

a Calling



to the Stage

Performing with Excellence for the Lord

A HIS COMPANY PUBLICATION
DIRECTOR'S VERSION

a **Calling**
Director's Version
to the **Stage**



A Calling to the Stage

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Director's Version

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preface

THIS BOOK IS NOT FOR EVERYONE. A professional actor performing on the stages of the New York theatre would find its counsel to be rather insulting. *Church* theatre, however, is not typically peopled by professionals, but by dedicated amateurs willing to risk playing the fool because of their love for the Lord. They are motivated not by fame, the hope of adulation or wealth, but by a personal and corporate devotion to God.

The dedicated amateur's training—as well as the training for their directors—is often limited to that offered by their high school drama coach, and may have occurred ten or twenty years in the past. They are often not self-starters, but require constant coaching, direction, encouragement and prodding. They welcome generous, often meticulous instruction, and without it would probably run screaming from the stage—or never show up at all.

A Calling to the Stage

This book makes no claim of universal appeal, but has been written for the possibly experienced, but still amateur director and actor. It is based on practical methods that have been put into use many times—methods that work. This book has been written, most of all, for those who have accepted their talents as gifts from the Lord, to be used at *His* bidding, in *His* service, and to *His* glory alone.

For this reason, the reader will not find the word “volunteer”—not used in a kind way, that is—anywhere in the pages that follow.

Church drama ministries—indeed, churches in general—have been infected with a philosophy of volunteerism. This is revealed in remarks such as “What do you expect—they’re only volunteers,” or “You can’t really demand much from volunteers.” From the lips of committee chairpersons, to music and drama directors, these words are used repeatedly to excuse the shoddy behavior and performance of people under their direction. But no matter how you approach it, brothers and sisters, we are anything but volunteers.

You could approach it from the perspective of *return on one’s efforts*. Volunteers work for free; they put nothing in the bank from their labors. But the faithful, humble, committed servant of God has a bank account filled with daily deposits. Whether washing dishes in the church kitchen, sweeping the front steps, balancing the church’s books, reading Scripture in the Sunday morning service or singing the biggest solo in the Christmas musical, the believer who serves his or her God with excellence is the best-paid person around.

You could also approach it from the *servanthood* perspective, understanding that we were purchased by a Master whom we now must serve. We don’t “volunteer” to serve Him; we serve out of obedience—no less an obedience than that which caused Abraham to lift the knife over the head of his only son.

The foundational philosophy of His Company—that out of which everything in the pages that follow derives—is that every child of God has, by the sacrificial blood of Christ, been purchased. He no longer belongs to himself. Every skill, every passion, every capability emanates from, belongs to, and is to be used in the service of God and His kingdom.

Or do you not know that...you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

For from Him and
through Him and to
Him are all things.
To Him be the glory
forever. Amen.

Romans 11:36

Volunteers? Not a one of us. We all have been purchased—and some of us have been purchased for the stage.

Acknowledgements

Most things issued from this desk are proofed and edited by my good wife, Linda. I am dependent on her wisdom and common sense to catch my mistakes, polish my prose, and add her opinions throughout all stages of a project. And her contributions to this project have been even more extensive. I am deeply indebted to Linda for her editing skills, her consistent attention to detail—and for not abandoning me to my own curious tangents. This book is made better because of her.

I would also like to thank the many pastors who have permitted us the privilege of serving the Lord before their congregations—and who have, on occasion, served as this writer’s “editors-at-large” when they have graciously corrected an errant snippet of theology.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of all those who, over the years, have been numbered among the members and supporters of His Company. They lived what you are reading in this book, and it was while working with them that I developed the techniques passed along here. I thank them all: for their help, for putting up with me, and for all the warming memories.

Winterset, Iowa
July 2011



introduction

THIS BOOK IS AS MUCH THE JOURNAL OF AN ODYSSEY as it is a how-to manual. His Company has plotted its own course, striving always to remain true to its calling, rather than following the vagaries of the times. It has been called to a specific purpose, fitted into the vast array of God's holdings alongside those that may have a different calling. We were called, from the beginning, not just to entertain, but to deepen believers' understanding of God's word and His ways by illustrating Scripture and its principles.

What This Book is Not

Our work has always been geared toward the adult member of the Body of Christ. For this reason, while some of what follows may inadvertently apply, the reader will not find here techniques for evangelism, street theatre, mime or puppetry. And while children have often benefited from our performances, and may even have had small parts

A Calling to the Stage

within larger productions, our work has ultimately been for the adult (or at least older teenage) cast, produced with the adult audience in mind. So the reader will not learn from this volume how to create a drama ministry with or for children.

In fact, this book does not tell *anyone* how to create a “ministry”—that ill-used, abused, and overworked word so effortlessly bandied about today. Our philosophy is clean, uncluttered, and direct: God has called us to this work; therefore, we must be about it. He moves us about; He assigns us tasks large and small; He brings joy and sorrow; He both supplies and removes fellow workers. Circumstances may change, but the task remains the same: Declare God’s truth from the stage. So that is what we do. If you choose to call that a “ministry,” then that is your privilege. We just call it, well, our *calling*.

What This Book Is

What does follow is a telling of our story—from idea to realization, mistakes along with brilliant triumphs—and a systematic, applicable guide to our methods. Our way is not the only way to successfully produce drama in the church, but it is one way that works—and our history will mirror the beginnings of many groups.

The advice in this book is short on organization, but long on practical doing. We do not believe in serving the Lord by committee or board. If you do, then that is your privilege. It is our position, however, that committees invariably gum up the works, sapping the vital energy and creative juices that bring essential life to a work such as this.

A Director’s Version

A Calling to the Stage is published in two versions: one for the director, and one for the individual actor—the latter a subset of the former. This version of *A Calling to the Stage* is for the director.

The methods in this book are applicable to a wide range of group types, including a company of players within a church or school, a choir that periodically draws from its ranks for dramatic roles, or an independent troupe, such as His Company. The book can be taken as a whole, or portions gleaned for individual use. It makes a good

This book assumes that the “director”—the person in charge of moving people about on stage—is also the person in charge of the overall acting company. In most churches of small to moderate size, and in some smaller independent companies as well, there is one person who serves as director, producer, governing board and cheerleader. But terminology should not be an obstacle to the use of the information offered here. No matter your title, if you are in a role of leadership in Christian drama, then this book is for you.

Also in this book, more often than not the masculine pronoun is used. This traditional literary device is employed for brevity alone, and should not be interpreted as any slight of those of the female persuasion.

bookshelf reference, as well as an excellent curriculum for instruction (especially in conjunction with the Actor's version of this volume).

Part One tells the His Company story, and describes our philosophy of service to the Lord.

Chapter One: "A Brief History"
Chapter Two: "Our Philosophy"
Chapter Three: "The Calling"
Chapter Four: "To Be, or Not To Be"

Part Two is specifically for the director, conducting the leader of church drama from the selection of a script through first performance. Its chapters are geared toward the inexperienced, but will also be of use to the experienced non-professional.

Chapter One: "Selecting the Play"
Chapter Two: "The Script in Hand"
Chapter Three: "The Reading Session"
Chapter Four: "Blocking: Philosophy and Method"
Chapter Five: "Blocking the Play"
Chapter Six: "The Blocking Rehearsal"
Chapter Seven: "Rehearsal Preparation"
Chapter Eight: "Regular Rehearsals"
Chapter Nine: "The Technical Meeting"
Chapter Ten: "The Technical Rehearsal"
Chapter Eleven: "Dress Rehearsal"
Chapter Twelve: "Opening Night"

Part Three is for the actor, a handbook for the amateur that takes him or her through the production process from receiving a new script through curtain call.

Chapter One: "The Script in Hand"
Chapter Two: "The Reading Session"
Chapter Three: "Blocking"
Chapter Four: "Regular Rehearsals"
Chapter Five: "The Technical Rehearsal"
Chapter Six: "Dress Rehearsal"

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Chapter Seven: “Opening Night”

Chapter Eight: “Curtain Call”

Part Four includes important chapters that take the actor and director deeper into the craft of the stage, and are meant to be used in conjunction with earlier chapters.

Emphasis One: “Memorization”

Emphasis Two: “The Character”

Emphasis Three: “Rehearsing at Home”

Emphasis Four: “Being Something One is Not”

Emphasis Five: “The Adaptable Actor”

Emphasis Six: “Costuming the Biblical Character”

Emphasis Seven: “True to the Word: A Case Study”

Emphasis Eight: “First Time: A Case Study”

Emphasis Nine: “On Excellence”

Emphasis Ten: “The Rehearsal Schedule”

Emphasis Eleven: “Behind the Scenes”

This book may be downloaded and used by the individual, or downloaded by a leader, printed, and distributed to those in his or her drama group.

However you use this book, use it to God’s glory. Just because his is a public, charismatic craft, the Christian actor is not excused from an attitude and motive of servanthood. We mount the stage to serve our Lord: the gift came from Him; the gift belongs to Him; the gift is to be used for Him.

part 1



The His Company Way

chapter one

A Brief History



NOT EVERY CHURCH DRAMA GROUP can or should slavishly follow the His Company way. Our history was our own, and our people a unique set of individuals. The methods put down in this book are not intended as a guaranteed path to success (however one measures success) for every group of thespians. Nor will its history be a perfect match for the beginnings of similar companies of players.

But that is not to say that the reader will not benefit from the telling. Our history is recorded here so that the Christian dramatist, director or actor might glean valuable information to encourage, inspire, edify—and that they might benefit as well from our many mistakes.

In the Beginning...

The history of His Company begins, appropriately, with an idea for

Part 1: The His Company Way

a sketch, and the tale is a poetic illustration of how we who carry around in us the Spirit of God are intrinsically bound together, and thereby influence the work of Christ's Kingdom.

Just why I wrote the monologue for the apostle Peter, *The Scarred Rock*, back in the early months of 1985 I can't say. But once it was completed, I handed it to the pastor for his thoughts on using the seven-minute sketch in one of our Sunday morning services. His response was both understated and ambitious. He not only liked the idea, but suggested that I write eleven more—one for each disciple—and he would schedule a series of sermons to match: one per week for three months.

The Twelve

The idea was both exciting and frightening. As unofficial assistant to our Music Minister, I had been writing narration and dialogue for our musical productions for several years, but I quickly saw that this would be a challenge of a different stripe. Not only would I need to be doing a lot of writing, but I would also have to line up actors and schedule overlapping rehearsals for all the sketches.

But the commission was accepted, and a schedule quickly worked out. I cast *The Scarred Rock* and began an eight-week schedule of rehearsals for that play. I established a routine that had me continuing to write the succeeding plays in their order, while directing the next to be performed. In the middle of each play's rehearsal schedule, I would cast and begin rehearsals for the next. On Sunday morning, August 11, 1985, *The Scarred Rock* was performed, and for the next eleven weeks a new sketch was performed every Sunday morning. At the time that the first sketch was being performed, the last in the series had not even been written.

His Company

Meanwhile, the process of casting these twelve sketches and monologues sparked a second idea. To cast these plays I had drawn from the list of usual suspects—those who had taken roles in various musicals and cantatas, and the odd larger play I had written and staged, such as *The Surrender* (1984). But there was something about the process of casting this succession of smaller plays that produced

the idea of creating an autonomous company of players that would do this sort of thing on a continuing basis, at many churches, rather than just the one.

As a result, on the evening of April 26, 1985 a group of seven or eight people assembled in Linda's and my home in San Diego, California. They (and others who were unable to attend) had all been invited to participate in mapping out a new idea: the creation of a Christian drama group to be called His Company.

During the course of that first meeting several points were discussed and agreed upon, with one of the more important decisions being that His Company would always be autonomous. We would remain independent, not under the jurisdiction of any one church or organization. The first reason for this decision was to ensure our freedom to minister to any and all denominations professing Jesus Christ as Lord. The second reason was that His Company would then not be governed by committee or pastoral fiat, free from church politics and cumbersome organizational restraint.

Responsibility

This autonomy placed a greater responsibility on His Company to stay true to its calling. Since it had no pastor, no Board of Deacons or Elders keeping the group in line, it was incumbent upon its leaders and members to zealously guard its integrity: Every script would be judged against the undiluted truth of Scripture; our methods would be continually judged against the life of Christ and the teachings of His apostles. Our "Board" would be the pastors and music ministers who reviewed each of our scripts before scheduling us to perform.

Even within the group, His Company was not organized by committee or run by consensus. We did assign responsibility for various departments to individuals, such as wardrobe, makeup, or props design. But the group was run, from the outset, as a benign dictatorship. It was even agreed that auditions for roles in new productions would be superfluous, since I already knew the strengths and limitations of each actor—and generally wrote each script with specific individuals already in mind. At one point I tried to delegate to a company manager responsibility for contacting churches for performances, but that

For more on the His Company philosophy of autonomy, see Chapter Two, "Our Philosophy," in this part.

For more on script integrity, see Emphasis Seven, "True to the Word," in Part Four.

Part 1: The His Company Way

met with only limited success, since the pastor would invariably require a level of authority that could only come from the group's leader.

A Commission to Serve

So we were off and running. Over the next few years we gradually added more personnel, and performed around the San Diego area doing sketches and one-acts for worship services, and the occasional larger musical, three-act play, or evening of drama. By 1990 His Company consisted of seventeen people—including some who served not on stage, but only in roles of support, behind the scenes.

During this period, we

- never charged for any performance or service, nor asked for a donation—although we sometimes were given voluntary love offerings;
- never charged anyone to become a member of the group, nor “passed the hat” for expenses—although on a few occasions some members volunteered to cover some expenses for props, etc.;
- never had our own theatre or home base—although we accepted the gracious use of the facilities of our home church for most rehearsals;
- never held auditions—either for productions, or to join the group;
- never performed any script written by someone else.

Curtain

In the winter of 1990/91, Linda and I sold our house in San Diego, packed up all our earthly belongings and moved back to our home state of Iowa. Needless to say, at this point His Company—at least as it was originally conceived—ceased to exist. (Oddly enough, not one person of the company was willing to leave sunny Southern California to relocate with us to the Midwest. Funny, that.)

Some further explanation may be helpful regarding the last item in this list, referring to our script selection, which sounds frightfully self-serving. Certainly, since the one leading the group and directing most of the plays was, by trade, a writer, the natural process would be to perform his work. But beyond that, the Lord seemed to be telling us that, for whatever His reason, this was how He wanted it.

At one point we ordered a small booklet of three plays from the same house that had published several of my own scripts. But the period of several rehearsals held for two of these plays was so fraught with disaster and bizarre occurrences, that we could only conclude that we were not to be performing those plays.

From then on, we never even tried to use other scripts. Besides, most of our work was commissioned for a specific venue or occasion, and performed by a closed company (no open auditions). So it only made sense in these circumstances to write and perform our own work.

So at this point His Company became something different—in visible, human terms—from what it had been before. Now it would be smaller for a while, consisting of just two people: Linda and me. But this reduction in personnel in no way limited our work. Indeed, in some ways it freed it from many of the restraints imposed by working with a larger group.

For the next couple of years Linda and I performed in the local church we were attending (the congregation into which I had been born, lo so long ago), and I continued to fulfill commissions for new scripts. When we purchased our present home, and began searching God's will for a church home, He eventually drew us to a congregation in Des Moines. Once again, by talking to people and making ourselves available, we began again the process of taking Christian drama around to churches in the area. By the beginning of 1993 I had written a new Easter musical for our church (*Crown Him with Glory*), and Linda and I were performing sketches in the worship services.

Through our work in the Easter musical, and through the gracious assistance of a member of the congregation in organizing a social evening in which we could present our credentials to a small group who might be interested, we brought into our work another couple—and set to performing some smaller pieces with them.

A Hard Lesson

Right about here, however, we—rather, I—made a fatal mistake.

The original incarnation of His Company, back in San Diego, had consisted of people who had worked with me for a number of years, in various capacities. I had sat next to them in choir; we had had them over for Bible Study, or dinner; and even before the creation of His Company, we had worked together with them in many other productions. They were friends, and out of this friendship grew a close bond that—without my realizing it at the time—was infused into His Company. I had become accustomed to their level of trust and respect, not realizing that that level of respect and trust was based on more than what we were doing at the time. They trusted me—not just because of my gifts, but because they knew me as a person.

Please Note: any reference in this book or at our web site to our "writing a musical" means that we compiled *existing music* and wrote new drama or narration to create a new package.

We do not compose or arrange music.

Part 1: The His Company Way

None of this invaluable bond was transferred to Iowa. These were people to whom I was brand new, untried. Just maybe they could be impressed by my acting abilities or writing skills, but they didn't yet know me as a person. *They didn't yet know my heart.*

Regrettably, I forgot about this essential component and jumped in with both feet, expecting—no, *demanding* their respect and obeisance. I expected them immediately to share my level of dedication, my level of passion for the art; I expected servanthood where there was not yet even Lordship; I expected trust from individuals who as yet had no good reason to give it.

We continued to work as a team of four in and around the area, taking productions to several other churches, as well as continuing to perform in our own under the His Company name. In fact, we did some splendid work together. But there remained a fluctuating yet persistent level of tension in our midst—especially regarding what I saw as a proper level of commitment to rehearsals.

Meanwhile, my reputation in the congregation as a whole was deteriorating. Individuals in the music ministry, as well as others interested in drama, were pointedly rejecting my input and participation. Far from being respected, I was not even liked. I had bruised too many fragile sensibilities when I had pursued so strenuously my calling at the outset. I had pushed too hard, too fast, expected too much too soon. And it was eventually made clear to us that we were not to be forgiven these transgressions.

For these and other reasons, in January 1995 Linda and I left the church, and our ties to the other couple were severed. His Company was now back to just two.

But this was by no means the end of His Company. The Lord never promised anyone that the status quo would remain forever. He moves us about at will—*His* will—and often changes our job description at a moment when we are wallowing in what we believe to be defeat. God gifts us with certain abilities, and if we indeed call Him Lord and ourselves His servants, then we serve at His bidding, according to His desires.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you."

Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel.

But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

Then the word of the Lord came to me saying,

"Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel."

Jeremiah 18:1-6

Today—and Beyond?

In 1994 God began setting in place the necessary components for what His Company was to become. The list is too long (and potentially boring) to detail here, but by supplying the technology, the individuals, and the opportunity, the Lord changed His Company from a local performing group into a voice that could be heard around the world. Today, through technology as much His creation as the first man, we are able to continue writing, fulfilling commissions for new musicals and plays, and making all of these available to people and churches in all corners of the world.

A New Church

In 2006 the Lord brought to the church we were now attending a pastor who was eager to incorporate our abilities into the weekly services and seasonal productions. Since that time we have gradually—oh, so gradually—returned to serving on the stage in a local body.

The hard lessons learned the last time we tried to assimilate into a local church had not been forgotten. When we began attending this church we carefully, patiently waited for the Lord's leading, depending on Him to use us as He saw fit. For this reason, when we finally did take to the boards to perform (a Good Friday monologue by the apostle Peter), many in the congregation were shocked to discover we could do such a thing. Up to that point we had been so quiet and reserved, they had no clue that we possessed the requisite skills for performance.

Later we cautiously put another toe in the water by inviting anyone in the church interested in working with us to attend a series of training workshops. These would be based on the counsel contained in this book. Again, we remembered that one of the reasons our attempt to involve others at our previous church had ended so badly was that even those who were interested had no history with us. They not only didn't know us, and didn't know what would be expected of them, but they didn't know the important *why*. This time we would start from the ground up, ensuring that anyone working with us learned the essentials of the His Company way of doing things.

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Response to the workshops was virtually nonexistent: only one person expressed a desire to perform with us. So, instead of holding workshops, we had our initiate read on her own the pertinent sections of this book. Before we took each incremental step in our first production together, we had her read the corresponding chapters in this book so she would know both the how and the why of the His Company process.

We performed several times with this person and one other, but as of this writing His Company consists of two people: Linda and me. We are comfortable with this, as it is clear the Lord's hand is in it. Obedience to Him is of first importance, and we have no desire to pursue anything that is not part of His will. So we have continued to write and perform in our local church, as well as publish new scripts at our web site.

What awaits us in the future? We can say only: His will be done.

By God's Grace

Because of a simple request by a local pastor back in 1985, we began something that continues to evolve, yet remains true to our original call to glorify God through the medium of the stage. Through God's patient grace—and by the power of His Spirit—His Company continues to make a small contribution to the exposition of God's word through the dramatic arts.

chapter TWO

Our Philosophy



IT SHOULD BECOME APPARENT EVEN TO THE MOST CASUAL READER of this book that His Company follows its own path. We neither condemn those who take an alternate route, or apologize for ours. Rather, our position is that while others have been called to serve the Lord in *their* way, we have been called to serve Him in *this* way.

And what is this way? What is the His Company way?

Foundational Principles

The His Company philosophy rests on a three-legged stool of *Excellence*, *Scriptural Integrity*, and *Servanthood*.

Part 1: The His Company Way

Excellence

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:58

Every few years we marvel at the prowess of those athletes that participate in the Olympics. We applaud the successful athlete who dedicates him or her self to excellence—as well we should. It is a good and admirable thing to commit oneself to do something to the very best of one’s ability. But then, why do we not likewise honor this same dedication to excellence when it comes to serving our God? If we admire this trait in athletes who pursue physical excellence for a medallion, why do we not pursue this same excellence as we serve our God for His eternal reward?

Why are we so casual with the things of God? Is it because He is so gracious, so forgiving, that we feel comfortable placing Him at the bottom of our list of priorities? Why do we work harder at our golf game than we do at being a deacon or an usher? Why do we spend more time sitting in front of the TV than we do kneeling in prayer? Why do we place soccer and Little League before choir practice? And where have we come up with this damnable “Sunday School skit” mentality that says it is all right to just haphazardly throw something together at the last minute, then excuse our bad manners with, “Oh well, God will bless.”

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.’”

Revelation 3:14-16

Why is the demonstration of our faith so mediocre when, for us, Jesus Christ gave His very best?

For more on the His Company philosophy of excellence, see Emphasis Eight, “On Excellence,” in Part Four.

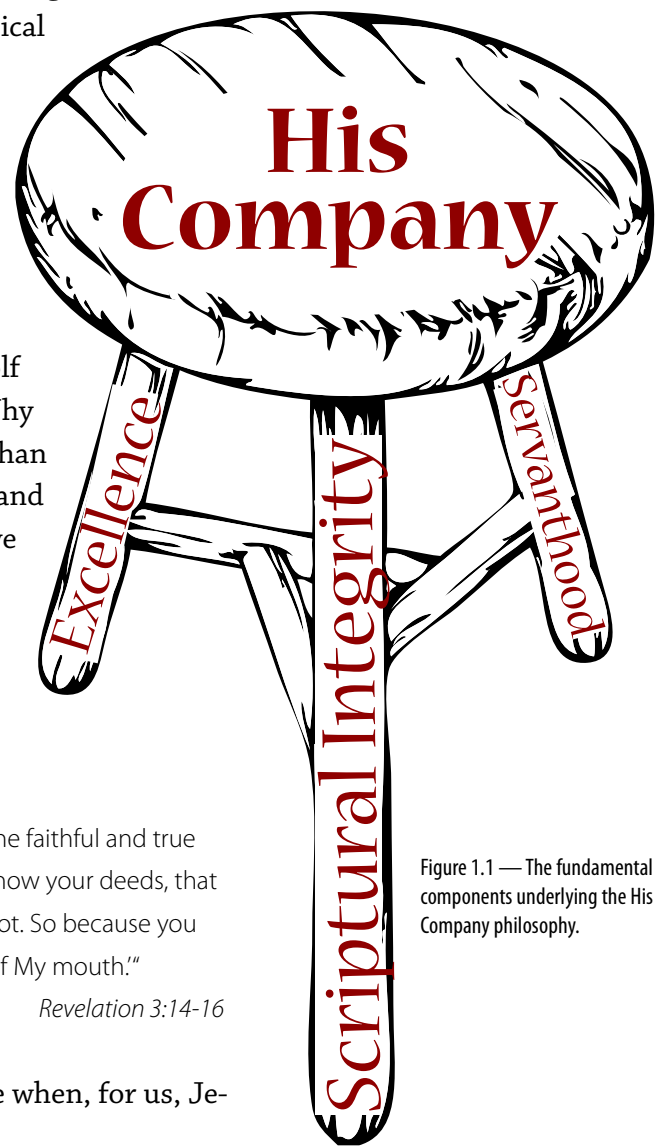


Figure 1.1 — The fundamental components underlying the His Company philosophy.

The philosophy of His company is grounded in our pursuit of excellence. This should not be confused with the errant pursuit of perfection, which can be as insidious as its opposite. Excellence does not demand perfection, but honest effort. Neither should the pursuit of excellence be confused with the heretical buying of God's favor. We do not earn our way into salvation, or gain God's grace, by working harder. Our work in His name is rather an offering of praise for what He has already done.

Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,
Yet those who wait for the Lord
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.

Isaiah 40:30-31

Soaring does not happen accidentally. Excellence is not something that just springs from us unattended. We serve our Lord with excellence because we intend to, because we love Him so much that we are compelled to serve Him to the very best of our ability.

Excellence serves with the attitude "I will give the Lord my very best, because He gave His best for me."

Scriptural Integrity

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

God's word is our source. Our constant prayer is that every word written, every line of dialogue spoken, every intent of our heart will square with Scripture—and that anything that does not, will evaporate as quickly as it is uttered, forgotten in the mists of all error.

God's word is also our handbook, containing everything we need by way of principle, statute, guideline and truth to glorify Him in our work.

For an example of His Company's practical application of Scriptural integrity, see Emphasis Seven, "True to the Word," in Part Four.

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Servanthood

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Servanthood is not something to be endured, but something to be embraced. Christians who struggle with their role under Christ imagine that becoming His servant means that they will have to go without something. They imagine certain rights and privileges will be removed when they submit to Him. But in fact, the opposite is true. When we release ourselves from those invisible bonds that hold us back from Christ, our world of possibilities actually widens. When we practice and live servanthood we gain freedoms never before imagined: freedom from worry, freedom from despair; freedom to rest in the arms of someone more wise, more experienced, more compassionate than anyone else we know.

Servanthood is an attitude, methodically nurtured, that changes our natural inclination toward selfish, protective behavior into a yearning to see and experience every moment of life from God's perspective. It doesn't come naturally; it must be practiced and developed.

Servanthood represents a conscious choice to submit to God's will, and in that, it has a close relationship with lordship. Acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord—confessing that He, and He alone, is the one in charge of our life—is the key to peace in the midst of a selfish, self-centered world.

In the Real World

How are these foundational principles played out in the setting of church drama? Here is where the His Company way may sharply veer off-course from the path taken by others, for His Company has never pretended to be an all-inclusive, egalitarian society; our goal has never been to make a place for everyone wishing to join. Rather, our goal has been to glorify God to the very best of our ability, and, by definition, not everyone will subscribe to that purpose.

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

1 Peter 4:10

Years ago a very talented woman expressed an interest in becoming a part of His Company. I knew her well; she was an excellent musician, accomplished vocalist, and could hold her own with any of us onstage. In terms of sheer talent, she would have made a substantial contribution to the whole.

But I never invited her to join.

From past experience with her (prior to the formation of His Company), I knew that she was a bit of a prima donna. She was often “under the weather” with something or other, and would crawl into rehearsals with a hang-dog look on her face—as if she were making the ultimate sacrifice to attend. On those rare occasions when she did show up strong and healthy, she generally showed up late, or at the very last moment, and whenever work needed to be done after rehearsal, mysteriously discovered some pressing matter that demanded her presence elsewhere.

In His Company, talent does not trump attitude.

In another instance, in which both talent and attitude were both present, a young woman joined through the auspices of another member of the group. She was immensely talented—as an actress, an artist, and makeup artist. She also had a healthy attitude about rehearsals, and I do not recall her ever giving problems in the area of pulling her load in the group.

Ultimately, however, she left, and I did not ask her to stay, for she was not a Christian. Because she was not a believer, she could not possibly participate in our purpose for existence. Her motives could never rise higher than a simple love for the craft. I came to learn, over time, that the possibility that we might witness to her for her own salvation was overwhelmed by the disruption she brought to the spiritual integrity of the group. And from then on I determined only to include individuals that professed faith in Christ.

In His Company, talent does not trump motive.

If His Company had not been independent, and if either one of these

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women had been the daughter of a church committee member—or worse, a daughter of the pastor—we would have been obliged to include her in the group.

The Actor

No actor was ever added to the His Company roster by sheer talent alone. No actor ever became a part of the company simply because he or she asked to be included. No auditions were held, since they would not have revealed the most important prerequisite for membership: the condition of the heart. For this reason, anyone wishing to join His Company was asked one question only: “Why?” Their response to that one question was a determining factor in their inclusion.

As the one in charge, I led His Company with the same philosophy I had used for years in other pursuits. To anyone expressing an interest in participating, I would

- give each person all the news up front, the good and the bad; tell them everything that would be expected from them;
- give them the opportunity to gracefully opt out;
- if they stayed, expect from them their very best; expect dedication, commitment, and excellence; expect them to work without pay, but as if they were getting rich.

This rather hard-edged philosophy was played out in the mechanics of production—both behind the scenes and in the lights. No actor that had failed to learn his lines ever heard the director say, “Oh, that’s all right. Just try to have them down by dress rehearsal.” No one showing up late for rehearsal ever heard their director say, with a smile, “I’m just pleased you were able to make it tonight.” And no actor ever heard the director say, after a bad rehearsal, “Well, that’s good enough. After all, you’re just volunteers.”

From the beginning of every project, all the actors were told what would be expected of them. As much as was humanly possible, they were given all the information about the production: the size and nature of their part, a general idea of the rehearsal schedule, and an idea

The His Company way is to choose quality over quantity. integrity over social order.

of the number of performances that would follow. Every possible bit of good and bad news about their participation was given them. They were then afforded the opportunity to check their calendar; their family, church, and work obligations; and their desire to take the part.

If the actor expressed a desire to proceed, they were given the script, and, at the earliest possible date, a detailed rehearsal calendar—which they were expected to immediately reconcile with their prior commitments. If conflicts were discovered, adjustments from either side were negotiated. Once any schedule conflicts were resolved, the actor was again given the opportunity to bow out of the production.

The actor who, at this point, agreed to take the role, would be expected to fulfill his or her commitment. As if they were a highly paid, professional actor signing a long-term Equity contract, they were held to their obligations to the production. They were expected to attend all rehearsals, showing up on time. They were expected to learn their lines, their blocking, and any other responsibilities assigned them. They were expected to behave as a professional, and cooperate with their fellow actors. In short, they were expected to be fully committed to the job set before them, and to perform their role with dedication and excellence.

Family emergencies could always occur; adjustments would have to be made for unexpected illness. But those who eventually demonstrated a disdain for this working philosophy were not asked to participate again.

The Director

This tough (by modern standards) philosophy of excellence, Scriptural integrity, and servanthood was not a one-way street: The same level of commitment and dedication to excellence was expected from the director and leaders as well.

As each production moved into the rehearsal process, it was up to the director to abide by the agreements worked out with each of the participants. If an actor had a regular obligation with family on Thursday nights, for example, then that evening would be out-of-bounds for calling a special rehearsal. If an actor or crew member had



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given a future date at which they would not be available, performances would not be scheduled for that time.

Just as each actor was expected to arrive at the rehearsal prepared and ready to work, the director as well was expected to arrive prepared, ready to lead the others in a productive time of rehearsal. He would have organized his intentions, worked through each phase of the rehearsal so as to use the time efficiently. He would organize the time based on the premise of making it as convenient as possible for everyone involved: if someone wouldn't be needed until later in the rehearsal, they would be given a later call time.

In keeping with the aforementioned philosophy, the director worked everyone hard—but always respected the agreements made at the beginning of the process.

Independence

Once His Company was formed under that name, it remained autonomous—independent of any one church, denomination, or organization. This was the only way to ensure the standard of excellence and integrity on which the group had been established.

As it happened, most of our members were also members of the same church, but that was the result of our prior relationships—not a prerequisite for being a part of the group. As we operated under the His Company name, our common church was treated much the same as any other: it was offered our productions, and the pastor or music minister always reserved the right not to schedule any in which they weren't interested. We received no sanction or funds from them, but did gratefully accept their offer of rehearsal space (as we also did from other churches).

Finances

In churches and drama companies, just as in marriages, one of the most troublesome obstacles to harmony can be finances—and the lack thereof.

Here again it is necessary for me to reiterate that the purpose of the

following is not to find fault with the way others meet their financial needs, but to describe the His Company way and to explain the reasons behind our methods.

Going Out

I recently received the following note from a drama team leader at a church in the United States:

Lastly, I wondered if you have any information on: how to prepare a budget for your drama team (including supplies, resources needed). We are preparing a three-year projection. Our immediate needs are for 5 wireless mics. Our venues are indoors and outdoors (both for our church and outreach to the community). Any help you can provide would be great. I've searched all over the web and can't find anyone who has a basic budget.

I was ill-equipped to answer her query, as His Company never operated under those terms. We were not a department of a church, but independent; we were never governed by committee or board, but operated under a "benign dictatorship"; we had no budget, since there was never any income (we never charged for performances), nor were we included in a church's budget; we never had our own facilities, but were utterly itinerant. Our expenses were nominal, but as they presented themselves for essentials such as fabric, makeup, props, printing expenses, etc., my wife and I bore the expense on our own. Only on rare occasions, such as with larger productions, did some members of our company voluntarily chip in on some expenses.

You see, God's calling is usually specific and personal. My calling was to write, direct, perform, and to create and lead a company of Christian players—but that was *not* the calling of the rest of those in the group. Their calling was, for example, to use their acting gifts in the Lord's name—not necessarily to lead or be financially responsible for a group.

So our philosophy regarding the group's finances was that it was our responsibility. It was our calling (mine and my wife's), therefore the Lord would provide the means—which He always did. As a result, we never mapped out future plans based on our ability to raise

Many years ago I was introduced to a gentleman by a mutual friend and pastor. He was described as someone who was also in the process of putting together a Christian drama group. Upon meeting this person, I was primarily impressed by one thing: he wasn't yet doing it. Oh, he had a lot to say about it. He talked about forming committees, and forming a Board of Directors, and negotiating to rent a performance space. He spoke a lot about his "vision" for what he wanted to accomplish. But he wasn't actually doing it.

Having a vision is all well and good, but my advice to anyone who asks is to just get out there and do it. Don't wait for a larger group—just use what you have. Don't wait for a stage—perform wherever you can. Don't form a committee—call a church (or sit down with your own pastor) and schedule a performance. Don't wait until everything is all lined up perfectly—just get out there and do it!

Do what the Lord is calling you to do, and don't worry about what everyone else is doing.

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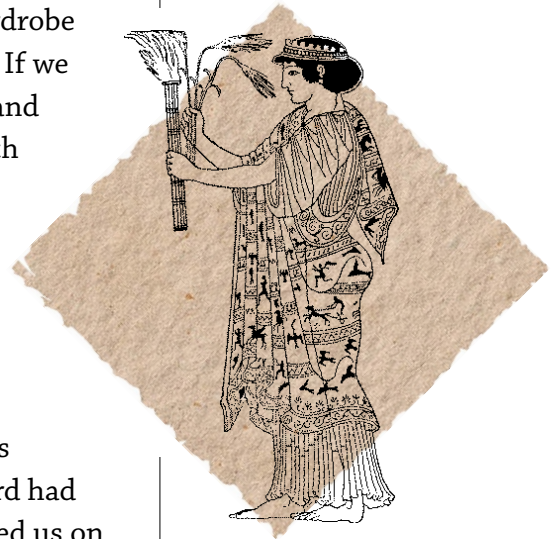
funds. We worked with what we had, and when certain expenditures were necessary, we spent wisely and with frugality, always using our personal funds in conjunction with the God-given gifts of others. By this I mean that if we needed new costumes, our funds would purchase the fabric, but it then would be turned over to the wardrobe mistress, who had the God-given gift for sewing and design. If we needed light stands, my wife and I would buy the materials and hand them over to the one in the group gifted at making such things. When materials were needed for publicity purposes, we might ask one of the artists to design a logo, but would bear any expenses ourselves.

The philosophy of servanthood was—and of course remains—the determining factor. The company as a whole, as well as its individual members, had been gifted for the Lord’s service. Those gifts did not belong to us, but to Him. The Lord had graciously given us the skills and abilities, then He had tapped us on the shoulder and said, “Now, this is what I’d like you to do with them.” How could we, under these terms, expect someone else to pay the expenses of our assigned task? Since the individual actor had been called to serve on the stage, I could well expect him or her to serve with excellence and professionalism, since that was part of their calling. But I could not expect any of them to participate in *my* calling, by expecting them to foot the bill for the group as a whole.

Coming In

Expecting people to foot the bill is one thing, but graciously accepting what is voluntarily offered is another.

His Company never charged for anything we did. In conversation with churches, we never even brought up the subject; it simply was not part of the process. If the subject was raised by the person I was speaking with, I would restate our position that our service was being offered free of charge. If they pressed further about maybe giving us a love offering, I would let them know that we would gratefully accept their expression of thanksgiving, but that the offering of it would be left entirely to their discretion. After that, I would never raise the subject again—even if they subsequently did not give us a love offering.



So from time to time churches or other organizations would give us an expression of their appreciation in the form of cash. As these amounts never were more than our expenses, the funds were simply absorbed into the personal checking account from which our expenses were paid.

As stated earlier, we never passed the hat among the members of His Company. No one was expected to help with expenses. If they were asked to purchase items for the group, they presented us with the receipts and were reimbursed. But on a few occasions, such as when expenses rose higher than normal for a large production, a few voluntarily bore some of the production expense.

One instance in particular I recall fondly. During the first production of *The Essence of His Death*, our props and lighting man was asked to purchase materials to construct a fire ring, some fabric for painting and fashioning into “rocks,” and wood to build two light stands. When he came to me with a fistful of receipts, he fanned them out like playing cards and, with a twinkle in his eye, told me to pick the one I would pay for; he would pay for the rest. The twinkle in his eye (I learned later) was from his knowing that I would try to select the most costly receipt, thus picking the longest in his hand—which I did. But only he knew that the longest receipt contained a long list of inexpensive nuts and bolts, while the shorter receipts contained just one or two more costly items.

Others in the group, as well, picked up the expense of items from time to time. And when people were asked to prepare food for longer rehearsals, rarely did they present receipts for their expenses. So we were blessed by working with individuals who shared the His Company philosophy of servanthood. And all was offered up to the Lord as an offering of praise.

Expressions of Thanksgiving

A humble spirit, however, when taken too far, can become an offense, as we learned at a number of churches we served.

It was our custom, when performing during the worship services at

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churches, to pack up and leave immediately upon exiting the stage. This practice was based primarily on our desire to keep the focus on the *message* of what we had done, and to do nothing that would detract from the flow of the service as a whole. We also wished to avoid being the recipients of praise, preferring that any praise be directed upward to the Lord.

Leaders at more than one church, however, pointed out to us that to deprive their congregation of an opportunity to express its appreciation would be almost as bad as blatantly expecting it. It was important that they be given the chance to thank us for ministering to them.

At venues where this desire was expressed to us, we typically would change into our street clothes, then (depending on the physical design of the building) slip quietly into a seat at the back of the sanctuary. If the pastor or leader asked, we would stand and graciously receive their thanks. Once the service had ended, we would immediately pack up and leave. If someone chose to stop us and say something, we would respond with grace and courtesy, but we never stood around waiting for them to approach us. The His Company philosophy of service does not include taking bows for the work we have done. The pastor does not take a bow after he has delivered his message; the choir does not take a bow after the anthem. Likewise, those participating in the dramatic portion of God's worship do not take a bow after fulfilling their commission to serve.

On rare occasions, when the production design or venue virtually cried out for us to return to the stage for a curtain call, care was always taken by the use of remarks from the stage, or body language, to redirect the audience's praise from us up to the Lord.

The His Company Way

Put as succinctly as it can be stated, the His Company way is *God-oriented*. The vehicle is the stage, and there is a built-in passion for the craft. But the *purpose* is always to glorify God, which is accomplished, throughout, with an attitude of humility and servanthood.

There is no higher calling than to serve the Lord; it is an extra joy to be given this privilege to serve from the stage. It is something to be embraced as a special reward, something heavenly that we are given to enjoy even before The Day.

May it be *His* name that is lifted up and glorified whenever you put on costume and greasepaint; may it be *His* Spirit that speaks through the lines you have memorized; and may every action and deed point the audience to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:1-11

chapter three

The Calling



LATER IN THIS BOOK THE ACTOR WILL BE TOLD THAT THERE IS not just one, correct way to act on the stage. One may be a disciple of the “Method,” as espoused by such luminaries as Stanislavsky or Strasberg, or the variation on the Method taught by Uta Hagen, which she refers to as “transference.” Or one may subscribe to a completely different theory of the stage. But no matter *how* one does the job, the important thing is to *do the job*.

Does it Work?

The same principle could be applied to directors and, by extension, the acting companies they lead. From an external perspective—that of members of the audience, or a church board, or the average person on the street—it doesn’t really matter how a person directs others on stage; what matters is the effectiveness of the finished product. You may be a tyrant, an in-your-face kind of director; or you may be a

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pussycat, a diplomat, or a clerk kind of director. But this is secondary to the more important point: *Does it work?*

And the same can be said for the organization and design of the acting company. In the final analysis it doesn't really matter whether it is just another department of a local church—much like one of the choirs—or an independent company serving more than one church. It doesn't really matter whether it is run by a dictator, a committee, or by “the will of the people.” What matters is... *Does it work?* Does it get the job done? Is it being faithful to its call?

A Different Breed

It can be easier for the director or manager of a professional, commercial company of actors to make this determination. They can examine their profit margin and the morning reviews by the local drama critic to decide if everything is working or not. We who have been called to serve in church drama, however, do not determine our success by receipts at the box office. We do not gauge the effectiveness of our work only at the back end (the reviews of our performance), but also going in. For we serve not ticket sales, but the Lord. Our effectiveness is determined at the start as much as after the final curtain. We are a different breed, and must set our rules by standards different from the marketplace.

Answering the Questions

Before any discussion of the role of the director, we first need to consider the calling of the dramatic group he or she leads. There is a reason why your—not the possessive, but the *familial* “your”—company of players exists. It has been called by God to serve a specific purpose within the universal Body of Christ. Some may raise the point that this all sounds too formal, too high and spiritual, that a company of actors may legitimately exist simply as a form of recreation, or a means by which to constructively occupy the time of youthful ne'er-do-wells. Yes, that is possible—if that is its calling.

Who are we serving? Who are we to please?

A very wise man once helped me to understand that no matter what we are doing, ultimately we do not serve man, but Christ. Many years



ago this church elder and I were discussing one of my recent performances in the church where we were both members. I complained about the seeming lack of positive response from the ignorant souls in the pews. I had given my best, I told him, in service to the Lord, but the people didn't seem to appreciate it. I pouted that maybe I should take my work for the Lord elsewhere, to a people who would more encouragingly respond.

Today I praise God for placing into my life this saint, this man so tuned to the spirit of God. For he spoke to me with the wisdom of God when he responded, "You're not performing for them. You are singing to Jesus. Let Him distribute the blessings where he wants them."

I have not forgotten that day when the Holy Spirit sat with us and gave this man the words I needed to hear at just that moment. And, to honor the memory of this man, I will not forget the lesson we both learned that day (for he was as moved by the wisdom coming from his mouth as was I), that no matter what work the Lord has assigned us, whether singing or acting, preaching or teaching, or cleaning the church bathrooms—no matter what, we do it for the Lord, trusting that He will use it to His glory.

And this is the lesson for every aspiring director of a drama group. Ultimately you are not doing it for the audience member. You are not doing it for the pastor, the deacons, or the church board. You are not doing it for a love of the craft (no matter how motivating that passion may be), nor are you doing it for each other. And certainly, you are not doing it for yourself. We serve only the Lord. The calling is from Him, and the product of our obedience belongs to Him.

What will be your audience?

This is not to say that there should be no consideration of the audience. Part of determining the calling of your group is to establish what will be the targeted audience. A writer pens words specific to his audience; a first-grade textbook is not intended to be read by a corporate board of directors, and a corporate annual report is not meant to be read by first-graders. *This* book has been written, not for established New York directors, but for amateurs who have bravely



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accepted the responsibility of directing other amateurs. Establishing this audience up-front has focused the words found within.

In a similar way, the Christian drama group (and its product) must be focused in the message it delivers to the targeted audience. It does no good to repeatedly deliver the Gospel message of salvation to an audience that is mostly made up of people who are venerable believers. Likewise, it accomplishes little to stage plays that illustrate life within the family of God in street theatre intended to reach the unsaved. The former is appropriate for the mission field, while the latter is appropriate for an audience within the local church.

What message are you called to deliver to that audience?

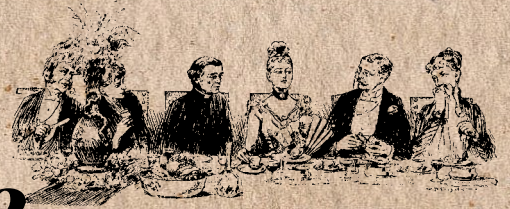
First, listen *for* the voice of God that will give you your direction, then listen *to* what that voice has to say. Take the time to let the Spirit guide you into truth, then obey the calling of His voice. Words mean something—both when they are issued from the throat of God and when they are printed on a handbill. Remain true to your calling and your audience.

This is less an issue of right or wrong than one of integrity. The world's perception of Christianity and the Church is already sufficiently confused and misinformed. Don't contribute to this confusion by being something you are not—or by not being something you should. If your calling is to follow the His Company pattern of devoted servanthood, giving all of what you do as a sacrifice meant to glorify the Lord and Savior Christ—then don't stage *My Fair Lady*, or *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. If, on the other hand, your calling is to offer a morally-uplifting alternative to a world drowning in the bile issued from Hollywood, then go ahead and stage *My Fair Lady*, or *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (but you should still stay away from *Bram Stoker's Dracula*).

Determine the Lord's call—both for you as an individual, and for your group. Then, without looking to either side, point yourself in that direction and go. Be fastidious about maintaining the integrity of your group—both in its composition, and in its public product.

chapter four

To Be, or Not to Be



IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE HIS COMPANY WAY—the way we believe to be the most productive and effective—is one of independence. That is, the His Company way of producing Christ-honoring drama is to be independent of any one church or organization. We believe this avoids many of the common encumbrances of a group run by uninformed committees, or by pastoral decree. It makes it easier for the group to be a more dynamic, creative entity within the universal Body, rather than a bureaucratic cog in the gears of just one local church.

This is not meant as a diatribe against the pastor, or even against necessary structure and organization in the church. May God bless all of the above. But there are times when the pastor, or the chairman of a committee, or the sweet-natured matriarch sitting in the second pew becomes an obstacle to the work of what is meant to be an artistic ministry.

But the truth is that most individuals reading this book are—and probably will remain—leaders of a group within the local church structure, rather than of an independent group. So we will consider the benefits and liabilities of both.

Security vs. Artistic Freedom

There is, of course, a certain amount of comfort and security built into remaining as part of a church. It usually comes with ready rehearsal and performance space; there may be an existing supply of costumes and props; lights and sound may already be in place. More than that, there can be a more steady supply of talent and, over time, children can grow up into youth, and youth into adults—all familiar with the drama group that has been in place for as long as they can remember.

The benefits of the church's installed infrastructure can be hard to resist—especially for the one just beginning a drama ministry. When there is a firm calling but no actors, no facilities, no funds, often the only practical choice is to remain within the supporting confines of that which is already familiar. Publicizing a need for actors, a new production, a need for props, costumes, and helping hands can all be easier when one is part of the home church. It is far easier for a drama group to produce a large-scale musical when there is an established choir in place—although church choirs are fast becoming an anachronism. And it can be easier getting people to attend a performance when it is sanctioned by an established church in the community.

All these advantages must be weighed against the level of creative and membership freedom that may or may not be enjoyed as just another department of the church. There can be no hard and fast rules—or even recommendations—because this is a very human enterprise, with all the joys and potential pitfalls that that entails. You may already enjoy a creative freedom, and such a wealth of talent and facilities where you are at, that there is no reason for you to even consider independence. But more typical is the one who, by staying, will suffer under a well-intentioned but narrow-minded pastor; a bombastic, power-mad board of trustees; a tradition-bound deacon board; or a stiff-backed church body that rails against their sanctuary being turned into another “thee-a-ter.”

One of the better, more committed actresses in His Company history happened also to be her church's Youth Director—a paid staff member. She had the female lead in a production with which we were touring, but when an opportunity to perform at a church on a Sunday evening presented itself, her boss, the pastor, would not permit her to be absent during a Sunday evening service. It was only one performance, and she had no formal responsibilities at the worship service, but he insisted that, for appearances sake, she be parked in a pew on that night, rather than out carrying the gospel to others outside his church.

Episodes such as this can be multiplied many times over when a performing company is a department of the local church.

The Call

This is the point at which one must determine and clarify one's calling. Is your calling (as the leader/director of a drama group) to offer constructive activity for youth? If so, then nurturing talent and performance quality will be of secondary importance to the organized activity itself. Is the music minister calling you to lead a talented sub-set within the adult choir—a few individuals who show dramatic promise for seasonal musicals? Then you will, by definition, need to work within the church's system. Is the church looking for some activity with which to fill Thursday evenings, wanting to offer something different with which to draw outsiders into the church community? If your calling is to lead such an activity, then outreach and evangelism will be its primary focus, rather than dramatic excellence in the footlights.

Everything begins with the call; it determines focus, direction, level of intensity, and the parameters under which you must operate.

Perhaps creative freedom and control over membership are not so important to you. More important to you is the security of a well-traveled road, and you are not bothered by the possibility that during final rehearsals the pastor may tap you on the shoulder and politely but firmly inform you that, "You can't do that here." Perhaps it is less important to you and your calling to seek the finest performance possible, than it is to simply involve more people in a given project. Perhaps you haven't the time, facilities, or energy to commit to running an independent company; in your estimation, if you don't do it at the church it won't get done at all. If, on the other hand, the powerful pull of God is taking you into a different direction, then we will show you how it can be done.

Fear and Trepidation

Some drama leaders fear that without the established infrastructure of their local church, they will not be able to perform. They fear that without the established lighting and sound capabilities, without the ready supply of costumes their church already possesses, they will be incapable of mounting a suitable performance.

Nonsense.

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His Company delivered many powerful, meaningful messages with only two or three people standing on the sanctuary platform on a Sunday morning or evening—no scenery, no mics, no soundtrack, no fancy lighting. Just a couple of well-rehearsed actors in authentic costumes, delivering Bible truth in a dramatic way.

If you are convinced that your call is for an autonomous drama company, independent of an organized church, then, if necessary, begin small. Be less concerned with what you don't have than with what you have. Cultivate hard work and excellence. In place of fancy scenery and elaborate lighting, spend many hours rehearsing, developing believable characters; with what little money you have, buy some makeup and create a few authentic costumes that tell the audience that this is not going to be just another sloppy, "Sunday School skit."

Personnel

The Church

The strongest benefit to serving within the local church is the opportunity to participate in a focused community ministry, to work in tandem with those who are pursuing the same goal but by different means. There is something exciting about a local church united in its efforts to glorify God as it both ministers to those without and builds up those within. A church united is a powerful force in a community, and for a drama group to become a part of that is a high calling.

PRO Typically, an in-house drama group—especially one in a medium- to large-sized congregation—will be able to draw from a larger warehouse of talent. Casting plays will be easier, with a wealth of personnel from all age groups and both sexes.

CON But along with this will often be the requirement to include those who may just be along for the ride, those looking only for relief



from boredom, or the offspring of parents looking for a free babysitter.

Autonomy

PRO The greatest benefit to being an independent group is the freedom to serve the Lord effectively in the manner to which you have been called. It means that you have the freedom to enlist people who are not just good actors, or effective behind-the-scenes personnel, but people who share your same vision of service. It means that God and His word will be your guiding force—not a church committee. It means you have the ability to say, “Thank you, but no” to the talented but self-absorbed prima donna, the misbehaving preacher’s kid, and the actor too busy to attend every rehearsal.

CON The downside of independence when trying to enlist others has already been implied. It is possible that the same number of people from your own church will choose to be a part of your group, but the idea of stepping outside the comfortable confines of the local body may scare some away. A method will need to be devised for enlisting others, regardless their church affiliation.

Adding to the Group

If you have determined that your call must take you out of the safer environment of the local church, then greater effort will need to be put into the search for others to participate. One cannot perform only monologues forever, so additional personnel are inevitably required. But a strong, dynamic ministry can be mounted with as few as two or three faithful partners. Begin small and let the Lord inform you how He wishes your group to grow. Remember that your goal is not to become a large group, but to become an effective group—a group that, first, glorifies God and, second, continually strives for excellence in everything that it does. When the time is right, there are a number of ways that people might be added to your group.

- Invite interested individuals from within your church. Hold an informal, no-pressure reading session where those in attendance take turns reading through a variety of scripts. This will not only ignite interest in a drama group, but will inform you of individual’s abilities.

Part 1: The His Company Way

- Advertise through a local association office for your denomination, or an ecumenical council, to get the word out.
- Whenever you perform, include an invitation in the printed program for interested people in the audience to contact you about joining your group.

If your call is for independence, then establish—at the start—the requirements for participation in the group. Consider the following:

- Will you restrict membership to professing Christians?
- Will you include participants from outside your denomination?
- What other requirements will you have for participation? For example, will you audition for acting ability before they can join the group?
- What, if anything, are you going to require in the way of time commitment from members of your group? Can they just come and go at their convenience, or will they need to be more dependable? If so, how will you enforce this requirement?

