**WORKING TOGETHER IN THEATRE: COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP**

By ROBERT COHEN and JOEL VEENSTRA

Second Edition web resources

## ADDITIONAL COLLABORATIVE INSIGHTS

With the updates in the second edition of this text a few collaborative concepts from the first edition simply did not fit in the second edition; nevertheless, they are valuable. As such, below are some additional collaborative concepts exploring translations and adaptations; designers collaborating with designers; actors collaborating with actors; actors collaborating with designers; and other notes on the collaboration process.

### Translations and Adaptations

If the play was originally written in a foreign language, one of the director's first tasks is to find – or create - an appropriate *translation*. Early conceptualization will help the director select from among alternatives – or commission a new one – but almost always, the producing entity will want to be involved in this search as well.

Translations are critical ingredients of the production of foreign plays, and they powerfully shape the play that the audience sees, as well as hears. Translations can differ drastically: in their wit, pace, emotive force, gravity, sensuality, profundity, profanity and contemporaneity. They may also differ as to period: some strive to retain the original author's setting and context, some are updates in time and relocations in country or region, and some turn verse into prose or formal speech into a local vernacular. So, the choice of text is critical, and a mistaken choice in the preparation period cannot be easily corrected after rehearsals begin and lines have been memorized. In selecting a translation, therefore, a director and dramaturg will often read comparable scenes aloud from the competitive texts aloud to each other, or with other actor friends, prior to making a final decision and starting rehearsals.

Translations under copyright must legally be treated the same as plays and cannot be revised or combined with other translations without the translator's (or, if the playwright has died, the playwright's estate, or the publisher's) permission. But often the director may collaborate directly with the translator to make desired changes if the reason is appropriate. In a production of Molière's *The School for Wives* that Robert Cohen directed in Utah, he selected Ranjit Bolt's British translation, but since it included a few British slang expressions ("clever clogs," "sodding"), Robert sought permission to Americanize some of the language and Ranjit Bolt agreed.

Conversely, in Susanna Morrow's 2009 Texas production of my translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope,* which was set in contemporary Beverly Hills rather than its own time, we agreed to update:

What's with this medieval *idée fixe*?

Good lord, Alceste, it's 1666!

with

What's with this neo-medieval line?

Good lord, Alceste, it's now 2009!

*Adaptations* of translations are easier to arrange than adaptations of modern plays in the audience's own language, since translations are already adaptations of the original. But adapting a play in its own language – that is, changing the words of a play to change its meaning and make it more "relevant," or perhaps simply to accommodate an actor who has trouble memorizing or speaking the line correctly, is not only illegal if the play is under copyright, but

generally cheating the playwright – and probably the audience as well. If Tony Kushner's play asks a character to say "Abbreviated fezlike pillboxy attenuated yarmulkite millinarisms," that's what Mr. Kushner wants the audience to hear, and to simplify that language (or let the actor paraphrase it) is to seriously undermine the character that Kushner has written and the play the audience will be seeing.

Mere *cutting* of classic texts, however, since they are now in the public domain, has now become relatively common. Most directors today cut the texts of long classics before putting them into rehearsal. Sometimes, they are required to do so by their producers; at least one Shakespeare festival, for example, mandates a 2,500 line limit to keep their running times shorter than the "three hours between our after-supper and bed-time" that Theseus describes as the appropriate duration of a play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* But exactly *which* words are cut, and which retained in Shakespeare's 4042-line *Hamlet* will have a major impact on the story the play tells and the way it tells it, so just *how* it is cut will prove critical to the play's meaning and dramatic power in production. Hamlet himself advocates cutting a play that the Players are about to present, telling them "It shall to the barber's, with your beard." Still, cutting is increasingly popular today, even with modern plays; the standard "serious Broadway drama" of the fifty years ago was three acts and three hours long; now it's much more like two acts and two hours, and older plays often receive some trimming, though only after having received appropriate permission.

