Contents

1

What it takes

Directing plays is difficult.

Putting together a coherent evening of theatre requires many skills. The aim of this book is to describe what those skills are, and give some sense of how a person wanting to become a theatre director might acquire them. The emphasis is on the professional theatre, but the book should be useful in other contexts – amateur dramatics, university, secondary schools and so on. Directing is directing, wherever you do it. If the emphasis is on text-based theatre, it's because it's the area that I know best. It's also the one that the young director is most likely to encounter.

But have you got what it takes?

Skill

The first skill you need to acquire is how to read a play. This isn't always as easy as it sounds. A director needs to be able to read dialogue, hear different voices and sense the dramatic action within the text. This isn't taught at university or college and certainly not at school, and many literate, intelligent people can't read plays at all. But a director needs to be good at it.

Second, you need to have some conviction about why you want to stage a particular play and an ability to communicate this to a number of people. If the play is a classic, you need to understand its original context, but also know why it's worth reviving now. You may have to know how to cut it and, if it was written in a foreign language, be able to tell a good translation from a bad one. If the play is new, you'll need to champion it and argue that it should be performed. You'll have to work closely with the writer and understand what he's trying to say. You may have to help him rewrite it – sometimes drastically – so you need to develop a grasp of the way that dramatic writing works.

If you're working professionally, you'll need to convince managements that they should put their money into your production. And in the amateur as much as the professional theatre, you must understand the business side: how to budget a production, draft funding applications, understand box office estimates and so on. You need to know how to negotiate with managers and agents and how to secure rights.

Third, you have to learn how to work with a team of artists and technicians, each with his own skills and demands, but also with his own anxieties and concerns. You need to be the leader of that team, while respecting individual strengths and abilities. You need to convey your passion, while giving clear and sober guidance.

Fourth, you need to know just how important casting is and how to ask the right questions about what the play requires. If working professionally, you need to be familiar with the work of as many actors and actresses as possible, and gain some sense of what they can and can't do. You need to work with casting directors, know how to hold auditions, deal with agents, negotiate contracts and handle questions about billing. In short, you need to learn how to employ actors.

Fifth, you need to work with a designer. You have to find the right designer for you and your project, and then collaborate with him. You need to think your way through such complex issues as how to set Shakespeare and the classics, and you must be able to communicate your choices with clarity and force. You need to know how the placing of doors, furniture and other objects affects the rhythm and shape of the piece, and you must work with a production team in making your vision come to life, in budget, on time, and within particular physical constraints.

Sixth, in rehearsal, you need to give leadership, help and support to your actors, recognising that each of them has individual needs and problems. You need to give clear, practical direction to older actors who may have been on stage longer than you've been alive, but also to others of your own age, possibly from very different backgrounds. You need to be helpful and know when to intervene, but also when to

leave alone. You need to demand the best without forgetting that you can't do the actors' work for them, and you must inspire, cajole, instruct and help them achieve their best.

You must develop an ear for the sound and rhythm of the play and know how to orchestrate and conduct it. You need to get actors to respond to the specific musicality of the piece, be it Shakespeare or Sheridan, Aeschylus or Ayckbourn, without cramping their own work on character and motivation. You need to learn when it doesn't matter that the action is too slow or too quiet, but also when the right thing to say is 'louder and faster'; when it needs more pace, volume and energy, but also when it should be delicate, still and quiet.

You need to develop an understanding of three-dimensional space and how to arrange actors on stage in such a way that the story is clear, the dramatic action is focused, and the audience is looking at what they should be looking at. You need to know how to create resonant images, without forgetting that the actors' innate energy and diversity paint a more dynamic picture than anything you can artificially construct with their bodies.

You must learn how to pace rehearsals, when to encourage free association, research and experimentation, but also when to insist on clearly defined objectives and tasks. You need to know when to work on tiny sections, when to run scenes, and when to run the entire play. You need to sense when to be critical and when to give praise, when to 'kick ass' and when to sit on your hands. There must be a limit to your patience, but you must discover where that limit is, and know how to express your impatience constructively.

You need to know when you should stick to your guns, but also when to abandon your most cherished ideas. You need to know where to look for help and how to find your way through the dozens of helpful suggestions that a director is offered every day. You have to be able to deal with your own exhaustion, and know how to protect yourself from being run ragged. You must remain fresh and true to your vision.

Seventh, once you get into the theatre, you'll have to work with a team of technicians and other artists on lighting,

sound and music. You have to give them clear briefs, which allow them their own creativity, while also ensuring that their work is integrated with everybody else's. You have to run a technical rehearsal within restricted time, and ensure that all the work gets done. Seeing the set and costumes under lights often comes as an enormous shock, and you may have to make difficult, sometimes unpopular changes. You have to discover how to use dress rehearsals positively, how to encourage actors to take over the stage and gain the confidence that will allow them to perform in front of an audience. But you also have to give them those last-minute and sometimes stern notes that can be so important.

Finally, you have to sit in an auditorium on the first performance, surrounded by strangers, and learn from them – about clarity and dramatic logic as well as rhythm, volume, visibility and so on. You need to rehearse on stage once the production is previewing, and know how to give notes from performances. You need to cope with the response you get from the audience, from your friends and colleagues and even from the press. Letting the production find its own feet is one of the hardest things to learn; depression and a sense of loss once the play is open are all too common, even with a success. And you're going to have to be able to deal with all of that too.

But nobody ever said that directing plays was going to be easy.