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Teachers and Directors Artists in their Own Medium

Kathleen Kristin Ruen

Theatrical directors engage in a form of teaching and their insights are often applicable to the classroom.

Every art form can act as a metaphor for teaching, but I have found directing to be its closest companion, partially because it is an art form that works with people. In fact, when I took a directing class with Paul Austin while studying for my M.S. Ed., I found myself constantly taking notes. So many of Paul's hints to directors related to teachers! I investigated this further by interviewing seven practicing directors and noticed at least four categories where directing and teaching are quite similar. It is important in this discussion to think about both teaching and directing rather broadly, not only as one who "informs" or tells people what to do. Stanislavsky himself said: "A director cannot limit his role to being the medium between Author and Audience" (Gorchakov 1954).

The Power of Observation

Observation is a tool used in both the theatre and in education. Directors spend a great amount of their time observing the actors on the stage and sitting in rehearsals; they are not only involved with the actors themselves but also in creating the environment of the piece by collaborating with lighting designers, set designers, and costumers. Teachers as well have the opportunity to watch their students as they play in the yard and work in the classroom, and like a director, they are able to create a unique environment for them in the classroom. It seems in both professions that the closer and more descriptively one can see the actor/child, the better the director/teacher will be able to provide a direction for the child/actor that will make the most sense and produce the best result for them.

The kind of observation that directors and teachers must engage in is two-fold: they must be aware of



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the specific and the whole at the same time. There is dynamic interaction between the specific and the whole that is illustrated by the structure of our DNA. In the smallest particle of our selves is a blueprint of the whole. Likewise, in paying close attention to specific details of a person or character, one can reveal a larger idea or theme. In the realm of education this way of looking is grounded in the Prospect Descriptive Review Process, developed by Patricia Carini (Himley & Carini 2000). Some of Paul Austin's remarks relate directly to the work and ideas of Carini, and placing them in context with each other further supports the notion of teaching and directing as similar art forms.

"A director must understand the life-objective of the character" (Austin 1992). The life-objective is the character's essence, the drive that moves him through life and influences his decisions. A director must be pretty clear about the character's life-objective in order to help the actor. Likewise, when a teacher understands what may be driving the student — for example, her interests and ways of doing things — she too can truly begin to teach. A small change in a student will mean much to the teacher if that teacher is a careful observer. A director as well can help an actor highlight a turning point in the play by a change in his or her inflection and stance. "On a subtler level, when we know someone well, a slight refocusing of the gaze, or a slight variation in the angle of the body, may speak volumes" (Carini 1979).

"Always make references to the specifics in the play" (Austin 1992). A director will be able to communicate his ideas more effectively if he can use details within the play as examples. In this way the actor and the director can be grounded in what *is*, rather than in interpretations that may not be relevant. In a similar manner, the more specific a teacher is in describing a child's work to the child, for example, "I see that you used a lot of red paint in this area, and mixed it with blue a little bit over here," the more likely the child will be able to meet the teacher in understanding how the child creates and what is being learned in the process.

In both these instances — one where the director/teacher is understanding the character/child, and the other where the director/teacher is understanding the text/work of the child — the same dynamic

between the specific and the whole is occurring. In other words, the teacher and the director must be able to observe and hold together the parts and the whole at the same time, and be able to see the individual child/character while also looking at the entire work/text of the child.

The Value of Questions

A valuable way for directors and teachers to communicate is through questions. Sometimes a person needs a direct question, while at other times a rhetorical question can help a person rethink what he/she is doing. Questions rather than commands give both the actor and the child a sense of autonomy and choice, while they steer them towards seeing things in a new way. Educator Eleanor Duckworth has written many books and articles on how questions help children enter into situations and how the phrasing of a question can be crucial to the child. "It is sometimes important to vary the words used until they make contact with the child" (Duckworth 2008). The directors I interviewed were very clear about how one can use questions with actors.

"When in trouble, look for a question" (Austin 1992). If directors are stuck in the play itself, a question can sometimes help them get back on track. Teachers can use questions about their own practice in the classroom to help them refocus and understand what to do next (Himley & Carini 2000). Often teachers find a large question that helps them support the growth of a class curriculum (Schwartz 1990).

"When you ask (an actor) too often, 'How did that feel?' you are getting information for yourself, not helping the actor" (Austin 1992). When a teacher asks, "What is that? What are you doing?" too often, the same thing is happening. The child, like the actor, may begin to shut down. Questions like these are needed at times, but too many make the relationship between the teacher and the child one-sided: the child informing the teacher. In a similar vein, Austin says, "Why questions are bad: They shut off actors" (Austin 1992). Both actors and children think that "why" questions must have right answers. The fear of critique for giving a wrong answer can halt the growth of the child and the actor.

