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## **Halifax Thespians Production Director's Guidelines**

This document outlines the expected standards of a director of a Halifax Thespians production and provides guidance on the various aspects of directing a production.

Directing a play is the skill of guiding dramatic performances on stage. It involves interpreting the play script, deciding on its meanings and method of presentation, and bringing that interpretation to life through the process of rehearsal and staging.

A director

- creates thousands of individual moments that flow together at different rhythms, tempos, and paces.
- leads the production of a play from the onset, through rehearsals, and to the final product.
- works with actors, designers, and other creatives to make artistic choices on stage.

A director oversees the creative vision of the production. The goal is to bring out the best performance from the actors and tell the story of the play in a compelling way. They also oversee creative choices on stage such as costume, design, lighting, and sound, although these decisions are made in conjunction with other creatives involved.

**Theatre at its very best, is a collaborative process.**

Creative vision is vital to the work of a director, without some kind of thematic and stylistic unity an otherwise excellent play can become a disastrous production: messy, confusing, over-wrought. It is the director's responsibility to develop and maintain a creative vision, to ensure that all involved are heading in the same direction. This includes the audience, who need strong, clear storytelling lest they lose interest and cease to care.

The most important difference between directing and acting is where your focus lays. As an actor, your job is to understand and effectively portray your character. As a director, however, your job is to understand and effectively portray the story. You may find incredible moments, and bring wonderful work out of your actors, but, if it isn't serving the story, you haven't done your job.

What are you trying to show? What are you trying to say? What do you want the audience to be left with? Always come back to these questions.

A common mistake for directors is 'making a meal' out of too many moments. This can push drama into melodrama and comedy into caricature (unless of course that is the genre of the play), or it can leave the audience asking themselves "why did I sit through that?"

Make sure you understand what you want the audience to witness and build the play to a clear climax to achieve this vision. You don't have to have all the answers at the start of rehearsals, as things may shift and change, but always work towards this.

## **HONOUR THE SCRIPT**

As with acting, all the information you need to know is in the script. That's where the story is, and that's where all the information is. Trust that everything is in there, and work to bring the truth out of the situation that has been presented. Fighting against this is a losing battle, so don't impose an interpretation that isn't founded by the words on the page, as you are destined to fail. Be thorough with your investigation of the script. Investigate the arc of each scene, each act, and the play as a whole. Then investigate each character and their individual arc. Identify the protagonist and antagonist, as each script will have one, and honour this relationship. Find out everything that is said about each character and make sure the audience hears all of the necessary information.

Weave these elements of the script together and you have the foundations of a great play.

Before you make any changes/cuts to a script, make sure the performance licence allows you to do so: some licences allow you to change up to 5% of the script, others don't allow you to make any changes at all without prior agreement.

## **STAY AHEAD OF THE AUDIENCE**

David Mamet said, "My greatest fear is that the audience will beat me to the punch line". Even though he is talking about comedy in this instance, the same sentiment can be applied to drama. As soon as the audience can predict where the story will go, you may as well finish the show there.

You always want the audience to be wondering what is going to happen next. Part of this battle is making sure the audience is invested in the characters so that they care what happens next, but the other part is not treating the audience like idiots. Trust their intelligence and don't end game the drama. Foreshadowing is a great device, but if it's overplayed, we give away the ending before we get there.

Think back to movies, TV shows, or plays you have seen where you as the audience member have beaten the story to the conclusion. Remember how quickly you disengaged after that point? Avoid that!



## WORKING WITH ACTORS

So you've investigated the script and the story, you've identified all the important information, and you have a vision for the production. Now you have to work with some actors. Or as you may come to know them as: walking meat props.

As they are lucid, unpredictable individuals, full of their own ideas, working with actors can be the most frustrating part of the directing process, but if you have a good working relationship with them, they can also be the most invaluable and inspiring members of the team.

