HOW TO READ AND USE STAGE DIRECTIONS

There are two* types of stage directions** that commonly appear in screenplays.

The first is a **slug line,** separated from dialogue, informing the reader of a physical action the author wants performed. These action lines are similar to the description at the beginning of a scene that indicates where the scene takes place and the general disposition of objects and people. In *50/50*, in the first chemotherapy scene, one such line reads "Adam reluctantly eats a macaroon".

 The second type of stage direction appears as a **parenthetical** under the speaker's name and before the speech. This type of direction is usually employed to steer the actor toward playing a particular attitude. In *Sideways* when Jack enters the Sanford Winery tasting room, his first line, "Baked with a butter-lime glaze" is preceded by the parenthetical: (proudly).

Before going any further I must point out that writers are terribly inconsistent in these practices. Different writers will use the formatting described above for different purposes. Often a writer will be inconsistent in their practice within the same screenplay. Be forewarned that there is no absolute uniform practice, and use these guidelines, with your good judgment, to decipher what is going on in each case.

Writers include stage directions in the text for a variety of reasons. Some may do it as part of the process of seeing and hearing the action play out for themselves. They leave superfluous*** stage directions in the text, innocent of any undesirable outcome their inclusion might cause. Others are aggressive in their use of stage directions. They claim the need to spell things out for careless, busy or stupid studio readers and executives. Others may acknowledge their intention is to "actor proof" a script by attempting to steer the performer toward a preconceived line reading.

Directors and actors respond to stage directions in a variety of ways. Some follow them blindly even without comprehension. Certain acting schools – taking the opposite extreme - insist on crossing out all stage directions as a matter of principle. As in most matters, common sense guides us toward a middle course. You will, naturally, take in the stage directions when you read the screenplay. I even recommend your noting the ones you feel are most useful. Now, however, I suggest you leave these directions in your reference script.

Go into rehearsal with pages from which the stage directions have been substantially removed. Here are some of my reasons for this:

Regarding the parentheticals:

1. Your goal is to free your actors from the obligation to produce a "result". The existence of the stage direction presupposes a result.

2. You want your actors to be "in the moment", as unconscious of the line they are about to utter as we are in real life speech. The stage direction on the page forms a visual mediator between the actor and the words, and thus forms a barrier to spontaneous expression.
3. Too many parentheticals are redundant of the intention contained in the line itself. Therefore the existence of the redundancy causes a kind of literal underling of the point. This is a sure path to obvious, clichéd readings and behavior.

Regarding the action slug lines:

1. **Keep only the ones that are integral and necessary to the story.** In the chemotherapy scene Adam must eat a macaroon. The addition of the adverb "reluctantly" to the direction is unnecessary. It is contained in the circumstances and to emphasize the point steers the actor toward indicating.
2. **Wherever possible leave open space for the actors to make their own discoveries.** In the same scene an earlier slug line reads: "Alan smiles as he pops a macaroon into his mouth". I might hold this stage direction back on my reference script, but not bring it into initial rehearsals. While I think both the behavior (smile) and the action of eating himself (implied intention: to get Adam to eat) are good choices, they are not necessary. Leave room for your Alan to find his own way of getting Adam to eat. Actors play choices of their own discovery with more commitment and relish than those that are force fed to them. If the actor doesn't discover this or a better choice, you always have the option to offer the direction later.
3. **Explore the timing of an action.** Just because the script says, "He sits", doesn't mean he must sit in the exact spot between two speeches where the direction appears on the page. Don't even assume that he must in fact sit – unless the sitting position is necessary for action that must occurs later in the scene. Find the timing for yourself through the organic process of trial and error we call rehearsal.
4. **Approach the words "pause" and "beat" with caution.** Writers tend to overuse these directions, and actors tend to overplay them. They usually mark a moment that is worth investigating, but don't surrender your right to use judgment as to how they should be played. To the actor's eye they look like Stop signs…But in real life, be honest, you don't always come to a full stop, do you?

*A third (fortunately) much less common type would be a sentence or group of sentences informing the reader of a character's state of mind, much the way one visits a character's thoughts in a novel. Such stage directions have no place whatsoever in a screenplay. For our purposes we will ignore them.

**A note on the provenance of stage directions is in order. I am discussing those that are placed in the script by the screenwriter. However, we cannot be certain that this is always the case. Screenplays appear on the Internet that represent transcripts of the movie as filmed. In these cases the actions and parenthetical prompts may be a recorded of a given actor's performance, or of one director's staging. In other words, they represent the record of someone's *choices*. In most instances, you and your actors have every right to make choices of your own.

*** Why do I say, "superfluous"? When a character's line is "I don't understand" is it really necessary or helpful to write (confused) before the speech?