

## Director's Notes

Charles Marowitz (February 26, 2010)

When a production reaches the runthrough stage and the need to maintain unbroken continuity becomes essential, the director's way of making changes and improvements is through notes, usually given at the end of each run. The actors huddle around the director who desperately tries to decipher the scribbles he has made and, by means of verbal corrections and suggestions, attempts to refine and sometimes alter the course his production has taken.

This ritual (and in many ways it is a ritual) reinforces the hierarchy that has always been taken for granted in the theatre. The director, a benevolent or terrifying father-figure and an audience-of-one, conveys to his company what he feels about the work that has thus far been accomplished, the goals achieved or unrealized, the missteps or peccadilloes he has noticed along the way and, in so doing, reconfirms the director's authority which has been tacitly assumed but never openly declared: viz. that the actors have been giving form and feeling to his vision of the writer's work.

That is not to suggest that throughout rehearsals the actors have slavishly relinquished their own personal preconceptions of their roles for, in many instances, they have been tacitly clung to and, consciously or unconsciously, secreted into the emerging interpretation. But when the play reaches the run-through stage, any contradictions and misconceptions that may exist become glaring and there is very little time to remove or rethink them. That is the point at which actors pay dearly for nurturing 'private moments' whose motivation may be egotism rather than relevance, histrionics rather than plausibility. For at that stage, the arc of the play has become abundantly clear – both to the director and his company - and anything that veers away from that arc needs to be firmly expunged.

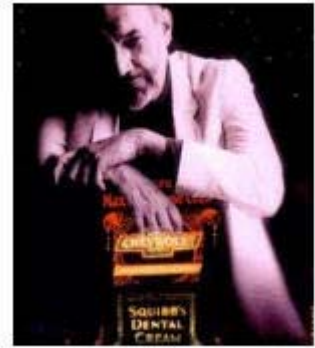
Most notes are technical in nature. "Rise here, rather than there", "Cross right, rather than left" "Stress this word rather than the other", but if they consist only of a litany of technical directions, they will be serving the production very poorly. For it is in the final stages that the director should be revisiting the perceived story of his play, the underlying meaning of its developing situations and the unfolding meaning of its chronology. It is a time for rediscovering the production's earliest intentions and testing them against final results.

This is also the period when a director, like the headmaster he sometimes is, doles out rewards to his prize pupils, recognizing this one's humor or that one's agility, the marked improvement in this characterization or the radical transformation in another. It is also the director's last opportunity to correct missteps or vague-ness and a time when he must be most politic. In private, he can be as unguarded as he likes to his actors, but in the communal atmosphere of the note-session, it behooves him to use his utmost tact – for each actor is now comparing his performance with another's and if publicly disparaged, there is danger of imposing a humiliation from which no constructive good can ever arise. On these occasions, it sometimes pays to be oblique. If you want to cool down an overheated performance by an actor who is prone to overacting, it may be useful to address your remarks to his playing partner about the degree of proper intensity the scene requires and, in passing, suggest a lowering of its temperature. The overheated actor will get the point even though it is not directly addressed to him.

Some corrections can be made through notes; many cannot. If it's a matter of a wrong inflexion or a slightly altered move, an apposite note can usually fix it. But if it's a piece of business between two or more performers, you would just be wasting your breath. Only finite, hands-on rehearsal can rectify such moments and merely citing the problem in a note without scheduling the time to rehearse it is useless, as actors are being told something is wrong but not given the opportunity to it put right.

The note session imposes objectivity on a process which is enveloped in subjectivity. The actor's tendency throughout rehearsals has been to shape the logic of his or her role; this inevitably leads to self-absorption; the actor's lines, the actor's moves, the actor's motives, the actor's psychology. When notes are introduced into the process, the director who has been constantly insinuating his own preferences, posits the first objective view of events the actors receive. It is as if a camera which has been shooting an endless series of close-ups suddenly

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**dollies back to provide a comprehensive long-shot of everyone's work. It is an essential and salutary change of focus; one which the actor needs in order to be able to evaluate his work in relation to everyone else's. That is why it is important for the director to speak in general terms as well as merely picking out particular flaws or imprecisions. It is at this time that the actor is depending on his director to provide that larger view which is what the audience will be seeing. If he doesn't provide that objectivity, if he clings to the correction of his precious minutiae, he is abdicating his true responsibility: to become the representative of a force greater than the writer or his company of actors, - namely 'the public' for whom, ostensibly, all of these efforts have been undertaken.**