The number of characters – and hence actors – in plays is also subject to cutting, either as part of the producer's or director's desire to have a shorter running time, or to reduce the production costs, or simply to give the play a tighter focus. Theatergoers are now used to eight-character versions of *Othello* and *Winter's Tale*, therefore, with or without actors doubling and

tripling in roles, with narrators often filling in the gaps caused by deleted dialogue. England's Royal Shakespeare Company may have precipitated this movement by touring to over a hundred colleges in America and the U.K. in recent decades an "ACTER" program in which five company actors would create mini-productions of Shakespeare's plays, playing all the roles of the cut-down versions they had prepared of those texts.

Other adaptations (of plays in the public domain, where copyright does not exist or has expired) may indeed *add* text to existing plays. *Timon of Athens* is one of Shakespeare's shorter plays, but the surviving text was almost certainly printed from an unfinished manuscript and most directors (including the author) seek to make or have a dramaturg prepare an adaptation that "finishes" the play by tying up loose ends in the plot, clarifying relationships among the characters, and simplifying the play's strange conclusion. Early conceptualization is of great help in making these decisions as well.

Some directors adapt plays into different works altogether. Engaged to direct Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* for the New York Shakespeare Festival, director Mel Shapiro decided the Bard's early comedy would be better as a musical, so, with playwright John Guare, he revised the text and co-wrote lyrics, and with new music by Galt McDermott their show proved a great success, transferring to Broadway where it won Tony Awards for "Best Musical" and "Best Book." With a completely different slant, director/playwright/theorist Charles Marowitz decided that his production of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* should forcefully emphasize the brutal dehumanizing of Katherine by a male-dominated world, so he eliminated from his production of the play all scenes from the original not pertaining to this theme and added wholly new scenes set in the present day. Re-titled simply *Shrew,* Marowitz's bold adaptation ended with Kate, having been pinned to a table by her father and brutally

sodomized by Petruchio, rising to utter her famous request for wives to place their hands "below your husband's foot" in a ghastly, psychotic stupor. Since Shakespeare's plays are in the public domain, adventurous directors are free to make any adaptations they wish, and many do – although if the audience is not appropriately alerted in advance (as they were by Marowitz's re-titling), there may be trouble at the box office when purists discover they are not seeing what they thought they were paying for.

**Designer and Designer Collaborations**

The collaborative relationships forged among the designers, each with each other, can be crucial to the result, yet these collective processes are often ignored by the director - as well as by many in the design team. This is a mistake. In surveying today's designers about their recent collaborations, nothing came up as frequently as poor organization and communication *within* the design team.

There are some designer-to-designer relationships that are particularly critical. Scenery and lighting have already been mentioned, since the appearance, and particularly the color, of scenery is entirely subject to what light falls on it. Scenery and costumes need special conversations because where there are walls or a cyclorama (as in most proscenium settings), costume colors should clearly "pop out" in contrast to them – unless having them blend in is an intentional part of the production's concept. Sound and lighting design must be in especially close rapport with each other, first because lighting instruments and sound speakers can get in each other's way, and second, because their cues are normally timed to coincide with each other – as well as with the scene shifts and indications of time's passing. "We're collectively focused on the rhythm, the beat, the movement; so, we must work out the beats together," says sound designer Vincent Olivieri about this process, who finds it essential to sit next to the lighting

designer during technical rehearsals so they can build their cues together. Sound coordination with scenic and costume designers is also important, of course, particularly regarding the placement of visible loudspeakers on the set and to body mics in the actor's hair, wig or costume.

In sum, it is chiefly the responsibility of the designers – and overseeing them, the director – to assure the successful "working together" of all those who plan and create the design elements – with each other and with the actors and other artists who come on board in the production stage. Designers should consult freely with each other but not – unless specifically and openly asked by the producers or director to do so – assume a hierarchical authority over each other. The collaboration must be a willing and continual effort of director and designers alike, with their integration with the acting and staging as the goal of the entire production team.

