

Notes on Directing Pragmatics

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Introduction

Directing Pragmatics intends to bridge the widening gap between theater and performance by translating the language of the directing process of theater into a lexicon that reflects contemporary aesthetics and practices of performance. Translating blocking into patterning, units into fragments, literal actions into mechanics, and goals into agendas affects the modus operandi of the director resulting into a new rehearsal practice. This practice, and the experience of the text by the actors during the rehearsal process in the context of a specific production, defines the core of the performative meaning and leads to a dynamic directing approach.

Directing is an artform which unifies practically and conceptually the various aspect of the production of a text. Pragmatics, in addition to being traced back to the Greek *pragmaticos* and the Latin *pragmaticus* meaning being practical, is a branch of linguistics which studies how context influences interpretation. The idea that words perform actions and the performative power of language “depends on where and when it is used”¹ has informed my investigation thus the marriage between directing and pragmatics.

Context unlocks meaning insofar it establishes its production practices as essential informants of performance. We all recognize that ‘this’ production is different from ‘that’ one because the context in which ‘this’ production acquires meaning is different from ‘that’ one. The extralinguistic variables of actors, place, design are brought together into a new temporal, social, psychological and environmental experience that affect any *a-*

¹ Petrey, Sandy, Speech Acts and Literary Theory (new York: Routledge, 1990) 3.

priori interpretation of the dramatic text. On stage, context influences interpretation and the performative force of language depends not only on why it is used, but also on where, when and who uses it.

Since context influences interpretation, the act of translation in Directing Pragmatics is not limited to the language used in defining the directing process, but directing is itself an act of translation. In translating from one language to another language, a translator takes into account the cultural context in which a word is being translated. There is no such a thing as a literal translation, therefore there is no a-priori interpretation. A text interpreted outside the extralinguistic variables that emerge and are part of the total production process from play selection to closing night is deprived of meaning.

An interpreter is a director that avoids any exchange between his interpretation and the reality of production, and is one who reproduces a literal version of the text that is often sterile, whereas a translator is a director that never assumes the final result of his work before finishing the act of translating and therefore directing. Directing is ever-evolving and quintessentially organic in its pragmatics approach. The rehearsal process of Directing Pragmatics is designed to facilitate this translation. In Directing Pragmatics, the director translates into stageable conventions his interpretation of the dramatic text by allowing the extralinguistic variables to clarify and even shape in context meaning and interpretation.

The final result of the Directing Pragmatics process is a translation of the text that is informed by the grammatical/literal content of the text and charged by the vitality of its social/geographical/environmental context which vividly reflects its historical moment of production.

Actors are the ideal extralinguistic variables through whom this act of translation is experienced and visually articulated. Creating an experience of the dramatic text that is visually communicable to the audience is the main objective of the Directing Pragmatics rehearsal and it is accomplished physically rather than intellectually.

A viable communication between actors and audiences happens only after the actors have a concrete and contextual physical experience of the dramatic text. Only when actions are the result of a spatial, temporal, and physical experience in the context of 'this' specific production, the intention is meaningful and enriched by a playable history.

The Directing Pragmatics process takes into account the meaning of the actor's performance in the context of its physical world, and it underlines the theatrical experience in terms of the physical manifestation of the performance intention. This physical manifestation of intention is what the audience sees, interprets, and reacts to, and when it is embodied aggressively the communication between actors and audiences becomes clear and intimate.

The rehearsal process of Directing Pragmatics is the application of these principles and it is articulated as follow:

A) The Short Play - First rehearsal.

