

Blocking and Stage Directions

The idea of blocking or staging a play can be very daunting. It is important to remember that the pictures you create with the actors on the stage ultimately serve to better tell the story. This chapter is dedicated to helping you tell the physical story the best way possible.

Regardless of experience, some things to keep in mind are:

- Go into every rehearsal with a clear understanding of the space in which you will be performing. You will not always have the luxury of rehearsing in the actual space, so understanding how that space will eventually be set up is imperative.
- Simplify.
- Know the “rules” but also know when to break the rules. For example, it is important that the audience is able to see the performers. Therefore, it is rare that a director will block a scene with the actors’ backs to the audience. However, there may be a moment when that choice is particularly powerful.
- Keep in mind that stage directions written into a script are very often simply the blocking that was used in the original production. Feel free to use those as a guide, but do not get stuck trying to replicate the original movement exactly.

NASCENT

At the nascent level, it is very possible that your students will have no idea what to do with their bodies in the space. It is, therefore, important that you are able to guide them.

For every scene:

- Find the important moments. Decide ahead of time how to best tell that part of the story physically.
- Come into every rehearsal knowing roughly how you want the scene to look. If you can choose your “pictures” ahead of time, as a team you and your cast can figure out how to get to each of them.
- Make sure that you, the cast, and the stage manager (if you have one) write down ALL of the blocking. This way you do not have to re-do the work multiple times.
- Know where in the space the moments take place.

➤ NASCENT ACTIVITY

For this activity, you’ll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 1:** Explanation of abbreviations

INTERMEDIATE

At the intermediate level, your students will probably have started to develop some good instincts. It is important to let them explore and try things in terms of blocking, but you should also go in with a plan. Please see the section on Nascent Blocking in terms of what you should prepare, but also allow yourself to be flexible and make changes based on what the actors are able to bring to the table.

➤ INTERMEDIATE ACTIVITY

For this activity, you’ll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 1:** Explanation of abbreviations

Remember to:

- Use your triangles: straight lines are incredibly boring to look at!
- Find levels: create pictures with some performers standing, some kneeling, some sitting, etc. This will create visual interest.
- Edit when necessary: though you want to give your students freedom to make choices and try new things, ultimately it is up to you to decide when something is working and when it is not.

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ADVANCED

At this level, your actors probably already have some good instincts. See what they have the impulse to do and allow yourself to be informed by it. Go into the rehearsal with an idea of your stage pictures, but do not be afraid to make adjustments and changes based on what the actors bring to the table. There is a reason you cast them! See the section on Nascent Blocking in terms of what you should prepare, and the section on Intermediate Blocking for reminders on forming stage pictures, but allow the students to inform you and do not be afraid to scratch your initial plan.

➤ ADVANCED ACTIVITY

For this activity, you'll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 1:** Explanation of abbreviations

Keep in mind:

- Physical choices related to posture, gesture, and quality of movement tell a lot about what is happening and who the characters are. At this stage in your blocking, be sure to work with the performers on those specific choices as well. It is one thing for an actor to move to stage right as blocked, it is another thing for her to slouch while dragging her feet and slowly moving to stage right. Encourage your students to be specific!

MUSICAL THEATRE

When thinking about staging a musical, you must first start by deciding which numbers will be blocked or staged vs which numbers will be choreographed. While your students probably have excellent instincts, when working on musical numbers specifically, it is best to go in with a plan and stick to it. Allow feedback, but ultimately you need to create the pictures that work best with the music, story, etc. When working specifically on the non-musical scenes and moments, please revert back to previous sections. Have a plan certainly, but also trust the intuition of the performers whom you have cast.

➤ MUSICAL THEATRE ACTIVITY

For this activity, you'll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 1:** Explanation of abbreviations

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Play Directing by Francis Hodge, 1979. Play Directing describes the various roles a director plays, from selection and analysis of the play to working with designers to bring it to life.

Tips: Ideas for Directors by Jon Jory, 2000. Until very recently, directing wisdom was passed on in the form of “tips”. Continuing this tradition, you will find them ranging from the way set a scene to directing the actor on the way to laugh.

On Directing by Harold Clurman, 1972. A straightforward, tasteful, and articulate account of what it is to bring a play to palpitating life upon a stage.

ADDENDUM 1: Explanation of Abbreviations

Abbreviations

SR: Stage Right
SL: Stage Left
CR: Center Right
CL: Center Left
CS: Center Stage
UL: Upstage Left
UR: Upstage Right
DL: Downstage Left
DR: Downstage Right
US: Upstage
DS: Downstage