"A good question is, 'So, what do you want to do now?'" (Austin 1992). In the relationship between a

director and an actor, this question can help both if the director is not sure what should happen next. When a teacher poses a similar question to a child, the child is empowered to make a choice about what is needed at that moment. The better a teacher and child know each other, the easier it is to have this kind of frank exchange. This goes for the director and the actor as well.

"The director helps the actor frame the right questions and how to ask them" (Austin 1992). In addition to asking good questions of students, the teacher should also be interested in the ability of a child to ask questions. Appropriate questions can help the child propel him- or herself into new investigations and understandings of an idea. Once a child is able to ask questions of herself and others, she will never stop learning.

"If you have a question, I will answer it. If I don't know it, I will find it out for you" (Freelon 1992). Embedded within this comment are two elements: the willingness to admit that one does not have all the answers; and the responsibility to respond honestly to a child/actor's question if the answer is known, and not feign ignorance in the name of "investigation." For some children/actors, asking questions is the way that they learn. It is important to take the time to respond to each question in a way that satisfies the learner. If there is a fear that an answer might end an inquiry, one must remember that if a child/actor is still interested in a direction of knowledge after getting an answer, he/she will continue to investigate it.

Questions are tools for both directors and teachers that allow the actor/child to become owners of their own learning and understand where they are currently in their own process. Knowing what kind of question might help is closely related to knowing the child/actor. Questions can be a way to understand where a child/actor is at a particular moment, but the most useful questions help the child/actor expand the possibilities of thought and action. "We need only broaden their scope by opening up parts of the world that that children may not, on their own, have thought of thinking about." (Duckworth 2008)

Timing

For teachers and directors, timing is a critical part of their work. Some of the questions directors and

teachers ask of themselves frequently are: When do I ask this question, when do I introduce something new to this group, and when do I give an individual space. The sense of timing comes from observing both the mood of the group and the individual.

Cheryl Katz (1992) describes timing as "when to push when not to push; when to end early and when to take a day off." Human beings are not built to obey unquestionably and cannot perform consistently, no matter how much it is expected. The more a director/teacher can understand where a group is naturally headed, the better he can adapt and provide what the group needs to move forward. A high-energy day might call for many quick exercises, risk taking, and humor. A low-energy day may call for an extended period of listening and reflection. Slowing down or shifting to another activity can allow the cast/class to take in the prior work and ideas and process them, which is often far more helpful than pushing on to the next scene or lesson.

As with questions, timing works best when teachers and directors know who they are working with. If a strong relationship and bond is created within a group, the teacher/director can take more risks in offering more than the group can handle. Austin (1992) states that "there is validity in offering too much to the actor, as long as the actor can say no." Teachers and directors must be sensitive to overstimulation in their work. The behavior and reaction of the participants to the presentation of the teacher/director needs to be taken into account. Wise teachers and directors have reworked blocking or classroom arrangements after a day where it became clear that something was not working! And when a child/actor can come out and tell the director/teacher that "This is too much for me right now," it can be extremely helpful in modifying one's practice.

Shirley Kaplan (1992), director, teacher, artist and playwright, has observed that "knowing the moment that the actors own the play [is vital]. You did what you had to do. Now is the time to disappear." This is perhaps both the hardest and most joyful moment for both the director and the teacher. The ensemble now knows enough to not need you hovering all the time. The students and the actors now have a true sense of themselves and the work they intend to do. It is difficult to step back and let go, especially

when you have spent so much time guiding and supporting what has occurred. The satisfaction of this moment is the realization that enough tools have been provided so the actors/children can now own the work, and that this ownership will continue long after, whether in the long run of a show, or in the learning life of a child. For a teacher, the feeling might resemble that of a director on the opening night of her show, watching proudly from the darkness of the house while the actors take the stage.

Timing is an element that is essential to the work of teachers and directors. The practice of this particular element of the art is hampered in the theatre by shorter and shorter rehearsal periods, and it is greatly hampered in education by the imposition of bells and set periods for learning, and in the race to cover what might be on a high-stakes test. In order to practice timing, one must *have* time, and somehow this is often in short supply.

Space

Space for teachers and directors has to do with where the action occurs, where the scenes and the learning will play out. For directors, the tangible space is the configuration of the stage. For teachers, it is how the classroom is arranged. Space can also be of an intellectual nature: the teacher or director's allowance for certain ways of thinking and expression. Within both the theater and the classroom, expectations of inner exploration should already be in place. It is obvious, but it still needs to be stated, that the elements and styles of both teachers and directors will be present in the spaces they create. Teachers must be constantly aware of the balance, and tension at times, between the scene of the "action" and what the actors or students bring to that space.