B) Exploration

1. Contextual readings
2. Mechanics
3. Markers: Pictures
4. Immediate and Peripheral Universe
5. Loops
6. Patterning: Physical and Emotional Patterns

7. Fragmentation
8. All over for act two with some differences

C) Table Work

D) Core

1. Character Development
2. A bridge between patterns and character development
3. Psychological Gesture
4. Agendas

First Rehearsal – The Short Play

Directors often talk about getting actors out of their minds and into their bodies and then the work starts by sitting around a table and intellectualizing the production ahead. It is nearly impossible to understand what we have not experienced, at best we can guess, and when the rehearsal process starts with table work, that work is a guessing game -at best it becomes an intellectual forecast and ultimately it becomes a waste of time. The economics of production affords an average of three weeks to put up a production, time is a luxury, so, why do we waste it sitting around a table? Characters and relationships must be built, not talked about, and are better understood once they have happened. Only when there is a shared history, actors can relate to one another and comprehend the universe of the play. In *Directing Pragmatics*, table work happens in the middle of the rehearsal process, when it is a looking back at what the characters have experienced, and an examination of the history that has developed between characters on stage during the rehearsal process. In order to charge with experience the rehearsal process, the first

rehearsal of Directing Pragmatics is called Short Play. The Short Play is a twenty-minute version of the play that actors fully stage by the end of the first four hours of rehearsal. This Short Play is a mini production in itself. The actors find in the rehearsal room the twenty-minute version of the script, as well as basic light and sound plots, costume and set pieces, and props. The immediate objective of the Short Play is to engage the actors on an instinctual rather than an intellectual level.

The Short Play is the initial interpretation of the production. It is the director's interpretation ready to be charged by the extralinguistic elements --those brought by the designers, the actors, producing environment of that specific project. Through the Short Play, the director offers to the actors an experience of germinal interpretative seeds. It is directing by preparing the physical conditions that will give a concrete and practical direction to the production --seeds that during the rehearsal process will grow and bloom according to the specific conditions of the environment in which they are cultivated. Additionally, the director can introduce the conventions and the style of the production. While the ultimate objective of table work is to get the actors on the same page, that of the Short Play is to get the actors on the same stage.

The Short Play should be the culmination of the collaborative work done by the designers and the director in the months preceding the first day of rehearsal -- collaboration that has already put in motion a contextual physical universe of the play with its textures, moods, lights, and sounds. The Short Play gives the designer the opportunity to test some of their choices, and the actors have the chance to experience and respond to this universe in the overall context of production, even if it is the context of the Short Play. The director leads the creation of the Short Play, and is responsible for

putting together the twenty-minute version of the script², while the designers should do the same according to their field. For instance, in a production of Dancing at Lughnasa, there is an important visual, a radio. As the scenic designer and I talked about its location, we discovered that any solution was unsatisfactory. The scenic designer then decided to let the actors choose the location of the radio, and the placement of the rest of the furniture of the house of the Mundi sisters. During the Short Play, the actors found the perfect place for the radio, place that was chosen according to where they decided to put the rest of the furniture. This arrangement did not change much from the Short Play to opening night. For the Short Play of a production of Reckless, the light designer brought in flashlights, mounted two light instruments on casters, pre-set three looks on a board which he left on stage for the actors to play with. He was interested in where the source of light was coming from, and whether using the actors to move light instruments could have worked in the overall style of the production. Our production of Reckless was conceptualized as a physical theatre piece performed by an ensemble of eleven actors, and the extent to which the actors used the flash lights and the two movable light instruments inspired the lighting designer, the other designers, and the director to go even further than what previously thought. As a result of this Short play, the actors moved and manipulated all the technical elements on stage: lights, sound, set, and costumes. For a production of Marisol, the costume designer was interested in who wore what, and how they would combine the different pieces of costuming. For this purpose, the actors found two racks of costume pieces in the middle of the stage the moment they entered the rehearsal room, and they made great use of them. For an original play called Guernika,

² Twenty-minutes is an indicative time, and in my experience the most appropriate length for a four hour rehearsal. If the first rehearsal is less that four hours, I would suggest to reduce the length of the Short Play.

the sound designer, selected two distinctive sound plots, each one of three pieces of sound, the length of each plot was of about seven minutes. She wanted to see which one the actors would respond to, and what they chose for their final performance. During the Short Play, instead of choosing one over the other, the actors mixed them together creating an exciting contrast; this gave the sound designer further material and inspiration to continue her work on the soundscape of the production. It is important that every designer participates in the preparation and rehearsal of the Short Play. In the years I have applied and experimented with this approach, I found the designers to be very available and enthusiastic about the Short Play. The Short Play gives the designers an opportunity to interact with the actors, and the flexibility to test and experiment with ideas –it is a great creative resource.

