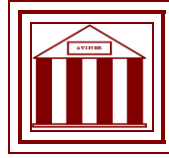


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
ART2015-1516**

**Writer vs. Director:
Who Authors Performance?**

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Whitireia New Zealand
New Zealand**

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Writer vs. Director: Who Authors Performance?

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Abstract

“I can say only one thing,” Chekov wrote to his wife about the premiere of *The Cherry Orchard*. “Stanislavski has been the undoing of my play...”

Stanislavski, on the other hand, felt he knew the play better than the playwright and wrote to Chekov “...this is not a comedy nor a farce. It is a tragedy.”

What right do Directors have to take scripts and make them succeed on stage? Conversely, what rights do Writers have in creating scripts that allow directors to succeed?

Last year, a script by the author of this paper, which had been written as a simple one-person-talking-directly-to-the-audience-about-suicide, was re-imagined by an enthusiastic director as a 3-person, multimedia, semi-musical. Later, this author directed a Thomas Sainsbury play at BATS Theatre, Wellington, New Zealand, of which the reviewer said of Opening Night that he “...couldn’t see the play for the acting.” In both cases the Director’s ‘vision’ dominated the Writer’s. In both cases the productions were well received by the audience.

So how important is the Writer?

In his book ‘The Empty Space’, Peter Brook (1968) writes “A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” Brook states the three main elements of theatre are space, actor, and audience. He doesn’t mention a need for text.

Is this, then, the ‘way of the world’? Anyone who goes regularly to the theatre will have “What an amazing production!” stories. Or even, “What powerful performances” stories. Even shows where we haven’t agreed with the staging concept are still often discussed with some admiration at the bravery/bizarreness of the Director’s attempt.

It’s an old example, but the film ‘Play it Again Sam’ (1972) is a screenplay by Woody Allen, starring Woody Allen, based on a play by Woody Allen. Yet whose name is above the title? Yep, the director’s: “A Herbert Ross Film”.

Whose is it, this thing called a production?

This paper explores, via research, and personal experience, the question who should be held up, the Writer, or the Director, as the primary creative force in theatre.

Keywords: Writer, Director, Author.

On the 20th August, 2012, in Wellington, New Zealand, an audience listened to playwright Ken Duncum and theatre director David O'Donnell describe their writer/director relationship as 'better than a marriage'. In this lecture they told of the productive work that was achieved by having the writer in the rehearsal room. The Director and the actors had the unusual luxury of asking questions of the creator of the story and their characters. The Writer watched his words come alive.

(It's no guarantee of usefulness however. Alan Ayckbourn, quoted in W. Wager's 1967 book 'The Playwrights Speak', as a young actor being directed in a Harold Pinter play by the man himself, asked the playwright a question about the background of the character he was playing. "Mind your own f***ing business." Pinter replied.)

Brook's staging of 'A Midsummer night's Dream'(1970) with circus trapeze is still held up as a stunning, breakthrough production. A smaller-scaled but local, equivalent in 80's Wellington, Warrick Broadhead's version of 'The Tempest' with its big silver tree and full-frontal male nudity, was talked about for some time. In both cases, the playwright barely got a mention.

So why did people go along to "Westend Girls" the before-mentioned Duncum/O'Donnell happy marriage? Does either name have a following? Is the book that well liked? With some perhaps, but most likely it was talk of the staging. The production was dynamic and fast flowing and fun. Was this as a result of the Writer's work, or the Director's?

In his book 'Mis-directing the Play' (2001), Terry McCabe believes that there is only one creative artist in the theatre: the playwright "...the only one who makes something out of nothing. The rest – directors, actors, designers - are interpretive artists."

This is perhaps too simplistic - that the playwright doesn't draw on anything to inspire the writing is simply not true. Ken Duncum could not create 'West End Girls' without having read the book. Even 'original' works come from stories or observations or influences. And, further, in this case, the playwright enjoyed an extensive period of work-shopping and rehearsing his script with the director and actors; and then the season of the play, and audience reactions. All of which will contribute to the final version of the script. (But the chances are that it will be only his name after "...adapted from the book by...").

The director of my script was very pleasant about it, but kept me at arm's length. Later, when I changed hats and directed the BATS production, I was really only interested in talking to the writer's agent and to gain the rights.

There are some Directors that don't want the Writer in the room. Mr. V. Prasad (2008) posted that this was plain insecurity: "Primarily, this is because the writer has a level of authority over the text that the director can never have." But for many directors it is somewhat like being a Writer and having to show an actor or director a first draft. –"Let me do my Directing craft, let me work through my mistakes/experiments for a bit before I show you."

There are some Writers who just want the Director to get on and 'do their thing', the Writer having done his/hers. There are obvious risks involved with

this (see the before mentioned multimedia suicide musical). Often, of course, the absence of the Writer in the rehearsal room is simple practicalities – he/she maybe based in another country. Or dead.

It is a simple fact that only the Director deals with all the elements that make up a production. Face it, when was the last time a playwright talked to a lighting designer? Having said that, the Set Designer probably won't ask the Actors for feedback on his/her ideas. The Sound Designer doesn't tend to talk to Costume. Props and Publicity? Hardly. However, the Director collaborates with everyone. More than this, the Director provides the framework for all the artists to be creative within. It is the director that pushes everyone towards the realised vision – the performed production. The skills required go way beyond mere management of the separate creative forces. Although, McCade thinks that the director is "...the interpretive artist in charge of putting the playwright's play onstage." Many directors would however argue that he/she is the primary creative force that inspires and drives all the elements needed for a successful evening at the theatre.

