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# NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

A DIRECTOR'S PROCESS

NANCY MECKLER



# Notes from the Rehearsal Room

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*Nancy Meckler*

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*For all the actors with whom I have  
shared the journey*



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# Introduction

Directing a play involves taking words off a page and bringing them to a place where they exist physically in time and space, where others can see, hear and feel them.

Actors are fortunate. In their working lives they will encounter any number of directors and their individual ways of working, whereas we theatre directors rarely have that opportunity. Often the tools and techniques of our trade are learned haphazardly through reading, workshops and early forays into acting.

For me, above all, making theatre feeds a desire to express what it means to be fully human. In life so often we repress or hide our emotions, our needs, our aspirations. But when we watch theatre, film or television drama we satisfy a hunger for experience. As spectators we can identify what matters to us. We can explore possible experience. We can learn about extremes of human behaviour, we can see enacted the kinds of open, frank, frightening conversations which may be infrequent in our daily lives. At best we come to feel and care about characters. When we care about what happens to them, to hope for their success or survival, we make an emotional connection. As we watch a play, it might be said that the actors are expressing emotions for us, feelings we might find too intense in real life. And I do not hesitate to include comedy in this realm. Comedy might lighten our hearts, but its roots are deeply serious.

Our sense of mortality is always present somewhere in our minds, but when we create I believe we become most fully alive.

How do we get to this point of a piece of art existing off the page? Of connecting actors and the audience with each other and with the essence of the play?

## A bit about me

Before the age of 10 I was making theatre. I had become obsessed with creating stories, gathering neighbourhood kids together to 'make a show' which we would then perform for any audience we could find. Given that television was new then, it is unlikely that I would have seen theatre of any kind, although I do remember at the age of 5 attending a recital at the local dance school. From that moment I was smitten with the idea of performance. Which led to my intense passion for acting, followed years later by an involvement in all areas of theatre and finally into directing.

I was a drama major from 1958 to 1963 at Antioch College, a liberal arts university in America's Midwest with a small theatre department. This meant that we few students had plenty of opportunities to make theatre and take on creative roles. Part of my studies was a course in Basic Directing and I subsequently went on to direct a few student productions, but at that time woman theatre directors were so rare that it would never have occurred to me as a possible career. All our drama professors were men; each summer we had professional directors visiting from New York City and they too were men. There were simply no role models which would inspire women to become directors.

As my driving passion since childhood was to one day become an actor, a lack of opportunities for women in directing was not a problem. And I pursued acting by persistently auditioning for roles in college productions. However, to my

dismay, I was rarely cast in the sought-after summer season which included professional actors. The disappointment was huge. My hunger for a life in the theatre meant a longing to be in a rehearsal room, as close as possible to the process. But it soon became apparent that the only areas open to me were in costumes, lighting or stage management.

Stage management did not feel particularly creative but it had its attractions. I would be at the director's side, taking down blocking, running the rehearsal room and being closely involved with every area of production. This was my route into the process, and I hungrily took the option. I eventually saw there was a danger in becoming too valuable as a stage manager and I was not keen to be stuck in that role. Little did I know that one day when I began directing, those years working in stage management would serve as a virtual apprenticeship.

After university and an internship at Washington DC's Arena Stage, I returned to my pursuit of acting, attending classes at the HB (Herbert Berghof) Studios in New York. Those classes with several truly inspiring teachers, including Bill Hickey and Aaron Frankel, introduced me to the basic tenets of acting and were to be invaluable in the future. To this day I use many exercises first encountered there.

Fruitless attempts to find acting work in the cattle call auditions of New York were followed by a year studying classical acting in the UK at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA). During that year of study I gradually and painfully came to realize that acting was not right for me. I loved theatre, I wanted to be a part of it, but no longer as a performer.

I was fortunate to discover that my previous forays into directing at university meant I could offer my services as assistant director to alternative theatre companies which were springing up in New York and London. These companies were often unfunded and therefore open and welcoming to young, dedicated, idealistic theatre makers. Ellen Stewart's La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club became an umbrella for many such

companies and I was able to join La MaMa Plexus in New York as an assistant director.

In 1968 I came to live in the UK during a period now referred to as the second wave of feminism, when the phrase ‘women’s libbers’ was born. Women’s groups and women’s theatre companies were springing up and although I never joined a particular group, I was aware of this exciting activity full of passion and adventurous intent. Looking back, feminism may not have been foremost in my conscious mind as I was pursuing a singular passion – to have a creative life in the theatre. At that time Warehouse La MaMa, an offshoot of the New York La MaMa, was starting up and I joined them as a directing assistant.

Within a year a small breakaway company, Freehold, evolved and I became their director. Our great fringe success at the 1969 Edinburgh Festival with a version of Sophocles’ *Antigone* devised by the company and Peter Hulton, was quickly followed by a dazzling sequence of events. We were invited by the Akademie der Kunste to open their theatre festival in Berlin and later that year the British Council presented us at BITEF (Belgrade International Theatre Festival) and the Venice Biennale. This whirlwind response led to us becoming one of the first fringe theatre groups to receive Arts Council funding, so finally we could pay a weekly wage.