So long as you state the ground rules for participation clearly and early-on to each aspirant, you need not apologize for your membership guidelines. Your overarching purpose is to serve God in the manner to which He has called you; explain this purpose fully to each applicant, along with any other requirements for membership, then let them decide whether or not they wish to be a part of that calling.

Rehearsal Space

As with most earthly endeavors, greater freedom means greater responsibility—and often some limitations. Without a home church, the director will have to organize rehearsal space somewhere—maybe a different location every week. Each performance may be in a different venue, requiring less dependence on lighting and sets, and greater flexibility in blocking. With a new group, projects will have to start small: fewer actors, less window dressing, less reliance on dramatic

For more on necessary flexibility because of the rehearsal space, see “Remaining Flexible” in Chapter Four, “Regular Rehearsals,” in Part Three, and Emphasis Five, “The Adaptable Actor,” in Part Four.

lighting, and a greater reliance on a solid, believable performance from everyone involved.

Non-governing Support

PRO The ideal situation is for an independent company to find a home base at a receptive, supportive church which offers both rehearsal space, and an affirming, encouraging spirit. Perhaps a church where you have performed will express its appreciation by making available a room or two for your rehearsals. Perhaps they may even offer storage space for props and set pieces.

CON To be honest, this ideal situation is rarely found. Politics and petty power struggles are as alive and well in the local church as in the governance of any other kingdom, and pastors and boards of deacons are often loathe to support any entity over which they do not exert creative control. Such a position is not necessarily unfair; it is a fair concern on their part that their church’s name not be associated with something delivering a possibly disreputable message. For this reason, no matter what kind of support we received from local churches, His Company never associated any church’s name with ours. They were not exerting control over our message, so they bore no responsibility—favorable or unfavorable—for it.

A more typical scenario is that most rehearsals will be held at someone’s home, but if performances have been scheduled at one or more churches, it is quite possible that one of them will permit you to use their sanctuary or auditorium for at least final rehearsals. After all, it will be to their benefit for you to use their stage for the final polish; it can only mean a better performance at their church.

No matter what arrangements are offered by churches, be sure that you and the members of your group conduct yourselves in a respectful, professional manner. Always leave a room as tidy as you found it; turn off all the lights when you leave; and if they have entrusted a key to you, be sure to lock up when your rehearsal is over.

The Essentials

Every performing group does need a few essentials. Makeup is neces-

Part 1: The His Company Way

sary to make people look like someone or some thing they are not; costumes are necessary to do the same, and to help set a place and a time. Beyond these essentials, however, little is required for the independent group to successfully stage plays and sketches.

Makeup

You can slide by for a short while using makeup gleaned from the purses of female members, but sooner or later every drama group needs to use professional makeup. Happily, good quality makeup is not terribly expensive, and usually lasts for a long time.

One of the best and most readily available brands of stage makeup is *Ben Nye Theatrical Makeup*. All items in their catalogue can be obtained a la carte, but for the beginning drama group the most economical decision is to start with one of their *Theatrical Creme Kits*, then purchase separately whatever additional items are needed. Each kit can be purchased for as little as \$50 US (at this writing), but contains makeup that would cost far more if purchased individually. (*Ben Nye* now offers smaller kits—called *Personal Theater Makeup Kits*—designed for the individual actor. These sell for around \$20 US.

At this writing each *Ben Nye Theatrical Creme Kit* Three Creme Foundations, Creme Contour Wheel (Cheek Rouge, Lip Color and two Creme Colors), Bruise & Abrasions Wheel, Highlight, Shadow, White Creme Color, Powder Cheek Rouge, Eyebrow Pencil, Lip Pencil, Black Pencil, Liquid Latex, Nose & Scar Wax, Hair Color, Translucent Face Powder, Spirit Gum Adhesive, Spirit Gum Remover, Stage Blood, Rouge Brush, Velour Powder Puff, Sponge Applicators, Stipple Sponge, No. 3 Flat Brush, No. 7 Flat Brush, Eyebrow / Lash Comb, Swab Applicators.

These kits are available for Fair: Light-Medium, Fair: Medium-Tan, Olive: Light-Medium, Olive: Medium-Deep, Brown: Light-Medium, and Brown: Medium-Dark. Costume and theatrical shops in major cities carry Ben Nye; to purchase these kits online, perform a web search for “Ben Nye,” and you will find several sites.

If you would rather purchase all your makeup a la carte, we recommend that the following items be considered essential:

Instructions for actually using makeup, creating beards and wigs, etc., are outside the scope of this book. “How-to” manuals for stage makeup are readily available in bookstores and online, and Ben Nye offers an instructional video series that includes the following topics:

- straight male/corrective beauty
- old age makeup
- special character effects
- how to apply a bald cap
- how to lay a crepe beard

- a selection of base (foundation) colors
- translucent powder and brush
- brushes and pencils (eye and lip liners)
- dark brown base and reddish blush
- smooth sponges for application
- rough sponges for stippling and feet
- wool crepe for making beards (white, gray, brown, black)
- spirit gum (for affixing beards, etc.)
- spirit gum remover
- liquid latex (for building beards)
- nose & scar wax

The disadvantage to purchasing makeup this way is that each item will be more expensive; the advantage will be that you will only get those items you need. To either of the above lists we would add the following “practical” items to include in your makeup kit:

- regular hairspray and mousse or gel
- curling iron
- mascara & eyelash curler
- scissors
- band-aids
- bobby, safety, and straight pins
- drinking straws
- coloring hairspray (white, black or gray)
- small pencil sharpener
- facial tissues
- paper towels
- hand mirrors
- soap
- cold cream and hand cream
- elastic hair ties
- combs and brushes
- charcoal briquette (stored in plastic bag; for streaking face or clothing)

Costumes

One of the most valuable members of any drama group is the seamstress. With a proficient wardrobe mistress (or master, of course) behind the scenes, one of the largest hurdles to a successful production is overcome. A creative seamstress can work miracles—and keep expenses down. Early on, the director should establish a candid relationship with the one responsible for creating the costumes, keeping her informed as to the requirements for each production, as well as any changes that might arise during the rehearsal process, working with her to establish an authentic look for each character.

For a detailed discussion about costumes, see Emphasis Six, “Costuming the Biblical Character,” in Part Four.

The Non-essentials

Sets

Sets—as in changing the look of an entire stage or platform—are rarely needed, and on those few occasions that they are, much can be accomplished with just a few pieces to suggest a time and place. As your productions require set pieces, begin acquiring materials that can be adapted to multiple uses. For example, early on, His Company invested in a large sheet of lightweight canvas that we painted to look like granite rock. This fabric could then be suspended as a quick backdrop, or be carefully shaped around chairs or stools to become rather convincing “rocks” on stage. Highly portable, the canvas could then be rolled up and stored away until the next performance. Another multi-purpose material is polystyrene—i.e., *Styrofoam*—which can be carved into various shapes and painted to look like rocks or other common objects.



Figure 1.2 — Lightweight canvas splatter-painted to look like stone from a distance.

Lights

Stage lights are beneficial, of course, but until you have them you can concentrate on plays that require no special lighting effects (most smaller pieces that a young group would perform do not). Very often the existing lights at a performance site will suffice, even if it just means turning off the main sanctuary lights while leaving on those lighting the platform or choir loft. Remember, the object of the play is the message—not the mechanics behind it. Work with what you have for now. Meanwhile, as you gradually build up the group and

your reputation (and funds), begin collecting the components for a portable set of stage lights. Here is how you might piece together a workable set of lights:



Figure 1.3 — Two views of a home-made lighting control board.

All prices mentioned are as of this writing (2010).

You will need two or more stands on which to mount the lights, a control panel, extension cords, and the lights themselves. The stands can be made, at nominal cost, out of wood; use cement blocks as weights on their bases to counterbalance the lights that will be attached at the top. Since the electrical system is 110 volt (in the United States, at least), common household materials can be used. A simple, yet very workable control panel can be made out of wood and a series of outlets (into which the extension cords will be plugged) connected to normal household dimmer switches. (The disadvantage to this system is that without more elaborate wiring, the board has no way to pre-set lights for a scene, then bring them up or down at once with a master switch. The advantage, however, is its low cost.) The lights themselves are the

most expensive component, since homemade will not do. Light bulbs in tin cans will not suffice; you will need real stage lights. With some variations, there are essentially two ways to go—Par 38 or Fresnel.

- Par 38 lights are pretty basic, and thus less expensive than fresnel lights. They use lower wattage lamps and the beam cannot be focused. But they do typically come with a gel attachment (to change the color of the light) and a mounting bracket that can be angled for directing the beam. Par 38s are a good, inexpensive way for an acting company to begin investing in lights. The light fixture itself (often called a “can”) can be purchased for less than \$30 US; the bulbs (either spot or flood) can be purchased for between \$5 and \$12 US.
- Fresnel lights are heavier, can be focused, and throw a brighter beam. Thus, they are more expensive. A basic, 6-inch fresnel can cost from \$150 to over \$300 US, depending on model. Most use a high intensity tungsten halogen lamp, which will cost from \$15 to \$20 US.

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For a low-budget company, two Par 38 lights can be set up for less than \$100 US. These, along with a homemade control board, comprise a workable, portable starting package. Later, if your budget permits, brighter, more sophisticated lights can be added and run from the same board. Whether or not you later invest in more expensive fresnels, the Par 38s will never go to waste.

The Production Process

Once you have begun gathering the necessary components for your group it is possible that you are still left wondering, “Now what?” The ultimate goal of every fledgling drama group is the same: to perform before an audience. But the process used to reach that goal can be different for each group. What follows is an outline of the typical His Company process—from first idea or commission, to final performance.

The Commission

A pastor or music minister would contact me with a request for a sketch, monologue, one-act, longer play or musical. The typical commission would be for a short piece to be performed in support of the pastor’s message, or to launch a church-wide emphasis, such as encouraging stewardship. Occasionally the commission would be for something larger, such as a three-act play for Easter. In our case, a new commission meant that a new play would have to be written; in your case it may mean that you will begin the search for an appropriate script.

A perennial problem during this stage is the seeming inability of some pastors or other church leaders to allow sufficient lead time for a new production—especially when a new script must be written. Even when the beginning step is to *find* a script, rather than write something new, the commissioning person will simply not understand that this cannot be accomplished overnight.

The His Company way is to not compromise. If a pastor is not willing to allow us the time to write something new, and rehearse it to an acceptable level of excellence, then we respectfully decline the commission. The Lord has called us to give Him our very best, and we

There is also another kind of commission: by the Holy Spirit. Not every production begins with a human request. Some plays have been written and produced at the call and urging of the Spirit dwelling within.

It is a mistake to think that independence for a performing company means no accountability. To the contrary, because it was submitted to several different pastors or church leaders prior to performance, every His Company script always received more doctrinal scrutiny than if it had been submitted to only one.

While it may be appropriate for your group, auditioning for roles never seemed suitable for His Company. As the writer of each script, I had certain individuals in mind for the roles from the beginning; as the director of most productions, I was intimately acquainted with the abilities of every performing member. So it made little sense for us to go through the charade of holding auditions for roles I had already mentally assigned. But in a group where scripts are obtained from an outside source, and where different people direct different productions, auditions may be the preferred method of casting.

dare not cheapen the product because of last-minute, albeit earnest, requests.

Ideas

Taking the idea suggested by the pastor or music minister, I would rough out some ideas for a script, all the while considering (even at this early stage) who in our group might take the roles. Once one or more ideas had been developed, I would contact the person who had made the request, and we would settle on one of my ideas, its length, use, and a reasonably definite idea of when it would be performed.

Submission and Schedule

With several pages written (to confirm the story line, roles, and approximate length of the script), I would sketch out a rehearsal schedule, culminating in the performance date agreed upon with the commissioning church. Nothing was ever finalized, at any church, until the commissioning staff member had read and okayed the final draft of the script.

Casting

I would then line up the actors to take the roles. It was always understood by members of His Company that they were free to turn down any role, but—and this was of critical importance—once they accepted the role, their responsibility was locked in. No last-minute changes. Because I would be making commitments to several churches, the actors were committing to the rehearsal and performance schedule as it was known at that point.

Additional Performances

While I continued writing the script, I would call other pastors to describe the new project and arrange for a performance at their church. In the early days I would often have to speak with them at length to convince them of our legitimacy. Later, as our reputation grew, and as we developed relationships with many churches in the area, all I would have to do is briefly describe the new script, and then agree upon a performance date. I would inform each pastor that their preferred date was contingent on the actors being available, but usually only minor negotiations with everyone involved would be necessary to settle upon a performance schedule that typically had us visiting a

total of three to five churches with any given play.

Rehearsals

The beginning point—the rule of thumb for a one-act, or even a three-minute sketch or monologue—was a three-hour rehearsal, each week, for eight weeks—in other words, twenty-four hours of rehearsal. This rule was based on working with amateurs that required lots of coaching and help with their roles. With more experienced personnel, this might be (and typically was) shortened—or the same number of hours were compacted into a shorter period of calendar time. This is what was required, with our personnel, to reach the level of excellence and depth of character that was our acceptable standard.

Even larger productions, involving many scenes and actors, could be fit into the same eight- to ten-week schedule, since the individual scenes could be grouped several to the week, resulting in more than one rehearsal per week for the director and principals, but often fewer than that for more minor characters.

Facilities

Before or during the rehearsal process, I would visit each church at least once to confirm for myself that we could stage this play in their facilities. I would check out the stage or sanctuary platform, entrances and exits, lighting, sound, level of ambient light on a Sunday morning (or evening, depending on the performance time), dressing and bathroom facilities, and traffic patterns for the actors once the auditorium was filled with an audience. If possible (and necessary), I would contact the sound man, asking if he would be available to work with us upon arrival for performance. I would also verify when the stage would be available on performance day for a run-through.

Wardrobe and Props

Beginning during the writing process, and continuing through early rehearsals, I would work with our wardrobe mistress, explaining what I wanted in the way of costuming. She would organize something from stock, or make something new, so that at least (and ideally before) the last few weeks of regular rehearsals could be done in costume. Props were typically few, and set pieces almost nonexistent except for those required for our larger productions. But whatever

For a detailed discussion on organizing rehearsals, see Emphasis Nine, “The Rehearsal Schedule,” in Part Four.

The practice of standing on stage to receive applause has always been abhorrent to His Company. Our reason for being is to honor and glorify God and His Son, Jesus Christ—not to bask in the adulation of an appreciative audience. Admittedly, there are times when this can be carried to an almost offensive extreme, or there are occasions in which a pastor will insist that we remain for some act of recognition by their congregation. At such times we would modestly receive their response with good grace and appreciation (all the while making every tasteful effort to redirect their praise upward), but it has always been our preferred method to simply do what we came for, then depart.

was needed would be supplied by our props man—and, again, would be ready as early as possible in the rehearsal schedule so the actors could get used to using them.

Performances

His Company was portable. Most productions—director, actors, props, makeup, wardrobe—would fit into one car or van. Prior to the day of performance I would have familiarized myself with the stage or platform of the church, so we would be prepared (and have rehearsed) any odd contingencies. Nonetheless, we would always arrive sufficiently early to run through the play at least once to limber up, and work out any problems with the different stage. At the prescribed point in the middle of the service, we would enter and perform the piece, then exit. It was our habit not to wait around for any applause or congratulations, but to immediately get back into street clothes and leave. We would only change this at the specific request of the church's pastor.

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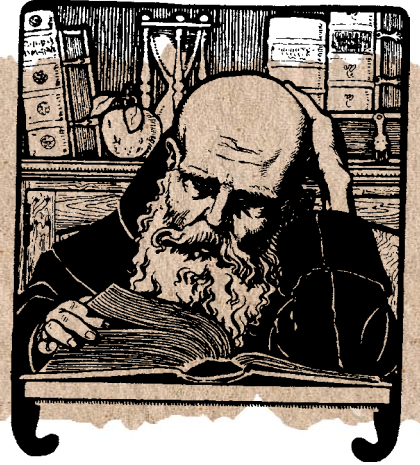
part 2



A Director's Guide

chapter one

Selecting the Play



THE INTREPID NATURE PHOTOGRAPHER did not create the scene laid out before him. He had nothing to do with the creation of the mountains and trees and fields that present themselves for his consideration. He had no say in the weather that either masks or enhances the beauty of the scene. Everything is there, in place, and, for the most part, immovable. But then the photographer lifts his camera to his eye. Suddenly he has some say in how the scene set before him will be portrayed for others. He now has control over composition (how much or how little to include in the frame), perspective (angle, type of lens, depth of field), and exposure (choice of f-stop, shutter speed, or filter). The photographer takes what is not of his own making, and interprets it for the viewer of his photograph.

Just so, the director of a play may not have written the play's script. He, or she, may have had nothing to do with creating the story or the characters who will people the play. And he may have to work within a

setting not of his own choosing. Yet, like the photographer, the director takes all of these disparate components and with them creates something beautiful, or powerful, or moving. He controls the composition, the perspective, and how the play is shadowed and lit. In fact, the director of a stage play possesses even greater control than the nature photographer, for, like the *studio* photographer, he controls not just the frame, but the exact placement of everything within the frame.

The responsibility of the director, distilled down to its essence, is to take disorder and mold it into order. It is to begin with the printed page and a handful of actors, and from them create something three-dimensional—something that will change lives for the better.

More than just Killing Time

There should always be a reason for performing a play. Christian drama should never be just a placeholder in a meeting—something with which to kill time until something more important comes along. Nor should it be simple narcissism—a vehicle for a star, or a fun activity for a group of talented individuals. There should always be a reason, something to accomplish.

Within that requirement, however, can lie any number of valid reasons to stage a play. Christmas gives us the opportunity to celebrate, explain, or expand on the birth of Christ; Easter gives us the opportunity to remind the audience of His sacrifice and resurrection, or to explain those critical events in a clearer way for those who do not yet know Him. A non-holiday play can be used to say just about anything—*but it must say something*. Just as a pastor does not study, write, and deliver a sermon for the sole reason of entertaining his parishioners, a director should never stage a play for the sole reason of entertaining his audience. Every play should be entertaining and interesting, but in the realm of Christian drama those can never be the only reasons for doing it. It must also exalt, or edify, or evangelize, or instruct; it must, ultimately, draw people closer to God.

So the first step in selecting the play is to determine your reason. What do you intend to accomplish with the project?

We need not waste time discussing lower purposes for the stage, for that is not what we are about. We are not here to entertain (although our work should always be entertaining), nor are we here to serve the baser intentions of man. We are here for two reasons: To glorify God and edify His people by means of the stage. That is a high and lofty goal that does not traffic in anything that does not exalt. More than that, our exaltation is not—indeed, cannot—be for mere man, but must be for the One who has called us to this purpose.

Typing “Christian drama” (for one example) into an Internet search engine, such as *Google* (google.com) is still the best way to find available scripts. With the transient, ephemeral qualities of the pages on the World Wide Web, it would do little good for this book to list specific web sites. Using a general-purpose search engine is still the best means for finding what is available right now.

For instructional purposes, in this and subsequent chapters we will use as our example the His Company Christmas script, *Vacancy*.

You may wish to visit our web site to download a copy for reference. Go to <http://hc.dlampel.com>

Obtaining a Script

Once you have established the purpose behind performing a new play, it is time to go looking for one that will fulfill that purpose. The director today has more options in this regard than ever before. It wasn't so long ago that sources for Christian scripts were limited to a handful of music publishers that would sporadically release thin volumes of “skits” of dubious worth. There have been dramatic musicals available for a longer period of time, but not everyone has sufficient resources and talent for these larger productions—and not everyone wants to do a sixty-minute musical every time they perform. The availability of quality sketches, monologues, one-acts, and three-acts, is a relatively recent development.

More Christian publishers now include drama catalogues, and, of course, we have at our disposal the vast, seemingly limitless resources of the Internet—something that in practical, usable terms did not even exist before the mid 1990s. Only after that did sites such as His Company become established and begin making their scripts available by this means.

Now What?

So you have selected what you believe will be a suitable play. This year the pastor asked that you produce a nonmusical play for Christmas, so you have found the one-act *Vacancy*—a script that you believe to be within the scope of your small group's abilities, but that also presents the traditional Christmas story in a nontraditional way. It uses period, Biblical characters, but the story is also made relevant to the modern audience. The new script is in your hand, and you must decide whether or not it will be the one actually staged.

Now what?

The first thing to do is *read the play*. Then read it again. Read it while sitting in a comfortable chair. Then read it outside in brilliant daylight. Read it before a crackling fire, then read it next to a babbling brook. Read it as many times as it takes, under different conditions, until you understand:

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- the statement the play is making
- the different personalities of the characters, and their reason for being a part of the story
- the personnel requirements of the script (do you have the actors who can fill the roles?)
- the physical requirements of the script (can you actually stage the play?)

Just as each individual actor must understand and acquire the full spectrum of his or her character to authentically portray that character to the audience, the director must do the same for all characters in the play. To help the amateur actor realize and mold his character, the director must be the first to understand it—perhaps not to the same depth as the actor (although that wouldn't hurt), but at least to the extent to which the director can assist the actor in his or her responsibilities.

Here are some considerations for the director during these early readings of the script:

- What is the play saying? What message does it leave with the audience? More than that, what will it say to your specific target audience? Does this message fulfill your expectations for the play's intended use?
- Is the play worth doing? Does it actually accomplish something—or is it just busywork for inactive actors? Does the play square with Scripture? Will it square with the traditions and practices of its venue?
- Does the script make sense? Is it structured well? Do the characters have a reason for being, or do they just clutter up the pages—and hence the stage?
- Do you have the personnel to populate the play? Will they be able to do it well? Or will it be done so poorly that it would be

A word about copyright...

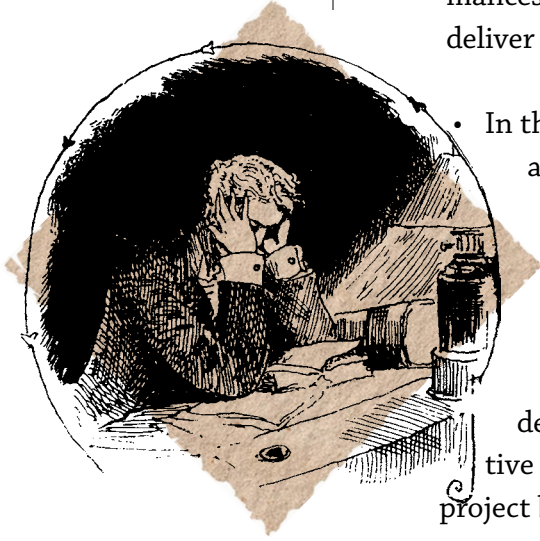
I once had reason to stick my head inside the choir room of a moderate-size church in Southern California. To my chagrin, against one wall was a wooden cabinet of narrow cubby holes—each filled with a stack of photocopied music literature.

Churches can sometimes be the worst offenders when it comes to breaking copyright law—not to mention the moral law they purport to defend. The tacit philosophy seems to be one of "It's for the church, for the Lord, so no one will mind if we borrow this without paying."

Churches and other Christian groups should be the *first* to play by the rules. The drama director will find a large number of scripts available at no charge—as with His Company's policy, extending permission to make any necessary photocopies. But not all distributors have the same policy.

When obtaining the script for a play or musical, be sure that you understand the distribution rights being extended by the author or publishing house.

Then abide by them.



better not to do it at all? If your players have only marginal abilities, will you be able to draw out of them the necessary performances? Can you direct it? Can you pull all the pieces together to deliver a polished, cohesive statement to the audience?

- In the cold light of logic, can you stage this play in a believable, meaningful way? Do you have the facilities—the stage, the lights, the sound, the right *environment* for what the script means to express?

The order in which the director addresses these points is less important than that he do it before casting and delivering the script into the hands of the actors. A negative response to any one of these questions could scuttle the project before it even begins.

Imagining

The director must be an *imager*. To the director the play must be more than words on a page eventually spoken out loud before an audience. Early on he must be able to see in his mind the visual and aural textures that will comprise the total package, and what is not drawn for him in the script, he must draw on his own. He must be able to hear in his head the voices of his actors as they will bring to life the characters that, for the moment, exist only on the printed page. Reading through a script is an active process for the attentive director. As the story proceeds, as the characters begin to take shape, the look and sound and physical texture of the play as a whole will begin to fill the mind and imagination.

How might this happen with a script like *Vacancy*—the one you have selected for this year's Christmas project? While you read through the script, you ask yourself: *What is this play saying?* and *If it is saying this to me, from the printed page, how can I translate this same statement to the stage? How can I make it three-dimensional?*

So what is the play saying? *Vacancy* begins with a modern-dress narrator saying standard things that would fit into most any Christmas program. But then it takes a turn...

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What a wonderful thought: That the glory of the Lord has actually come, and is now shining on us.

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(pause; soberly)

But I wonder if we see that light? The light of Christ rarely penetrates the smog of our humanity. Our world today is filled with the tarnished light of our own brilliance. And never more so than during this festive time of year. Plastic Santas and aluminum trees greet us in every shop of the mall...

Then a strange character called a Visitor says,

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Visitor #1

(a disembodied voice)

And do you think it was so different back then?

A second Visitor is mixed in, then the scene changes to an irascible innkeeper and his wife during the census called by King Herod just before 4 B.C.

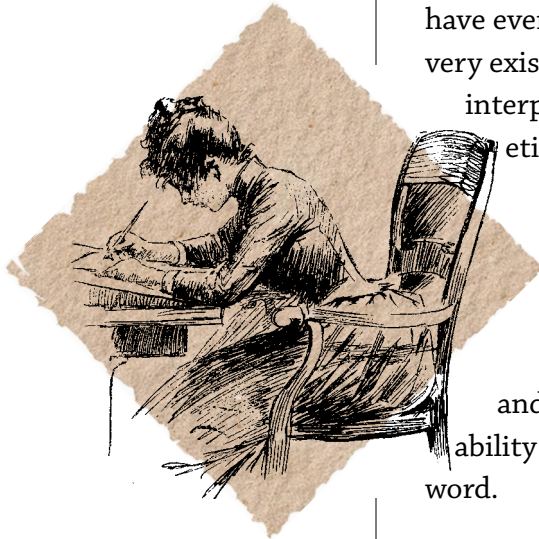
Right about now your mind is beginning to entertain images of actual people onstage, how this would be played out in your facilities. But don't get ahead of yourself; understand what the play is *saying* first. As you read on, you realize that the central story of the play is about the Bethlehem innkeeper, and his preoccupation with earthly things over the spiritual. Every day most of his energies are devoted to commerce and politics, rather than his family and the condition of his heart.

By now you have enough information to know that *Vacancy* is not just a retelling of the traditional, historical Bethlehem story, but that from the story around the birth of Christ it draws application to people's lives today.

While you are determining whether or not the play does this well—in the characters and their dialogue—you ask yourself, *Is this what I want to say from the stage? Will this be well-received by the audience I can expect? Will they understand it? If so, will they want to understand it? Will they like it?* If so, then you've answered the question, Is the play worth doing?

Faithful to the Source

No small consideration to the production of Christian drama is the requirement that the play square with Scripture. Indeed, without this necessary component, all other considerations become unnecessary. The Broadway stage (or the community theatre down the street) may have every right to present Jesus as a raving queen, or question the very existence of God. In a country that permits free speech these interpretations can and will take place on a regular, if not disquieting, basis. But the group that claims to be serving the Lord Christ—the one in the Bible—cannot practice such unholy license.



Doctrinal tenets will vary from place to place; individual church leadership will color the way Scripture is interpreted and applied. But at the root of every performance must be the ability to authenticate every word and action with God's written word.

This does not prohibit an informed fleshing out of what Scripture does not tell us. If every word Joseph ever spoke in Egypt were to be recorded, the book of Genesis alone would be too massive a tome to lug to church. The apostle John tells us that

...there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

John 21:25

These gaps in the written record do not, however, excuse sloppy theology. If new words are written for Jesus, they must be words He *might* have said; they must be authentic with what we do know of Him. It is the responsibility of the writer to do his homework; it is the responsibility of the director, or the one responsible for selecting the play, to double-check his or her scholarship.

As the writer as well as the director, I learned this lesson early on. In the original draft of the musical, *The Prophecy*, I had Elizabeth questioning the sobriety of her husband by asking, "Zechariah, have you been in the sacramental wine again?" When I submitted the script to

the pastor, he pointed out that “sacramental wine” was Catholic, and that the Jew would have said “wine offering.” So, with gratitude to the pastor, the line was changed. In fact some components in that script were researched with the librarian at a local synagogue.

Very often a script will contain small problem areas that need not remove it entirely from consideration. Under the best of circumstances, and most meticulous proofreading, a few mistakes can still slip through. But, as with the aforementioned example, a word changed here and there can easily right an accidental wrong. And in this day of the Internet and the ubiquitous e-mail, it can be easy and quick to consult with the author regarding troublesome spots in a script.

chapter two

The Script in Hand



Before

Know or learn who is available, and cast the play

Distribute the scripts with rehearsal schedule

During

Invest yourself in the story and characters of the play

Decide what you will expect from each character and actor

ONCE YOU ARE SATISFIED WITH THE STATEMENT that the script makes, it is time to consider who will play the parts, and how those roles will be assigned. No matter how the roles will be assigned, no director should proceed without having a pretty good idea that, one way or another, the play can be populated from the resources at hand.

Before

Depending on the common practice for casting plays in your group, it may be wise at this point to put out some feelers toward those who, in your estimation, could play the roles. Will they be interested and available? While it is true that your planning can go forward, certainly rehearsal and performance dates cannot be locked in until the players are on board. The director should always have at least a general sense of whether or not any given play can be adequately cast.

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A scene in the 1973 film *The Sting* has one of the characters, Kid Twist, paying a visit to a Chicago bar—a local hangout for grifters (con men). Sitting down in a back room with Duke the proprietor, the Kid lets him know that he's going to need some able-bodied men to pull off a scam.

"I'm gonna need a twenty-man boost right away."

Duke replies, "I got plenty of talent out there tonight. You can take your pick."

"This is a tough one, Dukie. These boys have got to be the quill."

Calling for his bouncer, Duke says, "Get me the Sheet." Then to Kid Twist, "Let's see who's in town."

The two proceed to run down the list (the "Sheet") of local grifters that will be available for the sting against the big-time mobster.

This is a good illustration of how the director is to keep tabs on who might be available for any given project. No matter whether yours is an independent company of regular players, or a loosely organized band of occasionally interested souls in a local church, you should always have a pretty good idea of who could potentially fill the roles of any play.

Once you have a handle on personnel (which would include not only actors, but also individuals in supportive roles such as props, wardrobe, lights, etc.), the final consideration is meeting the physical requirements of the play. You begin with what you know: the size and shape of your facilities. Upon this known quantity you overlay the physical requirements of the play. Those for *Vacancy* are nominal, but rather specific. The stage is divided into four distinct areas: One for the Leader, one for the more traditional dramatic scenes, and one for each of the two mysterious Visitors. Within these parameters the director has latitude to use his imagination, but even at this stage it is not too late to ask yourself again: *Can I stage this play? Will it work in the shape and size of our facilities? Do we have the lighting and sound that are necessary? If additional structures or sets must be constructed, do we have the budget?*

When it comes to amateur productions, it would be short-sighted to recommend one method of casting over another. Much depends on the traditions and history of the group, the personalities of the director and actors, and their relationship with each other.

Several factors, however, will influence the leader's decision. For example, if the number of available actors is small, making it almost impossible even to fully cast the play, then there may be little motivation for holding auditions. On the other hand, an abundance of talent on-hand may make auditions necessary. Similarly, if casting is thrown open to the entire church membership or community at large, the director may need auditions to uncover talent of which he had not been aware.

Meanwhile the relationship between director and actors will affect the decision. Do the players trust their director to select the best individual for each part without holding auditions? Do they trust him or her to be fair and equitable in distributing the roles? Or would they prefer the opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for a role?

How the roles are filled is far less important than the question of the effectiveness of the process. Does it work? Does it contribute to a production that accomplishes its purpose for being?

During

For a discussion on organizing the rehearsal schedule, see Emphasis Nine, “The Rehearsal Schedule,” in Part Four.

For instructions to the actors once they have been handed their scripts, see Chapter One, “The Script in Hand,” in Part Three.

The Scripts

After the foregoing points have been resolved, it is time to distribute the scripts to the actors. Ideally a complete rehearsal schedule will be handed to the actor along with his or her script. If at this stage of the game you have not yet worked out a detailed rehearsal schedule, you should at least be ready with a general idea of what will be expected from the actors. It is only fair to let them know what they are signing up for: how many rehearsals, how many per week, how long the rehearsals will be, and the scheduled performance dates. If you cannot yet give them exact calendar dates, at least give them a general time frame.

While the actors are digesting their scripts, you, too, must return to that common foundation from which you will all be working: the script. Now is the time, as you prepare for the first rehearsal—the reading session—to thoroughly invest yourself in the story and characters of the play.

Your Preparation

The more you understand about each character in the play, the better equipped you will be to direct your actors. While I do not recommend that you highlight and mark up your script in the same manner recommended to those playing the individual characters (for your script will bear sufficient scratchings from blocking instructions alone), it is nevertheless important that you, as much as possible, glean material from the script and outside sources for each character in the play.

In the professional theatre and films, a director very often will exert little control over the individual actor’s interpretation of a character or scene. In fact, most professional actors spend their careers wishing for as little input as possible from the director. The actor Laurence Luckinbill once said,

I like to work things out on my own, and I do not like directors—period. But the worst kind of directors are those who come in with something all laid out for me; I can’t work with them anymore... Most really good directors trust the actors enormously...

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The flip side of the type of director Luckinbill prefers is the overbearing tyrant who molds and manipulates his ingenue into precisely his image of what she should be onstage or on film—such as Otto Preminger with his teenage discovery for *St. Joan*: Jean Seberg.

In December 1956, however, Preminger was operating on a more manipulative premise: despite herself, Jean could be made to play Joan of Arc. It sufficed to exploit her natural qualities. There would be nothing collaborative about the effort. He would provoke the desired performance. If the character was distraught, Jean could be rendered distraught. Preminger had not discovered an actress; he had engaged a puppet.

David Richards, *Played Out: The Jean Seberg Story*

Our setting, however, is decidedly *not* Broadway or Hollywood, but the local church. The director is not the brilliant but belligerent Otto Preminger. And our actors are not highly trained professionals, but homemakers, firemen, plumbers, secretaries, mail carriers, and electricians. Just average folk who love the Lord and are willing to make fools of themselves before an audience for His sake. Most do not wish to be left alone, but crave guidance from the director at every turn.

And that's you. Even more important than finely honed directing skills, more important than many years of experience, more important than bearing the hash marks of countless productions on the boards of the stage—more important than any of these is your willingness and ability to understand the meat of the play and its characters. With this preparation in hand, you are ready to guide others into bringing the play to life—to make it into something three-dimensional and meaningful for an audience starved for understandable biblical truth.

The Compromise

Along with understanding the play and its characters, the director also must take this opportunity to decide what he or she will be expecting from each character and actor. Remember, these are two different entities; especially at this early moment of the production (but always, to a certain degree), the *character* as created on the page

The foundation of the His Company way is a group of amateurs behaving in a professional manner. And at the root of that foundation is a director—quite possibly as much an amateur as those in his or her charge—being as professional as possible at every step of the production process. This professionalism begins with the selection and preparation of the script. The director has within his power the opportunity to inspire, to embolden weak spirits with a desire to meet their God-given potential. But the director also has within his power the opportunity to dishearten with lazy planning. A too-quick selection of the wrong script, followed by bad casting and poor preparation, can result in not only a bad performance, but a discouraged company of players.

So the director, with fresh script in hand, is already at a crossroad: Does he take the path of least resistance, or does he rise toward the challenge of excellence? Your decision at this point will affect the quality of the overall production from now until final curtain.

and realized on the stage is something quite separate from the *actor* playing it.

An Acceptable Union

The director, as well as the actor, begins with the character as created and defined in the script. That is the common starting point. From this foundation the director will add and mix and remove elements based on the abilities and appearance of personnel, the physical dimensions of the local stage, budgetary considerations, and the mechanical limitations of the venue (i.e., lights, sound, etc.).

For example, the character of Nathanael, in *Vacancy*, is described as “twelve years of age,” but the local director finds himself being forced to choose between an eight-year-old and an eighteen-year-old to fill the role. This means that, whichever one is cast, some lines of dialogue may have to be modified to fit the different age of the character. It will also mean that different behavior and reactions will be expected, since either of these would certainly behave differently than a twelve-year-old.

Because the director of church drama rarely can cast the play from an endless supply of talent, the character will invariably be defined more by the inherent qualities of the amateur actor than by what has been imagined by the writer and director. (How many times has a director said or thought with a heavy sigh, “Well, it’s what I have to work with.”) Whether the situation is bemoaned, or accepted as a challenge—or, better, embraced as an opportunity for growth—it is nevertheless the hard fact of Christian drama that compromises will be made. And now is the time for the director to work out what compromises, if any, will be acceptable or necessary. At this point the parts have been cast, so as the director marries each actor with his or her character, decisions must be made about what will be the acceptable result of the union.

In a parallel process, the director must decide what will he will *expect* from each actor. The direction of a play is most often a balancing act between the ideal and the real: the play as imagined in the director’s mind, and the reality of what his actors are able (or willing) to give. Now is the time to at least lay the groundwork—the parameters—of

His Company stands ready to help whenever changes to any of our scripts are necessary or desired. Don’t hesitate to contact us.

what you will expect from the company of players that will be bringing the story to life onstage. The director will, invariably, make compromises over the course of the rehearsal schedule, but now is the time to establish the initial height of the performance bar.

Drawing the Line

Finally, while the actors are taking their first look at the script and their respective characters, it is not too early for the director to anticipate special problems with which he or she will have to contend based on the cast selection. Is there a prima donna in your midst? Is there an actor with the distraction of extraordinary problems at home? Is there an actor with a history of always being late to rehearsals? What about the actress who rejects criticism of any kind, or the actor who is so insecure that he asks for your advice about *everything*? How will you as the director deal with each of these situations? How far will you compromise, and how quick will you be to make them toe the line? Anticipating these situations will smooth the inevitable moments of conflict that will arise during the coming weeks of rehearsal.



chapter three

The Reading Session



Before

Determine how you will work with the different personalities under your charge

Determine the essential definition for each character

Plan the physical setting for the rehearsal

During

Set the scene—get the actors involved in the story of the play

Balance your level of direction with the actor's interpretation

Ensure that all direction is written in the actor's scripts

After

Have the actors review at home

Determine what changes will have to be made based on what transpired at the reading session

NO DIRECTOR CAN ANTICIPATE EVERY BEND IN THE ROAD, every fallen tree that will block his way, or prepare contingencies for every uncomfortable surprise that will come his or her way. The road from script selection to closing curtain will be sometimes circuitous, sometimes maddening, and almost always, at every turn filled with surprises.

But the more time and effort you, as the director, put into preparation for each step along the way, the less the road will be strewn with the wreckage from brilliant but misguided flashes of genius, and nasty surprises that could have been foreseen. It is the director's responsibility to ensure that flashes of genius and nasty surprises occur within a well-ordered framework prepared to assimilate them.

So even at this early stage, before any actor has mounted the stage to struggle with inadequately memorized dialogue, you are to walk into the first rehearsal having done your homework: The session has been planned, possible disruptions anticipated, and contingencies considered.

In most cases, those he has cast in the play will not be strangers to the director. Their abilities, shortcomings, peccadilloes and personalities are well-known. They have worked together before, so certain assumptions can be made about how rehearsals will go—and how certain individuals should be directed for maximum harmony and success.

The Actor

Here again, the director must separate the individual actor from his or her assigned character. You will formulate creative plans and ideas for the characters that will become a part of the play, but you also will formulate creative plans for the handling of each actor that will be bringing those characters to life. There is nothing devious or underhanded about this; every executive running a meeting calculates methods of working with the individuals that sit around the table. Each one brings his own challenges and unique contributions to the whole, and the successful leader will put effort into techniques that will draw out the best from each participant.

To that end, the director should spend time before this first rehearsal considering the various personalities with which he or she will be working.

- Is there someone who possesses great talent, but who can also be a prima donna?
- Is there a good-hearted soul who tries very hard, but always seems to fall short of minimum acting abilities?
- What about the talented actor who is perennially late to rehearsals; how will this situation be handled?

Before

Early on, before the first play is ever staged, the director must decide where he or she stands on this little matter of discipline. On one level, I am ill-equipped to address the subject, since I haven't had much experience in dealing with the bad manners of prima donnas, slackers, laggards, or the chronically under-the-weather.

For, you see, in His Company we simply didn't permit it. Those who thought themselves better than everyone else, those who didn't pull their weight or who never could seem to get to rehearsal on time, those who always crawled into rehearsal "down" with one or another of their chronic maladies—well, they just never stayed long. As the leader of an independent drama group, I made it clear what was expected of each member of the company: then I held them to it.

(continued...)

- What if someone calls in sick; what will you do?

These possibilities and more should be reviewed, and options considered, before rehearsals begin. The unexpected will certainly occur, but progress is made in the cohesive work-flow of the company whenever the leader can address a problem with confidence and resolve.

Having been born and raised in the church, I am not naïve about the machinations of self-important committee members, overbearing pastors or deacons, and the heavy weight of local tradition. Indeed, it was precisely these common elements in the Body of Christ that were the motivating force behind His Company being established as an autonomous group. I know all too well how the director of any group within the church must deal with the disappointing but pervasive politics of religion.

Hence the value not only of the His Company philosophy of autonomy, but the philosophy of “serving as if you are being highly paid.” This helps establish a degree of sober professionalism lacking in most church drama groups today. If every responsibility is addressed and treated as if the person is being highly paid for their effort, then discipline is more naturally enforced. If a professional actress who is collecting a high salary for her work in a production repeatedly keeps everyone waiting while she does as she pleases, *when* she pleases, producers and directors will be loathe to hire her for the next one; if a stagehand is being paid to be at a certain place at a certain time, but he never is, then he is going to be out of a job.

(continued...)

The Character

Of the five senses used by the director, primarily only two are involved in the rehearsal process—sight and hearing—because only two will be available to the audience. The audience will not be able to touch or taste or, for the most part, smell whatever is occurring onstage. So the director employs the same senses as the audience to sculpt what will be experienced by them. And for the reading session, only one is used: hearing. In subsequent rehearsals you will be dealing with what the actors look like and are doing onstage, but right now the focus of your attention should be on *what they are saying and how they sound*.

A Heavier Responsibility

Before the reading session the director should establish the essential definition for each character in the play. Ideally the individual actor will contribute to the creation of the character, and certainly the character will pass through an evolutionary process during subsequent rehearsals. But, in the beginning, both the director and actor should have a common starting point from which to “grow” the character. So, in preparation for the reading session, the director should ask himself some fundamental questions that will help lay the foundation for each character, to ensure that it will fit into the overall scheme of the play as imagined.

Why is this so important for the director? Because in church drama there is a heavier responsibility on the director to participate in the creation of the characters onstage. In fact, there will be times when the best he or she can hope for is that an actor will successfully mimic what the director has illustrated for him. There are amateur actors who can, on their own, interpret a role and really do something with it. But they are in the minority. More often the success or failure of

a play (in dramatic terms) will be determined by the creative and instructive talents of the director—not the individual actor. The actor will very often be dependent on his or her director to feed them with ideas, imagery, mechanical “business”—even the *sound* of their character.

Because the film *The Bridges of Madison County* was made on location, where we live, the local press was daily filled with snippets of news and interviews from the production. One story in particular illustrated the difference between a professional production and the average church drama. Clint Eastwood (director, producer, and male lead) told the story of his first meeting on the set with Meryl Streep, the actress playing the female lead. Even though the entire project was his, it was obvious he exerted little control over how his leading lady would portray her character when he asked her, “You aren’t going to do one of those accents, are you?” Streep is famous for her authentic dialects, demonstrated in breathtaking fashion in one of her finest roles as Sophie, the Polish concentration camp survivor, in the film version of William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*. In *Bridges*, Eastwood wanted a more Midwestern sound to the female lead, but Streep had other ideas, and in the final release, her character did, indeed, have “one of those accents.”

Beginning with What You Have

Nothing could be more different from the average, homegrown church drama, where most of the cast is utterly dependent on the director to feed them with suggestions and ideas. In fact, the director can become frustrated by those actors who wish only to blindly mimic what he demonstrates for them. Because of this, the groundwork the director lays early on for the characters in the play is important—not only to the success of the production, but to the confidence-level of the actors.

With this in mind, let’s consider, as an example, the principal character in *Vacancy*: Simon, the innkeeper. The script offers the following description:

Simon, the innkeeper, is the disturbing picture of today’s upwardly mobile, self-absorbed, Type A individual. While he does love his family, his behav-

(continued from previous page)

Attitude is everything.

The condition of the heart is everything.

Unexpected surprises will always occur. An otherwise dependable soul will hit a bad stretch; an otherwise healthy individual will pass through a time of being only one step away from their Maker. The attentive leader will know for whom these periods are an anomaly—or a way of life. In His Company, those for whom bad manners were a way of life were simply not permitted to join.

ior rarely shows it. His true passion is for the game and challenge of making profit, and he is mostly blind to his failings. In spite of these, Simon is lovably obnoxious; he is a good man misguided.

When you cast the role of Simon, you probably chose someone who could at least approximate, in a general way, the character as described in the script. But now it is time to turn that around somewhat, and consider the qualities of the actor selected. By that I mean, *work with what you have, not what you wish you had*. The process of creating a character for the stage is the art of marrying the physical actor to the imaginary character on the printed page. There is give and take from both directions—especially when the stage is a church platform, rather than the boards of Broadway. Before you try to superimpose your concept of Simon on your actor, ask yourself such things as,

- Will the actor playing Simon be really acting, or is he only capable of giving a variation on himself?
- Based on experience, how much work will the actor be willing to put into becoming something he is not?
- How deeply will he go into the role? Will he be willing to dig deeply into the character, taking part in the character's creation, or will he only be willing to skim the surface? Worse, will he only be willing to follow your orders where it comes to portraying the character?
- How closely does the actor physically resemble your idea of the character? For example, will Simon have a beard? Can the actor grow one, or will you need to create one for him?

With the answers to these points and others in hand, you are now better equipped—because they will affect the amount of work you will be facing as the director—to consider what you will do with the character Simon.

Defining the Character

The experienced director will have developed his or her own tech-

For more on the actor and his character, see the following chapters in Part Four:

"The Character"

"Being Something One is Not"

"The Adaptable Actor"

Part 2: A Director's Guide

niques for making decisions about the characters in a play, and this book is not at all meant to propose a strict doctrine for this or any other responsibility of the director. The guiding principle is always *whatever works for you*. But the inexperienced director might benefit from considering the following method.

Begin the process by reading through the script again—perhaps with a tablet nearby for jotting down notes. As you read, pay close attention to what the script says about the character—both in the included stage directions and the dialogue. Be liberal with your notes; you can always change your mind later. Jot down any character traits that come to mind. For example, the first line out of Simon's mouth betrays his **impatient** personality. Further down he reveals a **conspiratorial** bent and, certainly, **a desire to make more money**. In the same scene (and later) he makes it clear that he **hates the Romans**. But his wife Joanna's line—"You worry me, Simon. I've never seen you like this."—gives us a clue that at least some of his more negative qualities may be an aberration based on the circumstances of the Roman census that have overwhelmed their town. Simon, like most people, also seems to be rather **blind to his own faults**, and in his first conversation with Eliezer we can see that he has **drifted away from his Jewish faith**, and has even built-up some **bitter resentment toward God**.

Very often, however, a play will reveal in earlier scenes only the more obvious "high points" of a character's personality. This mirrors real life; think of a typical dating situation: During the early dates we try to reveal our best qualities; only later, as we spend more time with the person, do we let down our guard and show more of our real self. A play can be written in much the same way, with early scenes describing a character with broad strokes, reserving the subtleties for later.

This is what happens with Simon—but in an opposite way. The earlier scenes reveal some of his worst qualities, but later we see that though he can be **thickheaded**, he is not made of stone, and, deep down, he still has **a heart for God**.

Combining the Two

The next step would be to mentally overlay what you know about the

Simon's Character Traits

impatient
conspiratorial
a desire to make more money
hates the Romans
some negative qualities are new
blind to his own faults
drifted away from the Jewish faith
resentment toward God
thickheaded
still has a heart for God

actor playing the role with what you have just learned about the *character* he will be playing. Begin with what you have, then add to it what you wish to attain. This will give you some idea of two things: Is your actor capable, and, if so, how much work will it take to get him there? Follow this same process for each character/actor in the play.

Designing the Session

The reading session should take place in a comfortable, neutral location. It should be conducted around a table—not in easy chairs or pews, or even on stage. It should, specifically, be conducted in a place utterly non-dramatic, where actors will be less inclined to stand or move around, or concern themselves with anything more than the reading of the script.

Ideally, the reading session should be held in a nondescript, windowless room, such as a Sunday School or conference room, where distractions can be minimized. The actors and director should sit around a table, so it will be easy for them to see and speak with each other, and read from and make notes in their scripts. None of these stipulations are accidental, or based solely on tradition, but serve a useful and necessary role in getting the most out of the rehearsal time.

Minimizing Distractions

The nondescript, windowless room minimizes distractions. The actor should be concentrating on the script and his character, not studying an interesting picture on the wall, or gazing out the window at the lovely, sunny day he is missing. At this early, critical rehearsal, the director should make every effort to guide the actor into the story of the play, and hold his attention there for the duration.



Sitting around a table positions the actors where they can see and speak to each other—and where the director can easily see and hear all of them. It forms them, from the very beginning, into a tight community working toward a common goal. The table, in a practical sense, offers them a surface on which to rest their script and easily make notes in its pages. And the physical attitude of sitting in a chair at a table encourages participation. Just as on stage, you want the actors to

lean into their roles, rather than to hang back from them. Observe the level of participation of someone sunk back into the comforts of an upholstered easy chair, then compare it to the one seated upright, leaning over a table. There will be plenty of unforeseen distractions and lethargic participants with which the director will be forced to contend; here is one method of moving the proceedings into a healthy direction from the start.

When notifying the cast of the time and place for the reading session, instruct them to bring one or two pencils for making notes—then bring a handful and place them in the center of the table for those who will, inevitably, forget. And have first-timers read the corresponding chapter in “The Actor’s Guide” portion of this book (Part Three, Chapter Two: “The Reading Session”) for advice on the preparations they should make before and during the rehearsal.

This first public rehearsal, like all the ones that will follow, begins with prayer. Commit this rehearsal—and the production as a whole—into the hands of the One for whom it is being held. Without preaching, make sure that everyone in the cast understands the reasons and motivation behind the work in which you are about to embark. Now is the time to point everyone in the same direction.

Setting the Scene

One of the most difficult things to share is a vision. What is meaningful, moving, and fully developed to the individual will, in the telling, often come off sounding trite and inconsequential. The director has just spent an extended period living with this new play and its characters; for him the story has become something far greater than words on a page. And now he has been joined by a collection of souls for which the play *is* just words on a page. At this juncture the director should do two things: First, do his very best to share his ideas and vision of the play and, second, realize that it will take the actors and crew quite some time to see what he sees. It is not yet *their* vision—and it may not be for some time. They may have to be closer to the finished product before they can see what you see already.

We can't forget that within the sphere of the stage, ours is a special calling. For we do what we do to serve the Lord—not man. This means that our relationship with each other—director to actors, actor to other actors—is special as well. We are all caught up in the mystical union we have with each other through the blood of Christ.

During

So, after prayer, the next thing on the agenda is to describe the play for the actors. Fill in for them whatever is not on the printed page, but envisioned by you as part of the final production. Share with them, as much as possible, the look and sound and textures of what will be the ultimate performance. Tell them what their costumes will be like, how the sets (if any) will be designed, what their hair and makeup will look like—everything you have planned for the production that is not printed in their scripts. Enthusiastically get them *involved* in the play, and what it will accomplish. Share with them what you see as the message of the play—what you hope the play will leave in the minds and hearts of the audience members. Give your actors a *reason* for being a part of the production.

And, at the same time, don't be surprised if all you get in return are blank stares. Don't worry; most will come around in time.

A Proper Balance

How much or how little, or when and how you advise each actor about the interpretation of their character will be influenced by too many variables to set any methodical guidelines. Your personality and working methods; the individual personalities of the actors, as well as the personality of the group as a whole; the setting of the rehearsal; the type, length, and nature of the play—all of these will affect how you direct the actors during the reading of the script.

The key, however, is to strike a proper balance between your direction and the actor's interpretation. Indeed, this is the challenge for the director in all rehearsals: how to shape the performance of the individual so as to blend it into the performance of the whole—all the while encouraging the initiative and imagination of the actors. This essential balance will be established, over time, as you and your actors work together.

The Reading

Before the group begins reading through the play, give instructions to everyone for how they should record your directions in their script—following the guidelines in Chapter Two, “The Reading Session,” in Part Three.

Part 2: A Director’s Guide

Once you have set the scene of the play, and after you have discussed the general descriptions of each character for the actors, it is time to read through the script. While each actor concentrates on his or her lines, you read the stage directions that are supplied between the lines, as in the following excerpt.

225 **Simon**
(once again, without rejoinder) → Not read aloud, but, after his preparation, the actor delivers his line based on this direction.

Where is that boy?

Joanna

Uh huh.

230 Enter their son Nathanael, with their neighbor, Eliezer. Nathanael is carrying a basket of bread. → Stage direction read aloud by director.

Eliezer
(generously)

I had to return with Nathanael, to compliment his father on his son’s bargaining skills. Quite amazing in one so young.

