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“Cold Coach = Victory” and other Guidelines to the Director’s Playbook

Lavina Jadhvani
DePaul University

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**“Cold Coach = Victory” and other Guidelines to the Director’s Playbook
by Lavina Jadhvani, MFA Directing 2015**

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Introduction

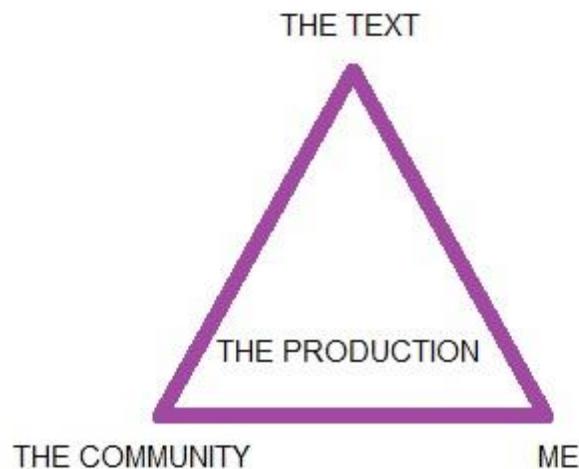
“Of course, of all the clichés in the world, I love football clichés the most. Colleagues were used to the sight of me wandering the halls of Carnegie Mellon tossing a football up and down in front of me. It helped me think. They’d probably say I thought football metaphors had the same effect. But some of my students, female and male, had trouble adjusting. They’d be discussing computer algorithms and I’d be speaking football. ‘Sorry,’ I’d tell them. ‘But it will be easier for you to learn the basics of football than for me to learn a new set of life clichés.’”

-Randy Pausch, The Last Lecture

I love NFL football. I’m a Chicago Bears fan, born and bred, and a Steelers devotee after living in Pittsburgh for five years, which culminated with the 2006 Super Bowl win over the Seattle Seahawks. I believe in the communal feeling that sporting events create for fans, the ensemble dynamic inherently created by a team, and the powerful impact that a good player-coach dynamic has. Between my training in DePaul’s MFA Directing program, thorough NFL research, and several viewings of *Friday Night Lights*¹, I’ve realized that I direct plays the same way that successful football coaches lead their teams.

I go to the theatre for the same reason I watch professional football: I love being part of a community and rooting for the home team. I make theatre because I love building that environment for other people. I believe that creating vivid, rich, and rounded experiences for artists and audiences to share furthers our understanding of each other and makes us more sensitive and responsible human beings.

As a director, I create productions that are conversation starters, and the conversation exists here:



¹ The television series, not the book or film. (Except for season 2, we never speak of those episodes.)

It is my job to craft a production that is both true to 1) the text and 2) my life experience and point of view on the story. Because I am the daughter of Indian immigrants, I will always see *Twelfth Night* as an immigrant story; someone else might spark to the themes of unrequited love and/or sexual confusion. All of those ideas are present in the text, but not all are present in every production. The third element of the conversation -- the community in which the play is being performed -- shapes the dialogue I hope to create. Great theatre should talk *to* not *at* its audience.

I've developed a directing philosophy that's suited to my own personality. I'm a person who believes in setting other individuals up for success and taking care of my team as a whole. That's how my brain is wired as the daughter of a small businessman and a former RA, respectively. I prioritize candor, rigor, and generosity in my work. (And humor. Always humor.)

This essay should be used the same way a football coach might flip through a colleague's playbook. I have crafted an approach to the work based on my particular strengths and rooted in my training, which is largely realistic, relationship driven work produced in Chicago storefront theaters. These plays may or may not transfer to another director's working environment and should by no means be treated as hard and fast rules. Rather, consider them akin to the Pirate Code -- they're more like guidelines.

Finally, I assume that the reader has a working knowledge of the rules NFL football. If that is not the case, please familiarize yourself with the basic regulations of the game, preferably by viewing Super Bowl XLII or XLVI (Giants vs Patriots 2007 or 2011). Those games are pure poetry, unless you're from New England. In which case... sorrynotsorry, as the kids say.

The Coach's Role

- **You have to have skin in the game.**

This is an adage that ESPN columnist Gregg Easterbrook would call “cold coach = victory.” Easterbrook has discovered a trend that “in bad-weather games, the coach who overdressed in a ridiculous K2 mountaineering parka inevitably was defeated by the coach in a varsity jacket or light coat.” The moral is -- good coaches share challenging game conditions with their players. If they're cold, you should be cold too. If a director expects her actors to be vulnerable, she has to be willing to experience that herself.

A couple of years ago, I found myself *needing* to direct a play called *The Ugly One* by Marius von Mayenburg. The main character in the play goes through extreme plastic surgery which makes him suddenly very attractive (whereas before he was not). He finds that people treat him significantly differently (read: better) as a result, and finds the situation delightful at first, then unsettling. I experienced something similar myself when I quickly lost 35 lbs in my first year of graduate school – I was uncomfortable receiving a lot of attention about something I judged to be superficial (but also kind of liked at the same time). At our first rehearsal, I shared this experience; my candor and personal connection encouraged the cast to hook into the material on a deeper level as well. In short: it immediately made the conversations in the room better. And I have to believe that led to a better final product.

My takeaway was twofold. First, as leaders, we have to figure out what's driving us in the room - - in part because that makes the work more personal and in part because it alerts us to our blind spots. I knew what I was thematically drawn to in *The Ugly One*, but I couldn't focus on only that. I couldn't only empathize with main character's transformation – I had to also attend to the other characters impacted by his change. In a way, those performances needed more attention, because I wasn't instinctually drawn to them.

Secondly, after we figure out what attract us to a particular project, we have to share that attraction with our entire team. When we do this, we signal to them that this is more than just a job for us, and hopefully inspire extraordinary performances from them. (Unlike the NFL, the theatre can rarely offer high pay as a motivator for above-average performance. This means that your collaborators must be motivated by the exciting opportunities and/or the inspiring personalities surrounding the project. Ideally, you assemble both!)

Your company will personally invest in the play if you show them that you already have. If you don't feel personally uncomfortable at some point in the process, you're doing it wrong.

- **Encourage your team to look at each play as a scoring opportunity.**

Halftime of Super Bowl XLIV. The New Orleans Saints are losing to the Indianapolis Colts, 6-10. The Colts are ready to receive the ball at the top of the second half, but the Saints decide to surprise the Colts' offense with an unheard of onside kick in which they manage to recover the ball, resulting in a Saints touchdown. They ultimately came back to win the game – their only Super Bowl victory to date. Coach Sean Payton devised a strategy in which an ordinary kickoff became a tide-turning play for his team; he reminded them that the goal of each play is to get points on the board.

- **Articulate the rules of the game, early and often.**

Plays differ from football in that the rules of the game change, depending on the nature of the project. Successful directors articulate those rules (or what we might call “the big picture”) of the play early and often. Your team needs to know what the goals of the project are; after that understanding has been established, you can trust individuals to execute the details themselves. Actors and designers are generally smart and want to please their directors. Tell them where you’re going and they will help you get there. Use phrases like “this is a play about…” or “I’m missing the story point of” or “this moment was particularly clear, and here’s why…” When you reinforce that their individual work is helping the entire team move forward, you inch closer and closer to the endzone.

