

# the dance with the director



Unfortunately, I think that much of the time actors view the director, consciously or unconsciously, as someone who needs to be endured until the show opens, and then, so the thinking goes, the show is really the actors', and they can really relax and enjoy themselves. Don't misunderstand me: I don't fault actors for this attitude. I fault directors. The director has authority, and with that authority comes the opportunity to define the relationship with the actors in such a way that the actors enjoy the interaction, and are nourished and emboldened by it.

William Ball, the legendary founder of the American Conservatory Theater, has this to say in his book *A Sense of Direction*:

*You have known directors to come into rehearsal crying "I want this. I want that. I see it this way. My entire concept...I need so many people on this side. I want you here." This is an amateur at work. He once overheard himself being praised as being a director who "knows what he wants." He uses the rehearsal as an endless opportunity to tell everyone what he wants. He puts the word "I" at the beginning of all his sentences...If he uses the word "I" recklessly and compulsively, the likelihood is that he is untrustworthy.*

And what, according to Ball, does a good director do? He follows Ball's principle of positation, by which:

*we say yes to every creative idea...we say yes because we understand that to do so is the practical way of sending a message to the intuition that every creative idea will be valued, respected, and used. And when the intuition gets that message often enough, it will send us its most perfect and most pure creative ideas. That is why, whether we like it or*

*not, saying yes to everything is the most creative technique an artist can employ.*

I'll let that sink in for a moment. Ball is saying that the skilled director says yes to everything that an actor attempts or proposes, not just the ideas that are congenial to the director's vision or understanding of the script.

A tall order. Directors do have vision and points of view (famously), and being willing to put this aside to promote the actor's flourishing and intuitive expression requires a lot of maturity and patience. It's kind of like good parenting.

Ball claims that the director does not need to prune the bad ideas, because the bad ideas will "fall out of orbit by their own weight." This is probably sometimes true, but it may be a trifle utopian to think that it always works this way. However, Ball's vision of the role of the director sets a benchmark against which directors can be measured, even if absolute conformity to it is unrealistic. The bottom line: a good director is very generous, very patient, and very appreciative of those with whom he collaborates. An actor who finds herself working with a director who does not comport himself with these virtues knows that she is working with someone with some major professional liabilities. I encourage my acting students to read Ball's book, so they will know what a real pro looks and acts like.

Interestingly, the punditry at Harvard Business School is catching on to what William Ball knew long ago:

*An oft-quoted proverb says: "The best leader, the people do not notice. When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"*

*Truly great leaders...recognize how silly it is to believe that a coach or a leader is the key to an organization's success. The best leaders understand that long-term results are*

*created by all of the great people doing the work – not just the one person who has the privilege of being at the top.*

And sadly, most directors harbor this false picture about leadership. I actually think that in this regard we are better off in the US than they are in Europe. Living in Germany, I often heard tales of directors who were notorious for screaming at those who worked for them, and the fact that they behaved in this way was offered almost as a badge of their “realness”. In the US, there is less tolerance for this outright abusiveness, even if the director is still able to put himself first, much of the time.

So, if you are an actor, and you find yourself working with a director who falls short of Ball’s vision for the director, what do you do? Evan Yionoulis, the Obie-award winning director who chaired the Acting Program at the Yale School of Drama for 5 years and who still teaches there, had this to say: “Render to Caesar, that which is Caesar’s, and render to God, that which is God’s.” These words were originally attributed to Jesus Christ, of course, when the Pharisees were attempting to trap him into recommending Jews pay taxes to imperial Rome. For actors, this means: the director is an authority that has to be reckoned with, and you will make your own life very difficult, as well as damage your future employment prospects, if you do not supply him with what he wants.

However.

Having this obligation to please the director does not relieve the actor of her obligation to “God”, so to speak. That is, to her vocation, to her spirit, to her own integrity. The actor must take care that she is appropriately invested in the cares and concerns of the character, that she is engaged in arduously pursuing what the character needs, and that she is doing this moment-to-moment. The truth is that there is almost

never a conflict between giving the director what he is asking for, and doing what the actor needs to do to make sure she is living up to her own high personal standards. The director, in some sense, should be seen as an extension of the writer: the director is continuing to define what it is that the actor must do. The actor must then find the need in herself to do what must be done as the character in the scenes in which she appears, and then she must do it.

The actor must take care to safeguard her own passion for her work, and not to allow anyone to snuff that out. An abusive director who will not mend his ways is a reason to quit a job. It will not often come to this, but an actor facing a truly abusive director should always keep in mind that quitting is an option. Creativity is too precious a gift to allow someone to squash it with contempt and abuse.

Finally, I'll mention that while directing and teaching have much in common, they are not exactly the same endeavor. A director is on a timetable to produce a finished product; a teacher's primary concern is the growth of the actor's command of the practice of acting. Because there is no final product for the teacher, there is more opportunity to challenge people to shed habits and re-examine their most fundamental beliefs about acting and about themselves. You can do very little of this as a director before you run the risk of undermining someone's confidence as they attempt to prepare to appear before the public. Never a good idea.

As an educator, I still regard it as important to express appreciation for my students' efforts, even when they are not the most successful efforts, even as I challenge them to fulfill the role more fully. But the imperative for appreciative expression is not as great as it is for the director, who, without it, will very quickly run aground.

Ball dedicated his book "to the well-being of actors everywhere".

I'll leave you with a video from William Ball's 1976 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. It's plain as day here: the man knew a thing or two about directing. (PS This is only a short snippet, but if you click through to the youtube page you can watch the full scene).

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