

**DIRECTING THE ACTOR by Judith Weston**  
(Reprinted from MovieMaker Magazine)

After having written two books on the subject (“Directing Actors,” and “The Film Director’s Intuition”), totaling together 700 pages, it’s a challenging assignment to condense for a magazine article the most important information and advice on directing the actor for film. I’ve organized the article into three sections (well, three and a half), according to a time line.

First, long term activities, things I think a filmmaker should start doing young, and keep doing for the rest of his or her life, in order to have successful and collaborative relationships with actors, and a long and happy career.

Second, “middle term” activities, that is, what to do as soon as you know you are going ahead with making a movie.

Third, the short term — when you are actually facing the actors on the set, with all the pressures of equipment and crew facing you at the same time. The “half” is rehearsal — a controversial activity that many directors choose to leave out of the mix.

It’s in a summary, lacking the anecdotes and examples I can provide in my books — or the hands-on practical experience I provide in my workshops and consultations. I hope it will be a useful digest and reference for both new and experienced filmmakers.

LONG TERM

Take an acting class, for as long and as often as you can. Meet actors, get to know their particular interests and problems. Learn and understand the actor’s tools: intentions, objectives, facts (situation, given circumstances), subtext images, physical life, obstacle, adjustments, the magic “as if.”

Learn how to tell whether an actor is listening. Practice working with actors, either in a class, or by getting together an informal group of actors and directors, or by directing theater. Start now collecting the ensemble of players (and crew members) you want to collaborate with throughout your career.

The very best way to connect to actors is to be able to connect to characters, as people rather than as plot devices. Learn about life, from observing people and figuring out what makes them tick. Study history, biography, languages, psychology, even science. Read a daily newspaper, watch documentaries.

Ask your friends and acquaintances to tell you the stories of their lives. Spend time around children and nature. Soak up other arts besides film and television: painting, music composition, plays, poetry, novels. Make the effort to get into Shakespeare, because of all writers, Shakespeare understood human behavior with the most clarity and detail.

Have something to say. Examine the world around you and all the things you have seen and experienced. Have a point of view, and examine it to make sure you are not merely regurgitating the opinions of others. Cultivate an interest in self-knowledge. Let yourself feel your own feelings, and empathize with the feelings of others. Stop asking, “What is the usual way things are done?” Value learning and insight over fame and fortune.

## MIDDLE TERM

If you haven't already begun to build your own ensemble of actors, get a casting director if you can possibly afford it. In casting sessions, instead of looking for the performance, look for these things: the actor's ability (talent and skill); whether he or she has enough life knowledge to play the part; whether you can work together. Don't cast performances, cast relationships.

Start your script analysis. Even before casting — it will help you know what to look for. Even if you have written the script yourself, you need to look at it with fresh eyes. A proper script analysis will give you an iron-clad connection to the story and the characters, and a strong vision that you will be able to communicate to others.

Many inexperienced filmmakers think that the way they hear the lines and see the characters in their mind's eye is an adequate script analysis preparation. The tendency of novices, once they have heard the line in their mind, to adhere rigidly to that line reading or interpretation is very detrimental. You need to get underneath the surface of the script. The words on the page — the dialogue and (to some extent) the stage directions — are clues to its subtext.

The subtext of a script is what is playable for an actor, and it is what brings to life the script's emotional events. Instead of imagining the line readings and expressions of the characters, the director must imagine the characters' history, needs, intentions, relationships, situations, idiosyncrasies. Get past superficial judgments and hand-me-down formulas. Know what the script is about. Prepare yourself to tell a story about people.

Use the tools of through-line, beats, and story subtext to understand the structure of a script, and thus be able to create its emotional events. Consider the physical movement in the camera frame not just in the two dimensions of the view-finder, but in the three dimensions of the characters' world. Learn how to block a scene (again, experience directing theater is helpful). As soon as you think of a great idea that solves a moment or a scene, think of an alternate one — or two — in case the first one doesn't work when you try it with actors.

## SOMEWHERE BETWEEN MIDDLE TERM AND SHORT TERM: REHEARSAL

All interaction between actor and director is experienced by the actor as direction, so think of every conversation with actors as part of the "rehearsal" process. By "rehearsal" I mean any time spent considering the work seriously. The term "rehearsal" is actually a poor name for the process, because it suggests a repetition, over and over, of a pre-set performance — which is exactly what it shouldn't be. Perhaps instead of "rehearsal" it should be called "warming up" or "exploration" or "preparing to work" — a chance for the actors and director to spend "quality time" together.

