There is No "Right" Way: 14 Things Directors Need to Know about Directing Actors

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For many directors, the thought of "directing actors" can instill panic. Directors who were once cinematographers, say, or who have worked on film sets, might be at ease working with crews or blocking shots but will freeze up when challenged to give notes to actors.

Such performance anxiety is not surprising. Unlike the crew, with whom directors have the whole shoot to develop working relationships, many actors are only on set for a few days. So it's understandable that directors may worry about "getting it right" when it comes to guiding them in their performance.

But the thing is: there is no "right".

For starters, a brief note about these people called actors. Stereotypes about actors abound in the film industry. Yet like all stereotypes, not only are they largely fiction, they often spoil the collaborative waters before a shoot even begins. Here's the shocker: not all actors are the same. Not all actors are extroverts. Not all actors love attention. Not all actors are divas. Sure, some do love the spotlight, but there are plenty others who are actually quite shy, modest, or introverted. And the "contrary to popular belief" list could go on. So, in turn,

advice for working with actors that begins with "never do this" or "always do that" just doesn't make sense. And yet, such "rules" are tossed around a lot.

There simply is no one-size-fits-all. Every actor is an individual artist with an individual personality and an individual way of working, and, if you're a new director, knowing that about your colleagues is a great place to begin.

But still, you may think…

"You have to treat the actors as 'special' on set."
While this may have been the case in the days of old Hollywood, being an everyday working actor is one of the more unglamorous professions around. And sure, while horror stories of actors flipping out on set exist (and may even be true), the reality is that many, many actors are amazingly generous human beings who need no more special care than anyone else. They're just artists who want to do great work in your film.
And yes, if your film requires them to go deep, be wildly emotional, simulate death, sex, pain, ecstasy, or other extremes of the human experience, some actors will know that certain specific circumstances will help them get to that place better than others. And they may ask for them. And if they don't, then try asking them what they need. Not because they'll flip out if they don't get it, but because simulating human experience can be a challenging thing to do, and you'd like for them to be able to do it as best they can. You'll be surprised to find that most actors, when asked what they need, will not require an upgrade in their honeywagon nor exotic teas, but something along the lines of a bit more rehearsal with you, or more time on set if the schedule allows.

"But if you give the wrong kind of note you could 'kill' their performance."
Sure, some actors are super sensitive and could go into a temporary headspin with any note… or worse, could freeze up. But chances are you will know this actor when you see him or her in an audition. And even with the most sensitive actor, if you are awake to the human in front of you, you'll sense how to phrase a note, and when to give it. But for the most part, actors are really used to getting feedback. Chances are, whatever you say won't throw them so far off course that they can't do their job.
On the other hand, actors tend to be really, really good at reading people. If they sense you're soft-pedaling just to be nice, they might wonder if they're doing so badly that you need to coddle them from the truth. While still other actors have a kind of "I can take it" persona, and prefer to skip the niceties and hear straight-up notes from a director. So again, it's more about getting to know the personality of

the actor, rather than assuming there's a "right way" or a "wrong way" to give notes.

"Never give an actor a line reading."
Well, yeah, in general, this isn't really viewed as a wise thing to do. Mainly because, chances are, you're not an actor. And even if you give a great line reading, that's not really the point. The point is that you're not playing the character, and the line you hear in your head is precisely that: in your head. The character exists not just in your mind, but is embodied in the actor, and the actor will almost never perform the role exactly as you fantasize about it.
But, all of that said, I have absolutely met actors who love the directness of a line reading. Actors can sense a director laboring through a lengthy description of how they "hear" a certain line in the efforts of avoiding giving a line reading. If they pick up on this, they may just prefer that you deliver it. After all, it may be the clearest, most expedient way of knowing what you're looking for. And in the end, while the actor wants to be happy with their work, they also want you to be happy with their work.

"You have to have conversations about character history and development, right?"
Are you catching on yet? Actors often have wildly different processes from one another. Some stay "in character" throughout the entire shoot, while others dip in and out with hardly any transition time at all. So, while you may have gone into long talks with an actor on your last shoot about the character's childhood, the next actor you work with may not connect to that kind of process at all.
"It's just all about knowing what to say to get the actors to do what you want."
Language like "I want to get Mary to…" is a bit of a red flag, as "getting" an actor to behave a certain way implies an inherent control. Of course, there are some directors who are super-precise and vision-oriented, and by all means, in some instances this makes for great art. But it's actually pretty rare for a director to have every last detail sorted out.
A more egalitarian way of thinking about the actors with whom you work generally pays off down the road. Even language like "my actors" (or for that matter "my editor", "my DP", etc) can be a bit sticky, as they're not "your" actors. They are actors (or editors or DPs) with whom you are currently working, and who will go on to work with other directors next week, or next month. They are actors with whom you will hopefully create extraordinary characters. Directors who tend to think of actors as artists and collaborators end up with actors who

bring way more to the table than the director who just has a "delivery" model in mind.