**Actor and Actor Collaborations**

So far, we've been talking about how actors collaborate with directors, who are a step up on the hierarchical scale. But how do they collaborate with other actors who are, technically at least, on the same plane?

Christine Ebersole gives an ideal answer when she writes about co-starring with Mary Louise Wilson in the Broadway production of *Grey Gardens* with words actors should surely pay attention to: "She's so hilariously funny, she's so utterly authentic and honest, there's not a phony bone in her body. It's sort of like the ultimate tennis game; when one lobs a ball they know it's going to come back. There's this tremendous feeling of safety, and feeling that safety on the stage, you can soar." For that's the nature of the *best* stage acting: a full, authentic and open interaction with one's fellow actors that gives them a "tremendous feeling of safety" and allows them to "soar." Such interaction doesn't occur automatically, and it can altogether disappear when actors compete – either for attention or stage time or their interpretation of a

given scene. *Characters* battle with each other onstage all the time – that's what dramatic conflict is all about: characters trying to win different goals and fulfill different intentions. But when the *actors* are trying to upstage or draw attention from each other, their professional rivalry will defeat rather than enhance the human drama in which they are playing.

For collaboration, while it is certainly hard work, should also be fun. Indeed, while this book is titled "working together" for actors it could also be called "playing together." Being thrilled while "playing" a character onstage is a plus for the play and a plus for the player. TV director James Burrows (*Cheers, Frasier)* considered his most successful directorial attribute was simply to "bringing the sense of camaraderie that the actors are capable of transferring - how they are with one another and what they feel about one another - to the screen." Actors flourish when they can make their own playfulness and mutual rapport integral to their performances. It makes them feel safe with each other as actors even when their characters are at each other's throats.

One thing that actors should never do, however, is to coach or critique a fellow actor's performance – either during the rehearsal period or in performance – unless the fellow actor requests it. While there may be an unstated social ranking among the cast - some are veterans and others beginners, some play leading roles and others are walk-ons, some are paid millions and others receive a pittance – *all* actors in a production must be able to look the other actors in the eye and see the *character* they are addressing (e.g., the Earl of Northumberland), not the *actor* who, perhaps, just told them that their performance sucked.

If *asked*, however, actors may help each other out enormously. Here is an example from Robert Cohen's life. When he was in graduate school, he was in the acting company of the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts. It was a great experience as he was acting with

actors that he had seen or would soon be seeing on Broadway – Frank Langella, Rex Robbins, Louis Zorich, and Sheppard Strudwick. At the end of the season, however, the company produced its first-ever musical and he found himself cast in a mid-sized singing role. Trouble was, he was not a singer, and the first rehearsals were a nightmare as he struggled to find my pitches. His efforts to get help from the musical director went nowhere; afraid to make Robert more nervous than he already was, the music director only said, "don't worry, it'll be fine." Finally, Robert approached one of the veteran Broadway music-theatre actors who had been brought in to play one of the leads and was in a quartet with him. Robert put it to the veteran actor directly: "I'm flat, aren't I?" To which, to his everlasting gratitude, the veteran actor simply replied "Yup!" – and worked with Robert until he became a passable singer. It was great actor-to-actor collaboration, and the number received encores each night of their run. So, while one mustn't go around instructing their fellow actors, one can certainly ask them for help!

But most actor-to-actor collaboration has nothing to do with instructing or coaching but simply with doing what one can, *simply with one's acting,* to make the persons on stage with them give the very *best performances* of their lives. This means, from as soon as one can in the early rehearsals right through closing night, to *interact fully, authentically, and powerfully with the actors playing those characters* with whom their character engages. This level of deep, emotional, non-self-serving, mutual engagement between two actors is what makes *both* give great performances. The most important possible level of collaboration is to make their fellow actor think that *they really mean it* when interact with them.