The Short Play never lies, immediately offers the director and the designers an answer as whether their approach will go somewhere, it is the continuous inspiration of practical aesthetics.

The first contact of the actors with the Short Play is the first rehearsal. The actors should come to the first rehearsal wearing comfortable clothing, ready to get up on their feet, and be one week away from being off book. They should not be told in details what the first rehearsal will be about, they should not be completely surprised either. Let them guess. It is playing and keeping the playful mood awake.

The day of the first rehearsal, the designers and the director should prepare the rehearsal room by putting the set pieces, costumes, lights, sounds, props etc. in the middle of the room. Once the actors arrive, they should receive the twenty-minute version of the script and be informed of the objective of the first rehearsal: to stage the

script using all the material they find inside the rehearsal room. The actors are not required to be off book. There are usually questions that the director should answer keeping possibilities open, but in setting up this first experience, it is important to stress that it is not about product or process, but it is about an experience of the play.

Once all the questions have received ‘vague’ answers (the less the director and the designers talk the better,) it is time to enter the room. The director sits down, watches and takes notes, while the actors often start introducing themselves and figuring out what they have to do and how. During these four hours, the director should observe and never intervene, while the designers are encouraged to give suggestions to the actors, and even participate as actively as they want. For instance, if during the rehearsal, a designer is inspired by what the actors are doing on stage, he/she should interact with the actors. Every designer involved in the production should not hold back, the more designers interact with the actors the more invested they will be in the success of the production. This is collaboration at its quintessential state.

Once the Short Play starts there is no time to waste, we all have a goal, and a need to work together to accomplish it. The raw energy of creativity is immediately engaged, an ensemble is starting to take shape and natural leaders take initiative, not to impress, but to accomplish the goal. Every member of the constituting ensemble reacts instinctually to what they find in the rehearsal room, and since the Short Play is a table work for the instincts, the director should be sensitive to them.

Given that the Short Play is set up by the director, she must be completely open and available to its possibilities. The best attitude is that of hoping for surprises, any surprise will rejuvenate the creative process. During this first rehearsal there will be insights into

the manner in which actors work, how they respond to ensemble work, their flexibility and adaptability emerge vividly during the Short Play. The Short Play is an instigation of the senses and a charger of creativity. It is a defining clue into the director's conceptual approach of the text, and it will give introductory indications as to the possibilities of the production.

In preparing the text for the Short Play of Marisol, the possibilities around which I built the script was the contrast between the monstrous and the sublime -the beauty of the slow motion falling of the Twin Towers on September 11, and the monstrosity of lives destroyed. Our production came some months after September 11, both the circumstances of the script and that of real life merged intensely in the conceptual approach of the production³. In creating the text, I excerpted from the script all the most poetic moments --the sublime of the text. To that text, the designers added the destruction post September 11. The scenic designer brought flyers with pictures of missing people, ladders reminiscent of those of the firefighters, a couple of doors and frames with graffiti. The costumes left in the middle of the stage were distressed and filthy, the lights set for the actors were harsh, whereas the sound was melodious. The contrast between what we heard and what we saw was the main seed that was planted as a possibility to explore. The actors were to stage the beauty of the text within a world of destruction. These basic choices guided by the initial concept for the production exploded powerfully during the Short Play, incited the actors to action in a way that words could not have done. At the end of the Short Play of the first rehearsal of Marisol, the actors had a concrete experience of the universe they were going to inhabit. Many

³ Marisol is the story of the angles declaring war on a senile god, and the effects of the war in the heavens are felt on hearth through its destruction.

images the actors created during the Short Play, inspired the designers and the director, and were re-elaborated during the rehearsal process. These same images emerged as powerful visuals of our production.

The last thirty minutes of the rehearsal, the actors should perform the Short Play. After the Short Play, the gates into the subconscious are wide open and easily accessible, and the director should give the actors the opportunity to flood a piece of paper with words through automatic writing. The actors find this writing insightful; it is writing they use as they create their character, an instinctual writing that comes from a practical experience. The automatic writing is of more use to the actors than to the director and it should be left as a private moment for the actors. This will also allow them to truly surrender their subconscious to the paper.

