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# Theatre Directing Without an MFA: A Practical and Systematic Approach for Directors in Kuala Lumpur

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# **Theatre Directing Without and MFA: A Practical and Systematic Approach for Directors in Kuala Lumpur**

**A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
THE THEATRE SCHOOL AT DEPAUL UNIVERSITY**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE MASTER OF FINE ARTS DEGREE IN DIRECTING**

**BY**

**KELVIN WONG**

**2015**

**CHICAGO, IL**

## PREFACE

### Beginnings

After graduating with a degree in psychology in 2008, I worked at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre as director-in-residence for three years. I joined the institution not only because it was an opportunity to sharpen my directing craft. It also helped me earned a living.

I was given the liberty to choose my projects as long as I aimed to bring new audiences<sup>1</sup> into our theatres. Just six months in and two productions<sup>2</sup> later, I noted a few recurring observations on how I worked as a new director. I realized that:

- I possessed a clear spatial and visual sense in terms of how a scene should look like, so most of my rehearsals were spent telling actors specifically what to do and where to go;
- I worked instinctually rather than factually. A lot of my directorial decisions were based on what I felt was right instead of relying on clues imbedded in the text;
- Through improvisational exercises<sup>3</sup>, I rallied together ensembles well although I didn't know how to bridge the games we played with the scenes we did; and
- I subconsciously did the acting work for my actors – all they had to do was learn their lines and choreography and regurgitate them during performance.

New audiences flocked to my shows and I quickly garnered a following. These reinforced my use of the approach above for another year. I was known as the young director with an impeccable visual eye who worked well with large groups of young people. The plays I chose continued to reflect these aesthetics<sup>4</sup>. I thought I was serving my craft well.

### Wake-up Call

My directing trajectory took a turning point when I attended The Instant Café Theatre's production of Shannon Shah's *Air Con* in 2009. The established theatre company<sup>5</sup> rented the black box at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre and ran for two weeks. Besides being naturally awed by several moments in the play which were visually exciting, I was also surprisingly drawn to:

- A straightforward but painful story about four boys who grew up in a local and dysfunctional boarding school;

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<sup>1</sup> A person of Malaysian descent who hasn't been to the theatre in the past five years.

<sup>2</sup> I directed David Mamet's *The Poet and the Rent* and the first episode of *INDICINELIVE!*, a devised sketch-comedy revue that eventually became highly successful with the Kuala Lumpur theatre-going community.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the exercises I used for ensemble building came from Viola Spolin's improvisational approach.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Sharman McDonald's *After Juliet* was a bloodbath sequel of *Romeo and Juliet* usually produced in high schools because of its large cast.

<sup>5</sup> Established in the early 90s, The Instant Café Theatre Company (Jo Kukathas was Founder and current Artistic Director) produces satire and original writing and has a less mainstream slant compared to other existing theatre companies in Kuala Lumpur.

- Characters young and old who spoke, moved and interacted like human beings;
- The intricate web of relationships the protagonist was caught in; and
- The subtle political commentary about how repressive our education system is and its ramifications on the society we live in.

The play evoked sensations I've not felt as an audience for as long as I could remember. Not only did I empathize with the characters in the play – *Air Con* reflected my personal experience growing up in the shackles of the Malaysian education system. Reviews that came in were astoundingly positive and they played to packed houses over an extended run.

My director colleagues<sup>6</sup> and I were envious. We've not had such responses for any of our shows, more so as direct employees at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. I set myself the task to unearth the missing link in my work. I wanted to affect audiences the way that *Air Con* did. Clearly, visual spectacles alone weren't enough.

### **New Leaf**

I attempted to be a better director by reading books on directing. I borrowed writings from Stanislavski<sup>7</sup>, William Ball's *A Sense of Direction* and Declan Donnellan's *The Actor and the Target* from my alma mater's library<sup>8</sup>. These books delved into character work and on-stage relationships which were new to me. Half confused, half inspired and loaded with new questions, I attempted to apply these notes during my rehearsal of Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs*. It didn't take me long to realize that:

- Making sense out of a new directorial note is one thing. Understanding it and knowing how to successfully apply it during rehearsals with untrained actors is another;
- I was using these notes on an absurdist play that didn't have rounded characters, a through line or human-like relationships;
- I was attempting to fix patches (the *hows* and *whats*) rather than question what I was doing as a director from a larger perspective (the *why*). I needed a systematic overhaul in terms of approaching the creative process from beginning till end. I didn't know where to start;
- If I wanted to improve on my craft, I needed close and constant mentorship with a group of people who knew what they were doing.

It dawned on me that I had an even larger dilemma. As a full-time employee, I needed to continually churn out productions that brought in new audiences. I didn't have much time to go over my books, let alone make use of new notes during our very short rehearsal periods.

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<sup>6</sup> There were four directors-in-residence working at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre at that time.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Benedetti's *Stanislavski and the Actor* (1998), Konstantin Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* (1937).

<sup>8</sup> The Tun Hussein Onn Library at Sunway University, Subang Jaya houses the country's most up-to-date collection of theatre studies books.

*The Chairs* turned out to be less successful<sup>9</sup> compared to my previous productions. I was fuzzy about the revamped direction I was attempting to take. My actors were still as clueless by the time the production opened. I left this experience with two choices about my directing career. I either:

- Gave up on what I was attempting to learn and stuck to what I was already good at, i.e. visual storytelling with large groups of people; or
- Gave up my residency at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre to sharpen my directing craft.

I applied to several graduate schools a few months later<sup>10</sup> but didn't succeed. I stayed on at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre for another year before trying again. I got into four schools around the globe<sup>11</sup> in the fall of 2012.

### Discovery

I chose The Theatre School at DePaul University because its MFA directing program aligned best with my goals as an emerging director. I wanted to:

- Learn the nuts and bolts of stage directing from humanistic, character-based and relationship perspectives like what I saw in *Air Con*;
- Expand my director toolbox in order to take on a wider repertoire of plays<sup>12</sup>;
- Challenge and expand my aesthetics in visual and physical storytelling; and
- **Investigate a practical and systematic directing approach that I can bequeath to up-and-coming directors in Kuala Lumpur who may not have the time and resources to attend graduate school.**

This paper maps out my discoveries from six productions<sup>13</sup> and multiple hours of classroom practice<sup>14</sup> over three years. These are laid out in the form of notes similar to Hauser

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<sup>9</sup> Audience turnout decreased over time, audiences brought up during the talkbacks that they were perpetually confused throughout the play.

<sup>10</sup> This was end 2010 – I was hoping to be enrolled by the fall of 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Carnegie Mellon's School of Drama, UCLA's School of Film, TV and Theatre, The Theatre School at DePaul University and The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

<sup>12</sup> By wider repertoire I meant plays from different time periods, writing styles and geographical locations across the globe. Throughout my graduate school career, I directed scenes and plays from Ancient Greece, Russia, Japan, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom and the United States.

<sup>13</sup> In order: Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* (2013), Hideki Noda and Colin Teevan's *The Bee* (2014), Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (2014), Douglas Carter Beane's *The Little Dog Laughed* (2014), Steven Berkoff's adaptation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2015), Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2015).

<sup>14</sup> From scene study classes – we explored plays by [Tennessee] Williams in our first year and [Anton] Chekhov & the Greeks in our second.

and Reich's book<sup>15</sup> for easy reference. I hope to share these findings with theatre-makers in Kuala Lumpur in order to:

- Elevate standards of local production practice;
- Create a more vibrant, competitive and eclectic theatre scene; and
- Inspire new local directors to discover their own directorial approaches.

## **PART ONE. The Starting Point: Selecting a Play**

**Begin with why.** One night after the performance of Sharman Macdonald's *After Juliet*<sup>16</sup> in 2009, a seasoned Malaysian director came up to me and asked why I chose to direct the play in Kuala Lumpur. I couldn't string together an answer because I didn't clearly know why myself. I asked him what he thought about the play. He told me that it lacked direction and emotional depth<sup>17</sup>. I remember articulating to the nines *what* my actors should do and *how* they should move during rehearsals<sup>18</sup>, so his candid statement baffled me.

It wasn't until graduate school that I encountered the same question – the one beginning with why – again. As I prepared for my first studio production<sup>19</sup>, I discovered that the response<sup>20</sup> to *why* a play is chosen spawns a clear direction of the piece. Knowing *why* guides the *hows* and *whats* of the creative process. I realized I've been working backwards all the while. Figuring out the *hows* and *whats* of a production without knowing *why* in the first place is akin to stepping into a car and driving around a city aimlessly.

Of a few final selections, I ended up with Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* because its totalitarian tone resonated with the dire political situation of Malaysia in 2013. I saw myself in the shoes of the protagonist who went against the punitive corporate institution she worked in. I wanted audiences to empathize with a rebel and spark their own personal rebellions. I wasn't sure how each rehearsal was going to turn out but my team and I knew where we wanted to go. Whenever there was a creative roadblock, we went back to *why* we needed to tell the story.

A captivating *why* also informs production design. In *Contractions*, we created a geometrically rigid world that lacked curves and colour. Red and black formed the majority of the palette. This environment succeeded in suffocating the protagonist and in turn, audiences.

Of all the plays that are available out there, why put up the one you've chosen, right here in Kuala Lumpur and right now in 2015?

<sup>15</sup> Hauser, Frank & Reich, Russell. (2006). *Notes on Directing: 130 Lessons in Leadership from the Director's Chair*. RCR Creative Press.

<sup>16</sup> Which I directed at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre's black box with a cast made up entirely of new and untrained Malaysian actors.

<sup>17</sup> Similar statements came up during audience feedback.

<sup>18</sup> I continued to use this prescriptive method of directing because it was the only way I knew. No one challenged this approach.