- **Recognize that you’re not the one on the field.**

Every coach has had the impulse to step on to the field and show his players how the game ought to be played. Directors must resist that impulse at all costs. The second you step on stage and walk an actor’s blocking or give him a line reading, you signal to him, “I know how to do your job better than you do.” And the fact of the matter is, that’s not true. I once assisted a director who would “tag in” for actors, the way a fight choreographer does, in order to demonstrate how he thought a performance should look. “Here, I’ll be you,” he’d say and then take the actor’s place on stage and begin speaking their text. From the outside, I observed the actors shut down every time this happened. The director was signaling to the entire room, “I’m smarter than you,” and his collaborators became passive puppets rather than active participants as a result.

From opening night onwards, the actors are tasked to perform the play without your guidance. Know that this moment is coming, and prepare yourself – and them – for it. Empower your company to solve problems on their own; create opportunities for the company to “gel” during the rehearsal process. A great way to do this is to assign smaller groups tasks (such as composition work or mapping of the space); break them up into teams and have them work independently, then come together as a company to share and celebrate their discoveries.

- **Manage the game clock.**

Every football coach needs to have a “hurry up offense” – a strategy utilized in the final few minutes of the game, meant to maximize time on the field while simplifying play calling. Directors should have this in their back pocket as well – oftentimes we are put in positions where rehearsal time is limited and/or unforeseen circumstances cause us to lose rehearsal time. Should you find yourself in such a situation, don’t panic – switch to your hurry up offense instead. Pick three things to focus on, and knock ‘em out of the park. Give your actors succinct, clear goals, and put ‘em on the field – that’s where most problems are resolved, anyway. Never bombard your cast with several last minute instructions – this will only result in confusion and lowered confidence. (As any fantasy football veteran can tell you, too much last minute tinkering results in silly, avoidable mistakes.)

- **Acknowledge and empower your assistant coaches.**

Football coaches rely on a small army of specialists to enable them to see aspects of the game that they cannot. During the game itself, the head coach is on the sidelines, speaking directly to players and referees, but he receives information from the offensive coordinator, who’s watching

the game from a booth at the top of the stadium, in his headset. The person who can view the entire playing field at once has different, and often better, information than the person who's in the trenches alongside his team.

In the rehearsal room, the offensive coordinator is often the assistant director and/or dramaturg. He or she does not have access to all of the details in your brain, and thankfully so – the audience won't either. Welcome them into your rehearsal room, and filter their feedback through your ears first, before deciding if you want to incorporate their input into your process. If you do implement their notes, give credit where credit is due – I'll often say, “This is a note from [insert dramaturg's name here] and I think it's a good one, and here's why...” This demonstrates my belief in the collaborative process and encourages more feedback from my colleagues. Plus, it's just good sportsmanship.

The Coach's Prep

- **Put yourself in your players' shoes.**

Good coaches may not have physically experienced the game as a player, but they understand every element of the athlete's process. They recognize the stress the sport can place on a player, and they know how to coach him through the day-to-day struggles. Similarly, a director must be able to empathize with both the actors as well as characters they play.

It is deadly for an actor to judge a character's actions, and therefore the director must avoid that as well. When working on, say, Chekhov you will find that each character has his/her own specific emotional struggle, and that struggle may seem foreign to you at first. If you, as a director, find a character's behavior deplorable, examine where that response is coming from. Are they acting out of fear? (Probably.) Have you also made questionable life decisions based on fear? (Almost certainly.) There's your in.

Pro Tip: BJ Jones, Artistic Director of Northlight Theatre, reads plays out loud, by himself in his living room. By the time he goes into auditions, he has a clearer sense of what he's looking for, because he's said the words of every character in the play. Jones, a former actor, instinctually found that this was an effective way of reading plays for him. Similarly, when I worked with Catherine Weidner on *Twelfth Night*, we prepared for rehearsals by reading the entire play to each other (doubling or even tripling roles when needed). As a result, I understood every word of the text by the time I went into rehearsal – even the ones I'd cut. Even if you don't come from an acting background (I don't!) consider reading the play out loud yourself – you'll get much more mileage out of that than you will merely listening to a read through.

- **Know your playbook before you walk into practice.**

We expect athletes and actors to walk into a room warm, ready to play. Coaches and directors must hold themselves to the same standard. Never walk into a room unprepared. Come up with a list of every question you might have about the text – the place, the people in it, the given circumstances, etc. Investigate each question – based on historical research or textual inferences – as best you can. Don't get caught off guard by your company – they look to you to call the plays.

That being said: half of our job is to walk into the room knowing what we know and knowing what we don't. Thorough prep does not mean having all of the answers – it means knowing which questions you need to ask. John Michael Garces is the Artistic Director of Cornerstone Theater Company, which is known for its highly collaborative, community-based work. In an interview with Damon Kiely, he describes his process as follows: “If I was I was going to write the production in my head, why don't I just write a fucking novel and be done with it? In my head, I already know what I need to do in a way. When I was a young director I wanted it to be like I wanted it to be, and I'm really not in that place anymore. I want to maximize this process to create the most exciting aesthetic event. I'm not saying I don't want it to be highly rigorous -- but why would I assume what I think this role is is going to be more interesting than what the world gives me and how I maximize that.”

No one player can see the entire field at once. Thorough prep enables you to get everyone's heads pointing in the same direction, but still leaves room for them to play.

- **Understand the arc of the game.**

Great football games generally mirror the five act dramatic structure that directors have come to know and love:

- the inciting incident of the game – the point where the action is rolling and there's no turning back – aka, the kickoff
- the turning point, an inevitable shift in momentum, occurs at halftime (intermission)
- the “crisis”² moment occurs around the two minute warning of the fourth quarter: now we're in “do or die” mode
- the climax is the end of the game, where the winner is determined – in a tragedy, this is when the last body hits the floor; in a comedy it's usually where the central couple decides to get hitched

Post-game interviews are the denouement; pregame analysis serves as exposition.

Typically, the Major Dramatic Question of the play is asked at the moment of the inciting incident and answered at the climax. In football, this is pretty straightforward: at kickoff we ask, “Will the Bears win this game?” and at its conclusion we learn the answer (generally, “no” unless you're throwing it back to 1985). In *Hamlet*, we ask the question, “Will Hamlet avenge his father's death?” when the ghost appears in Act 1, Scene 5; we learn answer (“yes”) in the final scene, after he kills Claudius.

Embrace this structure – it exists to create suspense in both theatre and live sports. Know where these four moments are in your text and make sure they're well attended to. If your text does not adhere to traditional dramatic structure (not all modern plays do), understand why it doesn't. Great coaches are well versed in the tempo of a game – they know that the energy shifts dramatically between acts and that the last leg of the game (two minute warning to the end) is the most important, and subsequently take longer to play, because at that point, each down is a significant event.

- **Geography matters.**

Playing a game at Mile High Stadium in Denver is totally different than playing CenturyLink Field in Seattle. Both are outdoor stadiums, but the former uses grass while the latter has FieldTurf. Mile High challenges visiting teams with its high altitude, CenturyLink with its notoriously loud crowd noise, known as the “12th man.” Indoor stadiums like the Metrodome in Minneapolis have an entirely different feeling. Shifting geography changes more than just the time zone in which the game is being played. It affects the entire emotional tenor of the game.

All plays also have unique emotional tenors, and that often stems from the geographic setting of the play. For example, a wide range of communities are represented within the genre of “American Realism.” Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is set in the French Quarter -- a steamy, claustrophobic, Southern sensibility pervades the play. Arthur Miller's

² Professor Milan Stitt's terminology. Former head of playwriting at Carnegie Mellon University.

Death of a Salesman takes place in New York City and Boston, where a more white-collar and repressed filter affects the way characters communicate (or don't). The two plays were written only two years apart, but 1,500 miles separate the two settings. All metropolitan cities are not created equal.