The most important thing is **respect**. If you treat the actors with respect, you will get respect in return. The director is the expert on the story, but the actor is the expert on their character, so encourage discussion and be open to their ideas about their character. **Collaboration** creates fantastic work, so do not deny actors their opinion, and if you are open to their ideas, they will be open to yours. Spend time during the rehearsal period playing and sharing ideas, so you can reach the end result together, rather than forcing your interpretation on them without exploring what may be insightful interpretations.

The other thing to keep in mind is that rehearsing is a process. You will not get the performance you want on opening night in the first rehearsal. Don't expect it. Be patient, be kind and add detail into actors' performances over time.

## TEAM LEADER

Everyone involved in a production needs to feel like a member of a team, all working towards a shared end goal. Everyone has their role and needs to feel like their contribution is being acknowledged and appreciated.

The director is the creative leader of the team, so act like one. Communicate efficiently with your design team, and have conversations, rather than making demands. Be open to ideas, but also be clear with what you want. As with actors, if you are receptive to ideas, not only will you often receive options you hadn't considered, you will also guarantee that your team is open to your ideas in return. If everyone trusts you and your vision, and feels they have a creative voice, you will have a cohesive team that is excited and inspired to deliver for the same end goal.

It should go without saying but lead by example. If you are always late to rehearsals or unprepared, you can expect your team to follow your lead. You need to get your team over the line, so keep morale up, and be supportive and encouraging. Back your own ideas and don't apologise for experimenting and exploring options.



Be a monarch, not a tyrant. You do have final say but work with your team and you will have a much more enjoyable time, and so will everyone else.

1. Know the material: Study the script over and over again.
2. Read with your actors: Read the scene together at least twice before you start any discussion.
3. Block the scene: Plan the movements of the actors on stage.
4. Plotting actions: Plan the actions of the actors.
5. Giving feedback: Provide feedback to the actors.
6. Adapt to discoveries: Be open to new ideas and changes.
7. Challenge yourself: Push yourself to try new things.
8. Organise yourself: serve as co-ordinator and facilitator.
9. Imagine the play: Create a vision for the play
10. Focus on the fundamentals: pay attention to the basics
11. Don't panic: stay calm and focused
12. Respect your performers: treat your actors with respect
13. Evaluate your performance: Reflect on your performance as a director

### **What kind of play are you directing?**

The very first thing you'll need to do is study the script. Over, and over, and over. Learn what you can about the characters, the context, the world of the story— anything that might help you determine what the writer intended and how the scene should be played. Take extensive notes, write down your discoveries and any questions you might want to bring to the rehearsal room for the actors. If the play is based on another work (i.e., a novel), track down and read it. If it's based on real events research those events; it is horrifying how many actors and directors skip this vital step! Always give yourself the added advantage of contextual knowledge. Don't panic if you end up with more questions than answers at this stage; at some point, your actors will step into the room with their own ideas/theories/questions, and you can compare notes. But know that there is a difference between being undecided and unprepared. Most actors can sense it immediately.

### **Read with Your Actors**

Once you have your actors in the room, read the play together before you start any discussion. How does the piece sound aloud as opposed to how it read on the page? Are the characters different to how you imagined them? Is anything more or less clear? Have any of your burning questions been answered?

## Block the Scene

The trick with blocking—the planning of actors’ physical movement and positioning in the scene—is to not overthink it. Block so that the audience can see the action, and in a way that enhances the drama of the scene but never gets in the way of performance. If you’re unsure of where your actors should be standing or what they should be doing, try giving them free reign for a run of the scene: often, in walking and interacting as their characters, they will come up with naturalistic blocking that suits the requirements of the piece perfectly.

**And a note on stage directions:** this is something of a contentious topic. Some people like to follow them to a tee, others disregard them either as means of opening the scene up to other creative possibilities. Sometimes, a stage direction may not be physically possible to complete—such as a scene written for two actors on horseback if you’re in a horseless rehearsal room. When it comes to which directions you follow and disregard, it is up to you to decide which parts will help or hinder the performance.. In any case, do think about why an author has included a particular stage direction; there may be an intention behind a seemingly innocuous action that is crucial to a character’s objective.

