

## WHAT IS DIRECTING?

Barnet Kellman

Directors never get the credit we deserve:

We either get more, or less!

And we're seldom appreciated or blamed for the right things.

That's because, let's face it: people are confused about what directing is.

I meet a lot of people who want to direct.

I doubt they are clear about what the director does. *Actually* does.

When I ask why they want to direct, they say they want the power "to realize my artistic vision," or "to have creative control." Power! They think it would be fun to have the power.

Well, directing is fun – when it isn't agony. And directors do have power. They have the power to do good or ill. But the power wielded by real directors comes from different places and in different forms than you might imagine.

The practice of directing is filled with paradox, and the paradox of power is at the heart of directing. It's a good place to begin.

### POWER

I laugh as I write this – I'm picturing my younger self. I remember the kick I got on the set of my first feature when someone handed me a megaphone to give instruction to extras off at some distance. All eyes turned – and not in admiration – at the squawk of my voice across the space.

Or the time in a TV studio when from the "control booth" I pressed the talkback key and my words boomed down like the voice of god to the actors on the stage below. It was not appreciated or effective.

Those were innocent thrills from before I knew that:

a) the megaphone was the tool of the assistant director and the only reason I was handed it was that I wasn't making what I wanted clear enough for the AD to convey my wishes herself, and

b) the “voice of god” was best reserved for simple directions like “have a good lunch everybody!”

Real direction, good direction, is not amplified, or given ex cathedra.

## THE IMAGE OF THE DIRECTOR

We can all be forgiven for having misconceptions. The notion of the director as autocrat or field-general is as old pictures of men wearing jodhpurs, perched atop camera cranes, riding crops in hand, appearing to wield power.

And a cliché image of the director at work persists to this day! You’ve seen shots of directors waving their hands in poetic gesture or pointing out of frame toward a distant vision. These are bogus poses, staged by photographers to create a look of dynamic activity. So are the ones – still around – of directors peering through the camera. Camera operators do that – directors look at TV monitors...or, even better, at actors. But that doesn’t make a good picture.

There’s a picture of me floating around the web. In it I’m listening to an actress. It looks like I’m doing nothing. I certainly don’t look powerful. It’s a shot no publicist would use to advertise my abilities. And yet I know that it shows me directing at my best – wielding power by listening.

The popular image of the director at work is a fiction designed to make work that is largely invisible seem visible and exciting. It gives people a false impression of the job.

What can we learn from watching a director at work? At first, not much.

## WATCHING THE DIRECTOR AT WORK

On a film set the director appears to be expendable. There’s the writer who wrote the script, the producer who assembled the equipment and crew, the designer who created the environment, the cinematographer and mixer are there recording the actors who perform, and an editor is standing ready to assemble the product. Each aspect of production is the responsibility of someone else. These artists could all perform their tasks in the director’s absence. The observer finds it hard to see exactly what the director contributes to the work.

What’s the value of having a director?” “Why”, one could ask, “do directors get the big bucks?” Surely it can’t be just for saying “action,” and “cut!”

What do directors do to deserve so much credit and the rewards that come their way?

It's a fair question, and one that we must try to answer. Without an answer, how can one prepare to direct? What is the job of the director? What is this profession we hope to practice?

Like the guy who mows the grass at the cemetery the director has a lot of people under him. He's a generalist, overseeing the work of many specialists. But a director is more than the supervisor of a workforce. Somehow, through the efforts of the director, there is a value added to the result. There is a creative contribution that is as real as it is difficult to pin down. But we must try.

Let's begin by making an inventory of the components of the job – the various roles the director is called upon to play.

## THE DIRECTOR IS THE STORYTELLER

“The world is made of stories not atoms.”

Muriel Ruckeyser

“Storyteller” is at risk of becoming the most over-used term in the English language. These days everyone is a storyteller. The company that sells you a product, the panhandler who asks you for money, the lawyer who argues your case... And it's true; storytelling is a fundamental human activity. We are all storytellers! But for those of us who work in narrative fiction there's no metaphor involved – we are actual storytellers. Our job is to tell a story.

In the telling of a play or film the director may be the originator of the story. Or, more likely, she may not. That distinction might belong to a journalist, or novelist, or screenwriter, or producer. Whatever the case the fact remains that in the realm “storytelling through performance”, the director is the ultimate teller.

The director tells the story through an act of collaboration.

## THE DIRECTOR IS THE CURATOR

The director begins the storytelling process by choosing her collaborators – selecting artists for their unique abilities to tell the story at hand. Like the curator of a gallery the director has been admiring the work of some of these artists over time. Others he has sought out recently for what they have to offer this particular project. This is a buoyant, optimistic activity. It's like that scene in a caper movie where a motley but excellent

crew of malefactors is assembled to pull off a heist. The director is the mastermind and curator of this talented and hopeful collaborative.