By *really trying* to achieve one's goal (one's objective, intention, task – Stanislavsky's term was *zadacha)* is what makes a passable actor a good one, and *really trying to achieve it by getting under the skin of another actor* can make a good actor a great one. Try to really "get what

you want from the other actor," says playwright David Mamet in his book about acting, and this is the strongest possible way for actors to collaborate with each other to the benefit of all. Just know how to transition back into the real world when one leaves the stage. At that point one must remember that acting is playing. It's Ebersole's "ultimate tennis game."

Actors collaborate in simpler and less intensive ways, of course. One is simply offering to "run lines" outside of rehearsals with other actors. Some won't take up the opportunity – that's of course their choice and one shouldn't challenge it. But just running lines – even after an individual thinks they know them – can prove immensely useful in surprising ways. It can certainly give one a greater confidence in speaking the lines on stage, and that greater confidence can let them improvise one's *behavior* while saying the lines, and burrow deeper into the mind of the character. One's acting will become less self-conscious, more natural and more individually creative. Here's where collaboration with others will, paradoxically, help bring out one's individuality – "the real you." And since it is only "running lines" and not rehearsing the scene, one needn't perform the lines as staged but run them in wildly different improvised situations: while jogging, doing pushups, playing imaginary basketball, or washing dishes, for example. Just don't talk about them: then it will start turning into directing one other. The point of running lines in this sort of manner is to *reach one's fellow actor through one's lines and behavior during the scene,* not by pre-arranging it, doing post-mortems, or stepping outside the scene to make comments on it. In that way one can run lines *as character-to-character* rather than actor-to-actor. Running lines this way will not, as one might think, make the scene stale; it will only let it get deeper into one's being.

**Actor and Designer Collaborations**

In the professional American theatre, actors rarely participate in design meetings and designers rarely spend much time in rehearsals, at least until tech. But this should not be construed as an ideal situation. This approach is too often the result of limitations of resources: time, money, or the challenge of getting individuals into the same space while designers are working on multiple overlapping projects. European theatre companies have often developed stunning productions with intensive co-participation from actors, designers, technicians and directors throughout the planning and rehearsing stages. Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble provided splendid examples in the immediate post-World War II period, and Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil does so in the present day. Indeed, Mnouchkine's *Les Éphémères,* which dazzled American reviewers and audiences in its 2009 New York appearance, was in large measure designed by its actors, who collected and contributed from their own homes most of the furniture and props that dominated the various "chariots" on which the play was performed. Actors also served as the chariot's "horses" that wheeled them on and off the stage, and as silent choruses responding to the dramatic actions being performed amongst them. Many American ensemble companies, as those mentioned in the first section of this book, also employ broadly collaborative actor-designer-director-stagehand relationships in which Brecht and Mnouchkine have pioneered.

But even in the conventional single-play production model, actors and designers may collaborate in a variety of ways. Nowhere is this more the case than with sound and costume designers, since sound design must be integrated with the actors' voices, often augmenting or enhancing them, while the costumes must be donned, doffed, and worn by them. Sound designer Vincent Olivieri is an exceptionally collaborative theatre artist who seeks assignments where he

can attend virtually all the rehearsals, designing, timing, and integrating his sound cues in concert with the actors as soon as the play gets on its feet in the rehearsal hall. He also likes to bring the actors into his sound studio to experiment with a variety of possibilities that either they or he have come up with. By the time the production opens, Olivieri has created an exquisitely modulated design that has been refined many times over, usually with stunning results. Although Olivieri is admittedly one of the few sound designers who works this way, but directors who have worked with him, and Robert Cohen is one, find the integration achieved by this method astounding. And multiple Tony-winning costume designer William Ivey Long points out that "the costume designer is in fact the one person – after the director and choreographer – who deals with the actual corporeal body of the performer." Long explains his process with performers as developing a mutual confidence: "I try to develop a trust and a bond of support between myself and the actor. I ask how the rehearsals are going, what specifics in movement and action the actor requires – 'How high do you lift your arms?'… [so] to stay connected with what is going on in the process of making the play come alive." Veteran costume designer Holy Durban emails cast members selected renderings of their costumes after they've been approved – yet before rehearsals begin – so the actors can begin to sense what is in store for them and pose questions and/or provide feedback to Ms. Durbin ahead of time. Scenery and lighting designers will also find that circulating with the cast, asking questions and sensing their reactions to the objects and lighting that surround them as the show nears its technical rehearsals, can pay great dividends. Are the door handles easy to grasp while the actor carries the required props? Do the windows swing widely enough so that the actors can see through them what they need to? How safe do they feel on the set? Does the grand staircase need a railing? No matter how much better the stairway might look without one, if the actress wearing high heels and a long gown grimaces