## Plotting Actions

Once the scene has been interrogated, discussed and blocked, it’s time for your actors to start running it. This is the point in the process where a lot of first-time or inexperienced directors trip themselves up by trying to tweak and shape the scene too much—or at least too much too quickly. Try to limit your notes to the end of each run, always speak to your actors as valued colleagues and *never* offer a reading of a line. If the actor’s not saying something the way you’ve imagined it, it is never their fault: find a way to articulate your intention so they understand.

The best tool you will have in shaping a scene in rehearsal is to suggest and plot actions. Actions bring the *how* to an objective’s *what*, and even a slight substitution from one to another can modify and enhance a scene in exciting ways. Actions are succinct units of direction, and often illustrate your point without robbing an actor of all control. If you tell an actor whose character wants to borrow money to “intimidate” rather than “beg”, you are suggesting a more aggressive stance without ever saying “Get angry!”. In fact: avoid directing with emotions all together. Any actor told “this is the part where you’re sad” without provocation will look like they’re playing make-believe. Emotions are the by-product of a well-chosen action.

This relates to the above step, but is important enough to warrant its own section: be polite, encouraging and respectful as a director. Begin each note with positivity, and then pivot to a suggestion that will help build on the actor’s work already there. This acknowledges the effort they are making in doing their job, regardless of whether it is the best thing for the scene. Compare the following directions:

***“Trudy, your character needs to be angrier in this scene. Really attack your sister for missing your birthday.”***



There's some good points in this: "attack" is a strong action, and it's tied to an intention that may or may not be in the scene—Trudy's sister missing her birthday. But it's a little direct. It punishes the actor for not creating the emotion, rather than offer up *why* that emotion should be there.

***"That was a great run! I wonder if Trudy could try attacking her sister more in this scene? It occurs to me she's probably feeling some anger at this point because of her birthday being missed. Don't be afraid to hold back on that."***

In this direction, we start with some praise, followed by the suggestion of a new action. Notice how it's posited as a suggestion for 'more' of something, rather than being there or not? This allows the actor to feel as though even though a change is needed, they've contributed something to the piece already that is working well. Emotion is still discussed, but within the context of the action. And finally, you give the actor the note to really let themselves go and try the action with total safety. It is always easier to dial a performance back than it is to wake a sluggish actor up

### **Adapt to Discoveries**

A crucial mistake made by directors is the assumption that they need to have every answer to a question in a scene. This is not true. Often, the most difficult aspects of a scene relating to from character to plot to objective to action will be solved by the actors up on the rehearsal room floor. Learn to identify a good offer, and adapt to the discoveries you will make with a good team who feel as though their opinions will be valued. While the director may not need to have every answer, they will need to make every final decision: gather the best ideas from your cast and they will respect you for giving them some input and their opinions the time of day. Ultimately, they'll respect your final say all the more if the process values their contributions.

Hone your skills, work on your craft as a director—which is to say communicating with others and making their work look and sound its best. Enjoy the simple pleasure of helping craft a story well told.

### **Organize Yourself**

In many aspects, a director serves as a coordinator and facilitator. It takes some forethought and preparation to coordinate the many distinct threads of a theatrical production. But you don't have to adhere to the timetable with deadly precision. Make it clear to everyone that rehearsal time is limited and that the show must be the main emphasis.



## 2. Imagine the Play

Nothing occurs until first a dream, as Carl Sandburg famously put it. Visualize the play's action. Have a concept of the visual and aural elements for each scene. Here are some things to consider:

- What passages have the potential to make people laugh (or gasp)?
- Which scenes in the play need to go more quickly than others?
- Which lines need to be sped up?
- Where are the climactic points?

Make sure you clearly explain your concept to your actors as you construct the "dream" in your head.

## 3. Focus on the Fundamentals

If the performance is bad, even the most expensive set and most spectacular effects won't save the show. Strong performances may amaze an audience even with a basic stage, no special effects, and second-hand clothes. The best plays start with acting basics.