## THE DIRECTOR IS THE LEADER

*The director leads a collaboration of artists in the telling of a story to an audience.*

This collaborative is like an orchestra, with narrative artists playing its various instruments.

Each plays the theme (story) in their own voice and according to their discipline. The director is like the conductor of the orchestra whose job it is to ensure that all the instruments play the same theme, and that the performance produces an emotional response in its audience.

The director blends many voices into one. The individual contributions – the parts – become indistinguishable. That’s when the story takes over. It casts a spell on the audience who receive it as a whole. The director’s task is not to do any one job, but to meld the creative contributions of many artists into that cohesive whole.

Really great direction is invisible. In the best work, the story reaches the audience seamlessly, and with such integrity that the work that went into the telling – the labor of the director and her collaborative – disappears.

## THE POWER TO LEAD

“You must have the courage to lead and the generosity to follow.”

Mary Joan Negro, acting teacher

The power to lead is not contained in the title. People don’t follow you because you are “the director”. The title may oblige them to tolerate you or humor you. If you are relying on the title for authority, tolerance is the most you will get.

Directors who are abided out of deference to the title are perceived as being “in the way”.

Directors earn respect - which is the source of real power - for the roles they play for other artists. These roles guide and enable them to do their work. Here are the roles through which the director leads:

## THE DIRECTOR AS BELIEVER

“Belief is more powerful than knowledge. What you believe you are, you are. Knowledge affects human events, but belief causes them.”

William Ball, director

The director believes in the story. To believe in the story is to believe in the value of the endeavor; it is the belief that in telling the story something of value will be found.

The director communicates that belief and instills it in her collaborators. She is the “believer in chief.” When the belief of others waivers, the director is there to sustain it.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS INVESTIGATOR

“What one man can invent another can discover.”

Sherlock Holmes

The director is a detective leading his team in an investigation of the story, piercing its surface and probing its depths in an effort to uncover its meaning.

“Meaning”, in this context, is not the explanation of a thesis. It refers to the emotional payload of the story - the thing that needs to happen to the central character in order for the story to have “meaning” for the audience. The storytellers must discover this meaning for themselves in order to convey it through performance to an audience.

The director is the principle investigator as well as the arbitrator of the investigations of others, identifying the evidence and assessing its value.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS SELECTOR

“I’m not a director, I’m a selector.”

Mervyn LeRoy, director

The power of the director is really “The Power to Choose.” The director is a decision maker, choosing among the options presented to him. A director on a set may make hundreds of decisions a day.

Director Jason Reitman talks about:

“...the countless...mostly binary decisions, yes or no, this one or that one, the red one or the blue one, faster or slower.....that

together define the tone of a film and determine whether it moves an audience.”

Directing is not a process of giving orders but one of guiding choices and deciding among them. Choice is the director’s creative act.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS TROUBLEMAKER

“I was born a troublemaker, I might as well earn a living at it.”

Bill Mauldin, cartoonist

Directors are troublemakers. They instigate. They initiate and incite action. They make initial choices and follow up on their implications. A director’s job is to inspire, to light a fire under people, to provoke them, to stir the pot, to make trouble. Directors get the ball rolling and keep it rolling.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS NAVIGATOR

“The winds and the waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators.”

Edward Gibbon, historian

The director sets the course for a journey and adjusts it along the way. Storytelling, like sailing, is a meandering process. One doesn’t progress in a straight line to a result. The winds of collaboration like those on the sea are ever changing, and the destination is beyond the horizon. Often the destination is beyond the knowledge of whoever originated the story. Ultimately it is discovered by the journey the collaborators make.

The director charts a course for that journey, tacking and beating in a zigzag fashion toward an unseen shore, watching for markers, making corrections, and looking for a place to land.

Directing is an unfolding process of discovery, of finding the story in the telling of it.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS ACTOR

"You do a lot of acting as a director...You do more acting as a director than you do as an actor. You’re always acting confident even if everything is going south. If the sun’s going down and you have five shots left and you don’t have enough money for this or that, you’re always acting like it’s not a problem. And there’s always a problem.”

Ryan Gosling

Sometimes a director is called upon to act. Not to lie, but to act. He must be able to go beyond his level of belief into action. That's what actors do and sometimes directors, in order to sustain belief in others, must act "as if" – as if he is *sure* when he's only *hopeful*. A director is an optimist. He is the chief optimist on set.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS COMMUNICATOR

"Better to be wrong than vague."

Freeman Dyson, physicist

The director needs to communicate with a variety of artists in order to encourage their best work. To lead a collaborative it is not necessary for the director to be the master of each -or any - of the disciplines she directs. A director's success, however, depends on how well she is able to communicate with the specialists that make up her team.

The director must strive to make her observations and suggestions understood. She must prefer the specific to the general, the simple to the complicated, the short to the long explanation.

