” You might discover the director likes everything about your rendering but the color—so, that exact costume in a different shade, and the director is happy. You have just saved yourself hours, if not days, of work and frustration generating rendering after rendering.

As for the “Make it look like this” director, ask her what it is in particular that she likes about the image she is showing you. It might not be that she is asking you to copy the image, but wants to make sure your design has a similar feel. Once you have isolated the particular elements the director wants, you should be able to fold those into your own design. You might introduce your sketch with the comment, “I looked carefully at the photo from the RSC production you showed me, and I think we can put our own spin on it with something like this...” If you do all your homework and get strong answers for the ten questions, you should be able to develop a design that captures the essence

of the previous work without resorting to outright imitation. Only the most impossible director will insist on a plagiarized clone.

In short, it’s up to you to ask and to listen. Take careful notes, especially of adjectives and any descriptive or evocative phrases the director might utter. Even hand gestures can be important. If a director is saying, “I don’t know, the set just kind of has to be... well...,” all the while making outward sweeping gestures, you might discover he’s trying to act out that the set should be wide and open. Once, as a director and I studied reference images, an attentive costume designer sitting across the table pointed out that the director was repeatedly (subconsciously) putting one particular photo neither of us were discussing. Once she drew our attention to this fact, we soon discovered this overlooked im-

age captured the set design concept we were both excited about.

We tend to think of design as solo work—something done in our studios at odd hours. But the most important time you will spend on a project will be those collaborative meetings early on. You should never leave any design meeting unclear about what your next step should be. Directors are busy, and

stage managers have an agenda to follow, but it is essential to take the time early in the process to ask these key questions and understand the answers.

Will your next show be a frustrating slog or an exciting collaboration on a successful design? With solid script analysis before, and thorough research after, the first design meeting can make the difference. ▼