

## Working With The Playwright

Charles Marowitz (June 15, 2010)

When directing a play by a living author, who is usually granted the right to attend rehearsals, the director will find himself in an awkward position. The power-base is suddenly split. Surely, the director is the Captain of the ship and his word is law. And yet, here is the author, without whom there would be no 'ship' at all - so to which authority should the actor be beholden?

If the playwright is someone like David Mamet, Neil Simon or Tom Stoppard, the author's influence is often paramount and there are frequent consultations between director and playwright, the contents of which do not seep out to the company except as directives previously agreed between both parties. However, if you are working with a new playwright, you might consider an alternative arrangement which may be more effective.

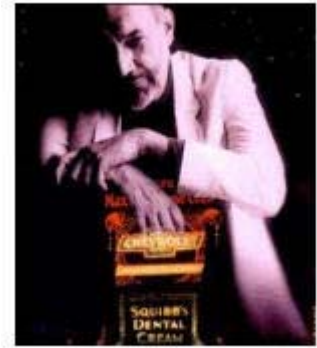
The first thing to realize is that many fledgling playwrights do not understand the process by which a play gravitates to the stage; that a variety of people with creative talents i.e. actors, designers, dramaturgs, etc., are reshaping the original material in the act of interpreting it. Sometimes, this may alter the playwright's original vision and sensible playwrights realize this is often to the good. But there are some playwrights who find it difficult, if not impossible, to relinquish the picture of the play they have in their minds, who insist on tangibly reproducing those images that first arose in their imagination. I am not inferring that a mise-en-scene should transform the nature or spirit of the original work, only that the act of interpretation opens doors to other people's conceptions of what a playwright has created and, unless the writer recognizes he is moving from one genre into another, and one which has its own special requirements, he will come unstuck.

The playwright should be in attendance during the two or three reading-rehearsals in which the actors are seated around the table with script in hand. He should be pumped for as much information as he can possibly give and everyone concerned with the production should have a chance to bombard him with questions. Once he has been pumped dry and the actors get on their feet, he should be prohibited from attending rehearsals. This may sound draconian but it is a practical prohibition. Once actors have begun struggling with their lines and formulating their moves, they become badly inhibited if the playwright is present. They are not sure whether or not he realizes that those early, tentative, necessarily imperfect efforts are part of the process of looking for and finding the route into the play, and they are painfully conscious of the fact that everything is in disarray; the inevitable disarray that precedes the decisive choices that will shortly be made.

Once the play is ready for its first runthroughs, the playwright should be invited back to see the work in its embryonic state. At that juncture, he will have an idea of which way the material is moving and if he has strong objections, that is the time to voice them. To the director, of course; not the actors. That is the same point at which the director will get an objective impression of what has already been created. The playwright's absence during the major part of rehearsals has given him an invaluable objectivity which he could not possibly have had otherwise. His reactions at that stage will be extremely pertinent and it behooves the director to give them very serious consideration. Often that is the moment where the playwright himself is inspired to alter and revise, delete or re-angle. It is also the point where the director has an opportunity to ventilate the problems he has encountered with the script. It is the second plateau of the rehearsal period where the production is not quite off the drawing-board, but almost.

Once the impressions of both director and playwright have been honestly evaluated, it is possible to visualize what the shape of the final product will be. The freshness of perspective for both parties provides a great

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opportunity to seriously assess the fruits of their joint labor. Once this has been accomplished, the remaining runthroughs and previews should try to assimilate the new information.

During that last stanza of the production, the playwright's criticism should be relayed exclusively to the director – never directly to the actors. Nothing subverts the authority of a director more than suddenly discovering that actors are responding to the playwright's notes – rather than his own. This is not a matter of bruising egos. It is simply that the playwright has neither the language nor the technical expertise to remedy the problems that have emerged and, just as the director would not have the audacity to revise the playwright's lines, so the playwright should not interfere with the communication which has been assiduously built up between the director and his company. A playwright may be able to tell an actor succinctly what is wrong with his performance, but usually, he hasn't the vocabulary or theatrical background to know how to correct it. In short, the chain-of-command which initiated the production-process should not suddenly be subverted as that tends to disconcert actors, upset directors and be fatally counterproductive to the playwright's own remedial intentions.

When I was directing a triad of plays by Murray Schisgal in London (the first professional productions, in fact, of this writer's work), the author would stalk up and down the aisle at the back of the theatre wringing his hands and mumbling his irritations with the actor's work. So much so that the actors complained to me that they couldn't possibly rehearse freely knowing that the playwright was being so disturbed by their work. I explained this to the author and, to safeguard the morale of the company, I banned him from daily rehearsals until the production was ready to open. This was very early in Mr. Schisgal's career and no doubt, he thought it very high-handed of me to bar the playwright from his own play but my choice was a simple one. Either the playwright remained and the actors became progressively more distressed, or the playwright went and proper work could be resumed. I had no hesitation in making my decision,

Recently, there was a production of a play in California which I knew was seriously overwritten and badly in need of editing. I also knew the playwright in question was very anal-retentive about his material as I had had a previous experience with him during which I had to forsake a production because of his unwillingness to make changes or deletions. To avoid a reprise of that unhappy situation, I entered into a written agreement with him that a) he would accept whatever cuts the company and I would make in rehearsal and b) that after the first Readings he would leave the scene to return only when runthroughs were in progress. Reluctantly, the playwright accepted those terms. During rehearsals in which the actors and I proceeded to trim the fat from the script, I found myself having to protect the play from the excessive mayhem the actors were anxious to perpetrate. The result, I can report, was gratifying to both the author and the public. But that was a unique situation. Usually, one commences rehearsals with a script already pared down to essentials. In this case, it was a play with obvious excesses, clearly in need of editing which needed to be carefully assessed before cuts were made. It sometimes happens that there is a slender work-of-art entombed in a flabby exterior (like Cyril Connolly's belief that "Imprisoned in every fat man, a thin one is wildly signaling to be let out.") That was exactly the case here.

Working with a playwright who has chosen you to direct his play is sometimes like being invited to a sumptuous feast on the condition that you don't spoil the table-setting by actually eating anything. Or it can be a marvelous tête-à-tête between two kindred spirits who clearly enjoy the same delicacies.