

GETTING STARTED AS A DIRECTOR IN STUDIO THEATRE

DIRECTORS: Learning the ropes in a new theatre space can be confusing, so this handout has been written to help you navigate through the process of directing for the first time in studio with technical support.

If you have taken the directing class, then you will be able to petition to direct a One Act without doing a Bare Stage. After you have done a tech support one act, you may petition for a full length. If you are considering honors in directing, and imagine that your project would include a fully staged production, you should plan on racking up some directing experience prior to submitting your honors proposal, as previous experience will be taken into consideration.

If you know that you want to direct in studio, you should start looking for a script a couple of terms in advance, as it is actually difficult to come up with the perfect script. If you hunt without the pressure of a deadline, you are more likely to find something you can be passionate about and you may even find several that interest you for future reference. When you plan to petition a full length, you must petition 2 terms in advance anyway, so use your time wisely.

Note: just because it does not have an intermission does not make it a one act....if it looks like a one act, but will run longer than 60 minutes, it is not a one act.

The Studio Production Company: When you direct in studio, you form a Studio Production Company in which you and the persons who commit to your show (and sign contracts to do so) are the whole company that mounts that production. TAB exists to provide guidance and help problem solve, so be sure to ask questions when you are not sure of something. Keep in mind that as the director, you are essentially the Producer and will be responsible for much more than just the aesthetics of the play once staged. How smoothly the whole process goes will be due to you being on top of all of your duties as a producing director and how well you communicate with everyone. You may have inexperienced people covering crucial capacities and it will be up to you to lead even if you don't exactly know fully how to execute all of the functions of the production team. You should know what needs to be done and create a schedule in tandem with your team in which it reasonably can be done.

1. What does “technical support” entail and where do I obtain it?

This means that your one act or full-length production may have access to the department's stock of building materials, properties, lighting, and costumes. Use of these materials, though, requires that you have on board your production designers and a stage manager who can help you to gather and manipulate these elements. You must also clear with the relevant design faculty any stock that you would like to use. Some elements in both shops are too fragile or expensive to go into general use.

You can start by asking the design Faculty whom they think among the students are likely designer candidates. Usually the more experienced directors are a pretty good

source for recommendations, as well. Additionally and importantly, the more you work production on shows, the more you will get to know the students with interest and expertise in design and technical areas—and the more they will get to know you. “Performance Divas” are not much admired by technicians, but a sincere desire to help and to learn is.

2. What kind of a budget do I have?

\$75.00 for a one act and \$150.00 for a full length. The first consideration you must take into account when thinking of spending that budget is what kind of dry cleaning bill are you looking at by the end of the show and what if any special physical elements does the show require? If you choose a large cast show or a period show, you should confer with the faculty costume designer, as most or even your entire budget will go to dry cleaning the costumes. If you need special set pieces or lighting, you should run the design concerns by the faculty designer so that you have a sense of what the cost will be. Generally, you can assume that unless you have to make special purchases, your materials will come from stock.

3. What do I need to provide my designers with in order to start?

You need to give them a copy of your play analysis so that they can absorb what you are thinking about the play (your petition might be useful here). You need to go through the script and make a list of the all locations and physical needs including interiors and exteriors, day and night shifts, time shifts, furniture, doors or other entrance and exit options, and levels, etc. If you have very precise set needs indicated in the dialogue, then you need to consider the placement of all of the elements in a preliminary *ground plan sketch*. A ground plan is a map of where the physical elements need to be on the stage. It doesn't have to be a Da Vinci drawing, just a simple layout will do, but it does need to be visual. From the basic ground plan, the designer will consider your thoughts and morph your rudimentary idea into a work of art, which will also result in a formal and mathematically accurate ground plan.

4. Who do I give the final ground plan to?

Your set designer will then develop a design that you will approve and draft a ground plan of the set. This is an aerial view of the set that you will refer to when blocking. All of the designers and the stage manager need a copy of this, as well as the TAB Technical Director. They all need to be on the same page. Lighting designers need to know if they have to have practical light and/or directional light and how many acting areas to light, costumers need to know what physical issues the set will pose for movement and what colors are going to be in the palate, sound designers will want to think about practical sound locations and sound-scapes, and stage managers will need to know what kind of rehearsal furniture and props to pull, as well as how to tape out the floor for rehearsal. This means a measurement faithful version of the ground plan in one dimension on the floor of your rehearsal space, which allows the actors and you to utilize the dimensions of the set before you actually get one. *This design must be approved by the faculty designer before it may go into the build.*

5. What is the first thing we do once I have a design team and stage manager?

Write an approach statement so you know how to talk about your ideas for the play. Then hold a design meeting. At this meeting you will convey to all of the designers your ideas about the play and they will convey theirs—be sure to listen, as they will have ideas that you had not thought of. It is a good idea to let them talk about their ideas before you launch into yours, so you learn what they are thinking—you may be pleasantly and creatively surprised. You also need to be prepared with a list of the specific things that you know that you will need (for instance, in *Mother Courage* there has to be a cart as the main scenic element). Remember that designers are artists and it is their role to interpret your ideas through their artistic media. Try not to dictate all of the designs; enter into conversation with the designers and inspire each other, ultimately letting them design in their own specialized area. You may be very specific about saying the tree must be a willow and it has to be up right, but leave the details to the designer. But—did you know that a weeping beech might work just as well? How about an ornamental? Learning to communicate in qualities rather than architectural specifics will allow designers to interpret the world of the play in their terms and yet respond to the dynamic qualities you sense in the play.