<sup>19</sup> Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* ran in Room 403 at The Theatre School from April 23 – 28 2013.

<sup>20</sup> This can be personally, politically and/or aesthetically-driven. Brecht in *Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (1964) states that the creation of a complete theatre experience combines all three.

**Who is your audience?** It was impossible not to have audiences in mind as I figured out the reasons behind mounting a particular scene or play. These reasons (the *whys*) must aim to resonate with the majority of audiences who will fill up the theatre. In the last three years, all my projects played to an audience of mostly students<sup>21</sup> from the university. I assumed that that these tech-savvy individuals grew up in the 90s and were force-fed with unending stimuli<sup>22</sup>. I also assumed they came with shorter attention spans and a greater appreciation for visual and auditory elements (as opposed to text) compared to their older counterparts.

I chose Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*<sup>23</sup> as my final studio project because I was fascinated by the playwright's nonlinear approach to writing. The text read like an expanded piece of poetry. There were no specific parts assigned to characters nor were there stage directions. There was plenty of room to create. I wanted our audience to empathize with the protagonist's struggle of dealing with depression before she eventually commits suicide.

Before our creative process, my team and I watched videos of previous productions and found superficial (and often condescending) interpretations of depressed individuals. Most involved actors screaming and shouting, redolent of caricatures of the insane in stereotypical mental institutions. Given the effect I wanted to create, there was little chance that our audiences would care for with such behaviour for over an hour.

We decided that our protagonist should portray a rounded human being whose mind shifts back and forth between surreal realms of ecstasy and grief. These shifts were supported by kaleidoscopic images of pop culture<sup>24</sup> that audiences recognized. Their senses were assaulted by ever-changing lights and sound. I also infused Eastern instruments<sup>25</sup> into the design to transport audiences further into a foreign place. Like the protagonist, I wanted audiences to find comfort in silence, which only came in small doses unexpectedly<sup>26</sup>.

A remount of this exact production would work almost as well in Kuala Lumpur, given the context of English-speaking audiences who are urban and globalized. I would replace familiar-sounding Eastern instruments with a more tribal soundscape to achieve the similar effect of transporting audiences into a foreign realm. I would also recast the protagonist with a Malaysian actor whose accent and vocal inflections are more familiar.

Knowing your audience and how they perceive our world<sup>27</sup> is crucial in the play/scene-selection process, what you intend to achieve, and the creative decisions that follow after. Never take young audiences in Kuala Lumpur for granted – they are smarter than you think.

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<sup>21</sup> Majority were American, urban, ethnically and gender-diverse, between the ages of 18 – 25.

<sup>22</sup> From the media, advertisements and the Internet.

<sup>23</sup> This production was presented in Room 418 at The Theatre School from April 13 – 19 2015.

<sup>24</sup> In *4.48 Psychosis*, the protagonist caught herself in the bonus round of a gameshow, a fight sequence from a video game, and was involuntarily part of a talk show ala Jerry Springer.

<sup>25</sup> 8 out of 24 scenes incorporated the Eastern-Malaysian gamelan and the Chinese erhu.

<sup>26</sup> Audience feedback was positive – most appreciated the fresh take on depression.

<sup>27</sup> While this is hypothetical, aim towards hypothetical accuracy as opposed to completely taking your audience for granted.

**Compare versions/translations of the same play.** The six plays I worked on at school were either new or recent writings (*Contractions, The Bee, The Little Dog Laughed, 4.48 Psychosis*) or works from the Western canon with no other versions – if they did they were obscure and unattainable (*Marat/Sade, Metamorphosis*). When I explored the Greeks and Chekhov in my second-year scene study class, I encountered various English translations (of the original text) from different epochs within the last decade. A detailed comparison of these texts revealed a few discoveries.

For instance, Jebb’s translation<sup>28</sup> of Sophocles’ *Antigone*<sup>29</sup> differed from Kitto’s<sup>30</sup> in terms of subject stress. In Creon’s response to Haemon’s first and only entrance, notice how Antigone’s fate is brought up first in the first translation, while Creon’s awareness of Haemon’s anger precedes the second:

CREON: My son, hearing the fixed doom of thy betrothed, art thou come in rage against thy father? (Jebb)

CREON: My son: You have not come in rage against your father because your bride must die? (Kitto)

In a different section, Fitts & Fitzgerald’s translation<sup>31</sup> was clearer on logos (pragmatic reasoning) while Kitto’s version played up the pathos (arousal of sympathy), exemplified below:

CREON: Do you want me to show myself weak before the people?  
Or the break my sword? No, and I will not.  
The woman dies.  
I suppose she’ll plead “family ties.” Well, let her.  
If I permit my own family to rebel,  
How shall I earn the world’s obedience?  
Show me the man who keeps his house in hand,  
He’s fit for public authority. (Fitts/Fitzgerald)

CREON: I will not make myself a liar. I  
Have caught her; I will kill her. Let her sing  
Her hymns to Sacred Kinship! If I breed  
Rebellion in the house, then it is certain  
There’ll be no lack of rebels out of doors. (Kitto)

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<sup>28</sup> Jebb, RC. *Antigone by Sophocles*. Retrieved online from <http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/antigone.html>.

<sup>29</sup> I directed the confrontation scene between King Creon and his son Haemon, right before Antigone (Haemon’s lover) was banished from Thebes. The scene was presented in Room 305 at The Theatre School.

<sup>30</sup> Kitto, Humphrey Davy Findley. (1994). *Sophocles. Antigone. Oedipus the King. Electra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Fitts, Dudley & Fitzgerald, Robert. (1939). *The Antigone of Sophocles*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company.



Then there was the question of which version read and sounded more contemporary for present-day audiences. Also notice how Haemon response is more direct (and delicious) in the first version, compared to his passive aggression in the second:

CREON: I'll hear no chatter from a woman's plaything.

HAEMON: Would you have all the talk, and hear no answer? (Kitto)

CREON: You girlstruck fool, don't play at words with me!

HAEMON: I am sorry. You prefer silence. (Fitts/Fitzgerald)

Directorially, I wanted to highlight Creon and Haemon's struggle as father and son in addition to their default archetypes as ruler and rebel. As I don't have a natural affinity for language, I found it helpful to read all three versions out loud. Keeping my audience<sup>32</sup> in mind, I chose Kitto's version because it was the most blunt, current and relationship-driven. My actors<sup>33</sup> lapped up this translation, which turned out to be one of the best scenes I presented in school.

Scrutinizing performance texts in this manner pointed out another mistake with my production of *After Juliet*. The two-hour-long play is constructed using heightened (albeit contemporary) language that makes it a popular choice for secondary schools in the United Kingdom. My actors and I were untrained and unfamiliar with heightened text<sup>34</sup>, yet we trudged along hoping we would get somewhere. We didn't. One of our roadblocks was the play itself, which we unfortunately didn't address.

Bearing in mind the context of multilingual and multicultural Kuala Lumpur, does your chosen text line up with your audience, actors and the direction you want to take? Are there better alternatives? What can you learn from various versions of the same play, if they are available?

**Pithiness is key to a directorial vision.** I first encountered the instruction to succinctly articulate my directorial vision for a sample play when I applied for graduate school. Like Polonius in *Hamlet*<sup>35</sup>, I meander a lot whenever I get the chance to write or speak. This often resulted in visions that were vague and lacked specificity<sup>36</sup>.

My professors challenged me to impose a word limit on myself. I rethought twice before I spoke or wrote. I used simpler vocabulary and avoided clutter as much as I could. Thankfully, it became easier after numerous practice attempts<sup>37</sup> to the point where it's now second nature.

This instruction evolved into a tool I found useful in the pre-production process. I forced myself to look at plays from a wider lens. I halted my obsession with minute detail for the time

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<sup>32</sup> Again, majority were American, urban, ethnically and gender-diverse, between the ages of 18 – 25.

<sup>33</sup> We worked with hired alumni actors from The Theatre School.

<sup>34</sup> Theatre, drama and literature isn't formally taught in the Malaysian K-12 education system.

<sup>35</sup> Ophelia's father in *Hamlet*, infamously known for his tendency to beat around the bush and not get to the point.

<sup>36</sup> I received the same feedback from Elizabeth Portes and Damon Kiely in different classroom sessions throughout our first year.

<sup>37</sup> We focused on directorial analyses in our first year and pitched suggestions for plays we wanted to direct in TTS. Succinctness was an integral part of our play-pitching process.

being. I discovered that a simple, general and straightforward directorial vision sparks off healthy creative conversation between the director and his or her team. Actors and designers (see next section) jump into their work quicker when they are clear about where the production needs to go. It also helps with remembering – no one recalls long and windy instructions.

As a rule of thumb, a clear directorial vision consists of several gestures and images that encapsulates the entire production. A combination of adjectives with a specific genre or style<sup>38</sup> (or a combination thereof) is helpful.

For instance, after observing videos of Japanese Butō dancers and B-grade horror films, I decided that Steven Berkoff's *Metamorphosis*<sup>39</sup> was a “grotesque and surreal memory play about the challenges of nonconformity”. Grotesqueness was already present in the text – it suggested how actors should move in this play. I complemented it with the surreal to further thrust the world into greater imbalance in terms of scenic, costume, lighting and sound designs. I chose memory play because I wanted to explore a dreamlike storytelling approach. Nonconformity was the central problem of the characters in the play.

There's greater room to create when a team works from big to small. It's still too early to expect specificity and intricacy from actors or designers at this point.

**Selecting a Play: Recap.** Before moving onto the next section, ensure that you:

- Articulate clearly *why* you've chosen a specific play to be performed in Kuala Lumpur right now;
- Address the majority of your audience are as well as their cultural, social and political perceptions and your intended effect on them;
- Select a version of the play that fits your direction and resonates with your target audiences; and
- Decide on a succinct directorial vision that will creatively guide you as well as your designers and actors in the near future.