235 *(with a twinkle)* → Silent stage direction.

I wonder where he learned them.

Nathanael hands the basket of bread to his mother, but speaks to his father. → Stage direction read aloud by director.

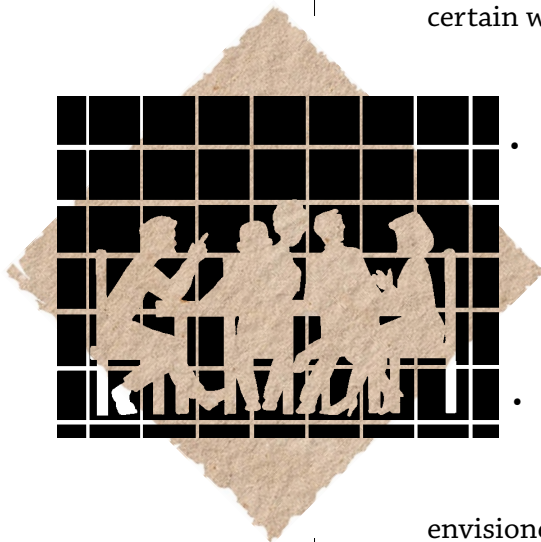
Nathanael
(proudly)

240 I did good, papa.

Again, there are few hard and fast rules, but here are some suggestions for a profitable rehearsal:

- Try not to interrupt an actor in mid-line. Wait until he or she has finished a line before interjecting any comments or direction.
- When appropriate, be sure to include positive reinforcement. It will be easy for some of the actors to feel like they aren’t doing anything right. Be sure to tell them when they are.
- Give directions quietly, yet firmly. Try to avoid a strident tone to your voice that could be interpreted as criticism. Good direction is not so much criticism, but *instruction*.

- Be ready (and don't be afraid) to consider the fresh ideas brought by the actor for his or her role. Encourage individual initiative by considering that the actor's interpretation may just be an improvement over yours. The goal is to work with actors who take an active role in the success of the play; this will not happen if their ideas are never respected.
- Make sure that the directions given are *actually written in the actor's script*. Be assured: anything that is not written down will be quickly forgotten.
- Be prepared to give a "why" for every "what." The director should always be ready to explain *why* he wants something done a certain way. Actors will soon lose confidence in a director who seems to be making frivolous decisions on a whim.



- Make sure that everyone in the cast remains attentive throughout the rehearsal. Even if an actor hasn't any lines in a particular scene, you still want them to understand the play as a whole. When not speaking, they should be listening.
- Don't let any of the actors veer off into other issues. The purpose of the rehearsal is for the actors to come away with a clear understanding of their characters, as envisioned by the director, and for the director to hear how the actors are interpreting their roles. The purpose of the rehearsal is not to air grievances about who got what part, to express a general dissatisfaction with the play, or to raise arguments over doctrinal interpretation. These side issues should be addressed with the offended (and offending) party on an individual, private basis. Put simply, arguments should never be a part of any rehearsal.
- If the length of the play permits, read through it again with fewer interruptions from the director, giving the actors a chance to put into practice the directions they have been given.

Before dismissing everyone from the reading session, remind them

that most rehearsing is done at home. Remind them that the public, called rehearsals are only the opportunity for them to add into the whole the individual work they have done on their own. Between now and the blocking rehearsal they are to review—ideally on a daily basis—the work just accomplished at the reading session. Now is the time for them to begin fleshing out their characters, building on the direction they have just been given.

Homework

You, too, have new information that must be processed. The reading session will have brought to your attention unanticipated problem areas that will now need to be addressed. Perhaps the rehearsal gave evidence that one or more actors will not be capable of portraying a character in the way you had planned. Perhaps you see personality conflicts developing between one or more actors—or between you and one of the actors. Perhaps you saw evidence of someone having a bad attitude about the production. Then again, perhaps you were shown that the talents of the actors exceeded expectations, and that you will now be able to do more with the play than you had originally thought.

Whether good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, changes will probably need to be made to your plans, and should be addressed right away. Based on your experiences during the reading session, you will want to give some thought to how you will direct these people in subsequent rehearsals, how you will handle their different personalities and different levels of talent and experience.

After

Refer the actors to Emphasis Three, "Rehearsing at Home," in Part Four.

chapter four



Blocking: Philosophy & Method

HOWEVER YOU, AS THE DIRECTOR, CHOOSE TO THINK OF THE appearance or texture of the play of which you are in charge, you *must* see it as a cohesive whole.

In the classic theatre configuration, the *proscenium* is the vertical plane defined by the stage arch and curtain. Think of it as the mystical “fourth wall” of the stage, that imaginary side of every scene supplied by the audience’s perspective. In the typical church, the stage is often replaced by a more open *platform*, without arch or curtain, so the *proscenium* becomes even more imaginary, less defined. The “fourth wall” must then be defined by the director as he or she imagines the setting for the play.

It is within the *proscenium* that the action of the play takes place. In practical terms, the audience will see this action as taking place

within two dimensions: vertically and horizontally. They will not give much thought to the third dimension with which the director will work: depth. All three dimensions, however, must be considered as the director begins the process of blocking the action for the play.

The best, first rule is that the director never stray far from the concept of the *cohesive whole*. I recall with squirming discomfort being in the audience at a homegrown college play in which my niece had a role. Not only was the writing sophomoric and the acting abysmal (by everyone but my niece, of course), but the blocking was a swirling, shapeless mess. Characters in the drawing-room drama floated about without purpose, and otherwise awkwardly inhabited the stage with an ungainly presence. It was too painful to witness.

Blocking a scene using the concept of the cohesive whole means that the director can squint at it from the back of the room and

- the composition will be *pleasing to the eye*;
- bodies and shapes will move about the stage with *purpose*, with *no wasted movement*;
- at times the blocking will seem as *fluid* as choreography;
- at other times it will appear *sharp*, and *dynamic*;
- at *all* times there will be a *balance* to the composition.

Everything that happens on stage must make sense. This means that along with the dialogue and characters, every movement contributes to, rather than detracts from, the story and purpose of the play. At my niece's play I was so distracted by the mushy characters and dialogue, and the seemingly pointless blocking, that I had no idea what the point of the play was! With a tightening up of the characters and blocking, even a badly-written play may have a reason for being.

Step back and squint. Move to the back of the sanctuary or auditorium in which the play will be performed, face the stage area—and squint. Notice how the act of squinting veils the overall vision, but focuses the gaze on the primary shapes. Later on in the rehearsal process, when you need to check the blocking and movement of your actors on stage, use this technique to observe that movement without being distracted by the smaller details that are filtered out by squinting. This is one way to critically examine the movement of the play as a cohesive whole, rather than as a conglomeration of disjointed parts.

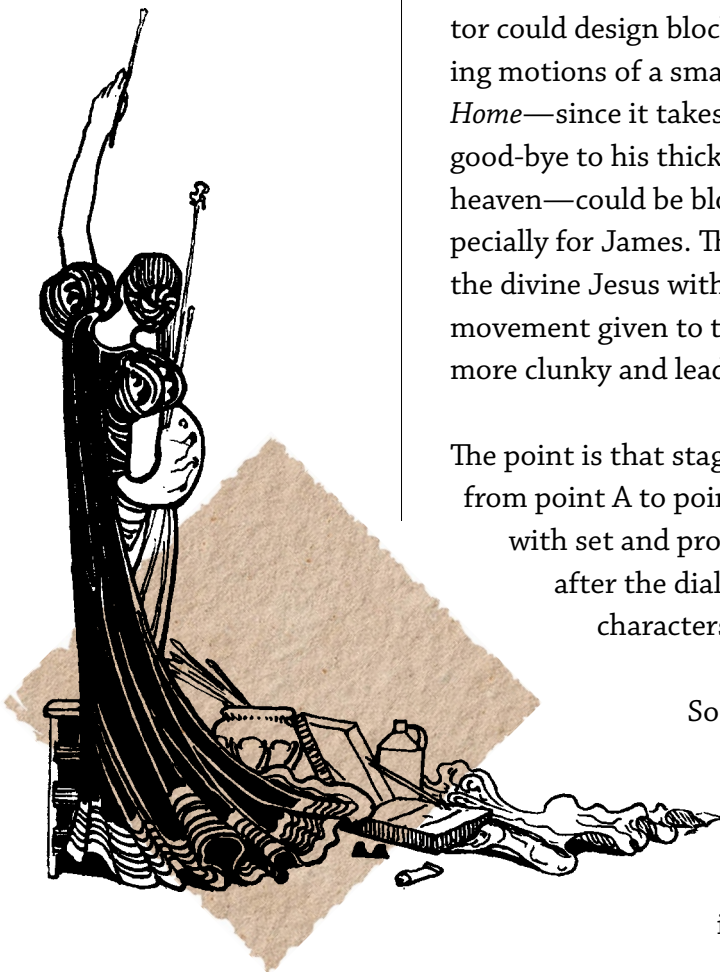
Painting the Canvas

Establish for yourself a convenient and comfortable metaphor that you can use for thinking of the overall composition of the play on stage. For example, you might think of the proscenium as a *canvas*—a painting in which you will carefully draw each character in dynamic interaction with the other characters in each scene. You might think of it more as choreography, with each character as a dancer moving about in fluid grace. You might think of it in more mechanical, construction-like terms, with each character, prop, and set piece becoming a more static component of the constructed whole. In truth, different productions will require different metaphors. Some plays will require a more fluid, artistic blocking, while others will require something more substantial—even heavy.

The one-act *An Exchange of Affections* is an example of a play that might benefit from a more fluid, aesthetic blocking. Since all of the action is understated and takes place on a ship, the creative director could design blocking that works in concert with the slow rolling motions of a small ship at sea. By contrast, the sketch *Going Home*—since it takes place in a carpenter's shop, with Jesus saying good-bye to his thick-headed brother, James, before returning to heaven—could be blocked in heavier, even awkward movements—especially for James. This sketch affords an opportunity to contrast the divine Jesus with the more earth-bound James, with more fluid movement given to the former, while the latter is assigned movement more clunky and leaden.

The point is that stage blocking is more than just moving a character from point A to point B. Blocking is what the director uses (along with set and properties) to paint the canvas of the play. It is how, after the dialogue, relationships and tensions between the characters are telegraphed to the audience.

So how could we approach the blocking for the Christmas play *Vacancy*? Because it is written to use three separate areas—for the Leader, the Visitors, and the Bethlehem scene—it would seem to be a good candidate for implementing more than one type of blocking. The Leader



is in contemporary dress and working alone, addressing the audience. His or her movements will surely be different from those of the Visitors—two unearthly beings who exist outside of time—and the characters in the Bethlehem scene, who, though ancient from our perspective, portray a more typical domestic scene.

The Leader

In *Vacancy*, the Leader is more than a narrator. While it is true that he addresses the audience and contributes to setting up the story line, he is at the same time a *character* representing modern man. As such, his blocking should be designed so as to express an immediate bond with those in the audience. He should not be static, sitting on a stool or standing before a stationary microphone, but be free to move about in his allocated space. At the same time, however, there is no reason for him to be roaming about the stage willy-nilly. Too little movement makes him seem wooden; too much movement becomes an unnecessary distraction from what he is saying. With an experienced actor, the director could define loose parameters for this role, then let the actor determine his own blocking—to be approved by the director. Note that I am not suggesting that the actor be permitted to ad lib, changing what he does at every rehearsal and performance, but to, early on, set his own blocking, then stick with it.

Blocking involves more than just the feet, and as a character who is on stage throughout the entire production, the Leader, when not speaking, must have a physical attitude of listening to everything being said by the others. It is important that he—just like a worship leader in the Sunday morning service—physically telegraph to the audience his interest and involvement. So the blocking for the Leader will include the attitude of his body—the tilt of the head, the linear angle of his torso—even when he is doing nothing but sitting in the shadows listening to the dialogue of others. If he is being seen by the audience, even in low light, he must be in character, and showing involvement (albeit, without distracting from the other action).

The Visitors

Blocking not only is more than action, more than movement of the feet, more than an interested tilt of the head, but blocking can sometimes be *inaction*. One way for the director to present the two myste-

I recall with embarrassment one of our early productions which consisted of a collection of sketches and one-acts introduced by various narrators from within the company. Because I was directing most of the individual plays, along with being in one or more, I didn't pay sufficient attention to what my narrators were doing on stage. Because I was busy with other details of the production, and because I considered them all to be experienced, I didn't "direct" the brief narration segments, but left them to block their movements on their own.

The narrators were in modern dress, and I later learned that one of the women unnecessarily moved about the stage during her narration—almost *strutting* in her high heels—thoroughly distracting from what she was saying. If I had done my job, I would have noticed this, and had her remain more stationary for her brief piece, thus being less of a distraction to her reason for being.

rious Visitors is not to have them move at all. And that, too, is blocking.

In the original production of *There's Room in My Heart* (the musical from which *Vacancy* was extracted), the two Visitors were presented as disembodied heads, one on either side of the stage. This meant that they had no physical interaction with each other, and, since everything but their heads was draped in black and unlit, their blocking included no physical movement below the neck. Everything in their roles was accomplished solely by the voice and the face.

But, of course, the director is not bound by this interpretation of the script. The two Visitors could be put together in one place, so there could be physical interaction between them. They also could be costumed differently, freeing up their arms and legs. No matter how they are staged and blocked, however, there should be a demonstrable difference between how they move and speak, and how the Leader and those in the Bethlehem scene move and speak. The Visitors are meant to be *different*—not only in *what* they say, but *how* they say it, and how they move when they are being seen by the audience.

The Bethlehem Scene

With the Bethlehem inn scene we have an opportunity for more traditional blocking. Here there are multiple characters moving about set pieces and props, interacting with each other as do people in a normal domestic setting. Here the blocking not only should have fluid composition, but it should also *make sense*. These are real people going about their very real daily lives. The audience should immediately see in them and their movements a reflection of the familiar. A more specific discussion of the blocking for the Bethlehem scenes is in the next chapter.

Blocking Conventions

Over time the experienced director will have established for himself a personalized, possibly unique form of notation in the script. Form is not nearly so important as *function*: whatever form is used must be legible, consistent, and easily interpreted. Until that personalized form naturally evolves, however, it is a good idea to begin with the

basics. The following terms and abbreviations are accepted conventions.

There are a number of ways that the director must mentally transpose information to perform his or her job, and this transposition begins with blocking. All blocking instructions are notated and assigned from the *actor's* perspective; the director (who is assumed to be positioned at the *audience's* perspective) must reverse the instructions from side to side. Take, for example, the traditional assignments for the areas of the performing stage.

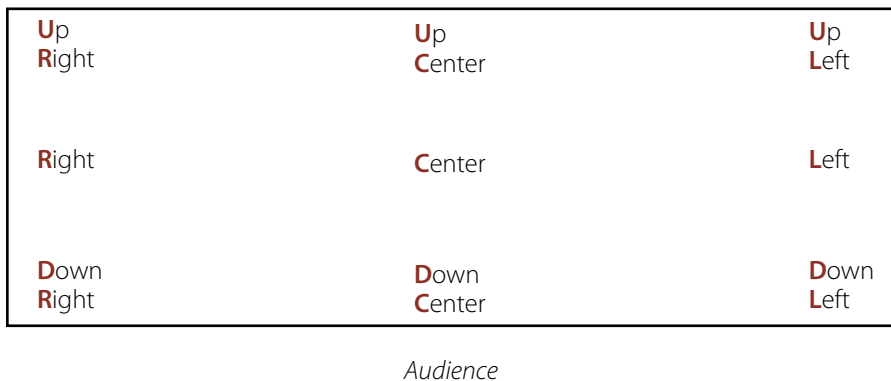


Figure 2.1 — Established blocking conventions to designate areas of the stage (from the director's perspective).

“Up Stage” and “Down Stage” should present no problems for the new director, but it may require some practice and concentration before he is comfortable with the fact that “Stage Right” is on his left, and “Stage Left” is on his right. At the same time, all designations are relative, and may not (in fact often do not) refer to the entire area within the proscenium. If, for example, your Easter production is a musical, with a large choir occupying most of the church platform, and the drama set positioned to one side, a “stage right” direction to Peter does not mean for him to traipse on over to the far side of the soprano section. It means, rather, for him to move to the right-hand side of the designated drama area.

Shorthand Notations

The following are conventional abbreviations used in notating blocking instructions in the script. It will be to your advantage to learn them, and teach them to your inexperienced actors.

Areas of the Stage

C	Center (stage)
UC	Up Center
DC	Down Center
L	Left
UL	Up Left
DL	Down Left
R	Right
UR	Up Right
DR	Down Right

Movement

TL	Turn Left
TR	Turn Right
Out	Turn out to face the audience
Back	Turn back away from audience
1/4	One-quarter turn of body or head
1/2	Profile
PRO	Profile
3/4	Three-quarter turn of body or head
FF	Full front (toward audience)
FB	Full Back (away from audience)
SL	Step Left
SR	Step Right
xSL	Number of Steps Left
xSR	Number of Steps Right
Step	Take one step
X	Cross (move to another area of the stage)
XL	Cross Left
XR	Cross Right
XD	Cross Down
XU	Cross Up
X to _	Cross to a character or set piece
CX	Counter Cross (movement of one character in opposition to, or at the same time as, that of another)

chapter five



Blocking the Play

BEFORE WORKING OUT THE BLOCKING FOR THE ACTORS, THE director should have a pretty good idea of what his or her set—if any—will be. Likewise (but to a lesser degree), before blocking, there should be some idea of which props will be in use, as well as a general idea of wardrobe. All of these will affect how and where the actors move while on stage.

The set for the Bethlehem scene of *Vacancy* can be as elaborate as a detailed interior of the inn, complete with three walls, windows and door, and even the suggestion of an upstairs—or it can be as understated as a simple arrangement of a rude table with chair or stool. Everything else can be suggested by dialogue and action. Indeed, this is one reason for deciding on the set before blocking the action; an actor's blocking for the line, "Is there a full moon tonight?" may be different depending on whether there is an actual window through

which he can gaze, or he must suggest its existence to the audience by his physical attitude.

For the purposes of this discussion, we will use a simple set for *Vacancy*, as shown in the accompanying drawing.

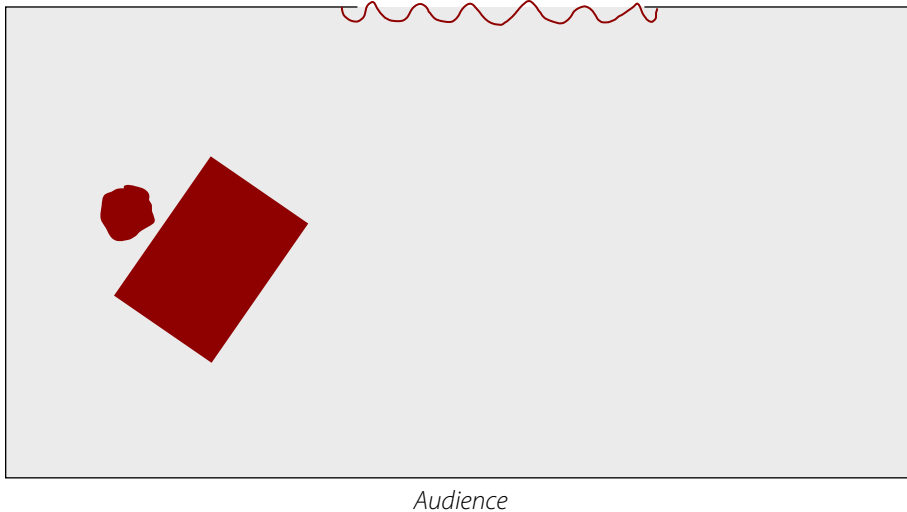


Figure 2.2 — Basic diagram for Bethlehem set in *Vacancy*.

A simple wooden table is positioned stage right, with a stool nearby. The actors will enter and exit through a curtain directly up stage. Not only is this set easy and inexpensive to create, it has the added benefit of being versatile and portable. By using few set pieces and no physical walls, it can be used in a variety of venues with little adaptation required. At the same time, however, the sparse set places greater responsibility on the actors to be thoroughly convincing in their performance. It will be up to them to be so utterly believable that the members of the audience will “see” in their minds the walls, and doors, and windows.

Marking Your Script

So let's get to it. After sketching out the less detailed blocking for the Leader and two Visitors, you turn to page nine in the script, to begin blocking the Bethlehem scene.

For the remainder of this chapter you will want to have open a copy of the *Vacancy* script. Download the script at our web site, if you do not already have it.

You have decided to portray the character Simon as a typical “type-A” personality—always on the go, the gears of his mind always turning, always scheming. This will be especially emphasized in the first scene, and will be in contrast with Simon’s more subdued behavior in later scenes. In a similar fashion, as the play opens Simon’s wife, Joanna, will be more cooperative with her frenzied husband, in contrast to her greater independence from him later on. And even though only her second line seems to be associated more with the latter attitude, in just the first few seconds after their entrance the blocking for both characters can establish these initial character traits.

Both characters enter together, with Simon in the lead and Joanna trailing close behind. They seem to explode into the room: Simon is agitated, even frenetic, and Joanna is close at his heels, her pace showing that she is trying to keep up. Simon’s body language expresses high energy and impatience, while Joanna’s is that of an agreeable servant trying to please. To succinctly note all of this in your script—not only for your reference, but to instruct the actors at the blocking rehearsal—you make the following notations in your script (*always in pencil!*):

The blocking instructions that follow are also shown, on samples of the actual script pages, later in this chapter.

near “Enter Simon,” write	UC
and	<i>frenetic, impatient</i>
and	<i>XDL</i>

all of which means you want Simon to enter from the one entrance that is located to the rear of the stage, and with brisk, impatient moves go immediately toward the lower, left-hand corner of the stage, near the audience. Then you add blocking for his first line:

near “Where is that boy?” write	<i>immediately</i>
near “I sent him...”	<i>looking around, out</i>

which means that as soon as Simon enters you want him to deliver his first line while crossing to down left, then continue looking around for his errant son—mostly out toward the audience—as he delivers the second sentence. For Joanna you make the following notations:

near "Enter his wife..."

near her line "Should I go..."

close, keeping pace (skip)

C (behind, cheat right)

Skipping

So what do these cryptic notations mean? Earlier I mentioned that a lot can be telegraphed to the audience about a character in only a few seconds. In literally the blink of an eye the audience can, in the body language of a character, come to believe they know what kind of a person the character really is. In church drama we seldom have the luxury of taking two or three hours to establish the personal history of characters, or the setting in which they live and move. We must speak in shorthand, telling the audience as much as we possibly can in an abbreviated span of time. One way to do this is with body language.

In Joanna's blocking instructions, "close" and "keeping pace" are self-explanatory; they mean that she should enter with Simon and keep pace with him, remaining close behind. But what does "(skip)" mean? That is my personal shorthand for a small bit of business that will reveal—in the blink of an eye—an important character trait of Joanna's. If you are on the street, and you see one person following closely behind another, head down, intent on keeping up with the first person, then you see the person behind do a little skip, to literally keep his footfalls in sync with the first—assuming you're not watching the close order drill of a military unit, what does that tell you about the second person? Immediately this tells you that the second person is in a position of subservience to the first. The lead person is setting the pace, and the second person not only wishes to keep up, but to actually *mimic* the actions of the first.

We don't have time, on stage, to go into a detailed history of Simon and Joanna's married life, but this one little bit of business will tell the audience quite a lot about their relationship.

Cheating

Then the instructions for Joanna continue, telling her to stop at center stage (while Simon continues to down left) to deliver her line—emphasizing the separation between the two characters with the added instruction "behind"—again, shorthand for "to Simon's

The term, “cheat” can also be used as a synonym for “open up.” This refers to the practice of an actor angling his or her body to “open up” a moment more to the audience. The typical application would be to a dialogue between two people. In real life, they would stand facing each other directly—in profile to the audience. But so as to include the audience more in the exchange, the one actor will angle his body slightly out toward the audience, and the other actor will angle her body in the same manner. The blocking shorthand designation would then be $\frac{1}{4} L$ for one, and $\frac{1}{4} R$ for the other, but the shorthand verbal instruction from the director could very well be “cheat it out” to both actors. Mind you, it is very important that this refer only to the body; two people having an exchange on stage must still *look* at each other. The gaze cannot be cheated. The audience will know—and will feel “cheated.”

back.” But what does “cheat right” mean? Step back for a moment and look at our stage: From the audience’s (and director’s) perspective, the two have just entered; Simon has shot down to the lower right-hand corner of the stage, while Joanna has stopped center. I think there is just a small amount of imbalance with this; if I were to step to the back of the auditorium and squint, the stage would be just a little heavy on the right-hand (stage left) side. But I have reasons not to send Joanna down to the stage right corner. Something else will be happening there—and, besides, I don’t want *perfect* balance to the stage, which could look overly mechanical. So, as the director, I would “cheat” Joanna just a bit to her right, to help balance the stage. I still want her, technically, center stage, but maybe edge her a bit closer to the table, and turn her a little toward the right. This small adjustment will give me the balance I am looking for.

The counter-cross

Remember, we want a lot of movement in this early scene, to stand in contrast to later scenes that will be more subdued and thoughtful. Here we want to communicate the bustling activity that has overtaken the household because of the census. So right away, we get Simon moving again:

draw a line to “Get back upstairs...”

and write
and

***XR below table
out (?)***

which means that he is to say “No time! No time!” without moving from his spot, but on the next word he is to turn and move to his right, to a spot just below the table. Sitting here at my desk, I *think* I want him to deliver that line out to the audience, but that may seem too much like he is trying to ignore—even demean—his wife, which isn’t the impression I want to leave with the audience. So I will include the “out” direction now, but seeing it in-person at the blocking rehearsal, I may change the blocking to have him deliver the line more to Joanna as he crosses right. (This is why we always mark our scripts in pencil.)

Now, if you have attended plays, or watched television or films at all, you have seen a common blocking device used countless times. Em-

ployed well, you probably never noticed it, but it is a valuable device for choreographing movement for the stage. The *counter-cross* is how we balance the composition of a scene while injecting the tension of movement. It can also be used to simply prevent one actor from obstructing another. In this scene we will use the device to help balance the scene, and to add some strength to Joanna's next line.

near "But what difference..." **CX DL**
and **Out**
draw a line to "If the room's..."
and write **to S**

A *cross* ("X") simply means for an actor to move from one point on the stage to another; a *counter-cross* (shown here by the abbreviation CX) means that the actor should move *at the same time as another actor*—to "counter" that actor's movement. These blocking instructions for Joanna mean that as Simon moves from down left to down right, Joanna moves from center to down left, delivering her line either as she moves or when she gets to her down left position—depending on the timing of Simon's line. Her line, "But what difference does it make?" should be delivered out to the audience, probably with incredulity or confusion. She then turns to Simon to deliver the next line.

Note that the printed stage direction for Simon's next line is "taking her quickly down stage; secretly." But both actors are already as down-stage as they can get. Now what? There is no foul; a director's blocking always takes precedence over any suggestions (for that is all they are) printed in the script. But this printed stage direction plants an idea that might improve the previous blocking. One small change in Joanna's blocking will set up Simon's line better—and will add more tension to the scene. So you go back up to Joanna's last instructions where you have noted

you add **to S**
 XC

Please note that even though, physically, these two directions seem redundant, actually the first refers to *how* and *where* the actor delivers her line, and the second refers to *when* and *where* she moves on

Don't be intimidated by this meticulous examination of such a small segment of the script. What is here being put into words and sentences and paragraphs represents—in the practical reality of the reasonably experienced director—fleeting thought and quick notation. For the purpose of instruction we are dissecting the minutia of the blocking process. In practice, once it is understood, reading this text takes far longer than the actual process it describes.

When a blocking move takes a character directly to another character in the scene, it is often helpful to specify the *character* as the destination, rather than a less-specific location on stage. So, even though Joanna is actually center, which would make Simon's move **XC**, it is both easier for the actor, and makes a subtle distinction in the character's motivation, for the direction to be toward the character rather than toward a geographic area. This has the added advantage that if, for some reason, the actor playing Joanna is not where she is supposed to be, or the blocking for the scene has been changed, the actor playing Simon will still, automatically, cross toward her.

stage. "To" is often used in a direction telling the actor to whom a line should be delivered, while "cross" (X) refers to moving the body. But now it is time for Simon to react:

near "Sssshh..." write	XJ
and	urgently to J
draw a line to "We're making..."	
and write	out

which means that even before Joanna has set the period at the end of her line, Simon should be reacting. As he quickly moves toward her, he is audibly shushing her, and delivers the next sentence in his line to Joanna, but the last sentence out toward the audience.

The Script Page

Here is how your script might look after you have added the preceding blocking instructions.

Scene Two

Lights up on drama set.

UC Enter Simon, an Innkeeper of Bethlehem. He has been frantically scurrying about for days because of the Roman Census. While he continues his grumbling about the hated Romans, he has no complaints about the money he has been raking in from their Census. **XDL** *frenetic, impatient*

Enter his wife, Joanna, right behind him. *close, keeping pace (skip)*

Simon *immediately*
Where is that boy? I sent him an hour ago. *looking around, out*

165 **Joanna** *C (behind, cheat right)*
Should I go look for him?

Simon *XR below table* *out (?)*
No time! No time! Get back upstairs and see if anyone is ready to leave.

170 **Joanna** *CX DL* *out* *XC*
But what difference does it make? If the room's occupied, why look for another? *to S*

Simon *XJ* *urgently to J* *(taking her quickly down stage; secretly)*
Sssshh...! Each time one leaves I raise the rate! We're making a killing off
175 this census. *out*

Rush Hour Traffic

The foregoing should give you a good start on blocking a scene between two people: Simon and Joanna. Let's now skip to a scene that includes more people on stage. With only two actors on stage, the movements and flow of the scene are easier, and can often be retained in the head. When more actors are brought into the scene, however, the director may wish to sketch out the blocking on paper before notating the script.

On page eleven of the *Vacancy* script their neighbor, Eliezer, enters with Simon and Joanna's son, Nathanael. Eliezer's wife is the local baker, and Nathanael had been sent to obtain the day's supply of bread. They have come back to the inn together. Let's pick up the blocking from the middle of the page. Simon is seated behind the table, right, facing out (down stage) or right. Joanna, on her line "Uh huh," has just crossed left, cheating her position just a little bit up. This has opened up center stage, ready for Eliezer and Nathanael's entrance.

In preparation for marking the script for blocking, you have worked out the traffic patterns by making the following rough sketch. Note how script line numbers have been used to associate the various moves with the lines of dialogue. (The letters represent characters, not blocking instructions.)

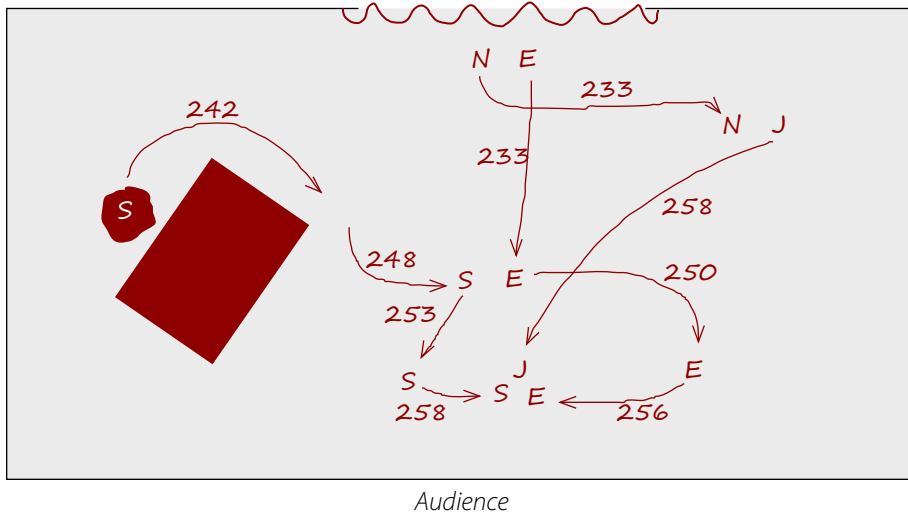


Figure 2.3 — Preliminary rough sketch of character movement in scene using line numbers.

Even if she is facing completely away from center, even slightly up left (toward the corner of the stage), Joanna will turn toward her right. Only on rare occasions, for a specific reason, would a character turn up stage. The rule is that the character turn *through* the scene—which normally means downstage. This means that if Joanna were literally facing the up left corner of the stage when Eliezer enters, even though turning to her left may be the shortest route, she should turn to her right, swiveling around to greet him near up center stage.

Note Nathanael's position next to Joanna in the sketch of this scene. Note how he has been positioned approximately even with her.

When a character crosses to another, and has the next line directed to that character, block them slightly up stage of the other character so that they remain facing the audience as they deliver their line. If, in that situation, Nathanael were down stage of Joanna, he would have his back to the audience.

Here, however, he is not speaking to Joanna, but Simon—who is across the stage. After handing the basket of bread to his mother, he would turn to his right, to deliver his line to his father. Indeed, in this situation, he might even be positioned slightly down stage of Joanna, since he is the one with the line, and is already speaking toward the audience.

Satisfied with the movement you have worked out in the sketch, you transfer the scheme to the actual script page, using standard blocking vernacular.

Near “Enter their son...” write ***NR***
and ***EL***

which means that Nathanael and Eliezer enter together, with the boy stage right (right of Eliezer) and the older man stage left. Unless you are going to change what Nathanael is carrying, there is no need to repeat the direction for him to be carrying a basket of bread.

Near “I had to return...” write ***immediately***
and ***to room***
and ***XC***
somewhere nearby in script write ***S turn L***
and ***J turn R***

which means that as soon as they enter, Eliezer delivers his line to no one in particular, but to everyone in the room, as he moves down to roughly center stage. As soon as he speaks, Simon and Joanna turn to see who has arrived. Near the end of his first line,

after “...one so young.” write ***NX to J***

which means that after Eliezer's first line, Nathanael crosses left, to Joanna. Again, since you are following the suggestion included in the script, there is no reason to repeat the stage direction about Nathanael and his basket of bread.

Leaving Some for Later

It is permissible to leave some blocking for the actual rehearsal. A case in point would be Joanna's reaction to her son, and what she does with the basket of bread he gives her. In the rehearsal, a perfectly natural, motherly response from her may flow out of Nathanael going to her. Just tell her you liked it, and to note what she did in her script. You may also determine in the rehearsal that you would like to add another set piece up left—for example, a bench on which she can set the basket of bread. Meanwhile, let's continue with the blocking.

Part 2: A Director's Guide

Near "And what did..." write *rise*
and *X U to UC*

which means that Simon stands as he begins his line, and moves around the up stage end of the table to a point up center, near the opposite corner of the table. This is not a fixed position, but just approximately where he should be when Nathanael answers. Reference your sketch to help place the actor; as it shows, you are going to incrementally move Simon closer and closer to Eliezer. You will do the fine tuning on these increments in the blocking, and subsequent, rehearsals.

Near "Only three shekels." write *step*

"Step" is a contextual, or *relative* direction. On a large stage, Nathanael might literally take a step; on a smaller stage, he might just shift his weight from one foot to another, or use other body language to emphasize his pride in making the deal. The point is that he is to do something that will "punch up" his line. Again, if necessary, the fine-tuning of this direction can be determined at the blocking rehearsal. By not assigning any blocking to the beginning of Simon's line ("Three shekels!"), you implicitly leave him where he is. But you *do* want him to move on the last sentence.

Near "Why such a high..." write *X to E*

which means that he should emphasize this confrontational line by moving directly to Eliezer. Eliezer reacts to Simon's accusatory question by smoothly edging away.

Near "Many new customers..." write *step DL*
and *out*

Eliezer's move is not so much a cross to a specific location on stage, as it is a move *away from* Simon. A step or two should suffice, followed by a cherubic plea of innocence delivered out to the audience. Simon's rejoinder brings him down to the same plane as his neighbor.

Remember: Blocking deals only with the physical movement of the actors. It *may* deal with when the actor is to deliver his or her line, but how and why an actor delivers a line is addressed—initially, at least—during the reading session.

Near “So with all...” write ***step D***
and ***to E***

With this choreography you are accomplishing two things: First, you are methodically bringing together Simon and Eliezer into a dramatic, nose-to-nose confrontation—always good fun for the audience. Second, you are moving them both downstage, which serves to make them larger to the audience. Dramatic high points in a play can be emphasized by blocking them downstage, which enlarges them for the audience. In this instance, Simon’s physical move brings him down stage, to a point across from Eliezer, and the second instruction tells him to deliver his line to the other character.

Near “This census won’t last...” write ***XR to S***

Just how Eliezer moves toward Simon will be determined by how the actor is playing him. The printed direction states that he says this line “slyly,” but if you are playing Eliezer with a stronger personality, he may be delivering this line with more punch—which would suggest a direction for the line more like “menacingly.” The point for this discussion is that this may affect how the actor moves during the line.

Near “No, but your...” write ***X to E***
and ***(nose)***

which means that you want Simon to move directly to Eliezer, ending up nose-to-nose, in a confrontational stance. Then Joanna intervenes:

near “Stop it you two!” write ***XD***
and ***coming between***

Joanna’s move must be anticipated by the actor playing her, but the precise moment in the script when she should react and begin her move may not be determined until the actual blocking rehearsal. It will be affected by the set (how many set pieces are in her way), where the other actors are, and how quickly you wish her to move. In any case, she is moving from the upper left corner of the stage, down through center, to break up Simon and Eliezer who are down center.

Timing, for comedic effect, is critical, so during the blocking rehearsal run through this brief exchange several times, incrementally moving the two male actors together on their lines, and culminating in Joanna breaking them up at precisely the right moment. And make sure the actors note every move in their scripts!

The Script Page

The actual script page for this blocked scene is shown on the opposite page.

This brief exercise should give you sufficient examples for blocking the rest of the script for *Vacancy*.

Ready for Rehearsal

In this chapter we have discussed how you, as the director, block out a script before presenting it to your company of players. In the next chapter we will close our discussion of blocking by taking a look at the actual blocking rehearsal.

230 Enter their son Nathanael, with their neighbor, Eliezer. Nathanael is carrying a basket of bread. NR EL

immediately to room XC **Eliezer** *S turn L*
(generously) *J turn R*

I had to return with Nathanael, to compliment his father on his son's bargaining skills. Quite amazing in one so young. *N X to J*

235 (with a twinkle)

I wonder where he learned them.

Nathanael hands the basket of bread to his mother, but speaks to his father.

Nathanael
(proudly)

240 I did good, papa.

rise **Simon** *X U to UC*
And what did Eliezer's fine bread cost us today?

step **Nathanael**
Only three shekels.

245 **Simon**
Three shekels! Why, that's robbery! I would have paid no more than two.
(to Eliezer)

X to E
Why such a high price to your neighbor?

250 **Eliezer** *step DL out*
(innocently)
Many new customers in town. My poor wife is kept busy with the orders.

step D to E **Simon**
So with all the orders you can afford to lower the price.

255 **Eliezer** *X R to S*
(slyly)
This census won't last forever.

X to E **Simon** *(stepping closer to Eliezer)*
No, but your greed probably will. *(nose)*

260 **Joanna** *X D coming between*
(quickly intervening)
Stop it you two!

chapter SIX



The Blocking Rehearsal

Before

Plan the blocking rehearsal, scene by scene, both by day (one or two sessions) and by hour, for maximum efficiency

During

Work through the script page by page.

Review each script segment more than once

Instruct the actors to review their blocking at home

After

Debrief, and make any necessary changes in your blocking plan based on revelations during the rehearsal

THERE IS A RHYTHM TO THE REHEARSAL PROCESS THAT SHOULD be established from the beginning. Your actors' work, as well as the production as a whole, will benefit from a healthy blend of discipline, flexibility, inspiration, and good humor—all held together by the wrapper of servanthood, and devotion to Christ.

When you are dependable in the manner in which you conduct your rehearsals, it will be easier for your actors to be reliable in support of the project. Be as prompt and well-prepared as you expect them to be. Approach this and every rehearsal with sobriety blended with good humor, and with a strong dedication to both the task and serving the Lord. In other words: *Lead by example*. If you expect everyone to come prepared, then you come well-prepared; if you expect everyone to arrive on time, then you arrive early, ready to go—and be so well organized that your actors will be able to *leave* on time. Don't keep them longer than scheduled.

The conduct of the blocking rehearsal is fairly straightforward. Its purpose is, first, to transfer all blocking instructions from your head and script to the actors' heads and scripts, and, second, to walk through the blocking as many times as possible. Beyond that, how the rehearsal is organized will be dependent on the nature and size of the play—with an eye always toward efficiency and courtesy toward the cast.

Breadth and Length

A simple five-minute sketch with two characters is addressed head-on: both actors are there from beginning to end; their blocking instructions are assigned, with time left over to run through the sketch several times to cement the blocking in their heads. A larger production, however, often requires a more creative approach. Since the blocking rehearsal need not be conducted in chronological (script) order, in a multi-scene production it is a good idea to organize the rehearsal grouped by common scenes. If, for example, one or two actors are only in scenes two and four, and two other actors are only in scenes one and three, then block scenes two and four together, and scenes one and three together. Schedule different call times for different actors, to minimize their wait time. An actor bored by waiting, especially in the young, is a disruption waiting to happen. If there is no good way to avoid having actors waiting around for their turn, convert this potential dead time into productive time by having an assistant on hand to work with them in another room. This time could be used for line memorization, costume fittings, or anything that puts the time to good use—even if only removing their distracting conversation from the main rehearsal room.

Sometimes the most efficient use of everyone's time is to schedule more than one blocking rehearsal—as might be the case with *Vacancy*. You have decided to split the blocking between two nights, working with the Leader and the two Visitors on one night, and the Bethlehem scenes on another. Within each of these rehearsals you have set different call times for the individual actors, so that your rehearsal schedule might look something like this:

Before

In theatrical parlance, a "call time" is the hour at which an actor is supposed to be in attendance. The public rehearsal could be from 6:00 to 9:00, but an individual actor's call time may not be until 7:15.

Blocking: Thursday, October 9

6:00 – 7:30 Leader

7:30 – 9:00 Visitors

Blocking: Friday, October 10

6:00 – 6:30 Nathanael

6:00 – 9:00 Simon, Joanna, Eliezer

This schedule minimizes dead time, gets the youngster playing Nathanael in and out at an early hour, permits more time for each scene—and the only person who needs to be there both nights is you, the director. Whatever the breadth and length of a production, organize your blocking rehearsals with sufficient time not only to dispense blocking instructions, but to walk through each scene at least once.

During

With your thoroughly notated script in hand, you are ready for the blocking rehearsal. Even though subsequent rehearsals may be held in a different location, you have scheduled this rehearsal for the eventual performance site, since you want the actor's blocking to be established—both physically, and in their minds—on the stage on which they will ultimately be performing. To further establish the blocking in your actors' minds you have positioned stand-in set pieces about the stage to approximate the table and stool that comprise the Bethlehem set.

Everyone has shown up on time—of course!—and you are ready to begin. Now what?

Prayer

Every rehearsal begins with prayer. Even if everyone has *not* shown up on time—indeed, especially if things are not going well at all, begin with prayer. Dedicate the time and the collective effort to the Lord. Be very clear to the actors that this rehearsal time represents a portion of their individual, as well as corporate devotion to Him. There are two important, but often overlooked components to the rehearsal process. One is the sense of *community* the director should establish and nurture: Keep reminding the actors of their dependency

on and responsibility to each other for reaching the goal of a solid performance. The other critical component is their mutual dependency on and dedication to the Lord: Let them not forget that what they are doing is not for themselves, not for you, not even for the audience, but for the Lord.

Going Through the Paces

The blocking process is unabashedly mechanical in nature. The actors are here not to refine their character, not to emote, not to debate the finer points of the story line, but to hear and notate your meticulous instructions for their physical movement on stage. So just begin: get the actors up on stage for the first scene—scripts and sharpened pencils at the ready—and give them their positions for the first entrance.

If possible at this early stage of the production, make your first instruction to each actor their *cue*—what will be their cue for stepping onto stage? Will they enter when the house lights go down, when the stage lights come up, on a musical cue—or when the manager shoves them out onto stage? Will they be entering onto a dark stage, or in full view of the audience? If the latter, *how* will they enter; certainly in character, but with what aspect of that character?

Remember, at this early stage the actors do not yet have in their minds the more complete picture that you have. When necessary, supply the *whys* behind the *what*. Once the actor is on stage, begin stepping through the instructions from your script. Here are some pointers:

- Alternate actors in a scene to avoid keeping any one waiting too long. Give instructions to the first actor for a line or two, then work with the second actor for the same passage while the first actor refines his hastily scratched notes.
- Be vigilant that every instruction is, indeed, written on the pages of each actor's script. Any actor that says, "I'll remember," will not.

One need not be a tyrant to insist on a certain level of discipline during rehearsals. It is of critical importance to establish the guidelines for acceptable behavior at the very first rehearsal on stage. (The setting is different for the reading session.) Be on the lookout for, and be prepared to stop certain typical behavior, such as actors whispering in the pews when not on stage, or running about backstage. Let everyone know from the beginning that noisy distractions are not only counterproductive, but rude—and something with which they would surely not like to compete when *they* are the ones on stage.

For more on using landmarks in the performance room for blocking reference, see Chapter Three, "Blocking," in Part Three.

- After giving instructions for a page or two, go back and have the actors walk through the blocking, as a review, before proceeding.
- After giving instructions for an entire scene, have the actors walk through the scene before moving on to the next.
- Encourage the actors to seek clarification when there is some instruction they do not understand.
- When actors have some waiting time between scenes, instruct them to go to another room and review their blocking up to that point. Tell them to note any questions they might have, so you can answer them before the end of the rehearsal.
- If the rehearsal is in the sole performance venue, have the actors orient their blocking to permanent landmarks in the room as a supplement to their normal blocking shorthand.

Review

Before dismissing your actors for the evening, encourage them to review all of their blocking either that night or the next day, while it is still fresh in their minds. Every review at home should include physically walking through the blocking, even to laying out an area to approximate the stage area, and using it every time they rehearse. The more often they review the blocking while the instruction is fresh, the more quickly and accurately it will become an automatic extension of their character.

After

Before anyone leaves the premises, have everyone in attendance help restore order to the room. Remove any set pieces and props, returning them to their original places, and police the area for food and drink. Be courteous to those who have given you permission to use this space for rehearsal—even if it is your own church. There can sometimes be tension between the drama group and other members of the congregation; don't leave them any excuse to find fault with your behavior.

Debriefing

While the actors are home, privately reviewing the pages of blocking instructions they have just received, your job is to go back over the work accomplished at the rehearsal. What changes need to be made? What didn't work in practice that, in theory, you thought would? Don't be afraid to make changes to your original concept. But remember: Changes are better made early in the process, rather than later. Don't let your actors work one way for three weeks, getting their lines and blocking thoroughly entrenched in their minds, before making necessary changes. Make them now, while everything is still fresh, and not yet memorized.

chapter seven

Rehearsal Preparation



THERE IS AN ALMOST “ORGANIC” FEELING TO A WELL-RUN, productive rehearsal. It is an example of community in its most authentic sense, with individuals of disparate stripe and talent coming together to achieve a common goal. Whether or not that goal is achieved, how well the disparate parts mesh during the process, how much a sense of community is sustained, and how much is actually accomplished during each rehearsal—all these and more are the responsibility of the director.

In this regard, the Christian company of players enjoys an advantage not shared by its counterparts on the legitimate stage: in addition to the common ground of the stage itself, believers are inexorably bound together by the strong, yet winsome grip of the Holy Spirit. There should be—and usually is—a sense of community from the outset because of His powerful presence and influence. For this reason the

director of Christian drama has both an advantage and an extra burden when leading his or her actors. The advantage is the encouraging, resident Spirit; the burden is to nurture and honor His influence throughout the rehearsal process.

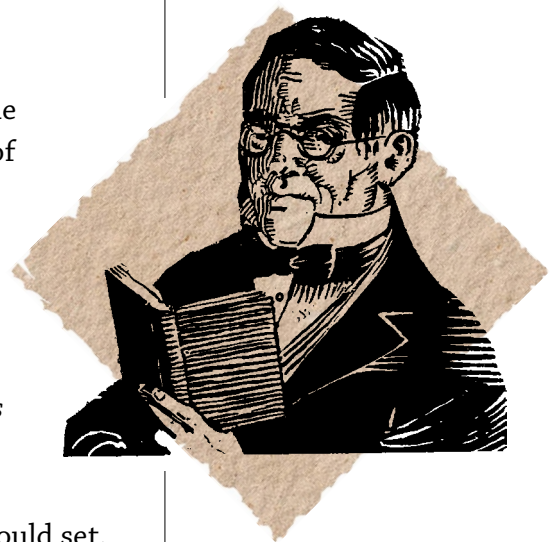
It is for this reason that every rehearsal must begin with prayer. The very act of uniting around the throne of God—no matter what is verbalized in the prayer—will have a powerful, bonding effect on every actor in attendance. And when things don't go well, when tempers flare and frustration levels rise, the Spirit will have already been invited to apply His inestimable qualities to hold together those who know Him.

Preparation and Review

More than anything else, a director's efforts are aimed at getting the most and the best from actors. But his level of success at spurring the actor on toward excellence begins with the director expecting the most and best from *himself*. No director has the right to show up for rehearsal unenergized, unprepared or disorganized—and then expect behavior higher than that from his actors. Your preparation is critical not only to each rehearsal, but to the success of the overall production. The actors and crew members take their cue from you, their leader. Therefore you should come to every rehearsal prepared with the following:

Know the Script

- Without necessarily memorizing the dialogue, know the script inside and out. Be familiar with it: have a sense of what happens on each page.
- Understand the flow and pacing of the play as a whole, along with the part each scene plays in that. This will help inform your answers to the inevitable queries from the actors about “Why are we doing it *this way*?”
- Know how long each scene should take, the mood it should set, and the unified image it should portray to the audience.



- Know the accoutrements to each scene: the props and set pieces, general lighting that will be used, where the mics will be positioned, etc. Because few of these will be known by the actors during early rehearsals, you will, again, have a ready answer when the questions come from the players or crew.

Know the Actors

- Know who should be in attendance, and their respective call times.
- Know what you will be expecting from each person (i.e., how far along they should be in their character development and memorization).
- Have a good idea who might be late, and what you might do about it if the tardiness occurs—not just what you will say to the actor, but how you will adjust the rehearsal if such tardiness disrupts the planned schedule.
- Anticipate who might cause problems in the rehearsal, and what you might do about it.
- Anticipate who will be an attentive leader in the rehearsal, and how you might encourage them.

Know the Characters

- Know which characters are in each scene (and which ones are not, thus being prepared with constructive activity for those not on stage).
- Understand the purpose and motivation of each character in a scene: Why they are there, and what they need to accomplish.
- Have a general idea of how each character will *look* in a scene, and with what mechanical limitations they may have to contend in performance (i.e., lights and sound, or a voluminous costume).

Know the Pace of the Rehearsal

- Begin on time. You expect your actors to be on time and ready to work, so make sure you, too, are organized and ready to begin on time.
- Outline the amount of time you will spend on each scene or segment. Try to stick to your schedule, but if for some reason you don't, know where in the schedule you can adjust to compensate for the changes. All of this so you can...
- End the rehearsal at the scheduled time. You are expecting courtesy from your actors; show them the same courtesy by holding to your published schedule.

Venue Selection

In many cases, the regular rehearsals will be conducted in a room other than the room with the performance stage. Unless the play demands it, you needn't go so far as to tape an outline of the stage on the floor, but, using normal furniture on hand, you should approximate the size of the performance stage, and the set pieces that will eventually be used. Even if rehearsals are held on the performance stage, you will still want to approximate any boundaries or set pieces that will be in place for the performance.

Arrive early, and have everything ready before the actors arrive.

And be considerate of those who have offered you the rehearsal space: whether you are rehearsing at your home church or somewhere else, whether you are rehearsing in the sanctuary, a Sunday School room, or someone's home, be sure to leave the room as you found it. Don't leave a room for the custodian to discover on Sunday morning with all the chairs shoved to the walls. Have your actors help put everything back where it was before they leave.

Pros and Cons

There are both advantages and disadvantages to any rehearsal venue. The obvious choice may be to rehearse on the performance stage. This surely will make it more familiar to the actors, giving them extra

confidence once the audience and all the set pieces are in place. But at the same time it can limit their flexibility in being able to adapt to a different stage if and when a production is taken on the road. They may become too set in their ways, too dependant on features and characteristics of that specific room. Rehearsing in a separate, more featureless room contributes to the actors' adaptability and flexibility, teaching them to rely less on the room itself than on each other.

Your decision regarding rehearsal space should be influenced by where the play will be performed. If you know that the play will only be performed at one venue, then the ideal choice, if possible, would be to hold all rehearsals there as well. If, on the other hand, your play will be performed at more than one venue, then it is better to rehearse in a neutral location, so that your actors learn how to bring life to the play on the basis of characters and dialogue, rather than the room in which the play will be performed.



chapter eight

Regular Rehearsals



BACK IN THE 1980s, HIS COMPANY PERFORMED A NUMBER of times at a church being led by a young, dynamic pastor. This pastor was enthusiastic about using drama in the church, and gave us repeated opportunities to serve his congregation. As a result, on more than one occasion we had the opportunity to hear this young pastor deliver his Sunday morning sermon. In those early days his preaching method was loud and brash, and more than a little mechanical. At times it was actually painful to listen to—the verbal equivalent of being thrashed about the head and shoulders. His method bore all the marks of someone fresh out of seminary, preaching in a manner he had been taught by someone else.

