



## CHAPTER ONE

# THE SKILLS OF THE DIRECTOR

**I**t is the director's job to bring together all the elements that go into making a play a reality on the stage. The director chooses and rehearses actors, **blocks** the play (sets the actors' movements), and works with the technical crew, including the **set** designer, lighting and sound technicians, costumers and makeup artists, and the conductor if the play is a musical. In high school and some community theaters, the director may also oversee the publicity to advertise the play.

In a high school setting, the role of director is often filled by a teacher or volunteer. A student is often chosen to be an assistant director or stage manager. This person assists the director during **preproduction** activities and oversees backstage activities during performances. Stage managing is an excellent opportunity to learn the skills of a director. If the school has a drama club in which students put on their own plays, or put on a play as a fundraising activity for a school or charity event, a student might direct in his or her own right. In some schools, seniors are given the opportunity to put on plays, including directing them.

One of the responsibilities of a director is to provide instructions to actors during the rehearsal of a play.



Community theaters are local theaters found in cities and towns around the country. There are many types of community theaters. Some community theater consists of performances put on by local amateur performers in rented or donated venues such as school auditoriums, or town or local organization halls. This type of community theater often starts with an individual who wishes to direct plays. This person picks the play, **auditions** and rehearses the actors, and oversees the technical phases of the production. The director in this case may put on plays on a regular basis all year round or seasonally. A second type of community theater consists of a

permanent company of actors. This type of group is often called something like The [*Name of Town*] Players. A community theater may have a permanent facility or rent a local hall or auditorium. In this type of community theater, the director, actors, and crew will have day jobs (unless they are retired) and put on plays in their spare time. A community theater can also have a large permanent facility and a full-time staff, and it may employ professional actors or a combination of professional and local actors for performances in the community. Many “summer theaters” fall into this category. The professional community theater may be headed by a director or by a producer who hires a director for each play the theater produces. Directors in community theaters may work with all local amateur actors, a combination of amateur and professional actors, or professional actors and student actors. Most community theaters are nonprofit organizations. Many offer training classes for students in addition to putting on plays.

## The Director's Skills

A theatrical director needs a variety of skills to succeed—and not go crazy—during the process of putting on a play. These include analytical, technical, creative, and interpersonal skills.

### Analytical Skills

Analytical skills are critical for a director. These skills come into play in several ways. Unless the director is hired by a community theater to put on

a particular play, the first thing a director has to do is choose a play. This process requires a director to analyze the pool of available actors and the audience for whom the play will be performed. Next, the director must consider potential plays to decide which would be appropriate for the theater's resources and audience. After the play is selected, the director must analyze the play to find the elements that will have an emotional impact on the audience. It is these elements that will make the performance successful.

The director must examine the characters in the play and then consider the performance skills and personal characteristics of the actors in the company, or those who audition, in order to find those best suited to the roles. The director must also evaluate the technical elements that will be required, such as the sets, costumes, lighting, and sound effects that will best enhance the presentation of the play.

### **Technical Skills**

The director needs a variety of technical skills in order to stage the play, including blocking (placement of actors), rehearsal techniques, and creating schedules and cue sheets, among others.

Directors need to understand how emotion, gesture, movement, and vocal expression are used by actors to create an effective performance. These skills can be learned from drama courses, books on directing, working as a stage manager or assistant director in school or community theater productions, or being a student intern at a professional community theater. In addition, it is valuable for the director to understand

public relations and marketing techniques for advertising and promoting the performance so that the public knows about it and wants to attend.

### **Interpersonal Skills**

Interpersonal skills are those that allow a person to work well with others to accomplish tasks and achieve a goal. Some of the characteristics required to be a successful director are patience, fortitude, self-discipline, organizational ability, and problem-solving skills. Patience is often required when actors don't learn their lines quickly enough, or when problems arise with sets, costumes, or other technical elements.

The director must often work hard with an actor to overcome problems with his or her performance. It may take imagination to come up with creative ways to convey the director's vision for the role, or the play as a whole, to the actor. Patience must be tempered, however, with the ability and authority to get people to do what is necessary. Not understanding the nuances of a role is one thing—not bothering to learn one's lines or show up on time for rehearsal is another.

Self-discipline means that the director does what is necessary to pull the play together, even when no one is requiring him or her to do so. The director has to be prepared to work long hours when no one is forcing him or her to do so. This may mean not engaging in other activities that he or she would prefer to be doing until the work on the play is over. Organizational skills allow the director to manage his or her time and schedule. Having organizational skills means being able to establish when various elements