## PART TWO. Going Deeper: Unlocking the Text

I recall intuitively directing *The Chairs*<sup>40</sup> without in-depth knowledge, whether factual or dramaturgical, about the written text. This made our rehearsals frustrating<sup>41</sup> as creative

<sup>38</sup> Genres/styles can come from the theatre (drama, comedy, tragicomedy, farce, physical theatre, guerilla theatre, environmental theatre, epic theatre, musical theatre, the post-dramatic, Commedia, Grand Guignol, etc.) and/or TV/film (romance, thriller, documentary, action, adventure, docu-drama, silent film, fantasy, noir, etc.).

<sup>39</sup> *Metamorphosis* was presented on the Fullerton Stage at The Theatre School and received full production support. It ran from February 6 – 15 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* was presented at the Indicine at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre from November 18 – 24 2010.

<sup>41</sup> One of my actors sat me out during rehearsals one day to express her frustration with the creative process. She didn't know what she was doing and couldn't keep up with my creative indecisiveness.

decisions were made on an arbitrary basis. Many hours were spent on composition<sup>42</sup> and blocking<sup>43</sup> – even these lacked consistency because textual support was scarce. The play adhered strictly to the absurdist theatre movement<sup>44</sup> which made our predicament worse. It wasn't so much that I didn't trust the text. I just didn't know how to unlock it.

Textual analysis for directors (as opposed to actors, designers and scholars of literature) was an entirely new language I spent months honing at graduate school. I discovered that intuitive creative decisions – ones in line with the direction of the piece – must spawn from factual information imbedded in the text. With the exception of new-play development<sup>45</sup> and the intentional deconstruction of the written word<sup>46</sup>, the text is the one and only constant in the playmaking process. It's where directors, actors and designers return to whenever they are stuck.

The following maps out several methods in unlocking the text that can be applied to a variety of already-written plays. These methods are laid out chronologically. I'll use my thesis production of Steven Berkoff's *Metamorphosis*<sup>47</sup> as examples.

**What's the dramatic question?** A dramatic question is driven by plot and centers on the driving action of the protagonist. It hooks audiences in on the dramatic action and upholds their interest throughout the duration of a play. A typical dramatic question begins with "Will he/she..." and is answered during the climax of the play. Plays written from a modernist perspective naturally contain one or more dramatic questions.

After reading your selected play several times<sup>48</sup>, choose a character with a sequence of actions<sup>49</sup> that resonate best with the story you want to tell. This is where you return, again, to your initial *why*. He or she may not always have the most lines and/or stage time. This character is your protagonist whom you want audiences to track. Next, carve out a dramatic question in relation to this protagonist. All future creative decisions must fall back on this question.

Here's an example. A close reading of *Metamorphosis* revealed two likely protagonists: Gregor, a travelling salesperson who wakes up one morning<sup>50</sup> already transformed into an insect, or his family<sup>51</sup> who depend on him for bread and butter. I wanted to investigate the issue of nonconformity (my *why*) and zoomed into the actions of both protagonists from this

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<sup>42</sup> The visual frame of any given scene in a play.

<sup>43</sup> Deciding where and how actors should move in space.

<sup>44</sup> A European writing style popular in the 1950s where archetypal characters often cannot effectively communicate with each other in a hopeless, cyclical and illogical world.

<sup>45</sup> Where text evolves in a symbiotic relationship with the rehearsal process.

<sup>46</sup> A post-modernist/post-dramatic technique which isn't covered in this thesis.

<sup>47</sup> This production was my graduation thesis with full design support. It was presented on the Fullerton stage at The Theatre School from February 7 – 15 2015.

<sup>48</sup> I find it helpful to first skim through the play quickly without interruption. After a break, I'll read it again closely for detail. After another break, I'll read the play one more time at a pace in which I imagine the play to be performed on stage.

<sup>49</sup> Or a through line, a term coined by Stanislavski; a sequence of actions that make up a character's super objective in a play. Also see note on unleashing the spine on page 12.

<sup>50</sup> The play begins here and moves forward, with occasional flashbacks of Gregor's pre-insect life.

<sup>51</sup> Gregor's family consists of Mr. Samsa, his father; Mrs. Samsa, his mother; and Greta, his younger sister.

lens. Gregor is the agent of nonconformity who, after struggling to return to his human form, accepts his physical state. His family, on the other hand, struggles to keep up with Gregor's metamorphosis – every attempt to contain him backfires.

The driving action of dealing with nonconformity was more dynamic and interesting than the advocacy of it. The former option also allowed me to explore the issue in greater depth. I chose the Samsa family as my protagonist. For the dramatic question, I wanted audiences to ask if they would survive the ordeal: “*Will the Samsa family cope<sup>52</sup> with Gregor's radicalism?*”

In the climax of *Metamorphosis* (see next note on dramatic structure), Gregor's family concedes that Gregor is a burden and sanctions him to die alone in his room. He does. The answer to the dramatic question was a decisive no.

**Unravel the dramatic structure.** Imagine you're given the task to decode the changes that happen over a two-minute rollercoaster ride. After leaving the loading platform, at which point does the train shoot for the sky? When does it perform loops, spirals and helixes? When is the final – and the most intense – lateral drop before the train slows down and returns to the unloading platform? Now imagine running the same task, but to the text of a play. This is known as the dramatic structure.

Apart from highlighting pivotal moments that happen during a play, the dramatic structure also breaks the text down<sup>53</sup> into smaller sections so each section can be investigated more thoroughly. It's organized into eight parts<sup>54</sup> and centers on the previously-decided protagonist and his/her dramatic question.

- **Status quo:** What's the world of the play like at the very top?  
*In Metamorphosis, the Samsa family (except Gregor) wakes up to an uneventful morning. It's 6 am. It's been raining for ages. They commune for breakfast in the dining room. They live in a modest house that Gregor bought from his hard work as a travelling salesperson. No one else in the family works. Mr. Samsa is a retiree, Mrs. Samsa is a house-maker, and Greta (Gregor's younger sister) goes to school and aspires to play the violin professionally. The family depends on Gregor for money.*
- **Inciting incident:** The incident that kicks off the protagonist's dramatic action.  
*The Chief Clerk unexpectedly visits the Samsa family. He conveys to them that Gregor – for the first time in five years – did not show up to work.*
- **Rising action:** How does the protagonist achieve his or her goal after the inciting incident?  
Use this form: [Protagonist] attempts to [dramatic question] by...

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<sup>52</sup> “To cope” had two meanings: to cope with Gregor's deformities, and to cope with depleting financial resources, since Gregor is the sole breadwinner of the family.

<sup>53</sup> Assuming the play (as with most plays written from a modernist perspective) operates on a linear timeline, i.e. has a beginning, middle and end.

<sup>54</sup> This may vary depending on the person relaying it. The dramatic structure I use was imparted by Elizabeth Portes in 2012, who was my first professor in textual analysis and also Head of Directing at The Theatre School.

*The Samsa family (with the Chief Clerk present) attempts to cope with Gregor's radicalism by finding every possible way to get Gregor out of his room.*

- **Turning point:** A point mid-way in the text where a pivotal incident occurs that forces the protagonist to change the way he or she pursues his or her dramatic action.  
*Gregor eventually gets out of his room, but in the form of a grotesque insect-like creature.*
- **Falling action:** How does the protagonist achieve his or her goal after his or her turning point? Use this form: [Protagonist] attempts to [dramatic question] by...  
*The Samsa family attempts to cope with Gregor's radicalism by tending to him in his room, while they figure out ways to financially support themselves.*
- **Oh-yay/Oh-shit moment:** The point in the text where audiences begin to know whether the protagonist's choices will or will not go well. It's too late at this point for the protagonist to turn any of his or her previously-made choices back.  
*OSM: An incensed Gregor attacks well-intentioned Mrs. Samsa and Greta who moved his possessions out of his room.*
- **Climax:** The moment when the protagonist is confronted with the reason for his or her dramatic action. This is also when the dramatic question is answered.  
*After witnessing Gregor drive the Lodgers (a source of income) out of their house, Greta tells her parents that they need to let Gregor go. Mr. and Mrs. Samsa agree. Dramatic question: Will the Samsa family cope with Gregor's radicalism? NO.*
- **New status quo:** What's the world like at the end of the play?  
*Gregor is left to die alone in his room. It has stopped raining. The Samsa family decide to take a few days off from their respective jobs. They vow to move to a smaller house and never return again.*

**Unleash the spine.** If the dramatic question highlights the protagonist's plot and story, a play's spine<sup>55</sup> zooms into the base action of the protagonist. A base action is the mother of all actions, also known as the super objective<sup>56</sup>. It's active, immediate and playable. A character's behaviour changes over time depending on the circumstances of a scene, but his or her base action remains constant throughout the play.

Why do some plays stretch beyond fifteen characters while others function on less than five? A spine also investigates how every character is an active agent in driving the protagonist's story forward. It assumes that the protagonist's journey would take a different turn even if one auxiliary character didn't exist in a play, no matter how brief his or her appearance might be. These characters either help or hinder the protagonist's spine. Sometimes a character – especially those with a longer arc – supports the spine only to oppose it later, and vice-versa.

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<sup>55</sup> This tool was also imparted by Elizabeth Portes.

<sup>56</sup> Another term by Stanislavski.

