



My Rules for Play Producers

AN article confined to rules for the guidance of amateur theatrical producers might be thought to have a somewhat restricted appeal, but "The Listener" has often discovered that amateur producers—and amateur players—are by no means a negligible minority in New Zealand, and when the rules have been written (as they are here, and for the first time) by BERNARD SHAW, they make stimulating and entertaining reading for all of us.

contrast is of the greatest importance, and is indispensable for broadcasting.

The play should be read to the company, preferably by the author if he or she is a competent dramatic reader; if not, by the best available substitute. If none is available, no reading is better than a bad one.

To the first rehearsals the producer must come with the stage business thoroughly studied, and every entry, movement, rising and sitting, dis-posal of hat and umbrella, settled ready for instant dictation so that each player will be in the most effective position to deliver his lines and not have to address an intimate speech to a player at the other side of the stage, nor to follow such a player without a line or movement to transfer the attention of the audience accordingly. The exits must be carefully arranged so that the players leave the stage immediately on their last word, and not hold up the play until they have walked to the door. If the producer arrives at the first rehearsal without this blue print, and proceeds to waste the players' time improvising it at their expense, he will never gain their confidence; and they will be perfectly justified in going home after telling him not to call them again until they can devote all the rehearsals to their proper function of acting.

THE PROMPT COPY

TO appreciate the necessity for this laborious planning, one has only to imagine a trial-at-law in a room without bench, bar, or jury box, or a service in a cathedral without altar, choir, or pews: in short, without an appointed place for anybody. This is what the stage is until the producer has made a complete plan, called a prompt copy. Properly such a plan is the business of the author; for stage directions are as integral to a play as spoken dialogue. But the author may be dead. Or in view of the fact that writing dialogue (of *Hamlet*, for instance), is a pleasurable act of creation, whereas deciding whether the Ghost shall enter from the right or the left is pure drudgery, the author may leave the drudgery to the producer. He mostly does.

It is not necessary to use a model stage for this job. All that is necessary is a chessboard with its chessmen, and a boy's box of assorted bricks. With these all scenes and furniture can be indicated and all movements made. Unless this is done, some movements, especially exits, are likely to be forgotten by even the most experienced producer.

The players should be instructed not to study their parts at this stage, and to rehearse, book in hand, without any exercise of memory.

When the movements are thoroughly rehearsed and mastered, the producer

should ask the players whether they are comfortable for them all, and if not, what is wrong.

All being satisfactorily arranged, books are discarded, and rehearsals called "perfect": that is, with the parts memorised. The producer now leaves the stage and sits in the front of the house with an electric torch and a notebook; and from that moment he should watch the stage as a cat watches a mouse, but never utter a word or interrupt a scene during its repetition no matter how completely the play goes to pieces, as it must at first when the players are trying to remember their parts and cues so desperately that they are incapable of acting. Nothing betrays the inexperienced producer more than dismay at this collapse, with outbursts of reproach and attempts to get everything right at every rehearsal. The old hand knows that he must let the players memorise their words before they can act their parts.

At the end of each act, the producer returns to the stage to explain or demonstrate such of his notes as may be judicious at the moment. But no fault should be mentioned or corrected unless and until its constant repetition shows that the player will not correct it in his or her own way as the play is gradually learnt. When all the players are letter-perfect their memorising will be so mechanical that if one of them makes a slip by repeating an early cue later on, the rest will pick it up again and repeat what they have just been through, proving that the memorising phase is over. The producer can now return to the stage and interrupt as often as may be necessary.

SPEECH VARIATION

THE danger is that as the players can now utter their words without thinking they will catch one another's speed and tone, betraying to the audience that they are only gabbling off a pre-arranged list of words, each knowing what the other will say next and fielding their cues like cricketers. The producer must accordingly take care that every speech contrasts as strongly as possible in speed, tone, manner, and pitch with the one which provokes it, as if coming unexpected as a shock, surprise, stimulant, offence, amusement, or what not. It is for the author to make this possible; for in it lies the difference between dramatic dialogue and epic narrative. A play by a great poet, in which every speech is a literary masterpiece, may fail hopelessly on the stage because the splendid speeches are merely strung together without provoking one another, whereas a trumpery farce may win an uproarious success by its retortive backchat.