The director must cultivate the ability to listen as well as to express. She must become a master communicator.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS CASTER

"The theoretical casting part of movies is the funnest part. You really can imagine so many different versions of a story based on who's embodying it."

Cary Fukunaga

I think of casting as the director's draft of the script. It is the first act of interpreting the story. Who the characters become through casting is critical to the story's meaning. In casting the director's voice may not be the only one, or even the most powerful, but her role is determinative. She must approve the casting or decline to direct. Once I have participated in the casting of an actor it becomes my job to do whatever is necessary to help that actor give the very best performance she or he has to give.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS MIDWIFE

The director is the midwife of performance. Her role varies with each actor and with every “delivery”. Sometimes is a hands-on struggle, other times she has the wisdom to step back, gently encourage, and be there to “catch the baby.” Knowing when to act and when to stand back is as important as know what to do. Sometimes actors ask for guidance – sometimes they need guidance but don’t know it. Sometimes an actor needs to be left alone. A director must be sensitive to an actors needs and be shrewd in serving them. It is the director’s responsible to interact with the actor in a productive way.

If I see a good performance I credit the director as well as the actor. If I see a bad performance I blame the director. This may seem harsh, but it reflects the pride I take and seriousness I place on the director’s opportunity to nurture performance.

The director has the chance to influence an actor’s performance for good or ill. The right to talk to actors while they work is one reserved solely to the director. It is a great privilege, a sublime opportunity and a weighty responsibility.

The director-actor process is hard to observe. It’s akin to horse whispering. It takes place in private encounters over long periods of time. Some of it is verbal some isn’t. Like “horse whispering” sometimes it involves a nudge or a pat...sometimes a carrot or even the appearance a stick.

The fact that this is an intangible and uncertain process makes it frightening to new directors, and even many successful professionals. They shrink from the encounter and go to lengths to avoid it. Director John Badham focused on this phenomenon in a book entitled *I’ll Be In My Trailer*. He went so far as to list all the places directors go to duck an actor with a question. He was, of course, not endorsing the behavior but acknowledging that it is widespread.

For me, directing actors is the marrow – the juiciest most delicious part of the job. It’s the place where I really earn my pay.

## THE DIRECTOR AS REALIZER

The director’s job is to *realize* the story. There no word for this in English but there should be. *Réalisateur* is the French word for “director” and to my mind it gives a much better description of what a director does.

The director realizes the story – he makes it *happen*. The fact that this “happening” is intangible is what makes it hard to recognize. That’s why it’s so difficult to identify the director’s contribution.

I'm referring to an observable *thing*, a *meaningful occurrence* that *happens* to a character we care about, and therefore happens to the audience. That thing is the payload of the story. And each scene that makes up the story has its own smaller payload to deliver. *Realizing* the scene or story means making that delivery happen.

The script, the writing, lays out a verbal path toward that delivery. The director's job is to make sure it actually happens. The director is the guarantor of the delivery.

For a director to "realize" a scene she must do more than supervise the recording of its speeches and the photographing of its moves. The director's job is to see through the parts to the whole - to see through the process to the accomplished fact. The value-added the director brings to the set is the ability - in the midst of the pressures of production - to discern that the thing has happened, to see that the scene has been realized.

Or the director might insist that it has not yet happened and therefore the company must continue its pursuit. The director must remain free to say, "no matter that all the words were said in perfect order, no matter that the camera move was gorgeous, that there were no boom shadows, no matter that it's getting late ---- we have not yet transcended the mechanics of the scene and arrived at our destination! No event of emotional consequence has happened to the characters... therefore nothing has *happened* to the audience. Therefore, we need to make adjustments and do it again."

I promise to return to this "thing" again in other contexts. For now let's accept that there's this "thing" the director has trained herself to recognize. She has learned how to foster its occurrence. She has developed a stubborn belief in its necessity.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS AUDIENCE

"Don't think about you - think the audience!"

Judd Apatow

The audience is a collaborator in the story transaction. The audience is a partner. For part of the process the audience is silent. The director's job is to speak for the audience when they cannot speak for themselves. The director is the audience's stand-in and surrogate.

The director's job is to experience the story the way an audience does, with an innocent and open heart.

Because what, after all, is the point of telling a story except to move an audience? As Billy Wilder reminds us, “The movie is for them.”

And without an audience how can the tellers know their story is being received?

In life we tell stories all the time. We tell them to friends, and colleagues to our children and partners. We recount not only the facts of the story but also the meaning it has to us.

In recounting a car accident I report, not just the fact that my automobile was rear-ended, but the betrayal I felt when some careless person terrified me, putting my spine at risk by ramming into the back of my car while texting!!!! I want the hurt and outrage I feel to be shared by my listener. If, in the telling, I sense their lack of involvement I automatically adjust my performance. It’s not an exchange of information I am after but an exchange of impact!