American cities can vary quite a bit within the same region. There's a huge cultural difference between Peoria, Illinois and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At a glance, both are blue-collar, Midwestern towns. But if you put those people in the same room, you'll find that there's little they agree on, culturally. Just try asking them what a carbonated beverage is called, then sit back and listen to the linguistic debate.

Just as visiting teams research their host's playing conditions, your company must determine what distinguishes the play's setting from the rest of America, then steep themselves in that culture. LA residents walk differently than New Yorkers. Chicagoans dress differently than Minneapolis folks. General geography will lead to general acting, which is generally boring.

Running the Rehearsal Room

- **Distinguish scrimmages from game day.**

Sports teams practice, theatre companies rehearse. Either way – participants should have the permission to create imperfect work in process, knowing that this work will enable them to approach perfection on the field. In practice, one has the ability to attempt new plays, break them apart, and analyze their success. This work is invaluable; failed attempts should be celebrated – the player has figured out what NOT to do, putting him closer to figuring out what he should do on game day.

When beginning blocking, allow the stage picture to be messy for a bit. Encourage actors to explore the text on their feet early in the process (see above, “fail early, fail often,” and below, “be a ‘doer’ not a ‘talker’”). Use this work to clarify relationships and identify conflict and action. Allow the actors to focus on these tasks before you give them technical notes to clean the stage picture. (Sightlines are easy. Feelings are hard.) In a four week rehearsal process, avoid giving hard staging notes until week three.

- **Set clear goals at the top of each practice.**

Make it a short list – “today we’re practicing our button hooks” or “today we are working on clarifying relationships and defining events,” for example. The goals should be cumulative, but the actors will feel like they’re only focusing on a few things at a time, preventing them from feeling overwhelmed. Whenever possible, begin each rehearsal with an overview of the day's activities. It clarifies the tasks at hand and signals to your company that you value and respect their time in the rehearsal room.

- **When your team is still learning the game, call one play at a time.**

When first staging a scene, work from event to event. [For the purposes of this thesis, I am working loosely off of Katie Mitchell's definition of an "event" -- something that happens on stage that causes every character to change what they're doing.] This will ensure that actors land the most important moments in the play and encourage a variety of actions. It also tends to break the work up into manageable chunks of text. When you zoom out to revisit the big game picture with your team, you will find that each individual play now has more clarity. Repetition builds muscle memory, which – when skillfully employed --can be your friend.

- **Fail early, fail often.**

Another Easterbrook mantra is “Fortune Favors the Bold.” Statistically speaking, teams who regularly execute risky plays – such as going for the first down on fourth and short -- win more games. Even if the team fails on said play, they will have increased confidence because their coach has signaled to them “I believe in you, let’s take this leap together.” This is how championship teams are built. Similarly, it is my belief that stronger, collaborative work results from companies who take big risks together early in the rehearsal process.

Encourage actors to start before they’re ready – for example, have them run the work on their feet before you give them any formal blocking, perhaps even on the first or second day of rehearsal (!!!). This will get them out of their heads and – more importantly – send the message that you value and trust their instincts. Conservative play calling typically leads to losses, as

Grantland writer Bill Barnwell regularly points out in his column, “Thank You For Not Coaching.”

- **Allow actors to call the occasional audible.**

When quarterback Peyton Manning is on the field, he has the ability to read defenses in a way his coach cannot. Coaches Tony Dungy and John Fox created successful teams by putting Manning at the center of their offense and trusting his instincts on the field.

If an actor says, “Can I try something?” in rehearsal, the director’s answer should always be, “Yes!” Know that he or she may be able to see something, from inside the scene, that you cannot. Honor actor impulses, particularly early in the process – it boosts morale and increases company “buy in.” If an idea is out of place, it should be apparent to the group immediately (assuming the director has successfully articulated the big picture). Don’t waste time arguing about whether an idea is appropriate or not – try it and see. Squashed impulses = frustrated actors.

- **Each player should have a connection to every other individual on the field.**

We expect certain players to execute certain plays – the wide receiver or tight end will catch passes from the quarterback, the runningbacks will receive handoffs from him, the offensive linemen are tasked to block, etc. The best teams expand the possibilities of each play by varying these traditionally defined relationships. Sometimes runningbacks throw to quarterbacks, sometimes tight ends are the best blockers. Quarterbacks like Russell Wilson, RG3 and yes, even Tim Tebow, have revolutionized the game because of the complexity they bring to the quarterback position – defenses never know what to expect from them.

Audiences, like defenses, should be kept on their toes. The best, most truthful way to accomplish this is by articulating all of the relationships in the text, and doing so in a way that is both honest and complex. Just as any open player can technically receive a pass at any given moment, every character on stage should be able to impact the entire room at any given time, based on his or her connection to the other relationships on stage. At the end of Act 3 in *Uncle Vanya*, the typically quiet and optimistic character of Waffles completely changes the course of a scene by exploding at a loved friend and then storming out of the room. He runs an atypical route, leaving the audience to wonder what the other players left on the field might execute next.

Have each actor in your company define his or her relationship to every other character in the play, and make sure those connections are clearly articulated and activated often throughout the course of the play. This will create an open playing field for the entire company.

- **Look for extremely long or tight hand-offs: defenses can see a short pass coming from a mile away.**

Two to three feet apart is a comfortable distance to stand apart from and talk to another person in real life; that same distance is highly ineffectual on stage and on the playing field. Consider instead standing quite close together (for a tight, sneaky hand-off) or far apart (for that long pass defenses won’t know how to cover). Avoid the quotidian whenever possible; that’s straight up rookie staging.

Obligatory Sesame Street reference: In a 1975 skit, Grover (Frank Oz) plants himself in front of the camera and says, “This is near.” Then he runs a good distance away and states, “This is far.” And then, because it’s *Sesame Street*, he sprints back and forth and repeats those phrases for over two minutes. It’s ridiculous, and totally watchable -- because he avoids the deadly “three feet away from his scene partner (or in this case, the camera) zone.” Check it out:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZhEcRrMA-M>

- **The first off book run through is a preseason game.**

My friend and colleague Carol Enoch once said that, “First off book run throughs are like being naked in front of your boyfriend for the first time – it's better if the lights are out. And if you're both a little drunk.” The point is, the first off book run of a play isn't about you. It's the first time the actors actually encounter the play, and it's exciting, but it's also awfully terrifying. Acknowledge that this is a scary and uncomfortable experience and remind your company that the goal, much like with preseason games, is to figure out where your strengths and weaknesses lie. I often say that the goal of the first run through is to “figure out what we know and what we don't know.” I rarely give acting notes after one; rather, I focus on what we learned (“this moment worked well because of...”) and what we don't (“this was unclear and here's where I think it needs to go...”)

Talking to Actors

- **Every great team has a rally cry.**

At the end of each pre-game talk in *Friday Night Lights*, Coach Taylor begins the chant, “Clear eyes, full heart...” and then his team chimes in with, “CAN’T LOSE!” Rally cries clarify the group’s identity and reassure players that they’re on the same page. Successful directors will steal from Coach Taylor and create and adopt an internal working language that makes their company feel at home.

For example, I teach every actor and stage manager I work with to respond to the question, “Is anyone NOT ready?” before beginning a run. (Think about it – it’s the only way to ask that question.) My favorite stage manager and I have a routine at fight calls that begins with me yelling (à la Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*), “The first rule about fight call is...” and she wryly finishes with, “... do everything at half speed.” Catch phrases build camaraderie and create shortcuts. Adopt ‘em early on – they will pay off during tech.