The spine for *Metamorphosis* was “to swallow deformity”. I used the verb “to swallow” specifically to suggest that the Samsa family needed to both suppress *and* endure the changes that come in order to cope. “Deformity” encapsulated several things: Gregor’s abnormal physical and behavioral states, the financial difficulty the family found themselves in, as well as social strata. The rundown for all characters in relation to the spine looked like this:

- **Dramatic question:** *Will the Samsa family cope with Gregor’s radicalism?*
- **Spine:** *To swallow deformity*
  - **Mr. Samsa** strives to swallow Gregor’s deformity by cooping Gregor up in his room indefinitely. He confronts the family’s financial deformity by getting a new job;
  - **Mrs. Samsa** strives to swallow Gregor’s deformity by caring for Gregor as if his transformation didn’t happen. She supports her husband’s decision to go to work;
  - **Greta** strives to swallow Gregor’s deformity by acknowledging that while her brother has changed physically, he is still the same person inside. She feeds him every day and encourages him to get up on his feet. She also offers to go to work to support the family;
  - **Gregor** doesn’t only experience a physically-grotesque deformity. He is also unable to verbally communicate. He witnesses his family’s deformity when they give up on him one by one. He misses his pre-deformed life;
  - **The Chief Clerk** has zero tolerance for social and physical deformity. He pushes Gregor to work despite his alleged illness, and freaks out when he sees his transformation;
  - **The Lodgers** perceive the Samsa family as socially deformed and reinforce their high status when they visit. They find Gregor’s deformity amusing and use it as a reason to not pay for their overnight stay.
- **Helpers:** *Mr. Samsa, Mrs. Samsa, Greta*
- **Hinderers:** *Gregor, The Chief Clerk, The Lodgers*

From the analysis I gathered that the Samsa family had to fend for themselves. The world of *Metamorphosis* was not on their side.

**Highlight the events.** Say you’re given the task to verbally recall the book, film or play you last read or saw. The chances of remembering every minute detail are low. What you’re more likely to successfully recall are a handful of subjective moments that stood out to you.

A similar compartmentalizing process – albeit a semi-conscious one – happens when you read through a play’s text. The analysis of which specific moments should take on greater importance, however, requires more than just intuition. Let’s call these moments events<sup>57</sup>. An event is any point in the text that affects and changes the direction of *all* characters who are present. Take the following scene as an example:

You’re sitting on the couch in your living room watching TV. The door bursts open and your best friend enters in tears. You turn the TV off and tend to your friend. He tells you that his pet dog – the one he grew up with – has died. As your friend slumps into your arms, you hear the sound of

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<sup>57</sup> I was introduced to this tool by Damon Kiely, Professor of Acting and Directing. He led three academic quarters of scene study classes where we marked out events for scenes. I’ve been using this tool for my productions since.

a chainsaw coming from the direction of the door. You ignore it and return to your friend. About fifteen seconds later, a bloody, unidentifiable woman walks in dragging the pet dog – with its head missing. Your friend passes out as you scream for help.

There are two events in this scene:

- 1) Door opens, friend enters crying
- 2) Bloody woman walks in dragging the headless dog

If the first event didn't happen, you would watch TV without a hitch. If the first event happened but the second one didn't, you would continue to console your crying friend. There are two moments that seem like events, but are not:

- 1) Your friend's announcement that his pet dog has died
- 2) The sound of the chainsaw from the door

In the first moment, the announcement merely provided more information in regards to your friend's miserable state. Your target was still your crying friend and not his dog. The sound of the chainsaw passed by you and your friend – it affected you both minimally.

Here were the events (and their effect in *Italics*) in the final act of *Metamorphosis*:

- 1) The Samsa family hears three loud knocks on their door; *they wake up from sleep and celebrate the monetary returns they foresee coming their way*
- 2) The Lodgers enter; *the Samsas, in a manner we've not seen before, kowtow to the guests and indulge them generously*
- 3) The Lodgers exit to their room to check its conditions; *the Samsas return to their normal behaviour and discuss the potential dangers Gregor could pose*
- 4) The Lodgers return and agree to stay; *the Samsas proceed and serve them dinner*
- 5) Gregor makes a loud crunching noise from his room; *the Lodgers stop eating while the Samsas panic – Greta quickly reaches for the violin and starts to play*
- 6) Gregor, enraged, bursts into the dining room; *Greta stops playing and the Lodgers stop dancing. They express their amusement, followed by disgust. The Samsas reassure them that Gregor is a harmless being*
- 7) The Lodgers refuse to pay and exit; *the Samsas slump their bodies in disappointment, while Gregor consciously chooses to not move*
- 8) Greta exclaims to the family that they need to let Gregor go; *Mr. and Mrs. Samsa agree, while Gregor crawls back to his room, defeated*
- 9) Gregor dies; *the Samsas decide to move out of the house and never return again.*

Even though the final act began with a surreal episode of Gregor's nightmare, it wasn't an event for two reasons: it had no effect on the Samsa family who were present and dramatic time was halted temporarily. All events must happen across a time continuum.

A play's inciting incident, turning point, oh shit/yay moment and climax are all events. As a rule of thumb, characters' entrances and exits are also events. This doesn't include

characters who enter stealthily to spy on others, unless they are found out. The discovery of the spy then becomes the event – not his or her entrance.

**List down the facts, drum up the questions**<sup>58</sup>. Imbedded in the text is pertinent information about the world of the play. These indisputable facts<sup>59</sup> – also known as a play’s given circumstances<sup>60</sup> – are either explicitly stated through stage directions or revealed through spoken word. These information may cover (but aren’t limited to) space, time, climate, sound, music, roles, traits, habits, appearances, social class, relationships, costume and specific uses of language<sup>61</sup>. In the first three pages<sup>62</sup> of *Metamorphosis*, I discovered that:

- Greta plays the violin (trait, habit)
- Mrs. Samsa makes her first entrance miming a sad face (appearance)
- Mr. Samsa wears clothes that resemble a mid-European tradesman (costume)
- Gregor’s family is lower middle-class (social class)
- Gregor is a smiley, amiable being (appearance)
- Clocks – and the constant sound of ticking – exist (sound, time)
- Greta is Gregor’s sister (role, relationship)
- Greta always waits up for Gregor (habit, role, relationship)
- Gregor drinks milk before he goes to bed and gets up at 4.00 am to catch the 5.00 am train every day (habit, role)
- Gregor is a commercial traveler in the cloth trade – he chose the job (role, social class)
- Mr. Samsa is constantly ill (trait)
- The Samsas rely on Gregor for bread and butter (role, relationship)
- Gregor made a picture frame with a cutout from a magazine (trait, habit)
- Gregor goes back and forth between traveling between towns and the warehouse (role)
- It’s been raining a long time (climate, space)

Facts alone, however, are like incomplete puzzle pieces. They don’t always provide the answers you need about a character or scene. Tempting as it is, it’s less helpful to fill in these blanks intuitively at this point. Instead, turn anything you don’t know yet into a question. You can and will return to them later. For example:

- How well can Greta play the violin? Where did she pick the skill up?
- Which part of Europe is the Samsa family in?
- What’s the current equivalent of lower-middle class?
- Why does Gregor hear Mrs. Samsa’s voice while he is asleep?

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<sup>58</sup> This tool was presented by Katie Mitchell in her book, *The Director’s Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (2009), Routledge, New York. We used this book in our second scene study class.

<sup>59</sup> I use the term “indisputable” to imply the world of the play as the playwright wrote it.

<sup>60</sup> Another term by Stanislavski.

<sup>61</sup> These elements that cohesively form the world of the play was taken from Elinor Fuch’s (2004) *Visit to a Small Planet*. Theater, Volume 34, Number 2. Duke University Press.

<sup>62</sup> I ran the facts and questions analysis tool on the entire play.



- Can Gregor and his family hear the constant ticking of the clock?
- Why does Greta wait up for Gregor every day?
- Is the house the Samsas live in comfortable? What's the spatial equivalent today?
- Could Gregor's liking of milk be tied to his relationship with Mrs. Samsa?
- What does the picture of the lady in the fur muff (that Gregor cut out) signify? Why did Gregor choose this picture?
- How far is the warehouse from home? How far does Gregor travel in today's equivalent?
- Why hasn't it stopped raining?
- How much time has passed in between scenes?

Ensure that the questions you ask are ones that help you gain a clearer understanding of the text. For instance, the first thing I learnt about Greta was her violin playing. There was no textual evidence of how well she played or where she picked the skill up. I turned these unknowns into questions. I was curious about how invested she was in the instrument, as Gregor – albeit inadvertently – crushes her ambition of becoming a musician later in the play. It was less helpful to question the kind of violin Greta played, her favourite violin piece or where at home she practiced the instrument. These questions had little effect on the play's dramatic action.

**Unlocking the text: Recap.** Before moving onto the next section, ensure that you carve out:

- The dramatic question that audiences hook into early in the play;
- The dramatic structure that audiences track as the play progresses;
- The play's spine that activates every character as the dramatic structure unfolds;
- The play's events that audiences string together until a cohesive story is realized; and
- The play's facts and a list of questions you need answers to to deepen your understanding about the world of the play. This is also useful in the design process (see next section).

The work up until this point merely provides the *foundation* for the imminent creative process with actors and designers. The greater you grasp the play you want to direct, the clearer the choices you and your team make when you *transition* – through rehearsals and design conferences – from page to stage<sup>63</sup>. This by no means suggest the arduous preplanning

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<sup>63</sup> Despite my training on prep work in graduate school up to this point, I didn't dive into the text as much as I should in Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*. As a result, the production – presented in Room 403 at The Theatre School from January 21 – 26 2014 – encountered several problems. Translated from German, Weiss's writing is intricate, layered (he interwove another play within the play) and highly philosophical (several scenes were political discourses). I wasn't clear about the dramatic question (and by proxy, the dramatic structure) by the time rehearsals began, so I didn't know what I wanted audiences to track. I wasn't clear about the spine either (I kept switching from one to another during rehearsals) so actors were in a constant state of confusion about how they should activate and drive their characters forward. The events, while clearer, didn't serve the plot. The result was a messy and hard-to-follow 2.5-hour production that was commendable only for its first and last images: inmates in

of every minute detail<sup>64</sup>, whether it's action on stage or the play's *mise en scène*<sup>65</sup>. Directors who do this limit themselves and their creative team from further discovery about the play. The work you have done so far must continue to evolve – imaginatively, collectively (with your team of collaborators; see next section) and most important, tangibly (during rehearsals and subsequently on stage).