A few years later, Linda and I visited his church to participate in the worship service from a pew, rather than from the stage. By now the young pastor's preaching had changed. Now, instead of shouting at

his parishioners, he spoke to them from out of his own personality—as if he were having a one-on-one conversation with each person sitting in the congregation. It was no longer painful to listen to him preach, and one could actually listen to the words, and learn. When I asked him about it later, the pastor told me that one day his wife offered some counsel that, when distilled down, was, “Honey, just be yourself.”

Finding a Method that Works

There are many different ways to direct a play. One can read books, and attend classes, and learn from the great masters of the craft. But there is one problem with this: None of these “masters” directed amateur Christian plays in the church. They all, invariably, directed professional actors, either on the legitimate stage or in film—and none of these situations apply to yours. You are (probably) an amateur directing amateurs, and few of the “master” techniques apply to your struggling band of thespians.

In keeping with the rest of the advice in this book, I won't tell you that my way is the only way to direct a play. I'll not even tell you that out of the many methods available to you, my way is the best. I *will* tell you how I direct a play, but only to serve as an example of one way that has worked for me. My method of directing a play was not studied and learned, copied from a textbook, or fashioned after someone else's style, but it simply evolved from experience, and out of my own personality. My best advice I will give you up front: Know what you want to accomplish, be well-prepared, and be yourself.

If it works, keep doing it. If it doesn't, try something else.

The Director as Communicator

One characteristic of a good director that is shared by professional and amateur alike is knowing how to work well with actors of different personalities and temperaments. Some actors require lots of hand-holding, while others just want to be left alone. Some actors accept criticism with good humor and grace, while others, uh, don't. The good director understands the disparate personalities under his

None of this is meant to dissuade you from consulting those who know more than you. By all means, read the books written by the established directors. Watch the plays, films, and television shows that you respect, to see what is possible. Learn from your own experience and by watching others. My point is only that the director of Christian drama must typically filter and adapt what others do, since he is working with amateurs with varying degrees of dedication, and is working within a paradigm of *faith*, rather than commerce.

or her charge, and knows how to get good performances out of them all. Even if you are new to the craft, in no time at all you will discover who accepts tough direction with grace, and who must be handled with kid gloves.

For this reason, the most important part of being a successful director is *the ability to communicate with your actors*: to listen and be attentive to their individual needs, and to tactfully impart your ideas to them. As in any successful marriage, the key is C-O-M-M-U-N-I-C-A-T-I-O-N. Without a foundation of sound communication between director and actor—no matter how experienced or artistically gifted either is—rehearsals will be far less effective than they could be. With that communication in place, however, marvelous and inventive progress will be made in rehearsals, bringing a vitality and resonance to the play that otherwise would be missing.

A different method was used by a member of His Company who directed a few of our productions. He was our lighting and sets man, and actually taught dramatic arts at a local college. He was experienced—and a good actor. But his directing method was the polar opposite of mine. During a run-through of a scene, he would sit silently in a back pew, taking notes. Once the scene had ended, he would gather the actors at the apron to discuss his observations; returning to the beginning, he would verbally work through the scene, adding his critique. From the perspective of an actor under his direction, I found this to be an awkward way to direct a scene, for (again, from the actor's perspective) as he referenced moments earlier in the scene in his critique, I would struggle to remember how I had done it—and how it had differed from how he would rather I do it. Meanwhile, I had had several minutes (while he sat in the pew) to imagine that my interpretation had been acceptable. Then, during the next run-through, I would find it difficult to remember all his suggestions, and incorporate them into the scene.

A Personal Style

The His Company method of directing is based on the premise that

- the actors in our charge will require—and welcome—lots of direction, advice, and both visual and verbal illustrations, and
- mistakes or unacceptable interpretation should be rectified as soon as possible.

As the director, I am never far from the actors rehearsing the scene. Unless for visual reasons I need to be at the back of the auditorium (for example, to examine the blocking of a wide, multi-actor scene), I remain near the apron of the stage—even, at times, on stage—when directing a scene. During those critical early rehearsals, especially—when characters are raw and unformed, and lines have not all been memorized—I stay close to the action.

Keep Short Accounts

During early rehearsals, use a “script person” to watch the actors’ lines while you attend to everything else. Your attention should be on the actors, and what they are saying and doing on stage—not buried in the script, checking the accuracy of their memorization. It is

important that they get their lines right; that is why your attention should not be divided. Just about anyone can watch lines—it takes no dramatic expertise to verify the accuracy of the lines being run from the stage—but impress upon the script person the importance of word-for-word accuracy. They must not let anyone get away with sloppy memorization.

Set the Stage

Before beginning the actual run-through, take a moment to set the scene for the actors—especially during the early rehearsals. Review for them what the scene is about, how it contributes to the play as a whole, and the emotional state of each character. Remind them of the physical setting: Be sure they understand what the temporary set pieces represent (how, later, those two folding chairs will actually be a heavy, wooden table), and what elements of the set are not yet being represented at all. Finally, if it is pertinent to their work in the scene, let them know how they will be costumed, and if there will be any props with which they will have to contend (will there be a long train to the queen's gown? will the soldier at the crucifixion scene have a sword dangling from his belt?).

A Sanctifying Process

The purpose of the play rehearsal is not unlike the purpose of the ongoing sanctification process through which every believer passes during his life in Christ.

In the moment of our rebirth, God justifies us and, in one sense (as in “set apart”), sanctifies us. But in a second sense, sanctification is an ongoing, maturing process that gradually—sometimes painfully—changes us into the likeness of our Savior. It is a holy occupation that is conducted while in the flesh, thus is imperfect, and grossly inefficient. The journey of sanctification is, ultimately, a very human process.

Just so, the actor is handed a script and the assignment for the role he is to play. It is a one-time occurrence in the production process. But, at inception, the character (as well as the play as a whole) is still raw, unformed, incomplete. The rehearsal process is what turns the

raw union of actor/character into a completed, “sanctified” whole. And just as the attentive, committed believer gradually matures into a greater understanding and depth of knowledge about the things of God, the committed actor gradually matures into his or her role, embracing it, and taking possession of it. In the beginning, the director must take the actor by the hand, explaining the fundamentals, carefully nurturing the creation of the character and—this is critical—shaping it into something that will fit into his conception of the play as a whole. But later in the rehearsal process less will be demanded of the director regarding the individual character, because the actor will have grown into possessing it for himself. Indeed, while in the beginning the director is the authority on each character in a play, later each individual actor will become the authority on his or her character. And this is as it should be, for during those later rehearsals the director will be obliged to turn his attention more to the production as a whole, rather than its smaller, component parts.

For the moment, however, we are still at the raw, unformed beginning of the play. The actors still clutch their dog-eared scripts, and still awkwardly step through their assigned blocking. It is the time when they most depend on their director for help.

Expecting Too Much

The greatest challenge for the director during this early stage is to not expect too much from the actors. As the one who selected, examined, and is now directing the play, you have had time and opportunity to form your own ideas about what the characters will become. In your mind, each character is fully realized, mature, complete. You see them *as they will be*—or, at least, how you hope they will be—while the actors still see them as crude, shapeless blobs. The difference between these two perspectives can cause the director to actually become an abrasive obstacle for the actor as he struggles to create a role.

The goal for the director, then, is to retain the fully mature image of each character in his head—but in abeyance, using it as a reference against which to measure the progress of each actor in his role. The director carefully leads the actor into that image, and remains open to fresh ideas for the character that will be discovered by the actor. For

this reason the director cannot expect each character to emerge fully realized at the first rehearsal. Accept the actor/character combination for what it is, and work with it from the basis of that rough foundation. Later, after a series of rehearsals, and as opening night looms, you will have every right to expect more.

A Logical Sequence

Elsewhere in this book the following advice is given regarding memorization:

Break down the script into manageable chunks. Learn one sentence so that you can say it perfectly. Then learn the next sentence perfectly. Go back and learn the two sentences together; don't move on until you are perfect on the two sentences. Then learn the next sentence; add it to the two previous. Use the same method for paragraphs and pages. Don't add more until you are solid on everything up to that point. At your next memorization session, do not proceed into new material, until you have successfully reviewed the lines from the previous session.

This is sound counsel, as well, for running a rehearsal. Not that you should expect a portion of a scene to be literally "perfect" before moving on, but the concept of working with one small portion at a time is as valid for the rehearsal as it is for script memorization. Begin with a discreet portion of a script (for example, on page 11 of *Vacancy*, from Eliezer and Nathanael's entrance, to Joanna and Nathanael's exit on page 12) and work it long enough for the progress made to become firmly established in the minds of the actors. It is always better to cover one page thoroughly, than it is to cover many pages superficially.

The bane of all directors—be they directors of drama, or choirs, or puppet ministries—is the "two-steps-forward-one-step-back" syndrome. Indeed, for some directors it could rightly be termed the "two-steps-forward-two-steps-back" syndrome. This means that too often the progress the director thought he accomplished at one rehearsal has mostly been forgotten by the next. It means that too much time in each rehearsal is spent relearning what was supposed to have been learned during the previous rehearsal. One way to minimize (but, of course, not eliminate) this time-hungry syndrome is to employ the

following sequential method to scene rehearsal:

1. Work on only a small portion of the script at one time.
2. Go through it several times during one rehearsal, striving for improvement each time through.
3. Before ending each rehearsal, go back and review the ground covered in that rehearsal.
4. Remind and encourage the actors to continue working on the scene at home.
5. Before covering new ground in the next rehearsal, review what was covered in the previous.

The term "small portion" is relative. With young, inexperienced actors in a short sketch, this could mean working on only one-half of a script page at a time. With more experienced actors, or with a longer script, the "small portion" could be several pages in length. You will quickly learn the correct amount for your actors in any given production.

By "review" (in steps 3 and 5) is meant a walk-through: lines and blocking, but without intensive rehearsal. (Put another way, not "Bible study," but "reading through the Bible.")

Beyond Mimicry

I once worked with an actor who often said (usually when frustrated by his lack of progress during rehearsal), "Just tell me how you want it and I'll do it that way!" While, for the director, there may be a smidgen of flattery hiding inside that remark, don't let it turn your head. Don't succumb to the temptation to dictate every interpretation, every nuance of your actors' performances. That is not acting; that is mimicry. Admittedly, there is a fine line between that and the necessary help amateur actors often require. The director of church drama will very often need to demonstrate for the actor a good way to interpret a moment in a scene. But this "demonstration" should always be combined with encouragement for the actor to do more than just mimic what the director has suggested.

When directing a scene, don't let your actors get by with just mimicking what you have suggested. Expect more by having them

- explain from where their character has just come (either a place or a situation);
- describe what their character is feeling and experiencing at this moment;

- encourage them to try out new ideas and experiment when rehearsing privately at home.

Then work with them on ways to marry those inner thoughts and feelings to the dialogue and actions necessary for the scene. (This will quickly reveal, by the way, those actors who have failed to work on their own between rehearsals.)

The director must help the actor realize that their dialogue is not just lines to be memorized then recited on command, but that *the script dialogue is the verbal expression of their character's inner thoughts*. It is how they let the audience know what is going on inside. It is what their character *must* say, given the situation.

More Than Recitation

This is an important point that is often overlooked by the amateur actor—and director. Memorizing lines and reciting them back on demand is not acting, but just recitation. *Real* acting is inhabiting a character, for a period of time, *to the extent that one thinks and behaves and speaks in the only way that character can at that moment*.

For example, look at the behavior of Simon in Scene Three of *Vacancy*. He is behaving miserly, irritated, unsympathetic to the plight of those begging for a room, and argumentatively toward his wife. Based on his personality and what he has experienced so far in the play (and before), his behavior is perfectly natural and anticipated. He is behaving in the only way Simon can in that point of time. Simon, as created and set into the situation by the writer, *must* behave in this manner.

There is a moment—a very special, magical moment—in the process of preparing a play, when the actor suddenly, and often unexpectedly, discovers that he is no longer just reciting lines, but is actually *speaking and behaving as his character*. It is at this precise moment that the actor has begun truly *acting*, and it is at this moment that he begins to really understand and *inhabit* his character. And it is only after this occurs that the play truly sings, and the audience feels its disbelief vaporize as it is inexorably drawn into the story of the play as something real, and taking place before their very eyes.

It is the director's job to bring each actor—sometimes gently, sometimes emphatically—to this point, then to mold and shape the odd collection of disparate characters into a cohesive, logical whole.



chapter nine

The Technical Meeting



Before

Ensure that all department heads will be in attendance

Prepare production notebooks

Follow same model as Reading Session.

During

Communicate to technical crew their importance, and get them involved in the production

Check status of each department

Work through the script, page by page, making sure that each department head takes thorough notes.

MOST DIRECTORS CAN UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF conducting a rehearsal in which all the members of the technical crew get a chance to rehearse their responsibilities for a production. The sound and lighting crews need to rehearse their cues with the actors; backstage personnel need to rehearse traffic flows and the distribution of properties; the stage crew needs to rehearse the movement of set pieces on and off the stage. This opportunity is the purpose of the technical *rehearsal*.

Many directors, however, leave out a critical step that should take place a few days before that technical rehearsal: the technical *meeting*.

A Study in Contrast

Put yourself in the place of, for example, the sound man for your Easter musical. He has arrived early for the technical rehearsal, dutifully

unpacked all the mics at his disposal, connected all to working jacks and tested each at his board. But when the rehearsal actually begins with the actors, choir members, and other crew members, he is utterly in the dark about what the musical is, and what his responsibilities will be within it. He doesn't know who will need which mic, or where, or when; he doesn't know which cast members will need wireless mics, and which will use mics on stands; he has never heard the music, doesn't know who is singing the solos, nor does he have any idea of the pace or texture of the story. All this and more will have to be explained to him by the director *during* the tech rehearsal—while he frantically makes the requested adjustments and notes the directions in his script. Meanwhile, during all this, the actors on the stage are struggling to wait patiently and quietly.

Contrast this to the sound man who, earlier in the week, attended a technical *meeting* for the production. He has arrived early for the tech rehearsal with his heavily annotated notebook in hand. When he unpacks his equipment, he positions the mics and stands specifically, for the opening number of the musical. Knowing that the first solo is going to be sung by the diminutive soprano, Margaret, he sets her mic stage left, where she will be standing, and lowers the stand to her approximate height. He then pre-sets his board to levels he knows (from Sunday morning experience) will be about right for her voice, and adjusts the levels of his overhead condensers for the rest of the chorus. After his mics have been set, he cues the accompaniment tape to the third song—the number which the director said he would use to get everyone up on stage for the rehearsal.

It goes without saying that every director and sound man would prefer this second scenario over the first, at his technical and dress rehearsals.

The second scenario, distinguished by its level of efficiency and knowledge of the production, is accomplished by the director holding a technical meeting at which all technical personnel are in attendance. At this meeting, at least those in charge of each department—such as lights, sound, stage crew, wardrobe, properties, etc.—are given their own copy of the script (if it is not already in their possession) and are conducted through the entire production, with their responsibilities discussed in detail.

Before

Perspective

The need for a technical meeting is obviously keyed to the size and scope of the production. A five-minute sketch for Sunday evening may require little more than a brief telephone chat with the resident sound man. A contemporary one-act play held in the bright sunshine of a Sunday morning, in a small church with only ten rows of pews, may require no technical crew whatsoever. But for a larger three-act or musical production, or for any production with extensive technical requirements, a meeting at which all requirements and responsibilities of the technical crew are discussed is essential.

Attendance at this meeting is imperative for the department heads. Those in charge of sound, lights, and stage crew must attend. In some instances it will be beneficial for their crew members to attend, as well—but more often those subordinates will just be bored. Those in charge of makeup, wardrobe, properties, and ushering should attend, but for some productions it may not be necessary. In deciding who should attend, keep in mind the purposes of the meeting:

- to familiarize everyone involved with the nature and flow of the production;
- to give detailed instructions to the tech crew, and have each department head record the instructions in their notebooks;
- to shorten subsequent rehearsals with the cast members, thus making them more efficient, more profitable, and more pleasant for everyone involved;
- to ensure that everyone involved is working toward a common goal.

The second point in the list above is the most important of the three. Nothing speeds along the technical and dress rehearsals so much as the key technical personnel already having your instructions in front of them. This is not to say that they won't need periodic reminding throughout the rehearsal, but it should only need to be that—reminding—not the dissemination of detailed instructions while everyone on stage stands around impatiently waiting.

Notebooks

If you are using commercial resources (i.e., you paid for them) for your production, be sure that you have purchased sufficient copies for everyone in the technical crew who will need one. Then, from the purchased material, prepare production notebooks for every member of the crew.

His Company musical scripts are formatted for the purpose of inserting music literature pages at the appropriate place, but other scripts may not be. Then again, you may be using a commercial package that includes both. Indeed, if you purchased a commercial musical and are not making any changes to it whatsoever, you may not need to prepare notebooks for yourself or the crew at all. But quite often a director will add or change the order of songs, add dialogue from another source (such as His Company), or reprise songs in a manner not intended by the publisher. In these instances, it is helpful to prepare a production notebook that includes every component in its proper order. Use a three-ring binder, so pages can be removed and inserted easily. If possible, number the pages and include a Table of Contents. But at least have everything in its proper order.

Some of those in attendance, such as those in charge of wardrobe or props—and, of course, the director—may have had their notebooks for some time. But others may be seeing them for the first time.

Ground Rules

Impress upon the members of your crew the importance of the meeting. The entire process breaks down if only one key person is missing. If, for example, your lighting person cannot make the meeting, you will spend much of the technical rehearsal explaining everything to him or her. If there is no possible way to get everyone in one place at the same time, at least have someone attend who can make all the necessary notes in the missing person's notebook, then touch base with them prior to the technical rehearsal. But this meeting should be included in the complete rehearsal schedule that is published early on in the process, so everyone should have plenty of time to organize their personal schedules to attend.

A note about director/technical notebooks...

His Company musical scripts are published with page breaks that permit the director to use them in a notebook that includes copies of pages from the choral or accompaniment score. This creates a practical, everything-in-one-place production notebook that is also suitable for members of the technical crew.

On its surface this process involves the photocopying of copyrighted material from the publisher of the music literature, and is, by the *letter* of the law, illegal in most instances. In our manner of producing these notebooks, however, it does not break the *spirit* of the law. The purpose of copyright law (at least in the United States) is to ensure fair compensation for physical or intellectual property. It is both illegal and morally wrong to make copies of this property *for the purpose of avoiding this fair payment*.

This fair requirement is fulfilled by purchasing choral books in sufficient number for every cast and technical crew member. But since the pages of typically octavo-sized choral books are not easily included in a production three-ring notebook, they are photocopied—which gives the added benefit of leaving wide margins for notes, on the 8½ x 11 page. His Company is of the opinion that this meets the spirit of the copyright law, since the publisher is still paid for every copy used. Then, after the production is over, all copies of the notebooks (except for archiving the director's copy) are destroyed.

For more on the benefits of an around-the-table format, see Chapter Two, “The Reading Session,” in Part Three.

During

The Mechanics of the Meeting

Just as with the reading session (and for many of the same reasons), hold the technical meeting around a table. You may have reasons to hold the meeting in or near the actual stage area, but still conduct it around a table.

If the production is a musical, have on hand a demo of the songs, and, perhaps, a copy of the performance Trax, if that is what you are using. When discussing specific cues with lights or sound, it is important to be able to demonstrate the cue with actual music, while they follow along in their printed notebooks and make the necessary notations.

Have everyone make notes in *pencil*. Just as with the blocking instructions you gave earlier to the cast, your best-laid plans can change. Invariably some things carefully planned on paper will not work in rehearsal, and will need to be changed on the fly. Notes at the tech meeting should be made in pencil.

But do insist that everyone take notes! No matter what they say now about their splendid memory, they will *not* remember later. Not only should they take copious notes, but they should make them bold and obvious. In most cases, during subsequent rehearsals and performances they will be working in extremely low light, so must be able to actually see and read the notes they have made in their script. One sound man I worked with for years would make his notes in large letters, with a dark pencil, then paint over them with color-keyed highlighters. And he rarely missed a cue in performance.

As with all rehearsals, begin this meeting with prayer. Turn over to the Lord its process, its purpose, and its result. Then, before working through the script page by page, give your tech crew—to whom most of what will follow will be new—an overview of the story line and texture of the play or musical. Do what you can to get them interested and involved in the production. Make it clear to them that their roles are just as important to its success as the roles of those who are on stage in the spotlight.

An Invaluable Contribution

Years ago (*many years ago*), when I was just beginning as a fashion photographer and still unschooled in much of the preparatory work that goes on behind the scenes, a model was brought to my studio all ready to go, with hair and makeup ready for the shooting session. I thought the young woman was beautiful, and had no problem making some good images of her. Weeks later, however, I went with my makeup artist and hair stylist to the model's home, to show her the finished shots—the results of the session. When the woman opened the door I didn't even recognize her. Speaking strictly from an analytical perspective, she wasn't beautiful at all! Although the essential structure was there in her face, all the color and sparkle—all the beauty that was so easily transferred to film—was missing. It had all been created by the makeup artist and hair stylist, then I had gone to work with my tools of lighting, motivation, and the capturing of the right moment. In this instance, very little of what comprised the finished product came from the model herself.

It is important that the members of your tech crew understand that their work is just as vital to the finished production as was mine and my stylists to the finished images of that model. Of course, the model was essential; she was, at least, the canvas, and a more talented model would have contributed far more than that. But just as those of us behind the camera were key to revealing and enhancing her foundational beauty, the tech crew is key to revealing and emphasizing what is taking place on stage. Without the sound man, the timid voice of the junior high "Mary" will never reach the back pews; without the lighting crew, no one will even see what is happening in the nativity scene; and without the wardrobe mistress, too much imagination will be required of the audience for clothing the wise men. Every member of the technical crew is vital. Make sure they know it.

Status Reports

First get status reports from all the department heads. On a general, non production-specific level, find out if everything is ready, or if there are lingering problems that must be addressed.

- Are all the lights working? Are there spare bulbs on hand, in case

An often-overlooked component of final rehearsals and performances is, in a word, *food*.

The goal of all directors should be for their rehearsals to be productive as the result of their being well organized. Every director strives to retain tight control over the rehearsal—not out of a dark need to exert power over underlings, but out of a dedication to the purpose at hand. And during those final, long and arduous rehearsals before opening night, one of the best tools for keeping a tight rein is food.

The last thing a director needs is for people to be coming and going during a lengthy rehearsal. Often the reason for their comings and goings is the need to quench their hunger. But when actors and crew members are getting into their cars and leaving for the nearest fast-food joint, disaster will surely follow. If you have arranged for a spread of food and drink at the rehearsal, it will be much easier to set the firm rule that no one is allowed to leave the premises.

Here, as well, is an opportunity for those dedicated, but acting-challenged souls who want to be a part of your drama group. Ask them to organize a selection of finger food and drinks for the technical and dress rehearsals, and each performance. Have them ask for volunteers to supply a variety of fruits and vegetables, chips, simple sandwiches, fruit juice, coffee and tea—all of which to be in place before the first person arrives. This will make it easier to call rehearsal times that may conflict with a family's dinner hour, and will remove the need for individuals to leave in the middle of the a rehearsal or performance.

one or more burn out? Any glitches in the board? Is everything working all right?

- Are all the mics working properly? Are there fresh batteries on hand for the wireless mics? Is the control board working properly? Is the CD player working reliably?

More specific to this production, but still general:

- Are all the costumes ready and complete?
- Is there sufficient makeup—and the correct kind—on hand for the number of characters in this production?
- Is the set ready? Any foreseeable problems moving it on and off stage?
- Are all the properties on hand and well organized?

In other words, *Is everyone ready for the final rehearsals?*

Page by Page

After you have given the tech personnel a brief overview, and have checked the general status of each department, begin working through the entire production from beginning to end.

- If it is a musical, include the beginning and ending of each song—as well as any passages within that involve a cue for one of the technical personnel. (Be prepared for this beforehand: Don't waste time by hunting and searching for the spots on the CD, but work all this out prior to the meeting.)
- Be specific with cues. For example, "On page twenty-nine, measure sixty, beat three, bring all lights up full," or "On page forty-five, line 15—Joseph's entrance line—gradually fade out program music." Tell them *exactly* what you would like, then be sure they note it in their scripts.

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- Share any information of which they may not be aware, but that will help them do their job, such as to the stage manager: “The custodian just told me there’s a problem with the toilets on the second floor; you’d better have the men use the first-floor rest-rooms,” or to the makeup artist, “Helen is allergic to our normal base, so talk to her about bringing her own for you to check against the lights in that second scene,” or to the wardrobe mistress, “John is going to be here early Friday evening, helping the sound crew; you can do that final fitting on his costume then.”

In practical terms, most of the critical information discussed at the meeting will pertain to the sound and lighting crews. But don't slight the other departments. As you work through the script, make sure that you cover the following points with the department heads.

Assistant Director

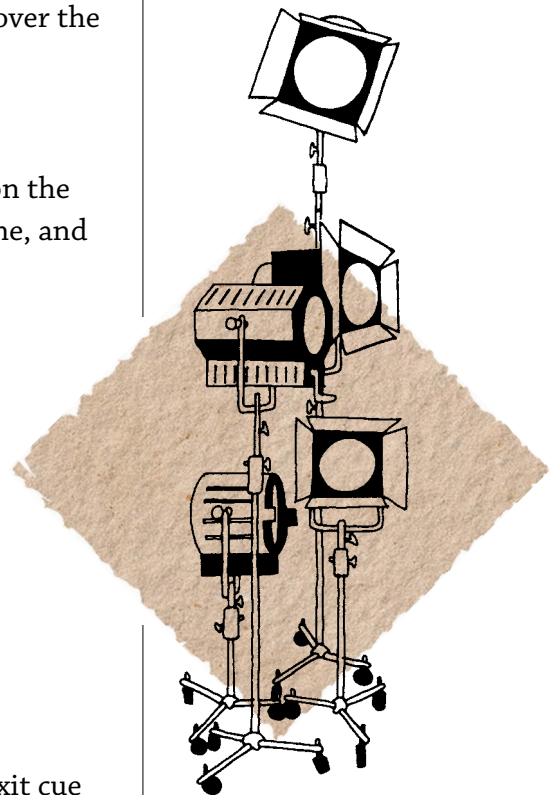
- What will be his duties during the final rehearsals and performances? Now that most of the hard work of rehearsals is over, make sure this person has meaningful work to do.
- What will be his “relationship” (read, level of authority) over the other departments? Does he speak in your name, or no?

Stage Manager

At this meeting, the stage manager should be concentrating on the mechanics of ensuring a smooth transition from scene to scene, and keeping order backstage.

- Discuss the backstage room assignments and traffic patterns.
- Which doors will have to remain unlocked, and which ones should be locked to keep out the audience prior to curtain and during the performance?
- Which bathrooms will be used by the cast and crew, and which ones by members of the audience?
- Be sure that the stage manager notes the entrance and exit cue

For more discussion about the responsibilities of each technical department, see Emphasis Ten, “Behind the Scenes,” in Part Four.



of every cast member. It will be her responsibility (or that of an assistant) to notify each actor when it is time for his or her entrance.

- Discuss the importance of quiet and decorum in the backstage area.
- Discuss where backstage the props and set pieces should be organized. (Properties should be kept near the entrance that will be used by the actors needing them.)

Wardrobe

While it is true that the bulk of the wardrobe mistress' responsibilities is focused on costume *creation*, there remains much to do during final rehearsals and performances. Costumes will often require quick, on-the-spot repairs, and in smaller, amateur productions, the wardrobe mistress is the logical candidate for a "dresser."

- Outline her pre-curtain priorities. Specify which actors are to be in costume first, and in which costumes.
- Discuss which actors will need the assistance of the wardrobe mistress, and which can be costumed on their own, or with the assistance of other actors.
- Either the wardrobe mistress or the stage manager should be in charge of dressing rooms. Finalize their locations, traffic patterns, and availability before, during, and after the production.
- Discuss the importance of quiet and decorum in the dressing rooms.

Makeup

Ideally, the more experienced actors should be able to do some or all of their own makeup. Realistically, however, most actors in the typical amateur production will need to have their makeup done for them by someone else. For larger productions, consider training several assistants to work with the lead makeup person.

For a detailed discussion about costumes, see Chapter Six, "Costuming the Biblical Character," in Part Four.

Part 2: A Director's Guide

- It is of critical importance that the makeup artist know the order in which the actors are to be made up—based on the sequence of their entrances—and whether it should be before or after costuming.
- Discuss where the makeup area will be located, and what she will need in the way of tables, chairs, and mirrors.
- Emphasize (when appropriate for the production) the need for makeup on areas of the body other than the face: smudging arms and legs, and applying “dirt” to the feet.

Sound

- Discuss the importance of safety—that all microphone cords and speaker cables will either be stored out of the way entirely, or taped down, so no one trips over them.
- Have the sound man color-code microphones—especially those that will be hand-held—to make it easier to associate any mic with its slider on the board. (They should not be associated by cast member, since during performance an actor or singer could pick up the wrong mic.)
- Inform the sound man how you will begin subsequent rehearsals—i.e., which scene or song do you wish him to set up for the start of rehearsal or run-through.

Lights

- Discuss the importance of safety—that all cords and cables will either be stored out of the way entirely, or taped down, so no one trips over them. Likewise, all floor lights stands will be secured, anticipating that they will inevitably be bumped.
- Lights should also be informed with which scene or song you will begin the technical and dress rehearsals.
- Discuss the temperature and texture of the individual scenes, as well as the overall production. No other technical aspect is as critical as lighting to the look of the play. No matter how well

Regarding hand-held mics...

Please remember that the purpose of acting—at its most fundamental—is to fool the audience. The goal of each actor is to trick the audience into thinking that he is really someone else, doing and saying things that he would never do, and dwelling in a time and place utterly foreign to his experience.

How can this be accomplished when the actor playing Jesus (or Joseph, or Mary, or the apostle Peter) is holding a microphone in his hand? This writer/director is dumbfounded by productions in which an actor has spent weeks establishing a character, the wardrobe mistress has created a thoroughly authentic costume, and the makeup artist has transformed the appearance of the actor to make him appear as someone else—only to, at the last minute, stick a twenty-first century microphone in his hand!

Please don't do this. Find any way possible not to encumber the actors playing ancient, or otherwise non-modern characters, with inappropriate modern appendages. If you do not have wireless mics, they can usually be rented for a moderate fee, or microphones can be camouflaged within props or set pieces. But *please* do not so casually destroy the illusion you and the actor have worked so long and hard to create.

The term “temperature” refers to the *color* of the lights used. Cooler temperatures are created with blue or green gels, while warmer temperatures are created with reds and yellows. (“Gels” are the colored plastic sheets placed in front of the lens of stage lights.)

the set has been designed, if it isn’t lit well, it won’t work; no matter how authentic the costumes, if no one can see them, or if they are turned a bad color by use of the wrong gels, it is all for naught. Discuss with the lighting master your vision for how the scenes should look to the audience. (Ideally, however, this should have been discussed long before the technical meeting.)

Set

By the time of the technical meeting, those given the responsibility of creating the set should be finished with their task, and have turned over their sets to the stage manager and his crew. Depending on the scope of the production, however, the director may still want to have the set designer at this meeting—as well as the technical rehearsal. If so,

- Verify that all set pieces are completed, and are in place backstage, ready for the final rehearsals. (Absolute deadline: technical rehearsal.)
- Inquire as to whether there is any special care needed in the handling of any set pieces.

Properties

As with the set designer, most of the footwork for the properties manager takes place before the final rehearsals. In fact, the earlier in the rehearsal schedule that props can be in use the better. In larger productions, however, the props manager may be needed backstage to help keep everything organized.

- Discuss where backstage the properties will be set up and available for the actors prior to their entrances.
- Have the props manager note in his or her script the scene in which each prop is used first; which actor (if any) uses it; whether it is carried on by an actor, or is in place on stage prior to the scene; and when the prop comes off stage (if before final curtain).

The Debriefing

Before dismissing everyone from the meeting, make sure they understand that you will be conducting a “debriefing” immediately following the technical rehearsal. After the cast members have left, you will huddle up with the members of the tech crew to discuss how things went during the rehearsal. Depending on the nature and size of the production, this may take fifteen minutes—or even one to two hours. It is important that any mechanical problems discovered during the technical rehearsal be resolved before the dress rehearsal.

Therefore, everyone on the tech crews should plan on a late night for the technical rehearsal.

chapter ten

The Technical Rehearsal



Before

Prepare your actors, prepare your technical crew—and prepare yourself.

During

Work through the script from beginning to end—including those elements that take place before and after curtain.

After

Debrief the tech crew, and do not leave before all problems experienced during the rehearsal have been addressed.

WE OFTEN REFER TO IT AS “HELL WEEK”—the week in which the director sleeps the least, the week at the end of which the director vows that he will never again mount a production of such size and complexity. As if the technical meeting is not sufficiently unnerving, it is followed closely by the technical rehearsal—the first time all the varied components of the production are flung together at the same place and time. The technical rehearsal is followed immediately by the dress rehearsal: the full-bore, give-it-all-you-got, make-or-break, very last chance to put it all together and get it right. Then, usually in less than twenty-four hours, comes opening night—the first of what may be many thrill-packed adventures into the great unknown.

Without question one of the more strenuous times for a director is the evening of the technical rehearsal. Up until now, much of what

will transpire during this and subsequent evenings has been floating about only in the director's head—a shapeless expectation that everything will, indeed, come together as planned, and work. But now it is time to actually bring to fruition (or at least trembling germination) the total package that was imagined long before.

Now, for the first time, the sound and lights crews will actually see what was only explained to them before: they will have actual bodies on stage with which to work. Meanwhile, for the first time, the actors will experience working on stage under conditions close to that of performance. Stage lights may blind them; microphones may now be clipped to various parts of their person or hung in close proximity above their head; subtle changes may have to be made to blocking they have rehearsed and, supposedly, had locked in for weeks.

And through it all, everyone's patience will be sorely tried.

The Actors

The rehearsal schedule for any production should be designed so that by this point your actors are essentially on their own. The time for wood shedding lines and blocking, and character development is over. Your work with the actors should now be limited to final polish, and any necessary adjustments to blocking based on new technical re-

Before



quirements or limitations. This does not mean that from now on the actors and their work will be inconsequential, but that your focus and energies will be applied more heavily to the technical side, and the production as a whole.

During your last regular rehearsal before the technical rehearsal—if not before—explain this to your actors, emphasizing that while you turn your attention to these new priorities, you expect them to

- continue rehearsing at home—even privately with each other;

Figure 2.4 — The changing relationship between director and actor over the course of rehearsals.

- continue fine-tuning their character;
- review their role thoroughly before each subsequent rehearsal and performance;
- be punctual, cooperative, and, above all, *patient* at final rehearsals.

It is easy for a director to forget what it is like for actors or choir members to stand around for long periods of time, trying to be quiet and well-behaved while technical matters are addressed. During an early production of the His Company musical, *Movin' up to Gloryland*, the local music minister took one of the principal roles while I directed the final rehearsals. At one point, when the technical rehearsal ground to a halt while sound problems were dealt with, the music minister—standing around on stage with the rest of the actors—lost his patience, demanding to know what was taking so long. He was now getting a taste of what it was like for those who had had to wait while *he* addressed such problems in earlier productions—and he didn't like it.

The director should remember that others are waiting while he or she addresses technical problems, and—as much as is humanly possible—such times should be kept to a minimum.

This is why the technical *meeting* is so important to the productivity of the technical *rehearsal*.

Keeping Contact

Much of your preparation for this final push will be determined by the relationship you enjoy with those on the technical crew—and their level of competency. Are they self-starters? Do they usually follow through with instructions given them at the technical meeting? Or do those on the technical side of your production require constant prodding just to accomplish the basics?

If the latter more closely describes your situation, you will probably be spending much of this week on the phone, chasing down details that need to be resolved before the tech rehearsal. If so, begin now to encourage a higher level of responsibility in your technical crew leaders. Your goal, in larger productions especially, is to leave the details of implementation to the ones in charge of their respective departments, and not to get bogged down in the minutia of mechanics.

I once wrote the script and directed the drama for a production in which the music director used up so much time working with his sound man to balance their brand new stereo sound system for the sanctuary, that no time was left to rehearse the drama for his musical.

Don't *ever* make such a mistake. Leave the details to those better suited to address them. If it is really necessary for you to be involved, do it at another time—ideally prior to the technical rehearsal, but at least not *during* a rehearsal, while actors and other technical personnel are standing around twiddling their thumbs.

Personal Readiness

Just as you have now reached the point where you expect the highest quality performance from everyone else working with you, it is

now time for you to be on top of *your* game. Now is the time for you to know your own responsibilities frontwards and backwards, inside and out. To employ just one more cliché, your job is to “hit the ground running” at every rehearsal. Be thoroughly prepared, including

- **Review the script.** The technical rehearsal is about more than just sound and lights. It is also about blocking, movement of set pieces and props, and coordination of backstage activity. The bible and road map for all of this is your copy of the script. Know it well. Before the technical rehearsal review the actors' blocking—especially any problem areas that will require special attention. (Don't concern yourself with the actors' *lines*; assign that task, if necessary, to an assistant.) Review the overall look and sound of each scene, including set pieces; time of day; any program music that will be used; and the jobs of necessary support individuals, such as wardrobe, makeup, and props.
- **Verify call times.** Make sure that the technical crews understand when they need to have their equipment in place and ready, and that the individual actors know when they should be on stage. If the formal rehearsal begins at 6:00, that is when the tech crews are to have all their stuff *ready*; it is *not* when they are to be walking in the door. At the same time, remind them that it will probably be necessary for them (at least the department heads) to stay for a while after the cast has left, to iron out any problems encountered during the rehearsal.
- **Plan the rehearsal.** Too much time is wasted when the director walks in the door of the rehearsal hall—and only *then* decides how to conduct the rehearsal. Sketch out beforehand how much time you intend to spend with each scene, and in what order. Anticipate problem areas, and allow extra time for them. Changes in your plan will inevitably occur, but just having a plan to begin with will mean your rehearsal will run more smoothly and efficiently.

Finally, make every effort to conduct the technical rehearsal under conditions identical to those for most performances (i.e., same time of day).

During *all* rehearsals, but especially during the critical final rehearsals such as Tech and Dress, direct everyone to turn off the sound of their cell phones and other portable devices—and then to *put them away*.

During

The word “curtain,” is used here as shorthand for the beginning of the play or musical. The average church venue usually will not use a literal curtain, but lights, to begin and end the production.

Have the actors read Chapter Five, “The Technical Rehearsal,” in Part Three.

The Complete Evening

It will be best for everyone involved if you can conduct the technical rehearsal in chronological, or *script* order. Begin at the very beginning, when the doors are first opened for the audience (if applicable), and proceed through the script until they are leaving the building. In other words, the technical rehearsal should include for consideration *all elements of the performance event*. The specific decisions and details will have been worked out in the technical *meeting*; at this rehearsal each component should be walked-through in its proper sequence. For example,

- **Pre-curtain.** When will the doors open? Will there be ushers present? Any special instructions for them? What program music, if any, will be used, and when? At what cue will the house lights dim in preparation for curtain?
- **Post-curtain.** What will be the cue for the audience that the performance is at an end? What sort of response from them do you anticipate? What will be your response to that? What will those on stage do during and after the audience response?

All these considerations will have been debated and agreed upon beforehand. At this rehearsal you will explain the rationale for them with everyone involved, and walk through them as needed.

Levels of Importance

Emphasize to the actors that this rehearsal is less for them than for the technical crew. The time will not be used for polishing lines, or character development, but for integrating into their on stage work the more mechanical aspects of the production.

Meanwhile, emphasize to the tech crew (if necessary) that while you welcome their input and advice—specifically in their area of expertise—they must understand that they are not responsible for making final *creative* decisions. That falls to the director alone.

Segments of the play or musical in which nothing “technical” or “mechanical” is happening, such as long speeches or songs, may be

abbreviated during the tech rehearsal. In the case of songs, cue the beginning, stop after a page or two, then cue the last page.

If something mechanical isn't working—and after several tries *still* is not working—deal with it later, at a time when others are not standing around waiting. *But certainly solve the problem before dress rehearsal* (see below).

Whenever time permits, it will be a great advantage—for everyone involved—to run through the entire production more than once during the technical rehearsal.

Staying Late

It is important to address any problems of a technical nature (i.e., not involving the cast) encountered during the rehearsal before moving on. After you have dismissed everyone else, solve these problems with your technical crew. Do not put them off until the dress rehearsal, because then you will once again have a stage full of cast members waiting around, struggling for patience. Solve the problems, one way or another, before leaving that night.

The Important Debriefing

At the same time, *debrief* your tech crew, and answer any questions they may have. While progressing through the play, they may not have had time to discuss certain issues with you on the spot. Field those questions now, while everything is still fresh in all your minds. Discuss with them how things went—not only for you, the director, but for them. Specifically,

- How did things go in places unobserved by you, such as backstage? Were there any timing or traffic problems? Were there any communication problems between you, the director (if out front), and personnel backstage?
- For both sound and lights, are all the cues *manageable* (i.e., is it physically possible to execute what is called for in the script)? If not, what adjustments must be made?

After

- Was there time to move all set pieces on and off the stage? Any surprise traffic problems?
- Do any adjustments need to be made to wardrobe or makeup?

Use this opportunity to discover, address, and clear up any problems, so that the next rehearsal goes smoothly. The upcoming dress rehearsal is *not* the time to work out problems; think of it, instead, as a pre-performance, in which everything *should*, ideally, work properly.

The purpose of every rehearsal up to now—including the technical rehearsal—has been to practice the right things and solve problems with the wrong things. As much as possible, the purpose of the dress rehearsal will be to give the actors and the members of the technical crew an opportunity to *practice performance*.



chapter eleven

Dress Rehearsal



Before

Plan the rehearsal carefully, so it will be an opportunity for the cast and crew to “practice performance.”

During

Conduct the rehearsal in three parts: Preliminaries, nonstop run-through, and post run-through debriefing.

After

Give it to the Lord.

IN THE STEADY PROCESSION OF REHEARSALS LEADING TO opening night, the dress rehearsal is prom night. It is the sometimes magical culmination of all the hours of memorization, blocking practice, and struggles to apprehend or sculpt an elusive character. It is the first moment in which everyone involved—not the least of which, the director—discover whether all their work has resulted in a worthwhile production.

This rehearsal is the first opportunity to learn whether all the disparate components—from the smallest walk-on to the leading role, from the vision of the set designer to the artistry of the wardrobe mistress, from the inventive dialogue of the writer to the style and discipline of the director—have coalesced into a cohesive whole.

The dress rehearsal may represent the tangible realization of the director's first vision, a faithful portrait of his or her imaginings generated from the first reading of the script. On the other hand, the dress rehearsal may represent a compromise—indeed, a *series* of compromises that have reduced the production to a disappointing smallness, falling far short of the director's vision. More often, however, the dress rehearsal may reveal something that only began with a director's vision, but has evolved into something different, better, more richly realized than even he imagined.

Making a Difference

The director must be on top of his game for the dress rehearsal. Thorough preparation is critical to the success of this very important rehearsal. For the cast alone, for example, the work you put into planning and organizing this important, final rehearsal will mean the difference between their moving into the first performance with motivated confidence and inspiration, and uneasy trepidation.

Details

Any problems discovered during the *technical* rehearsal should have been addressed and solved by now. It is critical that *all* components of the production—director, actors, backstage crew, lighting and sound crews, makeup and wardrobe—approach the dress rehearsal as if it were a real performance. This means that every question has been answered, every production article has been finalized, every problem has been solved. The purpose of the dress rehearsal is to *practice performance*—only a performance without the Damocles sword of the audience in residence.

Plan the evening carefully. Ideally, if there will be time, you should organize the rehearsal into three segments:

- Preliminaries.
- Nonstop run-through.
- Debrief, and address any problems, if necessary.

Before

Some directors permit a select audience to attend the dress rehearsal. Except for rare occasions—say, when an actor's husband is shipping off to war the following morning—the dress rehearsal should remain closed to the public. For the cast and crew, the attendant audience breaks the logical, gradual crescendo which began at the first stumbling rehearsal, and which will culminate in the polished opening night. For the audience, meanwhile, the dress rehearsal will no doubt be a poor substitute for a real performance. It is better for everyone that the two are not mixed.

It is possible that there could be some rough spots in the script that will need attention just before the dress run-through. Perhaps an actor has been having a terrible time mastering a bit of business, or a soloist needs to go over a particularly difficult passage. It is always recommended that such things be worked out prior to dress rehearsal night, but if it becomes necessary, address these rough spots either before the official beginning of the rehearsal (best), or at least before the dress run-through.

During

If your production is a musical, energize the start of a larger rehearsal such as this by having your sound person cue one of the more popular, upbeat songs to get everyone on stage.

Before the night of the rehearsal, review with your wardrobe and makeup departments the order in which the actors should be in costume, made up, and ready to go on stage. Discuss with the sound, lights, and backstage crews the organization of the rehearsal—especially if you will be rehearsing any scenes out of order, prior to the nonstop run-through.

Finally, make sure that all actors understand that everyone, no matter where their entrance comes in the play, will need to be there *from the beginning* of the rehearsal. There will be no individual call times. This is important not just to ensure their timely participation, but to ensure that everyone involved in the project is present to experience the full production. The dress rehearsal may be the first and only time before performance some will see realized the complete package.

Preliminaries

Begin the dress rehearsal by gathering everyone—including all the members of the various crews—on or near the stage. After a time of prayer and dedication, brief the cast and crew on your plans for the evening. Impress upon everyone present that the official dress run-through will be conducted as if it were an actual performance. This will mean that

- complete costumes and makeup will be used, including everything the actors will—and will not wear—during performance;
- actors will “cover” any mistakes made, without any reaction, just as they would during performance;
- technical crews will note any problems experienced, but will not let them stop the rehearsal;
- sound levels backstage will be kept down to a performance level, as if there were an audience out front;
- all cell phones are to be silenced and put away;
- nothing short of the Rapture will halt the proceedings.

About the only permitted difference between the dress run-through and a real performance is the location of the director. If, during performance, the director will remain backstage, during this rehearsal he will need to be out front to observe.

Inform everyone that they are to remain on the premises during the entire evening, and that immediately following the run-through they are to gather in this same spot for a debriefing. Then, before dismissing them, announce a time at which the dress run-through will commence.

Run-through

As much as you can, give *yourself* a performance experience as well. By now the performance itself should run with little or no input from you. Every actor should know his or her cues, the technical personnel have had several opportunities to practice their cues, and most every other responsibility has been delegated to department heads. You should be able to sit back and watch the dress run-through as if you were a member of the audience. By all means, you will need to jot down notes about problems you observe, but for the most part you should use this time to evaluate the production by experiencing it as will the audience.

If an unexpected occurrence does stop the run-through—say, the pastor storms into the sanctuary, or the sound system quite unexpectedly goes dead, or the entire set comes crashing down onto the heads of the actors—then simply acknowledge the problem and move on as smoothly as possible. Make a note of the occurrence, and during the subsequent debriefing use it as a teachable moment to ask the members of the cast and technical crew, “What will you do if this happens in performance?”

Debriefing

Encouragement

After the run-through, have everyone gather on or around the stage again for the debriefing—including, again, all technical personnel. In a few minutes you will begin pointing out all the things they did

See the sidebar in Chapter Nine, “The Technical Meeting, about supplying food at these final rehearsals.

wrong; be sure not to leave the impression that *everything* they did was wrong. In place of the missing audience feedback, be as encouraging and enthusiastic as possible about what you have just seen.

Focus

If your production is a larger play or musical, involving a greater number of people who do not often work on stage, it may be necessary to preface your remarks with the caveat that what follows is not to be taken as personal criticism, but only as an effort to produce the finest performance for the Lord. Excellence—not perfection—is the goal: everyone doing the very best of which they are capable.

During this time with the entire cast and crew, make every effort to address only those items that are either of broad, general interest, or those that can be dispensed with quickly. Limit more detailed or technical discussions only to those who need to know. For example, during the general debriefing you could mention such things as

- “I’d like to have more energy from everyone on the entrance to the opening number.”
- “Helen, I didn’t hear your exit line in the second scene. A little louder please, and deliver it before you turn upstage.”
- “Joe, the Trax were too loud on ‘In His Name.’ Could you take them down a little?”

Reserve more personal comments for private conversation with individuals, and more technical discussions with the responsible crews. For example,

- “Alice, you just aren’t there yet with the first scene. I know you have it in you—I’ve seen it from time to time, but it isn’t consistent. Could you spend some time on that at home tomorrow? Just let me know if you want me to work with you, but I think you know what I’m looking for in that scene.”
- “Harry, let’s discuss the lighting on the last scene. I have some ideas I’d like to run by you. Just some small adjustments, but I

think they'll make a big difference.”

Try to address these more specific issues before leaving for the evening, so that they are settled before opening night.

Facing Reality

Whether in private conversation with individuals or in remarks addressed to the group, always keep in mind that opening night is just around the corner. There is no point in belaboring problems that will not be rectified before then. Some actors will have only so much to give; some tech members will have only a certain level of expertise. Don't make them (and yourself) miserable by harping on a situation that has no hope for change at this late date.

By this point in the production schedule, you have done about all you can. For some involved in Christian drama, the accepted method is to do a slapdash job of rehearsing, then “give it to the Lord.” But that is an example of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call “cheap grace.” Yes, God does, indeed, wish for us to rely on Him in all things, but He also expects us to use to the best of our abilities the talents and skills He has placed at our disposal—to use them in His name.

The His Company method is to work hard, efficiently, with purpose and resolve, and *then* “give it to the Lord.” This does not ignore our dependency on Him, but represents a faithful and responsible stewardship of His gifts.

Since the moment you first selected your script, you and your cast and crew have worked hard to stage the play to the very best of your ability. You have strived at every turn to do it in a way that would bring honor and glory to the Father, and to His Son, Jesus Christ. Now the hard work of rehearsal is at an end.

Now, give it to the Lord.

After



chapter twelve

Opening Night



Before

Prepare yourself physically, mentally, and spiritually.

During

Energize without alarm; encourage and affirm when appropriate; gather everyone together prior to curtain; don't get in the way.

After

Give all the glory to God, but graciously accept any audience appreciation; later, enjoy the afterglow.

YOU HAVE SPENT WEEKS, PERHAPS MONTHS, SHAPING AND molding a disparate collection of actors into a unified, effective company. You have taken unfamiliar words on the printed page and turned them into a believable story played out upon the live stage. You have struggled against the actors' egos, petulance, tardiness, lethargy and outright rebellion—but you have also been energized by their enthusiasm, foresight, intensity of focus, and occasional brilliance.

You have put in long hours behind the scenes, struggled to communicate esoteric ideas to technical crews with minds fixed on the cold reality of cables and impedance and ohms and cubic feet, and you have made countless phone calls to prod lazy “volunteers” into action. But you have also experienced the triumph of seeing it all come together—at times in ways glorious and breathtaking. By God's grace

and long-suffering mercy, you have *done* it. You have seen it through to completion, creating something honorable to offer in the Lord's name.

Now what?

The Calm Eye in the Backstage Storm

The hard truth is, come opening night of a play, there isn't much left for the director to do. A larger production, such as a seasonal musical, will still require the coordination of the various departments and, perhaps, the director literally directing the choral singing from downstage. But by curtain of the first performance, the work of rehearsal is at an end. Any rehearsal at this point would be counterproductive—possibly doing more harm than good. Whatever the state of the individual characters, whatever the condition of the play, the work of the director to either of these ends is over. For better or worse, this is how it will be presented to the audience.

At the same time, you have delegated to others much of the mechanics of production: properties and stage crews will create and manage the set; wardrobe and makeup crews will dress and remake the actors into their respective characters; and sound and lighting crews will make it all audible and visible to the audience. If you are not out front directing the choir, you may spend the evening backstage, feeling like the fifth wheel on a rather substantial—and self-reliant—four-wheel cart.

None of this, however, reduces the importance of your contribution to the performance. The director of a play wears many hats. For weeks you have been the visionary, the teacher, the organizer, the disciplinarian, the artist. With the arrival of opening night you may still need to be all of the above, but it is now time for you to be as well the encourager, the cheerleader, the calm eye of the backstage storm. For the director, firm decision-making has not come to an end; it is still necessary for someone to be in charge. But if you have done your job well over the rehearsal process, everything should proceed to plan in performance with little additional effort on your part.

Before

A New Level

A play (or musical) is a living, breathing thing. By the time it is ready to be presented to an audience it has a life of its own—and a powerful yearning to express itself. Much like the body of Christ, the play is a single, irreducible entity made up of very different, unequal individuals—each contributing his or her gifts to make the whole better than the mere sum of its parts.

It is the director who artfully combines these singular gifts, drawing individuals into a project to create a cohesive, effective statement upon the stage. Once they are there, it is the director who organizes and employs these gifts to maximum advantage—adding here, removing there, crafting and shaping the whole by the skilled management of its respective parts.

And this work of the director does not end on opening night, but only moves to a different level. By opening night the work of the director is not unlike the role of the parent of an adult child: the time of hands-on molding and shaping is at an end, but the time of constructive *influence* is not.

Final Preparation

Prepare for opening night much as you did for the dress rehearsal.

- Is everything ready, and in place?
- Are there any last-minute technical details that must be confirmed prior to the actual hour?
- What about the venue? Have all arrangements been made for the unlocking of outside doors, or gaining access to offices or telephones?
- Is the stack of programs ready for the ushers?
- Are there any last-minute instructions for those who have not yet been involved, such as ushers or nursery workers?