Rehearsal includes getting to know the actors, not just in a superficial social way, but as human beings and as artists. Take time to get below the social mask with them. Find common ground. Find out their values and ideas. Find out their problems, concerns, and insecurities. Discussion of the characters over the phone does not constitute meaningful direction. When you are with the actors face to face, do more listening than talking. Listen to them, their ideas, and also their subtext. Let the actors know you have faith in them.

Many directors hold no formal rehearsal, which means they are rehearsing with the camera rolling. Conventional wisdom holds that there is no time for rehearsal in movies and television, or that rehearsal kills the freshness and spontaneity of performances. This is a misunderstanding of its function, which is not to set out a connect-the-dots schema for the actors to follow by rote, but to open up the possibilities of the script, find its emotional and physical structure, and give the actors permission to play. What I think many directors (and actors) mean when they say they don't have time to rehearse or they don't believe in rehearsal is that they don't know how to rehearse.

Rehearsal, conducted properly, creates trust, connection, and chemistry — and gets important work done ahead of time, so things can go smoothly on the set. Without substantive rehearsal the director is left to hope that things will magically fall into place and the actors will “hit the ground running” with no warm-up or pep-talk. (We don't expect this of athletes.) All actors are different. Rehearsal is chance to collect information on how actors work, and to identify and solve their concerns and problems ahead of time, thus avoiding emotional disasters on the set.

Actors frequently test young directors — let the testing take place off the set. Take the time to get the actors to let you in before the pressures are on, so that their sensitive emotional mechanisms can hear and respond to a crucial direction at a crucial moment when time really is running out. Rehearsal is also a place to address critical directorial choices such as pacing. Don't leave pacing entirely to the editing room.

Disagreements on interpretation are best solved when there is time to consider them thoughtfully instead of under pressure. Rehearsal is precisely the opportunity for conflicting ideas to be brought into harmony. The actor can have the chance to try out ways to bring her own inner life to the ideas of the director. Or the actor can try his ideas in front of the director, and the director can come up with ways to incorporate them.

Don't forget that actors are by nature suggestible. If a new idea — even one opposite to the one they feel committed to — is presented to them with persuasive emotional detail, they may later actually forget that they themselves were not the ones to think of it. By “persuasive emotional detail” I mean giving direction by asking questions and telling stories rather than via instructions and orders. Always do more listening than talking.

But if you feel uncomfortable rehearsing, then don't. Cast well, make sure the actors are listening to each other, and then back off. You need practice in the art of rehearsal (for instance in a class or workshop) before attempting it in a professional setting.

### SHORT TERM

“When a light bulb has burned out, you take time to change it. If an actor is burning out, why not take ten minutes?” — Francis Ford Coppola

Spending time will save you time. Pay attention to actors' problems on the set. Find out what they are, and pay attention to them. Always put the work first, ahead of ego. Be fearless about looking foolish. At the same time, take emotional responsibility. A director must act as a leader. Don't project your insecurities on the actors. Look for ways to see the glass “half full” instead of half empty. Appreciate mistakes. Praise the actors. Love them. Listen more than you talk.

Let the actors stay in the moment. Remind them to breathe. Don't micro-manage. Let actors work. Let them feel safe enough to find their core and to take risks. Don't ask them to "do it again just the way you did it before." When actors are getting freaky and frozen, give them permission to fail — and mean it. Try opposites.

Say something to each actor before and after every take. All actors need honest and accurate responses from the director after each take. Make sure the actors are engaged with each other (i.e., "listening"). In order to guide them to playing the objective rather than the result, ask each actor before each take: "Do you know what your character wants from the other character?"

Use the language of permission. Result direction is inaccurate direction. Let's say an actor on the first take wrinkles her forehead in a way that you like, and the take must be repeated. If you ask her to repeat the wrinkle you're not actually asking for what you liked. What you liked was the listening, the interaction, or the emotional event resulting from her surrender to a subtext choice.

Make sure that the actors receive feedback from one source only.

When you say "Action," try not to have an unconscious subtext of "On your mark, get set...GO!" This unconscious "starting gun" subtext creates a tension for actors and a feeling that "now it's time to start acting," which is not conducive to good moment-by-moment work. Say "Action" with a sense of allowing, letting go, permission, connection. When actors make technical considerations of matching shots and hitting marks their priority, their performance can become slick and technical. If you make the story and characters your priority, they will be better able to do so too.

Stand next to the camera. The way to tell if you are getting what you need from the actors is to stand next to the camera during each take, in a full, relaxed concentration. Be present — in the moment — as a human being of intelligence and feeling. The reason why directors should study and practice their interaction with actors is to be able to develop their powers of concentration, so that while the camera is rolling, that concentration can be iron-clad even amid the pressures and distractions of a movie set.