- **Invest in your players, and they will invest in you.**

There’s no substitute for good, truthful chemistry between a coach and his players or a director and her actors. As you’ve heard me say above (and will hear again below), setting your collaborators up for success is key. Every rehearsal room is a learning environment, regardless of whether or not you’re practicing in academia.

We are always teaching as we direct. On the micro level, we’re teaching actors how to perform in our vision of a given play. That’s the short game. On the macro level, we’re providing opportunities for us to learn together about bigger ideas – what makes for a successful moment of direct address, how to tell a story via fights and/or songs, etc. That’s the long game. Acknowledging individual actor’s growth over the course of a process (or processes) and recognizing when they teach you something about the play and/or your craft is an investment that will pay off tenfold.

Loyalty builds trust and rapport. That’s a currency that’s invaluable in any field.

- **Train your players to tackle conflict head on.**

Passions must run high on the field as well as on the stage. Otherwise – what are the folks on the sidelines paying to watch? Coaches psych their players up before sending them out on the field, prepared to fight their opponents. Directors must do the same with their actors, and that passion stems from identifying conflict in each character’s relationship to everyone else on stage.

All relationships contain some element of conflict (and often this stems from a sense of competition – particularly between lovers, siblings, or friends). If characters are often clashing with each other, their relationship has to be love-hate. (If it was just hate, they’d exit the relationship). In *Uncle Vanya*, Serebryakov might describe Vanya as “an irritating, judgy, generous in-law.” In turn, Vanya might call Serebryakov “a selfish, *accomplished*, worthless windbag.” Fights are more dramatic if the adversary is a worthy one. Similarly, love relationships are also more intriguing and complex if there’s a little hate mixed in.

Articulate conflict early in the rehearsal process and encourage actors to explore the tension in their relationships – while also saving the climax of said tension for as late in the game as possible. (No one wants to watch a piece of theatre that devolves into people yelling at each other for hours. Establish tension on stage, then keep the audience guessing as to when it will explode.)³

- **Give positive notes.**

Many coaches and directors find this unnecessary, but I firmly believe in giving positive notes in addition to constructive ones. Per Katie Mitchell's methodology, I've adopted the phrase "That's clear" when affirming an actor's choice, as opposed to "That was great!" or "I liked that." For example, I might say, "Laertes, when you pulled Ophelia away from Hamlet in your first scene, I got a clear sense of 'protective older brother.' That helped me know who you two are, even though neither of you had spoken yet." Notes like this build morale, but also give you an opportunity to remind the cast of the story you are telling. It affirms one choice, but doesn't prevent the actors from exploring other (potentially better) ones that tell the story you want to tell.

The best feedback comes in the action-reaction-result format. Instead of "Don't look at the ground!!" consider, "When you lift your head up, you can read your opponent's hips more clearly, and that will tell you where they're headed more clearly than watching their feet." Focusing on goals, rather than technique, will inspire your team members and yield better results. And whenever possible, lead with the positive.

- **Build rapport with your players.**

Testosterone-heavy NFL coaches rely on butt taps and clever nicknames to signal to their players that they love them. The wise director will find her own version of this shorthand in the rehearsal room. I always make it a point to find out 1) where an actor is from/where they went to school 2) if we follow any of the same sports teams or 3) if they have any siblings/what their birth order is. I almost always find a connection in one of those three, and will use that as an opportunity to establish an ongoing conversation. (And I'm genuinely passionate about my answers to those three questions, so it's never a forced inquiry.) If none of those three yield a common interest, the actor at least knows I've taken an interest in him/her.

A Note on Names: Dale Carnegie said, "Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language." I have found this to be totally true. Also, as a person with an unusual name, I make it a point to find out what a person likes to be called, and refer to them by that as often as possible. If there are two "Michael"s in the cast and neither likes to be called "Mike," then I will figure out a way to distinguish the Michaels. I recently worked with a South Asian actor who preferred "Siddhartha" even though everyone else in the room called him "Sid"; I made it a point to use his full name whenever possible, and he visibly lit up every time I did so.

- **Use the fake punt wisely.**

Every single director has used the phrase, "This probably won't work, but just for me can you try..." And more often than not, we actually do believe that idea will work, but we're soft-selling

³ To quote Damon Kiely, "Put people in conflict. Keep them there as long as possible."

it to the room for one reason or another; it is the directorial equivalent of a fake punt. And quite often – it works.

That kind of fake-out is totally fine – as long as your actors don't see it coming. But if you're dropping that phrase in every rehearsal, they're going to be able to see through you like the Bears' offensive line. Use it sparingly, and only on fourth downs.

- **Ask the question, “Can you win?”**

Nothing is more frustrating than being forced to watch a team play out a game they already know they've lost. (See: every game of the Detroit Lions miserable 0-16 season in 2008.) Any player or actor who looks like they've given up on the field while the game clock is running needs to be asked – demanded – “Can you win?”

In *The Winter's Tale*, an unfairly accused wife asks her husband to clear her name during a public trial. (Spoiler: he does not.) If the actress playing the wife (Hermione) knows this, there's no point in watching the entire scene play out. If she only tries one tactic over and over again, we know she's resigned herself to defeat. But if we watch her play multiple actions – plead, accuse, protest, beseech, pray – then I know she hasn't given up. She's pulling out all the stops, and I (as an audience member) want to support her, because we like to back winners.

If an actor is playing only one note in your scene, s/he might have stopped working during regulation play. Ask him or her, “Can you win?” If the answer is no, tell 'em to get off the damn field.

Casting

- **Trust your instincts.**

Coaches are notorious for following their guts – “I had a good feeling about him,” they’ll often say after hiring a player or “I liked his style.” They can’t truly know what they’re getting into in a tryout scenario any more than directors can in the audition setting. And yet – I can often tell if I’m interested in an actor before he or she even begins to read from the audition side. The way they enter a room, shake my hand (or don’t), introduce the piece, etc. – that’s all unquantifiable, but valuable information. I know, in my gut, if I want to work with this person and/or if they’re a good fit for my team, based on these behaviors. It may seem trivial, but it’s not. Trust your gut.

- **Acknowledge the draft order.**

New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady was drafted 199th in the 2000 NFL draft – the seventh quarterback that season. And man, does that guy have a chip on his shoulder about that; he’s publicly cried when recalling the humiliation of that moment and he’s often cited his low draft order as a motivator. (A recent ESPN documentary, *The Brady Six*, was devoted to following the lackluster careers of the six quarterbacks drafted before Brady – Chad Pennington, Giovanni Carmazzi, Chris Redman, Tee Martin, Marc Bulger, and Spergon Wynn. If you don’t recognize any of those names, well... that’s the point.)

Brady’s insecurities about his placement in the draft are not unlike actors’ insecurities about their own desirability. They know that their competition is fierce, and they like working with people who value them. Oftentimes, directors find themselves working with an actor who knows he wasn’t the first choice for the role – maybe someone dropped out, maybe the original actor got injured and an understudy had to step in. The point is – the man on the field is now your guy, and you better make sure he knows that you believe in him. Don’t beat around the bush with the draft order (actors talk, they know how it works), just make sure your players know that you’re glad they’re in the room now. (And maybe even acknowledge the situation in a gentle, empowering way – it sure worked for Brady.)

