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## Directing Stop Kiss by Diana Son within a Nontraditional Training Model

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DIRECTING STOP KISS BY DIANA SON WITHIN A  
NONTRADITIONAL TRAINING MODEL

by

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B.A. Florida State University, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Theatre Department  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Major Professor: Julia Listengarten

## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the generally held view that the best way for a stage actor to give a strong theatrical performance is through a traditional training model, I hoped to develop a way for inexperienced actors to perform beyond expectation within the context of one production through a system of mentorship, expectation-setting, and tapping into young peoples' natural desire to identify with people and characters. I directed a production of *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son with a blend of experienced and inexperienced actors to see if I could make this work, with mixed results. This thesis is a reflection on the process of directing *Stop Kiss* that was filled with multiple discoveries and challenges.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Sean Flowers, for believing in me and standing by me through every success, every failure, and everything in-between.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to give thanks beyond measure to my mentor, Dr. Julia Listengarten. To say that I couldn't have done this without her is a vast understatement. She supports me and more importantly, she challenges me, as she does all of her students. We are lucky to have her.

Many thanks to Earl Weaver and Vandy Wood for their guidance, inspiration, and patience.

Infinite gratitude to my mom, Danielle, for a lifetime of support and love. She has been by my side through it all and she was my first ever theater teacher. Je t'aime Maman.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What defines a “good” theatrical performance? How can an actor with little training and experience pursue a strong performance? How can I, as a director, guide young performers without training and experience to create engaging work?

My interest in these questions began in 2005 when, desperate for any type of work in theater, I decided to follow in my mother's footsteps and apply for a position teaching high school drama classes. I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into, but thought the job would be exciting and rewarding. My undergraduate degree is in Theatre Arts; I do not hold a degree of any sort in education, but was offered the position.

I was initially assigned to teach two classes of Acting 1 and one of Musical Theater. Each class period was an hour and a half long, and because the periods were so lengthy, it was suggested to me early on that I direct a musical during my Musical Theater class. My experience with high school theater since being in high school myself was minimal, but I had seen enough to know that high school productions, outside of those produced at arts magnet schools, usually weren't very specific or engaging. A colleague in the arts department at my school even told me something to the effect of “don't expect too much; they're just kids.”

Even though I had only been working with my students for a couple of weeks at that point, the advice somehow did not ring true to me. I was a little bit at odds with myself. My experience viewing high school theatre told me that my colleague was probably right, but my gut feeling about my students was that they were capable of more.

I made the choice to direct *Into the Woods* by Stephen Sondheim. It had the perfect number of roles for the number of students in my class, and my students and I all agreed that we

loved the show. My students practically begged me to do it. I was warned by several colleagues that the show might be too complex musically and emotionally for my students, not to mention that it was going to be my first directing attempt with high school actors. I decided to go for it *because* of the warning. I thought it would be a challenge, but I believed in myself. I believed *I* could do it.

What happened next was somewhat shocking to me. My students showed me that they were more than capable of taking on the challenge as well. They exceeded every expectation I had. They actually worked harder than most actors I had worked with previously, both professionally as well as at the collegiate level. They were passionate, energetic, eager, and open-minded. What they lacked in experience they made up for in adaptability. They soaked in everything I gave them and applied it to the process of creating the production. The more time that passed in rehearsals, the more I believed in my students and what they were capable of. The more I believed in them, the more they believed in me. This relationship created one of the healthiest working environments I had experienced previously or since.

My opinion on the performance is subjective of course, but I believe, based on my own observations and the reactions of educated audience members, that our production of *Into the Woods* demonstrated high quality work for a non-professional production. The performances were honest and specific. Even though I was there through the process, I was still surprised to see what these young performers were able to bring to the performance. They were so engaging and full-of-life. I loved watching them perform every night and seeing them grow into their roles. I came to believe that if you work with inexperienced actors diligently, they would be capable of creating incredibly strong performances.

Although I only spent one year at that high school, I have had the opportunity to direct untrained actors several times since. Every time I do so, the questions of what young actors are capable of and how to guide them play a large role in every decision I make throughout the rehearsal process. I never limit them by assuming they are only capable of so much because they are inexperienced, but rather let them show me where their current limits are. When we find those limits, I attempt to help push them further and further to new, higher levels of understanding and collaboration in rehearsal and performance.

### Purpose of Study

I have continued to search for best practices of guiding the inexperienced actor. Until now, my attempts at doing so have been informal with varying levels of success and no recorded outcomes. This project serves to continue my quest, but in a more formal sense. I will go into the process with a specific plan based on research, the successes and failures of my previous experiences, and the various observations I have made at the many high school, college, and community theatre productions that I have attended across the years. It is my goal to continue work with a team of artists with varying levels of training and experience to create an even, seamless performance.

I have devised a system of directing which I applied to a production of *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son. I chose this play because it is topical, relatable, and emotional, with roots in realism--all of which are qualities that can be very important for young/untrained actors. The system I tested included: community building and ownership, expectation-setting and mentorship, balancing structure and play, and identity and identify. From where I stand in my evolution as a

director, I believe these four areas are the cornerstones to guiding untrained actors in the process of a production.

### Casting

For my production of *Stop Kiss*, I held an audition at the University of Central Florida. I invited young adults from high schools as well as college students from acting for non-majors classes, B.A. programs, and B.F.A programs to audition. It was my goal to create a cast of actors with varying levels of experience and training. For the purposes of this study, I did not cast professional actors alongside my non-professional actors, though I hope to one day experiment with that process as well.

### Expectations of Study

It was my goal to finish this study with a framework that I can use in the future when directing untrained actors. I expected to have clearly identifiable successes and failures. It was also my goal to be able to understand why certain approaches do or do not work. I expect these outcomes will create clear pathways of application for future directing projects.

I also expected to run into a great number of challenges throughout the process. I understand that every production is as unique as every actor. There is no way for me to be able to draw fool-proof conclusions. I also understand there is no definite measure of what is “good” and what is “bad.”