on her way down, her "grand descent" won't look as wonderful as either the designer or director had hoped; it is far better to discover this in the rehearsal period – when a railing can be added or the high heels replaced – than at the final dress rehearsal when it may be too late to make sufficient adjustments.

And it is a well-known adage that "the lighting designer is the actor's best friend." Lighting designer Lonnie Alcaraz gives classes to actors on "how to find your light on stage," and actors who find time to chat with him during tech rehearsal breaks may get hints at which moments a slight turn of their heads or a half-step forward may pump up the lumens (and hence luminosity) that brightens their faces during the climax of their big speech.

Naturally, all such collaborations between designer and actor should be done with at least the implicit blessing of the director, who oversees all aspects of the production and should not be blind-sided by staging changes that deliberately subvert the existing staging – but directors who encourage their casts and designers to speak freely with each other will rarely encounter serious problems by doing so. If, however, a designer and actor collectively wish to propose a change in a design – say in a costume or a prop – they should be free, outside of rehearsal hours, to ask the director to consider it.

**Balancing Art and Schedule**

First, the director should be comfortable in wearing the mantle of artistic leadership. Hired (generally) before the actors and almost always involved in casting them, the director enters the rehearsal hall with an assumption of authority. If this assumption is squandered, the production may be in trouble. "Stage fright" is not only something that occurs on the stage: it is present in the rehearsal hall, and the excitement of the cast at the first rehearsal has elements of

terror as well. Collaborators want someone at the helm from the get-go, and the director must fill that role with apparent (if not actual) confidence.

Second, the director is the person in the production who (with the stage manager) must always be cognizant of the "ticking clock" – the amount of rehearsal time before the play's opening. For during rehearsals, every discussion initiated, question posed, compliment offered, complaint registered, coffee or toilet break taken, and "let's talk this over" proposed will represent exactly those minutes that will be lost forever – since unlike football games, the rehearsal clock doesn't stop when someone goes out of bounds.

So, in rehearsals the director must assume final responsibility for both artistic leadership and time management – which, however, are often in direct conflict. Artistic leadership inevitably involves reflection, questioning, nurturing, and thoughtful discussion at certain times, but such "times" are also what the director is charged not to waste. Nor does the stage manager's monitoring of the schedule, or the producer's occasional monitoring of rehearsals relieve the director of making the key decisions as to when to cut off the discussions and get back to "work."

But of course, everything that happens in the hall is "work," and each director must create their directorial style, one that will maintain sensitive artistic leadership and vigilant stopwatch efficiency in balance.

**The Logical Order to the Theatre**

Theatre makers execute many of their tasks in a precise order of progression: For example, the lighting crew cannot focus the lights until the scenery is in place, but the scenic crew cannot install the scenery until the lighting instruments have been hung. Similarly, the actors can't rehearse on stage while the scenery is being installed, or when the lights are being

hung, or while the audio technicians are establishing sound levels, or while the painted floor is drying. Multiply these examples with the dozens of units and scores of individuals that must have access to stage time, actor time, director time and anybody else's time, and one can understand why management and precise scheduling are profoundly crucial to this "creative art" we call theatre.

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