- **Conduct off the field counts. It just does.**

As a Steelers fan, it’s awfully hard to defend the reputation of Ben Roethlisberger. He’s a tough quarterback, he does a good job on the field, but you can’t ignore the reputation (and subsequent media circus) that surrounds him and his personal life. When you allow a quarterback with that kind of history into your club, you’re bringing that behavior into your locker room. Some coaches are willing to wrangle those additional challenges in order to hire very talent players; I am not.

As a director, I would rather invest in the slightly less talented, but hard working athlete with a clean record and no questionable extracurricular behaviors. I’m more willing to spend extra time with a committed actor on improving his work on a role than I am jumping through hoops for a diva’s scheduling needs or other life problems. (Hey – even the Jets would put up with Brett Favre’s nonsense. Just sayin’.)

When working as a guest director, one may find herself in a position of having to hire a player who is notoriously unsportsmanlike. In such scenarios, it is most important to protect the team

environment; hold all players to the same standard whenever possible and don't let unprofessional behavior infiltrate the company. Morale building begins at first rehearsal and continues through closing. Set your team up with a productive and professional environment from day one, and they will continue to model that behavior long after you leave the show.

Talking to Designers/Technical Rehearsals

- **Tech is scrimmage for designers.**

We don't expect seasoned actors to bring every aspect of their final performance to a first read through, or even the first time we work a scene on its feet. Coaches don't expect veteran quarterbacks to instantly gel with new receivers. And yet, when we get into technical rehearsals, directors often get frustrated if designers don't deliver the right cues right away. This is highly unfair.

Even the most experienced designers need time to build their collaborative vocabulary on a show. Tech is a moving target, consisting of the company onstage, the collaborators in the house, the crew backstage, and the infrastructure provided by the producers. Even on a remount of a show, the mix is never the same. And though this may seem counterintuitive when time is limited, *we have to give designers time to get a few scrimmages in*. This is particularly true at the beginning of the tech process.

- **Kickoffs are always the hardest.**

In even the most low-stakes of games, the buildup to kickoff requires a lot of choreography: before the game even begins, there's the coin flip, the singing of the national anthem, etc, etc. Before starting the tech of show, we first have to set pre-show announcements, taking out the house lights, how the actors will find their entrances, and how the stage manager will know they're set. While these tasks seem minute, they add up and take time to accomplish. More time than you think.

Beginnings and ends of acts are notoriously difficult to tech. Allow twice as much time as you think necessary to work the start of your show. Even if it's just house to half/curtain speech/blackout/lights up, allow an hour. (Carnegie Mellon professor David Boevers insists that "nothing can be done in less than half an hour." Twice that = at least one hour to tech the top of a show.)

- **Use your time-outs wisely.**

Consider also that, like an entertaining football game, a well-run tech has a smooth and consistent flow. If your team is getting bogged down in the details of a particular moment, it may be more beneficial to bookmark that moment and move on to the next one. Like calling an unnecessary time out, nitpicking a moment (particularly towards the end of the day) kills momentum and lowers morale. The Goodman Theatre is known for setting aside time at the end of their tech process to return to the top of the show and re-tech it. When they're first starting the process, they haven't yet built a working tech vocabulary, and so they don't actually know how to tech the show. By the time they reach the end of the play, they do; they then revisit the top of the show with their newfound vocabulary, and the process is more thorough and much smoother as a result.

- **Get 'em talking, early and often.**

Football coaches often have weekly meetings to discuss their progress in training and strategize for upcoming games. In theatre, assembling a team of professional designers to check in about the process and plan for tech can seem impossible. Prioritize these production meetings -- beg,

borrow, and steal time whenever you can, ply ‘em with food and booze, Skype people in if you must. This is the time where you build camaraderie and construct the world of the play; if that vocabulary isn’t established early on, if the whole staff isn’t intimately familiar with the team’s playbook (and each other), you will be lost come tech.

When those rare meetings occur, it can be tempting to push to make decisions ASAP, due to the short amount of time you have together. Resist that impulse -- brass tacks can be sorted out via email. Freeform brainstorming and clarifying the needs and goals of your production require on-the-spot communication. This is the time where your team learns to like and trust each other, the way actors do early on in the rehearsal process. Conflicts will arise during tech -- your job is not to prevent them, but ensure that your team likes each other enough to navigate them smoothly and efficiently when they do arise.

Also: As with actors, building rapport is key -- it’s even more important when working with designers and technicians because their work often goes unrecognized. My first paid work in a theater was as a light board operator for Kate Whoriskey’s production of *Talley’s Folly* at Northlight Theatre. She made it a point to introduce herself on my first day and I received an opening night card from her, even though we’d barely interacted during the process. Northlight is a theater with a particularly treacherous lighting grid, and it’s totally annoying (and scary) to replace burnt out lightbulbs. Even though board ops are supposed to replace spent bulbs immediately, technicians in that space will often let that task slide until at least two or three bulbs need to be replaced. I meticulously checked and replaced any necessary bulbs before every performance. Kate had signaled that she cared about me, and so I cared about taking care of her (and her show, by extension) as a result.

- **The best work happens at the bar.**

Great coaching teams make time to blow off steam together. After a long practice (or 10 out of 12), the last thing you all probably want to do is spend MORE time together. If your staff is up for it, stick around for a few drinks anyway. It will build rapport AND stealthily buy you additional meeting time (and sometimes even score you additional resources/money).

Technicians, in particular, are often treated like non-artists, when they are in fact some of the most creative minds in the room. Let them know that you like them and that they are part of your team. If bar time isn’t possible, you’ll find that a stealthily placed, nice bottle of Scotch will go a long way.

Working with Students

First, a caveat: I believe that all of these guidelines apply to working with professional actors, but are especially true for students. AKA, if you do nothing else, do these three things:

- **Empower them to solve problems on their own.**

In non-professional sports and theatre, there are far more opportunities for things to go wrong. Hines Ward isn't going to miss practice or display unsportsmanlike conduct lest he face getting benched or fined; Joe from Schaumburg might be late to rehearsal, not memorize his lines, even skip out on tech -- he's got 99 problems, and your show is just one of them. Accept that you can't prevent these scenarios; instead, what you can do is prep your team to adjust on the fly. That process starts by you empowering them as leaders and creative problem solvers. They won't know they're rookies if you treat them like pros. If you treat them like pros -- they're more likely to behave like pros.

High school coaches empower seniors as team captains, let them run drills, and set the bar for the team's work ethic. I'll turn over the keys early on in the rehearsal process as well. I might let the company vote on what they want their policy on lateness to be (I suggest, but never enforce "if you're late, bring a treat to share at the next rehearsal"). Often I'll have them work together to put together a 10 minute version of the play (an exercise I stole from Dale Heinen at Silk Road Rising some time ago); this enables them to start solving problems together from the get-go, allows me (and the stage manager) to observe the group dynamic, and gets the events of the play out of their heads and into their bodies.

Encourage them to be creative; do not let them worry about getting things "right."

- **Say the words "I don't know" often.**

First of all, because you don't. You cannot possibly go into practice or rehearsal knowing the answer to every question a student might ask you. Don't lie -- kids will see right through that and lose faith in you.

Secondly, student actors and athletes have the tendency to put their mentors up on a pedestal. Even when you screw up, you'll likely stay up there. By saying -- and truly meaning -- "I don't have all the answers," you allow your students to see a bit of themselves in you. You become more human in their eyes, and can use your lack-of-knowing as an opportunity to spark curiosity in a young person. Follow up "I don't know," with "What do you think?" or "Let's figure this out together." Not only will the student remember the answer better, they'll remember the process of finding it.