### **PART THREE. Assembling the World of the Play: The Design Process**

I came from a directing background where I also functioned as overall production designer<sup>66</sup>. This was (and still is) often the case with smaller theatre companies in Kuala Lumpur operating on a shoestring budget. The severe lack of funds made it difficult to commission professional theatre designers in the city and there weren't many to begin with.

The shouldering of greater responsibility had positive and negative effects. Through trial and error over several years, I picked up the crafts of scenic, costume and sound designs on my own<sup>67,68</sup>. This strengthened my role as an auteur director where I depended mostly on myself to achieve the effects I wanted on stage. I grew a particularly strong ear for sound design to the point of “hearing” specific sounds during rehearsals, up till today.

Naturally I had trust issues when I came to graduate school, where production practices reflect the regional-theatre model in the United States. I was encouraged to collaborate with other designers<sup>69</sup> and steer them towards the creation of cohesive worlds. “Collaboration” in my vocabulary meant telling designers exactly *how* to do their work. Of course I knew better. It didn't take me long to realize that I was resisting a new way of working.

Eventually – albeit reluctantly – I took a couple of steps back after getting my directorial vision across and actively listened to my designers' thoughts and ideas. Then, somehow, the

a fictional correctional camp gathering at the top of the play and hell breaking loose in the end. My experience with *Marat/Sade* was a lesson – I invited trouble by not analyzing the text in depth prior.

<sup>64</sup> I used to do this with actors before graduate school. After pushing myself to collaborate with American actors in the last three years, I'm certain most of my actors then came out of rehearsals feeling like they were chess pieces instead of human beings. I'm sure I missed plenty of exciting collaborative opportunities which would have elevated my productions to a higher level. Again, we're talking directing for the modern stage collaboratively and not postmodern directing approaches (auteurs like Robert Wilson, Joseph Svoboda, Richard Foreman et al. instruct/ their actors to do exactly what they want).

<sup>65</sup> French; the visual setting of any moment in a play that includes visual design elements (scenic, props, costumes, lights).

<sup>66</sup> Both in the theatre company I founded (see footnote 84) and when I was director-in-residence at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. I had slightly larger budgets for my productions in the latter, but they still weren't enough to hire designers to support the fictional worlds I envisioned.

<sup>67</sup> I was nominated best scenic designer at the 8<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Cameronian Arts awards for Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad* (2009) which I also directed, and the 9<sup>th</sup> ADA Awards (dedicated solely to Chinese theatre in Kuala Lumpur) for Mark Beau de Silva's [大头与蕃薯头] (2010).

<sup>68</sup> I always had assistance with lighting design and I can't design lights for a “simple” scene to save my life. By “Simple” I mean adequate and basic lighting for a scene from a realistic play, minus special effects.

<sup>69</sup> Student (BFA) designers from various departments: scenic, costume, sound, lighting and theatre technology, a field still unheard of in Kuala Lumpur.

creative *conversations* came. My designers asked questions I didn't think about and thought me new things about the play. I also used "yes, and..." more frequently than my knee-jerk response of no. This resulted in the evolution of what subsequently became mind-blowing designs I never would have thought of. My designers indirectly taught me about design principles further. I realized they knew a lot more about their respective fields than I did – of course! More important, a huge creative burden was taken off my shoulders.

Using everything you gathered so far about the world of the play, there are methods in getting the best out of the collaborative design process. This section maps out a few. They are not arranged in chronological order.

**Balance out your dream production and the bare-bones version of it.** Before addressing the design team of *Metamorphosis*<sup>70</sup> for the first time, I imagined a glass skeleton of a surreal gargantuan house that starts on stage and extends above audiences. I saw an acrobatic yet grotesque Gregor flying over and spooking the daylights out of them, similar to Julie Taymor's design of *Spiderman* on Broadway. No other furniture was present on stage except for three stools that Gregor's family utilizes in their daily routine. In the pre-climax, I saw the entire set shattering into pieces and a deformed Gregor appearing from the ground to make his final plea to his family.

In the bare-bones version of the same play, I saw a mini steel structure that Gregor could climb (six feet above ground would suffice) as well as three stools that the family uses. The original production utilized a similar minimalistic design.

The first version is what the production is capable of achieving if we had an endless supply of cash. The second is what the production needs in order for the story to be told in a rehearsal studio. Depending on budget and resources, production houses usually have to negotiate between both extremes.

It was crucial that the spooky and jaw-dropping effects of the spectacle remained. The Theatre School, however, wouldn't allow us to spend beyond a four-digit amount (in US dollars). The glass-structure idea had to go. After several drafts over three months, the final set for *Metamorphosis* consisted of a gargantuan wooden house with a high wall that enabled Gregor to climb eighteen feet above ground. A trapdoor unexpectedly opened from the ground for Gregor's last appearance. The stools were present. We missed out on the set hovering over audiences and the entire structure crumbling in the pre-climax. However, we used strobe lights, shadows and sound cues indicative of a suspense thriller to create similar effects.

The point in making theatre that enthralls audiences isn't so much in spending insane amounts of money. Budgetary, logistical and censorship constrains are often signs to push you and your team towards greater innovation and creativity. Compromise not on the effects you want to achieve. There's always a way to make things work if you and your team think laterally.

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<sup>70</sup> The design team for *Metamorphosis* includes: Lara Hall (Costume design), Greg Pinsoneault (Scenic design), Peter Recht (Theatre technology), Matthew Reich (Sound design) and Vada Briceno (Lighting design).

**Images speak clearer than words.** As much as you attempt to clearly express an idea or concept in a few words (like your directorial vision, for example) there's still a chance it could be gravely misinterpreted. For instance, my definition of "grotesque" is influenced by the broken and asymmetrical physical qualities of East-Asian dances while someone else's construal of the same word might conjure an old hunchbacked man with only a limb and four eyes. Five designers who hear that Gregor is a "grotesque creature" – note that there are two signifiers now – will undoubtedly see five vastly differing Gregors. Imagine if eight designers are told that Gregor is an "unnerving and grotesque creature who yearns acceptance". A director who doesn't expound this in further detail risks miring his or her team in a mayhem of confusion.

Given the limited time you have with your designers, it helps to provide supplementary material when discussing production ideas, concepts and updates. The goal is to ensure that every designer is on the same page as closely as possible at any given time.

For *Metamorphosis* alone – recall "grotesque and surreal memory play about the challenges of nonconformity" – my team and I first watched videos to clarify a cohesive definition of surrealism. *Destino* by Walt Disney and Salvador Dali resonated with us most. We "stole" their stark use of lines and curves and employed them in our scenic design. The video's relentless asymmetry and clashing colours percolated into our costumes. The following week, our scenic designer brought in visuals of architectural brutalism to clarify the definition of grotesqueness specific to our world. We sifted through hundreds of pictures and finalized a handful that spoke to us most. These influenced the base colour of the set (gradient shades of white, grey, dark purple and black) and texture treatment of the wall panels (patchy, spotty and rough).

For lighting design, my designer and I opened up the conversation about memory play by reading up on lucid dreams. These dreams are vivid phenomena that occur when people experience rapid eye movement in their sleep. We discussed the possibility of recreating this experience in front of an audience. She brought in various visuals of people's conscious rendition of lucid dreams and proceeded to match them with every scene in *Metamorphosis*. We discovered that the more conscious Gregor was of his surroundings, the brighter and starker the visuals were and vice-versa. My sound design and I – in the quest to blend the dreamlike with spooky suspense – listened to collections of baroque music and soundscapes of contemporary zombie video games. We were drawn to Sony Computer Entertainment's *The Last of Us*. Apart from their clever splice of classical and epic underscoring, the game also inspired him to create similar sounds (of zombie-like creatures breathing, eating, devouring and attacking) to highlight Gregor's activities on stage.

In th Because sources of inspiration are endless, specificity is crucial. Imagine if we scrutinized Joan Miro's version of surrealism instead of Dali or approached architectural grotesqueness from a neo-gothic standpoint. Or if we explored and aimed to recreate the effects of drugs (hallucinogens like LSD, for example) instead of lucid dreams when we unpacked the concept of memory play. The soundscape of *The Last of Us* is vastly different from say, Bethesda Softworks's *The Evil Within*, although both share the same zombie-survival premise.

The more directors and designers open themselves up to the world, the richer the creative sources they bring into the design process. And that's the point of our work: to create new exciting worlds from an assemblage of existing ones.