Part 2: A Director's Guide

- Have all the problems discovered in the dress rehearsal been resolved?

Meanwhile, it is important to the performance that you arrive well-prepared—physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Physically

Be rested. Don't arrive in a harried, breathless state; don't spend the afternoon rushing here and there, leaving that night's performance as only the last item on the day's do-list. Take the time to slow down and collect yourself. Arrive for performance refreshed and energized: there are those in your cast and crew that will need this from you.

Mentally

By now the script should be an old friend, but if necessary review any portions that have caused problems in the past. It is the director's responsibility to know everything there is to know about the production as a whole. Arrive for performance having thought through the entire play or musical. If you are directing the choral portions, rehearse those rough spots so you are on top of your game. Have a plan for the evening: arrive already knowing what needs to be done, and when.

Spiritually

There is no more important element of preparation for performance than having the heart right. Do not arrive dependant only on your own energies, but arrive energized by the *Holy Spirit*. Align yourself with the Lord prior to leaving home. Spend time before the throne so that every action, every thought, every motive will be in tune with God's purpose for this production. The highest calling is to work *with* the Lord—not without, or against Him.

Attitude and Body Language

The experienced director has, over time, developed the ability to energize cast and crew without also inciting alarm. There is a fine line between doing what is necessary to keep everyone on their toes, up and ready for performance, and creating undue anxiety or stress backstage. The director who has just raced to the church after a late-after-

Years ago we arrived at the time for performance of a worship musical for which I had compiled the music and written the narration for the Worship Leader. In addition, the Music Minister had asked me to take the role of the Worship Leader on stage. That morning, just prior to performance, the sound man and I met with the Music Minister in his office. We could have spent that time running down a list of check points, verifying that we were, indeed, ready for performance. We could have spent that time fretting over technical problems that had sprung up at the last minute, or worrying over the questionable reaction of the congregation to a musical of this type. Instead, we prepared ourselves for performance by doing the single most important thing we could: we worshipped. We sang and prayed together, and we humbled ourselves before the Lord. Nothing done by us that morning was more important than permitting the Holy Spirit to align our intentions and wills with those from above.

During

noon meeting at the office, coasted through a few stop signs along the way and gone without dinner—this director flying through the door out of breath and sweating around the collar will undoubtedly do more harm than good with cast and crew, exciting anxiety by her very presence. Likewise, the director who slides in at any old hour, exuding little more than bland ambivalence, pleased to let everyone go about their business at will—*this* director causes waves of panic to sweep through the room by his lackadaisical body language alone.

A Biblical Hope

The goal for the director is to exude *confident anticipation*—an expectation (a Biblical, not earthly *hope*) that good things are about to happen, that your “edge” is from *excitement*, rather than anxiety, and that your confidence is from resting comfortably in the Lord. By your every word and action—your very body language—you want to telegraph to every cast and crew member not “I sure hope you do all right tonight,” but “I know you are going to do a *great* job tonight.”

This is not to suggest that the director ignore reality and lie through his or her teeth. It does little good to pump up confidence with a lot of hot air. But by opening night the time for gnashing of teeth is over. You have invested time, energy, and not a little prayer in this production; now is the time to enjoy its coming-out.

Before the Throne

There should be a comfortable rhythm to the moments leading up to curtain. In broad terms, the evening of performance should follow a logical, systematic pattern:

- Everyone arrives at a call time that leaves plenty of time for preparation;
- Technical crew members organize all their equipment and paraphernalia, while
- Cast members get into costume and makeup;

Direct everyone to turn off the sound of their cell phones and other portable devices—and then to *put them away*.

The foregoing steps should be scheduled for completion at least ten or fifteen minutes prior to curtain. During these last few moments all participants—including the technical crew—should gather together in a quiet room for the most important preparatory step of the evening:

- A time of prayer and praise.

This time is important for a number of reasons. On a *practical* level, it affords everyone a chance to slow down and collect their thoughts after the earlier busyness and commotion necessary for production. On a *dramatic* level, it lets the actors settle down and begin preparing their respective characters. On a *community* level, it brings together everyone involved in the production to underscore and strengthen their sense of unity toward a common goal. But most important, on a *spiritual* level, it brings together everyone, as a corporate whole, before the throne of God.

Proper Alignment

Even after all the important rehearsals and meetings necessary to production, there is no step more critical to the success of the play than time spent before the throne. As is so often the case in a relationship with the Lord, there are multiple benefits for the supplicant. Like aligning iron filings by the pull of a magnet, this time aligns the hearts, minds, and intentions of everyone in the room to the true purpose of the play.

Anyone who along the way has started thinking too much of himself—an actor a bit enamored by her own stage presence, a sound man too impressed by his own technical skills—will be realigned by time spent before the Lord. If earlier an actor was beginning to love the applause, this time will remind him that the purpose of the play is to bring glory to God, not for him to revel in the adulation of the crowd.

As with other components of the production, stay organized, and keep this time tightly focused on its intended purpose:

Think of a pyramid—or the way an artist would paint a road in proper perspective: wide near the front of the painting, then gradually moving toward a point in the distance.

At the point of the pyramid, or at the point where the road meets the horizon, is God sitting on His throne. Forming the body of the pyramid, or the pavement of the road, are people bowed in prayer or praise. Now notice the people: Near the base of the pyramid, or the beginning of the road, where there is a broad expanse, the people are all doing the same thing—worshipping their God—but there is space between them. They aren't touching each other. But as they each draw closer to God, they are also drawn inexorably closer to each other as the pyramid narrows toward the capstone, or the road narrows toward the horizon, until their shoulders are rubbing and their bodies compacted against each other.

The closer we get to God—in worship, in study, in prayer—the closer and more aligned we will also be with His people who are doing the same.

- Begin with a word of appreciation for the work everyone has turned in, and their commitment to the production.
- Encourage everyone; affirm their good work, and assure them that the audience will be enriched and edified by their performance.
- If you let cast and crew share their thoughts or prayer requests, keep it on-topic: keep the focus on the play, and the job at hand—not requesting prayer for someone’s second cousin who is having their tonsils out next week.
- In both your remarks and prayer, keep the focus on *the Lord*, on making this play or musical an offering of praise and devotion to Him.
- Keep all remarks brief and succinct. Don’t wallow in community, but let community emerge from this time together before the Lord.
- After prayer, issue final instructions for everyone to quickly take their place for curtain.

On Station

Where you are and what you do during the actual performance will be determined by the nature of the production and the scope of your participation in it.

- If you have taken an on stage role, then your backstage role will be similar to those in the rest of the cast.
- If the production is a musical, you may be directing the choral portions from the “pit.”
- If the production is a nonmusical play, then you will be somewhere backstage.

Permitting Space

It is important that the director know his actors, and be sensitive to their individual preparation for going on stage. There is a time for the director to encourage, to play the cheerleader, to be the coach pushing his team out the locker room door for the big game against State. But there is also a time for the director to keep his mouth shut, to permit his actors the time and space to mentally prepare for their on stage role. More than once a well-meaning director has spent weeks preaching the gospel of an actor “getting into character” before entering for a scene—only to destroy that individual preparation by his opening night enthusiasm.

Some actors will require constant encouragement and coaxing right up to the minute they enter for their scene. Others—especially those in heavily dramatic or demanding roles—will require that they be left alone, and be given the opportunity and privacy to establish their character before going on stage.

Know your actors, and give them what they need.

Once the play has begun, you, as the director, should make your presence felt backstage—not as an irritating goad, but as an encouraging figure of calm authority. Your behavior, of course, begins with your distinctive personality, but also should be sculpted to fit the personality of the play. In general terms, however, you should be there, available, ready to encourage when necessary, available for questions or reassurance, ready to affirm the actor who has just exited from his scene.

Don't get in the way. Let your backstage crew do their job. Your job is to gently oversee everything while, principally, being there in a supporting role for the actors and crew.

After Final Curtain

One of the more obvious differences between the secular and Christian stage is what happens after the final scene. Don't betray what you said to them just before the curtain was raised, by what you have your actors do after the final curtain falls. If the play is truly for the

On more than one occasion I have been associated with musicals in which the choral director, nor anyone else, did not physically direct the singers during performance. Usually this was because he had taken an on-stage role—but in almost every case, the director never repeated this mistake.

No matter how professional and accomplished its musicians may be, every symphony orchestra has a director. Come time for the New York Philharmonic Orchestra to perform, did Leonard Bernstein sit it out backstage? Of course not. The director was essential for on stage unity of all the various musical parts.

Just so the Christian musical. The choir needs a director, in performance, to establish the beat, give cues—to hold it all together. But it is also important not to err egregiously on the other side. You are *not* Leonard Bernstein, and the audience did *not* come to watch you direct. Don't make the mistake of setting yourself up as the center of attention. A good place for the choral director during a musical is on the front pew: clearly visible to everyone on stage, but still invisible to the majority of the audience.

After

Lord, then let that be the motivating force of the cast even as they receive the praise of the audience.

Find a way, within the practices and traditions of the venue, for your cast and crew to graciously accept the audience's appreciation while redirecting their praise upward. It is honorable and good for those who have performed to receive the gratitude of those who have been in attendance. Their appreciation should not be stifled. There are ways, however, for those on stage to accept the applause, but then redirect it up to God—where it ultimately belongs.

The Afterglow

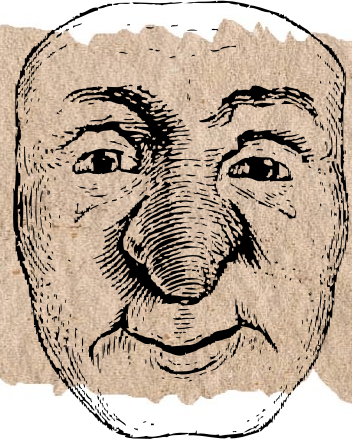
It is also acceptable for you and those you have worked with to enjoy the success of another production. The philosophy of servanthood is not intended to reduce everyone to the level of a lowly, good-for-nothing worm. Your gifts and skills are from the Lord; the play has been performed for Him and for His glory. But He *did* ask you to play a part in making it happen, didn't He?

Since the beginning of time, God has asked rather ordinary people to play important parts in His extraordinary design. He has graciously given you a role in something that will reverberate for weeks, months, perhaps years in His kingdom. So enjoy it, and be pleased that you were a part. Thank Him for the privilege. Thank Him for the honor He has bestowed on you to serve Him in such a public way.

Now, go out and find your next play!



part 3



An Actor's Guide

chapter one

The Script in Hand



The Basics

- Highlight every line and stage direction for your character.
- Read to the point of understanding all Introductory Notes.
- In one sitting, read through the script several times, making sure that at least one of them is out loud.
- During your readings, write down any comments or questions you might have regarding your character, or the play in general.

EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH THE SCRIPT. It is the foundation of every play. To be sure, the stage process is one of collaboration—every component from the director down to the stagehand is necessary. But it all begins with the script. Until humans are added, it *is* the play.

From the actor's perspective, the first step in the production of any new play is the moment at which the script is placed into his or her hand. And for many actors (both professional and amateur alike), the opening of a brand new script is a moment akin to Christmas morning for an eight-year-old. It is the beginning of something wonderful and rewarding—an almost mystical experience.

The actor's copy of the script is his guidebook, his road map, his sketchbook for the play or musical. Here he will chronicle his trek

through the mind of the author and the soul of the characters that inhabit the author's universe.

Approach every new script, in general, and your character, specifically, with an open mind—without any preconceived notions. Approach every new project with an attitude of discovery and an expectation of finding something new and fascinating.

Highlight

It seems a simple thing, too basic even to mention. But the simple practice of isolating your responsibilities from those of the other actors will go a long way toward smoothing the process for everyone.

One of the first things to do upon receiving your script is to sit down and highlight every one of your character's lines and every stage direction that refers to your character. This simple step will make it easier for you to learn your lines, make it easier for someone to *help* you learn your lines, and make it easier for you to quickly find your place when others are waiting.

Do not underline your lines; this will conflict with the underlining you will insert later for emphasis. Use a colored highlighter, instead, to mark your lines, or to mark the margin outside your lines of dialogue and directions.

Introductory Notes

If the play's author has included any descriptive notes on your character, they will usually be found either in a group with others near the beginning of the script—before the actual dialogue—or they will accompany your character's first entrance.

These notes by the author are the starting point for understanding your character. Any subsequent character development on your part should logically follow these.

Do not limit your reading to only those notes referring to your character. Read—and understand—everything about *every* character in

All notations you make in the script should be in pencil only.

the play. You will soon be called upon to interact in a believable way with these other characters; it will be to your benefit—as well as the benefit of the other actors, and the play as a whole—to get to know these “people” as well as possible.

During your reading of the introductory notes and character descriptions, circle or highlight the key words or phrases that describe each character, as in the following character descriptions from the His Company one-act, *Who do you say that I Am?*.

CHARACTERS

Erastus, the Gardener (p.6)

Erastus is in charge of the Garden of Gethsemane. He tends the shrubs and trees—mostly olive trees—and oversees the pressing of the olives into oil.¹ Erastus has the appearance of a hermit who spends little time in or around civilized society. He is squat and generously rotund, with a smudged face and dirt under his fingernails. However, while his manners and tone are gruff, these character traits fail to hide a mind more quick and nimble than his appearance would suggest.

As Jesus and His disciples have arrived in Erastus' garden, he has slunk back into the deep shadows. From that vantage point, Erastus has listened in silent wonder to Jesus praying in anguish to the Father. Then, with rising apprehension, he has witnessed the rush of authorities into the peaceful garden and the subsequent arrest of the rabbi.

Shara, the Syrian Baker (p.6)

This woman runs a small bakery just around the corner from where Jesus holds the Last Supper with His disciples. Shara is a simple (yet not unintelligent) woman who finds escape from an unhappy and unfulfilled marriage in her successful business. She lives peacefully with both the Jews and the Romans—not really understanding or caring deeply about either.

Late in preparations for the Passover, one of the disciples has come to her for the unleavened bread for the ceremonial supper. While most of her customers had placed their orders much earlier, Shara—being a shrewd businesswoman—has made extra for late orders; so she is able to supply their needs.

Being naturally curious, she has lingered after delivering the bread, listening to Jesus and His men through the door that opens onto the stairs leading down the outside of the house to the street below. Not being Jewish, the history and mysteries of the Passover have long escaped her, but Shara is fascinated by the words she hears coming from the lips of the Master—and follows after them when they leave for the Garden of Gethsemane.

Hananiah, the Money-changer (p.10)

This banker has overheard the teachings of Jesus for some time, as he has sat in the temple courtyard changing Roman coinage to Tyrian for worshippers. He is not antagonistic toward Jesus—in fact, under more benign circumstances, Hananiah might be well on the way toward becoming a believer. But that was instantly short-circuited the day earlier in the week when Jesus stormed into the temple, overturned his lucrative (and expensively leased) station and threw him and his like out of the temple.

Hananiah is, first and foremost, a pragmatist. No matter how he feels about what Jesus teaches, this new and admittedly attractive rabbi is not part of the power structure in Jerusalem—quite to the contrary, everything He says seems to speak against the power that be. Hananiah must, by his very practical nature, side with the priests and temple rulers seeking to do away with this one claiming to be the Son of God. Beyond his professional situation, Hananiah is a steely-eyed, cold-blooded snob who thinks himself more intelligent, more wealthy, and more privileged than just about anyone he meets. Those beneath him, he ignores; those above him, he courts.

Reading the Script

Your first job, as an actor, is to thoroughly familiarize yourself with the play and your character as quickly as possible. Your earliest source for this is the script itself. Later the director—and even you yourself—will contribute facets and nuances to your character, but the place where it all begins is the script.

You cannot read through the script too many times! The first few times, read it all the way through as you might a novel, taking no particular interest in your character over the rest. Consider the script as a whole: Note the statement it is making. Get a feeling for the pace and

flow of the story, the emotional rise and fall.

Integrity

As a Christian, you should also consider the *scriptural integrity* of the script. Does it square not only with what is written in the Bible, but also with the *spirit* and *intent* of God's word? It is not heresy to attempt a respectful "filling in the blanks" of Scripture; we do not have, for example, every last word uttered by Jesus or the apostle Paul. But it can be heresy to violate the *nature* of God's word, or the purpose of its characters.

Ideally the script will have already passed this muster with the director. This is primarily his or her responsibility. But before continuing, make sure you are comfortable with the attitude or point of view of the play or musical. If not, bring your concerns to the director—in private.

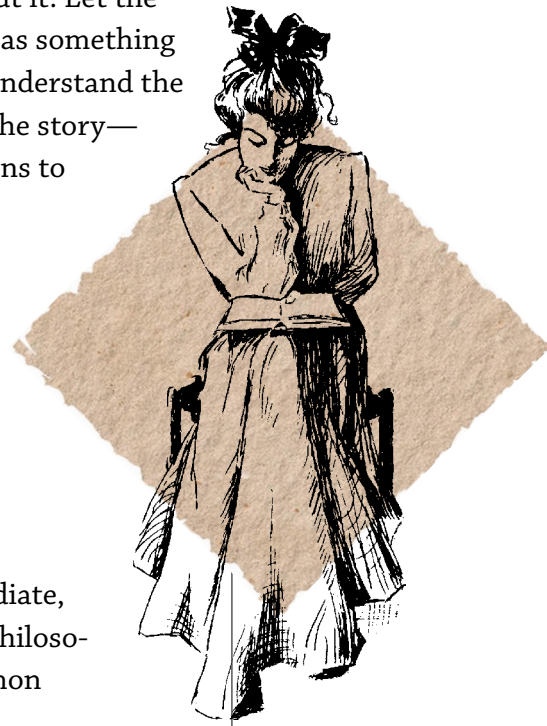
Character

Then read the script paying closer attention to your character, and how he or she interacts with the other characters. *Read it out loud!* Carry it with you to work, read it during your lunch hour. Take it to the park, keep it by your favorite easy chair. Think about it. Let the story roll around in your head. Imagine each character as something more than just words on a page. Listen to the voices. Understand the story through the eyes of each character. Understand the story—and where you don't, make a note to raise your questions to the director.

One way to do this is to jot down your thoughts in the margins of your printed script, as in the following script segment from the His Company sketch, *A Greater Love*.

Memorization

There is no greater advocate than this writer for immediate, timely memorization of the script. The His Company philosophy has from the beginning done battle with the common



KEREN
(mockingly)

Oh, sure. And did He? Did this—magician raise Himself out of His tomb?
(pause; drilling into Thaddaeus)

120 Well, did He?

THADDAEUS
(innocently)

Who is “we”?
You know, we all scattered so fast, I really don’t know.

KEREN
(sarcastically)

125 What a coincidence! Oh, He was a smoothie, all right.
(contemptuously)

He had you all fooled.

THADDAEUS
(firmly; as much to himself as to Keren)

130 I know He was the Son of God. I know it in my heart.
(the light bulb is glowing brighter)

Even before I admitted the truth to myself, I knew it in my heart.
(pause; turning to go)

135 I have to go back.

KEREN
(stopping him by grabbing his arms; frantically; for the first time Keren sees that she may have lost the argument)

140 Give it up! It was a strange faith.
(heavily)

And now it’s dead.

THADDAEUS
(tenderly)

145 The faith will live on.
(sadly)

It’s you who are dead.
(pause)

No one but the Son of God could have given health to the sick, sight to the blind—raised the dead.
(still in the process of convincing himself)

150 He did it for others why not for Himself.

What “truth” is he talking about? And where is Thad going back to?

“It’s you who are dead” seems awkward—maybe even unduly cruel.

misconception that lazy preparation is sufficient for stagecraft within the church. Under the His Company method, the Christian actor serving the Lord and His church is expected to serve them both with excellence—and an important component of this excellence is for each actor to learn the script, accurately, as soon as possible.

That having been said, it is generally *not* a good idea to begin memorizing lines before the Reading Session with the director and full cast. Invariably, changes to the script are made at this meeting, and the only thing harder than learning lines, is *unlearning* changed lines.

Unless there is to be a protracted period of time between receiving the script and the Reading Session, you should wait until then to begin memorizing your script.

For a more in-depth discussion of the His Company philosophy of Excellence, see Emphasis Eight, "On Excellence," in Part Four.

For a more in-depth discussion of the memorization process, see Emphasis One, "Memorization," in Part Four.

The Script in Hand: Review

- Highlight every line and stage direction for your character.
- Read and understand all descriptive notes about your character.
- Read through the script several times, making sure that at least one of them is out loud.
- Write down any comments or questions you might have regarding your character, or the play in general.

Your Primary Goal

To understand your character, the play, and prepare any questions you might have regarding either.

chapter TWO

The Reading Session



The Basics

- Read your lines to the best of your ability.
- Do not try to recite during this session, but *read*.
- Remain flexible in your interpretation; permit the director to begin influencing the shape of your character.
- Make sure you understand what the director is saying about your character and the way you are interpreting your lines.
- Take lots of notes; do not assume that you will remember what has been said.
- Listen carefully to how your lines work with those of the other characters.

YOUR FIRST CHANCE TO HEAR YOUR LINES within the context of the overall play will typically be at the reading session. This is the first opportunity to actually *hear* how your character will fit into the play's dialogue—and your first opportunity to hear how the director plans to mold the various elements together into a cohesive, dramatic statement.

Being Brave

The reading session is the time to present for public notice the homework you've done on your part. But, equally, it is also the time for you to hear the director's ideas for how your character will blend into the whole.

Both must take place. Both are important.

Your Preparation

One of the charter members of His Company (a semi-professional actor), while preparing for his role of the apostle Peter, said to me early on in the rehearsal process: "I want to do the very best I can with this part. I want to set an example for the rest." He had the right attitude. He was right, and he *did* do his very best, turning in an excellent performance of real texture and depth.

The actor who is a member of a company must always remember that he does not work in a vacuum. Along with every other player, he must contribute his equal share. This includes being an example of excellence for every other actor. When every actor carries this attitude into every rehearsal, the play will sing out, and soar far above the typical level of mediocrity so common in church drama today.

By the time of the reading session, you will not have memorized your lines, but you should be *comfortable* with them. Awkward words that you may have stumbled over during the first time through will have been practiced so they can be spoken with fluid confidence. You will be prepared to inject some of your interpretation of the character, as well as the voice.

While preparing for and approaching the reading session, take hold of your character—but hold it lightly; take possession of your character and call it your own—but understand that it will be a joint-ownership. In an amateur production, especially, your director will have something to say about the ultimate composite that becomes your character. It will be a joint effort.

Your Flexibility

The director is responsible for the look and feel—and ultimate impact—of the overall production. He will be the one with the earliest vision of the production as a whole. He will have an idea of how the scenes will be blocked, how the lighting will be designed, how the costumes will look, and how the play will look and sound.

Most (but certainly not all) Christian drama groups play by different rules than more commercial or secular companies. If the director of a typical church production adopted the hands-off method common

Laurence Olivier on experimentation...

"If you are frightened of making a fool of yourself, if you start too subtly, too cozily, giving just little glimpses of what the part might become, you create huge barriers for yourself later on. You must be open, naive, prepared to charge down every alley that presents itself, until you lock into the ones that you and your character need."

This writer has a profound respect for the traditions of the British theatre—both as an institution, and as evidenced in its individual actors.

Watch anything, from the lowest British sitcom to film or the stage, and you will see actors and actresses wholeheartedly committed to their craft, willing to make complete fools out of themselves to sell a character or a story. And, invariably, the result is not foolishness, but an utterly believable character.

An example? Watch Dame Judi Dench in *anything*—from her role as Jean in the long-running sitcom, *As Time Goes By*, to her stern, unflinching treatment of "M" in the James Bond films, to the sweetness of Miss Matty Jenkyns in *Return to Cranford*, to her breathtaking interpretation of Iris Murdoch, the writer with Alzheimer's disease, in the film *Iris*. Every one of her roles, no matter how different from the previous, is utterly and authentically believable.

with actors in the legitimate theatre, very little would ever be accomplished. Church drama is filled with good-hearted people who are willing to serve, but who have very little or no experience at the craft. They need help—and very often much hand-holding and encouragement—to do their job.

In His Company productions, the director very often had an even greater responsibility than would a director of a professional company. With a professional cast, the director may only offer the merest motivational prodding of the individual actor to accomplish the approximate “what.” In contrast, with the typical church production the director will need to be not just more explicit in describing the “what,” but in addition have to deal with the “how” and even the “why”—that is, *why* and *how* to accomplish the *what*.

Most rehearsals usually allow for a certain amount of give and take between director and actor. The reading session, however, is not a typical rehearsal. Everything is new; the wrapper has barely been taken off the new script.

Don’t get into an argument with the director—or, heaven forbid, with another actor. If you have a question about interpretation, ask it—this is the time. But if you *disagree* about a point of interpretation, this is not the time or place to raise your objection; make a note, and discuss it later with the director in private—preferably before the next rehearsal.

Taking Notes

Acting is a curious occupation that combines the printed word with the spoken. The printed script gives everyone involved in the play a common foundation from which to build and present the spoken production.

Elsewhere in this book it is stated that the characters described in the script—as delivered by the author—are only the framework for what they will eventually become. The same can be said for the script as a whole. It is not a novel. By itself, the script is incomplete. This printed framework of the play must be finished—it must be brought to life,

For more on the “building” of one’s character, see Emphasis Two, “The Character,” in Part Four.

so to speak—by the actors, under the guidance of the director.

During the first few weeks of the rehearsal process, the script will be your constant companion. Later you may not refer to it at all. This evolving relationship is illustrated in Figure 3-1.



Figure 3.1 — The changing relationship between actor and the written script over the course of rehearsals.

In the beginning of the rehearsal process, the actor's dependency on a reliable script is great. Because of this, it is of critical importance—not only to you, but to everyone else involved in rehearsals—that you take exhaustive notes. The development of your character—as well as the development of the entire play—will be a process that takes place both in formal rehearsals, with the group, and at home, by yourself. Accurate, reliable notes in your script ensure that time will not be wasted by you and the director trying to remember those things that were settled in earlier rehearsals.

This point must be emphasized: **Take notes!** Too many rehearsal hours are unnecessarily wasted because directions given early on were never written down for future reference.

You will not remember. *Write it down!*

Literally

So here we all are. A few days earlier the scripts were distributed, and now you've shown up with the others in the cast to take your place around the table—already dog-eared script and two #2 pencils in hand. After a few preliminary remarks from the director, everyone turns to page one, and the reading begins.

During the reading session, the director (depending on his or her style) will often interrupt and supply his thoughts on interpretation. He or she might go so far as to offer a specific word that should be written in the margins of your script. For example, he might say

something like, “She’s very confused at this point. We need to *hear* that uncertainty in her voice.” The actor would then write the words “confused” and “uncertain” in the margin of the script next to the associated line.

This simple (and obvious) technique might be referred to as the *literal* method; the word or words used by the director—or offered by the actor, and approved by the director—are written in the script. Where the direction is meant to be applied to only a portion of the dialogue, a line is drawn to the precise spot—as as in the following script segment from the His Company sketch, *Closets*.

325 *The WAITER exits.*
Still silent, the women begin eating. Finally, it is BETTY who speaks first. BETTY begins telling her story matter-of-factly, as if she really is talking about somebody else. But gradually, as she relives in her mind those events being described, it becomes clear—by the end of the speech—that she is really telling her own story.

330

BETTY *warmer here*

Let me tell you about a friend of mine. *with more pride here*

(pause)

335 She had a wonderful marriage to a wonderful man—a kind, thoughtful man. They had a son who excelled in sports and made the Honor Roll, to boot. They weren’t rich, but they were comfortable—a nice home in the suburbs. She was happy. More than that, she knew she was happy.

(pause)

340 One day she ran into an old flame from college—a man she had almost married. They spent hours talking over old times: Saturday football games, building a snowman, walks together through fallen leaves...

Using Imagery

A different method—one which could be used in place of, or in conjunction with, the literal method—might be called the *imagery* method.

Using imagery in your script notes is similar to the transference method of acting espoused by Uta Hagen, in which memories and experiences from your past are employed to bring the character to life. Using imagery in your notes means that instead of writing down a specific word (such as happy, confused, innocently) you would jot down a brief phrase that would describe a situation in which the desired emotion is created.

Uta Hagen on memories...

“The recall of the visions, sounds, smells, and textures of my childhood serves my acting to this day.”

Here are some examples:

<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>you might write...</i>
longingly	like a child looking into a toy store window
great sadness	just as when my grandmother died
unabashed joy	when told my wife was pregnant
peace	the way I feel when watching a beautiful sunset

The imagery method of script notation requires a little more time and imagination than the literal method, but for many people it can be well worth the effort. The imagery note written in the working script becomes an instant trigger for the correct emotion or action—becoming not only a reminder for what the director wants at that point, but *the means by which it is accomplished*.

In practical terms, during the reading session and subsequent early rehearsals, the actor would surely use a combination of both literal and imagery methods. So as not to take up valuable rehearsal time, he would quickly jot down the literal word suggested by the director; then later, on his own time, he would come up with just the right image that produces that emotion or mood, and write that image in the script alongside the earlier literal word from the director.

It is important to remember that the emotions produced by images are not universal, but quite personal. It would be possible to reuse the previous examples with entirely different results.

<i>The original image...</i>	<i>that produced...</i>	<i>could also produce...</i>
like a child looking into a toy store window	longing	giddiness
just as when my grandmother died	great sadness	relief
when told my wife was pregnant	unabashed joy	sheer terror
the way I feel when watching a beautiful sunset	peace	profound melancholy

So while the actual image can be shared, the emotion it produces cannot. It will be to the actor's benefit to have a ready supply of such personal imagery from which to draw moods and emotions—even in the notes he or she makes in the script.

The Reading Session: Review

- Read your lines to the very best of your ability, using the practice and insight gained from reading and rereading the script prior to this session.
- Even though you may have begun memorizing your lines, do not try to recite during the reading session, but *read*.
- It is good to come to this session with a certain perspective on your character in mind, but remain flexible; permit the director to begin influencing the shape of your character.
- During the reading session, make sure you understand what the director is saying about your character and the way you are to interpret your lines.
- Take lots of notes; do not assume that you will remember what has been said. *Write it down!*
- Listen carefully to how your lines work with those of the other characters, paying particular attention to pacing and rhythm.

Your Primary Goal

To come away with a clear understanding of how the director wants your character to be played and fitted into the overall production.

chapter three

Blocking



The Basics

- Be prepared with pencils, ready to take notes.
- Record every detail of blocking given by the director.
- Familiarize yourself with common blocking vernacular.
- Be patient.
- Add more details to help you duplicate the blocking instructions.
- Review your blocking shortly after it has been given.

BLOCKING IS THE PROCESS DURING WHICH THE ACTOR LEARNS what his or her character will be doing physically on stage. The reading session establishes *who the character is and how he will sound*, while the blocking rehearsal establishes *what the character will be doing where and when*. Put another way, the blocking rehearsal is the *physical* equivalent of the reading session.

Methods

There are almost as many ways to block a scene as there are directors. Some will be so casual as to say to the actor, “Go stand over in that general area.” Some will go a little further, directing the actor when to look out at the audience, or when to turn away. Others will direct, “On the second syllable of the third word of that line I want your left index finger to fold over at the second knuckle.”

The His Company method takes a more moderate approach to blocking. Amateur actors will benefit from rather specific blocking directions; they are eager for help, for suggestions, for specifics that will fill in where their lack of experience fails them. But instructions that are too meticulous can stifle the creative spark brought to the moment by the actor himself. (They also shroud in minutia the creativity of the director, when he should be concentrating on the overall package.)

In any case, it is the responsibility of the director (not the play's author) to block the scenes in a play—and it is the responsibility of the actor to record, then carry out that blocking. As stated in the previous chapter, the director is the one with the overall vision of the production; the blocking instructions he or she gives comprise an important component of that vision.

The Dance

What *composition* is to the photographer, blocking is to the stage director. And although it may not seem so to the actor being mechanically moved about from place to place during the rehearsal, blocking is really the play's *choreography*. It is the fluid dance that gives pace, rhythm, and physical tension to the scene being played out before the audience. When a scene is artfully blocked, one can stand at the back of the theatre, squint the eyes, and see the poetry of ballet being performed upon the stage. Each entrance or exit adds or subtracts dramatic tension to the scene; movement flows from actor to actor like a Rembrandt come to life. It is art, and it can be beautiful.

It all begins, for the actor, at the blocking rehearsal, where the director's instructions are recorded in each player's script, then physically played out across the stage. Longer productions may split the blocking process over several rehearsals, while a short sketch may be blocked and walked through several times in just one rehearsal.

Blocking Vernacular

The most important requirement of the actor's blocking process is that the instructions from the director be noted in his script in such

The play's blocking works with line memorization in a symbiotic fashion: each makes learning the other easier.

Blocking supports the memorizing of lines; by associating the two, the actor knows that when he is standing *here*, he is to be saying *this*.

Likewise an actor's lines make learning blocking easier; again, by associating the two, the actor knows that when he is saying *this*, he is supposed to be standing *here*.

The actor who learns *both* early on in the process, will have a distinct advantage at remembering both his lines *and* his blocking.

For making notes in your script, *always use a pencil*. Things change, and over the course of a rehearsal schedule that “cross from down right to up left” that the director was so confident about, may change to a “cross from center to up right.”

Never use a pen.

a way that they can be easily retrieved and put into practice. *How the individual actor chooses to accomplish this is secondary to his ability to duplicate what he has been told.*

So the scratchings that the actor uses to record the blocking in his or her script may certainly be personalized and unique—so long as they accomplish the desired result. It never hurts, however, to begin with some basic conventions that have been used on the stage for a very long time.

Stage Locations

The modern theatre is usually configured with a flat stage and the audience seated on a slope, as seen in Figure 3.2. In the early theatre, however, this was typically reversed, with the audience seated or standing on a flat surface, and the stage constructed with a slight incline from front to back, as seen in Figure 3.3. From this early configuration of a sloped stage we get our terminology for stage locations.

Figure 3.2 — Modern theatre design.

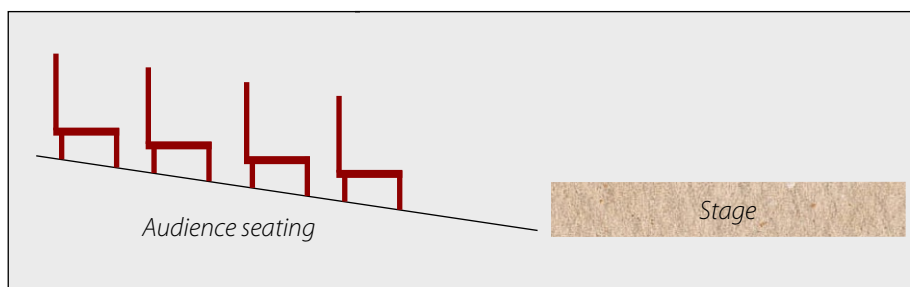
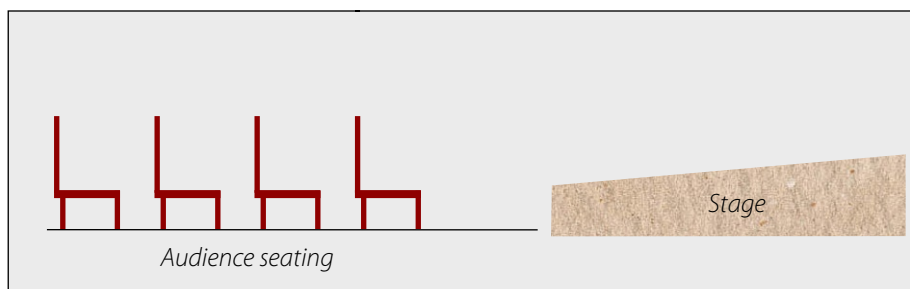


Figure 3.3 — Early theatre design.



The front edge of the early stage (that which was closest to the audience), was literally lower than the back of the stage. So the front of the stage (or apron) was referred to as *down stage*, and the back was *up stage*. And though our stages today are flat, we still use these same conventions when blocking.

Part 3: An Actor's Guide

Blocking notations are always from the *actor's* point of view; it is the director who must transpose. So, for example, when the direction “stage right” is given, it refers to the actor's right, as he stands on the stage facing the audience.

Figure 3.4 combines these designations—along with the standard abbreviations in bold caps—into a handy chart.

<i>Audience</i>		
D own L eft	D own C enter	D own R ight
L eft	C enter	R ight
U p L eft	U p C enter	U p R ight

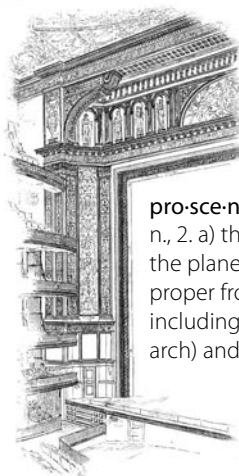
Figure 3.4 — Established blocking conventions to designate areas of the stage.

Relativism

Blocking directions are generally considered to be relative. Directors will sometimes define small areas of the larger stage for a “scene within a scene,” or—as often happens with church musicals, when the choir has taken over the majority of the stage—a smaller area, off to the side, will be designated for the dramatic component. In these instances, “stage left” may not be referring to some spot all the way across the proscenium, but only to the left portion of the smaller area.

Common Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are accepted standards for blocking notation in the script.



pro-sce-ni-um (pro see' nee um)
n., 2. a) the apron of a stage b) the plane separating the stage proper from the audience and including the arch (proscenium arch) and the curtain within it.

Areas of the Stage

C	Center (stage)
UC	Up Center
DC	Down Center
L	Left
UL	Up Left
DL	Down Left
R	Right
UR	Up Right
DR	Down Right

Movement

TL	Turn Left
TR	Turn Right
Out	Turn out to face the audience
Back	Turn back away from audience
1/4	One-quarter turn of body or head
1/2	Profile
PRO	Profile
3/4	Three-quarter turn of body or head
FF	Full front (toward audience)
FB	Full Back (away from audience)
SL	Step Left
SR	Step Right
xSL	Number of Steps Left
xSR	Number of Steps Right
Step	Take one step
X	Cross (move to another area of the stage)
XL	Cross Left
XR	Cross Right
XD	Cross Down
XU	Cross Up
X to _	Cross to a character or set piece
CX	Counter Cross (movement of one character in opposition to, or at the same time as, that of another)

All of the blocking abbreviations that are associated with your movement onstage can be modified with the name of another actor onstage, a set piece or prop—or even a landmark in the auditorium. For example, instead of the slightly ambiguous “XL,” you might write in the margin of your script “XL Harry,” or “XL table.” Instead of writing only “Out,” use the more descriptive “Out Clock,” which could mean, “turn out to the audience and look in the direction of the clock on the wall.”

The Real World

The director, whose responsibility it is to create and assign the blocking for the entire cast, may provide you with only the mere skeleton of your instructions. Since there is typically a lot of standing around during a blocking rehearsal—especially with a larger cast—use the waiting time constructively to modify what you've been told.

For a real-world example, let us look over the shoulder of Rupert Gandwiller, who has been assigned the role of Abraham, with his friend Penelope Newelpost taking the role of his wife, Sarah. It is the night of their second rehearsal, and the two veterans are scribbling the director's instructions into their scripts as she walks them through the blocking.

After Martha Dunwiddie, their director, gives the two of them their essential blocking instructions for a few pages, she excuses herself to take a call in the church office. While her instructions and comments are still fresh, Rupert takes the opportunity to go back and fill in the blocking with more details that will help him remember what to do in future rehearsals—even when rehearsing at home. Rupert walks through the blocking, noting in his script room landmarks that will give him something with which to line up.

The script segment on the next page shows us Rupert's script after Martha's initial blocking instructions. The script segment on the page after that shows us how his script looks after he adds more detailed instructions.

Notating room landmarks in one's blocking instructions are only worthwhile when all or most of the performances will be at the same venue. For a production that is to be taken on the road, it is better to note references to other actors on stage, or set pieces that will always be in the same relative place, no matter the venue.

A page from Rupert's script showing essential blocking as given by the director. (script: *Restless Dawn*)

The word "cheat," as used in the context of stage blocking, can mean different things to different people. But it is typically used as a shorthand term that means to angle the body or head just slightly—usually toward the audience—so more of the face can be seen, or so a line of dialogue can be projected out more toward the audience. In the example here, Abraham is in a tight clinch with Sarah—an intimate blocking that could easily hide his face and muffle his line. The director blocks the moment to emphasize the intimacy of husband and wife, and Abraham's desperation. For the audience to hear his line, and see that desperation on his face, however, Abraham (either by direction or on his own initiative) needs to angle his face slightly out—not so much as to detach himself from the powerful moment with Sarah, but just enough for the audience to be made a part of the moment.

Something like "cheating" is hard to teach or direct. It is something that comes with experience on stage—and the actor's sense of how he or she is being seen and/or heard by the audience.

595 *DL*
Abraham ends up away from Sarah, overwhelmed by the sudden intensity of his emotions—and embarrassed to be showing such weakness around Sarah. He stands, sobbing, with his back to her.
Out (cheat left)

600 **Sarah**
(going to Abraham; soberly)
Abraham, what's wrong?

605 **Abraham**
into distance (still turned away)
O, dreams and voices—dreadful silences—visions of what will be—
intense (turning quickly; Sarah takes him into her arms; Abraham clings to her) head D, cheat out
Oh Sarah, can one man be the beginning for so much?! Can one man bear the burden for so many?

610 **Sarah**
(tenderly; calming him)
Sssshhh— You've borne your burden. The trials and waiting of yesterday are behind us.

615 **Abraham**
turn out 1/4 (with a weary sigh)
Oh, I wish they were. How I wish they were.

620 **Sarah**
See what happens when you've been up all night? I've never heard such foolish talk!
(leading him toward the exit) RC
I'm putting you back to bed and telling the servants to let you sleep.

625 **Abraham**
(looking out)
Dawn. It will be light soon.
(shivering)
Oh, why must there be such a chill to mornings?
XDL (not quite in his right mind)
The night so unwillingly sheds its cold. And the sun grudgingly gives its warmth—
(regaining his composure; turning to look at his worried wife; quietly, after gazing upon her; solidly; more a statement than a question) still R
Do you know that I love you?

630 **Sarah**
(with the confidence that comes with years of being married)
Yes.

635 **Abraham**
(haltingly)
Do you know that I would never hurt you?

Part 3: An Actor's Guide

595 *DL*
 Abraham ends up away from Sarah, overwhelmed by the sudden intensity of his emotions—and embarrassed to be showing such weakness around Sarah. He stands, sobbing, with his back to her.
Out (cheat left) toward right end of front pew

600 **Sarah**
(going to Abraham; soberly)
 Abraham, what's wrong?

605 **Abraham**
(still turned away)
 O, dreams and voices— dreadful silences— visions of what will be—
intense (turning quickly; Sarah takes him into her arms; Abraham clings to her) head D, cheat out window over piano

610 **Sarah**
(tenderly; calming him)
 Sssshhhh— You've borne your burden. The trials and waiting of yesterday are behind us.

615 **Abraham**
(with a weary sigh)
 Oh, I wish they were. How I wish they were.
to sound board in balcony turn out 1/4

620 **Sarah**
 See what happens when you've been up all night? I've never heard such foolish talk!
(leading him toward the exit) RC
 I'm putting you back to bed and telling the servants to let you sleep.

625 **Abraham**
(looking out)
 Dawn. It will be light soon.
(shivering)
 Oh, why must there be such a chill to mornings?
XDL (not quite in his right mind) not a straight path; glancing up and around

630 The night so unwillingly sheds its cold. And the sun grudgingly gives its warmth—
(regaining his composure; turning to look at his worried wife; quietly, after gazing upon her; solidly; more a statement than a question) still R
 Do you know that I love you?

635 **Sarah**
(with the confidence that comes with years of being married)
 Yes.

Abraham
(haltingly)
 Do you know that I would never hurt you?
DON'T MOVE!

The same page after Rupert adds more detailed blocking instructions of his own. (script: *Restless Dawn*)

For a discussion on the importance of rehearsing on your own, see Emphasis Three, “Rehearsing at Home,” in Part Four.

Reviewing Your Blocking

Whether it is done at the public rehearsal, just after all the blocking instructions have been given, or privately at home, it is important that you review your blocking for the entire play soon after it has been given. It is very easy to forget—even with detailed notes in your script—the specifics and purpose behind the movements you’ve been assigned.

Lock it in quickly and soon, and it will stay with you over the full rehearsal schedule.

Blocking: Review

- Come prepared with several pencils, ready to take lots of notes.
- Record every detail of blocking given by the director.
- If you do not understand the *reason* behind any blocking, ask the director. Understanding this will go along way to learning your blocking.
- Familiarize yourself with the common blocking vernacular and abbreviations.
- Be patient. Blocking rehearsals—especially for larger productions—can be long and tedious.
- Add even more details—such as room-specific or stage-specific landmarks—to help you faithfully duplicate the blocking instructions each time.
- Review your blocking right away—either during the rehearsal or at home, just after the rehearsal.

Your Primary Goal

To record your blocking instructions in a descriptive way for accurate reference during both private and public rehearsals.

chapter four

Regular Rehearsals



The Basics

- Learn your lines quickly.
- Review the script before every rehearsal.
- Be someone your director can depend on.
- Keep your script handy during the first few rehearsals.
- Keep taking notes.

BY THIS POINT IN THE REHEARSAL SCHEDULE you should be well on your way to having your lines memorized. For some actors, memorization is the most difficult part of the acting process, while for others it is something accomplished quickly and painlessly. Most fall somewhere in the middle, however; for most of us memorization is a sometimes arduous, but manageable part of being an actor.

The experienced actor knows that there is a built-in reward for memorizing lines early and accurately: With the lines plugged in, the character starts to become a real person, and starts to blossom into a three-dimensional human being with whom one can have a relationship. This is truly when the fun of acting begins. Until the lines are learned, the character remains just words on a page, a mere dim reflection of its true potential.

Whether the task of memorization is easy or difficult for you, it is your responsibility to accomplish it as soon as possible. Procrastination in learning your lines makes life unnecessarily difficult for your director, your fellow actors, and delays your progress in refining your character. Just do it. Quit making excuses, and just do it.

The Habit of Review

If you have not already, now is the time to establish the habit of reviewing your script before every rehearsal. Because the public rehearsals represent only the *collaborative* portion of the rehearsal process, it falls to the individual actor to be up to speed, ready for every rehearsal. The bulk of your “wood-shedding” will take place at home, privately. Your goal is to step into each public rehearsal with the script as a whole and your character fresh and resting comfortably in the front of your mind.

Before each public rehearsal allow time to

- read through the entire script to fix in your mind the context of the play;
- walk through your blocking while reviewing your lines;
- review your lines and blocking, whenever possible, at the public rehearsal site, just prior to the scheduled rehearsal.

Be Dependable

What all of this—memorization and review—boils down to are good work habits and good *manners*. As an actor, you are part of a team; it is part of your responsibility to show up for each rehearsal fully prepared to carry your part of the load. Memorizing your lines early-on and reviewing the script before each public rehearsal are simply part of the mechanics of being a good team player.

- It goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway): *Don't be late!*
- Don't just show up on time, but be early: coat off, bathroom-stop

See a discussion on memorization in Emphasis One, “Memorization,” in Part Four.

During *all* rehearsals, turn off the sound of your cell phone or other portable device—and then *put it away*.

out of the way, ready to go.

- When unforeseen circumstances make you late, apologize.
- When preparations need to be made for rehearsal, such as pulling props out of storage or setting up lights, be there early to lend a hand.

The Script in Hand

So it's time for the first regular rehearsal to begin. Act Two, Scene One is called; you've reviewed the script prior to the rehearsal, and you're reasonably confident about your memorization of the scene. Wanting to impress the director, you leave your script on the front pew and mount the stage.

Wrong!

Go back and pick up your script—and while you are at it, grab a pencil. It may be that you are a Wunderkind, and have memorized absolutely every syllable of your script before the first rehearsal. Bravo; go get your script anyway (see “Inevitable Changes” below). More than likely, however, you are a rather average human being, and while you have been working hard at it, you really can't say that you are ready yet to solo. If that is the case, don't inflict your hesitations, stumbles, and lapses of memory on the rest of the cast and your director. Keep the script in hand, or within easy reach, for those moments when your memory falters.

And by the way: you're not there to impress the director, or your fellow actors, but to serve your Lord.

Inevitable Changes

Memorization progress aside, there is another reason for you to keep your script handy. Directors, like actors, are human, and they seldom get everything right the first time. They may have labored for hours over the blocking, but invariably they will change their mind during the first few rehearsals. They may have spent days on end crafting what they wanted your character to accomplish within the scope of

the play—but you can safely depend on changes to that plan to occur early on. And (heaven forbid) even into the third rehearsal they may want to change a word here and there in the script (shudder).

So keep the script and pencil within reach for the first few rehearsals, to record the inevitable changes.

Remaining Flexible

There is a classic bit from the old Dick Van Dyke Show of the 1960's that illustrates the importance of remaining flexible during the rehearsal process. In this particular episode Rob and Laura Petrie's New Rochelle neighborhood is putting on a variety show. Rob is directing a love scene, in his living room, between Marc Antony (played by a dashing Bob Crane) and Cleopatra, with the femme fatale lounging across the sofa. But the dashing Marc Antony keeps flubbing his lines. Instead of, "Ah, Cleopatra, I have arrived from Rome," the neophyte actor keeps saying, "Ah, Cleopatra, I have a-Romed from rive." When called on it by the director, the leading man repeatedly complains, "As soon as I get the helmet, Rob. As soon as I get the helmet!"—meaning, "As soon as I get my costume, and all the right props, and a real stage to work on, I'll quit flubbing my lines."

The unmistakable mark of an amateur.

It is not uncommon to rehearse in a room different from the place of performance. It is not uncommon, in the church, for the drama team to rehearse in a Sunday School room while Choir Practice is being conducted in the sanctuary. It is also not uncommon for props and set pieces to be supplied to the actor only later in the rehearsal schedule.

The theatre arts are based on imagination. They may strive to portray reality for the audience, but in themselves they are pretend. As it is the role of the play to suspend disbelief in the audience, it is the role of the individual actor during the rehearsal process to suspend disbelief in himself. The actor must invest himself fully in the imagined moment, thereby participating in something unreal to portray (for the audience) something real. It is slight-of-hand; it is fantasy.

For more on the subjects of imagination and flexibility, see Emphasis Four, "Being Something One is Not," and Emphasis Five, "The Adaptable Actor"—both in Part Four.

The terms "amateur" and "professional"—especially as used in this book—are relative.

We begin with the premise that most of us are amateurs—in the traditional sense that acting, or directing actors, may not be a profession for which we receive remuneration. Not many have received formal training, and the majority have had very little experience beyond high school or college productions.

Yet within that context of essentially amateur productions, we can subdivide the group—and thus adapt the two terms for a different use.

Within the non-professional production there can be individuals of either amateur

(continued on next page)

(continued from previous page)

or professional *attitude*. Using these new definitions, the “amateur” is one who takes forever to learn his or her lines, who is chronically late for rehearsals, who suddenly discovers a pressing engagement every time there is work to be done. The amateur does little to pump life into his character, thinking it is enough just to memorize the lines (eventually) and show up.

By contrast, the “professional” is not just on time for rehearsals, but arrives early to either help with extraneous tasks, or practice his role on the stage. He learns his lines early on, and doesn’t make excuses when he makes a mistake. The professional participates fully in the project, learning how to do his or her own makeup, anticipating the needs of the overall production and volunteering whenever possible.

We all recognize the “amateur.” Churches the world over are filled with them. They comprise the group subscribing to the “Sunday School skit” mentality so prevalent today: Just learn your lines at the last minute, then show up and walk through your part. Hey, it’s just for church—why bother?

This attitude is incompatible with the His Company philosophy. Over the years there have been a number of excellent, professional-quality actors who expressed an interest in being a part of His Company, but were rejected because of their “amateur” attitude. In contrast, most of the individuals who made a substantial, lasting contribution to our effort were just rank amateurs, but with a dedicated, “professional” attitude.

Part of the mechanics of fantasy is the actor’s ability to pretend when left virtually on his own.

“Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand?
Come, let me clutch thee...”

(*Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 1)

The professional could convincingly rehearse this scene using a pencil, or stick, or even nothing at all as a stand-in for the dagger. A really good actor—I mean a *really* good actor—could play the scene with nothing at all in his hand—but make you believe it is there.

No Excuses

The point is, no matter what kind of actor you are, or choose to be, it is your responsibility to get the job done. I believe it was Lillian Gish, that great lady of the American cinema, who had a rather short retort for a fellow actor that was expressing frustration over developing suitable motivation to play a scene. He was a “method” actor, you see, and he kept blowing the scene because he couldn’t conjure up a deep enough empathy for the character’s situation. He queried the actress as to how *she* accomplished it so well, so effortlessly. To this the venerable Gish replied with something like, “I just do it. I fake it. It’s called acting.”

In a similar vein, Dame Wendy Hiller, the superb English actress, was once asked by a reporter, “Miss Hiller, what is your method of acting?” She replied, “Well I have a *bash* at it, and if it doesn’t go, I have *another* bash at it.”

There is no right answer. Some breathtakingly great actors swear by the method; others just as accomplished don’t bother with any method at all, but just show up and fake it. The difference between a professional and an amateur is not so much *how* they act, but whether or not they pull it off—whether or not they get the job done! The audience doesn’t really care about the tools you use to create a character, or work a scene. They don’t care *how* you do it, only that you do. They don’t care about technique, only that they can believe what you

are doing on stage.

If you are going to use the “method,” or what Uta Hagen calls “transference,” then it is up to you to make that commitment to character background, personality, motives; it is up to you to do all that homework to bring the character up to a level acceptable to you, the director, and the audience. If, on the other hand, you are able to produce a complete range of emotions on demand, mechanically, then go ahead and do it. No one says you have to *live* the role.