Above all, through the application of this directing process, I expect to demonstrate that young/inexperienced/untrained actors are capable of giving strong performances under strong

direction that is tailored to their needs. It is my goal that the audience will not see a wide gap between the trained and untrained actors, but instead will experience a strong ensemble in an even performance.

## CHAPTER TWO: COMMUNITY-BUILDING AND OWNERSHIP

“The key to successful collaboration is finding a vision all can believe in, respecting that each has something of value to contribute, and creating an atmosphere of trust where everyone involved is willing to take risks and share the give and take as you collectively seek to bring the play to life in the most affecting way.” -John Ahart, The Director’s Eye

As I entered the process of directing *Stop Kiss*, I knew from my past experience directing young and inexperienced actors that building a strong sense of community within the cast and crew would be absolutely critical to our success. In my professional and collegiate-level work, community-building exercises and a family-minded outset were looked down upon, overlooked entirely, or relegated to the first or second rehearsal as ice breaker activities. In most of the texts I have read on directing, this work is not addressed in more than a sentence or two. The sense of belonging and ownership that can be created with this type of work, however, has been noted as being crucial to the success of scholastic theatre (Lazarus 79). Given that I planned to work with actors of varying ages and experience-levels, what techniques could I use to effectively create a strong bond amongst the cast members in order to improve the quality of our rehearsals and performances that would ultimately appeal to all ages and levels of experience?

Although the type of community-building exercises frequently targeted at younger performers are often not practiced in the collegiate and professional worlds, a strong sense of community can also be built within a professional cast; the building process is simply different. Relationships in professional theatre are primarily created through work and collaboration in the rehearsal room as well as through socializing outside of rehearsal, rather than exercises implemented during the rehearsal process that are specifically designed to create community.

A true collaboration involves a great deal of risk-taking and a willingness to try new

things. This type of work can create strong bonds over the course of a rehearsal period. However, high levels of risk-taking and collaboration are often overlooked or avoided in theatre for inexperienced participants. Community-building activities and trust exercises are the substitute. How could I combine these two different ways of building community in order to facilitate successful work?

The necessary ingredient across the board, in order to build a sense of community, is trust. Trust needs to be built early on and maintained. Harold Clurman, in his book On Directing, calls it “a kind of marriage... This becomes increasingly vital in the subsequent stages of rehearsal” (96). For an inexperienced actor, the simple act of being in a play is a huge leap of faith in itself. Throw in a few trust exercises and you are on your way. The average adolescent is longing to belong and can easily buy into these techniques (Lazarus 79). Thus, a community is born. For more experienced actors, as mentioned above, the community-building process is developed in a different way. For instance, the typical high school production does not involve the same type of risk-taking and collaboration that a play produced in a university setting requires.

One of my main questions going into this process was: why not? It is true that the inexperienced actor does not possess the vocabulary nor the training to easily jump into the same rehearsal space as an experienced actor does. I propose, however, that younger actors will rise to the occasion when given the right tools and freedom to experiment. Joan Lazarus, an expert in the field of educational theatre, says in her book Signs of Change, “Collaboration, co-ownership, risk-taking, and experimentation are hallmarks of best practice theatre-making with middle and high school students just as they have been in the professional practice of directors” (29).

I decided I would combine community-building aspects of both scholastic and professional theatre. My goal in doing this was to create a sense of ownership of our production of *Stop Kiss* within the artistic team, as Joan Lazarus recommends. When a cast feels ownership over their production, they feel responsible to it and will work harder for it. That harder work, of course, yields a stronger and more satisfying process and result for all involved. So one of my main challenges going into the process of directing *Stop Kiss* was: how do I create a sense of community and ownership within my cast, given that their levels of experience will vary greatly? Also, how much will the differences in experience and expectations prevent a commune? How will we overcome that, or even better, use the variation to our advantage?

### Pre-Production Planning

Going into the process of directing *Stop Kiss*, I decided I would use a lot of different techniques to create trust and community within my artistic team. I made it a high-priority throughout the rehearsal process. I also decided that some of the techniques I used would need to be process-based. By that I mean that the exercises would serve to build trust and community, but would also directly serve the play. Some community-building techniques/exercises I decided upon ahead of time are outlined below.

### Highs and Lows

Every day at the beginning of rehearsal, each person called (including actors, understudies, stage management, the directing team, and designers) would tell the group the best and worst part of their day so far. Everyone would be encouraged to be candid and brief, but

would not be forced to divulge information they felt uncomfortable sharing.

### Date Nights

Actors whose characters had close relationships in the play would spend time together in similar situations outside of rehearsals.

### Snack Duty

We generally rehearsed for 5 hours at a time so a lengthier mid-rehearsal break was necessary. Each person in the cast and crew was assigned one or two days on which they were to bring a snack which could be shared with everyone at rehearsal that day. During that break of 15-20 minutes, everyone was supposed to spend time together outside of the rehearsal room.

### Original Exercises

I would work to create at least two original exercises based on the situations occurring in the play that would bring the actors closer together while also shedding light on the play's circumstances.

In addition to the above set of activities, I also decided to solve a major problem of producing the play by creating a highly creative and collaborative arena for the actors to play within. The issue we needed to tackle was that of scene transitions. There are 23 scenes in the play, and each scene jumps either backward or forward in time significantly. In addition to the time jump, almost every scene change also changes location. On top of the challenge of changing time and space 22 times, every scene involves the main character, Callie. I also knew that we

would be working in a small space on an extremely limited budget.

In order to both solve these issues while creating a strong sense of ownership through collaboration, I decided we would reserve a lengthy amount of rehearsal time to create the scene transitions together. I planned to first collaborate with the designers to come up with creative and artistically justified ways of making the transitions be able to happen in terms of logistics of the set, costumes, and lighting. I would then work with my assistant director to come up with some basic ideas for each transition based on what was happening thematically within the play, as well as what logistically needed to take place. Since I was the sound designer for this production, I would then begin to create rough sound designs for each transition. Finally, I would take the designs, sound clips, and basic ideas to the rehearsals and share what we had created with the actors. We would then design the movement of the transitions as a group, everyone having equal room to share ideas.

