

DIRECTING NOTES

What is a director?

The role of the director was only properly established in the early 1900s – before that, performers used to devise work amongst themselves. Objectivity is required, so the role of the director came about as someone who could watch the action on stage from outside of the scene and make sure that the story was clear.

Over the years, the role has expanded: it's not only the person responsible for rehearsing all the performers' interaction on stage, but also the person responsible for deciding on and overseeing the concept of the piece. On large scale productions, the director collaborates extensively with set designers, costume designers, lighting designers, sound designers, stage management and technicians to stage a coherent and smoothly run performance.

You're basically deciding how you tell the story.

How to direct?

Being a director is a lot like being a teacher – you harness everyone's energy to focus on the same thing. In directing, that is making sure everyone and everything on stage is playing a role in the same story. Lead your class as confidently as possible and run your ideas past people you trust beforehand if you're unsure.

Firstly, you need to decide how you want to tell the story – your concept. Are you doing a very traditional production? Are you trying something very abstract? Choreographed? Atmospheric? Colourful? Disney/Dr Who/etc themed? Set in a certain period in history? It really doesn't have to be the most original idea, you just need to have a reason why it is an appropriate concept for the piece – and it has to serve the story.

Once you've decided on a concept and your designs, you need to make sure your performers know the story – there are some exercises in the "How to Tell the Story" video for some ideas on how to do this. Any set design will need to be decided on before you start rehearsals as your performers need to know what stage layout they're working with, and they also need to know where the audience will be.

A director works very closely with performers to help them understand their roles and how they interact with other characters. Whether they're playing main parts or are members of a chorus, it's important that performers know all the details about their characters. The text and the music should give you lots of information about the characters.

As a director, you should also have an idea of how you're going to stage the performance – essentially, how bodies will be arranged around the stage! You then need to devise and rehearse the action on stage with the performers so that everyone knows what they're doing, understands why they're doing it, and that the story is clear.

Telling the story

The comparison task in Activity 2 is intended to get the students to understand there are many different ways there are of telling a tale. The director gets to choose where to set story (time and place)– and can be daring or as classic as they like, as long as you tell the story coherently and clearly.

Have you ever wondered why some stories are remade as movies or theatre productions so often? It's because audiences like children, love hearing the same story over and over and told in different. The job of a director and story teller is to present the story in as comfortingly familiar, or unsettlingly different ways as you like as long as the audience are engaged.

Having a choreographed action with the whole group at times - especially with children – is particularly impressive to the audience. There's something very engaging about watching a lot of people doing the same thing in perfect unison and being equally committed to what they're trying to communicate. If you've got a big group and not much time, it's also an easy way of getting quick and effective results! You could have a series of poses for the fashion show that the students rotate through – it will create energy, keep the attention of the audience and contrast well with the solo scenes.

How to stage a scene

This is demonstrating to the children how to arrange things in a space, and how to creatively devise and rehearse those things. If two performers stand close together at the back of the stage it's difficult to make out what they're doing and for the audience to work out what the dynamics are between them. Similarly, if they stand far apart, it's very difficult for them to relate to and communicate with each other. So it's not just the performers' placement in a scene, but also their placement in relation to one another that matters when telling a story. You can work these things out in rehearsal. The audience members must be able to see everything in order for the story to be told, so ensure the action of the scene is clearly in view.

A good way to start staging is for performers to play with the script – if it's a musical or an opera, just speak the text and add music later. You need to have done some work on the characters and the story so that everyone understands who they are and where they're going as this helps prepare the singing.

Start with no rules, no furniture and explore the story by having the performers read the words aloud. Give everyone permission to experiment with different ways of saying their lines – have at least one go where everyone totally over-acts to create something a bit ridiculous as it's surprising what dynamics or ways of performing something you might find between characters that hadn't occurred to you before. Let everyone use as much or as little of the space as possible and let them explore the movement of the piece in terms of their own physicality, as well as their presence in the space in relation to each other. Basically, play with it! As a director, you can feel totally free to let the students devise staging and offer different ideas to help them try out new things on the go.

GOOD LUCK- Opera Australia hopes you enjoy creating your own interpretation of *Cinderella*!