So with "rules" out the window, here are some things to play with.

Positive feedback works.
This one isn't in quotes, because it's pretty much a fact. And it's not because actors all need compliments. Rather, when we humans know what we're doing well, we can easily do more of it. It's much harder to "not do" something. So, when giving notes, try starting off by pointing out something that is working. Not only does it help the actor to avoid feeling like they're completely off base, but it gives them a strong sense of what energy or tone you are liking, and let's them know to lean in that direction.

Acknowledge what you saw before stating what you want to see next.
Sets get stressy. There's never enough time. But have you noticed how often different people on the crew ask for a few more minutes? All cool, it's just that this usually ends up eating into the time you have to work with the actors. So by the time you're shooting, everyone is zipping along to keep on schedule, and in between takes, the director just dives in on the actors with notes. It's fine, actors understand stress and can work quickly, but taking a moment to first acknowledge what you just saw the actor do before diving into what you want to see them do next will help immensely. You'll be giving the actors valuable information as to how their performance renders to your eye and developing a language together. And you'll find that the note will then land much more clearly.

Get the crew on the same page.
On a busy shoot, a lot of people come up to the actors and give them adjustments or notes, and it's important to do your best to make sure they aren't getting mixed messages. For example: you've told the actor you don't mind if they are loose with the script here and there, but then the script supervisor goes up to give line notes. This could go totally unnoticed by you (as you're super busy!), but it's the exact kind of thing that can make an actor go a little batty… they were working in a way that allowed themselves the freedom to not focus on being "word perfect" only to then be called out for it in between takes. So, just be sure get your team on the same page to minimize crossed signals getting to the actors.

Are you going for consistency or variety in takes?
Sometimes — whether for coverage, camera, or subtle variation in tone or timing — you need the actor to repeat the same performance across takes. Other times you'd like to see him or her play with totally different versions of the take or

scene. Whatever you need is fine, just be clear with the actor about which page you're on. It can be confusing to just hear "going again," as the actor will generally like to know why. That said, if you notice an actor just rocking it out, without this clarity… they're on fire doing their thing, best to just step aside. All is good.

Change tactics.

Sometimes though, an actor is not landing it, and it can be really frustrating for you and for them. And unmitigated frustration can snowball into collective "stuck-ness," which is a real bummer for everyone. Try taking a micro-pause. If you keep getting the same thing from an actor in every take, try changing how you say things, changing what kind of note you're giving the actor. For example, if you've been digging into the psychological space of the character, talking about motivation and intention in between takes, and it's just not landing, try asking the actor to shift what they're doing physically instead. Or ask the actor to play with pacing and speed in the next take. Sometimes asking an actor to focus on a different aspect of their performance, changing internal tactics, will free up how the performance is delivered. It's kind of like stargazing: you can't always see a star when you look right at it, but if you look just to the side, the star is visible in your peripheral vision.

Check in with the actor.

Actors (particularly trained actors) often have a great sense of their work and will know when things are off. If you allow them to air these thoughts, they'll often follow up with a solution, an intuitive take on what they need to do next to get themselves back on track.

Ask the actor if they feel complete before moving on.

Many actors are busy trying to deliver the performance you want during the takes, but this often leaves them with an un-performed take kind of left inside. So if you have the time, ask if the actor if they want to do another take, or if they've got something in there that didn't get onto camera yet, even if it's a completely different version. You may not even like what they do in that take, but the working trust and the creative flow you help engender will serve you in the long run. The actor will feel more free to play, to experiment; and you'll be doing yourself a great service by having an actor bring it all to your film. On the other hand, that last take may be exactly what you were looking for when you kept giving the actor all those notes. The actor just needed to feel free to do whatever he or she wanted in order for the character to really render.

The actor may not work like you do.

This is mostly a reminder to directors who were at one time actors. Sure, having performed (or still performing) you've likely got a lot of information under your

skin about working with actors. Just remember not to assume you know what their process is like just because you've acted or still act.

And not to freak you out, but…

Most actors have worked with lots of different directors, and in turn, are likely to know a lot more about different directors' styles of working than other directors do! And if you're fortunate enough to work with an actor who has worked with some of your director heroes or heroines, pick their brains over dinner break… you may actually be able to learn from them!

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