

OSLT Director's Handbook

Preface:

1. This handbook was compiled during the 2014-2015 season by the members of the OSLT Directors' Team.
2. This handbook is meant to be a guide for beginning directors, presenting what we have learned over our years as practitioners. It is not meant to be a prescriptive handbook, but a starting point to help directors develop their skills as they progress from fledgling to experienced directors. Everyone develops their own style as they move from production to production and from workshop to workshop. We sincerely hope that these suggestions will help you have an effective start to your directing career.

Criteria for Directing A Major Production:

1. If the candidate is a first time director, he or she must do the following before they will be accepted as a director of a major production:
 - direct a one act play for OSLT. This will involve working with an experienced director as a mentor.
 - shadow an experienced director through a major production.
 - get acquainted with all aspects of production by working on other major productions in a significant role (assistant director, Musical Director, Stage Manager, Assistant Stage Manager, lead in a major production area-Tech, Props, Set Design and Construction, etc.)
 - attend directing workshops put on by OSLT, WODL, or Theatre Ontario.
 - Acceptance and Recognition of appropriate skill by a panel of experienced OSLT Directors.
 - Read available books on directing.
2. If the candidate has directed for other groups, or for high school, his or her production(s) must have been seen by OSLT members, or he or she must be able to provide visual evidence of the work to the OSLT Directors' Group, before he or she will be accepted as a Director of a major production.

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1. Choosing a play

- a.) Choose a play to which you are attracted for some reason. You might like the story, the themes, the characters, or its social relevance. Read it several times to be sure that you are comfortable with, and understand the content. Read some reviews and criticism online or in books to be sure that your grasp of the play is insightful and thorough.
- b.) You should be able to briefly tell the story of the play. What is it about?
- c.) Be able to state the themes which the play develops. Understand how each character contributes to the development of those themes.
- d.) Be able to state what you want the audience to get from this production. Emotional impact? e.g. feelings, attitudes, entertainment? What should they leave the theatre feeling?
- e.) Carefully consider the production requirements for cast, set, lighting, sound, costumes, etc. Is it within the grasp of the organization to produce this play? What are the production challenges?

2. Submitting a play (September for the next season)

- a.) Find a Producer and a Stage Manager who are interested in committing to the production.
- b.) Find a Music Director and a Choreographer, if necessary.
- c.) Submit your plan and team to the Play Reading Committee
- d.) Inform the Play Reading Team of any changes you wish to make to the script. Any changes in the script must have prior approval of the playwright or the rights-holder of the performance rights. Written proof must be presented to the Board immediately.

3. Once your play is accepted

Discuss a budget with the Producer. A budget must be submitted and approved by the board before you hold auditions. (Sample budgets from past shows of a similar nature are available in the archives.)

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4. Before Auditions

Decide on audition and rehearsal times and ask the Producer to book these times with the Theatre Manager.

Publish your audition and callback dates and let actors know if they need to prepare anything for the audition. Ask the Producer to order scripts and place them in the box office so prospective actors can read them before auditions.

Read, read and reread your play. Get to know your characters in preparation for auditions.

Get a clear idea of all the practical necessities of your set and acquire a set designer. Have a diagram or model of the set before rehearsals begin. Acquire a set painter if necessary.

Acquire a Costume Designer, Props Manager, Lighting Designer and Makeup and Hair Stylists. Ask the Producer to arrange a Production meeting to discuss colour scheme, style and era. Be clear about how much movement the character must be able to achieve in each costume. Provide a complete list of costumes and props that are needed. At this point, everyone can see the set plan and adjustments can be made for lighting and actors movement with costumes and props. Set a time line. A consensus among the designers early on can save a lot of adjustments near the end!

For a musical: Meet with the Music Director and Choreographer to discuss, share and develop your vision for the production and invite their expertise to ensure the singing, dancing and speaking parts of the show all work as one. Collaborate on how much time you each need in the rehearsal schedule. Decide how the Choreographer will access music for rehearsal.

For a play: Decide if there is going to be a musical element in the play, background music, pre- and post-show music. Work with the Stage Manager and a Sound technician to gather and record and time all this music.