Once the automatic writing is done, everyone is free to go, and ready for the second rehearsal. The director should not share with the actors what he saw, and absolutely refrain from giving any type of remark especially notes. The director should thank them for the risks they took and be grateful when they took them fully. I find it useful to make a video of the Short Play, but I must admit that I have never watched it.

Exploration

With the Short Play, we have set out toward a pragmatic process that allowed the actor to experience a version of the play within the physical world of the stage. Furthermore, it opened the communication between the actors, and permitted an instinctual psychophysical reaction to the play. This experience will inform the actors throughout the rehearsal process, and will appear in subtle ways into their performance.

The Exploration is a continuation of the pragmatics journey through readings of the full script. Like table work, the actor will be reading the script, but unlike it, during these readings the actors are encouraged to move around within the stage they have set up during the Short Play. Since the actors are the final extralinguist variables of production, where and when they interact physically and emotionally will unlock the performative power of the dramatic text. For this reason the objective of the Exploration is to continue experiencing the psychophysical universe of the play, and each other within the overall context of the production, in order to find all the possible combinations of ‘wheres’ and ‘whens’. Experiencing these combinations charges the actors work with an history that brings life to a tri-dimensional character who lives in the moment to moment life of the performance. The microcosm the director prepared for the actors with the Short Play is now the starting ground of exploration of the script. The rehearsal continues.

The First Reading

At this point of the rehearsal process the actors have read and worked on their scripts and characters by themselves. This is the first time they read the script with the other members of the company. They are no longer alone.

For this first reading, the rehearsal room should be set up the way the actors left it after the Short Play. Invite the actors to go on stage script in hand, and give them fifteen minutes to re-familiarize themselves with the space and each other. Before the reading begins, the director should remind the actors two given circumstances, when and where, and encourage them to continue the exploration of the stage they started with the Short Play. It is possible that the set designer may have made some changes to the stage as a

result of the Short Play, inform the actors if such changes occurred, let the reading being and observe attentively. During the reading the actors should enter and exit the stage as suggested by the script, while the SM will be reading the stage directions.

This first reading is really to get the actors comfortable, and to expand the context of the play from the twenty-minute version to the entire script. For the first twenty to thirty pages, the reading will be rushed; at times, the all first reading is rushed -if rush is what the actors have to get over, the reading will have accomplished an objective. The director should let this first reading happen without intervening.

There are many challenges the actors encounter during this first reading, the greatest is keeping the exploratory nature of this work. During the first reading, some actors are more willing to move about the stage than others. As the reading progresses the one that moved too much will settle down, while the one that did not move a lot will start to explore the stage. At the end it will balance out. If there is a long stage direction that explains the movements and the business of the characters, let the actors decide what they want to do, some will listen while others will jump in and act them out.

The director also should overcome the need to direct the actors -let them find their own rhythm, and their own ways. There are ample opportunities to direct them. If direct you must, direct the actors toward a world filled with possibilities, and help them explore each one of them. Remember the objective of this work is to gain an understanding of the play by experiencing its universe physically and emotionally.

One of the great advantages of having the actors reading up on their feet, and on stage, is that it requires them to look at each other from the first reading of the play creating immediate interaction among them. The director should encourage the actors on

and off the stage to watch what is happening onstage instead of reading along –heads buried into the script are never active. This is true for the director as well. The sooner a director takes his head off the script and looks at the action on stage the better. This requires a specific preparation prior to rehearsal and a great familiarity with the script.

Once this first reading is over, share with the actors what you saw happening. This should never about giving notes, tell them how they shared and explored the stage. Point out whether there were areas of the stage the actors neglected or used the most. Answer any question the actors may have keeping in mind the concept of exploration, and then give them a break. During this exploration give suggestions and never notes. Giving notes is often perceived as a request by the director for final product, while we are in the experiencing realm which is never final nor product

The Second Reading

At the beginning of the second reading, the director should give one note only: Do the opposite you did before! If an actor started the first reading standing Up Stage Right, the director should encourage her to start the second reading sitting on the opposite side of the stage. For each following reading, the actor must start from a different place, and apply the idea throughout the reading. The actors must explore entirely the physical universe of the play, and experience the same fragment of the play in different places on stage. The when of each fragment must be experienced in different wheres. For each actor that follows this idea, the combinations multiply exponentially increasing the number of experiences each actor can explore.