But if you are like the rest of us, you will probably use some of both techniques—if one can call the latter a “technique”—along with several more of your own devising.

More Than Sincerity

There are times when a role will require little more than the appearance of sincerity. If a 40-year-old father of one is asked to play the role of a 45-year-old father of two in a contemporary setting, he will not have to spend a lot of time at the library researching his part. If, on the other hand, a 29-year-old single man takes the same role, he may have to interview some of his older, married friends to reach some understanding of what it is to be a middle-aged father.

For the first production of *Restless Dawn*, our one-act play about Abraham and Sarah on the night before Abraham is to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22), playing opposite my Abraham was a young woman of substantial acting talent. To take on this role, however, she had three obstacles: the fact that she was not a Christian, and wasn't familiar with the story; the fact that since her mom was divorced, she had no immediate example of a long-term marriage; and the fact that she was so young (around twenty, I believe).

She turned in a pretty good performance, as I recall, but it was thin. She mostly relied upon talent and mechanics to pull it off—and using only those, she did better than an actress with less talent. But she never did the research that would have brought more depth and believability to the role. By contrast, several years later my wife Linda took the Sarah role opposite my Abraham. This time the actor *was* a Christian, and quite familiar with the original story; she also had

plenty of familiar examples for a long-term marriage—not to mention her own; and, though certainly not close to Sarah’s age, she was sufficiently mature to have more of a feeling for a woman of age. This time the performance had much more depth and believability.

When it comes to an individual choosing how best to assay his or her role, there is no one right answer—except that you are to do whatever will bring your character to life in an authentic, believable way.

Regular Rehearsals: Review

- Learn your lines quickly. Just go ahead and do it!
- Review the script before every rehearsal.
- Be someone your director can depend on.
- Keep your script handy during the first few rehearsals.
- Keep taking notes.
- Do whatever is necessary to develop your character.

Your Primary Goal

To participate fully in every rehearsal, well-prepared, investing your energies in developing the full potential of your character—and the play as a whole.

chapter five

The Technical Rehearsal



The Basics

- Be patient! You will do lots of standing around. Expect it. Live with it. The technical rehearsal is not for you.
- By this point the mechanics of your role—lines and blocking—should be automatic; use the waiting time to work on character and familiarize yourself with the technical components of the production.
- The technical rehearsal will be on the performance stage; if this is your first time on this stage, use the waiting time to familiarize yourself with it.
- Be cooperative, quiet, and agreeable. The tech rehearsal is not for your benefit.

WRITE THE FOLLOWING ON A SLIP OF PAPER in big, bold letters, and paste it to your forehead: *“The technical rehearsal is not for my benefit!”*

There should come a moment during the rehearsal schedule for any substantial production in which the director will need to rehearse with the technical crew. Typically this will occur near the end of the actor’s rehearsal process, but near the beginning of the technical personnel’s involvement. They haven’t had any lines to learn, no character to develop, no blocking, no costumes with which to become familiar. Ideally, they will come to the technical rehearsal with some familiarity with the script, some instruction on what will be expected of them. But this will probably be their first opportunity to actually observe and work with the production on stage.

With a simple, Sunday morning monologue or sketch, there may be no technical crew larger than the regular sound man who works the microphones for every other service. But with a moderate to large-scale production, the technical component will surely be larger, and will take on a greater importance. In a large sanctuary or auditorium one needs the sound people to get the voices to the back rows. In a musical, one needs the music cued at just the precise moment. When more than the standard room lighting is needed, one needs the lighting people to arrange and adjust the stage lights for maximum impact, and to cue the lights at the right moment. Property personnel are needed to organize everything carried onto the stage, and stage hands are needed to move the larger set pieces on and off the stage. Those helping with makeup and wardrobe need to know how much time will be allowed for changes between scenes. Special effects need to be practiced and timed. And, not least of all, the director needs to know that all of these mechanical components will work together smoothly, and for the production's good.



So repeat after me: *"The technical rehearsal is not for my benefit!"*

Working Out the Kinks

So, *why* are you there? It isn't that the tech rehearsal is a totally selfless exercise for the actor; the investment in time and energy will be well-spent. But the first reason for your presence at the technical rehearsal is, well, technical.

The lighting crew needs bodies on stage for them to be able to make their adjustments. They need to actually see the blocking to know where the bodies go and when. They need to see the colors of the costumes, along with the shades and design of makeup, to know where to set their levels and choose the right gels. The person working the board needs to know how each scene begins, and how each actor enters. Do the lights come up slowly or quickly? Do they come up

cued to the music, or to the entrance of the scene's first actor? Does a scene close softly and slowly, or with a dramatic flourish? How long before the next scene?

The sound crew needs to hear the actual voices—from the booming baritone playing Herod, down to the timid junior high girl playing Mary—to know where to position their mics and set their levels. If microphones are to be hidden amongst the set pieces, they need to observe the blocking to know where the actors will be moving and standing. If the mics are to be worn or held, they need to know which actor will use which mic—and who it will be handed off to when they exit. They need to know how much time there will be between each scene so they can reset their board, or cue up the next song on the Trax.

When live musicians are used, the conductor needs to know many of the same things as the sound and light crews. The conductor needs to hear the voices in performance to determine the volume level of the orchestra; he or she needs to know how long between scenes, and what the entrances and exits will be like.

If the actors are not doing their own, the makeup people need to practice what they are going to do with each face, and see how it will work in the lights. They need to know how long it will take them to do each actor, and what their costumes are like: Will the arms and legs need to be done, or just the face? What will the hair look like, and how will it and the makeup look from the back

rows? Will anything need to be changed between scenes—such as the mother of Jesus aging from a teenage to a middle-aged woman—and if so, how much time will they have to accomplish it?

Wardrobe personnel will need to have the actors try on every costume and make final adjustments where necessary. They, too, will need to know how much time they will have between scenes, who should be dressed first before curtain, and who may wait until later. How well do the fabrics they have selected work in the scheme created by the



lighting people? Do the long robes of a Pharisee work without getting tangled up in the actor's feet, or brushing against a set piece? What will he have to do with his costume to walk up the temple steps?

The stage manager needs to work out the organization, dressing room assignments, and backstage traffic patterns. He or she needs to observe the flow and pace of personnel backstage, the noise level, the means by which set pieces and props are carried on and offstage. The stage manager needs to work out all the details on who belongs where and when.

All of these behind-the-scenes considerations are important to the success of the production. Your job, as a member of the cast, is to be attentive, cooperative, agreeable and quiet, doing nothing that would distract the director and others from the work at hand. The director has had days and weeks to work with you and your fellow actors, rehearsing and polishing your individual roles. Now he or she has only a short window of time in which to accomplish a lot with the technical crew. It is important that you be cooperative without getting in their way.

Your Opportunity

The first reason for your presence at the technical rehearsal is for the tech crew to become familiar with what you are doing on stage. The second reason is for you to become familiar with all these new production components that have not, to date, been a part of your rehearsals.

After rehearsing for several weeks on a barren stage illuminated only by ambient light, it can come as quite a shock to suddenly be bathed in the full trappings of the well-dressed stage. Suddenly there is a mic clamped to your costume, with a wire and transmitter hidden beneath, or you are being asked to adjust your blocking to hit a new spot near a pre-positioned mic. All the set pieces heretofore only imagined are suddenly in place, and now when you look out over the audience seats you are blinded by the bright white of a traveling spot. Now there is a scratchy beard on your face, and strange new objects sitting about the stage. That "pregnancy pillow" you've only imagined is now in place, and it feels awkward strapped to your belly. All of a

sudden the empty room in which you have been rehearsing is peppered with the distracting commotion of tech people going about their business. And, without warning, that deep level of concentration to which you have become accustomed has just flown right out the window.

The Complete Environment

This rehearsal is your opportunity to set your character, and the play as a whole, into the more complete (and sometimes complicated) environment of the production. The subsequent dress rehearsal will offer an even more complete and polished setting, but the technical rehearsal is the moment when you will begin to absorb and become familiar with the myriad components that will work in cooperation with your contribution. As such, the most important thing you can do during this rehearsal is to have every sense awake and aware of what is going on around you.



You may wish to have your script handy. Though by this point you don't need it for lines or blocking directions, it is possible that because of new-found constraints—because of adjustments that need to be made to what the actors are doing as a result of unexpected technical or artistic requirements—you may want to note any changes in your script for the few remaining rehearsals and performances. For example, you may have been rehearsing for weeks with

blocking that put you two feet from the left edge of the stage on a certain dramatic line. But during the tech rehearsal, discussions between the director and lighting chief determine that you need to deliver the line more center than left. It is a good idea to note that change in your script.

Assimilation

Beyond the mechanics of simple changes, such as with blocking or wardrobe, your responsibility is to quickly and efficiently incorporate these technical elements into your performance. As mentioned in the Emphasis entitled "The Adaptable Actor," the actor should perceive each scene in terms of space, movement, and his physical relationship with the other actors. He is to "carry the set around in his mind." No

matter the ultimate design of the production, during much of the rehearsal process the actor's space has remained portable and self-contained, tucked away in the individual actor's imagination. By the tech rehearsal, however, some of what had heretofore been only imagined will become reality. That plastic kitchen stool that had been standing in for a crude wooden one will now be exchanged for one that actually looks the part, and the fading glow of a setting sun may now actually look just like that. As a consequence, one of your responsibilities during the tech rehearsal is to quickly acclimate your character and blocking to any props, set pieces, or technical contraptions that are suddenly new.

Even after all these considerations, even after you have familiarized yourself with all the new production components, there still can be a lot of dead time for the actor at the technical rehearsal. Instead of letting yourself get bored or, worse, doing things that will be a distraction for the director or members of the tech crew, use this time to polish your own responsibilities. Without getting in the way of others, silently run your lines, review blocking, begin getting ready for opening night by imagining every seat in the house filled and every eye on your performance. If none of these are necessary, help out the tech crews where you can, or excuse yourself to go rehearse in a separate room until you are needed next on stage.

The Technical Rehearsal: Review

- Be patient!
- Use your time to familiarize yourself with the performance stage.
- Use the waiting time to work on character, and to familiarize yourself with the more technical components of the production.
- Be cooperative, quiet, and agreeable. The technical rehearsal is not for your benefit.

Your Primary Goal

To acclimate your role to the new (to you) technical components of the production, while doing nothing to get in the way of the director and technical crew.

chapter SIX

Dress Rehearsal



The Basics

- Review thoroughly every responsibility you will have at the dress rehearsal.
- Treat every aspect of the dress rehearsal as if it were a real performance before an audience.
- *Stay in character!* No matter what happens, *stay in character.*
- Debrief yourself after the dress rehearsal to fine-tune your performance in preparation for opening night.

FOR THE ATTENTIVE, FULLY INVOLVED ACTOR, the dress rehearsal is really his Opening Night. This is the first opportunity to put to the test all the many hours of work on character, all the blocking and movements that have been repeatedly rehearsed, the dialogue timing, and practice with props and set pieces. This may very well be the first opportunity for the actor to experience the production as a unified whole, from beginning to end, without stopping for direction.

Dressing Up

During my grade-school days, back in the 1950s, the last day of the school year was a special event when all the students celebrated the beginning of summer vacation by dressing up in their very best. We knew it would be an abbreviated day of fun, with no actual school

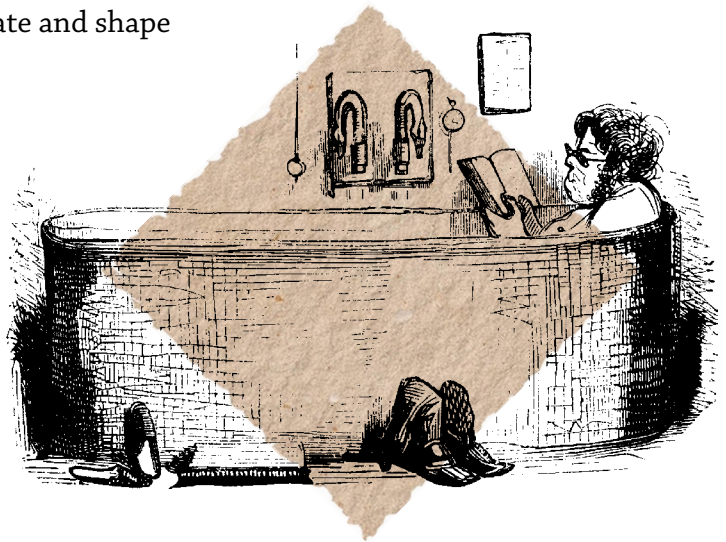
work being done, and we all made an occasion of it—even the teacher. We would rise early, our minds filled with exhilarating expectations, and arrive at school on that one special day presenting ourselves at our very best, fresh-scrubbed and decked out in our finest. We would arrive with our heads filled not only with the events of that special day, but of the many carefree days of summer vacation to follow.

That is similar to how the individual actor should approach the dress rehearsal of any production. It is not only a special occasion, but one in anticipation of something even better. The actor should arrive well-prepared and ready to go, expecting the very best from himself and his fellow actors. For the actor with a professional attitude, the only difference between dress rehearsal and opening night should be the presence of the audience.

Homework

As with every other rehearsal up to this point, this one begins at home. But preparation for the dress rehearsal should be even more complete, and more meticulous than your preparation for previous rehearsals. Leave sufficient time beforehand to walk yourself through—both mentally and physically—the entire play, from the moment you will walk in the door, to the final curtain. Using the same imagination you have been using to create and shape your character, while still at home:

- Review the instructions you have been given about the dress rehearsal. Does the director want you in costume and makeup right away, or will there be a run-through in street dress before the actual dress run-through? Do you have any other responsibilities before being on stage?
- Remind yourself which room you have been assigned for dressing and makeup; think about the process, and how long it will take for you to get into costume and makeup.



- Do you know where your props will be located?
- Run through every one of your scenes, including lines and blocking.
- Review every on-stage and off-stage responsibility you have.
- Go in the right frame of mind. Commit the entire process to the Lord, asking the Spirit to be in charge of your every word and action. Go with an attitude of cooperation and calm, centered not just in *what* you are doing, but, more importantly, in *why* you are doing it.

On Your Own

You should also keep in mind that the dress rehearsal is of critical importance, as well, to your director, since it is his or her first (and possibly last) opportunity to confirm the overall vision that has heretofore existed only in his or her mind. You and your character are now on your own. You are now past the point of lengthy discussions with your director over motivation, emotion, or interpretation. The director must now be occupied with the production as a unified whole, and not so much its smaller, component parts. The director also must now deal more with the technical aspects of the production than with any one actor's interpretation of a particular scene.

Now is the time for you to take full possession of your character—mature, fully realized, locked in, competent. Now is the time for you to be completely professional in attitude, appearance, dependability, punctuality and cooperation. Now is the time for you to add as little weight as possible to the burden already on the shoulders of your director and his technical crews.

In Rehearsal: A Real Performance

The “amateur” attitude regarding the dress rehearsal is to treat it as something only slightly more important than the average rehearsal, whereas the “professional” attitude is to treat it as a priceless opportunity to simulate a true performance. The first approach will accomplish very little, but with the second, the actor will reap valuable insight into the actual performance process.

So your goal is to treat every aspect of the dress rehearsal as if it were a real performance.

Ideally, the director, or a disaster, will not interrupt the dress rehearsal, but it will proceed without break, as if there were an audience in attendance. It is important for the director—and each actor onstage, as well as the technical crew—to know how to proceed when the unexpected occurs. What do you do when a stage light suddenly winks out, or your mic goes dead? What do you do when an actor in your scene forgets his or her line? And what do you do when you (shudder) forget a line?

Mechanical Surprises

Your response to these and other potential disasters will, first, be determined by your director. Follow his counsel, as it will be based on experience, your unique venue, and your customary audience. Absent that counsel, however, there are certain basic rules you can follow.

- First and foremost, *stay in character*. Unless the ceiling drops out of the sky, or a hurricane blows away every member of the cast, *stay in character!* This is very important: Treat the unexpected occurrence *as your character* would treat the unexpected occurrence.
- If a microphone goes out, just keep going—but with greater volume. Find ways to cheat your dialogue out more to the audience, so that your voice will carry further. If stationary mics are being used on stage, cheat your lines toward one nearby that is still working. Don't radically change the blocking, as this will cause more problems than it solves, but make small adjustments that will help project your voice.
- If one light goes out, keep going, as if nothing has happened. It is remarkable what an audience will accept as normal. We can blow our lines, change the lyrics of a song to garbled nonsense, or throw half the stage into darkness—and the audience will think it was all done on purpose, for effect. So don't be too quick to assume that the audience senses disaster.
- If *all* the lights go out, freeze. Stop the scene and stay where you

Uta Hagen on proper rehearsal attitude...

"Before, during, and after rehearsals, limit your conversation to the subject of the play, and resist and keep to yourself all comments about the weather, your or other people's state of health, past and upcoming jobs or auditions, opinions about the latest TV series or the state of the world."

are. Once the tech crew has repaired the problem, resume where you left off—*as if nothing had happened*. Make no verbal or visual reference to the occurrence.

- If a prop is on stage, but in the wrong place, just go to where it is. If you suddenly have to cough or sneeze or wipe your eyes, well, people sometimes have to do those things. Just do it in character and the audience will applaud the authenticity of your acting! In general terms, if any relatively minor thing is not as it was rehearsed, just adapt—in character—and no one in the audience will know the difference.
- If one of your props is unexpectedly not available at all, your response will be influenced by the level of importance of the prop. But, generally, you can just proceed—either as if the missing prop were not meant to be a part of the scene, or faking it: go ahead and “pick it up,” and “use it” as if it were real. Different situations will call for different solutions. But always *work around* the missing prop; never stop the scene because of it.

It will be to your advantage, as an actor, to take an active role in ensuring that all your props and wardrobe pieces are where they are supposed to be. Don't make yourself a pest to the properties crew, but you can make it a point to double check everything necessary to your role before you go on stage.

Absent Dialogue

- If you realize that you have dropped a line (i.e., left something out of the middle of a speech), do not go back and get it. Just keep going.
- If you trip over a line, mixing up the words, or change a word here and there, just keep going. Chances are very good that no one will notice.
- If you (horrors!) suddenly go blank, and cannot for the life of you remember your line, your companions onstage may help you out (see next paragraph). But no matter what happens, *stay in character!* It is far better that your *character* be stumped for words, than for the audience to realize that you, Joe Jones, cannot remember your lines. Play it as part of the scene, as if at this point in the play your character is at a loss for words. Meanwhile (while you are stalling), mentally back up in the script and take a run at it again, to see if that jogs your memory. Picture the printed script page in your mind, and the line may leap out at you.

- If the actor on the other side of your dialogue suddenly goes blank, help him out (depending on your quick-witted abilities) by either inserting a clever line that will accomplish what the missing line would have accomplished, or simply move past the missing line in hopes that the actor *will* remember his next. A momentary hiccup in the dialogue is preferred over a major shutdown. Chances are good that many in the audience will not notice anything at all, and if they do, it will not be for them an obstacle to understanding the message of the scene.

Quite a few years ago, during the first performance of the musical, *The Prophecy*, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, the actress playing Elizabeth momentarily forgot the lyrics to a song. In the first scene of Act One, during the song “Where Do We Go From Here?”, I blocked it with Zechariah (yours truly) and Elizabeth singing antiphonally from opposite sides of the stage, each facing out toward the audience. I sang my lick, but when it was her turn, she sang a few bars then fell silent. She remained facing the audience, in character, but silent while the Trax played. Then, when it came my turn again, I picked up as if nothing had happened. And it was remarkable the number of people who weren't aware that anything had gone wrong. And for those who *did* notice something wasn't right, because we proceeded as if nothing had, the small glitch was quickly forgotten.

The Debriefing

Your director, typically, will conduct some sort of debriefing of the cast and crew after the formal dress rehearsal. Pay attention; if necessary, take notes. But whether the director does this or not, conduct your own private debriefing while the events of the rehearsal are still fresh.

- Was your preparation for the dress rehearsal sufficient, or will you need to make adjustments before opening night? Were you able to get into character easily, or will you need to do things differently to better prepare for your role?
- Did your costume and makeup work well? Were all the accessories there, and did you allow sufficient time for getting into

The ultimate solution to the problem of forgotten lines is the application of the thorough rehearsal methods described in this book. When the actor—and participating actors as a team—approaches his work on stage with a sense of commitment and excellence, he will not need to worry about forgetting his lines in performance. When the actor has thoroughly apprehended his character to the point that it has become second nature to him, there will be no reason to expect that he will forget lines.

A thoroughly rehearsed and prepared actor forgetting his lines is a rare occurrence indeed.

costume and makeup? If changes were made between scenes, did they go well? Was there sufficient time?

- Were your props where they were supposed to be, *when* they were supposed to be?
- Were there any moments when you were unsure of your lines or blocking? If so, review those scenes right away, and be sure to emphasize them in your review before opening night.
- Was your performance *solid*? Did you perform with a firm, confident grasp of your character? Did the lines seem to flow as if from your own mind and imagination, rather than just something memorized? Were your movements onstage fluid and logical, or did they seem mechanical or forced? The experienced actor knows when he is “on”—when everything is working as it should. Were you “on,” or did your performance seem awkward, unnatural, ineffective? If the latter, can you pinpoint the reason why? Did you prepare for the performance as well as you should have?
- Was everything you did your very best effort?

Dress Rehearsal: Review

- Beforehand, review thoroughly every responsibility you will have at the dress rehearsal.
- Treat every aspect of the dress rehearsal as if it were a real performance before an audience.
- Stay in character! No matter what happens, stay in character.
- Debrief yourself after the dress rehearsal to fine-tune your performance in preparation for opening night.

Your Primary Goal

Now is the time for you to be completely professional in attitude, appearance, dependability, punctuality and cooperation.

chapter seven

Opening Night



The Basics

- Prepare at home, as you did for the dress rehearsal
- Be careful not to get carried away by audience reaction
- Stay true to your character

FEW MOMENTS ARE SWEETER FOR THE ACTOR than a production's opening night. Every minute of memorization and character development, every hour of arduous rehearsal is now distilled down to this moment of anticipation. A real audience will now be filling those seats out beyond the footlights, and that expectation fills the actor at once with exhilaration and dread.

Homework Redux

But before this paradoxical process can take place, the actor must go through the mechanics of preparation. As with the dress rehearsal, preparation for the first performance (and, naturally, every subsequent performance) begins at home. So it is worthwhile to briefly reiterate the points outlined in the previous chapter:

Part 3: An Actor's Guide

- Leave sufficient time beforehand to walk yourself through—mentally and physically—the entire play, from the moment you will walk in the door, to the final curtain.
- Review the instructions you have been given about this performance: Does the director want you in costume and makeup right away, or will there be a run-through in street dress before the actual performance? Do you have any other responsibilities before curtain?
- Remind yourself which room you have been assigned for dressing and makeup; think about the process, and how long it will take for you to get into costume and makeup.
- Do you know where your props will be?
- Run through every one of your scenes, including lines and blocking.
- Review every on-stage and off-stage responsibility you have.
- Go in the right frame of mind. Commit the entire process to the Lord, asking the Spirit to be in charge of your every word and action. Go with an attitude of cooperation and calm, centered both in what you are doing and, more importantly, in why you are doing it.

Dismiss these more mundane, mechanical preparations at your peril. The concert pianist does not create moments of creative genius in performance without long hours of woodshedding over his or her scales; the painter does not create magic on canvas without first understanding the mechanics of brush and oils. “Genius” is often a misnomer for the result of many hours of hard work combined with attention to detail. (For example, most people are blithely unaware of the countless hours of work that Fred Astaire put in to making his dancing technique appear “effortless.”)

Community

Part of the exhilaration of opening night has nothing to do with the new component of the attendant audience. There is a powerful community dynamic that takes place within a company of actors. Like a company of young soldiers that have just survived boot camp by relying on each other, the cast of a play approaches opening night bound together by their shared triumphs and woes. Behind them are the times of wailing and gnashing of teeth when problems arose, when an actor just couldn't get it right, when tempers flared and intemperate words were said. Behind them, as well, are the times of brilliance—those sharp, penetrating moments in which characters suddenly sprang to life, or the essential meaning of the play was dramatically drilled home. All these episodes combine to create a sense of community, and a familial bond.

This bond is one of the key elements in holding together a production—and it can have its practical benefits. For the first performance of *The Essence of His Death*, several members of the cast were ill—including this writer: the director of the production and player of the Theodosius role. A flu-like malaise filled the dressing room area backstage, and many of us wished only to be at home, in bed, feeling sorry for ourselves. But, as they say, the show must go on, and by helping and encouraging each other, we were able to push beyond the malaise to turn in a respectable performance.

Over the many weeks of hard rehearsals all of us had developed a strong sense of community—a community not only committed to the success of the play, but to the well-being of each other. Without that bond, that dressing room would have housed little more than a miserable collection of isolated souls, each depending only on themselves, and the performance that followed would have been a resounding flop. As it was, through the power of community, prayer, and mutual determination to excel for the Lord's sake, the actual performance became a powerful statement of Christ's love and sacrifice.

The Essential Audience

Another of the mysterious engines that motivates a performance is the added component of the audience. For its members are not just

spectators—anonymous voyeurs hidden beyond the lights and the “fourth wall”—but they are actually candidates for inclusion in this new community. We are not just playing to them, but are doing our level best to include them in this society that has developed around the play! We want them to understand what is going on, to become a part of the story, to invest themselves in the new reality we as actors are striving to create.

The experienced actor does not ignore the audience, but establishes a relationship with it. Earlier it was said that the rehearsal process is not a linear path toward a static performance, something locked in, frozen, and simply repeated ad nauseum for the allotted number of performances. What the individual actor does on stage has a life of its own; it is a living, breathing, evolving, adaptable being. The play is not a photograph, something two-dimensional, displayed in a frame for the public to pass by and view for a moment before continuing on to their lunch. The play is a tightly condensed moment in time, a new reality that exists for the sole purpose of *drawing in* the audience, to make them a part of this new thing being created for their sake.

So a reciprocal relationship is established between the actor and the audience. The actor uses every practiced skill to draw in the audience, to involve them in the performance—to convince them that it is something real. When this is successful—even on a limited basis—a symbiotic relationship is set up so that the involvement and response of the audience actually *feeds* the actor, energizing his performance, making it more substantial and real. Both are challenged; both are rewarded.

Over the Top

One of the easiest mistakes for the committed amateur to make is to get caught up in the rarefied atmosphere of the opening night and to give too much, or to “go over the top,” in his or her performance. It is easy to take a good thing too far. Years ago I was guilty of this myself.

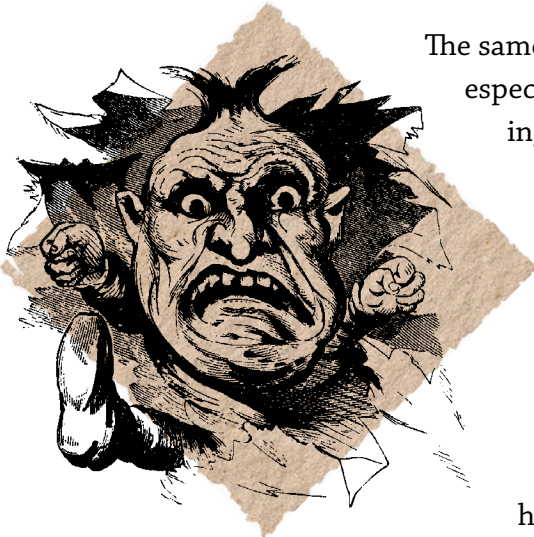
We were in rehearsals for the first musical I had written, *The Journey Back*, and I was playing the role of “Paul,” who at one point is reminiscing about his baptism experience. The line was

Lynn Redgrave on the importance of the audience...

“They are the missing ingredient that you’re working towards, and only when you finally have an audience do you have a play. They’re part of it. The participation of the audience in theatre is essential, and what they bring to it or don’t bring to it alters the nature of the performance.”

...and I kept telling the pastor that I couldn't swim, and was afraid to let him put my head under the water. He said: (in a slight caricature of an evangelist) "My boy, just think about Jesus and you'll be fine."

Well, at the first rehearsal I played the line pretty straight, but when I added some juice to the word "Jesus," I got a favorable reaction from the director and fellow actors. So (conveniently forgetting the stage direction of "a slight caricature") I kept adding juice, until about four or five rehearsals later I was delivering the line as a strident, offensive cartoon of the stereotypical fundamentalist—and the director had to tone me down, because I was, indeed, taking it over the top.



The same thing can happen to an actor in performance—and especially on opening night, when the adrenaline is pumping at full force. Buoyed by favorable audience reaction, the actor can get carried away by the opportunity to entertain, and take his or her character into places it doesn't belong. This can be a dangerous situation where the actor begins to lose control of his character; suddenly—and it can happen with alarming speed—after weeks of rehearsal and careful construction of a believable character, the character is behaving way over the top, in a caricature of what he is really supposed to be. And for the price of an easy laugh, or an approving gasp from the audience, the integrity of a character—and, maybe, the whole play—lies in tatters.

The long hours of rehearsal are meant not only to create and develop the character, but also to *cement the character in place*. This doesn't speak against necessary *flexibility*, but is meant to prevent the actor taking the character into places he shouldn't.

Leaving Some to the Audience

In an interview conducted around 1978, the venerable character actor, Barnard Hughes, offered another reason for not taking a performance too far.

When I receive that measly pension from the mistress after having been her gardener all my life [in the play *Da*, for which Hughes received a Tony for Best Actor], I'm sitting with my son and I say, proudly and sadly, "I planted them trees there, and I set up the tennis court." He tells me, "You've been diddled." And I say, not wanting to admit it, "What, diddled?" and then almost break into a tear, knowing he's right. But I've been wondering whether I'm taking that too far by almost breaking down: maybe I'm playing out the reaction that I want the audience to feel. If I play the emotion for them, you see, they don't have to feel it themselves. An actor should only suggest, suggest, suggest and let the audience do the feeling. Allow them to play out the emotions.

I remember when I was playing Kurt in *Watch on the Rhine*, I said goodbye to my children, and the tears just flowed. I could hardly control myself, hardly get through the performance. When I'd take my curtain call about five minutes later, I'd still be choked up. And everyone thought how wonderful it was that I could cry so facilely—but I really shouldn't have been crying at all. The audience should have been dissolved in tears instead. The very fact that people admired my ability to cry showed that I was not acting well: it reminded them that I *was* acting. Anything that draws attention to the fact that you're acting isn't acting.

James Agate once said that when he looks at a watch, he does so to learn the time, not to admire the works, and I think that's a good thing for actors to keep in mind. These fancy actors who call attention to their technique are keeping the audience aware that they're actors. And yes, I'm afraid that I might be playing that moment in *Da* a little bit too strongly for the audience; they might not empathize or sympathize with me because I'm playing it so fully that they don't have to.

The wise actor approaches every performance with expectation measured by caution—enthusiasm informed by sobriety.

Stage Fright

Finally, a brief word about that old nemesis, stage fright.

In a word, it is unnecessary. While there may be among us those individuals of chronically terrified constitution, for the rest there is no need for anything more than a normal, healthy case of pre-curtain butterflies before a performance.

With only rare exceptions, those standing in the wings consumed with stage fright—or those who have just made their entrance and find themselves staring mute at the audience, paralyzed with stark fear—are those who have not properly prepared for the moment.



The actor who follows a methodical system of rehearsal, such as that outlined in this book, and who commits himself to the concept and pursuit of excellence in service to the Lord, will meet opening night with little more than a healthy, motivating case of nervousness. The actor who has rehearsed well approaches the first curtain confident in his or her character. Everything about the role—lines, blocking, behavior—have long ago become second nature. The play is so familiar that it has become an almost parallel universe, as familiar as real life.

Given this, there is no cause for stage fright, only an overwhelming desire to get out there and finally give full flower to the moment up to which the long rehearsal schedule has been crescendoing. The well-prepared actor meets this moment head-on—maybe with butterflies in the belly, but also with a powerful hunger to give life to the character and play.

Now— Go break a leg!

Opening Night: Review

- Prepare, at home, as you did for the dress rehearsal.
- Be careful to not get carried away by audience reaction.
- Remain true to your character.

Your Primary Goal

Remember and put to use all the work you've put in on your character and the play.

chapter eight

Curtain Call



The Basics

- Be modestly gracious in your response to those who applaud your work.
- Evaluate your work after the first and subsequent performances.
- Make sure that your motives have been righteous, and that God receives all the glory and praise.

SO YOU'VE JUST MADE YOUR FINAL EXIT. Perhaps it was out the wings, stage left, or through the audience, down right. Perhaps it was after a blackout, or after being run through by a soldier's blade, left to bleed and die in writhing agony down center, slow fade to black.

However it ended, the performance is over for you, your work done. If you had a sizeable role at all, and if you did your job well, you should be exhausted—exhilarated and exhausted. No matter the dimensions of your role, you should be experiencing a sense of accomplishment—a sense that you have just served the Lord to the very best of your ability. You have employed His gifts in serving His kingdom; you have served not yourself and your own aggrandizement, but you have just done your best to bring glory to God.

And that feeling is worth more than all the applause resounding across the Broadway stage.

A Gracious Response

If you have read Part One of this book, you will know that the idea of a traditional curtain call—the practice of the cast trooping out to bow and receive the praise and adulation of the audience—is abhorrent to the His Company way. There is something inherently repugnant about receiving personal praise for serving the Lord. It leaves a bad taste in the mouth—as well it should.

It is not up to the individual actor to decide how the play will end. It is up to the individual, however, to be responsible for his own motives, the purposes of his own heart.

If, at the end of the play, the cast does take a bow, it is your responsibility to receive the applause with grace and humility. If, later, you are uncomfortable when people approach you to say what a wonderful job you did, don't reproach them, and don't preach. Just smile graciously and say "thank you." Just as it may have been hard for you to learn how to have a servant heart when performing before an audience, it can be hard for members of the audience not to applaud your efforts. Thank them for their appreciation, and, where appropriate (and if you mean it), use a simple phrase to redirect their praise, such as, "I give God the praise," or just "Praise God"—always with an attitude of *Thank you. Let us praise God together.*

The Debriefing

It may well be that your opening night is also your closing night. It may be that there will be only one performance of this play for which you have worked so diligently. Or it may be that another performance will follow the next night, or next week. Or, in some cases, after the final curtain of opening night, you may be facing a run of ten or more performances.



In any case, your work is not yet done. Even if this was the only performance—and certainly if there are to be more in this run—it is important that you debrief your own performance. Your goal, throughout this process that is nearing its end, is to be a better actor tomorrow than you were today. And one of the most valuable tools in accomplishing that worthy goal is to take a moment to review the work you've just completed.

Your director may conduct a more formal, full-cast debriefing. But whether he does or not, I would encourage you to spend some time evaluating your own performance. By all means, enjoy the moment; revel for a while in the joy of the theatre. But then step away from the applause and the praise; let the euphoria of the performance fade. Then make a cold, hard examination of the work you've just done.

Post-performance Checklist

- Did you run through the entire play before you arrived for the performance? Did you review all your lines and blocking?
- Did you arrive on-time?
- How was your pre-performance preparation? Were you ready for opening night, 'up to speed'? Were you organized with the tool-kit of your performance—your costume, makeup, and props?
- When you made your first entrance, did you feel confident, thoroughly in character, or did you enter a bit tentatively, even off-balance?
- Were your lines and blocking comfortably plugged in, a natural part of you, or did you spend the performance struggling to remember your next line or move?
- Did you forget any of your lines? If so, how well did you recover?
- Did you, at any point during the performance, lose your concentration? Were you distracted by anything unexpected in the audience, or from one of the other actors? Did this cause you to

drop out of character, or blow a line? How could you have avoided this situation?

- If any of your fellow actors forgot a line or their blocking, were you able to do anything to help? How could you have handled that better?
- Did you behave like a professional backstage—keeping quiet, and concentrating on the overall production, as well as your role?
- With your script in hand, review your performance. Honestly, how well did you do? Were you solidly in character throughout your time on stage, or was there a moment when you relaxed, and slipped out of character? Make a note of where in the play that occurred.
- Did you deliver your lines as rehearsed? Did you either intentionally take liberties or accidentally change a line? With your script in hand, remind yourself of the correct line. (And if, in the heat of the performance, you intentionally changed a line, *don't ever do that again.*)
- How well did you establish a relationship with the audience? Were they working *with* you, or *against* you? Were you comfortable with them, or did the audience leave you feeling ill-at-ease?
- Were you “on”? Did you enjoy yourself? Did you “feel” like your character—or did you feel like an actor?
- Finally, what can you do to do a better job the next time?

Motive

The Christian actor's situation is very different from that of the secular actor. The secular actor, with rare exception, is serving primarily himself and his career. He may feel a sense of responsibility toward the project as a whole, and his fellow actors, but he wants prominent

billing, a fat paycheck, and most of the glory for himself. At best, he does it not for money or fame, but for his love for the craft.

This is not meant to denigrate the intentions of secular actors. Theirs is an honorable profession with honorable rewards. I do not fault their pursuit.

In contrast, however, the actor in the Christian or religious production has a higher calling. Our calling is not to be the glorification of self, but the glorification of God. From the selection of the script, through casting, rehearsals, and final performance, every aspect of the Christian production is to be focused on and informed by the Godhead. It is all to be energized by the Holy Spirit, performed out of a love for and gratitude to Jesus Christ, and dedicated to the glory of God and His kingdom.

At the end of a production run—after the sets have been broken, the props and costumes put back into storage, the extra sound and light cables put away—after the dust has settled, the Christian actor is to be filled not with admiration for himself, but the wonder and praise of His Lord.

For that is the His Company way.

Curtain Call: Review

- Be modestly gracious in your response to those who applaud your work.
- Evaluate your work after the first and subsequent performances.
- Make sure that your motives have been righteous, and that God receives all the glory and praise.

Your Primary Goal

To be a better actor tomorrow than you are today.

part

4



The Next Level

emphasis
one

Memorization



MEMORIZING LINES IS FUNDAMENTAL. Few people actually enjoy the process of cramming lines into memory, but the process is necessary—and accomplishes two important things in the early life of a play.

- Memorization permits rehearsal. No *real* rehearsing takes place until the lines are memorized.
- Memorization begins the important process of the actor acquiring the character. Memorizing the lines is like ingesting the essence of who the character is—and, more importantly, equipping the actor to speak as or for the character.

Non-negotiables

There are certain hard and fast rules to follow when memorizing lines.

- Learn your lines *verbatim*. The actor, by himself, does not make changes to the script; the changing of lines—if it is to take place at all—is always the result of discussion between the actor and director, or writer and director.
- Take great pains to learn your lines correctly the first time. It is twice as difficult to *unlearn* lines that have been memorized incorrectly.
- Learn the words first. Don't try to develop the character while you are memorizing lines; that will come later.
- If someone helps you learn your lines, make sure they hold you to the printed lines. Make sure they don't let you get away with changing the lines—either accidentally or on purpose.

Methods

Every actor has his or her favorite method of memorization. So long as the lines are learned correctly, and on time, personal methods—no matter how odd—are perfectly acceptable. Here are some recommended, tried and true methods; use any or all that work for you.

- Break down the script into manageable chunks. Learn one sentence so that you can say it perfectly. Then learn the next sentence perfectly. Go back and learn the two sentences together; don't move on until you are perfect on the two sentences. Then learn the next sentence; add it to the two previous. Use the same method for paragraphs and pages. Don't add more until you are solid on everything up to that point. At your next memorization session, do not proceed into new material, until you have successfully reviewed the lines from the previous session.
- Do not work without your script in hand until your lines are solid. Actors begin learning their lines inaccurately when they too quickly set aside their script. What this means more specifically is, for example, don't run lines in your car, while driving to

This is not to suggest that the writer's words are somehow holy writ that dare not be changed; lines are changed all the time when there is good reason. But the play requires a common foundation from which all participants work. It cannot be something that twists and turns at the whim of the individual actor.

Realistically it is difficult to draw a strong, bright line between memorization and character development. Depending on the role, there are times when "being in character" can be a help in much the same way as blocking. The critical point is that you add in nothing that becomes an *obstacle* to quick memorization of your lines.



Laurence Olivier on memorization...

During the summer I worked at the speech day and night for four months.

I knew from experience that it was essential to get the words first. Then, when I'd got the words absolutely so that they were tripping off my tongue, I'd get the accent. Trying to learn the words and the accent at the same time was dreadfully unwise, for then you had twin problems to contend with.

Lynn Redgrave
on learning lines...

And then I do try to learn the lines [after reading through a new script]. The bigger the part the more I like to know them. It's the biggest bugaboo of my life that most actors, through sheer laziness, do not do the same. I know it sounds arrogant, but it's true. Many actors justify their laziness with excuses like, "Oh, I can't possibly learn my lines, I have to know my character and my moves along with it." But that is absolute rubbish, and it's the biggest time-waster in rehearsals. It is boring to learn your lines... but it pays off one-hundredfold the minute you start rehearsals. You see, you cannot really act with a book in your hand, and so it's a great thing to hide behind.

work or the store, until you can say them flawlessly—or at least until you learn them well enough to know when you've made a mistake, and can correct it immediately.

- When working from the script, cover your line while reading the previous character's line. Work your way down each page in this way. This will help you learn the *context* for your lines—*when* to say them.
- Think photographically. One way to remember lines is to recall their placement on the printed page. Is it the line at the top of the page? The one right before the page turn? Or is it the long one in the middle of the page, broken into several paragraphs?
- Use the phrasing and rhythm of words to help you remember their order.
- Use the script line numbers (usually running down the left-hand side of the page, if they are there) for reference—much like one would learn a passage of Scripture by remembering its chapter and verse.
- If you are still memorizing lines after the play has been blocked, it will be to your advantage to learn the two together. Always walk through your blocking as you work your lines—and always run your lines as you rehearse your blocking. This practice will not just reinforce the combination of the two, but is also a good memorization tool: The best way to remember a line is to associate it with where you are standing on stage; likewise, the best way to remember your blocking is to associate it with what you are saying when you are there!

Again, it is less important *how* you learn your lines, than it is that you *do*—with dispatch. The most important contribution you can make to the success of the play—especially in the early days of the production—is to learn your lines early and accurately. Your director will appreciate it, as well as your fellow actors.

emphasis two

The Character



THE PROCESS OF AN ACTOR ACQUIRING AND SHAPING his or her character begins with the moment the script is in hand and continues through the final performance. The process is discussed throughout this book, but here we will develop it to a deeper extent. What are the first steps to an actor building the character?

Building

The term “building” is used intentionally. The character is not something already in existence that can, in an elemental sense, be viewed and understood. Assuredly, the character is created by the play’s author, but the author has only erected the *framework* for the character—as well as the scaffolding on which the workers will stand to put up the walls, windows and furnishings. Though created by the author, it is up to the actor to fill in all those walls and windows and furnishings.

Part 4: The Next Level

Using a more human analogy, the author may supply the skeleton, but it is the *actor* who puts on the flesh.

Kit Bag

Every person has a past and a present. Every person has a kit bag crammed with life experiences, memories, loves and hates, and people: people observed and people experienced. Every actor has thoughts, opinions, fantasies and dreams. Every person on the stage brings with him a life filled to overflowing with raw material.

Following the building analogy, these could be seen as the items filling the warehouse from which the building will be finished. These life experiences will be brought into the actor's realization of his character.

The venerable actor and master teacher Uta Hagen refers to this process as *transference*—but we can de-mystify this concept by simply thinking of it as the actor making selections from personal life experiences and giving them to his character. It is how the flesh is applied to the skeletal framework.

This process supplies some of the “what” of a character, but, more importantly, it supplies most of the “how” and the “why.” Let's look at this in greater detail, using the Biblical character of Ruth for an example.

Beginning With the Facts

You have been given the role of Ruth. What is the first step? You settle into a comfortable chair with the script and the Bible. To discover how the author has interpreted the character, you read through the script several times. Even though your character is a familiar Bible character, you familiarize yourself with the script first—not because the script is more important than Scripture, but because your first job is to perform the *character* of Ruth as created by the author, not necessarily to perform the historical character as described in the Bible.



Our one-act play, *Family*, is based on the first eighteen verses of the Old Testament book of Ruth.

In this context, Scripture is the *background* resource, whereas the play's script is your *primary* resource.

Once you have read through the script a number of times, and believe that you have at least the beginning of an understanding of the role, you then turn to the book of Ruth in Scripture. Your purpose is essentially two-fold: to discover or remind yourself of the established background for the character, and to verify for yourself that the character as written does not run counter to the Biblical account. From Scripture (if not from the script) you learn that

- Ruth is a Moabite.
- She has married into a Jewish family, originally from Bethlehem in Judah.
- She was married for no more than ten years, at which time her husband, Mahlon, died.
- Ruth has made the decision to leave her native Moab and go to Judah with her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Although there is certainly much more to glean from the Biblical story of Ruth, for the purpose of this discussion let us stop there for the moment, with just these four points, and consider how you will begin to build this character and make it your own.

You begin by asking yourself the fundamental question:

“If I were _____...”

supplying the name of your character:

“If I were Ruth...”

From the start, your purpose is to personalize the character—to see yourself living the life lived by Ruth. So let us now reconsider the four facts about Ruth gleaned from Scripture—facts reworded to reflect your acquisition of the character.

- *I* am a Moabite.

Part 4: The Next Level

- *I married into a Jewish family, originally from Bethlehem in Judah.*
- *I was married for ten years, at which time my husband, Mahlon, died.*
- *I have made the decision to leave my native Moab and go to Judah with my mother-in-law, Naomi.*

Learning All You Can

The next step—that is, when your character is an historical figure such as Ruth—is to learn all you can about the real person. Using only the above four items (for this example), you begin your research.

- Go to the library and learn everything you can about ancient Moab. What was the place like? the climate? What kind of culture was it? What were the people like? Did they get along with neighboring Judah, or were they at war most of the time? What was the status of women in the Moabite culture? What freedoms or restrictions did they have? How did they dress? Did they wear makeup, wigs?
- Based on what you've learned about the Moabite culture, how common would it have been for a woman to marry into the *Jewish* culture? Would this have ostracized her from the rest of the community? Would Jews have been looked down on, looked up to—or accepted as readily as anyone else?
- What would have happened to a widow in the Moabite culture? Would she have easily remarried—or would she have been stigmatized for the rest of her life?
- What kind of culture shock would a Moabite have experienced moving to Judah? How would she have been received?

Uta Hagen
on character origin...

If, like Laurette Taylor, you want to ensure that you will be “wearing the underpants” of the character, you will have to start at the beginning with transferences from your own life to the very origins of your character, to ensure faith in the reality of your new existence.

Transference

Now it is time to begin the process of injecting *your* life experience into the character of Ruth.



- “You” were born and lived the early years of your life in Moab—a rugged, desert land. Are you familiar with the desert? Have you experienced how hot and dry it can be—so hot breathing can be difficult? You may not have spent much time in the desert, but have you driven through it while on vacation? If not, surely you’ve experienced the occasional day of brutal heat. Maybe—if not the desert—you’ve spent time on a dry, sandy beach. Do you remember what it was like getting the sand all over and in everything? What would it be like living under those conditions all the time? But it could also rain in Moab. Have you ever lived in or visited an area that had been dry for an extended period, which then received welcome rain? Do you remember how it smelled afterward, how everything looked suddenly green again?
- Have you ever married or dated someone from another culture? How did you feel when visiting that person’s family? Did you feel awkward—at least at first? out of place? alienated? If you haven’t a romantic situation to draw from, have you ever had a friend from another culture? Did you invite that friend to visit you and your family in your culture—or did you visit theirs?
- Most people have lost a loved one or intimate friend to death. Remember those feelings of loss, emptiness, of feeling left behind. Were you angry? angry with God? What did the loss feel like down deep in the pit of your stomach?
- Have you ever left home for good, or for an extended period of time? Was there a queasy feeling of homesickness associated with it? After a while, did you long to return home again? Or maybe there was an opposite reaction: maybe you were glad to leave, and happy in your new home.

Observation

The actor cannot always build his character from personal experience. Sometimes—in fact, quite often—we must add in our observations of other people. The actor *must* become a student of people, observing their actions, behaviors, quirks and idiosyncrasies.

So the actor must become a *voyeur*, of sorts—not prying into people’s private lives, or peering through their window shades, but always keeping his or her eyes open to what is going on around him. The observant actor collects characters like other people collect seashells or buttons, always keeping an eye out for something interesting to add to the collection. Let a button collector visit a swap meet or garage sale, and she will come away with a new treasure. Likewise, let an actor stand on a subway platform, and he will come away with a pocketful of new characters to add to his storehouse of material.

An actor’s mind becomes a catalogue (or a database, if you’d prefer) of qualities that can be retrieved and used at will. For example,

- THE FOIBLES AND BEHAVIOR OF THE STRANGER in an adjacent plane seat—such as the woman I observed one time on a plane from Nairobi to London. She had probably boarded in Johannesburg, from where the flight had originated. I didn’t hear her voice, but she *looked* South African: mostly Dutch, slightly Germanic, with short blonde hair. It was the hair, in fact, that caught my eye. It was greasy, you see; not wet or damp, but greasy. Yet she repeatedly brushed her fingers through it and tossed it about as if it were long and luxurious, and she were a blow-dried starlet in Hollywood. Yet it was short and greasy, for crying out loud! I imagined it left little slivers of grease stains on the paper-covered headrest. This woman seemed full of life, radiant. She fairly *glowed* with vitality, and it occurred to me that she knew her hair was rather unkempt, and just didn’t care.
- A POMPOUS OFFICIAL DOING AS LITTLE OF HIS DUTY AS POSSIBLE—such as the Mexican customs agent I observed as a teenager when our missionary group paused for inspection at the border crossing at Nuevo Laredo. He sat at a tiny desk, a desk barely larger than his own substantial girth. He wasn’t doing a thing,

Laurence Olivier
on observations...

I hear remarks in the street or in a shop and I retain them. You must constantly observe: a walk, a limp, a run; how a head inclines to one side when listening; the twitch of an eyebrow; the hand that picks the nose when it thinks no one is looking; the mustache puller; the eyes that never look at you; the nose that sniffs long after the cold has gone. Rhythms. Observe the speech patterns; keep them in your head, in your magic box. Store them until you need them, then use them. The way people walk down a bus or a subway train, one arm bent behind or both hands brought forward, elbows in as if in fear of accidental indecent contact.

but just sat there as if expecting no one to notice him. While he waited (or daydreamed, or stared at the flies on the wall) he smoked a cigarette—methodically, rhythmically, patiently. And the most remarkable thing was that I never saw him *exhale*. For the entire length of that cigarette I never saw one particle of smoke emerge from either his mouth or his nose.

- THE DESPICABLE PERSONALITY OF A HOUSE PAINTER—such as the man who was hired to paint the exterior of our house a few years back. He was not terribly bright, since he got lost repeatedly while trying to find our house. He was an ugly man, with a face pockmarked and distorted by scars. His personality, as well, was coarse and abrasive, his language profane. He constantly cut corners and reneged on promises made. He yelled at his men and called them derogatory names. His behavior was churlish and abusive, full of empty boasts and small-minded excuses. Throughout the job, he was argumentative with me, and even expressed his pique that though I was younger than he, I apparently lived better. This man remains to-date the ugliest person—both in visage and personality—I have ever met.

Along with observations of real people, in real life, one could also add to the personal catalogue characters and situations seen on television, in movies, and on the stage. And it is rarely necessary to physically compile these observations, writing them down; when one gives full attention to the observation it will be fixed into memory, waiting for just the right moment to emerge, and contribute to the building of a new character.

The Hard Slog

It is not uncommon for actors in church theatre to invert the logic of an actor's responsibility toward a role. They—as amateurs in the traditional sense of the word—will spend little time working on character, when they, with their lack of experience and training, are the ones who should be working at it the hardest. Meanwhile, the professional—again, in the traditional sense of that word—exhibits his professionalism by working hard at those things the amateur believes are unnecessary!

If ever there was anyone who could phone-in an acting job, it was Laurence Olivier. Without a doubt, he could read through a script, cold, with more expression and verve than most of us after a 60-day schedule of rehearsals. He was the consummate actor, a chameleon, an artist. Yet it may surprise the amateur to learn that he worked hard at his art, as the following notes on his preparation for Shakespeare's *Othello* illustrate.

I began to think about the play again, and look at it from Othello's point of view. I began to sniff around the man, like an old dog inspecting yesterday's bone. I began to read and reread it, worming my way into the text. Scratching at the veneer I had left on it from my previous experience of Iago's point of view, chipping away and getting back to the bare, fresh page. Throwing off the harness of a previous production.

To create a character, I first visualize a painting; the manner, movement, gestures, walk all follow. It began to come. Pictures and sounds began to form in my mind, subconsciously at first, but slowly working their way to the surface. You keep the image in the heart and then project it onto the oil painting. I say "oil" rather than "watercolor" because for me, acting will always be in oils.

I was beginning to know how I should look: very strong. He should stand as a strong man stands, with a sort of ease, straight-backed, straight-necked, relaxed as a lion. I was certain that he had to be very graceful. I was sure that when he killed in battle, he did it with absolute beauty.

Black... I had to be black. I had to feel black down to my soul. I had to look out from a black man's world. Not one of repression, for Othello would have felt superior to the white man. If I peeled my skin, underneath would be another layer of black skin. I was to be beautiful. Quite beautiful.

Throwing away the white man was difficult, but fascinating. Of course, you can never truly do this, but there were times when I convinced myself that I had. The oil painting.