I hoped the actors would use creative movement to express their character's journey as they transitioned from one state of mind to the next. The idea was that these transitions would be fully visible to the audience and would not solely serve as practical moves but would give the actors and audience the chance to delve even deeper into the world of the play by giving the actors the chance to create and share new moments. I knew this would be a big challenge and a chance to collaborate and hoped that it would yield not only interesting results for the audience to watch, but also the sense of community and ownership that I was looking for.

I did have some questions and concerns about these plans going into the rehearsal process. Would my more experienced actors find such activities as “highs and lows” and “snack duty” to be too juvenile? If so, would their opinions negatively affect the rehearsal process?

Would I be able to get the actors to spend quality time together outside of rehearsal and would it have any effect on the process, considering I would not be there to guide them? What would my original exercises be and would they prove effective? If they turned out to be ineffective, how greatly would that negatively impact the rehearsal process? The transitions felt like a lot to take on considering I was already taking on so many challenges. Could I get everyone on board? How could I get them excited to collaborate and create with me? Would the differences in experience hinder this process? If so, how much? Could we orchestrate 22 creative transitions or was this going to turn into a complete disaster?

My expectations for these plans were high. I hoped we could find a balance between experience versus inexperience and work versus play that would create positive results. My main goal was to create community and ownership through trust and collaboration that would positively affect the process, and therefore the product.

### Casting Results

After two days of auditions, my assistant director and I carved out a cast list that involved a wide range in terms of experience-levels. The actor with the least experience had taken one acting class but had never before been in a play. The actor with the most experience was in a B.F.A. Acting program with an impressive resume. Of the five actors and three understudies we cast, two actors had never been in a play before, 3 had worked on a few plays in high school/college, and 2 had worked on many plays, including collegiate and professional productions.

### Community-Building Exercises In Practice

Most of what I set out to do in terms of creating a close-knit cast who felt a great deal of ownership over their production proved to be quite successful. There was a small amount of resistance in the first day or two over the activities that might be perceived as being juvenile, i.e., “highs and lows” and “snack duty.” I found after a couple of days, however, everyone not only participated fully in these activities but seemed to be excited by them. By the end of the rehearsal process, snack time was a fun and sometimes raucous time period when everyone let off steam, laughed, and often shared intimate details about their lives. I was surprised to find that this break time, enjoyed with food, turned out to be the single most unifying activity our cast participated in.

The least effective activity that I planned turned out to be the date nights. I asked several sets of actors to meet outside of rehearsal over the course of the production. I felt that putting them out into the real world together would make their relationship in rehearsal more strongly connected. The biggest struggle I had was actually getting them to follow through on meeting. It took more than one try for each pair, and seemed to be more frustrating to them than anything. They reported enjoying their time together, and I did see relationships grow. The strain on their time, however, created stress that was ultimately detrimental to the process. We rehearsed 18-20 hours a week, they often were given things to think about/look up when they went home, and had lines to learn as well. All of this on top of their school and/or work schedules proved to be a bit too much to ask of them. In the future, I would not require so much extra commitment outside of the rehearsal room unless we were rehearsing fewer hours a week or if the cast was not so heavily involved in other activities.

As for the exercises I wanted to create myself, I did end up coming up with two in collaboration with my assistant director. It was important for these exercises to serve the process of creating the world of *Stop Kiss*. In the play, two women meet by chance in New York City. One is a native and the other is new to town. Over time, we watch the two women fall in love and struggle to come to terms with their feeling.

My assistant director and I attempted to create an ongoing exercise in which the two lead female actors would play a game together several times a week. This game would attempt to re-create some of the psychological struggle their characters go through in the journey of the play. The game would need to be hard to beat so that we could play it many times. In fact, we hoped the game would be nearly unbeatable in order to help mimic some of the frustration felt by the characters in the play. We thought if the actors could feel that frustration in an abstract way in rehearsal, they would be able to recall that feeling more keenly in performance. We also thought that going through this struggle together, again in an abstract way, would create a stronger bond between the two actors.

The game we created involved the two actors starting at opposite corners of the room, as far from each other as they could get. Obstacles such as chairs, tables, and props were put in the path between them. The goal was for the actors to reach each other within one minute of time. Each actor was given secret instructions regarding the rules they were to follow in navigating the course. The rule they both had to follow was that if either of them touched any of the objects in the room, they both had to start over. We purposely created each actor's rules to contradict one another so that it would be difficult to meet up.

We encountered several difficulties in playing this game. The first one was time. We

were already devoting so much time to other activities that it was difficult to squeeze yet another in. The second became that we couldn't seem to find a way to make the game just hard enough to seem difficult but not impossible. At first the girls beat the game right away. That was frustrating for me instead of for them! When we adjusted the rules, it became overly-difficult. The actors sensed right away that they would never beat this game. I needed them to think they could beat the game if they worked at it, even if it would actually be nearly impossible to beat the game. The last difficulty in making this game effective was creating a sense of urgency. In the play, the urgency is extremely high the entire time. We thought the time limit would create enough urgency, but the stakes were simply not high enough. After several attempts to make this exercise work, we deemed it a failure and decided not to pour any more time or energy into making it work.

The second exercise we created proved to be much more effective. In the play *Stop Kiss*, the two main characters are brutally assaulted by a drunk man while kissing in a park. The scene is never seen onstage. The play deals with the events leading up to and resulting from that central event. I will refer to this unseen event from now on as “unseen event.” We felt it very important for the actors to fully understand unseen event in order for it to carry over into the resulting scenes that the audience does see. I decided we needed to create the unseen event in a way that would be completely safe for everyone involved but would also create a strong emotional reaction that would not only affect the believability and emotional journey for the actors but would create an even stronger bond between them. I also felt it was important to work our way up to creating the unseen event over time and that all of the plans surrounding this remain a secret known only to me and my assistant director. I believed if the actors knew what was going

to happen ahead of time it would give them time to think and plan rather than just feeling and reacting organically in the moment, thus ruining the exercise.