The final phase of production is that of "dress rehearsal" with costumes, scenery, and make-up all complete as for public performance, instead of everyday dress and a bare stage with the doors marked with a couple of chairs. It is now the producer's turn to be more upset by the change than the actors. Everything seems to have become wrong and incredible. However, the producer soon

learns to be prepared for this, even if he never quite gets over the first shock of it. He is now back on the stage, going through the passages that need finishing, and generally doing what he likes. A bad last rehearsal need not alarm him: in fact he should connive at its failure lest the players should be too confident of success "on the night" and not do their utter best.

TIME-TABLE

THE time needed for the production of a full-length play on this method is roughly a week for the stage movements book in hand, with the producer on the stage; a fortnight for the memorising, with the producer off the stage silent, watching, and taking notes; and a week for the dress, with the producer on the stage again, directing and interrupting *ad lib*.

Rehearsals should be most strictly private. No journalists or lay visitor of any kind should be present. When for some reason it may be necessary to allow strangers to witness a rehearsal, no instruction nor correction should be addressed in their presence to a player; and the consent of every player should be obtained before the permission is granted. To emphasise the fact that what the visitors are witnessing is only a rehearsal, a pre-arranged instruction should be addressed to a stage carpenter, never to a player.

During the memorising phase a muffled passage must never be repeated on the spot, even if the players desire it. The producer's word must be, "No: you will not be able to repeat it on the night; and you must not make a habit of a mistake. Go right on." A producer who says, "We must go over and over this again until we get it right," is not producing: he is schoolmastering, which is the worst thing he can do. Repetitions on the spot do not improve: they deteriorate every time.

Never find fault until you know the remedy; and never discuss a passage with a player: show how the passage should be done as a suggestion, not an order; and exaggerate your demonstration sufficiently to prevent the player giving a mere imitation of it. A performance in which the players are all mimicking the producer, instead of following his suggestions in their own different ways, is a bad performance. Above all, do not, instead of demonstrating a passage, say "This scene is essentially pathetic" (or comic as the case may be). If you do, the player will come to the next rehearsal bathed in tears from the first word to the last, or clowning for all he is worth all the time.

PRODUCER'S NOTES

THE notes taken by the producer as he silently watches the players are a test of his competence. If, for example, he writes "Shew influence of Kierkegaard on Ibsen in this scene," or "The Edipus complex must be very apparent here. Discuss with the Queen," the sooner he

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PLAY producing, like orchestral conducting, became a separate and lucrative profession less than a century ago. The old stage manager who arranged the movements of the players, and called every actor Old Boy and every actress Darling, is extinct. The producer has supplanted him. Yet there is no established method of producing, and no handbook from which a novice can learn the technical side of the job. There is not even a tradition, because producers do not see one another at work as players do, and can learn only by experience at the expense of everyone else employed in the production.

THIS is an attempt to supply a beginners' guide. It is not concerned with production as a fine art; but it covers the mechanical and teachable conditions which are common to all productions, without knowledge of which the novice will waste hours of rehearsal time that should be devoted to acting. All playwrights should study these.

The most desirable producer of a play is the author.

Unfortunately, as playwriting is a solitary occupation which gives no social training, some playwrights are so lacking in the infinite patience, intense vigilance, consideration for others, and imperturbable good manners which producing requires, that their presence at rehearsals is a hindrance instead of a help. None the less, they should know how to write for the stage as playwrights, and not as poets and novelists indulging their imaginations beyond the physical limits of "four boards and a passion."

VOCAL CONTRAST

THE producer, having considered the play, and decided to undertake the job of producing it, has no further concern with its literary merits or its doctrine (if any). In selecting the cast no regard should be given to whether the actors understand the play or not (players are not walking encyclopedias); but their ages and personalities should be suitable, and their voices should not be alike. The four principals should be soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Vocal