I want the listener to share my feeling. And if, after expressing all that, my partner says, “when your vehicle is rear-ended you should file a police report and inform your insurance company,” I will feel the ultimate let down. The facts of my story have been conveyed but it’s meaning – my reason for telling it – has somehow been lost.

In life we get this, and we intuitively adjust our communication with the constant goal of delivering impact to the hearer – our audience.

The standup at a club, the storyteller at a slam, also share the advantage of a live listener. They work *with* an audience and have a natural dual consciousness, tuned not only to what they do and say, but also to how it is being received.

An audience keeps them honest and on track.

Actors in rehearsal or a film crew on set don’t have that advantage. They tell their stories in bits and pieces, in a space filled with equipment, or the opposite, empty and devoid of context. They are subject to time and economic pressure. All manner of creative elements have been brought together at great expense; all except the audience.

The true measure of a director’s contribution is the extent to which he can “be the audience”. The skill to do this, like other precious skills, must be cultivated.

## THE DIRECTOR AS VISIONARY

“If you have a strong vision then you are able to throw it

away for a better one.”

Julie Taymor, director

People who say they want to direct say they want to “put their vision” on view for others to see. But the vision they have already imagined is only the beginning. True vision is seeing through your intentions to what is actually emerging in front of you. The vision most precious to a director is the ability to clearly see what is in front of her and to capitalize on the opportunities it presents. It is to be spontaneous and alive in the moment-to-moment process of telling a story, and to see the picture as it materializes.

The director – along with all the artists in the collaborative - has prepared for production. She has made decisions about the story, and choices intended to enhance its telling. Such planning is absolutely necessary, yet it comes with a danger. The collaborators are invested in their ideas and their planning. It is almost inevitable that they will see in their results what they wish to see, instead of what is there.

The investments we make erode our objectivity. Often we miss seeing what’s in front of us and instead we see our dreams and intentions.

An audience is innocent. It doesn’t know or care about our intentions. It sees and feels what is actually happening. Its only desire is that the narrative be entertaining and moving.

The director must remain acutely objective, seeing and feeling what is actually happening. The director’s job is to have “fresh eyes”... “audience eyes.” His job is to be the audience and demand to be engaged.

#### THE DIRECTOR AS TRUTH-TELLER

“Divorce your story and marry the truth.”

Tony Robbins, author

Storytelling is truth telling. We start with a story and we follow it to the truth. The eyes and the ears of the audience are our greatest guides on that journey. This audience is demanding – it’s hungry for the truth. Knowing, feeling, respecting the audience helps us tell the truth.

Directors need to be both the tellers and the receivers of the story. They must have the arrogance to offer the story and the honesty to reject it when it lies.

The director knows that the only vision worth projecting, worth sharing, is a vision of the truth.

## THE PRACTICE OF DIRECTING

Directing is an unfolding process of discovery. Like detective work, it's a search for the emotional truth of something. The director assembles her collaborators like a search party, inviting them to join her on an exploration to *find* a direction...a pathway through the narrative toward a truth. Scene by scene the company investigates and covers emotional ground. Scene by scene it is up to the director to assess when the goal – the emotional impact on the audience – has been achieved. In this way a director does not so much *give* direction to his collaborators as *point* in directions to investigate, and follows leads, deciding which evidence to pursue.

This is the nature of the director's power. Does it amount to "control"?

In art, as well as life, control is something of an illusion.

Directors don't have control – at least not in a reliable way like a driver steering a car on a paved highway with no traffic on a beautiful day. A director controls his collaborators the way a shepherd drives a flock. It's an unpredictable, roundabout, meandering course at best.

People are the director's medium. Like sheep they are willing to be lead but they are autonomous, unpredictable and, well, let's be honest, also animals. Which is to say, they are human.

Here is how a director "controls":

By believing in a story and communicating its value to his collaborators.

By choosing collaborators well. By enabling them to do the best work they can do. By listening to them, encouraging them to explore, and choosing among the discoveries they make.

By charting a course for exploration. By keeping eyes and ears alert to what the journey reveals. By learning from the journey and being willing to alter course accordingly.

By being an optimist when the hours get long and the going gets tough. Communicating to the company the conviction that there is good to be found around the next corner or just down the road.

By keeping the true goal of the journey foremost in mind – that the prize the company seeks is a gift they give to the audience. By imagining

the reception of that gift the director will know when the journey has arrived at its destination.

That is the practice of the director.

Storyteller, Leader, Believer, Investigator, Selector, Troublemaker, Navigator, Actor, Communicator, Caster, Midwife, Realizer, Visionary, Truth-teller, Audience

These are the skills that a director needs to have to do the job. They are necessary in whichever medium she practices her art. They are as important in drama as in comedy. We will consider each in specific and in detail in the sections that follow.