**Aim for long-term relationships.** We spent two quarters in our first year rediscovering the ins and outs of effective communication<sup>71</sup> with our designers. Having also learnt from three monogamous relationships in the last eight years, I contend that healthy relationships between directors and designers are no different. I find these reminders useful:

- *Set deadlines you both agree on – and honour them.* If a work schedule has not been set by the producer and/or theatre company<sup>72</sup>, it's crucial to map out a plan in the months or weeks ahead. This plan doesn't only help to track progress – it also provides the assurance of an end goal to head towards. Some designers and directors, like me, work best under time pressure.
- *Candour and transparency.* I make it a point to address the importance of candour and transparency in the first design meeting. I ensure that this environment is consistent throughout the design process by asking questions to encourage open conversation. The work suffers when either designer or director holds back his or her thoughts, especially ones that may be construed as criticism. Comments, when formed constructively, allow the both of you to learn and discover while driving the process forward and upwards.
- *Listen as much as you speak.* Active listening doesn't only assure the designer that his or her contributions are valued in the creative process. It forces you to take a step back and learn about the play in ways you didn't think of. Prepare to be surprised by how much you – despite your homework in textual analysis – still don't know.
- *Allow ideas to ruminate.* Instead of jumping the gun immediately all the time, I learnt that it's helpful to hold on to potential ideas for a few days before returning to them. Often these ideas evolve outside the meeting room. My proudest collaborative epiphanies happen when I shower, drive or light up a cigarette. An email to the designer usually follows after.
- *Articulate decisions clearly.* The designer expects you to make the final call. When he or she understands the reason(s) behind your creative decisions (especially ones made early in the process) he or she grasps the way you think about your vision better. This speeds up work in the near future.
- *When conflict arises, take time off before readdressing it.* Work deteriorates when emotions get in the way. Approach the work again when minds regroup and logic ensues.
- *Imagine you'll work together again.* This is perhaps the most important advice of all. It's a reminder never to take your relationship with the designer for granted. Preserve the relationship during the design process. You never know if the both of you will cross professional paths in the future.

**The Collaborative Design Process: Recap.** Before moving onto the next section, strongly consider that you:

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<sup>71</sup> Theatre/tech collaboration was taught by Victoria (Toy) Deiorio, Head of Sound Design at The Theatre School.

<sup>72</sup> The Theatre School provides production teams with a finalized design/tech schedule at the start of every season. It helps everyone to plan their work ahead.

- Approach the design process within realistic and achievable realms;
- Supplement your directorial vision with specific images; and
- Work towards a healthy, symbiotic and long-term relationship with each of your designers.

## **PART FOUR. Selecting Your Actors: Auditions, Callbacks and Casting**

Before graduate school, I approached my casting decisions solely from a visual standpoint. It was important that each actor looked the part they played. They also needed to look good as an ensemble. Most of the time I ended up working with groups comprised of people with varying degrees of acting training and experience. Take Steve Yockey's *Octopus*<sup>73</sup> I directed in 2010 for example. Of five actors, three had previously worked on film and stage while two were enthused theatre neophytes making their first stage appearance.

By the second week of rehearsals – bear in mind I was solely going by intuition for *Octopus* as I did with *The Chairs* – two actor factions emerged. Despite my very-limited notes on composition and blocking, the experienced actors made sense of my “direction” effortlessly. They were also quick to transform prescriptive acting notes into active stage behaviour. Their scenes naturally directed themselves. I didn't need to interfere as much<sup>74</sup>.

The inexperienced duo (who was coincidentally cast as a couple in the play) failed to register the same level of accomplishment. While they understood the corrective notes I gave them in theory, it was difficult for them to translate these notes vocally and physically. Frustrated and unnerved, I used up rehearsal hours to explore acting basics<sup>75</sup>. This unleashed an odd and mechanical style of acting which set us a handful of steps back.

Their lack of theatre training and/or natural disposition as modern actors weren't the culprit. My casting choices were. I unfairly shoved demanding roles to green actors and expected the same caliber as the experienced ones. By opening night, the difference between the two groups was more distinct than the get-go. *Octopus* came across as two different plays involuntarily put together.

No one said it better than Hauser and Reich<sup>76</sup> that casting makes up about 70 percent of a play's success. How a person or group looks like might be a crucial signifier in a production, but there are other important factors to consider. I learnt in graduate school that no one actor

<sup>73</sup> *Octopus* was presented in the Pentas 2 black box at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre from December 16 – 22 2010. I also designed the set.

<sup>74</sup> This was both a positive and negative thing. Positive because I trusted the experienced actors with their work. Negative in the sense that, in hindsight, I didn't know what else to say or do as a director, having consistently witnessed “perfect” scenes during our rehearsal process. Of course, this would be different today.

<sup>75</sup> This was a poor move on my part, as it subliminally (or not!) suggested that they weren't “good” actors. This differentiated the inexperienced actors from the experienced ones even more. Also, I wasn't clear what I was teaching (I can't remember now) as I wasn't formally trained as an actor myself.

<sup>76</sup> Hauser, Frank & Reich, Russell. (2006). *Notes on Directing: 130 Lessons in Leadership from the Director's Chair*. RCR Creative Press.

– despite his or her high level of training – can play every character successfully. This section explores a few methods I find helpful in auditions and casting. Because these are tips rather than a rundown of the entire audition/casting process, they are not arranged in chronological order.

**Humanize each character in a paragraph.** Imagine a friend asks you to describe someone you know well: your best friend, a workmate, your mom, a childhood buddy. It’s likely that you – without much thought – use adjectives to describe this person. But where do these adjectives come from? For example, someone who you believe is short-tempered has probably elicited, in your presence, specific actions and behaviours that match your definition of short-temperedness.

It’s absurd to cast a role you don’t know well. Imagine the same friend asking you to describe a certain character in a play. A cognitive process like the one above happens only if you know this character inside out. While you could by now infer a few behaviours from textual analysis, it’s helpful to start afresh – as if you know nothing about this character at all – to ensure you don’t miss anything out.

Imagine looking at this character through a magnifying glass. First, list down everything he or she does (and to whom) from start till the end of the play. These actions can be quick, recurring or sustained over a period of time<sup>77</sup>. Let’s call this list character bones<sup>78</sup>. Here’s a snippet of Mr. Samsa’s bones from the second act of *Metamorphosis*:

- Hears Gregor scratching from outside his room
- Refuses to bring Gregor milk
- Refuses to acknowledge that metamorphosed Gregor is his son
- Accompanies Greta to the door before she shoves milk into Gregor’s room
- Calls Gregor his son – encourages him to drink milk
- Leaves Gregor alone to discover the milk himself
- Figures out – with Greta and Mrs. Samsa – an alternate way to feed Gregor
- Realizes loud noises from Gregor’s bedroom while eating breakfast
- Eats loudly to drown out the sound of Gregor eating
- Loudly announces to the family that he cannot deny Gregor’s loud eating noises any longer
- Insists that Mrs. Samsa and Greta are living under *his* house
- Reiterates the responsibility of a son to support his parents, etc.

Next, tabulate the bones and form a conclusive paragraph, like how you would describe someone you know or knew in real life. Highlight behaviours that contradict each other. These

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<sup>77</sup> This is **NOT** an action palette that an actor uses to motivate his or her character in any given scene. Action palettes consist only of playable and sustainable actions that lasts longer than 10 seconds, according to William Ball in *A Sense of Direction* (1984). Drama Book Publishers, New York. For instance, to convey, glorify, impale and frighten are playable and sustainable; to live, breathe, kiss and kick are not.

<sup>78</sup> Damon Kiely introduced this exercise in our second-year scene study class. It’s laborious but useful in the long-run, rehearsals included.

behavioural inconsistencies aren't mistakes – rather, they are purposeful attempts by the playwright to illustrate characters that resemble human beings. I inferred, for instance, that

Mr. Samsa is an early retiree who left his family in debt. This prompts Gregor to work at an early age. He is extremely proud of Gregor until his metamorphosis, which he has difficulty accepting. Mr. Samsa protects his family from Gregor's threats and gets increasingly ashamed of him. He loves Mrs. Samsa but often comes across otherwise. Sometimes he displays childlike behaviour to get what he wants. Although weak and worn (he walks with a stick) Mr. Samsa portrays outbursts of physical strength when the need arises. He secretly dreams for a better life for his family. Towards the end, he suggests that his family works to support themselves and cope with Gregor's metamorphosis. We see a softer side – one of acceptance and regret – after Gregor's death.

What did I infer from the paragraph above? I discovered that Mr. Samsa disapproved of nonconformist behaviour from a place of fear – the fear that his children won't succeed in life. His greatest flaw was ill-temperedness. It often prevented him from verbally expressing what he genuinely wanted: to free his family from the shackles of debt. These were different from my first impression of Mr. Samsa, who I thought was a bitter and jaded old man who cared only for himself. I didn't realize how much he secretly looked out for his family – metamorphosed Gregor included.

Understanding a play's characters through the lens of human beings brings clarity and specificity into auditions, callbacks<sup>79</sup> and casting. You must know what you're looking out for. It's also helps to stay open that actors – despite auditions and casting being a short process – could teach you a thing or two about these characters further.

**What can't be taught?** When I directed Steve Yockey's *Cartoon* in 2011<sup>80</sup> I wanted actors who could sing and dance well. The play demanded a high-energy opening number that rewound and replayed several times before the inciting incident broke the loop. During auditions and callbacks, I found that most actors moved and danced passably but couldn't really sing. A few who could sing well had trouble with choreography. Some were equally unsuccessful at both. In spite of these setbacks, I proceeded to cast the best from the lot hoping they would improve on the skills they lacked.

By the third week the group – despite extensive training that took up rehearsal time – showed little improvement. As we only had one more week to work, I knew there was nothing else we could do. People spend years and decades honing specific artistic abilities. It dawned on me that it was unfair and unrealistic to expect the cast to pick up new skills in a matter of days or weeks. I intervened and made a few artistic choices to strengthen what the ensemble was

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<sup>79</sup> The choice of audition/callback sides are as important as seeing what actors do with them. I find it helpful to use scenes that highlight a crucial segment of the dramatic structure, as they contain one or more events. These scenes are also usually where characters are most rounded and layered, giving actors greater room for interpretation and exploration.

<sup>80</sup> *Cartoon* was presented in the Pentas 2 black box at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre from August 18 – 27 2011.



already good at, while minimizing flagrant deficiencies. *Cartoon* turned out to be one of the more successful shows<sup>81</sup> I directed before attending graduate school.

