

← Back to Original Article

A director's work is never done

What exactly is involved in directing? Try 'all of the above,' says Richard Linklater.

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"Directing a movie is a very overrated job, we all know it. You just have to say yes or no. What else do you do? Nothing. 'Maestro, should this be red?' Yes. 'Green?' No. 'More extras?' Yes. 'More lipstick?' No. Yes. No. Yes. No. That's directing."

Thus speaks an acerbic costume designer played by Judi Dench in "Nine," the musical about an addled movie director played by Daniel Day-Lewis. The film, based on the Broadway musical, is about many things: men, women, sex, guilt, life, death. But it's also about the complicated meaning of the two words "Directed by."

We know when a movie's been well directed, right? It's been well directed when it works. When it looks great, sounds great, captures actors at their peak performances, leaves the audience feeling satisfied.

But wait: We liked the story and that dialogue was hilarious -- doesn't that mean the movie was well written? And that actress we love -- she's good in everything. The director didn't design the costumes. She didn't operate the camera for that unbelievably cool tracking shot. She didn't write that lush musical score or invent the sound effects that nearly rattled our teeth out of their gums.

Maybe Dame Judi is on to something -- maybe directors are overrated.

Er, not so fast, wardrobe lady. Yes and no sound easy enough, until you say no when you should say yes. Or say yes to the wrong thing. "A director makes a thousand binary decisions a day," says Jason Reitman, who directed "Thank You for Smoking," "Juno" and, most recently, "Up in the Air," starring George Clooney. "Now, let's say I get one of those questions wrong. It wouldn't be a big deal. Even if I got 5% wrong, it'll probably fly by.

"But let's say I got half of it wrong," Reitman says. "What if this was a really intimate scene and it didn't feel intimate because the location seemed too modern? Or the background actors brought too much attention upon themselves? All of a sudden enough questions come up that, for whatever reason, you've stopped believing in the reality of this movie. . . . And all of a sudden the movie is poorly directed.

"Directing is tone," he concludes. "And tone is the hardest thing to explain to someone. It's like how you know you're in love with somebody."

Unseen element

The most important quality of a director might be invisibility. When viewers are transported by a movie, when they've entered a new world, immersed themselves in its milieu and mood and characters, they're in a sort of trance. If at any point the director's presence is felt -- in a too-fancy shot, for example, or a showy piece of editing -- the spell is broken. But if moviegoers emerge rubbing their eyes and asking where they just went -- they've just been taken on a journey led by a good director.

Even before a director gets to the set, she has been spending months in pre-production, hiring costume designers, production designers, a cinematographer and the heads of countless technical departments. She's scouted locations, maybe taken photographs or created storyboards, and held meetings to explain the way she wants to approach the script. She's hired a casting director to hold auditions, approving or nixing every hire. Once filming gets underway, she's the go-to person for every question on the film, from where to lay a troublesome cable to how to get a temperamental actor out of his trailer.

"Directing is the ultimate 'all of the above,'" says Richard Linklater, whose 15th movie, "Me and Orson Welles," opened recently. "You're the head coach, and like a head coach, your job is to create an atmosphere where all your collaborators, every department head, every worker, every actor, the writers if you're working with them, can do their best work around the common goal, which is the best movie possible from this material."

Perhaps the most crucial decision a director makes, at least from the audience's point of view, is casting. How many times have we seen a movie where the lead actor or actress seems to be appearing in an entirely different movie than the one on screen? "I remember Ethan Hawke, when he first met me he said, 'If you're good, I might be good. If you're not, I won't be good,'" Linklater says.

"When I see a bad performance, I never blame the actor. I blame the director. He either mis-cast, and that happens, or he didn't create an atmosphere where he could get the best out of that person." (Casting was so crucial to "Me and Orson Welles," which features an astonishing performance by Christian McKay as the title character, that Linklater says if he hadn't found the right actor, "I would have walked away.")