In the unseen event, the character Sarah experiences the majority of the physical attack, while Callie is forced to watch. Callie deals with the emotional consequences of the unseen event in later scenes. Since the actor playing Callie needed to understand the unseen event most keenly, we decided to focus our attention on working with her to start with.

The first day we worked on this exercise was about halfway into the rehearsal process. We started by asking the actor playing Callie to describe the unseen event to us. We then spent just a few minutes talking through it in order to have the series of actions clear and linear in our minds. The next time we worked on this, a few days later, I had Callie slowly and safely walk through the events with an understudy. We worked out the kinks so that the scene ran smoothly in slow motion. A few days later, we added the actor playing Sarah into the mix. She was given very little prep and asked to trust and go along with the exercise. This step in the process seemed very effective. This part of the exercise resulted in an unexpected and productive conversation on why the playwright chose to omit it and why that was a good choice which helped everyone understand the play more on a technical level.

The last day we worked on this exercise was our last day in the rehearsal room right before our final run-through prior to moving to the theatre space for technical rehearsals. We brought in a male actor who played the parts of Peter and the Detective in the play, both of whom are antagonists to the main characters. He had been given instructions that he would be playing the attacker. We went through the scene, still slowly but a little more up-to-speed, going through broad versions of the attack motions with very limited physical contact. It was clear that

the girls understood the unseen event more clearly, but I also sensed that there was still a wall up that we hadn't gotten through.

I decided on impulse to take them outside. We went to a big grassy area with a couple of trees just outside of our rehearsal space. It was dark outside and there weren't any pedestrians around. This was as close as I could get to re-creating that actual environment of the unseen event. This time I could feel all of the actors commit to being vulnerable and living in the moment. The scene was intense for all of us.

In our discussions afterward, I voiced my worry that this activity had been too manipulative, but the actors expressed to me that they felt it aided their understanding of the play in a way that nothing else could have. In the run-throughs that followed, I saw a clear difference in the performances the actors gave. They were distinctly more connected and believable. I ultimately decided that because we had conducted the exercise in a safe, healthy environment and because the result was so effective, the exercise was a success.

### Scene Transitions Work In Practice

The biggest challenge of producing this play with these actors was creating the scene transitions. The designers first created movable set pieces and costumes that would transition easily. My assistant director and I discussed the transitions as we went: what logistically needed to happen and what we felt was happening thematically. We then took all of this to rehearsal to experiment with the cast. I ended up creating sound during rather than prior to the process. We adjusted movement and sound many times as we went through, fine-tuning each transition.

In the beginning, creating these transitions was very difficult. Some of the inexperienced

actors struggled to be creative and experiment while I struggled to find language that would be effective in facilitating creativity and experimentation. I often gave the logistics of what needed to be accomplished in the scene transition, such as: Sarah needs to exit and get on the bench; Callie needs to get from her scene 1 costume to her scene 2 costume; the hospital curtain and bench need to come onstage; we need to shift from a place of awkwardness and potential to a place of shock and grief. The inexperienced actors didn't even know where to start, where the more experienced actors felt unsupported. At first when I added in music, it overwhelmed rather than aided the process.

It took me some time, but I eventually learned that telling them to “play” or to “try something else” didn't mean much to them. While I was figuring that out, I later learned the actors with more experience were on the sidelines encouraging and coaching to those who were struggling. That peer-to-peer mentorship was crucial. I also learned that demonstrating an example of something the actors might try in a transition helped free them by giving them a place to start from without dictating their every move (Lazarus 34). Later on, allowing them to add in vocals also aided the process.

Eventually, we all adjusted and found a place that was highly collaborative and creative. I believe the only way we were able to do this was because while we all did adjust to each other, I never altered my expectation that everyone would contribute and experiment together. I never said to myself: “they're too young to get this so let's give up.”

Through mentorship and expectation-setting (more on both in later chapters), all the actors started to feel more comfortable trying new things and contributing their own ideas. This led to deeper conversation and understanding of the characters in the play. The actors also began

to get excited about the transitions, owning their own movements and developing them more thoroughly as we travelled through the rehearsal process. While in the beginning I got a lot of blank stares when I asked my actors to explore their journey from one scene to another through movement, in the end I found myself fielding more ideas than we could use! The result was 21 scene transitions that included movement of set pieces and props, costume changes, original sound compositions, and character explorations that were artfully crafted through collaboration and experimentation.

### Conclusion

I feel confident in saying that by the opening night of *Stop Kiss*, the cast and crew felt a deep sense of community. Friendships with strong bonds were formed and developed between all of us. I believe the trust our work yielded was visible onstage. Many audience members remarked to me that we had created a very strong ensemble. This leads me to believe that we achieved some success in my goal to create an even performance across all levels of experience.

Ultimately, although we hit snags along the way and all the extra exercises and transition work took a lot of extra time in rehearsal, the results were positive. In the future I would spend a little bit less time on the exercises that were meant strictly for community-building while still keeping it as an integral part of the process. Perhaps choosing one of these activities or alternating activities would be a more effective use of our time. I feel the work we did that served both the play and the community were the most effective overall and will continue to develop the ways in which I incorporate these activities into my rehearsal process.

The scene transitions, because so much work had been put into them and because they

required so much collaboration, ended up being a point of pride for everyone in the cast and crew. The sense of ownership the actors felt over those moments was palpable. Most audience members I talked to remarked that those were some of their favorite moments of the performance. The audience was allowed to take a deeper look into the lives of the characters through movement and sound, and the actors were able to explore their characters in non-conventional ways. The transitions ended up being the part of the process where we most fully realized our goal of creating an even and seamless performance across the whole company, and I believe this directly correlates to the ownership and community built by the experimentation and collaboration it took to create those moments.