A walk... I needed a walk. I must relax my feet. Get the right balance, not too taut, not too loose... He should grow from the earth, the rich brown earth, warmed by the sun. I took off my shoes, and then my socks. Barefoot, I felt the movement come to me. Slowly it came: lithe, dignified and sensual. Lilted, yet positive.

The voice. I was sure he had a deeper voice than mine. Bass, a bass part, a sound that should be dark violet—velvet stuff.

Working At It

A process such as that which Olivier followed for his Othello is what brings both clarity and depth to a performance, and a variation on that same process should be carried out by every actor in every role down to the smallest bit part in the shortest sketch.

Since I don't do a very good job of acting and directing at the same time, when I am directing a larger play I may reserve for myself (if necessary) a small, one-scene role, often a character part, with which I can have fun for a short time, then get back to my directing responsibilities. And one such role was that of Theodosius in our three-act, *The Essence of His Death*.

Into the script I had written only the merest suggestion of the character...

Enter THEODOSIUS, a Roman merchant on his way toward Egypt. He is a trader in silly and inconsequential trinkets, a commodity ill-befitting his "robust" stature. Theodosius sweats a lot.



It wasn't much to go on, so I began layering on a look, a demeanor, a personality for this merchant. For his demeanor, I drew from every fat person I had ever met (including myself)—but primarily the irretrievably disheveled appearance of a Social Studies teacher I had had in the eighth grade. For his bargaining skills and wily ways, I drew on a thoroughly amoral store owner I had once worked for in San Diego—a person who would not have lost a minute's sleep over cheating a customer out of his life savings.

At home I tried out many possibilities, not worrying about going “over the top” in private. I worked out a voice, facial expressions, behavior. I practiced repeatedly how to smoothly slip a necklace from my bag and present it in an artful manner to my customer, fingers curled just so, displaying the necklace to catch the glint of “sunlight,” making it sparkle like something worth more than its real value.

Then, in rehearsal with the two leading men of the story, I warned them to be on their toes, because I was going to do everything in my power to steal the scene. (Which, of course, I did.)

On Stage

A final note regarding the character: *Stay in it!*

One of the most difficult challenges for the inexperienced actor is to stay in character. Certainly during the earlier rehearsals, while you are struggling to put legs on your character, and the rehearsal is being repeatedly interrupted by direction, it can be almost impossible to remain in character. But as the rehearsal process continues—as the time between interruptions lengthens—you should also be rehearsing the art of staying in character.

The quickest way to deal a death blow to the fragile relationship between your character and the audience’s suspension of disbelief is to—even for the briefest moment—step out of character. Relaxing for a moment, letting your attention drift, or letting your eyes wander while standing in the background of a scene—any one of these can immediately and fatally remind the audience that you are, in fact, Mary Jones, and not really the Queen of Sheba.

As the rehearsal schedule moves into its final days, as your interpretation and realization of the character deepens and matures so that it becomes less a description on the printed page and more a three-dimensional human being, you should be spending increasingly more of the rehearsal time in character—until, at least by the dress rehearsal, you get into character before you even step onto the stage, and you remain in character until the final curtain.

Somewhere, buried deep within the cobwebbed annals of amateur productions, lies the root and source of a gross fallacy—the fallacy that an actor need only be in character when he or she has actual lines to recite.

This is horribly wrong. In fact, the most critical work an actor does on stage is what he does while *not* speaking: while listening to the opposite side of a dialogue; while pausing between speeches; while standing in the shadows, as seemingly insignificant as the set piece against which he leans.

The “professional” actor realizes that it is of critical importance that he remain in character at all times—especially when he has nothing to say.

emphasis
three

Rehearsing at Home



THE HIS COMPANY PHILOSOPHY AND METHOD includes the following principle: Public rehearsals—that is, a scheduled rehearsal with the director and other cast members—represent only the tip of the iceberg; the *real* rehearsing takes place at home.

The Professional Way

The amateur way—and that term is not used here disparagingly, but only to accurately describe the typical church drama participant—has traditionally been to consider the regular, scheduled rehearsals as the only time that rehearsing of the *individual* role takes place. The amateur returns home from play practice, tosses the dog-eared script on the dresser, and forgets about it until the next scheduled rehearsal.

That, however, is not the His Company way.

Character-based

The His Company performance method is character-based. By that it is meant that every other production component is secondary to the authentic, richly developed character. Without the believable character, nothing else will save the play; with it, very little else matters. All the splendid scenery of the Broadway stage will not save a play in which the characters are little more than stick figures. Set pieces, special effects, or gloriously authentic costumes will not salvage a play in which the actors have not done their homework.

His Company began with (and always specialized in) the short sketch performed to illustrate some other component of the worship service, such as the sermon or special music. A two-person, three-minute sketch stuck in the middle of a service just before the sermon cannot depend on elaborate sets or lighting to create a mood. It rarely begins with a blackout, has no curtain, and is typically performed in the harsh sunlight of a Sunday morning—with a red exit sign overhead and choir members whispering in the background. The audience is usually taken by surprise, the pastor is seated just a few feet away, and someone's unruly infant is caterwauling in the front pew.

In these circumstances, everything, e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g, depends on the immediately believable character. Authentic wardrobe helps, certainly, and, in some cases can be almost as critical as the character wearing it. But what really makes or breaks the performance is the woodshedding each actor has put in on his or her character.

The aforementioned three-minute sketch will typically require twenty-four hours of public rehearsal. Assuming a weekly, rather than daily rehearsal schedule, this would mean eight three-hour public rehearsals spread over two months. For the individual actor to fully invest himself in his character—to pump real flesh and blood, emotion, depth, and authentic clarity into the role—requires at least an additional twenty-four hours of work at home.

The Goal

The goal for the individual actor is to *bring the character to life*. It is as simple and direct as that. If you, once you have exited from your per-

Uta Hagen
on invisible technique...

I am only impressed when the actor's technique is so perfect that it has become invisible and has persuaded the audience that they are in the presence of a living human being who makes it possible for them to empathize with all his foibles and struggles as they unfold in the play. It is my firm belief that when you are aware of how a feat has been achieved, the actor has failed. He has misused his techniques.

formance, hear the audience exclaiming, “Didn’t Jimmy do a splendid job!” or “My goodness, Alice sure put in a lot of work on that!” you have failed miserably. Your goal—not always attained, but always in sight—is to so bring to life your character that within the first minute after your entrance the audience has utterly forgotten that you are the one playing the role. Your goal is to leave them exclaiming, “Now I know what Moses (or Paul, or Jesus, or Mary) was really like.” Or, better yet, you want to leave them so moved they are stunned into silence.

It is true that with the typically unsophisticated, home-church audience this result may be next to impossible. Unless they are seeing drama on a regular basis—unless they are accustomed to having Scripture and its principles being played out before them by actors in costume, they will inevitably be preoccupied with *process*, instead of story or moral. Realistically their response will be a blend of both.

Nevertheless, the actor should never stop striving to attain the goal of presenting the audience with a character so deeply and authentically realized that the *actor* disappears before their eyes.

This level of performance does not happen without homework. The real, fundamental crafting of the character is done by the actor alone: researching, practicing, experimenting, trying out voices and movement. This is where the character is given birth, depth, maturity. Then, with that homework under the belt, the actor arrives at the public rehearsal ready to share with the director and cast that which has been created.

The private work is where the character is developed; the public work is where the individual character is assimilated into the overall production.

The Home Stage

Find an area at home that approximates the shape (if admittedly not the dimensions) of your stage. Like the prayer closet in which you regularly meet with the Lord, use this same area for all rehearsing at home. Consistency of space is a valuable tool in the rehearsal process. Just as with landmarks in the auditorium, consistently “hitting your

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mark” when rehearsing at home will help you do it right every time.

For example, if, when practicing at home, you always end up staring at the third shelf of the living room bookcase when you say the line, “Oh, how I wish they were. How I wish they were,” then you will establish the habit of associating the two. If you fail to remember the line, you will recall it by remembering what you always say when you are staring at the third shelf of the bookcase. Likewise, if you temporarily forget your blocking, you will remember that whenever you say that line you are to be staring at books!



If you are in an area and climate where you can rehearse outdoors where there is more room, by all means, work *al fresco*!

Atmosphere

When rehearsing at home, do everything necessary to focus on the task at hand. Minimize distractions: don't permit an audience (unless you find that it actually helps the process). If someone is there to monitor the script for you, they must keep quiet except to correct mistakes or supply other characters' lines—and make sure they hold you to the script, not permitting you to take liberties with your lines.

The essence of acting is the willingness to make a fool of oneself. As early as possible in the process, make your rehearsals private. With no one else in the room you will be free to experiment and stretch the boundaries of your character, to try out different voices, to practice giving free reign to all aspects of your character.

Visualization

Rehearse physically and visually. Unless your blocking has you there on stage, don't sit comfortably in an easy chair, silently reciting your lines in your head. Get up! Move through your blocking, practicing it along with your lines. Run your lines out loud, full voice.

Meanwhile, visualize everything else that will be going on on stage; see in your mind the other actors, the set pieces; if you will have a prop in your hand on stage, then have something similar in your hand when rehearsing at home. If you have your costume already, wear it; if you don't, wear something similar. Do it for real!

And use this time to exercise your “flexibility” skills, preparing yourself for those moments to come when not everything will go as planned.

For more on being flexible, see Emphasis Five, “The Adaptable Actor,” in Part Four.

emphasis
four

Being Something One is Not



ACTING IS ESSENTIALLY AN ART OF THE MIND. It depends on a director to envision the finished, completed production sometimes months before it is actually realized; it depends on an individual actor imagining herself as someone she is not, standing somewhere she is not, saying things she herself would never say; it depends on everyone on stage working together in concert to create something that doesn't really exist.

When handed one of my scripts for an Easter musical, a teenage girl grimaced and said rather imperiously to me, "I would never say that." I quickly conceded her point, but then rather pointedly told her, "You may not say that—but your *character* would."

Unseemly Actions

Acting is a frightening high-wire act in which a person volunteers to

Part 4: The Next Level

stop being what he really is, to become, for awhile, something he is not. This can present moral quandaries for the Christian performer. For example, in *Closets*, the character of Loraine tries to light a cigarette in a restaurant.

Loraine is dressed shabbily—not like a street person, but as someone who once knew better days, but is now down on her luck. Her clothes are clean, but almost worn out. She has tried to arrange her hair, put on her face, but hasn't done a very good job of it, and there's a run in her hose. She slouches when she walks, as if hoping no one will notice her... Loraine removes her jacket, busies herself with her purse, then buries her nose in the menu. Meanwhile, Betty returns to her own perusal of the menu, occasionally glancing up at Loraine—not unkindly, more wanting her to be at her ease. As the waiter returns to take their order, Loraine fumbles in her purse, removes a pack of cigarettes and places one in her mouth. When she starts to strike a match, the waiter stops her.

The first performance of this sketch, in the commissioning church, was a logistical nightmare, since the actress playing the part of Loraine became ill at the last minute. After weeks of rehearsals, just a few hours before performance I was not seeing any way to proceed with only two-thirds of a three-member cast. But the pastor of the church insisted that we go ahead with the performance—with one of his willing parishioners standing in, *reading* Loraine's lines.

I anticipated disaster, but actually—after a few feverish run-throughs—it turned out to be something less than terrible, since virtually the entire sketch was performed sitting at a table, making it easier for the stand-in to read her lines. The problem, however, came in the direction with the cigarette: The woman refused to put the cigarette in her mouth. The short version of the tale is that I eventually compromised, and had her just fumble with the pack of cigarettes and matches.

In another instance, a pastor turned down a performance of our short one-act, *Sand Mountain*, in his church, based on his conviction that no one would ever buy into the premise of a man and woman being close, yet Platonic friends.

The decision to actually book a performance of a play will be outside the responsibilities of the individual actor, but he or she will often have to decide about things such as the mechanics of how their character is portrayed. These decisions, however, should be covered early-on in the production process. Objections should be raised at the first reading session with the new script—not later on, after rehearsals have begun.

Displays of Affection

A more common example deals with displays of affection on stage. Our three-act Easter musical, *The Choice*, has the male and female leads embrace and kiss in the final scene, before they part company, perhaps forever. This scene (which originated in *The Essence of His Death*) was performed without objection or insurrection in a number of different venues, until a church in the Midwest decided the only way they could stage the play and include this scene would be to cast two actors who were already married to each other as the leads.

The Kiss

In rehearsals for the inaugural performance of *The Essence of His Death*, I was faced with a different, but all-too-common problem: two willing, but clumsily nervous actors. The female lead was already married, and the male lead was engaged, and though they were trying their best, we spent long hours discussing the hows and whys and wherefores of this brief embrace and kiss. Finally, during one late-evening rehearsal, I, as their director, reached my breaking point. I had run out of words to *talk* them into doing it the correct way, so, instead, I decided to demonstrate. My point all along had been for them to quit thinking about it so much, and *just do it*. So I unexpectedly grabbed the leading lady, hugged her close to me and planted a stage kiss smack on her lips. *Just like that*, I said to them. *Just do it*.

The inexperienced actor often makes the mistake of writing too much of himself into his character, when, in reality, acting is the glorious opportunity to step *outside* the confines of one's personality. In the example of the aforementioned scene, any number of valid arguments could be put forth for not doing the scene as written. The leader of the church venue could raise an objection on moral grounds; the indi-

The term "stage kiss" refers to an outwardly authentic, but actually passionless, touching of the lips. From outward appearances it is the real thing—as real and deep as necessary for the scene—but in fact expresses no feeling whatsoever between the two actors. It is just one more device in the actor's toolkit for portraying something that doesn't actually exist.

vidual actors could object on personal moral or decorum grounds; the director or actor could object on the basis of character development, electing to have the two characters, at this point in their relationship, for example, embrace without a kiss.

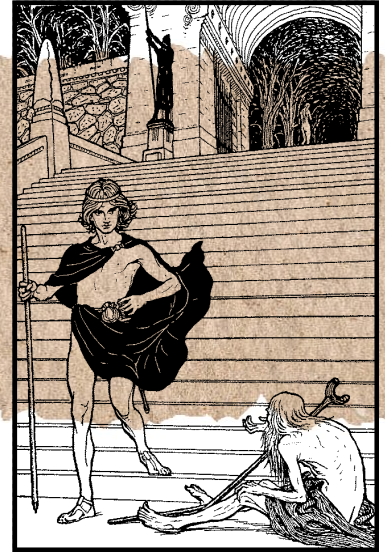
But what is *never* a valid argument against playing a scene as written is the actor claiming that he or she “would never do that.” The response to this amateurish stance is simple: No one is asking *you* to.

The Final Call

Decisions such as these will always have to be made by directors, pastors, Boards of Deacons or Elders (!), and even the individual actor—and local standards will invariably win out. But within these constraints, if the actor is unwilling to become something or someone he is not already, then he is demonstrably in the wrong profession. For acting, at its root, is make believe. It is, by definition, the art of being something different from what one is—and someone unwilling to do this, should look for another means by which to serve the Lord.

emphasis
five

The Adaptable Actor



FROM THE BEGINNING, IT WAS CUSTOMARY FOR HIS COMPANY to take a shorter play—either a sketch or one-act—to several different venues, rather than invite the general public to come to a central location. We were mobile; besides, without a stage of our own, it was the practical way to reach as large an audience as possible.

It was impractical, however, to take larger productions—such as a musical or three-act play—on the road. We would then offer several performances at one venue and, instead of performing the entire piece at different churches, we would visit them during one of their worship services to promote the larger production with a short excerpt. These occasions are good examples of the individual actor remaining flexible about such things as the configuration of the rehearsal/performance space, use of props, and even blocking.

Staying Loose

When we staged *The Essence of His Death*, I scheduled several promotional visits around town. In each case, I visited the church prior to our Sunday-morning promo to speak to the person in charge and get the “lay of the land,” so that we wouldn’t be walking into a completely unfamiliar environment. The two actors, however, had never seen these sites. They would be stepping out onto a strange stage, before a live audience, to perform a short scene lifted out of a larger play.

Our visit to the first church went without a hitch. I hustled the guys into a back room, leaving them to change into costume. Meanwhile I worked my way around to the back of the church to check the room. Everything was much as I had remembered it from my earlier visit, so I returned to my actors and gave them instructions for their entrance. They did the scene, exited, quickly changed clothes, and we piled back into the car to arrive on time at the next church.

At our next stop, I again sent the two actors into a back room to change while I went around to scope out the sanctuary from the back of the church. To my horror, all the platform furniture had been changed since I had last seen it. This meant that our original blocking would no longer work. I quickly returned to where my actors were changing. “Uh, guys,” I said, “you’re going to have to *reverse* your blocking. You’ll have to enter from the opposite side of the stage, reverse your blocking right to left, then exit right instead of left.” And this without any run-through. The worship service had already begun.

Well, by God’s grace and my players’ dedication to craft, they pulled it off. And we piled back into the car to make our appointment at the next church.

All this to say, it is important for the individual actor to not become locked into only one way of doing a scene. This does not by any stretch mean that the actor ad lib his or her way through rehearsals. What it means is that the actor think of each scene not as a series of repetitive tasks to be memorized and repeated, but as a living, breathing moment in time. The actor should perceive each scene in terms of *space*, *movement*, and his *physical relationship* with the other actors.

Lynn Redgrave
on staying loose...

The hardest thing about developing a subtext is not to get too wedded to one way of thinking. Sometimes you see a situation very strongly in a particular way and you set up a whole load of conditions surrounding it. In order to fulfill those conditions, you desperately want the other actors to react in a certain way, but they may be off doing their own interpretations, and those may not coincide with your own... Quite often it’s just a matter of being reminded that if the other actor does this, then you must do that; or maybe he doesn’t want to do this, so you must not do that. You have to fit your parts together somehow. But [from] that exploration, wonderful new insights can come.

Space

The rehearsal hall, the Sunday School room, the sanctuary platform, the living room—they all can become, for a moment, the destination in an imaginary journey. Gnarled olive trees grow in the first row of the choir loft; a carpeted step is a crude, wooden stool; colored light cast by stained-glass windows is the sun setting on a far-distant, desert horizon; a sofa is a funereal bier; hard linoleum is a mountain stream.

The actor's responsibility is two-fold: to convince the audience, surely, but first, to *convince himself*.

The actor operates inside a false world. The space may be defined by bedroom walls, a masking tape outline on tile floor, or an elaborate stage set—but they are all false. The actor knows that even the finely painted backdrop behind her is just oil cloth or cardboard; the actor knows that his realistic beard was purchased as a strand of wool, then glued onto his face in pieces. And all the actors on stage know that they are not really standing in a Jerusalem street, or on a New York subway platform, but on the carpet of their sanctuary stage. It is all make-believe—the actor making *himself* believe, in order to make the *audience* believe. And that is the challenge and glorious joy of the stage.



The early stages of the rehearsal process, in which the actor studies and researches his role and the play as a whole, begin the process of cementing in his mind the setting of the play. All the elaborate scenery and set constructed by the stage crew are not really for the actors, but for the members of the audience, who have shown up at the allotted time to be fooled for an hour or two. They haven't the advantage of knowing everything beforehand; they haven't had four to eight weeks of rehearsal. So the scenery and set are there to help "set the scene" for the unknowing. The actor, on the other hand, is to carry the set around in his mind.

Learning one's role is not just a matter of reciting back, at the right time, a collection of memorized lines. It is not just putting on a

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costume and fake beard, or learning how to walk like an old, arthritic woman. Learning one's role is *learning to see what the character sees*.

In the first performance of the sketch *To a New Life Born*, a fleshing-out of the John 3 episode between Jesus and Nicodemus, the inquisitive Nicodemus enters a moment after Jesus.

45 **Nicodemus**
(formally, yet with an underlying air of anticipation)
Rabbi, I don't mean to intrude. Your disciple outside gave me entrance.

Jesus
You are welcome, councilor.

50 **Nicodemus**
I am Nicodemus.

Jesus
And I am honored by a member of the Sanhedrin. What brings you at such a late hour?

55 **Nicodemus**
(after thinking for a moment; looking about nervously)
Discretion.

Jesus
(with a knowing smile)
Ah yes. Discretion.

This sketch was written for, and first performed in, a Sunday morning worship service. There were no props, no backdrop, and no set pieces. The choir was in the choir loft behind us (I took the role of Nicodemus), and the pastor sat just a few feet away on the platform. The first thing in my line of sight when I entered and approached the other actor was a red Exit sign over the opposite door. All we had with which to convince everyone were two actors: in costume, and thoroughly in character.

I knew that when I walked through that door, as Nicodemus, my physical eyes would be seeing carpet, a sanctuary full of people, a clock on the wall, a pulpit and mic stands. As I stepped up to the platform, I would be seeing the choir members and pastor, the music minister, a red Exit sign, and, last of all, my friend and fellow actor. To remove my senses from reality, I created in my mind a different

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

"Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"

John 3:1-10

scene. Standing behind the door, awaiting my entrance, I was Nicodemus, the learned and respected member of the Sanhedrin. It was late evening, dark, and I was approaching a nondescript alleyway off a darkened street. I was alone, and moving furtively through the shadows, fearful of being seen. Opening the door for my entrance, I was walking down the alleyway; stepping up onto the platform, I was entering a dimly lit room that no one would have discovered by accident. The room was sparsely furnished—just a simple table and stool. On the table were the remains of a Spartan meal, half-finished. Sitting before me was not my good friend, Guy, but a weary and lonely Jesus—a teacher, the adopted son of a carpenter, and just maybe (in the skeptical, yet inquisitive eyes of my character) the Son of God.

That was my space, and no matter where we performed, no matter the ambience and conditions of the venue, the “set” remained the same, tucked away comfortably in my imagination. And by creating that altered universe for my character, I could present to the audience a Nicodemus that was authentic and thoroughly believable.

Movement

Earlier in this book, in Chapter Three of *The Actor's Guide*, the blocking of a play is compared to the poetry of ballet:

Although it may not seem so to the actor being mechanically moved about from place to place during the rehearsal, blocking is really the play's *choreography*. It is the fluid dance that gives pace, rhythm, and physical tension to the scene being played out before the audience. When a scene is artfully blocked, one can stand at the back of the theatre, squint the eyes, and see the poetry of ballet being performed upon the stage. Each entrance or exit adds or subtracts dramatic tension to the scene; movement flows from actor to actor like a Rembrandt come to life. It is art, and it can be beautiful.

This movement—this *choreography*—is an essential part of the play's rhythm and pace and, ultimately, its message. The director will spend a lot of time working out the movements for each character, weaving the individual into the fabric of the whole to present a cohesive and meaningful tapestry. The actor then takes this fabric and, while con-

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centrating on his or her individual part, takes the whole as a physical environment in which his character will operate.

The movement of the actors within the play—the blocking—is not just a roadmap that keeps everyone from bumping into each other, but also becomes, over the course of rehearsals, a familiar framework that makes the play more portable, even adaptable. This is not an easy concept for the inexperienced actor, who may think of a play in more two-dimensional terms. A play is not a factory assembly line, in which individuals perform prescribed actions repeatedly—actions learned to the point where, as in some factory situations, the actors need no longer even think about what they are doing.

Some less-experienced actors may think of their role in a play in these terms. Their goal is to memorize their prescribed lines, learn their prescribed blocking based on a specific performance space, then go out on opening night and simply walk through their part by rote. Granted, some directors would happily settle for this method from their actors, as opposed to the slapdash kind of preparation to which they are more typically accustomed. But it is a mechanical method fraught with danger: let the least little thing be out of place, let another actor forget his line, let someone make their entrance at the wrong moment and go to the wrong place—let anything go wrong, and the mechanical, by-rote method immediately falls apart.

Instead, a safer way to prepare—a way which has the added benefit of producing a deeper, more believable performance—is to think of the role in more three-dimensional terms.

Why

This process begins by asking the simple question: *Why?* If the blocking has your character moving up and left before saying a line to the other character, ask yourself, *Why? Why is this important? How does the move influence the dialogue? Does it change the way I think about the other character, or react to him?* If you understand the *why* behind your blocking, you then will have taken a large step toward making your



performance more flexible, and more adaptable when unforeseen changes arise.

The Wide View

You may not be the director, but the overall production—as well as your individual performance—will be enhanced by your taking the *wide view* of what it all looks like. This means you understand not only why you are doing what you do on stage, but you also understand how and why the overall scene looks as it does. *What is being accomplished here, and why? What is the overall texture of the scene? Is it dark and moody, or bright and cheerful? Is there a lot of dramatic tension, or is everyone just sitting around chatting about the weather? What does the moment look like, and what is my responsibility within it?* Understanding this makes the individual actor a more integral, vital component of every scene.

Physical Relationship

This component is related to Movement, so many of the same principles apply. But of the three—Space, Movement, and Physical Relationship—this is the most intimate, for it is the one that brings you the closest to your fellow actors. This is also the one most adaptable, the most portable. An intimate dialogue between two or three people can be performed just about anywhere—and often is.

In the production mentioned above, of *To a New Life Born*, once Guy and I had established our characters; our characters' reasons for being there in that moment (motivation); the general definition of the "space" in which the scene was taking place; and our authentic, motivated movements within that space—after all these components were in place, we were free to perform the piece anywhere, under most any conditions, in the smallest or largest venue. Our two characters had established a relationship that transcended any external considerations.

Inhabiting the Imaginary World

Even this writer is sometimes caught referring to acting as a "craft," as if positioning it alongside basket weaving or pot making. But act-

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ing is more an art of the mind, in which individual actors, creating individual roles, come together to create something that has never existed before—something greater than the sum of its individual parts. Acting is more mystical than basket weaving; the actor must participate in the process by establishing, in the mind, the imaginary world in which his character moves, and speaks, and relates to the others that inhabit the same imaginary world.

emphasis
SIX

*Costuming the
Biblical Character*



HIS COMPANY PHILOSOPHY IS GROUNDED in the well-rehearsed and authentically costumed character. With these two elements in place, little else is needed to move the audience with a powerful message. If every character in a play is thoroughly believable, in both personality and appearance, the purpose of the piece can be accomplished with scant window dressing.

Second in importance to the behavior of the actor—but only just—is the actor's appearance. Elsewhere we have discussed the creation of the character, the research that is often required to give a meaningful presentation, and personal rehearsal methods that will result in a performance of substance and believability. It is now time to consider the methods of costuming that will faithfully complement this work put in by the actor.

Creating the Biblical Costume

The goal in costuming is for the individual actor's attire to look authentic and believable—to the attendant audience (ideally, from the first row to the last), and for the time period of the play. Taken as a whole, this dictum suggests that a certain measure of compromise may be necessary.

As a general rule, the clothing worn by people in either New or Old Testament times was dirtier, grittier, more unkempt and less uniform than the costumes created for the typical church production. The thin, bed sheet fabric often used doesn't look anything like what would have been worn by the people of the period. And outfitting every man and woman to look like pristine, cookie cutter clones, changing only the bright colors of the bed sheets, bears little relationship with the reality of the times.

For example, why did a good host wash the feet of his dinner guests upon their arrival to his home (Luke 7:44)? Because conditions out in the streets were filthy, and the host or hostess would not want all the dirt and mud of the street tracked into the home. People had fewer clothes, and garments were not washed as often as they are today—which is one reason why workers would strip off their outer garments when doing heavier work (John 21:7). The ideal Biblical peasant garment should be simply cut, rough around the edges, made from coarse homespun in earth tones—and not look like everyone else's on stage.

Fabric

Just as stage makeup is often exaggerated so that it appears normal under bright lights from a distance, it is sometimes necessary to use fabric that has an exaggerated texture to achieve the look of homespun on stage. We have found that old drapes often fill this requirement. When new costumes are needed, our first visit is usually to the local *Goodwill* store, or other used-goods charity. Here we find a selection of used drapes, being sold at a low cost, that have colors or texture that work well for Biblical costumes on the stage. Up close, the open-weave texture of a drape may look nothing like something a person would wear as clothing, but from a distance it may look exactly like the coarse homespun worn by a Semitic peasant. (Though

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

Luke 7:44-46 NIV



Figure 4.1



Figure 4.2



Figure 4.3

Figures 4.1-4.3 — Three views of a costume made from secondhand drapery fabric. Originally created for the role of Judas in *Never Called Him Lord* (the disciple in hell), the fabric was crudely shaped, torn, and painted to represent soil. Yet, the faint shimmer left in the fabric hinted at a garment originally meant for someone with wealth—which Judas certainly could have been. The same costume was used later for Erastus, in *Who do you say that I Am?*, but dyed to darken color and to mute the shinier elements.

it is hard to work with—and even harder to wear—we have, on rare occasions, even used burlap to costume a rougher character, such as John the Baptist.)

No matter the source, be sure to use fabric for Biblical costumes that has sufficient weight and suppleness to hang and move properly. Using the bedding metaphor, think cotton or thin woolen *blanket*, rather than bed sheet.

Some Indelicate Advice

Those of fragile constitution may wish to blushingly turn away, for the subject now turns to (gasp!) underwear.

An Authentic Experience

The His Company philosophy regarding costuming is this: The individual actor is to do everything possible to not only look authentic to the audience, but to have an authentic experience within the costume. What this means in practical terms is that the actor should not wear any unnecessary, modern layers under the costume. The teenage boy or girl should not wear jean shorts beneath the more flowing garment of a peasant; the adult should not wear white socks or pantyhose in sandals.

The reason for this is simple: We feel different and move differently in modern clothing. If you, as an actor in a period piece, are fully dressed in modern apparel beneath a period costume, you are not going to move and behave as someone from that period. The difference may be subtle, but will still be noticed by some members of the audience. Even hidden garments will affect your body language.

There is, as well, a psychological component to what the actor is wearing beneath the costume. The actor who insists on being fully dressed beneath his costume is not fully invested in the character. The convincing performance comes from entering as the character—not just seeming to look like him. If I am Abraham about to sacrifice my only son upon the altar of obedience, I cannot be wearing beneath my outer robes a pair of jeans and a polo shirt. It just doesn't work.

By all means, modesty and common sense, as well as the typical church venue, dictate that the actor wear normal underwear while on stage. But no second layers—such as shirts or pants or stockings—should be worn, as they will not only impact movement, but may also awkwardly bulk out the costume. Likewise, care must be taken on occasion to select the most appropriate undergarment for a character's costume. Male Egyptian merchants dressed in short, white skirts shouldn't be wearing voluminous, multicolored boxer shorts beneath. Women dressed in light, diaphanous gowns must take care to wear a modern bra that will not be seen through or around the fabric. Sometimes—such as in the case of Sarah, in *Restless Dawn*, just out of bed and wearing typical Chaldean attire, which would be worn off one shoulder—it is best to wear a low tube top, which will give support while having the appearance of a more authentic article of clothing.

Sir John Gielgud
on costumes...

Costumes in correct period can be a problem for an actor. But designers are determined to have their own way and they are quite right... If given a chance, costumiers will often take short cuts, and actors and actresses too can be very difficult about their costumes. The high heels and heavy coats for men in eighteenth-century plays alter your balance, and actresses used to be very reluctant to wear tight corsets, although the young actresses today seem to be very good about it all. I have noticed in the last few years how they all wear the correct corsets and petticoats, perhaps because television and films insist on greater accuracy. Edith Evans was exceptional, as she always said she could not play a costume part unless she was dressed absolutely in the right period, right down to the underclothes. Nowadays, directors are also anxious that the actors and actresses should have some rough idea of what they are going to wear at rehearsal so that they can get used to it.

There are circumstances, of course, under which compromises are permitted. For example, if the timing of a scene-change dictates that a female actor must quickly change costume in a less-than-private location in the wings, she might wear a modest leotard or swimsuit under her costume. And, certainly, no one with delicate skin should be made to unnecessarily suffer the scrape of harsh fabric against bare skin; the man could wear a thin undershirt, the woman a slip. But no matter the exception, at no time should anything be seen by the audience, or leave an awkward outline on the surface of the costume.

The Accouterments

For the most part, the local director dictates the total appearance of each actor—which is as it should be. The director designs the overall appearance of the production, of which the individual actor is only one part. Once the director has approved the hair, makeup, and costume of the individual, the actor is not to make any changes to his or her appearance—from rehearsals to first performance, and from one performance to the next. Perhaps the following two negative examples will serve to illustrate...

Jewelry

One mistake that some directors make when costuming their female actors is to have them remove all jewelry. But it is entirely appropriate—as well as historically accurate—for Semitic women of the period to wear *more* jewelry than their modern sisters. The typical Jewish woman—even one of relatively modest means—might wear gold necklaces and earrings to an extent that would be considered extravagant today. The custom among Semitic women of the Biblical period was to display whatever wealth they had, wearing it in the form of jewelry.



But then, like anything else, this can be taken to the extreme. Several years back I wrote the script for a church's Easter musical and directed rehearsals for the dramatic players and the few rehearsals where they were combined with the choir. This arrangement was necessary since the church's music minister was also playing the male lead.

Part 4: The Next Level

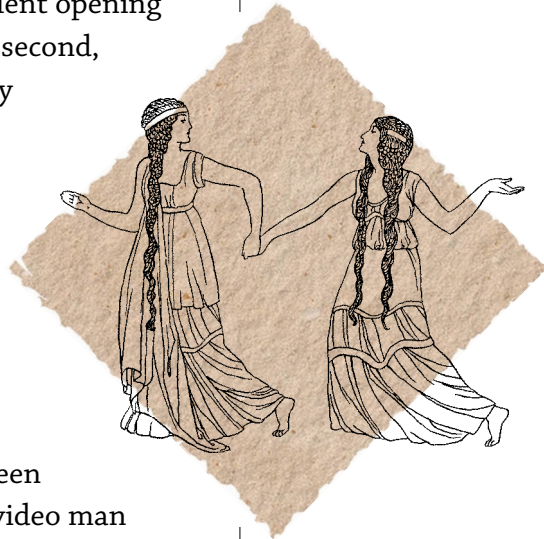
A dynamic, but strong-willed actress who was playing one of the principal support roles in this production had been issued my standard instructions regarding jewelry, and over the later rehearsals we had settled on her look. Quite unexpectedly, however, as we moved from dress rehearsal to first performance, this actress began making her entrance wearing more and more jewelry—until finally, just before the final performance, I had to tell her to remove her rather gaudy, gold-ball necklace that would have made this support character the center of attention in every scene!

Hair

The individual actor should never change his or her appearance without first consulting the director. In the same Easter production, the music minister in the male lead turned in an excellent opening night performance, which was on a Sunday night; our second, and last, performance was to be the following Saturday night. Upon arriving for that performance, I was horrified to discover that my leading man had been the recipient of a rather short haircut just the day before! He now looked very different—and *very* inauthentic.

If he had consulted his director, this actor not only would have been told not to get a haircut because the look would be wrong for the role, but he would have been informed that on opening night the week before, the video man had taken all his wide shots, reserving close-ups for the following performance. Because he *didn't* check with his director, the actor not only looked wrong for the closing performance, but the final edit of the musical's video cuts back and forth between his character with long hair, and his character with short hair!

Needless to say, the actor's costume, makeup, and hair are to be as much fixed in place by opening night as are his lines, blocking, and behavior.



Details

Here are some points to remember when costuming Biblical characters.

- In any crowd, some will be peasants, some middle-class, and some will be aristocrats; let their costumes reflect the difference. Peasants would look scruffier, dirtier, their apparel cut from meaner fabric; aristocrats (just as with the wealthy today) would be cleaner, and wear more expensive clothing, possibly brighter colored, and the women would wear more jewelry; the middle class would split the difference, looking better than the former, but less well-off than the latter.
- Never iron (press) Biblical costumes. Depending on the characters' societal station, leave them as wrinkled, roughed-up and dirty as possible.
- Begin wearing costumes as early in the rehearsal process as possible. The bulky robes without pockets of the Biblical period are alien to contemporary sensibilities and habits. Take every opportunity to become comfortable with the way they hang, the way they move, the way the hems sometimes get tangled in the feet. The goal is for them to become so familiar to the actor that he gives no thought to them at all.
- Head gear of some sort—turbans, knitted caps, etc.—is historically accurate, but putting something almost identical on *every* character looks unnatural to the modern audience. Mix it up, and leave a few characters bareheaded—such as laborers or shopkeepers.
- Most male and female characters should wear a “girdle” (or belt). This would take the form of a long strip of fabric (at least several inches wide) wound several times around the waist. This not only holds the other garment(s) off the ground, but also serves as pockets. It would be in the girdle that someone would carry their coin purse, or hide a knife.
- People in Biblical times did not wash their hair every day with shampoo. They also didn't comb it every few minutes, nor did

they use hair spray to hold it in place. Leave most of the characters' hair scruffy and uncombed, and in the case of some women (such as the wealthy), hold the hair in place with the use of combs, clips, or fabric, instead of hair spray.

- Use a dark-brown shade of makeup to streak “dirt” on all the character’s feet. It’s not necessary to cover the entire appendage; just some streaks here and there will give the illusion of dirty feet. For some characters (depending on their profession or activity), apply the dark makeup in the same way to the arms and hands, even face.
- Dirty-up some of the costumes, as well—especially those for characters that do manual labor for a living, such as fishermen, brick makers, or gardeners. For example, the script *Who Do You Say That I Am?* includes in its three characters one each of the aforementioned classes: Erasmus, the gardener, would be about as scruffy and unkempt as any character could be, covered with the soil of his trade; Shara would be more middle class, as the owner of her own bakery, but sweaty and dusted with flour; and Hananiah, the money-changer, would be more wealthy, and richly attired—as well as cleaner than the other two characters.
- Modern accouterments are not permitted, such as glasses; diamond rings (those who refuse to remove their wedding ring should turn them to hide the diamond inside their hand); watches (use makeup to camouflage the pale skin beneath); modern-looking jewelry; radical, modern hairstyles; piercings, T-shirts or other modern clothing visible at the open collar, sleeve, or below the hemline; modern socks or pantyhose; and modern footwear.

References

A discussion on Biblical costumes would be incomplete without some tips on where to locate appropriate illustrations.

Libraries and web sites are filled with reference material, so that the intrepid director or wardrobe mistress will discover a cornucopia of source documents to illustrate costumes for a full range of Biblical

Always rehearse without the articles that you will not be permitted to wear in performance. For example, if you typically wear eyeglasses, be sure to rehearse without them, to become accustomed to navigating around the stage.

Likewise, if you never wear jewelry, but will be expected to in the play, be sure to rehearse with it, so your performance will look natural.

characters. There are many good, scholarly resources that will supply a precise description or picture for every time period and national culture. Here, however, I will recommend a handful of sources less scholarly—from popular culture but generally accurate, and appropriate for the average church production.

Films

Originally produced by *Turner Pictures* for TNT, but now distributed by *Warner Home Video*, *The Bible Collection* consists of six DVDs, with each film based on the story of one or more Old Testament characters. Included are biographical films on Abraham, Samson and Delilah, Moses, Joseph, Jeremiah and more. At this writing the DVDs are available individually or as a set from Christian Book Distributors (CBD.COM) and Amazon (AMAZON.COM).

I favor these films for Old Testament costume ideas because in all of them they have employed a grittier production standard than is more commonly used—one I believe to be more authentic. Some of the Biblical epics produced in the Fifties and Sixties were laughable in their fresh-scrubbed, smooth-edged rendition of how people lived in a rough and dirty desert land.

If the TNT productions err, it is in being a little too rough around the edges. There was, of course, wealth and finery—even in the time of Christ. For some good visuals of how aristocrats lived and dressed during this time period, view a copy of the classic 1959 production of *Ben-Hur*, with Charlton Heston.

Two, more recent films are worthy of mention. *The Nativity Story* and *The Passion of the Christ* are both excellent resources for more authentic and interesting Biblical apparel, and are readily available from a number of sources.

National Geographic

Past issues of the venerable magazine, *National Geographic*, contain many full-color illustrations that can be used as the basis for ancient costumes. Here are a few:

- Abraham/Sarah (Chaldean culture): December 1966, p.739-789.

Part 4: The Next Level

- Egypt: October 1941, p.436-515.
- Rome: November 1946, p.567-633.
- Israel: “The Last Thousand Years Before Christ,” December 1960, p.812-853.
- Israel: “Bringing Old Testament Times to Life,” December 1957, p.833-863.

Books

A standard text for descriptions of how people lived in Biblical times is *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Moody Press), by Fred H. Wight. This small book is available in most Bible book stores.

Finally, here are some books to generally *avoid* when looking for costume illustrations. These are older, revered volumes that many of us grew up with, but have been for many decades the source for the typical Sunday School “dyed bedsheet” standard we have seen for far too long:

- *Egermeier’s Bible Story Book* (The Warner Press)
- *The Bible in Pictures* (Greystone Press)
- *Hurlbut’s Story of the Bible* (The John C. Winston Company)

emphasis seven

True to the Word: a case study



THE WORDS AND BEHAVIOR OF THE TWO CHARACTERS in the His Company sketch, *Only for a Time* (which originated as a scene in the larger play *The Surrender*), may seem controversial to some. Jesus is preparing to begin His public ministry—which will be initiated by His baptism. First, however, Jesus must leave his home—and say good-bye to His mother, Mary.

The background research and rationale for this sketch serve as a good example of His Company's efforts to remain true to God's word in all that we do. The picture of a middle-aged Mary is based primarily on three groups of scripture:

- at the temple - Luke 2:40-52
- the wedding at Cana - John 2:1-11
- Jesus' family calling to Him - Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21

A Painful Good-bye

I began with our traditional image of Mary, which is taken from the Annunciation and the Magnificat; but then I overlaid that with time, the aforementioned references, and (most importantly) human nature. Mary was not a supreme being, nor was she a perfect human. God chose a virgin without blemish (at that moment) as the vehicle by which to incarnate his Son, who was utterly without blemish. My reading of scripture has left me with the foundational premise that Mary was first and foremost a mother—nothing less, and very little more. We do ourselves a disservice by leaving Mary with the personality of a fragile, awe-struck teenager for the rest of her life. She *did* believe; she *did* accept her role as mother of the Son of God; she *did* believe the angel—the Magnificat so beautifully tells us she did. But look at the later passages.

Luke 2:40-52

Only twelve years after the birth she has already forgotten. She and Joseph “...found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening and asking questions,” questions and answers that “...amazed all who heard Him.” What was his parents’ response to such an amazing thing? Mary scolded Him: “Son, why have you treated us this way?” Wouldn’t the Mary of the Magnificat have said something like: “How wonderful! It’s finally beginning!” No, verse fifty tells us that even after Jesus explained to them that He now had to be about the things of His Father, “...they did not understand the statement which He had made to them.”

Now, approximately eighteen years after the temple event, Mary is probably in her late forties or early fifties, her husband is (as most commentators agree) probably dead, and she is left with several children—the oldest of which is Jesus, who has learned the trade of his earthly father. Surely, as the oldest, it would have fallen to Him to support the family after the passing of His father. But let’s leave the good-bye scene and skip ahead to those two events recorded where Jesus had further dealings with his mother and family.

John 2:1-11

In just three succinct verses, at the scene of His first recorded miracle, we get a clear picture of their new relationship from the perspective

The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it, but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day’s journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him.

Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, “Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You.”

And He said to them, “Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s house?” But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Luke 2:40-52

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine."

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it."

While He was still speaking to the crowds, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. Someone said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You." But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother."

Matthew 12:46-50

of both Jesus and Mary. I defer to the *Wycliffe Commentary*:

Mary came to Jesus with the tidings that the wine supply had been exhausted. In His reply, the use of "woman" does not involve disrespect. "What have I to do with thee?" (KJV) The words indicate division of interest and seem to suggest a measure of rebuke. Mary may have expected Jesus to use the situation to call attention to Himself in a way that would have furthered His Messianic program. But His hour had not yet come. Later references point to the cross as the focal point of the hour. Jesus wanted His mother to understand that the former relationship between the two of them was at an end. She was not to interfere in His mission. Mary wisely did not dispute the matter. If she could not command Him, she could instruct the servants to obey His directions. Thus she showed her confidence in Him.

Matthew 12:46-50; et al

Jesus further defined this separation later in His ministry when He was surrounded by a crowd of people and His family wished an audience with Him. When informed that His family was outside wishing to see Him, he gestured to those immediately around Him and said: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

These scenes from the Scriptures tell me that Mary went through a time of transition—and that probably that transition was not easy for her. The New Testament is replete with examples of how people—and especially His family—did not understand what Jesus was about. Even His disciples—twelve men who lived with Him day in and day out, witnessed miracle after miracle, heard him teach—did not understand until the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost—just as we don't understand any of it without the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Mary had thirty long years to accept Jesus as her son, to know him as a man; she nursed him, cleaned up after him, fed him, bathed him, watched him play with the other boys in the neighborhood. She had thirty years to conveniently slip away from that momentous visit by the angel. She didn't change her mind, and she didn't entirely forget. She just chose to deny that He had never really been hers to begin with. He belonged to God, and I think any mother of thirty years would have wanted to hold onto her first-born.

Only For a Time

15

ENTER Mary and Jesus, already in conversation.

Mary

(frustrated)

20

But I don't understand this.

Jesus

(quietly, but firmly)

I must leave.

Mary

25

You haven't given me a reason. Have I done something wrong?

Jesus

I—I'm compelled.

Mary

30

Jesus, when your father died, he left with his heart at peace, knowing that you—his first son—would continue his business and care for his family.

Jesus

I am the first-born to another.

Mary

Again you speak of it!

Jesus

(tenderly)

35

Mother, when I was twelve years old you and father took me to the temple in Jerusalem. Do you remember? It was my first time and I was so excited. It was all so new and special to me. But I stayed too long. I was separated from you and stayed behind and made you angry. Do you remember what I said to you when you found me there in the temple? Mother, do you?

40

Mary

(emphatically)

45

Your father's business is here!

Jesus

Would you have me deny my Father's will?

Mary

(missing his inference; nostalgically)

50

He wanted only the best for you. You learned his trade so easily—you were born to it. And he was so proud of you. Why, Joseph always said—

Jesus

(firmly)

55

Mother!

(pause; softening)

I loved Joseph with all my heart. With all his uncertainty, all his questions, he accepted me. He loved me as his son. But it was a love that held much pain. He put up with so much vicious talk.

60 **Mary**
Oh, was I immune to the gossip of neighbors?

Jesus
I was at least of your body. He held no claim to me but marriage to you. A man and woman join to create life. That child is then a special miracle to those two people. Joseph never had that with me. He could love, even
65 accept, but never fully understand. I was never a part of him. My beginnings were not stirred from his loins—and my end will not be his memorial.

Mary
(turning away; sadly)
70 At this moment, I think I miss my husband very much. I feel so—alone.

Jesus
(going to her)
I will always be a part of you. You brought me to this world. You gave me the warmth of your arms, the nourishment of your breast— You gave me life! You're my mother!
75

Mary
(turning back quickly)
Then how can you leave?

Jesus
(stronger)
80 It's my time.

Mary
(angrily)
Time for what? To break your mother's heart? Time to walk away from your responsibilities, your family? Your life is here! You are the oldest.
85

Jesus
I go to be baptized.

Mary
(stunned; incredulous)
90 Baptized? Why? Only the Gentiles require baptism when they accept our faith. Why would you have need of this?

Jesus
To fulfill all righteousness. In obedience to my father.

Mary
(harshly)
95 Your father died nine years ago. He left you to take care of his family.

Jesus
(sternly)
100 Woman! You can no longer keep buried in your heart the reality of my birth! Remember. Remember how it began. I have never been yours to keep. Only for a time.
(pause; softer)
I have no one closer to me on this earth than you. But, it is my Father's plan that I walk the rest of the way alone.

Part 4: The Next Level

105

Mary

(after a pause; in catharsis)

Oh, Jesus! I've denied the possibility of this day for thirty years. I prayed that, somehow, God would show me mercy—that He would change His mind.

110

Jesus

The Father will never forsake you. Through you He has accomplished His purpose. Don't be afraid, Mary.

Mary

(smiling through her tears)

115

A long time ago, an angel from the Lord said that to me. I wasn't sure how to take it then;

(seriously)

I'm not sure how to take it now. I am very much afraid—for you.

(pause)

120

Will I ever see you again?

Jesus

I'll not be a stranger to you. We'll meet from time to time and others will keep you informed of my whereabouts. But,

(painfully)

125

you must understand, I now walk the lonely path of my Father's design. It's a way narrow and hard. Mother, you will never completely understand why I came. To you, I'll always be your son. But now I must be His son—and only His son. That, too, is my Father's design. He has given you thirty years—more than even I imagined.

130

(pause)

It's now my time. And my time is short.

They exit.

135

emphasis
eight

*First Time:
a case study*



THE CENTERPIECE OF THIS CHAPTER is a first-person account penned by someone brand new to the stage. It serves as a candid, sometimes frustrated, yet ultimately encouraging narrative of what it is like to be someone serving the Lord as an amateur actor. It serves also as a journal of sorts by someone experiencing the His Company rehearsal methods for the first time.

Mike was cast in the role of Hananiah for our one-act play, *Who do you say that I Am?*, which was performed during a Good Friday service. During the final days of production he informed me that he had jotted down some notes that might be helpful for anyone going through a similar experience. I heartily agreed, and his notes follow, accompanied, where appropriate, by my own.

Hananiah was my first ever theatrical role. I was without even a high school play to my credit. As something completely new and foreign, the thought of appearing on stage was intriguing. My director, David, would not accept my first reluctant “yes” to his offer. Rather he asked that I read a few chapters of his book and then the script before a final yes was accepted. Doing that, I was as well prepared as any first timer could be for what would be expected and what it would take to rise to an acceptable level of performance quality. Notice I wrote “acceptable level.” Make no mistake: unless you are playing you in the production, you will not master the part as an amateur on stage.

Even with all the background preparation, I was surprised and pushed beyond what I expected at most every turn. This was hard work. Harder than almost anything I can remember doing in the past twenty years.

Those who are inexperienced with drama, whether on stage or in the audience, always seem surprised by what it takes to rehearse and perform to an “acceptable level”—which, by the His Company standard, means performing to the very best of our personal ability *and* doing it for the Lord’s glory alone.

I suppose it could be considered a compliment, of sorts, that people assume from watching a performance that what we do takes little effort. Even Mike remarked, after getting a few rehearsals under his belt, that Linda and my performance (in an earlier Christmas musical) flowed so smoothly that it never occurred to him that there was so much work involved in producing that “effortless” performance.

And even though in the flesh a part of us wants people to know how much work we have put into a performance, the goal really is to make it seem so natural, so seamless and effortless that they think, at least for the moment (even if they *do* know better), that it is all happening naturally right before their eyes. That is what is called, in the trade, the “suspension of disbelief.”

The performance was a success. It was well received by the church body and the whole Good Friday service that went with it made an impact and I believe was glorifying to God. If it had not been, what follows might have had an altogether different tone. This is a list of my thoughts and guidance to any novice who is

For more on the His Company method of casting and involving people in a project, see Chapter Two, “Our Philosophy,” in Part One.

considering a role in the company of experienced stage actors, or being directed by an experienced stage director.

This director, too, learned something from this rehearsal/performance process—something that should stand as a cautionary note for *any* director. It had been quite a while since I had directed someone so inexperienced on stage in a play this size, and I had forgotten what it was like for him. I just went about the normal procedure I have used for many years, forgetting that it was all brand new to Mike. Happily, he was not reluctant to ask questions—which helped immensely, and clued me in to his thought process. Therefore...

New actor, when you don't understand something, ask questions. **Experienced director**, remember that some in your cast may be hearing and experiencing all this for the first time. Don't be reluctant to explain.

Before you Rehearse

Stage acting is much more demanding, I imagine, than screen acting. There are no second chances; a blown line is not an option on stage. Therefore, memorization of your part is absolutely critical and the barest minimum of what is expected. Without your lines solidly memorized the rest of your character cannot be developed. I was slow to appreciate this and slow to memorize my part.

Your lines matter to everyone else on stage. I struggled in early practices with lines. I really didn't get it until someone else had a bad night and I personally felt the impact that poor script work has on everyone. I was confused and unsure of my cues when the lines were paraphrased or all-out bungled. Your ability to deliver cue lines is imperative to other actors performing up to their ability. That night was a light bulb moment for me; I had no idea how much the others were being pulled down when I was off.

This cannot be emphasized too much. Not only is the director fighting against the all-too-common “volunteer” attitude so prevalent in the church today, but (as was the case with Mike) simple ignorance over the importance of knowing one's lines. Perhaps even some new *directors* don't get it yet.

Part 4: The Next Level

When the actors' lines are learned quickly and early in the rehearsal schedule it places the entire production light years ahead of the game.

Early on, run your lines daily. You must work with someone else so you can hear your cue line delivered and begin associating your line with the cue.

For me the most important line in the script was the one that came before mine.

Even though I had given Mike the standard instructions about memorizing his lines (in fact, I gave him a copy of this book, which he dutifully read) he was not as careful as he should have been to always have someone there to help him plug in his lines accurately.

As a result, more than once he showed up to rehearsal technically knowing his lines—but not knowing where they went! He knew his words, but not his cues, and this was because he had failed to learn them with someone always reading the surrounding lines of the other characters.

There is an even larger issue to this business of learning lines. Mike, like so many before him, was nervous (perhaps even scared to death?) over the prospect of forgetting his lines in performance. I assured him that he needn't worry about that. Was I just blowing smoke, bolstering his confidence with wishful thinking? No, from experience I knew that this would not be a problem. But how could I say that with such confidence?

More than one inexperienced actor has looked with chagrin at the typical lengthy rehearsal schedule handed them for a His Company production. The amount of work and time dedicated to the task is so far afield from what they have been accustomed to for presenting "church drama" that they think we are either joking or are sadists.