A play is like a loop, when something new has been inserted into the loop, that new element affects the loop in its totality. During the following readings, the actors should always insert into the loop different choices because they want to experience every time a new set of circumstances. Each experience of the affected loop adds critical layers to the performative choices of the actors.

When each actor affects the loop by doing the opposite, the combination of where and when is dynamic. This dynamism offers the actors a new prospective and experience of the moment they are playing. Now is the time to set nothing, everything must be continuously re-experienced and framed in new circumstances.

All through these following readings, the director should listen, observe, take notes, and keep reminding the actors to do the opposite. This suggestion, at first, is in reference to the space they occupy at a specific moment of the scene, but gradually, it will affect the actor's investigation of the character, the relationship of the character with the physical space, his relationship with other characters, and the relationship with other characters within the physical confines of the stage. These are valuable experiences, they will charge the characters with a history that the actors can easily recall as they continue the work on the character and on the play.

During this second reading, starting with the long monologues, the director, should encourage the actors that are still reading along, to listen to each other, and gradually extend this suggestion through the reading. If the actors are worried about their cues, remind them that the stage manager can bring them back on track.

It is extremely helpful to see how the actors relate to the task they have ahead, the character, each other, and the space. Let the actors know that they can change the

choices they made whenever they want, even in the middle of the reading. I worked with actors that during one read through went from exploring the softer side to the dangerous side of their characters; from dealing with characters that were physically led by their heads, to being led by their hips, from one accent to another. This constant change keeps every actor aware of the infinite possibilities of the stage, creates different experiences which require constant adjustments, and it is always fun.

The relationship of each character with the space she is occupying is individual, and this individuality must be nurtured during the rehearsal process. The space must be perceived as flexible, a space that gets bigger or smaller according to the choices and the circumstances the characters are in. The actors playing a character shape the space around them; it is not the space that frames them. This flexibility of the space, allows the actors to define their individual memories spatially, spatial memories that can be charged with signals which can be recalled during performance. How do I feel when the space that divides my character from another gets smaller? How do I feel when the space gets bigger? What can I gain from experiencing the same line first within a smaller space and then a bigger space? How can I store this memory that has acquired spatial qualities and recall it during performance? The relationship of each character with the space and each other is another extralinguist variable that changes for each production and should be experienced in the overall context of the production. This experience is to be facilitated and gained during the Exploration period of Directing Pragmatics.

The Third Reading

During the third reading, the director should re-introduce the props the actors used in the Short Play. Even with a script in hand, the actors can handle props. Those actors, who could be resistant to the idea, will soon adjust, and find that this new challenge adds to their exploration of the play. Being introduced to props early, forces the actors to get rid of the book in hands faster. The longer the actors hold the script in their hands, the more they are working with words rather than actions. The sooner that protective shield is taken away, the faster actors will jump into the life of the character and of the play.

The actors are as interested in getting rid of the script as the director, and they are working on their lines during these readings. Some actors will leave their books down and start to be off book for smaller sections of the play and often they will trip on their lines. When this happen encourage the actors to go back to their book instead of calling for the line they don't remember. This work is not about memorization, it is about experiencing the text, when lines are called, it becomes about learning lines. Schedule a line rehearsal if that is necessary, but never mix the exploration with memorization. Intellectually and emotionally Exploration is about charging the lines with the extralinguistic variables of production, while memorization is about remembering lines flat, with no emphasis, no life. Exploration and memorization have two opposite objectives and can never be mixed up during rehearsal.

The actors use the process of exploration to learn lines. When they read through up on their feet, and while required to adjust to the ever-changing loop, the actors find easy to learn lines without emphasis. As a matter of fact, when the 'emphasis' is on the exploration rather than the memorization, the process aids actors memorizing lines.