I feel we justified the idea that inexperienced actors can find great success in taking risks and collaborating. It took a lot of time and patience to get started, but the process ended up being exciting with results we were all proud of. In the future, I would love to continue highly-collaborative work with everyone I direct, regardless of age and experience.

## CHAPTER THREE: EXPECTATION-SETTING AND MENTORSHIP

I have heard it said far too many times that inexperienced performers are “only capable of so much.” It is my gut feeling that many of these performers are simply meeting the expectations set for them, and that those expectations are low. Although an untrained actor does not have the benefit of vocal, physical, and character development training that a skilled actor has to bring to every acting challenge he or she faces, I believe untrained actors with talent and commitment can grow within the process of a production to create a solid performance. I am of the same mind as Joan Lazarus who says, “Theatre is theatre. It either is compelling, entertaining, meaningful, or it isn’t” (35).

I further believe these untrained performers need directors who will set high expectations of them and then nurture them along the way. Again following the lead of Lazarus, I decided to use a system of mentorship through which the actors with more experience could model the fruits of high expectations for the actors with less experience (34). I challenged myself during *Stop Kiss* to set the bar high for everyone involved through a system of expectation-setting and mentorship.

### Pre-Production Planning

My challenge going into this particular part of the planning process was to figure out exactly what the expectations were going to be and how I would convey them. How could I not only convey them but also consistently follow through, while also effectively nurturing my team? First, I needed to define exactly what my expectations were and why, and from there break

down what I needed to do to ensure my team would be successful.

I realized my expectations were simple and few. I expected we would be professional, perform our jobs to the best of our abilities, and create a final product that would be thoughtful, creative, and enjoyable. I further realized that if I truly held everyone, including myself, to the first and second standard, the third would evolve out of the process. I felt I needed to further specify what it meant to meet these expectations and choose methods in which I would follow through with my team. I defined my expectations as: being on time and prepared to work, contributing and collaborating with an open mind and positive energy, having fun but making sure it is focused on our work, doing the necessary work outside the rehearsal room, pushing ourselves always to do better. I also defined methods of setting expectations during pre-planning, which are defined below.

#### Stage Management Team

I needed stage managers who would be excellent. This seems obvious, but I knew I needed to set the tone of professionalism from the start, and a great stage manager would do just that (Doyle 57).

#### Company Credo

All company rules would be clearly stated and always enforced. (Doyle 79) Barring emergency situations, I had to be completely consistent.

#### First Rehearsal Tone

At the first rehearsal I would set the tone clearly by being highly organized and prepared

for the actors. If the actors felt the rest of the artistic team was meeting high expectations, they would feel right away that they should do the same.

### Constant Reminders

I would remind them every day with what I would say and do that I would expect nothing but the best from all of us.

In addition to the plan outlined above, I wanted to test a system of mentorship within the cast. I wanted to make sure I had at least one actor in our production who had more experience than the rest of the group. Although I did not want to point out this actor as the “mentor,” I hoped this person's rehearsal behavior and work ethic would rub off on the rest of the cast. I felt if I made it obvious that this was what I set out to do, the mentorship would not happen organically and the attempt would be futile. I would, instead, try to choose the right person who would mentor naturally through best practice behaviors. I would be looking for a person who was right not only for one of the major roles in the play, but also for someone who would exemplify the expectations I wanted to set for the artistic team as a whole.

### Expectation-Setting

I started the process of setting the expectations for our production by interviewing several stage managers and finally settling on two who were knowledgeable and capable. Although they were both students, they were well-versed in their craft. They immediately set the positive tone with the design team by creating reports and sending e-mails. From the first moment of the first

rehearsal, the actors knew what level of professionalism was expected of them simply by the way the stage managers conducted themselves. The stage managers continued in a professional and enjoyable manner throughout the process, and I do believe it positively affected the tone of rehearsal every day.

With our stage managers, my assistant director and I created company rules. We agreed there would be a one-time forgiveness policy for each rule. Each rule was straight-forward, and we all agreed it would be enforced diligently by the stage management team. For instance, schedule conflicts had to be submitted to stage management by e-mail at least three days prior to the date of conflict. If anyone broke this rule more than once, they would be replaced by their understudy. Every cast member followed this rule without a problem, which I believe was due to the clarity of expectation and consequence.

Another rule was there were no sandals allowed in the rehearsal room due to safety concerns. Early on, an actor forgot and wore flip-flops to rehearsal. Stage management let her know this was her one and only forgiveness for this rule. The next day, she forgot again. Stage management politely sent her home, telling her she could come back as soon as she was wearing close-toed shoes. I think everyone was a little surprised but also respected that we were expected to follow the rules. The actor returned to rehearsal soon after with sneakers on, and very few rules were broken after that. The stage management team was steadfast in making sure the expectations designated to them were upheld well, and we had a smooth process because of it.

Something I did not particularly think about prior to selecting a stage manager and creating company rules, but turned out to be crucial, was having stage managers who were very proactive about enforcing and adjusting rules as needed. It seems obvious now that this quality

would be something crucial to look for, especially since not all stage managers are particularly gifted in this area. With younger performers, in particular, it was a very useful skill for the stage managers to have. Young people have a way of testing rules, and it was very helpful to have stage managers who were ready to be tested and alter rules when necessary.

For instance, one of our company rules was no one was permitted to have or use a cell phone while rehearsing. Although our team was very good about adhering to the rules for the most part, this rule proved to be particularly difficult for the younger members. The very first day this was causing a distraction, our stage manager took it upon herself to take care of the problem. After asking my permission, she let the actors know that as of the next rehearsal we would be implementing a new company rule. From then on, everyone was to leave their cell phones on her table during rehearsal time. As soon as someone was not needed or we went on break, they were permitted to take their phones again. I was surprised to see the group seemed to agree that this was a good idea. The following rehearsal was much more focused, and the stage manager implemented that rule all the way through until tech rehearsals began. Having a proactive problem-solver made all the difference in maintaining a focused rehearsal environment in which expectations were set and met.