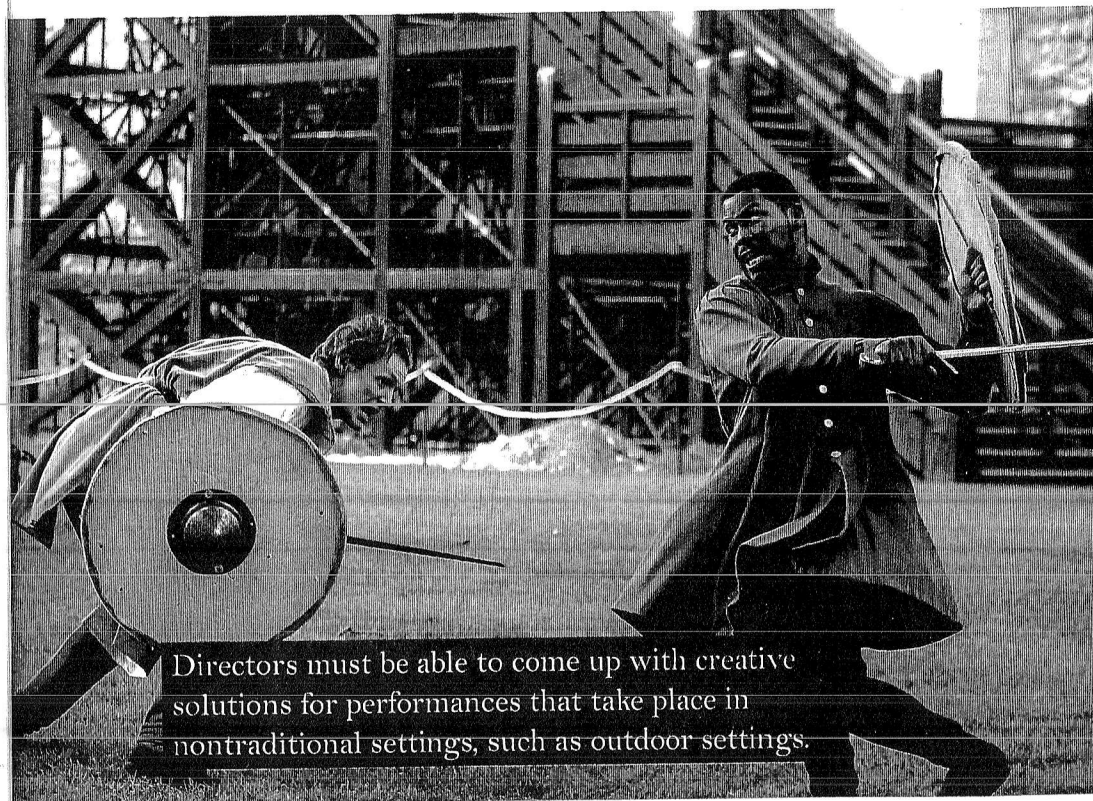


such as costumes, lighting, props, scenery, and the like, need to be completed, and then to assign and monitor tasks necessary to ensure that everything is ready on time. Time-management skills allow a director to accomplish all this and still have time to meet the demands of other aspects of his or her life. This means being able to keep track of everything that needs to be done and the time that it must be done by. The director must be able to prioritize tasks and delegate work when necessary.

Fortitude means that the director has the ability to persevere, even when all types of problems arise while preparing to put on a play—and they always do. The director must be able to overcome obstacles, solve problems, and make choices without becoming overwhelmed. The ability to deal with stress is important for anyone leading a project. Problem-solving skills allow the director to analyze a situation and identify possible solutions or alternatives. Sometimes a problem cannot be solved by the director alone. Teachers or other professionals whom one can ask for advice are valuable resources. A director needs to know when to ask for assistance and the appropriate people to ask for assistance.

## Creativity

In the final analysis, directing is about using actors, lighting, setting, costumes, music, and other elements to create a play that has an emotional impact on an audience. The result may be funny, sad, touching, or delightful, but it must affect the audience to be successful. To accomplish this, directors must have



Directors must be able to come up with creative solutions for performances that take place in nontraditional settings, such as outdoor settings.

creative vision and use their skills to creative effect. Where the director places actors in relation to each other; the tone he or she has them take when speaking; and the type of lighting, costumes, and sets the director uses all contribute to attaining a specific effect. Before the director even begins casting a play, he or she must go through the script page by page and develop an overall picture of the effect on the audience he or she wants the play to achieve. The director then needs to think about all the elements that will go into achieving that effect. For example, if you were directing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, would you use dark costumes and sets—to emphasize the mysterious and dramatic aspects of the play and the

horror of the murder—or would you use historically accurate costumes and sets and present the play as a historical drama? Or would you set the play in a modern time period and aim for relevance to a contemporary political situation?

The creative decisions of the director determine the audience's perception of a play. To understand all the elements that a director must work with, you might want to attend some community and summer theater plays and observe how the director uses lighting, costumes, sets, and sound to create particular effects on the audience. Some theaters have special pricing for students or free access in return for volunteering as an **usher**.

## Developing Directing Skills

High school provides an opportunity to develop two types of skills that can help one be a successful director. The first type of skill involves general knowledge. Directing plays requires a knowledge of both literature and language. English courses provide an opportunity to learn the rules of grammar and syntax, which allow students to understand how language works. Language skills also enable one to speak and write clearly and correctly, which minimizes misunderstanding when directing actors. They also help a director appear professional when speaking to members of the community from whom he or she may be seeking financial support, venues in which to perform, or materials for the production. Classes in history are useful for understanding the context in which plays that are not contemporary take place and

for a sense of setting, costumes, and props. A basic knowledge of math will help when preparing and tracking a budget.

A second type of education that may be available is courses that teach skills directly related to the performing arts. If your school has a drama club or a course in drama, take the opportunity to learn specific aspects of theater and their terminology. Even if your school only teaches acting, not directing, the experience can help you understand the elements that go into creating a moving performance, which in turn will allow you to get the best performance from actors. If you cannot take drama courses at your school, you may be able to take such courses at one of the community or summer theaters in your area. Many theaters supplement their income by offering classes in acting and other aspects of theatrical production.

Even if you don't want to perform in front of an audience, high school productions and other events can provide useful experience. If a teacher is directing a school play, see if there is a need for a stage manager to assist with the production. If not, volunteer for other behind-the-scenes work. This will let you observe firsthand the elements that go into directing a play. While you are in high school, you can also take advantage of internship opportunities to gain experience. Contact the local theaters in your area, including community and summer theaters, and ask if they have student intern positions. These are unpaid positions in which students perform a variety of behind-the-scenes tasks. Larger community and summer theaters often employ professional actors and staff; they can provide invaluable information.