Saying "I don't know," in front of a student isn't admitting defeat; it's an opportunity to spark curiosity.

- **Be vocal.**

Nothing is scarier than the deadly silent coach on the sidelines or the unreadable director in the back of the house. And while professional poker faces have their place -- maybe you're trying to front in front of the other team's defense or maintain a game face in front of an important critic --

this is, above all else, a school play. It's not about your ego, and it really isn't about winning or losing -- your job is to create an *experience* for your students, and that experience starts in practice and rehearsal.

You and your team of assistants, stage managers, dramaturgs, etc. are responsible for building an environment that signals to your players when things are going well. (Don't worry about telling them when things aren't going well -- most of them are their own harshest critics and will already know this.) If something is funny, your job is to *laugh*. If they pull off an awesome play, cheer like a crowd gone wild. This will 1) boost their ego (and most students do need that) and 2) prep them for the inevitable game day nerves. Celebrate your wins in rehearsal; the performance day wins will still be sweet.

Thoughts on Chekhov

- **Be a “doer” not a “talker.”**

When it comes to the Aristotelian elements of tragedy, Chekhov places character and theme before plot. Create opportunities to explore the former elements in an active way – via composition exercises, research tasks, creation of maps/diagrams/etc – or else you’ll lose the action (and therefore the plot) entirely. Structure rehearsals so that actors aren’t sitting at the table and talking about the text for more than two hours in a row. Teams belong on the field working on plays – not in the locker room, reviewing game footage.

- **Review the fundamentals of the game.**

Teams can make foolish, completely avoidable mistakes by losing sight of the basic rules of the game. From the sidelines, it seems ridiculous that a professional team would be penalized for something as simple as “too many men on the field” and yet, it happens at almost every NFL game. (Seriously, though – how hard is it to count to eleven!? In truth – it can be quite difficult when one is focused on the more complex aspects of the game.)

One fundamental that’s particularly helpful is examining the text’s punctuation and stage directions for clues. Chekhov uses simple indicators such as pauses, punctuation, and stage directions very specifically in his text. Look at these less as “rules” but more like “guidelines” – the director does not have to be a slave to these proposed ideas, but if a pause or ellipses is in the text, it is worth examining what was behind the playwright/adaptor’s impulse. Obviously he or she thought that was important information to include – does it indicate an event? A shift in intentions? If it’s not useful to the actor after the exploration, then discard it.

(Please note: Chekhov marked both ellipses and em dashes as ‘...’ in his text. If a moment doesn’t make sense as a trailoff/pause, try it as a cutoff instead.)

- **Death hangs heavy.**

Ever seen a quarterback lose significant yardage by scurrying or sliding away from an impending defensive lineman? “What the *\$#% were you thinking?!” you yell from the sidelines before remembering – he is merely mortal. And mortals fear death.

Similar to an athlete nursing an old injury or a warrior protecting a chink in his armor, a character who has brushed close to death (either personally or through a loved one), can often appear rash and/or foolish. Sometimes the fear of death prompts irrational decisions (i.e., Serebryakov’s proposal to sell the estate in *Uncle Vanya*); sometimes it prompts unexpected moments of sadness (such as Lovey’s reminiscing about her dead son in *The Cherry Orchard*). Make these themes part of your table work discussions; as the process continues, remind your actors of their character’s relationship to death. It is a given circumstance that is often forgotten and can deeply enrich scene work.

- **History factors into every game.**

The rivalry between the Chicago Bears and the Green Bay Packers is the longest and most played in the National Football League – the two teams have met 187 times to date (and Chicago currently leads the series, 93-88-6). They play each other twice every regular season and each

encounter is, by definition, epic. Similarly, any time the Manning brothers meet on the field, the game's stakes are heightened, because of the familial history between the two quarterbacks.

On stage, relationships formed at an early age – such as those between siblings and first loves – inform the trajectory of all future encounters between those characters. Factor this history into scene work, even if it is decades removed. Relationships formed early in life can mature, but – for the most part -- they don't change.

- **When all else fails – just be honest.**

Audiences laugh out of recognition during Chekhov's plays. He's done the lion's share of the work for you and your actors by creating characters and predicaments that capture the hilarious, terrible, and terrifying truths of everyday life. Don't over-celebrate by showing the audience how funny it is. (Remember: there are now severe penalties for excessive touchdown celebrations and other displays of unsportsmanlike conduct.) Just do the work truthfully and trust that hilarity will follow.

Thoughts on Shakespeare

- **Review old game footage, but don't get bogged down in history.**

Here's the thing -- and it took me YEARS to understand this -- but so many people are concerned with how Shakespeare "should" be done. The truth of the matter is that, while we know essentially how these plays were staged, *we have no idea how these plays were actually rehearsed and performed*. We have some clues in the text when it comes to performance (where people might've entered due to the construction of the stage, embedded stage directions about how characters might behave). When it comes to rehearsal, well -- what we know is that they didn't have a lot of time for that. More often than not, these plays were written quickly and performed by the seat of their pants.

That being said, don't throw scholarship entirely out the window. People have been performing these plays for over four hundred years, and we can learn a thing or two from reviewing that history. Successful coaches review footage from past games (and sometimes other teams -- legally or not), but what makes them successful is their ability to understand a new tool *and* assess whether or not it's a good fit for their team. A fake punt is no good if you don't have a punter who can throw the ball well; similarly, folio work⁴ is only useful if it's a tool that speaks to the actors in your company.

When you're working on these texts professionally, most actors will come into the room with a sense of how they like to work on verse. Actors and directors widely vary when it comes to how much importance they place on scansion, dictionary work, reading footnotes, etc. Your job is not to codify them in terms of technique; it is to *tell the roaring story*. It will prove useful to understand the fundamentals of these different approaches so you can give notes to your actors in a language that speaks to them.

- **Recognize that your audience is watching the game through a different lens.**

The way we watch football has evolved significantly over the last few decades; the red "challenge" flag for coaches wasn't introduced until 1999, for example. Fantasy football has made allegiances much more complicated. Instant replay allows at-home viewers many advantages over the folks at the stadium. At the same time, cell phones, social media, and the ease of video streaming have changed the way theatre patrons experience a play. In short, Shakespeare competed with a lot less noise. So, many of his assumptions and historical/cultural shorthands no longer apply.

Shakespeare (and his colleagues, like Marlowe and John Webster) did this really smart thing -- they wrote plays about issues that affected them in their *present day*, but they set them in locations that were *just a little bit in the distance*. For example, Shakespeare set many of his plays in Italy -- that way the English audiences viewing them could comment on the issues addressed, without feeling like they were being directly confronted with their own shortcomings.

⁴ A technique that involves closely combing early folios of Shakespeare's plays for clues about breath and diction, as opposed to relying on modern, edited versions of the play (which include corrected spellings and punctuation).

When we tackle these plays in a contemporary context, we have to ask ourselves, “How can I create that same amount of distance?” Close enough to be recognizable, but not so close that we’re hammering away at heavy-handed themes. Often this means shifting the plays to an era that’s closer to present day than the original time period. Producing John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* in its original setting (early 1500s, Italy) doesn’t mean much to a modern American audience. But updating it to something that’s a bit more recognizable to them, like Reconstruction Era in the southern United States, frames the texts original themes in a context that’s more accessible.