John Ahart, author of the well-known go-to directing guide The Director's Eye, stresses the importance of setting the tone in rehearsal (200). Sending a message to the actors on the first day that says, "I really have it together," through your voice, demeanor, words, and actions will let them know that they should have it together too. (201). Since the directors, stage managers, and designers had been meeting for about two months at that point, I thought it was important for us *all* to convey the message of having it together. I also felt it was important for the actors to

feel excited as of day one. I hoped they would be inspired to get to work right away so their work would match the level of everyone else's.

When the actors came into the rehearsal room for the first time, we made sure everything was perfect. Their scripts and paperwork were all immaculately presented, the designers gave exciting presentations about their designs thus far, the stage managers conveyed their expectations clearly, and my assistant director and I spoke passionately about our vision for the play. The air of excitement throughout was palpable. The tone we set suggested, “we are working hard and having a great time, and we want you to join us.” We lead by example (201). That tone definitely carried through the entire process of *Stop Kiss*.

As suggested by youth theatre pioneer Rex Doyle in his book Staging Youth Theatre: A Practical Guide, we adopted a no-nonsense attitude with the cast that was firm but kind (79). We established consistent patterns of work and did not accept excuses for being unprepared (79). For the most part, every person came in every day ready to work and have a productive and exciting experience.

It helped that I made a genuine and consistent effort to let the team know I appreciated their hard work, expected them to keep working hard, and I was excited to continue to see their hard work pay off. I think it was particularly important for the younger ones to hear me consistently tell them I thought they were doing wonderful work and wanted them to keep pushing themselves. Whenever I saw a little slump in energy, a little pep talk would always bring them back.

There were a couple of times when actors slipped up, of course, but because we created such a tight team and the expectations were so clear, these situations were handled just about as

well as they could have been. For instance, one day an actor came to rehearsal unprepared for the day. He did not know his lines very well and was not completely focused. It must have been particularly difficult for him because every other person at rehearsal that day was very prepared. When we went to break, he approached me. He apologized, told me he was disappointed in himself for letting our team down, and assured me he would not come to rehearsal unprepared again. I believed him to be sincere. I gently told him that I shared in his disappointment and I expected him to do better. He never came to rehearsal unprepared again.

Although having great stage managers, clear rules, and setting the tone from day one were all really helpful, I feel the frequent reminders and encouragement were most effective. I consistently expressed my belief to the group as well as to individual cast members that they were capable of creating something extraordinary, and I expected them to fulfill their capabilities. Looking back, I think that is exactly what they did.

### Mentorship

In every rehearsal room, there are bound to be varying levels of experience. It is important to find a common way of working and communicating that everyone can follow, but also to have some sense of leadership within the cast (Ahart 194). Ahart calls them the “veterans” of your cast, those on whom you can rely to help you lead the journey (195). In this case, I began the project deliberately looking for someone to do just that.

As we auditioned actors for *Stop Kiss*, it became clear that the actor who would be the acting mentor for this process would be the actor we cast in the role of Callie. She was more experienced than everyone else we were considering, and a little older than most of them as well.

It seemed to me that she would excel as a strong mentor because she was intelligent, kind, and driven. During her callback, we called her into the room to discuss mentoring briefly with her. I simply told her I was looking for someone to be the leader of the cast by setting a good example in rehearsal and helping out the younger actors when they needed it. I asked her if she would be up for the challenge, and she replied enthusiastically that she would.

The actor playing Callie was a wonderful mentor from the start. It was easy to see the other actors respected her right away. They could see she was very talented but also approachable. She had more experience than them but didn't make them feel bad about it. They liked her, and I think some of them admired her as well, and she stayed humble throughout.

She had effective rehearsal habits and etiquette that helped the rehearsal process run smoothly and productively. For example, she always wrote down the notes given to her at the end of rehearsal, made notations in her script when we worked scenes, and approached me after rehearsal to discuss unresolved questions right away. I noticed after a couple of days that the other actors began following her practices. The first day the actors were supposed to be off-book for a portion of the play, she was the only one who was 100% prepared. I could see everyone taking notice of her preparation and also noticing how her level of preparation affected the speed and efficacy of our rehearsal. From then on, everyone else followed her example.

This mentoring by example extended to attitude as well. She was a go-getter in terms of risk-taking and collaboration. When other members of the cast began to get frustrated, I would see them becoming encouraged by working with her. She set a bar for excellence, and they wanted to meet it. It was exciting to see the less-experienced actors encouraged by example.

For the most part, that was what I hoped and expected would happen. What I didn't

expect was how much the less-experienced actors would affect the more-experienced actor (and myself) as well. I will admit that *Stop Kiss* can get really heavy, and it can be easy to get too serious. The younger actors were always the first to lighten the mood or break the tension when we really needed it. Or they would come into rehearsal boiling over with energy and laughter, and it was infectious. They helped to make the work less heavy. It was hard to create an even performance with a performer as strong as the actor playing Callie was, but her level of talent and professionalism definitely brought the rest of the cast to a higher level of performance while the energy from the younger ones helped bring the whole production to life. The blend worked out rather well.

### Conclusion

Expectation-setting and mentorship was, to me, the most successful part of this experiment. Although rules were sometimes broken and people did not always meet their potential, the team as a whole not only met but exceeded my expectations. From what I observed, it was because we were unwavering. The rules were clear and unwavering. I was consistently encouraging. They knew what we expected of them; they grew to expect the same of themselves and constantly strove to meet those expectations.

Mentorship was very successful as well. I can see now how the person in the “mentor” role really needs to be someone very capable and also very humble. With ego involved, the mentorship aspect of any production could be disastrous. Luckily, the mentor in our production simply mentored by example and was always open to helping and answering questions without any ulterior motive or desire to feed her ego.