The purpose behind the many hours of rehearsal—combined with at-home rehearsing for the individual actor—is to instill the character so deeply into the actor, to work the dialogue so many times that come performance there is no thought given to remembering lines. They are simply there. And the actor can thus devote all his or her effort to

For more on memorizing lines, see Emphasis One, "Memorization" in Part Four.

For more on organizing the rehearsal schedule, see Emphasis Nine, "The Rehearsal Schedule," in Part Four.

pumping life into the character and interacting with the other characters, without wasting energy or concentration on remembering lines.

About Rehearsal

Be prompt or even early to rehearsal. When you're there, be all there; focus on the tasks at hand—not on the work place or the chores waiting at home. Don't cheat the others by giving them only part of your attention.

This is the bane of the part-time actor (and his director). As mentioned elsewhere in this book, Christian drama is usually peopled by nonprofessionals, and almost every one of them will have many other things going on in his or her life: job, situations at home, paying the bills, problems with kids—the list could go on endlessly. But it is the actor's responsibility to do everything possible to set aside all those distractions—not just during the rehearsal, but during the time leading up to it.

Come with your part ready and with an idea of how you would play the part. There are plenty of hints in the script to help you form the character in your mind.

Now forget implementing anything you conjured up as to how to play the part. That is simply helpful in giving the director a starting point to work from. It isn't how you want to play the part that is important. It is how the director wants the part played that matters.

Mike is sort of correct here. It is true that more often than not in Christian drama the vision of the director is the one that must prevail. The actors in this environment typically depend on the director to help them with their character development and role interpretation. But I would not go so far as to say that the actor is to “forget implementing anything you conjured up.” I prefer to think of it as a *joint effort*, as this was expressed in Chapter Two, “The Reading Session,” in Part Three:

While preparing for and approaching the reading session, take hold of your character—but hold it lightly; take possession of your character and call it your own—but understand that it will be a joint-ownership. In an amateur production, especially, your director will have some-

For more on the actor's preparation for rehearsals, see Chapter Four, “Regular Rehearsals,” in Part Three and Emphasis Eight, “On Excellence,” in Part Four.

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thing to say about the ultimate composite that becomes your character. It will be a joint effort.

I had to check my pride and inhibition at the door when I came to rehearsal. There is no place for them in the rehearsal or in the performance. Remember, it isn't you the audience sees; it is your character. More importantly it is the version of your character the director has in mind that should be seen on stage. Do it the way the director wants it done.

Help the director to communicate with you. Repeat back key instructions so he knows you've heard and understood. Don't say yes or nod your head when you don't understand. This will only result in the director having to repeat himself, often with a notably different tone. Directors will use language that you may not understand; ask questions. If the script says to say the line "sheepishly" and you don't know how to do that, ask.

This is excellent advice! Deep in the throes of a rehearsal, the director will assume the actors have understood his direction if he hears no response. It is up to the actor to seek clarification when it is necessary.

Be prepared for the director to change his mind about how you should play the part. You may not be able to play it as the director envisions the part, or, during rehearsal, you may say a line in a new and intriguing way that the director likes. Either way the director may change how you deliver a line to improve the whole play—not just your part.

Even those who have an appreciation for the work that goes into a theatrical production may not grasp how really *organic* the rehearsal process is. There is give and take, and wonderful, remarkable discoveries can be made as the actors and director work together. It is great fun! And one of the delights for this director is when an actor delivers a line in a fresh, new way—demonstrating not just proficiency, but *interest*—an interpretation superior even to the director's original intent.

Remember, the director is concerned for the whole, yet he has to coach the pieces. This is much like an orchestra conductor but without the precision of musical notes to work from. If you think what is asked is silly, do it anyway; it will pay off in the end. Impatience [or vanity] doesn't serve the actor.

Good advice again. Acting, by its very nature, is a narcissistic profession, and it is easy for the actor to be protective of his method, his interpretation of the role. He can feel slighted, or put upon, by the demands of the director. But the director must take into consideration *all* components of a production—not just the individual actor’s ego.

We started in January for a late April performance. By February I thought shooting myself would be less painful than continuing. By March I could see progress occurring but knew I’d never get there. During the last three weeks before the performance the mechanics of the part were in place and I got to add more color to the character. That’s when it became fun and when I at last felt like I was contributing.

After more than a quarter-century directing, I still marvel at the wondrous, almost magical transformation that takes place in an actor and his role from the early days of rehearsal to the final days before performance. And it is a blessing to be permitted the privilege.

About the Performance

Did I say show up on time, or even early? Well, do it again. The last thing anyone needs is to rush around cramming too much into the minutes before the curtain goes up.

Our run through was flat, with missed lines and little energy. David pronounced that good. A little humble pie keeps pride away. I guess pride before the performance fuels over-confidence that may kill the quality. At least it worked that way this time.

It is an old rule of the theatre: Bad run-through, good performance. It is not chiseled in stone, but there is sound logic behind the proverb. Actors should always be at least somewhat nervous before stepping out into the lights of opening night. Overconfidence from a perfect run-through or dress rehearsal can spell disaster. Better to have a less-than-perfect run-through to keep everyone on their toes for performance.

You should be relaxed, focused, nervous, confident—and hoping that the place will catch fire so you won’t have to go on. Seriously, be ready for a mixture of emotions; they are good and will add to the energy you bring to your part. In all likelihood you will perform your part with more emotion than you practiced it.

Remember to breathe during the performance. If you try to work slowly you'll find the pace of your lines are about right, because all that good nervous energy will probably speed you up some.

What Mike refers to here is the tendency—especially in the inexperienced—to get caught up in the adrenaline flow of first performance, and begin rushing through everything. It is remarkable how quickly one can lose the carefully rehearsed pacing when suddenly there is an audience beyond the footlights. Better to take a breath and, as Mike suggests below, concentrate on what is going on within the scene.

Ignore the audience. You won't be able to, but try. Your work is on the stage. You will properly play your part only if you participate in the scene and interact with the other actors. The audience is a voyeur just watching. They have no part to play.

This is very good advice for the inexperienced actor, but does not necessarily apply to the veteran. The experienced actor can *use* the audience for feedback, for motivation, going so far as developing in the best of circumstances an actual *rhythm* with them. But this is not something that should be attempted by the novice. Better for him to concentrate on the scene, and the interaction between his and the other characters.

Devotion

Throughout the production process for *Who do you say that I Am?* Mike demonstrated not just a workable proficiency on stage, but the spirit of a true servant: sticking his neck out in what was for him utterly foreign territory; willing to take direction and play the fool; willing to show up on time and work hard at the task, even though he had pressing commitments elsewhere.

Here is the faithful template for the His Company actor, in which devotion to the task takes precedence over innate acting ability. And from that willingness invariably emerges a pretty good actor, as well.

emphasis
nine

On Excellence



IN FEW AREAS OF THE CHURCH IS THERE A GREATER NEED for a reappraisal of purpose than in the area of drama. For far too long the corporate body of Christ has settled for sloppy, half-hearted, childish efforts in the service of Biblical drama—that is, the use of drama to exposit, illustrate and invigorate our knowledge of God’s word.

The typical “Sunday School skit” mentality that has infested the church for decades is anathema to a life of healthy, reviving service offered in devotion to a loving and gracious God. The act of hastily throwing together something shabby and under-rehearsed, then calling it “drama” is an offense both to our heavenly Father and the body of believers united under His Son’s name.

We have a higher calling than that, ladies and gentlemen. We are called not just to entertain, but to offer a holy sacrifice up to God

by means of the gifts He has entrusted to us. Church drama, done well, is on a par with the choir anthem or special music, the Scripture reading, the receiving of the offering, the sermon. It is the holy act of bringing to life the word and will of God, and if it is not based on our best efforts, it will—as much as a lazy, ill-equipped pastorate—inevitably collapse under the weight of its own hypocrisy.

Beginning

Our relationship with our Maker is based on faith—not works. We do nothing to buy His favor, because His favor has already been purchased at the cross. We cannot add to that; we can only believe that it happened.

Some, however, have committed themselves to the one-time *event* of salvation while disregarding the *process* of living a life that has been saved (sanctification). Some have confused the error of “salvation by works” with the call to “work out our salvation.”

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Philippians 2:12-13

It is a hollow faith that ends with the “right hand of fellowship.” It is a shallow relationship that does not seek to please the one through whom salvation has been given. Most of us have been effusively warned against working to *obtain* that relationship, but few of us have been encouraged to work as a *result* of that relationship—and thereby obey the one with whom it is shared.

Excellence on stage begins with obedience. Before even that, excellence begins with the *desire* to obey.

A. W. Tozer
on our obligation...

The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long; but even if the multiple burdens of time may be lifted from him, the one mighty single burden of eternity begins to press down upon him with a weight more crushing than all the woes of the world piled one upon another. That mighty burden is his obligation to God. It includes an instant and lifelong duty to love God with every power of mind and soul, to obey Him perfectly, and to worship Him acceptably.

The Debt

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16

Evangelical types love to talk about grace. They like to emphasize the doctrine of salvation by *belief* or *faith*—that “whoever believes in him shall not perish.” But many evangelicals get sick and nervous when you raise the issue of service or works—or debt. It’s almost as if they base their religion on the second half of John 3:16 without remembering the first.

There are certain conventions of courtesy and decency we follow in our dealings with each other. When someone invites us over for dinner, we write or telephone our expression of appreciation, and very often reciprocate. When someone gives us a Christmas present, we thank them, and maybe give them a present in return. When someone does something nice for us, we generally like to do something nice for them in turn.

So where did we get the idea that—if for no other reason than out of basic decency—nothing is owed our God for the gift He gave us?

God the Father—the one omnipotent, omniscient God of the universe—loves us so deeply, so intensely, that He chose to nail to a wooden cross His one and only Son as a final blood sacrifice for our sins. There had to be a sacrifice, and since He knew we couldn’t do it ourselves, God had His Son take our place on the cross. His one and only, dearest Son. It was the brother of Jesus who said:

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

James 2:26

A Debt of Gratitude

What does it say about us—as people and as Christians—when we show greater courtesy to the one who gave us a birthday present than to the one who gave us eternal life through the death of His only Son? What does it say about us when we happily take possession of grace, yet turn our backs on gratitude?

We owe our heavenly Father the debt of our lives—our eternal lives. This is not a covenant debt, where if we fail on our side, He will retract His promise. No—and this is what makes our payment of the debt so important, so necessary—God the Father will love us no matter what, because our salvation debt has been paid by Christ. Our debt of *gratitude*, however, is still outstanding. We owe our Father the common courtesy of living for Him, out of a full and joyful heart of thanksgiving. We owe Him the very best of which we are capable, nothing less.

What are you doing for God, simply because you are grateful? How—and how well—are you working in His name, simply because you love Him?

The Reason Why

Have you ever wondered how things would be if God the Father adopted toward us the attitude we often have toward Him? How would things be different if the Father approached our needs with the same, lackadaisical attitude we often have toward His needs and service? It might sound something like this...

The Time: Eternity past

The Place: Heaven

God the Father and God the Son are having a last-minute discussion prior to the latter's departure for Bethlehem.

Father: You have everything you need?

Son: I think so. Don't really need much.

Father: Right. Well, here's just a few last-minute notes before you leave. Listen, I like these people, I really do. But I don't see any reason to break a sweat for them. They'll probably go along with our plan no matter what, so let's just take it easy. Now, about your disciples...

Son: Right. Twelve of them.

Father: Well, I've been giving that some thought. We don't really need all twelve. Ten would do just as well. I think we could get the point across just fine if we left these names off. *(hands the Son a list of names)*

Son (reading the list): Matthew and John?

Father: Right. Who needs four different versions of your story? Two will do. Now, about this crucifixion business.

Son: You wanted me to die on a cross, didn't you?

Father: I've been rethinking that, too. That's really going to a lot of bother—I mean, all that blood and pain and death... and then there'd be the business of the resurrection. What a hassle! Wouldn't it be a lot easier if we just had you scourged, then run out of town? A lot cleaner, don't you think? I think being whipped will say a lot about your love for the people. After all, we know none of them would voluntarily go through that for you.

Son: Well, if you say so. But I'm willing to die if you want me to.

Father: Hey, why bother...

Ludicrous, isn't it. Thank God that isn't really what happened. What really happened was that the triune Godhead loved us so unspeakably much that they willingly suffered separation and a tortuous death on our behalf. For us. They gave their very best—the very best thing that has ever existed in all of time and before: Jesus—just to save our wretched souls.

Yet still people will ask, *Why? Why should I expend the energy and time to reach toward excellence? After all, we live in a state of grace: we don't earn our way into heaven. Isn't all this talk of excellence and hard work just an attempt to make us into something we're not? After all, God isn't impressed with flash and glitter—and we're certainly not supposed to be trying to impress each other.*

God is “impressed” with us, no matter what. He can be impressed by our faithfulness, our devotion and giving heart—or he can be impressed by our sloth, and the cheap price we have placed on the sacrifice of His Son.

The righteous person serves the Lord with joyful excellence and a commitment to both His worship and the needs of His body out of the gratitude of a forgiven heart.

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He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

Colossians 1:17-18

To Be Like Him

Serving the Lord through drama—for the correct reasons—can be a form of worship. We are called to worship and serve our Lord with excellence—the very best of which we are capable. We do this out of a sense of obedience, indebtedness, and thanksgiving. But how is this accomplished? How do we go about offering excellence to God?

Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
The God of my salvation,
And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.
For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it;
You do not delight in burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart—
These, O God, You will not despise.

Psalm 51:14-17 NKJV

All things begin with God—even the service and worship we offer to Him. We begin by approaching Him with humility and an open, broken heart. This establishes our position in relation to His. As we proclaim His lordship, we confess our inability to live without Him; as we magnify Him, we diminish ourselves; as we establish His high and lofty plane, we comprehend its contrast to our own.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

Romans 7:18

An Origin in Him

Whatever beauty we offer up to God must have its origin in Him. It is only through the blood of Christ and the indwelling Spirit that we

even gain access to the throne; we are incapable of manufacturing praise out of our flesh—it must be God Himself who energizes the worship process.

Likewise, striving for excellence in our service devoid of the energizing motivation of the One for whom the service is rendered, is nothing more than “striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:26). It is empty effort, offered for unholy reasons. Look, instead, to the example of Christ, the epitome of excellence.

...who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:6-8

There are those who denounce the pursuit of excellence as nothing more than showing off. But when we understand that true, Biblical excellence can only exist in an atmosphere of contrite humility before God, we understand that when we strive for holy excellence we are no more “showing off” than was Jesus, when He debased Himself to become the ultimate servant and sacrifice for man.

Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:30-31

To Soar Like Eagles

Soaring does not happen accidentally. Excellence is not something that just springs from us unattended. We serve our Lord with excellence because we intend to, because we love Him so much that we are compelled to serve Him to the very best of our ability.

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The Lord has gifted you with certain abilities; it is your responsibility to identify those abilities and place them in His service. He has not entrusted those abilities to you for them to be squandered or spent lazily. He has entrusted them to you for their quality investment in the work of His Kingdom. True Biblical excellence is not flash and glitter—it is not “trying to impress people.” True excellence springs from a heart devoted to a God who loved us enough to spend His excellence at the cross.

How, then, can we offer Him anything less than our very best?

emphasis
ten

The Rehearsal Schedule



THERE ARE NO SUBJECTS MORE CENTRAL to the His Company principle of excellence in service to our Lord than the rehearsal schedule. For it is here that the rubber meets the road, as it were. We may happily subscribe to the higher concepts of servanthood and excellence, considering them to be the least of God's just due. But the point at which we back up with action our theoretical position on these high concepts, is when we bring out our calendar and begin penciling in dates.

There is no way for the Christian director to remove the Spirit from his scheduling of play rehearsals. Ours is a holy purpose, and even if one must necessarily concern himself with hours and dates and work commitments and family vacations, we must remember that our process is as high and sanctified as that of any ordained servant of the Lord. We do not plan our service without considering its result-

ing quality; we do not consider its quality without understanding in whose name it is offered.

With that in mind, history and experience would reveal the sad truth that most Christian drama groups traditionally commit far too little time for rehearsal. May God forgive the dark thoughts I have entertained when receiving correspondence from directors looking for an Easter musical just three weeks before the date, or someone asking if I can recommend a play they could use at a dinner to be held that same week! Maybe the best response, on such occasions, would have been to echo Jesus: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” My actual response, however, to such short-sighted requests has often been to recite the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

It is true that experienced actors—especially ones accustomed to working together—can quickly work up a short sketch in just a matter of days. Something written in a familiar genre, following a familiar set of guidelines, and performed by actors familiar with that type of script as well as each other, can indeed be presented in suitably polished fashion in a relatively short period of time.

But that does not describe the typical church drama group. Here is a more accurate description:

- The director works a forty-hour week at a “regular” job, has a family that requires much of her time, and, because she is talented, is already committed in varying degrees to other programs within the church.
- The actors range from middle-aged down to young junior high age, and range in experience from almost professional quality down to barely housebroken.
- One or two of the actors in the group are thoroughly fired up about the ministry, ready to drop whatever they are doing for the chance to polish their craft and serve the Lord. But most are only periodically interested at best, and, at worst, require a shoehorn to pry them away from the TV, bowling league, soccer practice or the ubiquitous cell phone.

For more on excellence in our service to the Lord, see Emphasis Eight, “On Excellence,” in Part Four.

- Some members of the troupe must be threatened within an inch of their life just to learn their lines some time before dress rehearsal, while others repeatedly show up late to rehearsals or whine about having to be there at all.
- Even when most of the participants are enthusiastic and committed, because of their lack of experience and so many other activities in their lives they require *lots* of rehearsal time to accomplish a solid performance.

The preceding more accurately describes the typical church drama group. And, under these conditions, the average play or musical will take considerable rehearsal time to produce a worthwhile performance. The His Company rehearsal method was developed with actors who, for the most part, were indeed dedicated to the principle of excellence, committed to bettering themselves at their craft, and motivated by a profound love for the Lord. But they were also busy people with other responsibilities, and mostly amateurs, with very little stage experience beyond what they had already done within our group.

Within this setting we learned that *twenty-four hours* was a good rule of thumb for planning rehearsals. By this I mean that for the typical Sunday sketch of from three to ten minutes in length, a solid performance required, on the average, eight three-hour rehearsals, one per week. Based on this, our average rehearsal period was two months: 8 rehearsals x 3 hours each = 24 hours = (at one rehearsal per week) two months.

It is true that the same number of hours could be compressed into a shorter period, by calling more than one rehearsal per week. But in most instances the actors' other commitments prevent them from attending more than one session per week. Besides, as is pointed out elsewhere in this book, the public rehearsal is only the tip of the iceberg; the days between each called rehearsal give each actor time to work on his or her own at home.

For more on the importance of rehearsing at home, see Emphasis Three, "Rehearsing at Home," in Part Four.

Scheduling

Many variables will affect the length, breadth, and depth of a re-

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hearsal schedule. The length of the play, number of characters, level of experience of the actors, amount of time to which they can commit each week—all these and more must be taken into account when organizing a schedule of rehearsals. So, in practical, pencil-on-paper terms, how does all this play out? The basic structure of the rehearsal schedule (as mirrored in the organization of this book) consists of the following:

- Reading Session
- Blocking Rehearsal(s)
- Regular Rehearsals
- Technical Rehearsal
- Dress Rehearsal(s)
- Performance(s)

So, with a first performance scheduled (for example) for April 5, 2003, working backward from that date, the rehearsal schedule for the actors in a typical sketch or one-act play might look like this:

Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		20 Reading Session 7-10:00 PM	February		
		27 Blocking Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
		6 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM	March		
		13 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
		20 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
		27 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
April		3 Technical Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM	4 Dress Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM	5 Performance 7-8:00 PM	6 Performance 7-8:00 PM

If the production were a larger, multi-scene or -act play, with more actors, the schedule might be expanded in the following way (but still keeping the number of rehearsal hours per actor about the same):

Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		20 Reading Session 7-10:00 PM	February		
25 Blocking Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM		27 Blocking Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
4 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM		6 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM	March		
11 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM		13 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
18 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM		20 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
25 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM		27 Regular Rehearsal 7-10:00 PM			
April	2 Technical Meeting 7-10:00 PM	3 Technical Rehearsal 6-10:00 PM	4 Dress Rehearsal 6-10:00 PM	5 Performance 7-8:00 PM	6 Performance 7-8:00 PM

Note that the Technical and Dress rehearsals for the larger production are four hours long, instead of three. Again, this will mean longer hours for the director and technical crew, but not necessarily for the cast. The “twenty-four-hour” standard is not a hard and fast rule, but a guideline. Smaller productions with experienced players may require less; larger productions with players of varying abilities may require more.

In Practice

For the purpose of the following practical case study, we will develop a detailed rehearsal schedule for a production of *Vacancy* for the Christmas season—with a performance on Saturday, December 20, 2003, and Sunday, December 21, 2003.

The first rehearsal is easy: everyone will attend the reading session. Even if their part is insignificant—even if someone is just a walk-on, without lines—every member of the cast must attend the reading session. In fact, it would be worthwhile, if not mandatory, even for technical and backstage personnel to attend, so that they might listen in, and thus gain a better understanding of the project as a whole.

Blocking Rehearsal

Likewise, every cast member will attend the blocking rehearsal, but this rehearsal should be organized to minimize dead time for the smaller roles; individuals should be given specific call times. And—especially with larger productions—more than one blocking rehearsal may be required to cover all the scenes and characters.

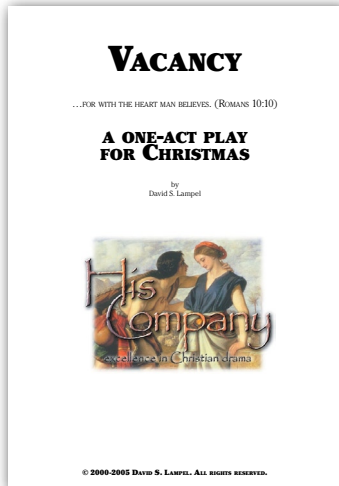
The inexperienced director might look at a script like *Vacancy* and, with a shrug, figure that it can certainly be blocked out within one three-hour rehearsal. I mean, how hard can it be? But the experienced director knows that the conduct and pace of the blocking rehearsal can be an awkward, time-consuming process. The experienced director knows, as well, the value of getting the blocking thoroughly cemented in the minds of the actors early on. It is time well-spent, and an investment in the success of the rehearsals to come. So even though it is not a terribly long play, and does not have a lot of characters, *Vacancy* might benefit from splitting up the blocking into two rehearsals, as the chart below shows.

Blocking: Tuesday, Nov. 11	7-10:00 PM
Leader	7:00-8:30
Visitors	8:00-10:00
Blocking: Thursday, Nov. 13	7-10:00 PM
Nathanael	7:00-7:30
Simon, Joanna, Eliezer	7:00-10:00

Ideally, the completed rehearsal schedule—with call times for the individual actors—will be handed to them with their script, *before* the reading session. Sometimes, however, this is unrealistic. With their script, the actors should at least be given a general idea of the rehearsal schedule; their detailed call sheet for subsequent rehearsals should be given to them no later than the blocking rehearsal.

Remember that the blocking rehearsal involves more than just assigning movements, then dismissing the cast. Taking the time now to run through it a few times after the instructions have been given will pay dividends in later rehearsals. It will also make more productive the homework for each actor between public rehearsals.

It will be helpful to have a copy of *Vacancy* on-hand while reading the rest of this chapter. If you do not already have it, visit our web site (HC.DLAMP.EL.COM) to obtain a free copy. (Be sure to download the Adobe Acrobat (PDF) version of the script.)



This schedule minimizes dead time, gets the youngster playing Nathanael in and out at an early hour, permits more time for each scene—and the only person who needs to be there both nights is the director. A variation on this schedule could be used if the Visitors will remain fairly static throughout the play (as they were in the original production). If so, their blocking will be minimal, and will not take more than a few minutes. In this case, the director could switch from two rehearsals of three hours each, to one four-hour rehearsal.

Organizing Efficient Rehearsals

With the calendar days determined, the director must now sit down and map out the specifics for each rehearsal. It is not enough to say to the actors, “We will have eight rehearsals on such-and-such dates. Be there.” The more care the director takes in optimizing the time for his or her actors, the happier, more enthusiastic, and more productive they will be—as well as more eager to participate in subsequent projects. Let’s take a look at the *Vacancy* script to determine how best to assign the scenes to the rehearsal dates.

Scenes and Actors

These days the director can be as low- or high-tech as is comfortable for his or her style. We have a plethora of tools from which to choose for organizing our time and the time of others. Today the director might use something as sophisticated as a “Project Management” computer program for organizing the assignments of a larger production. The director might use a word processor, or spreadsheet program, to create tables that illustrate in a graphical way who does what when. Or the director might use tools no more sophisticated than a clean sheet of paper and a sharpened pencil. Whatever he uses to get the job done the goal remains the same: *to organize the time and efforts of the actors and technical crew to minimize wasted time, while always striving toward the goal of performance excellence.*

To that end we return to the pages of the script. The first thing that I, as the director, need to determine is which characters are in which scenes. In addition, it is often helpful to organize the script into what might be called “rehearsal groups.” Some plays lend themselves to this better than others. If the script permits, this is an essential part of

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the process of making the rehearsal schedule as efficient as possible, and minimizing dead-time for the actors and crew.

The scenes in *Vacancy* can easily be organized into rehearsal groups. Since I have already determined that for rehearsal purposes there are, essentially, two separate parts to the cast, I can use those parts as the beginning point for organizing the scenes—as shown in the chart on the following page:

Leader and The Visitors

Scene One	p6	Leader only
	p7	Leader, Visitors
	p8	Visitors only
Scene Three	p15	Visitor only (one line)
Scene Four	p17-19	Leader, Visitors
Scene Five	p24-25	Visitors only
Scene Seven	p30	Visitors only
Scene Nine	p34-35	Leader only

Bethlehem

Scene Two	p9-11	Simon, Joanna
	p11-14	Simon, Joanna, Eliezer, Nathanael
Scene Three	p15-16	Simon, Joanna
Scene Five	p20-24	Simon, Eliezer, Nathanael (one line)
Scene Six	p26-29	Simon, Joanna
Scene Eight	p31-33	Simon, Joanna

Page numbers refer to the PDF version of the *Vacancy* script.

From the script and the list above we glean the following key points:

- Simon and Joanna will have to attend more rehearsals than anyone else. In fact, it may be necessary to schedule extra rehearsals just for them.
- The Leader does not directly interact with the Bethlehem scene, so will not have to attend any of those rehearsals. For the most part he will be rehearsed by himself—except for Scene Four, and the end of Scene One, where he interacts with the Visitors.
- Technically, Visitor #2 is in Scene Three, but his one line, at the

beginning, is not in any way connected to the other characters, so this one line could be rehearsed with one of his other scenes. A similar situation exists at the end of Scene Five for both Visitors; they could be rehearsed separately from the other actors.

Narrowing it Down

With the list of rehearsal groups now organized, it will be much easier to fill in our calendar of rehearsals. But there is one more, intermediate step that must be done first. We must determine how much actual rehearsal time each group will need. This is, admittedly, a subjective determination—affected by the level of experience and talent of the cast members, their ability and willingness to commit time to the production, and the director’s level of commitment to excellence—and may not be easy for the new director. The process of organizing personnel within a series of rehearsals is one that, admittedly, benefits from experience. If it is new to you, be assured that, with practice, you will be better at it tomorrow than you are today.

Working from the list just prepared, I pencil in the amount of time I think will be necessary to spend rehearsing each group.

<u>Leader and The Visitors</u>			
Scene One	p6	Leader only	} 1.5 hours x 2
	p7	Leader, Visitors	
	p8	Visitors only	
Scene Three	p15	Visitor only (one line)	15 min. x 2
Scene Four	p17-19	Leader, Visitors	1.5 hours x 2
Scene Five	p24-25	Visitors only	30 min. x 2
Scene Seven	p30	Visitors only	15 min. x 2
Scene Nine	p34-35	Leader only	30 min. x 2
<u>Bethlehem</u>			
Scene Two	p9-11	Simon, Joanna	1 hour x 3
	p11-14	Simon, Joanna, Eliezer, Nathanael	1 hr. x 3
Scene Three	p15-16	Simon, Joanna	30 min. x 2
Scene Five	p20-24	Simon, Eliezer, Nathanael (one line)	1 hr. x 3
Scene Six	p26-29	Simon, Joanna	1 hour x 3
Scene Eight	p31-33	Simon, Joanna	1 hour x 2

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These time amounts are not cast in granite. Adjustments will be made here and there for a variety of reasons, but these initial amounts will give me a beginning point from which to proceed.

Right away I see that rehearsals will have to be added. How do I reach this conclusion? Simple addition. As I work through the time I will want to work with just the Leader and the Visitors, I see that the time is quickly slipping away. Let's look at the numbers.

Removing the first two rehearsals (Reading and Blocking) and the last two rehearsals (Technical and Dress), leaves me with four, three-hour rehearsals—or twelve hours. As I begin sketching out the amount of time I would like to work with the characters, I immediately see that twelve hours will be insufficient. My initial time amounts for the Leader and Visitors alone total nine hours.

The numbers above mean, for example, that I want to work with the Leader and Visitors on Scene Four for one and one-half hour on two separate occasions. (The reason for scheduling at least two occasions for rehearsing any scene is to follow, whenever possible, the pattern of “rehearse/review/rehearse again.” This gives the actor time to go home, refine the scene on his own, then return for more polish with the director later.) The numbers in the notes above add up to nine hours out of the allotted twelve—and I haven't yet had any rehearsal time with the actors in the Bethlehem scene!

As I add up the numbers for the Bethlehem scene, it is clear that I am “over-budget” with my time, and adjustments will need to be made. The total number of desired hours (15) is so far beyond the remaining time (3 hours), that it is obvious that the solution must involve more than just adding extra rehearsals. I will also have to trim some time off my initial estimates for each scene.

When faced with a scheduling situation such as this—especially one involving rehearsal groups as separated as the Leader/Visitors and Bethlehem actors—the easiest way to compensate is to schedule more than one rehearsal per week. In this instance, doing so will, for the most part, add no more rehearsals for the individual actors; only for the director. So right off the bat I can move the Leader/Visi-

tors rehearsals to another day of the week—for the purpose of this discussion, Tuesdays. Next, as I lay out the detailed schedule for each rehearsal, I will trim some time off the desired times for the other rehearsal group, bringing it closer to a more realistic amount.

And in case it is not yet apparent, remember that it is not necessary to rehearse the scenes of a play in their printed order. Just as with the filming of a movie, the most efficient order in which to rehearse the scenes is very often *out* of order.

The Completed Schedule

I have finally reached the last step in the process. It is now time to create, out of all the preliminary notes, a detailed rehearsal schedule that can be distributed to cast and crew. And when I do, I will make it clear to every participant that the times listed in the schedule indicate when the actor (or crew member) is expected to be *ready to work*—not just walking in the door.

If, for example, the call time for the actress playing Joanna is at 8:30, this means she is to arrive sufficiently early to get her coat off, visit the bathroom and get a drink, and be ready to step onto the stage for rehearsal at 8:30. It also means that she has mentally set aside the problems and pressures of her day, and has taken the time to get into character.

The final rehearsal schedule is shown on the next two pages.

Vacancy Rehearsal Schedule

Reading Session: Thursday, Nov. 6 7-10:00 PM

All

Blocking: Tuesday, Nov. 11 7-10:00 PM

Leader	7:00-8:30	Scene One, p6; Scene Nine, p34-35
Visitors	8:00-10:00	Scene One, p7; Scene Four, p17-19 Scene One, p8; Scene Five, p24-25

Blocking: Thursday, Nov. 13 7-10:00 PM

Nathanael	7:00-7:30	Scene Two, p11-12; Scene Five, p20
Simon, Joanna, Eliezer	7:00-9:00	Scene Two, p9-14; Scene Three, p15-16 Scene Five, p20-24
Simon, Joanna	9:00-10:00	Scene Six, p26-29; Scene Eight, p31-33

Rehearsal: Tuesday, Nov. 18 7-10:00 PM

Leader	7:00-8:30	Scene One, p6; Scene Nine, p34-35
Leader, Visitors	8:30-10:00	Scene One, p7-8; Scene Four, p17-19

Rehearsal: Thursday, Nov. 20 7-10:00 PM

Simon, Joanna	7:00-8:00	Scene Two, p9-11
Simon, Joanna, Nathanael, Eliezer	8:00-9:30	Scene Two, p11-14
Simon, Nathanael	9:30-9:45	Scene Five, p20
Simon	9:45-10:00	Scene Eight, p33 (last speech)

Rehearsal: Tuesday, Nov. 25 7-10:00 PM

Visitors	7:00-8:00	Scene Five, p24-25; Scene Seven, p30 Scene Three, p15 (Visitor #2)
Leader, Visitors	8:00-10:00	Scene One, p7-8; Scene Four, p17-19

Rehearsal: Thursday, Nov. 27 7-10:00 PM

Simon, Joanna	7:00-8:30	Scene Three, p15-16; Scene Two, p9-11
Simon, Eliezer	8:30-10:00	Scene Five, p20-24

Rehearsal: Tuesday, Dec. 2 7-10:00 PM

Simon, Joanna	7:00-9:00	Scene Six, p26-29
Simon, Joanna	9:00-10:00	Scene Eight, p31-33

Rehearsal: Thursday, Dec. 4 7-10:00 PM

Simon, Joanna, Eliezer, Nathanael	7:00-9:00	Scene Two, p11-14
Simon, Joanna	9:00-10:00	Scene Two, p9-11

Rehearsal: Tuesday, Dec. 9 7-10:00 PM

Leader	7:00-8:30	Scene One, p6; Scene Nine, p34-35
Leader, Visitors	8:30-9:00	Scene One, p7-8; Scene Four, p17-19
Visitors	9:00-10:00	Scene Five, p24-25; Scene Seven, p30 Scene Three, p15 (Visitor #2)

Regular Rehearsal: Thursday, Dec. 11 7-10:00 PM

Simon, Eliezer	7:00-8:30	Scene Five, p20-24
Simon, Joanna	8:30-10:00	Scene Six, p26-29 Scene Eight, p31-33

Technical Meeting: Tuesday, Dec. 16 7-10:00 PM

(with all backstage and technical crew members [no actors])

Technical Rehearsal: Thurs, Dec. 18 6-10:00 PM

Technical Crew	6:00-10:00	Set up in preparation for rehearsal
Cast	7:00-10:00	Complete script

Dress Rehearsal: Friday, Dec. 19 6-10:00 PM

Cast	6:00-7:00	Run-through
Technical Crew	6:30-8:00	Set up in preparation for rehearsal
Cast	7:00-8:00	Into costume and makeup
Dress Rehearsal	8:00-9:00	Complete run-through, without stopping
Cast and Crew	9:00-10:00	Address problems and make adjustments

Performance: Saturday, Dec. 20 7-8:00 PM

Cast and Crew	6:00
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Performance: Sunday, Dec. 21 7-8:00 PM

Cast and Crew	6:00
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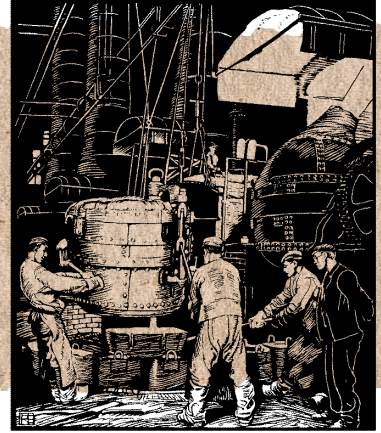
Distribution

In fairness to all participants, the completed rehearsal schedule should be created and distributed as early as possible in the production process. In a perfect world, it would be handed to each cast member with his script. In the *real* world, however, at that early date there are usually too many details still unsettled to commit to a printed schedule. Whenever the schedule is distributed, it should be accompanied by the proviso that some dates and times may change as unexpected circumstances arise.

That, too, is part of the real world.

emphasis
eleven

Behind the Scenes



THE MEMBERS OF THE AUDIENCE SEE THE ACTORS delivering their lines and bringing life to their characters. They sit in their comfortable seats and watch the canvas of the stage being painted by the actors—and often give very little thought to all the backstage people who have made it all possible. Leave the typical actor on stage with his rehearsed lines, but remove the costume, the makeup, the prop he was holding in his hand, the set that once stood behind him, the microphone, and the lights—and what is left may not hold the audience’s attention for long.

The playwright pens the words, the actors wrap the words in flesh and blood, but the often-invisible technical crews are the ones that bring the play its sparkle and vitality. They are the ones that project the lifeblood of the play out beyond the stage apron and into the last seats of the auditorium.

This chapter offers a brief outline of duties and skills necessary for each of the principal players that work in relative anonymity behind the scenes of the typical production.

Assistant Director

The position of assistant director will most often be limited to those groups working within a large church—or an established, independent company. When most churches struggle just to fill the necessary stage roles, an assistant director will be considered an unattainable luxury. But even a small group may wish to begin training up more directors in its midst, and a good starting point for those wishing to direct is to apprentice under one who is more experienced.

The tendency will be for the assistant director to be used as a “go-fer,” running here and there to do the real director’s bidding. But that role should be filled by someone else. The assistant director should be *observing*, and learning from the director not only *how* to direct, but *how to direct this play*. One of the principal responsibilities of the assistant director is to stand in for the director when he or she is unavailable—whether for a few moments, or for an entire rehearsal. To perform this task effectively, with the least disruption to the rehearsal process, the assistant should be ready to step in with methods similar to those the director has already established. Continuity is important, and valuable time can be lost if the assistant takes the actors in a direction off the beaten path.

The assistant director should...

- observe the methods and technique of the director, so as to learn from him or her, but also to be ready to seamlessly step in as a temporary replacement;
- be prepared to work with the actors in a sub-rehearsal (in another room), while the director conducts the main rehearsal;
- be prepared to take a rehearsal in the case of the director’s absence;
- communicate the wishes of the director to the various technical departments;

- be a liaison between the director and backstage during final rehearsals and performances.

Assistant to the Director

The assistant *to* the director—*not* the assistant director—should be the designated “go-fer.” This does not, however, mean that this is a menial position. Indeed, there are productions in which the assistant to the director plays a vital role in its success. Yes, there will be times when this person fetches coffee, or a sandwich, or performs some other mindless task. But more often the director’s assistant serves to insulate the director from those things that would detract from his or her purpose: directing the play and its various supporting departments.

The director should not be watching the script to make sure everyone is saying their lines correctly. The director should not be screaming to the back of the auditorium with instructions for the lighting crew. The director should not be leaving actors waiting on stage while he runs backstage to say something to the stage manager. The director should be focused on the task at hand—and it is the assistant to the director who makes that possible.

The assistant to the director should...

- unless running an errand for the director, always be close at hand, within earshot (or, in this high-tech age, connected by headphones);
- watch the script during early rehearsals to verify the accuracy of the actors’ lines;
- in later rehearsals and performances, watch the script for important cues for the director (“At the end of this song is that tricky 3-bar cutoff...”);
- run errands and messages for the director;
- be in charge of the director’s paraphernalia: script, pencils, light, etc.;
- watch for anything out-of-place—either on stage or off.

Stage Manager

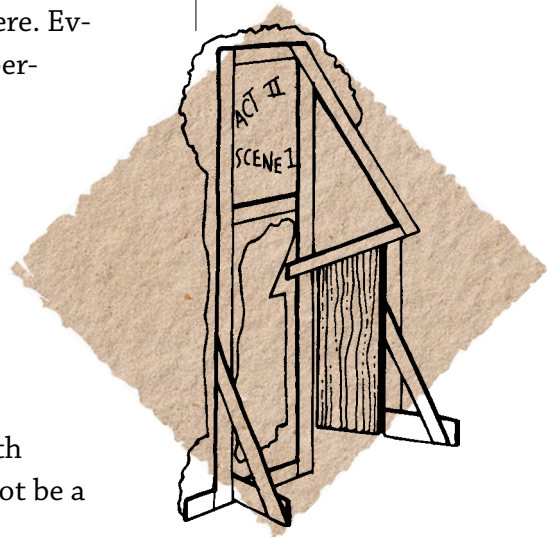
Think of the stage manager as the backstage director. He or she *gives* orders—and only *takes* orders from the director. More than anything else, the stage manager is a combination traffic cop, sergeant-at-arms, and efficiency expert. The stage manager is not only responsible for getting every body and every thing on stage or offstage at the proper moment, but for maintaining order and quiet backstage. After the director, the stage manager is the most powerful person in the production—and thus should be feared and respected.

It is important that the director establish—publicly and loudly—the authority of the stage manager over those within his sphere. Everyone backstage—be they actors, technical, or support personnel—are to know that when the stage manager says something should happen, it should happen. If a piece of scenery is in the wrong place, it should be moved; if a prop is missing, it had better be found; and if the stage manager tells someone they are speaking too loudly, they had better be quiet.

This means that the stage manager should be a person who both has organizational skills, and is comfortable with the job of (tactfully) telling others what to do. She need not be a tyrant, but should be a person who carries authority well.

The stage manager should...

- know the script inside and out, and have it always with him;
- be a person who can keep track of many things at once;
- work with the properties manager to organize set pieces and props for their efficient (and safe) use on stage;
- organize the various rooms backstage—dressing, makeup, bathrooms, props—and manage the flow of traffic between them;
- be safety conscious, keeping track of cords and cables backstage, and doing whatever is necessary (such as using Glow Paint) on obstacles and steps in dimly lit areas;



- use tape and Glow Paint on stage when actors will be entering and exiting in the dark;
- keep order and quiet backstage;
- know when and where actors should be for each entrance.

Wardrobe

In the typical church production, the wardrobe mistress is very often a combination designer, seamstress, and dresser. She may or may not be skilled at actually *designing* costumes, but at least should be adept at creating them from a design or picture. She should be willing to research the appearance of authentic costumes, but also be willing to work with the director's ideas for the appearance of the play's characters.

With some costumes, the actor will require her help in getting everything on correctly. In the professional theatre an actor will have a "dresser" who helps with this, but that position is rare in amateur church theatre. For that reason, it is recommended that you have a more mature woman (assuming it *is* a woman) for a wardrobe mistress. If your resident genius at the sewing machine is a young woman, by all means, enlist her. But when it comes time for fittings and backstage dressing help, give her a more age- and/or sex- appropriate assistant. Speaking as an actor who has, on occasion, needed help from the wardrobe mistress in getting everything in place, it would not only have been inappropriate, but awkward being assisted by a young woman. But it bothered neither of us when she was a more mature woman. And if even that makes you feel ill-at-ease, then have male dressers on hand for the men. If the person who creates the costumes is a man, then be sure to have a woman on hand for the fittings of the women.

The wardrobe mistress should...

- work with the director to establish the look of the characters;
- be responsible for the creation or acquisition of the costumes for the play, including head pieces, footwear, jewelry, and any other accouterments to the person of the character—which means she

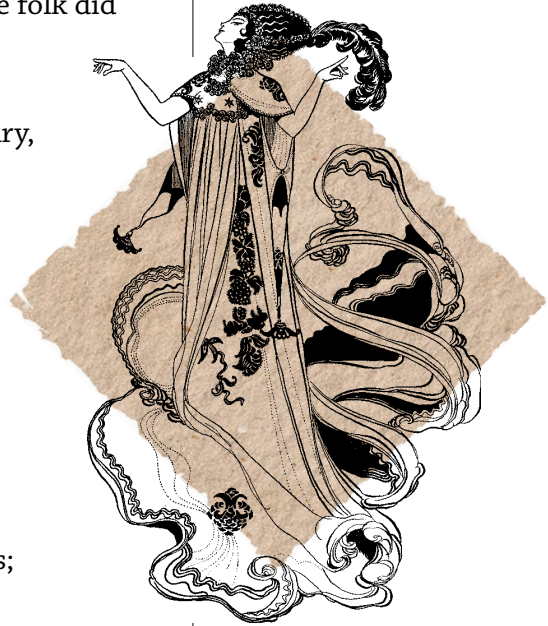
For more on resources for creating authentic-looking costumes, see Chapter Six, "Costuming the Biblical Character," in Part Four.

By its very nature, the backstage area of even a church production can become rather slapdash about modesty and decorum. No matter how one tries to segregate the sexes and establish rules, some blushing moments will occur. Use common sense, set down the rules and traffic patterns, but when the blushing moment occurs, don't make it bigger than it is, but address it with calm maturity, then move on.

Part 4: The Next Level

may need to work closely with the Properties department;

- be *creative* about acquiring materials and costumes—and be able to work within a budget;
- have sandals or appropriate shoes for everyone (Bible folk did *not* go barefoot all the time);
- keep track of all assigned articles of clothing and jewelry, and make sure that the actors do not make any unauthorized changes;
- efficiently organize the costumes for all rehearsals and performances, in or close to the dressing rooms for the actors;
- work closely with the makeup artist;
- always be prepared for quick repairs and adjustments;
- be available (or have someone available) to assist those actors who need help dressing.



Makeup

The makeup artist for a production should have experience in the use of *stage* makeup. It is not enough for someone to just know how to apply her own street makeup in a pleasant way. Stage makeup is not just street makeup more heavily applied, but is a collection of tools used to compensate for the unique qualities of stage lighting, and project facial and body characteristics far beyond the edge of the stage. If she (or he) does not have the experience, she should do the necessary reading and research to learn the craft.

Her level of experience will dictate whether or not the makeup artist actually designs the look for each character, but she will at least be in charge of acquiring and organizing the makeup for each rehearsal and performance. In most cases she will need to actually apply the makeup on the actors, or enlist others to help with this task. Thus, she will

For detailed information about acquiring stage makeup and instruction for its use, see Chapter Four, "To Be or Not To Be," in Part One.

need to carefully budget her time, and the order in which she should do the actors.

The better method, however, is for the makeup artist to early-on instruct each actor as to the application of their makeup so they can do it themselves. The makeup artist then supervises, and adds finishing touches. While this is preferred, it is not always feasible in a smaller amateur production. Very often, however, when the cast is large, the individual actors can at least be shown how to apply their base.

The makeup artist should...

- purchase and keep organized all makeup used for the production;
- work with the director to design the faces for each character, creating face charts that can be followed by the individual actors;
- supervise the application of makeup by the actors, and approve each one before they go on stage;
- always check the actors' finished makeup under the stage lights (during technical and dress rehearsals);
- work with the wardrobe mistress for the appropriate look for costumes, hair, legs and arms (e.g., use of makeup to smudge arms and legs for "dirt");
- be prepared and available for quick repairs *during* rehearsals and performances.

Sound

The principal responsibility of the person in charge of sound is to ensure that everything spoken or sung on the stage is heard in all seats of the auditorium. Anything more than that will depend on the size and nature of the production, and whether (in the case of a musical) accompaniment will be by keyboards, Trax, or full orchestra. If accompaniment Trax are used, and if the sound man will have his hand's full bringing up and taking out mics during the production, it

may be advantageous to have a second person cueing the CD or tape.

The sound person should...

- run the sound for the play from the audience—ideally *not* from an isolated booth, or separate room (there is no way to accurately set sound levels unless you are hearing what the audience is hearing);
- ensure that all sound equipment is kept in dependable working order;
- always have on hand necessary emergency items, such as spare mic cords and fresh batteries for wireless mics;
- arrive sufficiently early to any rehearsal in which he is a part so that all sound equipment is set up and tested *before* the actual rehearsal begins;
- manage all cords to ensure everyone’s safety;
- cooperate to accomplish the *director’s* vision for the production;
- take clear, complete notes at the technical meeting so as to faithfully execute sound cues during production;
- enlist others to help when he runs out of hands.

Lights

For some smaller productions, the lighting duties may consist of little more than flipping a wall switch to light the church platform. In larger productions, however, the duties of the lighting crew can be complicated, and critical to the success of the production.

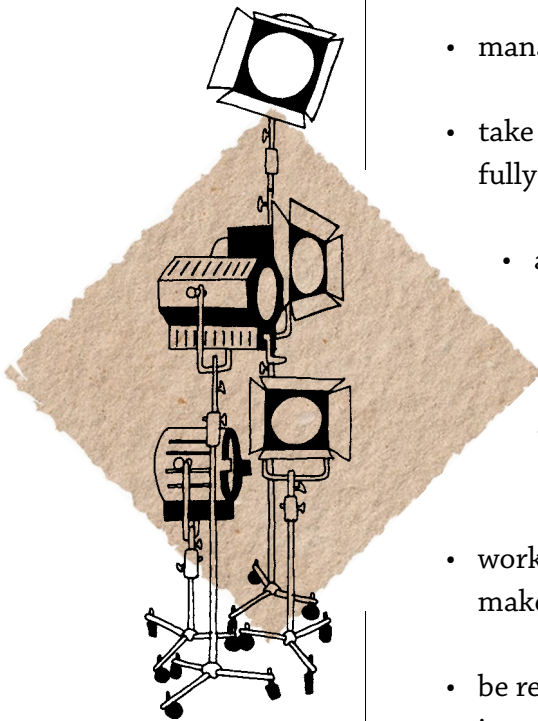
The lighting man (or woman, of course) needs to be experienced in—or actively learning—how to “paint with light.” It is not enough to just flip a switch at the proper moment. It is not enough to just illuminate the stage—although that is an essential component. Lights play a critical part in designing the look and texture of a play or

musical. For example, the one in charge of lights must consider such things as:

- What is the time of day for a scene?
- Is it exterior or interior?
- What is the “temperature” of the scene (i.e., is it warm or cool)?
- Are the shadows where they should be?
- If the *set* looks good as lit, what is happening to the actors’ skin tones?

Meanwhile, the lighting person should...

- maintain all lighting equipment so it is ready for rehearsals and performances;
- always have on hand necessary emergency items—such as replacement bulbs, and spare power cords;
- manage and tape down all cords to ensure everyone’s safety;
- take clear, complete notes at the technical meeting so as to faithfully execute lighting cues during production;
- arrive sufficiently early to any rehearsal in which he is a part so that all lighting equipment is set up and tested *before* the actual rehearsal begins;
- cooperate to accomplish the *director’s* vision for the production;
- work with the makeup artist to find the correct balance of facial makeup and lighting color;
- be ready—and willing—to make adjustments to the initial lighting setup during final rehearsals;
- politely communicate to the director the technical reasons why



you may not be able to accomplish what he is requesting (usually at the technical meeting).

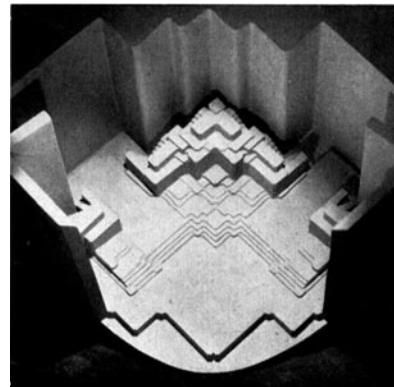
Set Design

Most of the technical departments for any production do their more substantial work in or near the actual performance of a play or musical—except, that is, the set design department. The artists that design and create the set do the bulk of their work early on. Then, when the big day arrives, they are pretty much out of the picture, as the product of their work is taken over by the stage crew.

Perhaps more than any other quality, the set designer needs to be *inventive*. Artistic, yes; backgrounds need to be painted, and set pieces need to be arranged properly. But beyond that, a good set designer should be adept at creating something substantial from very little, good at working out the mechanics necessary to implement the director's ideas.

The set designer should...

- have artistic skills—or be in charge of those who do (it is rare, but possible for the set designer to be only an *idea* person, while those ideas are actually executed by others);
- be able to work within a budget;
- work closely with the director to create the set he or she has in mind for a play;
- be sufficiently experienced to know—or is actively learning how—what is painted backstage will look when under lights on stage;
- be inventive about acquiring the necessary materials (often with a modest budget) for creating the set.



Properties

The line of demarcation between stage set and properties can become blurred. One man's set piece is another man's property. For this reason the two departments should work closely with each other. (One way to demarcate the two departments is to specify that *stationary* objects belong to the set, while objects *carried on and off by actors* belong to properties.)

The properties department should be, like the set designers, inventive. But it should also be adept at acquisition—adept at finding, wherever it can, those odd accouterments to each scene. And, like the set designers, it should do most of its work early-on, getting the props into the hands of the actors as soon as possible.

The properties manager should...

- keep a list of ready resources for possible props, such as *Goodwill* stores, swap meets, junk shops;
- be able to work within a budget;
- use library, university, or online resources to verify the appearance and authenticity of any prop for a scene;
- be a good organizer: good at cataloguing available items; good at keeping borrowed items separate from those the company owns; good at ensuring that the props are always in the right place at the right time for the actors;
- during final rehearsals and performances, be backstage to supervise the distribution, use, and collection of all properties.

A Dynamic Contribution

The attentive, responsible director will make a point of treating the supporting backstage people well—not to cynically exploit them, but because they *deserve* it. A smoothly operating, enthusiastic backstage crew can make the difference between a stumbling, lackluster production and one that makes an instructive, dynamic contribution to God's Kingdom.



an afterword

THE STAGE CAN BE A MAGICAL PLACE—a place of creativity, imagination, a place of wonder and delight. The stage can be a place where timeless truth is declared in a new way, a place where imaginative shadings are added upon deep, old colors.

The stage is a powerful, dynamic platform from which the truth of God's word can be declared—but declared in a winsome, creative way that speaks directly to the heart, the spirit, the unbridled soul.

Our most earnest wish is that this book has excited in you—the director, the actor, the backstage worker—a desire to serve the Lord deeply, and authentically, according to His call for you. And if it is His will for your life that you serve Him upon the boards of the dramatic stage, then our prayer is that you will remain true to that call: *A Calling to the Stage*.

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