- **The lifespan of good players – in football and in Shakespeare's plays -- is relatively short.**

It’s no secret that Shakespeare was obsessed with death. He lived through multiple outbreaks of the Bubonic Plague, which took the lives of several of his colleagues and his only male child -- an eleven year old named Hamnet, who likely inspired a play with a similar name. What often doesn’t get clocked is the fact that the Elizabethan mortality rate was much higher than it is today; the average life expectancy was 30-35. Nobility, who could afford to pay for medical care, lived much longer (Queen Elizabeth I died at age 70). But for the average citizen, life was potentially fleeting and definitely full of uncertainties.

The pilot for the television series *Friday Night Lights* features a star quarterback who tragically receives a paralyzing, career-ending blow in a high school game; it’s memorable because it captures the vulnerability of all football players, who must wrestle with the fact that their careers could potentially end at any moment. While players over the age of 40 are occasionally seen in the NFL (largely in the relatively safe position of kickers or punters), the average career spans about 10 years. Like the Elizabethan characters Shakespeare was writing about, most players are facing mortality by their early 30s.

This means that a 30-year-old Hamlet who’s contemplating suicide isn’t a spring chicken; he’s middle aged. When 27-year-old Hal is coronated at the end of *Henry IV, Part II*, he knows the clock’s ticking; he ruled for less than 10 years. Time tends to feel compressed in these plays, from a modern perspective; consider that, in the Elizabethan mindset, news travelled slower while life passed more quickly. It will automatically up the stakes of your scenes.

- **Status is everything.**

The Elizabethans believed in the Chain of Being, a rigid hierarchical structure that placed Gods at the top, then angels, demons (fallen angels), stars, the moon, kings, princes, nobles, men, wild animals, domesticated animals, trees, other plants, and finally stones and minerals. This means that when an ordinary citizen overthrows a king -- a theme we see in *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Richard II*, to name a few -- he is committing an unnatural act that goes against God.

Like it or not, those rigid social structures are still in play today. At the top of the NFL’s pecking order is Commissioner Roger Goodell, who is responsible for hiring employees, negotiating contracts, and disciplining individuals. Goodell is often subject to criticism, most recently for his lack of attention to domestic violence committed by players in his league. When ESPN columnist Bill Simmons went on a profanity-laced rant on a podcast where he called Goodell a

liar, he was immediately suspended by his employer for three weeks. The message was clear: do not go against the chain of command.

Status is fluid -- one's status in the workplace might instantly shift upon entering one's home -- but ever present. Define the status relationships in your Shakespeare productions: make them specific (ie, "Princess of France" might become more of a Queen Bee/Blair Waldorf type in a contemporary setting of *Love's Labour's Lost*) and define the consequences of defying them. If one overthrows said contemporary Princess, will he be fired? Socially ostracized? Bankrupted? Sentenced to death? Status speaks to stakes; if the former is vague, the latter will be unclear or nonexistent.

- **Know the stadium's configuration.**

Speaking of status, the social rank of Shakespeare's patrons was clear based on their placement within the theatre. The poorest audience members, known as groundlings, stood closest to the stage; nobles sat further back, on cushions; the richest folk would watch the plays from a chair onstage itself. Royalty was not present at public performances (that scene in *Shakespeare in Love* where Queen Elizabeth appears at a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* is total fiction), but text that addressed them or the Gods were sent up, to the back of the house (closest to the heavens). In contrast, crude, dirty jokes were delivered down, directly to the groundlings. Like Green Bay Packers players who leap into the stands at Lambeau Field to celebrate with their fans after scoring a touchdown, Shakespeare's actors played to their crowds. The result is a strengthened bond between actor and audience or athlete and fan.

Kevin Coleman of Shakespeare & Company is famous for saying, "The fourth wall is a recent invention, and I don't think it's a very good one." Elizabethan audiences didn't go to *see* a play (oftentimes the groundlings couldn't see much!), they went to *hear* one. Shakespeare wrote plays designed to put the language in the audience's lap. With this type of theatre, more than any other, you'll want to carefully consider the configuration of your audience so that it's clear when actors are engaging with patrons as opposed to their scene partners. You'll find that proscenium theatres are more challenging -- though not impossible -- for this kind of work. Consider thrust, alley, promenade, in the round... something that allows the actors to see the audience and vice versa. Remember: these plays were performed in broad daylight; the actor-audience relationship was inherently in play!

To add to Coleman's thesis -- house lights are a recent convention, and I don't think they're a particularly good one, either. (One could say the same about stadium lights as well.)

Thoughts on New Plays

- **College coaches don't win Heismans.**

There are no playoffs in college football. The team's regular season record determines its ranking, which then determines which teams play in which bowl games. There's no room for error; one marginal loss can mean the difference between the prestigious Rose Bowl and the far-lesser Tostitos Fiesta Bowl (which sounds more like a snack item, just sayin'). The same goes for the first production of a new play -- reviews are essential in determining the play's future life.

For you, as a director or coach, this means that there's a lot of pressure on everyone involved to succeed, from casting to design to individual performances. Your job is to raise the bar for your team's performance without adding to that pressure. The first step to doing this is to remove your ego as much as possible. The first production of a new play isn't about showcasing the director's vision of it; it's about showing off the play itself.

Great college football coaches work their way up the ranks by setting their star players up for success; when those players reach the professional level, their coaches quickly follow suit. College coaches don't win Heismans and directors' tireless work on new plays often goes unnoticed in reviews. Your job is to set your people up for success, to manage the play *and* your relationship to the playwright.

When you excel at both tasks, people will take notice.

- **When you get lost (and you will), review the fundamentals.**

New plays are moving targets, and it can be challenging to keep your eye on the ball when so much is in flux. Working on a new play is forging new territory -- but that doesn't mean you have to re-invent the wheel in order to navigate it. When teams are losing focus, great coaches don't overthink the problem; they revisit the fundamentals.

For football players, that means reviewing basic footwork and passing routes; for directors, it looks like basic text analysis. Tools like beat breakdowns and dramatic structure can quickly go out the window. Perhaps they feel too much like "homework," perhaps it's simply too much to track when pages are flying right and left. When you lose sight of the field, remember -- the game itself hasn't changed. Asking simple, obvious-seeming questions like, "Who's the protagonist?" and "What does s/he want in this scene? Does s/he get it?" can unlock a complicated play.

Playwrights are great at writing plays but aren't always great at talking about them. Don't be afraid to ask your collaborators stupid questions. They will often reveal intelligent answers.

Thoughts on Musicals

- **Trust your assistant coaches.**

Chicago Bears head coach Mark Trestman oversees a coaching staff of 19, including offensive and defensive coordinators, specialists on positions such as quarterbacks and tight ends, strength and conditioning specialists, and quality control. Directors who work on musicals have a similarly expansive staff, including a music director, choreographer, and possibly vocal coaches, composers and/or lyricists, an expanded design team, and several assistants. Typically, there's a lot more noise in the room when working on a musical than there is when working on a straight play, and that can feel overwhelming.

But here's the thing: 1) those people are here to make the production better and 2) your boss (the owner/artistic director) is paying a lot of money for them to do their jobs. So set any ego aside that you might have about people liking them better than you and **let your colleagues do their jobs**. The way you collaborate with your production staff in the rehearsal room signals to your cast how they should collaborate with you. If your choreographer asks, "Can I try something...?" in the room and you say, "Absolutely!" your cast will feel comfortable coming to you with suggestions as well. If you shut the choreographer down, then they'll become obedient -- and less collaborative -- followers.

With musicals (generally) comes more money, and with more money -- as Notorious B.I.G. informed us -- comes more problems. Most of these problems can be avoided through ample communication about 1) the story and 2) the schedule.

