

**On Stage Directions**  
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Caryl Churchill's play *A Number* has no stage directions. There's something about this that inspires reverence. It bespeaks a kind of late-career Mandarin remove, lines of dialogue delivered like sibylline verses without guide or gloss. "I present you with a riddle," she seems to say. "Figure it out."

Or maybe she just gave up.

So I'm talking to an actor who wants my advice on something and he throws in, by way of parenthesis, "I know you're supposed to ignore stage directions." At which I stop him.

"They tell them to ignore punctuation, too," said a fellow playwright when I told him this story. An actress I asked had a more convoluted explanation, but since it was one of those things that make acting classes seem more like self-actualization seminars, it got by me. It had to do with not letting stage directions interfere with the actor's organic connection to the part.

Playwrights, of course, are famously interfering. They want the actors to say the lines the way they wrote them. They'd rather the director didn't add that very creative bit of staging that's totally going to make the play *land*. Indeed, the cautious director keeps his wilder brainstorm to himself because, when the playwright learns that you're thinking of casting a man in one of the lead female roles, the playwright will be inclined to interfere.

So the idea that stage directions might be viewed as another way for the playwright to interfere is not surprising. And I could have guessed that actors were taught to ignore them by the following bit of dialogue, versions of which I've engaged in more than once:

Actor: How is he feeling when he says this?

Me: Well, I think he might be feeling kind of sad.

Actor: Oh, like it says in the stage direction. "Sadly."

Me: That's right.

Not just actors but directors seem to regard stage directions as the part of a play you don't have to read.

A purist could argue that plays are built of dialogue, and a good playwright shouldn't need stage directions. Stage directions are a crutch, a way of avoiding the responsibility of creating the world of the play in the words of the play. Shakespeare never had to say "sadly."

Shakespeare, though, wrote in blank verse, a form in which the emotions of a line are shaped by its rhythms and its imagery. Just try saying "Gallop apace, ye fiery-footed steeds" without impatience and longing. (Shakespeare was also a member of the company, so when the boy actor said, "Do you think Juliet's feeling kind of impatient right now?" he could say, "Hm. Maybe.")

All sorts of pressures changed the way plays were written, the advent of realism and, with it, realistic dialogue large among them. A line like "Is it raining out?" can be spun for any number of emotions or intentions, and there are many actors who have such an instinctive grasp of character and situation that they'll go directly to the line's emotional heart. And there are many who do not. Hence, "sadly."

At the height of the age of realism, stage directions filled every corner of the play, describing sets, costumes, hair styles, gestures, and fine shades of feeling. Shaw opens *Candida* with pages of description, touring the Morells' neighborhood, detailing the "intolerable monotony of miles and miles of graceless, characterless brick houses, black iron railings, stony pavements, slaty roofs, and respectably ill dressed or disreputably poorly dressed people," zooming in by degrees on the Morrells' street and their "semi-detached villa," until he finally reaches their drawing room, the only part of all this to appear onstage. (He also ends the play with the direction, "They embrace. But they do not know the secret in the poet's heart." Try playing *that*.)

What is Shaw doing, besides taking his customary satisfaction in the sound of his own voice? He seems to be violating the first rule of stage directions which is that they must be stageable. It's an occasional mistake of novice playwrights to put essential information in a stage direction. "She hates him because he raped her mother a long time ago, and now her mother's in an insane asylum," the novice playwright will write, and nowhere in the play will you find an opportunity to bring this to the audience's attention. "It's no good," you want to tell this novice playwright, "to tell us anything in a stage direction that we can't put on stage."

To which the novice playwright might reply, "What about *Candida*?"

Shaw is using his stage direction, at admittedly Shavian length, to do what stage directions are designed to do. They provide information. There's no way of staging Shaw's detailed analysis of the Morells and their geographical and social coordinates, but you could argue that all these details can be used to inform the production, to bring director and actors to a greater understanding of the socioeconomic world of the play and its characters. It's interesting that the same theatrical culture that disdains stage directions is enamored of the dramaturg.

The actress who explained to me why acting teachers teach their students to ignore stage directions also told me that, in preparing to play Emilia in *Othello*, she thought of going not just to Venice but to Cyprus. I wanted to tell her she'd be doing more than Shakespeare ever did, but I let it pass. I understand the desire to expand your understanding of a play through outside research. But the best source of information about a play is the play itself.

Which is not to say that stage directions are as inviolable as dialogue. (We all agree, I hope, that dialogue is inviolable.) Theatre is the most impure of all the arts, and nothing in it, not even a stage direction, is purely one thing or another. I'm aware, for instance, that I often write stage directions for the play on the page, not the play on the stage. Playwrights need to be produced, and in order to get produced you need to capture the imagination of a reader in a position to move your play towards production. Pressed by a director, I'll admit that I don't care whether the actor sits or picks up a glass at that precise moment or whether the actress's dress is

red or blue. I was just trying to give movement and color to the play on the page. But to say that stage directions don't need to be followed to the letter is not the same as saying that they can be ignored. Even "movement and color" directions are information: they tell you how the playwright sees the play. They are part of the conversation that the playwright is having with those who read the play, those who act in it, and those who stage and design it. It's that conversation, of course, that makes the art of theatre so impure.

And as I've gotten older, my ideas about my part in that conversation have changed. I've started to doubt the efficacy of stage directions, either in capturing the imagination of a reader or in communicating to actors and directors. We live in a different theatrical world from Shaw's, and it seems to require a looser, less controlling approach to playwriting. Just as certain pressures led to a superfluity of stage directions, other pressures have led to their decline, and one of these is surely the need for plays to be portable, by which I mean producible in a wide range of venues. Shaw knew that his characters would sit and rise and cross on a massive and detailed set; today's playwright can't write "she sits on a chair" without wondering where the chair will come from and who will strike it at the top of the next scene. This set of conditions can produce stage directions that are both sparser and bolder, a different appeal to the imagination. Playwrights can say, "Figure it out," not in abdication but in faith. "GOD is now on an airplane," read a stage direction in an evening of short plays I helped produce, and the director made it happen, vividly, without a single set piece.

"Figure it out." The words are immensely freeing. It *is* a declaration of faith and also an acknowledgment of limits. In the impure world of the theatre, the play is not yours but the creation of a whole set of imaginations operating together. Your job is to write a play that will stand up to those imaginations and that means leaving room for those imaginations to operate and allowing for the wide range of conditions in which they might operate. This can't help but affect the way that you write not just stage directions, but the play itself, its dialogue, its action, its

structure. More and more I find myself staying my hand, standing back, leaving room for the actors and director, which means taking up less room myself.

It wasn't so long ago that I used to sit through day after day of rehearsals, gnawing my knuckles, taking the director aside for notes, rewriting lines on the fly, trying not to look distressed. It's only lately that I've begun to know the pleasure of never seeing a rehearsal, of seeing the production only as a finished product, past the point when I can do anything about it, when all those imaginations have had their say. Sometimes I don't see the production at all. It's freeing to be able to leave the terrors of the rehearsal room and let the play live without me.

Or, as Shakespeare might put it, "Exit, pursued by a bear."