

## Settling For Less

Charles Marowitz (October 10, 2009)

Every director occasionally makes mistakes and the most common errors are often in the area of casting. It often happens that in the middle of a rehearsal process, a director finds that the actor in a key role simply cannot cut it. What is required of him or her cannot be delivered because it simply does not exist. You made a mistake. You were misled by an exceptional audition or persuaded by other people's opinions and therefore ignored that small, niggling inner voice that was sending out alarms, and now you are paying the price.

The most expedient remedy is to remove the person that's posing the problem. - Replacement. - It is often the course that seems the most extreme because a) it may disturb the morale of other members of the company and b) it seems a little heartless to punish another for what, essentially, was your mistake. But if all else has failed, replacement is the most practical course - assuming of course, you can find a new actor that can actually deliver the goods.

But at such times, when the director is suffering an anguish that rarely conveys itself to his company but is no less intense for being suppressed, another impulse rears its ugly head: the impulse to 'settle for less'. He/she can't get what this role requires, so I will quietly compromise and come to terms with the inadequacy of the situation. This is like ignoring an ex-ray which clearly indicates you have a tumor. The problem will grow and fester and reach a point where, the only way you will be able to bear the inadequate actor is by refusing to acknowledge his presence. But the other members of the company, and subsequently, the audience, will be less inclined to 'settle for less'. They will receive the full brunt of the problem you tried to sweep under the carpet, and whether they recognize it or not, will react negatively to what they see and hear.

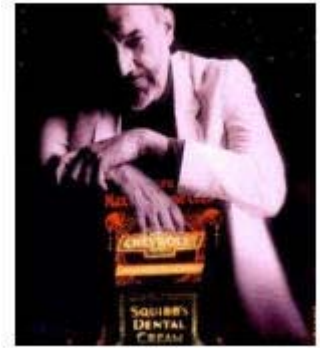
What then, are the choices? Either fire the artist or retain them and accept the harm they inflict on your show. There is a third way and it is the hardest of all - hard on the actor as well as the director. It consists of openly acknowledging the actor's insufficiency and refusing to let it fester and infect the surrounding context. It involves direct confrontation and brutal honesty. An unqualified acknowledgement of precisely what is lacking in the actor's performance and a joint resolve to try to supply it: a process which is equivalent to entering intensive care.

This involves stripping away the accumulated traits, readings, inflections and conceptions that have been assiduously built up over the rehearsal period. Going back to square one. Abandoning the text, employing improvisation and a variety of acting exercises and in-depth maneuvers to 'unblock' the actor and cause him actively to rethink everything he has been doing from the very first reading. It also involves a certain humility on the part of the director; acknowledging that he too has been wrong in allowing certain tendencies to develop which have led only into a cul-de-sac. Together, the director and the actor drill past the text and the sub-text to that amorphous area below which theatrical gestation first begins.

The nature of the exercises and the subjects of the improvs will always be directly related to the specifics of the problem being tackled and it is best for this work to be done only between the actor and the director and those one or two characters with whom the performer is obliged to interact. It should not be a 'company project' conspicuously carried out before all the members of the cast. On the contrary, it can only work if it becomes the subject of intense private explorations between the problem-actor, his immediate playing-partner and the director.

It is a painful process because it is predicated on the belief that there is something terribly wrong and drastic measures have to be employed to correct the situation. But as with a behavioral problem thrust into the hands of a benevolent psychoanalyst, a measure of good will has to exist on both sides. The 'process' is not a punishment but an extreme remedy in order to effect a dramatic change where one is desperately required. It is

CHARLES MAROWITZ



Email: [winomar@mac.com](mailto:winomar@mac.com)

time-consuming and laborious; it can be injurious to the nervous system and can go terribly wrong if a breakthrough is not effected. But when it works, it can salvage not only the actor's performance but improve the overall texture of the entire production.

In a production of "Othello", I was confronted with just such a problem in regard to the actor playing the lead role. He was a black actor with a strong voice and a powerful presence but, in all of his scenes, he projected a suave and unruffled façade – even when he was being diabolically manipulated by Iago or cruelly contemptuous of an allegedly faithless Desdemona. It was as if he was afraid to reveal the fire that was burning inside of his character or unleash the ferocity which had been stirred up by Iago's provocations. Perhaps I had made a wrong casting-choice; had been duped by the actor's natural attributes; his resonant bass voice and strong physical presence. But I refused to admit that was the case. The actor seemed to have all the attributes needed for the role and there was something either I or he was doing that was preventing the emergence of the character.

We went into private sessions. I was deliberately provocative; I created harsh even humiliating exercises which forced him to react strongly, and little by little, he took the bait. We segued from improv back towards the Shakespearean text. Iago, with specific instructions from myself which had nothing to do with the logic or truthfulness of the scenes, also goaded and provoked the actor into aggressive behavior – so much so that on one occasion I had to break up a minor scuffle. After an arduous eight or ten sessions, something was loosed in the actor which could be transferred to the character. Rehearsals progressed rapidly to the preview stage. Everyone in the company, who had been tacitly as worried as myself, breathed a sigh of relief. The actor had 'found his role'. Othello had arrived.

In this case, it turned out that deep within the actor's psyche there was the fear that if he showed the cruel and vicious aspects of a black character too blatantly, it would in some way reinforce the prejudice that many people felt towards blacks and so, unconsciously, he was pulling all his punches. Had I been an analyst (which I wasn't), I might have confronted the actor with the nature of this block and we could have discussed it openly. But since I was a director and he an actor, the symptoms of the problem had to be routed out without direct reference to their cause. It didn't matter. The arduous 'extra sessions' managed to unlock what the actor himself had placed in a tight, firmly locked compartment. I suppose, in the early dark days of those rehearsals, I might have 'settled for less' but that would have meant countenancing an interpretation which was at odds with the playwright's intentions and I felt that was an unconscionable. But I have to admit that in other, similar circumstances, I lamely accepted inadequacies which there was simply no time to remedy and I did 'settle for less'.

Those are the sins of omission which a director never forgets or ever forgives.