Actors come into the audition room bringing different traits and abilities. Some are innate and some were picked up over the years from their artistic, cultural, societal and political backgrounds. New behaviours can be taught and honed over a short period (i.e. via rehearsals) while traits and abilities can't. For instance, a straight male actor can play a man in an intimate homosexual relationship (behaviour) but this doesn't change his sexual orientation (trait). The effectiveness of his character portrayal also depends on his imagination (ability), understanding of text (trait/ability) as well as level of physical and emotional openness (trait).

Some actors are inherently more comfortable with their bodies and sexuality than others. Some are lithe and fast movers while some have vast emotional availability. Some have good rhythm while some are simply tone-deaf. Some have naturally enigmatic personalities while some are open books. Some are funny and some are just not, no matter how hard they try.

Specific physical features, traits and abilities are things to look out for during auditions and callbacks. Pre-tech<sup>82</sup> rehearsal periods, particularly in the English-speaking theatre world<sup>83</sup>, span between two to six weeks. You want to use your limited time wisely to focus on the bigger picture, which is telling the story. It's always wiser to cast someone who can already give you what your production needs.

**Address casting politics.** In our age where race is still a global issue, audiences from historically diverse societies<sup>84</sup> are likely to bring their ethnocentric<sup>85</sup> views to the theatre. Productions in these global cities<sup>86</sup> have a greater chance to be seen with an additional racial lens. This by no means suggest that directors need to be politically correct. However, every casting choice made – race included – must be dramaturgically addressed.

Take Douglas Carter Beane's *The Little Dog Laughed*<sup>87</sup> for example. The two-act satire tells the story of Mitch, a closeted gay man who aspires to make it big as an actor in Hollywood.

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<sup>81</sup> From audience turnout and feedback. The cast was also nominated for Best Ensemble at the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Cameronian Arts Awards.

<sup>82</sup> Before the combination of technical elements (lights, sound, video, etc.) in the actual performance space.

<sup>83</sup> More specifically, modernist productions (as opposed to postmodernist, post-dramatic and the avant-garde) that begin rehearsals *after* a play is fully written (as opposed to devising new material from scratch) and are influenced by regional-theatre production practices from the US and UK. English-speaking theatre in Malaysia follows a similar model.

<sup>84</sup> Where political and economic policies in the past formed significant conglomerations of different ethnic groups in one location. The result is a present population that is ethnically and culturally diverse.

<sup>85</sup> I use this term in a non-pejorative manner. Ethnocentrism, in a neutral sense, is the [heightened] awareness of membership of an ethnic group, community or culture. Entry retrieved online from The Oxford English Dictionary, oed.com.

<sup>86</sup> A global city is a significant production point of specialized financial and producer services that make the globalized economy run. These cities are multi-cultural hubs and possess high levels of cultural interaction with other cities around the world. New York, London and Kuala Lumpur are examples of global cities. Renn, Aaron M. (2012). *What is a global city?* Retrieved online from newgeography.com.

<sup>87</sup> This production was presented in Room 305 at The Theatre School from April 15 – 19 2014.

His no-nonsense agent Diane barges into his hotel room one day and finds him naked with Alex, a bisexual rent-boy who happens to also be his secret lover. Hell breaks loose. Diane suggests Mitch to cover up his sexuality by marrying fan girl Ellen, who is Alex's housemate and lover. Diane offers Alex a huge sum of money in return. Mitch agrees and so does Ellen. Heartbroken by two individuals, Alex flies off to a new city to begin a new life.

Compare the racial make-up in my production with the world premiere in 2006:

<i>Character/Production</i>	<i>Second Stage Theatre, New York, 2006</i>	<i>The Theatre School, Chicago, 2014</i>
Mitch (M)	White	White
Alex (M)	White	Black/Middle-eastern
Diane (F)	White	Black
Ellen (F)	White	White

In the original text and plot, Beane made a few satirical insinuations:

- Mitch will jeopardize his future career if he's seen in public with a man;
- The ideal couple in the eyes of Hollywood is straight;
- Diane has to suck up to countless men to get to the top;
- Ordinary people can make it big in Hollywood if they play the game; and
- Gender and sexual politics are still major problems in Hollywood.

I chose diverse casting and additional implications sprung up:

- Mitch will jeopardize his future career if he's seen in public with a man *of mixed descent*;
- The ideal couple in the eyes of Hollywood is straight *and white*;
- Diane has to suck up to countless *white* men to get to the top;
- Ordinary people *of colour* can make it big in Hollywood if they play the game; and
- Gender, sexual *and racial* politics are still major problems in Hollywood<sup>88</sup>.

Did audiences<sup>89</sup> catch the racial politics behind the play? I didn't find out and it didn't matter. I did, however, make a point to responsibly address my casting choices as it took place. The racial make-up of a production – as well as other pertinent socio-political choices you make during casting<sup>90</sup> – must consciously serve the story you want to tell.

**Trust your "gut"**. By this point you should know the play you want to direct like the back of your hand. After textual analyses, auditions, callbacks and thoroughly addressing your potential cast from various dramaturgical viewpoints, you might be lucky to attain several exceptional choices for a role. Casting boils down to intuition next. Who fits better into the ensemble? How

<sup>88</sup> This was the central theme in my directorial vision of the play.

<sup>89</sup> Majority were American, urban, ethnically and gender-diverse, between the ages of 18 – 25.

<sup>90</sup> Depending on the time and location of your production and the majority of your audience, other socio-political components that may require thorough dramaturgical addressing include (but aren't limited to): age, gender, gender identity, religion, national origin, disability, marital status and socioeconomic status.

a particular actor compliment his or her partners compared to the rest? Who do you think you work better with? Who benefits most from your process? What can a certain actor teach you that others can't? If you find these questions difficult to answer, a deductive approach might be easier: Who doesn't fit as well into the ensemble? Which actor would be less helpful to his or her partners? Who do you think you won't work as well with? And etc.

After the callbacks for *Metamorphosis*<sup>91</sup>, I was drawn to an actor for the role of Mrs. Samsa as she was the only person who sparked images of my own mother in her younger days. The other actors who read for the same role took my direction and empathized with the character's pathos well, but I wasn't feeling them as much. My assistance directors suggested that I consider the other actors and not the one I connected most to, citing reasons that the latter was underwhelming.

In the height of pressure in the casting room, I intuitively cast the actor who reminded me of my mother. She was shy in the first day of rehearsals but opened up to the group as the days passed. Then she fit right in. Our relationship during the creative process smooth-sailed after. I remembered the hardships my mother went through and pushed her toward the direction of the dangerous and vulnerable. She in turn discovered a heightened performance language – vocally, physically and emotionally – she described as personally liberating. By opening night, I knew I made the right choice – Mrs. Samsa was complex, conflicted and her love for her son was clearer than I could imagine.

**Selecting Your Actors: Recap.** Before moving onto the next section, strongly consider that you:

- Summarize and humanize each character via bite-sized paragraphs so you're clear about the roles you're casting;
- Know what you're looking for in actors in terms of their physical features, abilities and personality traits;
- Address the racial make-up in casting as well as other pertinent socio-political issues that might be present at the production's time (i.e. now) and place (i.e. Kuala Lumpur); and
- Trust your "gut" when you make the final casting decision in the event you're torn between two or more actors for the same role<sup>92</sup>.

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## PART FIVE. Skin in the Game: Running Rehearsals

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<sup>91</sup> We were only given 80 minutes to run callbacks. Our movement director ran a simple movement exercise with the actors before we proceeded to work on scenes.

<sup>92</sup> It's strongly advised that once a director finalizes his or her cast, he or she should stick to this decision until opening night – unless unforeseeable events happen. Directors who change their minds after casting or worse, once rehearsals begin puts their team and their professions as ethical leaders and decision makers in serious jeopardy.

In the early years of my directing career<sup>93</sup>, I modeled rehearsals after my theatre studies class in college<sup>94</sup>. I remember playing plenty of theatre games in between intensive scene work for Tony Kushner's *The Illusion*<sup>95</sup>. These games eventually became a significant part of my own rehearsal structure. I wasn't clear about the exact purpose of these games then, but I sensed it was related to actor training and ensemble building. I wanted to recreate for others the fun I went through myself.

Over time, we got carried away with playing. Every now and then an actor would introduce a new game and I would evolve it further to make it more challenging. By the end of our first year together we must have played close to a hundred different games altogether. Very little attention was paid to scene work because I absolutely had no idea what to do.

It dawned on me that I was using games to cover up my inadequacies as a novice director. When push came to shove because we had production deadlines, "scene work" meant that I just needed to put my auteur hat on and instruct actors on where to go and what to do. This marriage of games-auteur-composition became my directing "style" over the next few years.

Naturally, I became better at certain skills and deteriorated in others. My obsession with games made me a good leader and observer – I also know how to make a bored room fun. The downside to this is that I tend to overwork people. My place as an auteur turned me into someone who seeks high degrees of specificity. I'm also pretty good at problem solving on my own. The disadvantages? Not-so-great communication skills, trouble speaking in acting terms and trust issues in mutual artistic collaboration. Working on composition has made me appreciate visual signs as the main signifier in all of my productions. Text wasn't and still isn't my strong suit.

Before going further, take a moment to reflect upon yourself and the work you have done so far. Directorially, what are you good at? What are your weaknesses? How did they come about? And most important – what's your current rehearsal process like? What works? What do you think needs improvement on?

This section maps out several methods I find useful in my rehearsal process. Most were derived from trial and error. It was helpful to keep in mind in the past three years that I wanted to overhaul my old rehearsal process and reconstruct a new one. These methods don't follow a chronological order.