### Voice Projection

Projection and articulation are important. If the audience can't hear, they'll be unhappy. Your memorization will be useless. Projection requires proper breathing, word choice, and enunciation. Unskilled actors "turn up" by speaking louder and with more intensity. Audiences see clarity as loudness.

### Stage Position

Also important is stage position. actors often speak while turning, hiding their faces, or avoiding the audience. With experience, every actor may "play to the audience," revealing their gorgeous face and the emotions it can convey.

## 4. Take Time to Study the Details

The magnifier is the stage. On stage, little things may grow into great things, and a little disturbance can cause chaos in a large set. Sit in the house during a rehearsal to see your performance from the perspective of a viewer witnessing it for the first time. Move about the theatre and check several views. Take a close look. Pay careful attention, then relay everything you observed and heard to your cast and crew.



## **5. Create a Team**

Drama is a collective craft. Don't attempt to create drama alone. Use the knowledge/skills of others (set building, sound, lighting, props, stage manager, actors). Create a productive working connection with them and enlist their assistance.

Remember the support roles. Actors alone are not enough to make a play. It requires technicians, stage workers, set painters, PR personnel, a stage manager, a property team, and others.

## **6. Don't Panic**

Plan and prepare ahead of time. Never wait for the last minute to rehearse or do the needed stuff for your play. Always plan in advance. If you do this, you don't need to panic. You don't let panic become your default mode while putting a show together.

Panic may strike from time to time. The development of problem-solving abilities is one of the many advantages of directing a play, so approach any challenges with a level-headed, can-do attitude. Show your composure under pressure to your performers. You are capable of doing it.

## **7. Respect Your Performers**

Actors and actresses should not be treated as chess pieces that can be moved about a board. They are multidimensional, thinking, emotional individuals who have lives outside of rehearsals.

On stage, support their artistic expression. Helping them to unwind and enjoy themselves requires that you must also relax and enjoy yourself. Be upbeat and express your appreciation for the performers' efforts. Find a way to focus on what they have done best. Commend them and do this with utmost sincerity to let them feel valued.

## **8. Evaluate Your Performance**

After the production is over you will be invited to Play Selection and Casting meeting to discuss the production, notes will be taken, and the evaluation will be passed onto the management team and the Board.

The evaluation/discussion should be constructive and objective.





There may be more questions to add to this list, but these will help you and the group get started:

1. How did you feel about our play?
2. What did we/I do best?
3. What did we/I do worst?
4. How can we/I improve if we/I were to stage the play again?
5. What was the audience reaction? What did you hear them say?

## **The Importance of the Rehearsal Process**

### **Chunk the Script**

I sit down with the script and divide it into rehearsal-friendly chunks. This can be done by dividing the script by beats or by scenes. I define a “beat” here as a part of a scene.

### **Create the Beats (French Scenes)**

Some scenes are long and have several entrances and exits. If this is true, I look at the scene and create beats where there are major changes in the characters on stage. (These “beats” are also referred to as French scenes.) Using the “beat” breakdown of the script means that I don’t call all the actors in the scene at one time and only work on the first three pages, leaving several actors sitting on the sidelines.

### **Use a Chart for Planning**

After I have gone through the script and decided where the break points are for each rehearsal chunk, I create a chart. On the chart, I include the following columns:

- The first column defines the rehearsal chunk, including the page numbers.
- The second column lists the characters in that scene.
- The third column lists the actors in the scene.

I then fill in all the columns with the correct information. After that, you can start creating a rehearsal schedule.



## Lay Out the Schedule

In creating the rehearsal schedule, I want to include all of the following: blocking rehearsals, depth rehearsals, whole company rehearsals, technical rehearsals, and dress rehearsals.

As I lay out the rehearsals, I keep my conflict calendar handy. My master conflict calendar is a compilation of all of the conflict calendars that the actors submitted. I try my best to honour their conflicts, and I note on my schedule if I have scheduled a scene with an actor who has a conflict. My rule is that if they tell me in advance that they have a conflict, then I don't expect them at rehearsal.