In the future, I will definitely continue to employ the techniques of expectation-setting and mentorship that I utilized during *Stop Kiss*. I will continue to tailor the expectations to each cast depending on age and experience, of course. In the future I also will consider hiring a college-level or professional stage manager for any high school production I am involved with in order to help set and keep the tone of professionalism throughout the process. If I were to do that, I would be able to extend mentorship to inexperienced stage managers as well. I would like to extend a system of mentorship to all aspects of my directing process in the future.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IDENTITY AND IDENTIFY

The last prong in my approach to directing *Stop Kiss* was to harness young peoples' desire to carve out their identities and to identify with other people in order to build truthful performances. Adolescent psychologist Thomas Prester says that adolescents are “driven to find themselves”, and it was my belief going into this project that that drive makes adolescence an ideal time to teach young people to find themselves in a character as a starting point to character development (2). I hoped the actors' ability to relate the characters to themselves would then blossom into an ability to become something other than themselves.

In addition, I hoped to tap into Lazarus' concept of socially responsible theatre-making (58). Choosing material that relates to the lives of the young people we work with helps them be more socially-conscious human beings (77). Helping actors to identify the world of the play with their own world and to transfer what they learn from the play to their own lives is ethical theatre-making (78). From my point of view, helping young actors be more socially-conscious and aware will, in turn, make them better actors. The more aware actors are of their surroundings and in-tune they are with what others are going through, the more they will be able to access truthful feelings and thought processes to apply to their character development.

One of my fears as I approached this aspect of the process of directing *Stop Kiss* was that these young performers might get stuck on “this character is me” and would make their choices thinking, “I would do this” or “I wouldn't do that,” and find it difficult to move beyond themselves once they'd identified with their character. I did feel I would be able to recognize this issue if it were to arise; but how would I solve it? Also, how would I take my actors on the journey from self to other than self? Lastly, how would I use this as a starting point for

characters who might not be easy for a young person to identify with? For instance, in *Stop Kiss* there are two characters (generally played by the same actress) who are older women who do not show much of their personal lives onstage. Was it going to be possible to tackle those characters in this same way? If not, what would I do?

So much of this depended on who was in my cast and what occurred in the first few rehearsals that I realized there wasn't a lot I could do to prepare for this portion of my directing plan. I planned to ask questions such as: What would you do? What would you be thinking in this situation? How would you react? Beyond that, I felt I had to tackle this area on-the-go.

### Identify

As mentioned earlier, I chose to direct *Stop Kiss* for this project because it offered various challenges in terms of staging and complexity, is based in realism, and is relevant to our time. The latter two points were important to me because I felt they would help my actors identify with their characters as well as the play itself. I do not believe young people can only perform in realistic contemporary plays, but for the purposes of this study I wanted to focus on creating believable performances without adding on the challenges of other time periods and genres. Connecting the world of the play to the world of the actors would hopefully create some of the enthusiasm and ownership I was looking to generate to kick start some strong work (Clurman 91).

This is the one area of the process I did not go into with a very specific plan in mind. I knew it was important for the actors to identify, and to work from that place, but I did not have a list of exercises or series of activities I wanted to try. When an actor struggled to understand a

moment in the play, I often helped them work it out by asking them questions to get them to think in a different way about their character. These questions were sometimes meant to guide them to think about how they themselves would react under the given circumstances. I was surprised to find that whether or not they would do the same thing that their character would do, they were better able to understand their character's actions by relating it to their own reactions. For instance, one of the actors could not understand why their character was acting so fearfully of what the other characters in the play would think of her. I asked, “what would you do differently?” The actor responded that she would do whatever she wanted without caring what everyone else thought. I told her I thought I would do whatever I wanted to, but wasn’t sure if I would actually be that brave if it was actually me in the same situation as her character. There was a brief pause while she thought about what she had just said and then she continued by admitting it was easier for her to think that way because she had a lot of love and support from her friends and family while her character did not. She later revealed she had friends in a similar position as her character and realizing that truth made it easier for her to identify with her character’s choices. These may seem like simple realizations, but they were big steps for the actor. These steps opened her up to thinking about her character in new ways. Above all, it was crucial for me to avoid making the connections for the actor, but rather guide her toward making the connection herself (Jory 123).

There were many other examples similar to the aforementioned, but I came to realize the biggest strides we made in rehearsal were not when the actors identified with their characters, but when they identified with the situations and themes of the play. “One of our goals is a shift in students' understanding of themselves, their fellow humans, and their world” (Lazarus 78). I took

that quote to heart and thought of it every day in rehearsal. The more the cast discussed the relevancy of the play, shared stories from their own lives and the lives of friends and family that mirrored the narrative of the play, and researched current events that echoed the events of the play, the more they related to it. The more they felt the story of the play was their story to tell, the better they got at telling it. It became very personal for them; the core of the story became wrapped up into the actors' identities. Ahart points out, and I am quite inclined to agree, that “there is no substitute for honest emotion. It means we have connected. We care about the story we have come to tell” (210). I never felt I was wasting time going back to the “table work” of discussing and connecting to the play. We did this constantly throughout. The process was richer because of it, and the product benefited greatly as well.

As for my concern regarding the actors not knowing when to move past “this is me,” I found my fears to be completely unfounded. Any sense of “I am this character” grew organically into deeper character development. I’m not sure if that would always be the case, however, especially when dealing with younger actors. It is possible for an adolescent actor, wrapped up in the world of the play that is similar to their own, to have some trouble moving past their own experiences (Prester 2). In our case, however, I do feel the majority of the cast members discovered much in their characters to identify with, and that these discoveries positively impacted their performances. However, I also feel they were able to move beyond that level with ease and without much guidance from me.