**Begin with an overview.** On the first day of rehearsals, let actors know the structure of the entire rehearsal process. Then inform them of the broken-down plan at the top of every rehearsal. When focus is narrowed down and compartmentalized, there's less stress from the

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<sup>93</sup> I formed a theatre group in 2004 with a young bunch of enthusiastic individuals who had no prior theatre training. Through trial and error, we devised and performed our own work. In 2007, we staged full-length plays from the western canon. The group disbanded in 2009 when I was hired as director-in-residence at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre.

<sup>94</sup> I took this elective in completion of my Ontario Secondary School Diploma in 2003.

<sup>95</sup> I played Calisto/Clindor/Theogenes. This production was presented at the Rooftop Theatre in Sunway University in 2003. Rey Buono was director.

pressure to over-prepare and overthink. Strive to meet the day's goals with some leeway for creative digression. If you don't, address them at the end of the day in relation to the next rehearsal. Provide homework if necessary.

An overview also helps to gauge the ability of your team so you can plan future rehearsals accordingly. The idea is to keep each rehearsal challenging enough, but within a realistic and achievable realm.

**Hook actors in early.** Keep rehearsals within the first week fun and light. Play games (yes!) and do activities that reinforce the ensemble spirit while you open up early discoveries of the text and the world of the play. Aim for exercises that require actors to be more physically involved. Clarify performance language that the production requires. While it's exciting to cerebrally dig into the play via dramaturgical discussions, avoid binding actors intellectually. The goal is to balance actors' early knowledge of the play and their thirst to explore it further on their feet.

It's also helpful to use this period to clarify personal goals each actor has. Check in again in the middle and end of the creative process. One-on-one time between director and actors fosters closer working relationships, provides insight into better rehearsal approaches and invites both sides to be more personal with their work.

**Decide exactly what you're investigating.** If you don't know what you're looking for when you run a scene, you wouldn't know if you found something even if it's right in front of you. This could be a recurring behaviour, a physical pathway<sup>96</sup>, ensemble dynamics, a crucial moment that ignites the event, or the unfolding of the event itself. When you find what you're looking for, great – is it clear? Does it need refining? If you discover something else, even better – do you and your actors explore it further or drop it entirely?

The greater the specificity in the investigative process, the further a scene can develop.

**Emotional generosity begins with you.** While it's desirable that actors tell their stories in a manner that is personal and specific, this vulnerability must first be cultivated through the director. The more you candidly acknowledge that you're a warm-blooded human being – made up of aspirations, fears, dreams and nightmares – the more your cast will open up too. Actors who are given the assurance of a safe and communal space take greater emotional risks and inject life to an otherwise technical scene.

In the quest to relay a further understanding of Gregor's struggle with his metamorphosis, I opened up to my cast two weeks into rehearsals about my guarded fear of contracting HIV. As someone who occasionally explores his sexuality with multiple partners, I invited the cast to join me in imagining the actual contraction of the disease. We discussed how it slowly destroys the human body and the little the carrier can do to live normally. We then

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<sup>96</sup> A chain of movements (pedestrian, abstract or a combination of) with a beginning, middle and end that illustrate a story. A term in Plastiscene, a physical theatre approach created by Dexter Bullard, Head of Graduate Acting at The Theatre School. We spent a quarter in our second year exploring this approach.

talked about HIV survivors. I likened this to Gregor's struggle: he wakes up one day transformed into a creature that he fights against, before finally accepting his fate.

The session above activated the actor who played Gregor. Instead of whining about his state (a danger with Gregor's role), he played Gregor's need to liberate himself from the metamorphosis. The effect stayed on until our closing performance.

**Have a "cheat sheet" in hand.** You're not always the expert in the room and you don't have to be. Sometimes you forget facts you spent countless nights excavating. Review these before you begin rehearsal and have a concise sheet of notes nearby that you can refer to whenever the need arises. If something you're looking for isn't there, open it up to the group and explore it together. Or bookmark it and move on to something else.

Trust that information will subconsciously find its way back to you when you don't relentlessly chase it.

**Side coach as necessary.** Some actors find it helpful to be continuously reminded of their thoughts, impulses, voice and physicality while running a scene. This keeps them on their feet as you feed them notes. Some find it less effective to be called out on what they're doing as they're running, but appreciate in-the-moment reminders of stakes, circumstances and their through-line. Ensure that these notes are succinct, robust and clear.

Some find all forms of side-coaching intrusive and distracting. For cases like these, wait until the scene is over. Give quick notes, then do it again.

Find out which way works best for your actors. The goal is to get the scene up and running. Resist the temptation to break into discussion or worse, philosophize.

**Understand (and speak in) actors' vocabulary.** Every actor has a personalized acting vocabulary which might differ from yours, more so if they come from different parts of the globe. While it's helpful to clarify the terms you'll use for rehearsal – good actors are malleable to different directorial styles – put in the effort to understand theirs. Speed up the rehearsal process by assimilating their language into yours. Various terms (objective, goal, intention, target) often mean the same thing.

When I directed *Metamorphosis*, I interchanged between two distinct acting vocabularies: modern American realism<sup>97</sup> (intention, given circumstances, relationship, etc.) and Viewpoints<sup>98</sup> (tempo, gesture, shape, etc.). I found out by the first rehearsal week that some actors were more comfortable with the first approach, i.e. a direction needed to make psychological sense before they bodies came to work, while some were able to immediately justify physical directions on their own within believable circumstances. I adjusted my approach

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<sup>97</sup> I picked this vocabulary up at The Theatre School. We spent our first year exploring scenes as actors alongside our MFA acting classmates. Dexter Bullard was my acting professor.

<sup>98</sup> Created by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau to systematically break down the physical work of an actor, so each can be manipulated at greater specificity.

accordingly and worked towards cohesion between the two groups. It was important that the movers didn't physically stand out from the psychological actors, and vice-versa.

**Keep every note to less than 10 words.** If you don't have an assistant taking them down, use a short-hand that makes sense to you. Review notes you've taken in the past and look for words you often use. It's helpful to start off every note with characters' initials.

Be discreet. Actors naturally become self-conscious when you're equipped with a pen and paper. Avoid writing notes on a laptop. You need to watch your actors and not get distracted (or distract them) with incessant typing.

Keep notes simple and clear. The more you ramble on to make a point, the less you're paying attention to what's in front of you. There's also greater chance for confusion (and confusing others) when you return to the long-winded note later.

Economize. It saves you and your actors more time to do the actual work.

**Connect from bigger to smaller picture.** If you give an actor general-note A on day one followed by specific-note B on a day two and even-more-specific-note C on day three, make sure they add up to a clear directional arc you want the actor to take. It's not usual that actors, no matter how experienced, pay attention to fresher notes and forget older ones.

Treat note A as the mother of all notes and occasionally help actors see how notes B, C, D, E and so forth are connected to it. Actors who fully understand note A are usually able to take care of smaller notes themselves.

On the other hand, there are actors who blindly and mechanically observe smaller and more detailed notes without knowing why. For this reason, they often have trouble retaining the same notes for subsequent runs.

The bigger picture is a useful tool to return to, especially late in the creative process. It also allows you to pass the torch to the acting company earlier, so they can carve out their own personal trajectories without relying on you too much.

**Stuck during scene work? Turn it into a question.** Prepare to be amazed by how much actors know – often more than you do – provided they're clear about the direction you're taking. Make sure the discussion that follows benefits the issue at hand and drives the group forward. You'll be surprised with a new solution or two.

If the group is still stuck, go back to the text. Look at the scene before and after. Return to the drawing board: the spine, character descriptions, given circumstances and events.

**When things go wrong, keep that "poker face".** Share the joy and love but keep all frustrations, annoyance and anger to yourself, especially when the perpetrator is present. There's a place and time to let it out, just not here and now. You've put in the effort to earn everyone's respect. They look up to you as the leader and expect no less of themselves. You want to keep things this way.

Take breaks often. Not only does it help you formulate and recalibrate your thoughts, it also allows actors to reflect on their work. Check in with the company when you regroup – if they're aware of what they need to fix, you save time without having to repeat yourself. It also balances out creative responsibility in the space.

At the end of the day, it's classier to be the calm and collected one when someone else isn't.

**End rehearsals with a chance for everyone to speak.** Spend at least the last fifteen minutes of every rehearsal for closing thoughts and questions. Not only does feedback help you plan ahead, it also reinforces the collective voice of the group. Use this time to connect everyone – stage managers, assistant directors and designers if they're present – with the next rehearsal. It's useful to pose a cliffhanger question that gets everyone thinking until you meet again.

To move forward and upwards is key.

## AFTERTHOUGHT

"I hate the idea of theatre just being an evening pastime.  
It should be emotionally and intellectually demanding.

I love football.

The level of analysis that you listen to on the terraces is astonishing.

If people did that in the theatre...

but they don't.

They expect to sit back and not participate."

**Sarah Kane** (1971 – 1999)

Contemporary English theatre in Kuala Lumpur is reaching a point of stagnancy. While we have the facilities, we still lack educators and practitioners who are properly trained in their craft. We're still telling stories from other cultures when our own stories are begging to be told. We seek to emulate results rather than honour the arduous creative processes of failure and discovery. Theatre trends across the globe are evolving as fast as the next internet meme on social media and we're miles behind. We're losing relevance with our diverse communities. We need to change these. I hope to return to Kuala Lumpur soon and play a part in this movement.

This paper doesn't and can't transform a novice into an expert stage director. It's merely a *starting point* for aspiring directors in Kuala Lumpur. The craft of directing takes years, if not decades, to master. Like you, I'm still learning. Whether or not any of the advice in the paper suits theatre practices in Kuala Lumpur, you need to find out yourself. Constant practice – like a musician who plays her scales every day – is unquestionable. If there are no outlets to hone your skills, create them like I did. Read. The books cited in this paper are indispensable.

And question.

Question often.

Question endlessly.



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