Managing: Getting Into, and Out of, the Way

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by Phil Weaver-Stoesz


See also: series: practices and principles by phil weaver-stoesz, advice, directing

For many theatre practitioners, the act of creation is tied to the act of living—they cannot exist separately. This is the third of a series of posts (http://howlround.com/tags/series-practices-and-principles-by-phil-weaver-stoesz) that explore positive practices and principles to help keep our art mindful, expressive, and sustainable. Phil Weaver-Stoesz is a multi-disciplinary director, devisor, and performer studying and working at Arizona State University.

Every leader is one of three things: an inspiring mentor, a forgettable blip, or a terrible story that colleagues tell to get a laugh at the bar. Each director, teacher, and boss I’ve had has fallen into one of those three categories: they inspire me and I’m still working with them, they provided me with stories that begin with “I once had a director who…” or they, well...I don’t really remember the others.

Being a leader is a complex affair. You must simultaneously know what’s best for everyone, communicate it clearly, and know when to lean back and let the work get done. Harold Clurman, in On Directing, sets the bar pretty high for being a director. “The director,” he writes, “must be an organizer, a teacher, a politician, a psychic detective, a lay analyst, a technician, a creative being. Ideally, [they] should know literature (drama), acting, the psychology of the actor, the visual arts, music, history and above all, [they] must understand people.” That’s a platonic ideal if I’ve ever heard one. As a director, I’m continually trying to live up to this ideal of skill and knowledge—if I achieve half these attributes in my lifetime, I’ll be happy.

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While this wonderful, idyllic director is great in theory, what are the actual directors we’ve worked with like? For every inspiring mentor, I have ten terrible director stories. The narrative of the “overbearing, micromanaging, egotistical director” runs strong in most theatre circles. While I’ve never heard a harrowing story about a light op or seamstress,
stories of crazy directors abound.

**Q2Q comics** ([http://q2qcomics.com/](http://q2qcomics.com/)), written and drawn by Steve Younkins, is a comic portraying the all-too-honest side of theatre work. The characters in the comic are familiar, relatable **theatre** ([http://q2qcomics.com/comic/q2q1/](http://q2qcomics.com/comic/q2q1/)) caricatures ([http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fq2qcomics.com%2Fcomic%2Fq2q1%2F&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNjXpjEzH_6YBglHzZE5dFMFdpFloCQ] : the steely stage manager, the fastidious sound designer, the matronly costume designer. And of course, the inept, sentimental director.

We laugh because we recognize a person we’ve worked with in every character. Q2Q’s humor is particularly revealing of directorial downsputs. So what does the character of the director reveal? Are they the teacher, musician, historian, and organizer Clurman dreams of? In short, no. Every time we meet the director in Q2Q, he...

is asking impossible things:

is inept in technical trades:
is insufferably indecisive about design:

is equally indecisive about staging:

and is oppressively romantic:
How do we reconcile the learned, gentle, confident leader that Clurman describes with the blundering buffoon stereotype that is the theatre director? If directors are supposed to be eloquent jack-of-all-trades, why do designers groan when the director comes to inspect their work?

As the adage suggests, if you’re a jack-of-all-trades, you’re a master of none. So if you’ve put together a team of ace designers, you need to learn how to get out of their way. Getting into designers’ business too much telegraphs a lack of trust, and nothing squelches creative risk-taking faster than distrust.

If you’re a designer and you’re reading this, raise your hand if you’ve ever taken a note from a director and said you would change it. Then you changed nothing, waited two days, and silently chuckled when the director thanked you for the change. Designers use this little hack against micro-managing directors—they use the director’s own indecisiveness against them and dodge tweaking a design. In all probability, designers have used this on me and I was none the wiser.

Getting out of the way is especially hard for directors who feel as though they have something to prove to someone. Their work is tied so closely to their ego that any misstep, mistake, or risk taken by their designers or actors is met with frustration, opposition, and pressure. The director in Q2Q has opinions that are untrained, have little basis in thought, and are oftentimes entirely worthless.

When I first decided to be a director, I was advised to “always have an opinion—that way people know you’re in charge.” The only thing worse than that advice was the fact that I actually followed it for a production or two. Without knowledge or experience, I was suddenly professing strong opinions about styles of hemming and the benefits of Rosco over Lee. I was performing the part of director admirably, I thought, blissfully unaware of the eye-rolling around me.

Directors need to create a safe space for designers to practice their craft. In Japanese culture, there is a term for this trust: \textit{omakase}. \textit{Omakase} roughly translates to “respectfully leaving another to decide what is best.” It’s used in a restaurant when, instead of ordering which specific dish you’d like, you leave the choice of what you’ll eat to the chef. You trust that the chef has mastered their craft and you faithfully subject yourself to their skill.

Opinionated directors know all too well how to get in the way—which, I warrant, is necessary at times. For a vision to be realized, concepts, staging, and adjustments must be fought for. But knowing how to get out of the way is equally important. So if you find yourself dominating production meetings or hovering over draft boards and you hear whispers silenced when you walk into a room, perhaps a little \textit{omakase} is in order: lean back, trust your team, and let the masters work.