The Freehold company survived barely four years (1968–73), partly because I had married and taken time out to have a baby. This meant having to bring in visiting directors for several productions, always difficult when a company has a strong history and work ethic. Also, our Arts Council funding required lengthy tours which were simply not compatible with having a small child.

In the following years my work has taken me into many spheres: new writing, directing feature films, and working in ballet as a director and a dramaturg. For twenty-two years I led an Arts Council touring company, Shared Experience Theatre. And I have directed many Shakespeare productions for the Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare’s Globe.

## A woman in theatre

Women's lives and women's issues may not have been a conscious commitment and yet, in every working opportunity, I was drawn to women playwrights and intuitively chose women's stories. My work for Freehold began by exploring a women's theme: a study for the witches in *Macbeth*. Later projects were the deconstructed version of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Add to this our production of *The Successful Life of Three* by Maria Irene Fornes, an American playwright, and my inclination was evident.

When asked whether being a woman has ever held me back as a theatre director, I can cite many instances when being a woman and a mother of two has meant turning down work away from home, which might otherwise have led to a smooth path up the proverbial career ladder. And I can cite numerous occasions of being ignored or rejected when there was most likely an unconscious bias against women. But when I spent over twenty years as the artistic director of Shared Experience Theatre, we made a consistent effort to employ women in every sphere. In the late 1990s Polly Teale became my directing associate and eventually my co-artistic director. Together we sought the talents of women designers, writers, movement directors, production managers, senior staff and board members. As a general rule I find women are particularly open to collaboration and this was a deeply collaborative environment. We certainly did not exclude men. One crucial member of our creative team was composer Peter Salem, who created inspiring and wide-ranging scores for so many of our productions including *War and Peace*, co-produced with the National Theatre in 1996.

## Diversity

As I write this book, we in the theatre are experiencing an important sea change in our commitment to addressing diversity in all areas of production. The Black Lives Matter

movement, begun circa 2014, has led to heightened awareness of diversity shortcomings in our profession. When I began as artistic director of Shared Experience Theatre in 1989, my intention was to open doors whenever possible to actors, writers, assistants and technical people of colour. Thereafter we made efforts to continue in this vein; certainly our expressionistic productions encouraged us towards more open casting. Subsequently in my freelance career I have worked with casting directors committed to opening the field as widely as possible.

It hugely bothers me that the pool of people from diverse backgrounds trained in backstage and technical skills is so limited. There are efforts made now by the National Theatre and producers to introduce people at a very young age to those skills and opportunities, and sixth form colleges have begun offering training in technical skills. Hopefully this will open the way to many who would never have considered a behind-the-scenes life in the arts.

## Physical theatre

People reading this book might expect me to deal with the many years I have spent working in physical theatre. Shared Experience Theatre was certainly devoted to that realm and we created extra-long rehearsal periods so that we could train actors physically and prepare them for rehearsals requiring physical exploration and physical expression. In fact our working credo was a commitment to expressionism: work that explores the hidden feelings, thoughts, dreams and aspirations of its characters through physical expression. To give an example: when Anna in *Anna Karenina* became addicted to morphine, we created a movement sequence to express the immediate physical effect each time she sipped the drug. Such movement sequences underpinned by a sound score were virtually bordering on dance, but in this case performed by an actor. These moments were a creative collaboration between

the actor, the director and our movement director, the remarkable Liz Ranken. Liz is a theatre artist working in dance and theatre with performers of diverse abilities. She was able to craft a sequence with an actor through improvisation, using their first nonverbal instincts as her starting point. Because movement work in our company was initiated from actor impulses, it had an immediacy and an honesty which was engaging and often deeply moving.

In the late 1980s when I met director and teacher Mladen Materic at the Edinburgh Festival, I discovered his extensive method of physical exercises which provided a clear and precise way for introducing physical exploration to a rehearsal room. We invited him to Shared Experience for workshops, where I learned a new and exciting vocabulary.

In sharing my process I plan to touch only briefly on this physical work. Physical exercises need to be experienced or at least observed; describing them tends to be unsatisfactory and indeed can be easily misunderstood. I have decided to limit this book to a process which can be communicated through the written word. Most importantly, I want to emphasize that these written exercises are the keystones I would use in every rehearsal room, whether the work is traditional or 'physical'. In fact, I have often brought them into use when working with dancers on their acting in narrative ballet.

## Why this book?

My generation of theatre directors, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s rarely had any formal training and often came to directing through their time at university. As a result there were probably as many ways to direct plays as there were directors.

Nowadays there are courses and books on directing. In my experience, reading about exercises and then trying them out is only occasionally successful. But when it is, those few exercises can become a solid and invaluable base for the work. Inevitably

these exercises morph into something else as you discover how they work and how they work for you.

In this book I am offering up some of the tools I use when bringing a play to life. Many of these are my own invention, discovered through trial and error. For example, I have never studied improvisation, but gradually have developed a technique for using it in the rehearsal room. I came to believe that starting rehearsals by sharing basic starting points and vocabulary with the company lays down a common understanding of priorities and prepares the ground for true ensemble playing.

Finally, as I believe that we learn best by doing, rather than by watching or having things explained to us, it is my hope that some of these tools will come across as suggestions, which can spark off ideas. You might try them out, or better yet, they might encourage you to invent your own. However you use them, I hope you find what follows stimulating and even useful.