

Approaches To Acting

Stage Directions

Directional vs. Directive

Actors are often confused by stage directions. Should we follow them to the letter or ignore them entirely? The answer is that an actor must use her judgment to determine what is essential to the scene; what opens up interpretation, rather than closes it down or narrows it.

Playwriting, like acting, is a process. Neither takes place in a vacuum. The actor works with a director and other actors to interpret the playwright's text. The playwright may initially write a draft of her play alone, but at some point she will work with a dramaturg, a director, and actors, to see her play reach the stage.

In a process, things change—they are open to question. The idea is that, in a collaborative medium like theatre, artists will bring their skills and instincts to bear on a project or play. They must do so carefully, ensuring that the changes, if there are any, aren't made for the sake of change, or that an individual's ego or group mindset isn't dictating the change. There must be an initial respect for the idea of the playwright and its initial form. This respect should never be replaced by reverence, which is static, non-intellectual, and unproductive.

Some playwrights would like their work to be treated reverentially. Some actors would prefer that they are never criticized, either. However, if the work is not perfect—and it never is—then outsiders, *informed* outsiders, must be allowed to bring their skills to interpretation and to question the initial choices of the artist. An informed artist knows the subject, not just the play; has trained in interpretation; and has practical floor skills used to create comparative choices to the choices made in the text.

Some playwrights have experience in practical theatre, but many do not. Like many actors, a playwright may have some experience in one form of theatre, but not in others. They may not be aware that there is more than one way to interpret and perform a play, or they may believe that the form they know is the best form, or that it's the only form their play can take.

However, plays are magical beasts. Just like an actor with few social skills can effectively play a charming character on stage, a play is often greater or more flexible in its form than the author realises. It's a living, breathing organism. Treating each stage direction like it is graven in stone is actually disrespectful, to the art and to the play; it assumes it's not a living thing, but a museum piece, dead history.

That said, some distinctions must be made. First is the distinction between the words of the characters and the directions. The words of the characters—dialogue and monologue—constitute the expressed life of the characters. These are inviolable. (Contracting words—“is not” to “isn't” is sometimes appropriate). Actors struggle with utterance forms like “Oh!” or “Ha ha ha!” and these should be seen as approximations, a kind of verbal stage direction for the actor. In such cases the actor must exercise care; substituting one's own laugh or utterance of surprise may sound more genuine, but it may not work within the context of the character. Choose carefully. Try to invest the written utterance with all the life you can. It is, however, an approximation, less specific in most cases than the character's words.

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Stage directions, or stage instructions, fall into two broad categories. The first I call “**directional**” stage directions, and the second “**directive**”. *Directional* stage directions are action guides. They tell you where to go, what to do. They relate, often but not always, to the character’s physical action. *Directive* stage directions are the playwright’s attempt to fix interpretation, to play director.

The difference between the two can be difficult to discern. A direction to lean on a table, or turn upstage, will immediately be felt by an actor in rehearsal to be *directive*, even though it is clearly *directional* in form. That is, it tells you where to go and what to do. But it does so in a way that closes off the actor’s instincts, imposing a choice that is not essential to the successful interpretation of the play. Depending on the production, there might not *be* an upstage, or even a table; but the play could still be successfully interpreted (just as it could be in a scene for scene study).

A good *directional* stage direction is one that is essential. The action of the play depends upon it. The most obvious of these is the indication for a character to exit or enter in a scene. A kiss that results in a character’s sudden rejection of another is an essential stage direction, because without it the actors may seriously misinterpret the moment. If a stage direction indicates an action which has a consequence, it’s essential. If it’s a directed action which could be replaced by any number of interpretive actions (such as leaning on a table), it’s not.

George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O’Neill, and Tennessee Williams were famous for the length and detail of their stage directions. Most of these were *directive*, even going as far as to outline the exact physical description of a character. Does this mean that an actor who doesn’t fit the description cannot play such a role? It does not. Although their directions are brilliantly written and highly entertaining for the reader, such stage directions are not essential to the successful performance of the play. Rather than disregard them altogether, however, they should be seen as useful metaphors for the actor. What *kind* of person does O’Neill have in mind for Josie in *A Moon For The Misbegotten*? What kind of girl does Williams have in mind for Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*? This metaphor can be then be of use to the actor in interpreting their role.

Similarly, playwrights will often insert a directive word or phrase before a character’s speech. It looks like this:

(Angrily)

Again, the actor must exercise careful judgment. Some of these indicators seem *directive* but are actually *directional*; that is, it may seem like the playwright playing director and imposing a non-essential choice on the actor, but in reality the playwright is helping to make a potentially fuzzy moment clear. Think of the infinite number of ways “I love you” can be said, even to the same person. Here, a playwright may feel that a *directional* stage direction is helpful to the actor. A direction such as *(Lovingly)* is practical, because it has direct consequences for the rest of the scene. Many times actors will know what choice to use from the other character’s response, but not all playwrights know this, or are comfortable relying on this knowledge.

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Still, most stage directions of the one word or one phrase form that come before characters' speech are directive. If it is so, then the choice may be tried, and, if it isn't useful, discarded. An actor may feel an instinctive need to laugh at a different point in a scene, for instance, than is indicated; or, in interpreting a role, may decide to underplay a moment, to *work against the text*, by playing an opposite. Remember, some playwrights have just enough experience with practical theatre to be bad actors. They think that if a character says a nasty thing, she must say it nastily. If she's angry, she must shout. Actors recognise this as beginner acting early in their training. Playwrights with little practical experience as actors do not.

Finally, beware of playwrights who insist their directions be followed to the letter. In my work with playwrights as a dramaturg, this is usually the result of a playwright's negative experience with a careless director. It's an attempt to place their play in a protective box. But theatre is precisely the act of opening that box. Playwrights must often be encouraged, in the writing process, to write from instinct rather than insecurity. Once the words are in printed form, the tendency increases. Printed words look permanent. Often, directions are added: by the playwright, by editors, by the play's first producers. The intent is to add clarity *for the reader*. For the actors, all stage directions must be questioned. That's the bottom line. Some will be kept and performed exactly as written; some will be discarded altogether; and the majority will remain as useful, changeable guides to interpretation.