The rehearsal schedule is like a puzzle into which you need to fit all of the pieces. Be flexible and know that you can make changes along the way.

## Recommended Order for Creating the Schedule

I don't necessarily create the schedule in a linear way. Using a big calendar, I fit the pieces in the following way:

### 1. Dress Rehearsal

Dress rehearsals are easy to place on the schedule calendar, so I tend to write them in first.

**Dress rehearsals take place on the Sunday and Monday before opening night for main stage productions and the day before opening night for other productions.**

### 2. Technical Rehearsals

Technical rehearsals are mandatory, and I usually attempt to program 2 into the schedule, one for crew only and no cast and the 2<sup>nd</sup> including the cast.

Assuming the tech side is set up and ready for the first tech I find having a crew only tech where levels and timings are set (sound and light), and to go over scene changes with stage can save a lot of time when you add the cast in on the 2<sup>nd</sup> tech (you have 2 early (ish) finishes rather than one very late one).



During technical rehearsals, we set the final light and sound cues, and we practice them. We assign and practice scene changes. We work on timing.

There are no conflicts allowed during tech week. (in fact it is expected that there will be no conflicts the whole week before the opening night).

### **3. Whole Company Rehearsals**

Some roles in your show will be bigger than others. It is important that you don't lose the enthusiasm of the actors who have smaller roles

The first one or two rehearsals should be whole company calls. You will want to use these rehearsals to do a read-through of the whole play and to begin getting ideas for the design of your show.

### **4. Blocking Rehearsals**

After the whole company read through rehearsals, the next set of rehearsals should be blocking rehearsals. In a blocking rehearsal, you will block out where actors enter and exit, where they stand and move, where and when they sit or stand, how they interact with others on stage, etc.

As a director, find a balance during these rehearsals between your vision and the vision of your actors. Define the floor plan, use spike tape and mark out where the set pieces would go. This allows you to define the entrances and exits, which helps the actors know where to go without asking every time.

Let the actors work the scene in their own way first. Then step in to direct them. You want to stand back and make sure that everyone is visible, no backs are to the audience, and that the scene is a series of pleasing images.

### **5. Depth Rehearsals**

After all the other rehearsals are on the schedule, the rest of your rehearsals will comprise depth rehearsals. These are the rehearsals where you focus on the depth of a scene. Actors will already know where to enter, exit, walk, sit, stand, etc. In depth rehearsals, your focus is on making the scene believable.



## **Depth Rehearsals** continued

Actors should work on expressing the meaning of the text and building chemistry with their scene partners. Sometimes, you may need to rehearse a scene or a part of a scene many, many times until it is right. Push your actors to go deeper. Give them ideas about creating the scene in different ways until everyone agrees that it is right and beautiful.

Your more experienced [actors may work on the depth](#) in their scenes outside of rehearsal or when they have downtime at rehearsal. Encourage that, as they will take more risks with each other sometimes when you are not watching. Sometimes, I will ask scene partners to go away for a while and work in the green room or in the hall. I ask them to work and come back with something different, and I move on to work with another group. This can be a good technique if a scene isn't going well or gaining enough depth.

## **Designate the Off-Book Day**

Give actors a few weeks to learn their lines. During the initial phases of the rehearsal process, they should have their script. They should also have a pencil to make notes. After those few weeks, designate a day for the actors to be “off book.” From that day forward, actors should not be able to have a script on stage.

On off-book day, I tend to do a run-through of the show. It is a very telling rehearsal, as you will know who has been working and who hasn't. Don't give in! If an actor hasn't done the work, they should face the embarrassment of having to ask for their lines over and over. Trust me, that the actor will get to work fast after that experience.

Your prompters will be available from that date, in fact some may come to rehearsals before off-book day to start marking the prompt book with pauses. Any actor who doesn't know a line should pause and say “line.” The prompter can feed in the line, and the scene should keep going. It might be a rough rehearsal. Be prepared for that.