Plan your auditions. Have people to greet the actors and gather information from them on an audition form. Include all rehearsal dates and ask about any conflicts right up front.

Decide if you are going to audition actors one at a time or have them read in groups. Plan how you are going to structure your auditions and attempt to make your actors as comfortable as possible throughout the process.

Ask your Stage Manager to prepare scripts and music for the auditions.

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5. Auditions

Choose audition dates carefully. Ask your Producer to check with the OSLT/Roxy Office to make sure there are no conflicts with the spaces required. Avoid nights when other productions are rehearsing. Be sure to add a date or dates for "Call-Backs".

A) For a Stage Piece That is Not a Musical:

- i) Three nights is usually sufficient.
- ii) Prepare an information sheet for each actor/candidate which includes:

Name, Age or Age Category, Phone Number, Email Address, previous experience, Preferred Role (if there is a preference). They should also be asked if they would take a different role if offered, or if they would be willing to work on another production area or team if they are unsuccessful.

They should also be asked about potential conflicts with rehearsal schedule, particularly if they have a job with shift work, differing hours, or pre-arranged trips, vacations or commitments.

- iii) Have the Stage Manager (SM), ASM, or Producer present so they can hand out forms, direct traffic, handle enquiries, so you can have another pair of eyes on each candidate. They can keep track of the information sheets.
- iv) A useful addition is to have a picture taken and printed of the candidate, attached to the information form, for the director's later recall of the candidate.
- v) Select and run off 3 or 4 short scenes from the play to be distributed for perusal. These should be for specific characters, with something to be read for each character.
- v) Allow time for the candidate to prepare the excerpt either alone or with another actor.
- vi) When the director is ready, and the candidate has had sufficient time for preparation of the scene, have the actors brought into a room separate from the other candidates and perform the scene for the director. The director should have the actor's information sheet so notes can be made directly on it.
- vii) The director may have the candidate read the piece a few times, or switch roles if there are two candidates reading. The director listens for clarity, volume, variety in voice and inflection, understanding of the text, and looks for physical suitability for the part. It is not a bad idea to have the person move and perform a simple task. This way the director can get a sense of whether or not the candidate can take direction, and is able to move convincingly.
- viii) The director may have a candidate read with several people to determine which actors work well together, or sound like the characters in the play.

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ix) Inform all candidates that they will be contacted regarding call backs or results within a few days. The sooner the better. Explain that several factors will inform the ultimate decision and that it will not be arrived at lightly.

Auditions For A Musical:

i) In advance, have candidates phone or email a preferred time slot (two people per slot for ten minutes per slot) on each of the nights for auditions.

ii) Usually four or five nights will suffice for a musical cast which is generally larger than a play cast.

iii) Follow the same procedure with registration and information sheets.

iv) Each candidate will have been told on the audition notice to prepare a song. The candidate must bring music for the accompanist (usually the musical director and/or the vocal coach is the production has a separate one).

v) A bit of movement improvisation can separate candidates that are otherwise of equal vocal ability. A short reading will also be useful to identify vocal dynamics.

vi) If there is dancing in the show, candidates will then go in small groups with the choreographer who will assess their dancing ability.

vii) After each pair, the Musical Director and the Director consult on the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate.

viii) Afterwards, the input of the choreographer is added to the decision-making process.

ix) Sometimes call back auditions are necessary when the final decision for a role is difficult to make among several candidates. On the info sheet, the question can be posed, "Are you available for a call back on a specific date?"

x) When the decision has been made, the final stage is the phone calls to the successful and unsuccessful candidates. Some directors like to make the calls themselves, some pass it over to the Stage Manager or Producer to do.

NB: a) One of the elements which makes members unhappy is the concept of "pre-casting", ie., that a director has certain people in mind for certain roles before the auditions. Directors must avoid this by having fair, and open auditions for all roles.

b) We must also be careful when we cast local celebrities in shows for whatever reason. This must be carefully considered for its value. Some members have expressed concern that these people do not become members or do anything backstage, yet they take away roles from hard-working members trying to learn and practice their craft. Any such casting should be cleared by the board before the show begins, or before the audition process.