- **Communicate the game strategy in as many different ways as possible.**

NFL games come with a lot more "noise" than high school football and large musicals garner more attention than smaller, straight plays. At the end of the day, the basic principles behind both remain the same -- win the game and tell the story.

Great coaches spend time with their staff, in group meetings as well as 1:1, to make sure that all of his assistant coaches are familiar with his game strategy and their place in it. Directors must do the same thing, speaking in terms of "story." The trick is, specialists in both fields tend to speak their own unique languages. Your job is not to understand the nuances of their specialty -- your job is to communicate the big picture of your plan in a language they understand.

Using phrases such as "the play is about X..." or "this moment should feel Y..." that are *goal-oriented*, not *detail-oriented* will prove most successful. When you, as a team leader, get involved in the nitty-gritty particulars of another specialist's field, you signal to them, "I think I can do your job better than you," and they will shut down.

- **Stack that schedule.**

After trust and communication have been established, the next thing your collaborators will need is time in the room. They can't rush their jobs any more than you can. Musicals require lots of time with the music director up front. It's impossible to stage a scene in a play when the actor doesn't know what s/he's saying; same goes for musicals, where the songs are a major part of the text. The catch is, your music director (and choreographer and vocal coach and and and...), like

you, will want as much time with the company as they can get. They're not being selfish, they just want to do their jobs well! In order to satisfy your team's goals for the production, you have to become a scheduling wizard. And if that's not one of your strong suits, then you need to empower your stage manager to become one.

You'll want everyone in the same room at the beginning of the process, when you're building your vocabulary for the production. After that, you'll be better served by dividing and conquering. Football coaches can easily double stack practices, as their teams neatly divide into offense and defense. Your musical might not. *West Side Story* and *The Last Five Years* are easy to schedule, because character(s) are often grouped together throughout the play; the Jets can work music in one room while the Sharks dance in another. A musical with characters constantly weaving in and out, like *Sunday in the Park with George* might be harder, particularly when the title character is in almost every scene.

Squint at the structure of a musical before you get into the rehearsal room -- if it looks logistically complex, that's all the more reason to start planning ahead. Don't map out the entire schedule (it will quickly fall apart as you get off schedule), but if you can figure out which scenes can be rehearsed simultaneously, your whole team will be happier and more efficient.

Thoughts on Assistant Directing

- **Your job is not to direct the play; your job is to help the director see the play.**

Good assistant directors work like offensive coordinators. Traditionally, the offensive coordinator sits up in a booth where he can view the entire field and reports to the head coach what he can see from above. The head coach is in the trenches, on the sideline; the offensive coordinator has a more removed view, which enables him to view the big picture more objectively. Because of his distance from the field, he can see things the head coach cannot. His job is to keep the coach wise from afar.

If possible, this is one of the best ways to assist another director. While it can be tempting to stick by her side in the trenches, you're often more helpful if you can offer up a different point of view. If she's sitting in the front of the house, see if you can scope out sightlines from the back or sides. If she's zoomed in on detail work in a scene, take a step back and watch it like a first time audience member. Find your director's blind spots and get comfortable sitting in them.

- **Anticipate the head coach's needs.**

All great assistants know how to make themselves invaluable, and the best ones excel at anticipating their boss' needs. This means you'll have to figure out how they like to work (with or without them telling you), and then set them up for success. If you know that the offensive line needs to review blocking patterns before the head coach can have a scrimmage, make sure that happens. If you know that an actor needs help with lines before s/he can be useful in scene work, offer to help make that happen.

Be thorough and efficient, but make your effort as inconspicuous as possible. (Befriending stage management will help a LOT.) Assisting is often a thankless job. After you have gone to school on another director's process, take a moment to (as objectively as possible) evaluate how they work. Ask yourself, "What would I steal? What part of that process wouldn't work for me?" Avoid qualitative judgments -- the goal is not to figure out what good or bad habits the director had, but rather what tools might work for you. Assisting someone who works quite differently than you do is often more helpful than someone who has a similar directing style.

- **Coaches need pep talks too.**

Leaders like directors and football coaches tend to have relatively small peer groups. "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown," as Shakespeare would say. They have lots of people below them who need their support and guidance, but rarely is there someone above the director or head coach who can give them an encouraging word or two when needed. This is where an assistant director can make herself invaluable.

That "three weeks of yes, one week of no" adage that I mentioned earlier? Directors need to hear that kind of affirmation as well, and they can only hear it from you. For every *brilliant*, game-changing suggestion you might have (and we know you have them), offer up three genuine compliments first. You'll find that if you lead with positive feedback, the director will often solicit your critical advice as well. That's your in. Establish trust and build rapport first; it will pay off in dividends later.

Getting the Job (and the One After That)

- **Your first season counts the most.**

The sports and theatre communities are basically very small -- you'll find yourself crossing paths with the same people over and over again. Because of this, *your reputation must be golden*. Directors and head coaches must excel at managing and being managed; a thorny personality will not help with either of those tasks.

Your first season with a new team or theatre company will set the precedent for the rest of your working relationship. Your win-loss record in that first year is paramount, but even more so is the rapport you build with your colleagues. If you win them over, they will clamor for your return, even if the scoreboard (or reviews and house counts) left something to be desired.

- **Communicate with your team owner (and then some).**

The aforementioned rapport stems from consistent and charming communication, both up and down the food chain. Managing up -- communicating with your superiors -- is inherent to the work. Check in consistently with the person who hired you, make sure they have what they need from you, etc. Perhaps even more important -- and often overlooked -- is managing across and below.

Who makes a sports team function like a well-oiled machine? The assistant coaches, equipment managers, and janitorial staff. Smart coaches befriend them all. Who are the people who actually run a theatre company? The stage managers, production managers, dramaturgs, and interns -- for starters. The people who know the day-to-day operations of a team are its lynchpins, and it's essential that they receive your respect and attention. They can ensure smooth sailing or the exact opposite for your production. Make sure it's the former by checking in with them as well.

Ask your stage manager, "Is there anything you need from me?" at the end of every rehearsal. Invite the tech staff into your rehearsal room. When you communicate with your colleagues and invite them into your process, you signal, "I respect your opinion." Spread that message far and wide. As BJ Jones would say, "Make 'em happy to see ya and sorry to see you go."

- **Learn to apologize.**

You will mess up at some point in the process. You just will. But what will define your process is not what mistakes you make but rather *how you recover from them*.

When you screw up, say, "I'm sorry." Don't offer excuses or assign blame. *Do* explain what you've learned and/or promise to work differently in the future. *Do* ask for forgiveness. *Do not ignore the problem*.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell took much heat for claiming that he wasn't aware of the a wealth of domestic abuse cases in his league. Inevitably, this blew up in his face. Let's all aim to be better than Goodell, and nip problems in the bud. A five minute apology in rehearsal is preferred to a three hour conflict negotiation during tech.

- **And finally...**

We had a saying at Carnegie Mellon: *don't be a dick*. Few professional artists or athletes make it to the “big leagues” where we receive a living wage. Most of us do what we do because we love the work *and* the people who come with it. Invest in personal and professional relationships with your colleagues. I’m not saying that you have to be BFFs with all of them, but go the extra mile and treat people like... well, *people*. Ask about the dramaturg’s family and celebrate the interns’ birthday. Talk sports (or other shared interests) in addition to talking shop. Signal “I like you,” as well as “I respect you.”

If you’re committed to a life in theatre or sports, then you know that the process is a long haul. A marathon, not a sprint. Do the work, do it well, and do it with people you like. Success will follow.