### Problem Characters

As previously mentioned, there is one performer in *Stop Kiss* who plays two older

women: one of the characters is the woman who witnesses the attack on Sarah and Callie, and the other is a nurse who takes care of Sarah in the hospital. Both characters are very small with only a handful of lines. They do not reveal much about themselves in those lines. How was I going to get a young person to identify with those characters?

I cast a performer with very little performance experience in these roles. She had a willingness to play, an interesting voice, and took notes well. In rehearsal I found her to have a solid work ethic, but not much in common with the characters in order to give her an anchor in reality while playing them. In terms of the nurse character, although the character was about fifteen years older than the performer, she was able to relate with the desire to be a caregiver for another person. She identified herself as that type of person and was able to portray the nurse's few lines believably. Her ability to understand this character also meant the scene transitions involving the nurse were inventive, with clear intentions.

The witness character was much more difficult. It was not easy for us to find a way in which the performer could relate with this character. To begin with, the character only has a handful of lines, and her intentions are very difficult to ascertain with the limited information given to us within the text. In addition, the performer and character were opposite from one another in terms of age, geography, marital status, social sphere, work, economics, attitude, and emotional state. We found their worlds to be little too far apart, so there was nothing for the performer to grasp onto. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of pushing the actor a little too far. I was trying to help her connect, but instead made her overly-aware of her lack of connection to the character. She tried to compensate for that gulf by pushing the performance (Ahart 211). As a result, the character came across as a bit of a caricature.

This was a problem in the process that I did not find a solution for. In a backwards way, this proved my point that young actors will be better able to portray a character if they can identify with the character they are playing. However, directors in scholastic setting do often have to cast actors in roles they are too young to play. Directors make the best choices they can, but casting young actors in older roles has to happen out of necessity. What can we do to make this better? Was it simply miscasting on my part? What could I have done to be a better director for that actor? In the future, I will need to re-examine my approach in this area in order to avoid similar outcomes.

### Conclusion

What I gained from this portion of the process is a further conviction that the best way for me to help young people to develop a character is to start from the micro and work to the macro. As I continue my work with young performers, I will make a point to start by helping the actor find ways in which to identify with their character. Once they are starting to connect in that way, I will help them identify the ways in which their characters are not like themselves. From there I will expand to the world in which the characters live. By not only understanding but finding passion for the context/issues of the play, young performers can bring a greater level of awareness, energy, and authenticity to the roles they play. Through this process, young people create stronger identities as artists which not only enriches the play they are rehearsing, but their future work as well.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Though I am content with the results of this project and have learned a lot that I can apply to future directing pieces, I have come to terms with the fact that nothing can replace inspired casting and the right combination of experience, training, and talent. I definitely consider *Stop Kiss* a success because the actors grew in their work, the audiences enjoyed the show, and we experienced more that was fulfilling and positive than negative along the way. To put it simply, I feel good about the work we did.

My goal of creating an even performance, however, was not realized. The actor who walked into auditions with the most experience, training, and talent was the actor who shined most brightly in performance. I don't think that would be a shock to anyone, but I was hoping to create something more seamless. The most experienced actor gave me what I expected and a little more, but the least experienced in the group grew a great deal. The inexperienced did not meet the experienced fully, but they moved quite far in that direction. Many audience members who knew what I was trying to accomplish told me they were pleasantly surprised by what they saw.

When I began my work with young people in 2005, I was bright-eyed and a little naive. The students I directed in *Into the Woods* inspired me with their open minds, talent, and strong work ethic. That strength of that experience convinced me that every experience could and would be that strong. I thought if I could capture that magic and formalize it a little bit, I could come up with a manual for myself that with tweaks here and there could be used time and again to create experiences for young actors that would be as fulfilling as my experience with *Into the Woods* was.

As I write this, I no longer feel the desire to capture, formalize, and re-create what I felt at the start of this project. Are there techniques and pathways I will use time and again in my directing process? Of course. What I have learned though is to let myself approach each project a little more organically; to let the form and content of the play dictate the form and content of the rehearsal more than a prescribed idea of how I “should” do it. As the process of *Stop Kiss* wore on, I got better at letting go of my preconceived notions of what I was supposed to be doing and let myself be more present and supportive. All of this is not to say I won’t prepare for rehearsal. I believe in thorough preparation, but I also believe I have to live in the room with the actors I am working with and let the process take me where it needs to go.

A lot of time has passed since I began this project. I am no longer in graduate school and no longer seeking to formalize my process, but instead seeking to deepen my tool bag in order to be a more effective director for each unique group of people that I will work with. I used to try to go in with a rigid plan, stick to it, and shape everything to the finest detail right away. At the end of the process is when I would give room for actors to breathe and play. Now I realize that while it is in my nature to always walk in with a plan, I can throw away that plan when I need to, collaborate and explore, and *then* work on shaping what we’ve discovered. In addition, every production is different, as is every cast. What works this time may or may not work next time, and that is completely okay. As long as I continue to add to my tool belt, I can continue to be a supportive and collaborative force in the rehearsal room.

That being said, I would like to continue my work with inexperienced actors. It’s so different than the challenges that come with working with professionals. It’s a lot of extra work on top of the already demanding work of being a director. Seeing young actors grow into

themselves as artists is rewarding and inspiring in a different way than professional work is. Finding that I have the patience and excitement for the process tells me to keep at it in addition to professional directing projects.

At the beginning of this process I posed the question: what defines a “good” theatrical production? That question is completely subjective with no one answer. Every artist would answer differently. If I traveled back in time, would my 2005 production of *Into the Woods* be as “good” as I perceived it to be at the time? Probably not. Naturally, I have learned and grown since then and my tastes and critical eye have changed. That doesn’t really matter though, because I have discovered for myself that “good” means: an exciting process full of discoveries with a thoughtfully crafted and honest result. That is the definition I can measure my work by, and based on my own measurement, we did good work on *Into the Woods*, and we did good work on *Stop Kiss*. Regardless of anyone else’s definition of “good”, that is what matters to me as a director.

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