Paul Austin (1992) believes that "once one has a successful ground plan, all movement becomes inevitable." In directing, one needs to place set pieces in a way that interesting connections might take place between the actors. Levels (a sunken living room, stairs, chairs) work well for directors to show relationships, and help the actors explore those relationships in their work. In the same way, teachers need to be aware that the way tables and desks are placed will have an effect on the movement of the class. Intense discussions might occur around a large work-

table or a large rug. Quiet chatting or reading is more likely to occur in a pillow-filled corner with a cosy chair and lamp. Many teachers quickly learn that the placement of a wastebasket can have a dramatic effect on the tone of the class. Like the director, the teacher needs to imagine the students in the space while she is setting it up.

Imagining the students in the space may help the teacher question some of the choices she has made. For example, the choice to have a "teacher's desk" and the placement of this desk set up a power relationship that will be obvious to the students from the first day of class. Rows of desks will often communicate individual, focused, competitive learning, while round tables with chairs send a message that students will talk to each other and collaborate. Between these two choices lie many variations, including outdoors schools that break all of these constructs (Leyden 2009).

Shirley Kaplan (1992) feels that for directors it is "important to create the environment and the spacing and the style." The style of the classroom space usually reflects the style of the teacher. Some teachers want to make a space for each discipline, to clearly emphasize this way of thinking for their students. Others might be interested in putting various books and materials in one space, related to a theme, like dinosaurs, in order to show how the disciplines are interrelated. Another teacher might mix up elements in order to free children to make their own connections. The style of the space also relates to the values that a teacher holds toward the purpose of education itself.

Paul Austin (1992) asserts that "one needs space for large ideas." A play reads differently when it is played in a tiny black box instead of a huge auditorium. Small spaces usually convey intimacy and personal relationships. The larger the space, the more often larger ideas will prevail. For the teacher, considering the architecture of the room and how the largeness or smallness of space will affect the depth of ideas is important. Teachers and administrators need to rethink the value of space, and how the design of schools and classrooms affect students' learning. The Mead School in Connecticut is a good example of how school design affects learning. Its spaces flow from one room to another with many openings

to let the building, and ideas, breathe. I can envision ideas floating around in this space and resting in corners to be found again later. In contrast, students who attend schools with only one working toilet, overcrowded and crumbling classrooms, and inadequate heat certainly understand how much their ideas are valued by the larger world (Kozol 2006).

But space can also be the intellectual space allowed by the teacher. If a teacher thinks globally, symbolically, and meaningfully, and encourages the students around her to think likewise, space for thinking and learning can be found in the “closets” many teachers find themselves working in, but this is an almost impossible challenge.

In viewing several plays in different theatrical venues, I have noticed that plays that have worked well on a small stage lose their particular power when the action is placed in a larger setting, where even the actors have more physical distance between themselves. Epic plays (I am thinking about *Angels in America*, Shakespeare, and opera) are often more powerful on large stages. Intellectual, political, and philosophical ideas can play in a small space, perhaps not as grandly as on a large stage, but subtle, intimate, relational ideas need a closeness and smallness between the actor and the audience. If one makes a connection of this idea to education, schools need to have both kinds of spaces, with the spaces also replicated within each classroom. Spaces for big ideas and subtle connections need to be provided for students in schools.

Playwright and director Eduardo Manchado (1992) looks at space as “the foundation in which to base everything else on. It gives you a pad to sketch on. It tells you where you want to go off in to.” The classroom space is both the grounding of the teacher in the tangible and the limits to which a class can expand an investigation in thought.

Qualities of Good Directing and Teaching

As a part of my 1993 interview study with these directors, I asked each one what they thought were the qualities of good directing. They responded:

- Patience
- Flexibility
- An understanding of psychology

- A good imagination
- An inquiring mind
- An ambition to work with people
- A willingness to assume responsibility
- A love of the medium itself
- Vision
- Courage
- Respect for all professionals in the medium
- Organization
- Compassion
- Not being afraid to do it
- Having standards while staying open in the hand
- Inquisitiveness
- Patience
- A love of design
- Life experience
- Perception
- Working one on one
- Listening
- A love of what motivates actors
- Trusting actors
- A respect for both the text and the actor

I believe that educators and teachers can see that these qualities also reflect the art of teaching. I find that there is a real connection between these two types of artists, one that should be explored much further, for both can learn a great deal from the other.

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