Report

Do Directors Need to Train?

Geoff Williams, 15 February 2015

I called this session because I am continually beset with interrogations about why I trained as a director. A number of these have the explicit undercurrent of "directors don't need training - that's a waste of time". I have also experienced a tension between those who have trained and those who haven't, so I thought that opening a forum for discussion would be a good idea. It turns out that a lot of people have thought about this and have strong opinions, so we had a very productive and energetic debate.

One of the key outcomes, I would contend, is that developing and learning a set of skills is crucial, but that this does not have to come in the form of formal training. There is a set of practical skills (breaking down a text , planning a rehearsal schedule, how and when to give notes to actors etc etc) that directors make use of all the time, and these can and should be learned. However, formal training is not the only way to acquire them and there are many roads to Rome.

I suppose the issue of contention was what is meant by the idea of 'training'. Each of us is obviously biased by our own route into the profession, and I think it is worth keeping this in mind as the discussion (hopefully) continues. I don't think there is ever a need to defend one's own journey to directing. What I think is worth fighting for and defining is the dignity of the directing profession as a skilled job which not everyone can do. I want to avoid taking this discussion into other territory, but I would challenge the assertion that anything goes. There is a huge variety and diversity of good practice, but there is also bad practice and there are bad ways of doing things. I make

no claim that I have special knowledge of the distinction or that anyone is really expert. But I would say that it seems to me that it is a fundamental discussion to have ongoing. One should always be able to defend the choices one makes.

So one outcome is that we need to find ways of exploring what the skill set is. The last couple of decades have seen an explosion of awareness about the idea of director's practice. Or to be more explicit, directors have become aware that practice is a thing that they have and that should be thought about. On this point, we arrived at the idea that there is a need to create a peer group or set of peer groups to discuss practice and explore working methods. For me, this grows again out of questioning whether anything goes: surely there are some ways if doing things which are just bad?

Assisting is frequently a training role, and we talked about how is can be made more useful. Once one manages to get a job as an assistant, there can be an ambiguous relationship to the production: what are the director's responsibilities to your development, and what are yours to creating learning opportunities? Personally, I am for ever being told that if I'm not getting what I want from an assisting job, I should make space to do what I want. I think proactivity is invaluable, but I also wonder what responsibilitiy of the director is to offer a coherent experience for the assistant? We thought that this could be helped if the role of the assistant has a couple of clearly defined and more widely accepted criteria. As things stand, no two assisting jobs are the same, and each new one requires starting from scratch in finding out what the job actually is. These parameters do not have to be rigid or universal, but saying that assistants should have a weekly session with the director to touch base, for example, would be one way of helping everyone involve.

Some positive aspects which came out is that confidence is such an important thing to

build. It comes from trusting that you have a body of knowledge and skills to fall back on. Lack of confidence can lead to all sorts of problems, but forums like this where concerns can be aired and perspectives and anxieties shared mean that we all feel less alone and more secure in what we do. In a way, vulnerability goes hand in hand with this. It is so difficult to admit that one does not know something or that one may have messed something up and needs help. But the peer group is such a good resource and finding ways of tapping into it will make all of our work better. It is a misconception that we are forever in competition with each other. Sure, there are limited resources, but we're almost certainly trying to do different kinds of work so we can thrive together. To do this, however, we need to learn to open ourselves to developing our techniques, and allows the opinions of others to guide us sometimes.

Suggested actions and ways forward:

- A common concern was that although we tend to be artistically creative and skilled, we don't get trained or learn a whole lot about the practical and business side of this profession. Workshops or masterclasses or discussions run by SDUK would be hugely valuable and appreciated.
- In terms of the assisting concerns, SDUK might consider developing some parameters for the assisting job. For ease of everyone involved, if there were some guidelines, people might find it easier to make the most of the job. Additionally, we wondered if there might be a way for SDUK to coach people in how to make the most of the assisting jobs they get: e.g. how to create a space for yourself, how to approach a director, what your responsibilities are for your own experience and so on.
- We thought that SDUK is a great organisation through which to create a peer group. We can become quite isolated and insular in our work, so opening ourselves to more peer interaction can allow us to help each other and collaborate in solving problems.

Some of us are lucky in that we already have fellow directors who we know and trust and can go to for advice and consolation. This group means that people who do not already have close friends who are directors can build trust and friendships which can give them a support base: we all know how lonely life is as a director.

- We thought that SDUK might be an organisation that could help to connect people within the industry(e.g. making introductions for possible assisting jobs). It's hard enough to make advances by oneself. Going through an organisation (or even simply getting advice on how to go about this) makes things a lot less pressurised.

- Simon Dormandy made a very good suggestion regarding engaging with universities. Most universities have drama societies and groups, but these group basically have few or no skills. There seems to be a space (along mentorship lines) of going in a couple of days a week and offering guidance and some basic skills. This would fall under informal training.

- Mentorship - I know that there have been other discussions about this, so I won't write much. Suffice it to say that I think defining the role of the mentor is important, as well as thinking about what one gets and wants from having a mentor.

Existant groups and organisations that may be of use:

- "10 years and counting": group for people who have been directing for 10 years or more.

- "Living pictures": running various short courses in training aspects of the life of a director.

- "ITC" (we think): runs practical courses on the administrative life of people in the arts (e.g. tax).

Tags:

skills, peers, Theatre, training, Directing, Training, Collaboration, mentor, THEATRE, Diversity, mentoring, Mentorship, diversity, collaboration, Mentoring, mentorship, theatre, directing