It is always interesting to notice the transition between reading on book and acting without the script. The ease in which they connect to the other person is more innate because they have been trained from the beginning to deal with the other person in a specific space. Even during the Short Play, the actors were addressing their lines toward someone occupying a space within the universe of the play rather than sitting in a chair.

During these early reading the actors will deal with stereotypes. Exploring a stereotype is inevitable and should be encouraged. A stereotype is a common understanding of a specific behavior, a behavior universally perceived as typical of certain people. The universality of such behavior is a common and understood starting point. Familiarity breeds perceptive understanding and it is always a positive. Moving past the stereotypical is then a choice that can be made by the actors. During Exploration, actors must procure themselves different experiences even those that might feel wrong for the character. There is no right or wrong experiences because all of them will inform and add to the life of the character. It's good to make the wrong choices now, good to get them out of the actors system, and if playing a stereotype is one of them, that should be welcomed.

The Fourth Reading

Toward the fourth reading some patterns will start to emerge. By pattern is the repetition of a gesture, movement, character motive in the same textual moment of the play. A pattern is when an actor, during the first lines of scene two of act I, has settled into a physical or psychological repetition. The director should nurture some patterns and break other ones.

The first patterns that emerge are the safe patterns. A safe pattern is the one that closes the actors' body to the view of the audience. When actors find static, sitting, or lying places, early in the rehearsal process, those choices are indicative of safe patterns. The director should help the actors challenge these safe patterns, as well as, watch for the circular, and the wondering ones that have the tendency to emerge during the first readings. Actors tend to circle around one another, furniture, or obvious traits of the character and wonder the space without attempting to establish a relationship with it and what is present in the space. The director should take notice of these patterns and at the end of the reading make them evident to the actors. Often, and when they re-emerge, they are indicative of either a clue into the actors understanding of the script or a sub-textual fragment of the script of great importance.

There are psychological and physical patterns. Often, early in the rehearsal process, actors explore one and neglect the other. For instance, during the first three readings of Benediction, a play by the actor playing David Mack explored the physical space well while got stuck on a strong-willed character. The character was written as essentially overpowering. It was necessary to break that psychological pattern in order to explore the softer side of the character. Breaking that pattern gave the actor the experience to find a complexity in the character that was lacking in the writing.

Actors can get fixed exploring the public persona keeping the private moments of the character for themselves, or for later in the performance. This is another pattern that must be broken. It is not true that some experience is better to leave un-experienced because they will explode powerfully during the performance. If an actor is un-willing to explore those private moments during rehearsal, he will not know their impact and power

to an audience during performance. The explosive un-known must be avoided during performance. Directing Pragmatics is about knowing and experiencing all that can be experienced, because the knowing of the experience adds to the explosive power of the dramatic text.

Doing the opposite from one reading to the other requires actors to make choices, choices that are expressed through actions. These actions are at first physical, like moving from stage right to stage left because the actor needs to be in the opposite place where he was the previous reading. But that same cross generated a new set of spatial relationships with other character which require actions motivated psychologically by the new circumstances. Usually, the first physical action of each read through is motivated by the necessity of doing the opposite. Once the loop has been affected by an opposite choice, that loop will never be the same and all the following choices and their actions will be motivated by the need to respond and adapt to the change.

A play is a loop, but each play is also comprised by smaller loops, and the division follows the structure of the play. The bigger loop is the play, followed by the act, while the smaller loops are the scenes. Any further break down of the dramatic structure, in this case the smallest part of the play, is called fragment in Directing Pragmatics.

By the end of these four readings, the director will have gained an understanding of the mechanics of the play -how each fact leads to the other in the overall context of the play. This understanding will later help the director stage and communicate to the audience a clear and specific story.

The Short Play has set up an ensemble that functions according to the principle of playing around and having fun. Exploration feeds this idea. Theatre needs a great dose of humor, and while we should work hard and seriously, we should never take ourselves too seriously. Doing theatre is a joy, experiencing the many possibilities by playing with the script is a joyfully opportunity. Theatre is playing joyfully. It is the director's responsibility to nurture the creative atmosphere the Directing Pragmatics sets up.