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DIRECTIONS FOR DIRECTING

THEATRE AND METHOD

AVRA SIDIROPOULOU

ROUTLEDGE



Directions for Directing

Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method lays out contemporary concepts of directing practice and examines specific techniques of approaching scripts, actors, and the stage. Addressed to both young and experienced directors but also to the broader community of theatre practitioners, scholars, and dedicated theatre goers, the book sheds light on the director's multiplicity of roles throughout the life of a play—from the moment of its conception to opening night—and explores the director's processes of inspiration, interpretation, communication, and leadership. From organizing auditions and making casting choices to decoding complex dramaturgical texts and motivating actors, *Directions for Directing* offers practical advice and features detailed Workbook sections on how to navigate such a fascinating discipline. A companion website explores the work of international practitioners of different backgrounds who operate within various institutions, companies, and budgets, providing readers with a wide range of perspectives and methodologies.

Avra Sidiropoulou is Assistant Professor at the MA program in Theatre Studies at the Open University of Cyprus. Her research focuses on the theory, practice, and ethics of contemporary directing. She is the Artistic Director of the Athens-based Persona Theatre Company and has produced work internationally.



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Directions for Directing

Theatre and Method

Avra Sidiropoulou

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To Nikiforos always, and now to Sophocles



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Introduction

Why Directing? Why Directions?

We all carry a director in us. In our family routines, our workplace, our social interactions, conversations with friends, mundane dealings with the outside world, or during those rare moments of solitary clarity, when our sharp focus on reality begins to merge with softer forms of perception, we tend to direct our lives, filtering facts that have already occurred or recalibrating thoughts toward imaginary possibilities. Directors are authors of culture, privileged with freedom, authority and a limitless power to interpret the world and its dictums. A good director is a fearless director who remains consistent and relentless to the mission of realizing a vision, no matter how utterly illogical it may appear to others. The allure of the directing profession is no accident: directing is primarily about creating new realities and, as such, it is inextricably linked to reinvention and redefinition.

Many argue that directing is basically about instinct, and therefore, it cannot be taught. I tend to disagree. Much though directing is about instinct, it is also about technique, form, control of the stage, developing your own language, and making informed choices. All these things are learnt gradually, be it in a formal educational context or in the context of practice. The growing number of MA and MFA directing courses, together with the proliferation of young theatre companies worldwide make pressing demands for up-to-date educational materials that analyze the theory and practice of the art through a combined application of traditional and innovative methodologies and rehearsal strategies. Besides, there is an extraordinary number of practitioners (including actors, writers, and designers) who have received no formal training within an academic or conservatoire setting and who could benefit from a study that details the fundamentals of theatre making—both regarding theoretical underpinnings and practical applications.

Directions for Directing is an acknowledgment of the need to describe the methodology of directing, how an original vision is born and

developed to a full production. It is intended as a useful guide for prioritizing the mental and experiential steps this process involves and as a tool of teaching a discipline that is both complex and elusive. In its synthetic approach, it comes to fill a void in theatre scholarship, theorizing on the motivations that make directors create, and laying out a model of work that sets the consecutive stages of the director's individual and collaborative process clearly and concisely. All through, it tries to remain in keeping with the dual nature of directing: on the one hand as an aesthetic and philosophical pursuit which needs to be cultivated, and on the other, as an aspect of theatre that relies on a series of practical skills and strategies that can be taught. More than anything, it is as much about the art of directing as it is about theatre and its method.

The book is, therefore, an attempt, means of communication, as well as instruction, to tap into those notions of the art that are a series of abstract considerations but also a handling of different skills—organizational, interpersonal, and technical. Moreover, it aims to inspire alternative angles through which to perceive and express the world. As such, it builds on a vocabulary that directors, actors, designers, producers, and regular theatregoers may use, while discussing several aspects of theatre practice. Citing relevant instances and proposing creative (re)solutions for the gestation period of preparation and the actual rehearsals, it is aimed not just to the director (young, amateur, or experienced) but also very much so to the broader community of actors, dramaturgs, set, costume, lighting, video and sound designers, and choreographers; in fact, to anyone directly or indirectly involved in the theatre.