## **Stay Flexible and Communicate Well**

In laying out the rehearsal schedule up front, everyone involved will be able to know what their obligations are for the project. Be sure to honor the conflicts listed on the conflict calendars, and also be clear that actors need to make this project a priority.

Know in advance that you may need to tweak the rehearsal schedule as you go forward, as it might take longer than you anticipated to get a particular scene right. Let your company know that changes may occur and communicate throughout the rehearsal period. Communicating and being organized with your rehearsal schedule will make the process go smoothly.

### **Create a lighting plot.**

Lighting is an essential aspect of any play, as it can help to create the mood, atmosphere, and focus the scene.

This does not need to be technical (you don't need to know how to achieve specific lighting effects). The LD (the person who designs, rigs the lights etc.) will do this.

**Collaborate with the LD:** If you're working with a lighting designer, it's important to collaborate with them closely. They will be able to advise you on the technical aspects of lighting and help you to achieve your vision.

All that is required is description of what you want for each scene:

- Is it daytime (morning/afternoon)
- What time of year is it?
- Do you want warm or cold lighting?
- Are practical lights required (table/standard lamps, wall lights/ hanging fixtures)
  - Do they need to turn on/off during the scene?
- Do you want the lights to change during the scene (for example to signify afternoon into evening)?
- Do you want a specific style? (theatrical/realistic)
- Do you want black outs?
  - Do you want them to fade out or snap out?
- Do you want separate areas of the stage lit at different times?
- Do you want special effects (fog/haze)?

### **Create a sound plot**

As with Lighting, sound is an essential aspect of any play, as it can help to create the mood, atmosphere, and focus the scene. such as adding a faint sound of birdsong under a scene set in a garden.

Sound can also be used in an abstract way. For example, you could choose sounds which reflect the emotions of the characters onstage or a sound that creates fear or builds tension, e.g., a repetitive ticking noise that increases in volume throughout a scene.

Music may also be used to create mood and atmosphere. Playing it underneath the action onstage not just for "curtain up" and "curtain down" can enhance your production.

However, this not always easy when using music not composed for specifically the production. (Music should complement your production not detract).

Most scripts will indicate what sound effects are required, but you can add to them (or remove them).

### **Create a sound plot (continued)**

Some shows use a lot of sound effects and it's the sound designer's and director's job to decide what should be added where to enhance a production. **Collaborate with the SD.**

The SD will source the sounds and with the director plan when they come in, when they stop and what volume level they should be at for best effect.

- What special effects are needed and when (is there specific cue that it need happen on)?
- Some examples are:
  - Car arriving
  - Thunder
  - Door slamming
  - Doorbells
- Can they be recordings, or do they need to be live (for example do you want a telephone to actually ring)

### **Staging**

#### **The purpose of set design**

The set helps show where and when the story of a play takes place, while also conveying meaning to the audience.

#### **Conveying setting**

The most essential aspect of set design is to show the audience where the action takes place, which might be as general as a country or as specific as a room within a house.

#### **Conveying period**

As well as conveying the setting, the set design should suggest the *period* of the play. For example, a play set in a living room in the 1970s could feature yellow and browns within the patterned walls and floors and large retro furniture associated with the era.

#### **Communicating themes or symbols**

The set design can also communicate abstract concepts, such as *themes* and *symbols*. As an example, a design could include a large, dead tree to suggest the themes of death and decay.

#### **Interacting with other design elements**

Set is one aspect of a show's visual *aesthetic* and it needs to line up with the other design elements, eg costume design and lighting design, to create a cohesive overall style.

#### **Supporting style of production**

Set design is also important in supporting the style of the production. For example, a play in a *naturalistic* style would aim to create the impression of reality through realistic-looking *props* and set items. A play performed in a *minimalistic* style would use just a few, simple props to represent a setting, such as a large, suspended window frame to suggest the performer is standing inside a grand manor house.