But shouldn't The Text be the most important? Research reveals that a lot of people think so. But not everyone: Jack Rothman posted a summary of part of his book 'Hollywood in Wide Angle: How Directors View Filmmaking' (2004) that included a quote from some anonymous Director – "If the words are that important, why not just flash the script up on the screen?"

He makes an interesting point. Directors control the action, what happens on the stage, what the audience hears and *sees*. In other words, the vision.

The danger here of course is that the visuals can take over. Back to Hollywood again and Allan Massie (2012) points out that directors are "...setting out to astonish the public with what computers make possible, piling special effect on special effect and forgetting that film, like other forms of story-telling is more satisfying when it has a coherent narrative and an intelligent script."

The queues outside the latest Superhero movie may beg to differ.

Writers have long tried to put pictures onstage, to have some say in the staging or their plays. Tennessee Williams wrote extensive stage directions alongside his texts. As did Beckett, Osborne and many other successful writers.

Samuel Beckett's play 'Breath' is nothing but stage directions. It features neither dialogue, nor actors; just a set, sound and lighting.

It was the trend at one stage for Directors to remove all stage directions from scripts as they resented being told what to do. (As freeing as this sounds, there is the instance where a director who used this practice, was simply not able to work out why a character called Hildegard just stopped having lines, but there was no apparent reason for her to have exited. Stumped, the director finally phoned the playwright. It must have been with some satisfaction that the writer read to the director the stage direction: "He fires the gun, four shots, into Hildegard.")

But how important to the success of the production are these Writer instructions? Shakespeare wrote very sparse stage directions – 'Enter', 'They fight', 'Dies', and of course the classic 'Exit pursued by a bear'. Further, his

texts are very rarely performed in their complete, unedited and original form. As a playwright, he has enjoyed considerable success.

More recently, local Wellington, New Zealand Director Ross Jolly told of the numerous email conversations he has had with the author of his latest production at Circa – Ross reassuring him that he wouldn't 'mess about' with his script – before the rights were granted. (Ross also tells of a play he saw a little while ago with a German director who complained that as much as he appreciated the show, he "couldn't see the director" in the production. For him, it was without 'personality'.)

In 2007, playwright Edward Albee likened directors and actors who wanted to re-interpret his plays to 'the forces of darkness', to whom he imagined saying, "Go f*** yourself; if you don't want to do the play I wrote, do another play."

Russell Reich's 'Notes on Directing' (2003) tells the Director that "You are not the parent of this child we call the play. You are present at its birth for clinical reasons, like a doctor or a midwife. Your job most of the time is simply to do no harm".

It was also not that long ago that The Text was all - 'The tyranny of the text' as described in Avra Sidiropoulou's book 'Authoring Performance' (2011). An academic rigidity whereby terms like 'respect' and 'authentic' and 'traditional' reduced creativity to mere interpretation. Reaction to this has meant that dance, song, film, and unusual staging have now arrived, alongside the text, into the theatre. Some would say that the audience experience is all the better for it.

The professional practitioner authoring this paper has always liked the explanation that the director is more like the filter; you have all these departments and actors doing their work and the director is the one who says, "Yes, that way" or "No, that doesn't work". Regardless if he/she is the writer or not, the director is the one who has to know what the play or film is about on every level. How many of those levels he/she is willing/able to divulge to others may determine whether or not this director chooses, in the end, to write his/her own material.

Having worn the Writer's hat, and the Director's, this author has basically given himself a headache. In the end, each production is a unique case when it comes to collaboration involving who did what and how much. It's a messy business but someone's got to do it. Yes, there is a danger of a Director imposing his or her vision at the expense of the Writer's, but there is an equal and opposite danger of the writing disallowing the creative processes of not only the director, but the actors and designer and so forth.

Rather than hold the Writer, or the Director, up as the primary creative, it is better to accept each collaboration on its strengths, and celebrate (or criticise) the produced production. Only then may we have the martial harmony as exemplified by *Misters O'Donnell and Duncum*.

Or is there another force involved?

Conclusion

Theatre is a form of art which is born twice, once when the script is written and a second time when it is presented. The script of a play (and, indeed, a film) is a form of literature like a novel, or a poem. The creator is the writer. However the *purpose* of the script becomes completed after it is *performed*. The performance is as much a creation as writing the script. The creator is the director. He/she uses the script as launching pad and gives it an audio visual form.

If the author and his play are well known (e g Shakespeare and Hamlet respectively) then everyone knows what the author had written in the script. If the director has changed anything, it is generally noted by those viewing the production. If the change is worth it, it is appreciated by the audience and critics. If it is not, it is rejected by them. If some like it and some do not, it invites debate.

The best art makes artists out of those who interpret it. When we, as viewers, watch a performance we are seeing a representation of life and of ourselves. And as we are constantly trying to understand and redefine what life is... theatre artists like Directors and Writers have a reason to create.

So perhaps the author of performance is neither the Writer nor the Director. Maybe it's...**us**.

“The test of a work of art is, in the end, our affection for it, not our ability to explain why it's good”. - Stanley Kubrick

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