In preparation

Of those thousand daily decisions the director makes, says writer-director Phil Alden Robinson ("Field of Dreams"), an "amazing" number of them are made months before the filmmaker is ready to make them. First the director embarks on a mission to scout locations, if the movie isn't being shot entirely on a soundstage. Then there's a "tech scout" to suss out how all the non-aesthetic elements of the production will be handled: camera, sound, electrical and the like.

"So the transportation coordinator will ask, 'Where are you going to put the camera?' " Robinson says. " 'You have to tell us now, because we have to figure out where we're going to park the trucks, because we have to submit the permits.' Then you're locked. And everybody now bases all of their plans on what you said two months before you showed up."

The multi-tasking doesn't stop once the production is underway, especially working with actors whose rhythms and quirks can demand Sudoku-like skills on the part of the filmmaker. Reitman notes that his lead actors in "Thank You for Smoking," "Juno" and "Up in the Air" did better depending on which take they were on. "Clooney, take one, you've basically got it," he says. "You've got the best version he's going to give. Whereas Aaron Eckhart is best on takes five and six. Ellen Page is phenomenal on take one, but will add depth with every take.

"Now, let's say you have two actors working with each other," Reitman continues. "If one's a take one-er and one's a take five-er, you want to start shooting with the person who's good on take one, and hope that the person who's best on take five is getting some of their bad takes out of the way while they're off screen."

Director Lynn Shelton found that her particular style of shooting overcame that problem on "Humpday," starring Mark Duplass and Joshua Leonard as heterosexual friends who volunteer to have sex with each other for an art project. Shelton developed an outline of the film with her actors, who then improvised all of their scenes. She and her cinematographer filmed most of the sequences using two cameras and exceptionally long takes (up to half an hour), removing the need for re-takes. "The only problem is that it's very limiting," says Shelton, who shot most of "Humpday" in close-up because the framing had to match but also because the style suited an intimate, character-driven film.

Invariably, you'll hear an actor say that ultimately he or she wants to direct. The reason? Control. Which is ironic, considering the vicissitudes of weather, studio economics and human nature directors are subject to.

"The actor may not want to do it [your] way, or the cameraman may say, 'We can't get that shot, the sun will go behind a cloud,' " says Robinson, who was a screenwriter before making his directorial debut with "In the Mood" in 1987. "The sound man will say, 'I can't use this take because the airport is so close.' The art department may say, 'We don't have enough money to do this.' . . . Part of the job of directing is being able to think fast on your feet, improvise and come up with some other idea that does what you wanted to do in the first place."

Serendipity

Or sometimes it's seizing the happy accident. Robinson recalls one night while shooting "Field of Dreams" on a farm in Iowa, and a low bank of fog was rolling in, "almost like a roof." Ray Liotta, as Shoeless Joe Jackson, was about to deliver an important monologue but hadn't yet run through the scene. "I said to John Lindley, my cinematographer, 'We've got to use this,' " Robinson says. "And John said, 'If you want to shoot it, you've got about two minutes before the fog completely obliterates the lights.' I told Ray he had two minutes. He said, 'Where do I stop to deliver the line?' and I said, 'Wherever you want to.' "

They shot it, Liotta nailed the line, and "we have this magical shot of him running into the corn," Robinson says. "And that fog never happened again that summer."

So, is Dench's costumer correct? Is directing overrated? Most directors -- including all of the ones interviewed for this story -- are quick to share credit with their collaborators, from screenwriters and actors to the technicians and craftsmen whose endless questions help bring their ideas to life. Yes, no. Yes, no.

But when the lights go down, whatever the audience sees or hears on screen was put there, deliberately, by one person. "While we were shooting, just as a joke I'd say, 'You're all here as adjuncts to my vision,' " Linklater says with a laugh, quoting one of Orson Welles' tirades in the film. "People would ask me, 'Do you really think that?' And I'd say, 'I think it, but I would never say it.' "

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