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c) Any deviation from normal practice must be carefully weighed and **announced well in advance**. Barring people who are involved in one show from auditioning for another can cause dissension within the membership but may sometimes be necessary due to conflicting rehearsal times.

6. Before the First Rehearsal:

Before you meet with actors:

- i) Break the play into scenes or units. A unit may be a section within a scene in which there are specific characters, events, or actions. Often, a unit will consist of an exchange between characters before another character enters. Look for changes in topic, action, theme, or characters. This decision might inform the structure of rehearsals.
- ii) Decide what is happening in the unit. Is there conflict between characters? Is information being given to the audience (background or exposition)?
- iii) Determine what the playwright's objective is in the unit. By "objective", we mean what the playwright needs or wants the scene to achieve for the audience. Does it develop character, theme, conflict, etc
- iv) Decide what the characters' objectives are in the unit. What does each character need or want in the scene? Where do objectives cross and create conflict?
- v) How do the characters relate to each other in terms of status? Who has high or low status? What has created that status relationship? Does the status change during the unit? How does it affect their lives? How does status affect each unit and how we relate to the characters?
- vi) Identify the emotional or dramatic peaks in each unit. What drives the unit to that emotional moment?
- vii) Plan your blocking. Who should the audience focus on at any given moment? How will you position the actors on stage so that the audience looks where you want them to? (You can't use close-ups in theatre as you can in film, so you have to arrange bodies so the audience looks where you want them to. Lighting can also help you achieve focus).
- viii) Educate your cast and crew about the times, history, and social attitudes. The cast must understand the context in which the play was written, and the social background for their characters.

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7. The First Rehearsal

- a) The first meeting of the cast may literally be a read through of the play.
- b) Plan a rehearsal schedule and have it ready for the first rehearsal. Take into consideration any known absences that were noted on the audition forms. Be sure to include time to finish blocking the entire play, do several runs with props, a full tech rehearsal to set light and sound levels and then a few full runs with set, tech and dress before dress rehearsal. Also, allow time during rehearsal for costume fittings and parades so costume problems can be fixed well in advance. For a musical, use your Choreographer and Music Director to work on several scenes at the same time in different areas of the theatre to maximize rehearsal time. Ensure that sufficient time has been scheduled during rehearsals for set changes and costume changes. **Stick** to your rehearsal schedule!
- c) Express your expectations in terms of guidelines for rehearsal (starting time, being early so rehearsals can start on time, breaks, rehearsal norms about quiet, input from the actors). Support your stage manager in his or her role. They will help you run rehearsals and call the production so it is important that the cast see an effective partnership. The Director and the Stage Manager must set the tone for the entire process, from rehearsal to production to strike.
- d) Inform the cast about the relationship with the Production Team and the channels for communication. Identify the process for dealing with issues.
- e) Let everyone know clearly when you expect them to have their lines memorized and follow through by having a prompter begin work on that date.
- f) Share with the cast your vision of the play, why you chose it, what it is about, and any particular style of performance you intend to create. Discuss their characters and what they contribute to the realization of the playwright's objectives.
- g) Give the cast any other important information about the background of the playwright, the time in which the play was written, or social attitudes which are necessary for them to understand what the playwright is trying to achieve.
- h) Have a model of the set there so you can show actors what the show will look like.
- i) Make it clear that attendance is necessary at all rehearsals and that failure to attend rehearsals may result in recasting. Any absences must be scheduled well in advance so the rehearsal schedule can be adapted as needed.

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8. Rehearsals:

- a) Establish a routine for rehearsals. Be there early and prepared to go when the rehearsal is scheduled to begin. Do not waste their time, or allow them to waste yours or other cast members by being late. Make full use of the 7-10 rehearsal time. Treat everyone at rehearsal with respect and politeness. Remember that everyone has a life outside the theatre and ensure that their time at rehearsal is productive and positive. Ask and expect actors to be prepared for the scenes that are scheduled for rehearsal. Let actors know from the beginning the time line for being off-book.
- b) Allow and incorporate time for announcements, notes or changes in schedule either before the rehearsal begins, or at break time so as not to waste rehearsal time. Provide the Stage Manager and actors with all the information about props, lighting cues, sound cues, costume changes, set changes for each scene as it is blocked. Ask the Stage Manager and the actors to record all stage movement.
- b) If possible (depending on the rehearsal space and whether or not you have to share the space), have the set taped out on the floor. If there is more than one set, use different coloured tapes to indicate the set or furniture for other scenes or locations.
- c) Have a schedule for the rehearsal indicating which scenes you will be working on at which times during the rehearsal. That will allow characters to arrive when they are needed and not have to sit around waiting for lengthy periods.
- d) Communicate to and with the cast and crew what your plan is for the rehearsal or what your objectives for the evening are.
- e) Begin to block out the movement of the actors in the space. Encourage the actors to develop their movements from their understanding of the character and context, objectives, situation, and status. The actor and director must collaborate to create motivated and logical blocking which is appropriate to character and the director's eye and sense of focus for the stage picture. These are the key factors you should focus on as you develop the scenes or units.
- f) "Pace is God". A director must be sensitive to the pace and rhythm of the scenes. Your aim in rehearsal is to find the most realistic pace for the scene. Pace will evolve as the rehearsals develop.
- g) Every director will develop his or her own style. Whatever method (s) you use in rehearsal, be true to the playwright's objectives. Know where you want each scene to go, and help the actors to understand your vision of the play and how each scene contributes to the whole.
- h) Runs of the play are essential for timing and continuity. The balance between polishing and runs is at the discretion of the director. A mentor or play-polisher should attend rehearsals somewhere between 1/2 way through the process and before the final two weeks so there is time to incorporate suggestions in the polishing before runs take place.
- i) It is also a good idea to have cast using costume pieces, even approximations, and props as soon as possible so they can get used to working with the costume, using pockets, scarves, etc..

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"IN" the Theatre (10 days - 2 weeks before Opening Night)

a) Ensure that the set builders and painters have scheduled time to complete the set and the lighting designer has time to hang the lights. Communication and understanding between these groups is essential due to the short time available.

b) Technical rehearsals must be held to give the lighting and sound operators, and the stage managers the opportunity to polish cues and establish correct timing. The **first tech rehearsal** may involve only the director, stage manager, lighting designer and sound designer. At this rehearsal, the stage manager numbers all the cues and places them in the Stage Manager's script. The Director will watch and listen to all the cues and adjust if necessary. This rehearsal can be a long one, depending on the complexity of the show.

The second tech rehearsal will involve the cast and crew and this may be a cue-to-cue rehearsal or a stop/start rehearsal. This rehearsal is usually held on the weekend prior to opening so you have a long period of time when the cast and crew are available. Unless it is a very simple technical show, do not try to fit it into a regular night's rehearsal. The actors must be informed of the need for patience in this rehearsal as it can be a slow rehearsal. Remind them that they (the cast) have had months to prepare for the show, but the technical teams only have had very little time to prepare.

c) There may be a variety of Dress Rehearsals: Tech, Tech Dress, and Dress Rehearsal. Each of these can be necessary depending on the technical demands of the play. It is helpful to have an audience for the final Dress Rehearsal as the audience response will stimulate the actors, and remind them of the play's humour or impact.

d) It is a good idea to have a Costume Parade in the week before opening to see all of the costumes together under the show lights and solve any problems before the play opens.

e) Work with the Stage Manager to schedule arrival times for actors and backstage personnel for the run.

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Suggested Bibliography

Sarah Barker:	The Alexander Technique-The Revolutionary Way To Use Your Body For Total Energy
Henning Nelms:	Play Production-A Handbook For The Backstage Worker
Sonia Moore:	The Stanislavski System-The Professional Training Of An Actor
Peter Brook:	The Empty Space
Michael Shurtleff:	Audition
Harold Clurman:	On Directing
Seyler and Haggard:	The Craft Of Comedy
Derek Bowskill:	Acting and Stagecraft
Barnet/Berman/Berto:	Types of Drama and Essays
Toby Cole and Helen Crich Chinoy:	Directors on Directing
Toby Cole and Helen Crich Chinoy:	Actors On Acting.