

CHOOSING THE PLAY

by Charles Marowitz (November 19, 2009)

'Choosing the play' is already something of a false start because in most instances, a play is chosen by a producer or a producing organization and then assigned to a director. But just as often, a director finds a new script or an old one he wishes to revive and persuades some well-heeled management to back it with him at the helm. Occasionally, a group of actors anxious to display their talents will raise the money privately, rent a theatre and subsequently 'rent' a director as well. Directors should be wary about accepting these kinds of projects as they almost invariably have some interpretative strings attached (an actress who is dying to startle the world with her bulimic version of "Hedda" or an overambitious youth desperate to foist his roller-skating 'Hamlet' alongside Olivier's, Gielgud's and Branagh's) which only become known once the production has set sail and it is too late to do anything - except perhaps, jump ship.

But assuming this is a play you have yourself chosen because you have a notion as to how it should be mounted and are eager to realize it, there are certain steps which should be taken. If a new play, it is sensible to circulate it among three or four literate friends to see whether they share your enthusiasm. If they do not, it is equally sensible to consider their objections. If these do not dissuade you and you believe the work has virtues which others failed to recognize, proceed by all means. Some of the most successful productions have been of scripts that have been circulating for five, ten sometimes fifteen years, the virtues of which no one previously recognized. If your gut-instinct says, this is worth doing, your gut-instinct is probably your best guide in the matter.

If it is a revival of an established play, it makes sense to do some investigations as to when it was last revived - in what part of town - and whether successfully or unsuccessfully. If it had a healthy run, there is a good likelihood people will not beat down the doors to see it again - unless of course, you have such a startlingly new interpretation it can be given a completely new gloss and guarantees an experience unlike the one previously bestowed.

Once you have eliminated good reasons for not abandoning your choice, there are certain steps you should take in regard to the script.

First of all, you should divide it into its respective parts. Which is to say you should examine to see how it *divides itself* into its various parts, so that you have a clear notion of its literary structure. This done, there is nothing to prevent you from combining parts or deleting others and giving it a shape commensurate with your notion of what you wish to express through it. But before playing fast and loose with a play's actual structure, it makes good sense to recognize it for what it is. To be negligent in this matter is to discover, often in the middle or late stage of rehearsals, that you have been proceeding in a straight line whereas the play is essentially curvacious or non-linear. As with the interpretation of a classic work, you can proceed in any direction you like - so long as you recognize that it might be a divergence from what the playwright originally intended. The pitfall is being so obsessed with your *re*interpretation of the work that you never see the play in its pristine, original form. Many turkeys have been hatched due to the ego's insistence that what is in the director's mind is far superior to that which was originally in the playwright's. But as a hasty corollary to this warning, I have to add that a really new and fertilizing idea is precisely what an old, established classic is longing for - and if you are fortunate to have digested the original and belched up a masterpiece of your own, heave ho!

It is common, in the case of new plays, for directors to organize Readings or Workshops of the work in question. Occasionally, this can provide some useful input on the material because it lets in outside light. But one always has to bear in mind that a Reading is only the tip of a very deeply-submerged iceberg - only one dimension of a three-dimensional object - and for that reason can be misleading. The same is true of 'workshops' which, because they are founded on the premise that the play in question 'still needs work', can encourage a process which transfigures the work with 'improvements' and ultimately, destroys what original

value it may have once possessed. (Dramaturgs are particularly hazardous during this process as they too proceed from a premise: namely, that they know better than the author how to develop and improve his play; a supposition I have never known to be proven true.)

Let us assume, you have avoided all the above pitfalls and you have a notion of what you want to do with this script. It is important to safeguard it for, from the very first discussion of the play, long before the first rehearsal, you will be bombarded with other people's views of the given material. Occasionally these can be edifying; more often than not, they are misleading or subversive to your original ideas. It is a general rule in the theatre that everyone fancies themselves a critic or a play-doctor and almost everyone will have a 'bright idea' as to how a play can be improved. Flee from these as you would a squadron of Valkyries for they are usually only the outpourings of essentially uncreative people who believe they have been blessed by the Muse when in fact, they have only been goosed by the Devil.