Examples from the work methodologies of established artists internationally serve to bring home the idea that directing is an extremely generous, virtually inexhaustible art; needless to say, the inclusion of some directors at the expense of a multitude of others is by no means an indication of lack of extraordinary talent in the profession. Moreover, excerpts from individual plays are also brought in for the reader to make immediate connections between the theoretical observations and their hands-on application. In general, most of the examples I used in order to make an illustration come alive and ensure its effectiveness are drawn from popular plays. While I am aware of the immense value of lesser-known experimental play scripts, the existing plays provide easy reference and direct access to analysis both in the main body of the book and in the Workbook sections. That said, my discussion of seminal aspects of directing such as text and scenography includes updated perspectives from contemporary forms of theatre making: visual and media textualities and the adventurous practices of site-specific and immersive theatre are discussed alongside more “traditional” elements of the theatre, as are story, character, dialogue, and actions.

Structurally, the book focuses on the fundamental tenets that define a director's work from the initial moment of inspiration to preparation to rehearsals to opening night, featuring a dual focus on critical concepts, on the one hand, and practical applications utilizing exercises, on the other. The division into six chapters roughly follows the work of a director from the play's conception through to the moment a performance is delivered to an audience. The different sections of the book are organized in such a way as to suggest the director's multiplicity of roles and the complexity of the directing profession. Therefore, the first three chapters (Chapter 1. "Inspiration", Chapter 2. "Interpretation", and Chapter 3. "Method, Leadership, Collaboration") analyze the mental steps that inform the director's understanding of a play, but also discuss an array of production choices in which the director engages before and during rehearsal. Among other things, they discuss the sources of directorial inspiration, strategies for motivating actors and spectators, point of view, metaphor, and style. They also address the pragmatics of such immediate matters as making casting and venue choices, organizing auditions and rehearsals and facilitating a collaborative spirit, while exhibiting a strong sense of leadership. The remaining three chapters (Chapter 4. "Director and Text(uality)," Chapter 5. "Director and Stage," and Chapter 6. "Director and Actor") concentrate on the director's work with the text, the stage, and the actor, by means of theory, examples, and recorded analyses of select directing strategies. They detail the process of decoding complex dramaturgical coordinates and explore the director's manipulation of space and sound as well as the dialogue between the director and the design team, and finally the fascinating relationship between director and actor. Each section is accompanied by a "Workbook," which aims to solidify these concepts further into tangible practice. By no means exhaustive or applicable in every rehearsal context, the exercises are meant to be *suggestions* for directing students and for practicing directors.

An integral and vital innovation of the book is the Web Companion. Its sections feature the work of international, mostly younger generation practitioners of different backgrounds who operate within various institutions, companies, or budgets. These artists include directors (John Collins of award-winning, New York City-based Elevator Repair Service, Oriza Hirata of Tokyo-based Seinendan, and Lars Lars Romann Engel of Helsingore-based HamletScenen) and actors (Kate Mueth of Neo-Political Cowgirls, based in the Hamptons, New York, and New Zealand-based Miranda Manasiadis). Set and lighting designers (Athens-based Athena Stourna and New York City-based Maria Cristina Fusté) discuss their methodology and process of collaborating with the director. Last but not least, directing students from RESAD, the renowned academy of drama in Madrid, and Athens-based Vanessa Christodoulou share their

work and their thoughts on whether directing can be taught and on what makes for a valuable directing education.

In the final analysis, the book envisions the practicalities of economy and style. And while *Directions for Directing* is primarily addressed to directors, actors, playwrights, and other theatre artists, one should never ignore the numerous and ever supportive theatre aficionados who wish to know more about the making of a play and the development of a form, following the journey of an art product throughout its tumultuous lifespan. In this light, the book is a methodology of staging plays answering to the fundamental questions of why, where, when, and how a text can be rendered performance, once an idea strikes you and the skin of imagination is torn open. It is a small token of appreciation to every theatre-loving person, another gateway to the mysteries of the director's art, the codes, and formulas of the stage.

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