From this meeting, set a second meeting where the designers bring in ideas and you start to sift through them together to reach a specific and coordinated design. Now is the time to be flexible, but guided by your concept. You may discover that the idea you had for the perfect set piece is not nearly as cool as the idea the costume designer has for it. The collaborative process here should open up the initial ideas in all kinds of creative directions and the end product could look quite different from what you had initially envisioned, and happily so.

6. What do we do once we have a design in place?

First—run the designs by the design faculty so that they can assure that the ideas are feasible, the required materials are reasonable, and understand your needs in the context of all of the shows in a given term. The designers should do this, but you need to make sure that it is done. Once you have their approval, you and your team will set build schedules and the technical rehearsal schedules. Remember that this step is a requirement for the department. **If you and your designers do not get the design faculty to sign off on your designs, your production could be stopped.**

Once you have designs approval, you and your team must set up **weekly production meetings** where you will discuss the progress in each department of the production and problem solve. These are very, very important meetings, so be sure to schedule them in early and regularly. These will be informed by the **daily rehearsal report** that is compiled and circulated by the SM and which will convey to all production departments developments that come out of rehearsals. This report also should go to the design faculty.

7. Who builds the show? Your cast, designers, crew, and YOU. This is why you do not get to be a Performance Diva. This why none of your actors gets to be a Diva. No matter how foreign tech is to any member of your cast, all of your cast must be present, as there are always jobs of varying skill levels and even the most tech phobic actor can

find some way to contribute. You might also apprise your newer actors as to how serious this necessity is and how failure to take the tech aspect of studio seriously and responsibly could affect whether or not people want to work with them in the future. Essentially, your cast, designers, and crew that have signed on all become a production company mutually responsible for getting the show mounted. Your designers will generally assess what they need in terms of crew and find those specialists, but your cast must help at build calls, load-in calls, and strike. ***Additionally, your whole company must attend the All Studio Load-in, load-in for your set, the strike for your set, and the general studio strike at the end of the term--and it is your responsibility to get them there.***

8. Where do I rehearse?

The Departmental Secretary will help work this out. Generally, the shows closest to opening get priority rehearsal space. So, you might cast in the beginning of the term even though you don't go up until the eighth week. Under those circumstances, maybe you only rehearse three nights a week until two weeks before you go into tech. Given other shows in rehearsal, you may not get into studio theatre or lobby for a while.

9. When do I get into the Studio space?

This depends on what is ahead of you. If there is a show the weekend before your show, you get possession of the space on Sunday following their strike. If there is not a show, you might be able to get the space to rehearse in as soon as the last show strikes. If your show is a full tech support show, you will get into the space two weeks before you open.

10. Studio Contracts

There are contracts for actors and for designers. These exist so that everyone understands the Studio Production Company concept and the departmental expectations of being allowed to participate in the use of studio theatre. Our productions do not happen without everyone's help and support. It is up to you and your stage manager to confer with the TAB Production Manger to establish the time to get these contracts signed, preferably at your first rehearsal.

11. Company Meetings

If you do not call your entire cast to every rehearsal, it is a good idea to have a company meeting before a rehearsal at least once a week just to be sure that everyone understands how things are proceeding. It is not necessary to have the design and production team present, as the SM can convey topics to them at the production meeting. Communication is always essential to a production and solving concerns before they become problems is the best way to keep things running smoothly. Encourage your cast to speak with you and/or your SM if they have a concern—and create an environment where they feel welcome to do so.

12. Rehearsal Schedules

This is one of the biggest headaches you will face. If you obtain all conflicts from all of your personnel at the outset, you should be able to build a rehearsal schedule. Be sure that all persons who sign on to your production understand the production dates, the rehearsal

dates, and other commitments (such as fittings and tech calls) BEFORE THEY SIGN ON. Remember that new members of the department are not going to be as familiar with the college, the department, and all of the things that you take for granted through experience. Collect conflict information from each individual and build a schedule. If anyone has a conflict that cannot be resolved, you need to cut that person loose. Be sure to ask about night classes, Greek commitments, other club responsibilities, student senate, field trips, and anything you can think of. If you can present your company with a full rehearsal schedule by the first (but definitely by the second) company/production meeting and have them all sign off on it, you will be doing well, and will have lots of leverage when someone suddenly remembers the Art Chicago trip they forgot..... Even once you have the full schedule handed out, send out a weekly schedule as a reminder. Be sure to discuss with designers when they will come to run-throughs.

12. The TAB Production Manager

If all goes well, you won't really need this person other than to initially "show you the ropes," but it is great to keep them in mind as a resource. The Production Manager should be invited to your first company meeting, just so that your cast knows this person's face and this person can promote the idea of TAB and the Studio Production Company concept. The Production Manager is there as your support and will help you to problem solve if you need it. You should also invite the Production Manager to your first or second production meeting. Remember that the Production Manager is likely to be someone very experienced in producing in studio and will be able to help you remember details and protocols that need to be attended to in order to make the process go more smoothly. The Production Manager is not there as Big Brother and you should not feel as though you should present this person as the Go To person for when problems arise—you are the Go To person. But—this person can be a Go To person for you.