ARTISTRY IN COLLABORATION: THE DIRECTOR'S APPROACH IN MUSICAL THEATRE

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Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts
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by
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Artistry in Collaboration: The Director’s Approach in Musical Theatre

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DEDICATION

This project report is dedicated to all the directors, designers, choreographers, musical directors, and actors who have mentored and inspired me throughout this process. And to those artists who are always searching for freedom, truth, and beauty within their artistic realm.
Vision is a point of view. There is a personal commitment to it. It comes from one person, a leader’s connection with the work, and why it is important to the work.

- Ming Cho Lee, Yale University of Drama
ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

Artistry in Collaboration: The Director's Approach in Musical Theatre
by
Timothy J. Allen
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts with a Concentration in Musical Theatre
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Musical theatre is one of the most collaborative art forms. With it comes collective story telling, enriching learning experiences, artistic satisfaction, and personal growth and reflection. However, there are also differing opinions, disparate talents, despotism, and frustrations, etc. The primary function of the director is to not only envision or approach a production in his or her own specific way, but to foster the creativity of all members of the collaborative team within this vision. This will thus lead to a more cohesive and artistic production.

There is not one book that is devoted to the art of collaborating on a theatrical production. However, I have conducted much of my research through books that focus on the art of directing. Most authors include a chapter or periodic references regarding collaboration. As a case study, I was the assistant director to a professional production of Hairspray at The Beck Center for the Arts in Lakewood, OH. I reference my personal collaborative experiences on this production throughout the report. Through research and experience, I have found that no two productions will be the same in terms of collaboration.

I have created this project report to assist the director in understanding the duties of his or her collaborators. But more importantly how he or she can best communicate with them to create a process that fosters artistic creativity and freedom.
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Finally, I am eternally grateful to those at The Beck Center for the Arts who helped me in my research and professional experience. Thank you to Scott Spence, Larry Goodpastor, Martin Céspedes, David Glowe, Trad A. Burns, Ben Needham, and the cast and crew of Hairspray.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: “IT’S NOT WHERE YOU START (IT’S WHERE YOU FINISH)”

When one attends a musical theatre production what would be the first comment after the production is complete? Maybe it is a comment on the scenery, or perhaps the music and the dramatic stage lighting, or maybe an actor proffered a cathartic moment for the audience. Unless properly trained or sensitive to how a theatrical production is built, rarely does the conventional theatre patron comment on the ingenuity of the director. It is this role that cannot be seen or heard throughout the course of the production. However, if one takes a closer look, it is the director who moves the dialogue forward and creates stimulating compositions. But more importantly it is the work of the director to aggregate the creative team together within a unified vision and breath life into the musical. But sometimes productions are incongruous. There are many levels of reasons why, but a common problem among directors is that they do not allow the creative voice of their collaborators. The director will be truly successful in creating a masterful work of art by unifying the creative team within a single vision in addition to allowing their creativity to be realized.

Throughout the course of this project report, I will use various examples from my internship with The Beck Center for the Art’s production of Marc Shaiman, Mark O’Donnell, Thomas Meehan, and Scott Whitman’s Hairspray. During this production I acted as the assistant director, production assistant, and a member of the cast, playing the role of IQ. Through these appointments I could both observe the production externally through the director’s standpoint as well as internally through the standpoint of an actor who receives direction. By sitting in every rehearsal and making suggestions to the director throughout the process, I was able to journal my observations of the collaborative process; therefore, you shall see some of my ideas in block quotations as they were taken from my personal journals. To assist my thesis, I have also referenced various authors on the subject of directing and collaborating: Michael Bloom, Thinking Like A Director: A Practical Handbook; Babak Ebrahimian, Sculpting Space in the Theatre: Conversations with the Top Set, Light, and
Costume Designers; Alan Ackyborne, The Crafty Art of Playmaking; and others. In the following chapters, one will find transcriptions of the Hairspray libretto that will act as a reference as I explain how the production was directed.

Chapter Two entitled “The Director’s Approach,” will identify the role of the director and the task of collaborating with the creative team based on a personal approach or vision. Chapter Three examines the director’s work on a more external scale by collaborating with the design team: set, costume, lighting, and sound. Chapter Four focuses on personnel whose assignments are most closely related to the director’s role during rehearsal processes – the choreographer and music director. Chapter Five will focus on the collaboration the director has with the actors, another major integral part to the design of a production. Finally, Chapter Six will summarize the ideas of the director as an artist and collaborator.

The director’s job is inherently collaborative; he or she must constantly work with the creative team in order to advance a desired effect. To garner a successful collaboration, the director must understand how the creative team performs their tasks. As a reference, parts of each chapter will be devoted to explaining each team member’s job and how it relates to the director. Through research, one may find there are many references and sources that elaborate on the collaborative process between the director and the creative team. The problem therein lies with the idea that no two collaborations will be exactly the same. This project report is based on the idea that musical theatre is one of the most collaborative arts, and there are ways in which the director can foster the inherent creativity within the team members as well as maintaining his or her creative approach or vision. How does the director collaborate effectively with other artists who are in turn striving for creative expression? It all starts with the director’s unified approach.
CHAPTER TWO

THE DIRECTOR’S APPROACH: “DREAMING THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM”

The director carries a number of responsibilities throughout the production process; however, the most significant responsibility the director must undertake is unifying a group of artists, designers, and creative teams under a single vision for the production. Stephen Peithman and Neil Offen contend:

Musical theater is the most collaborative of the performing arts, blending the skills of composer, lyricist, librettist, director, choreographer, actors, singers, dancers, conductor, music director, instrumentalists, and designers of costumes, lighting, and sets. This interdependence creates challenges and rewards at every turn. (xii)

Thus the director needs to act as a leader, guiding the artists through the script and score to tell the story; a commentator, enabling the written and sung word to proffer the author’s intent; a visionary, imagining the reason for telling the story; a mediator, managing the inevitable personnel disintegration; an editor, exalting or trimming the work of other artists, etc. The list may go on and on and the director chooses which processes work best in directing a production. This “wearing of multiple hats” should be key in the collaborative process.

Before collaboration begins, a director needs to explore his or her own conditions of telling the story. Michael Bloom writes:

As the directorial profile has evolved from manager or craftsperson to full-fledged artist – not unlike the development of film directing – professional theaters genuinely committed to artistry have hired directors for their sensibility, taste, and vision – in other words, for their aesthetic. (12)

After much research and multiple script readings the director focuses on an “approach.” I will refer to the “director’s approach” as the central or interpretive idea employed in telling the story. Commonly directors will use the terms “vision” or “concept.” For myself, an “approach” constitutes more of a strategy that allows the director to access the author’s intent while allowing him to build a solid foundation for the creative team to build upon. I find the
word “vision” may constitute the imagined ideas for a production; however, a stronger word such as “approach” incites more of a substantial cornerstone in which to build a production. Henceforward, I will refer to the director’s vision, concept, interpretive idea, or plan as the approach.

All directors have their own personal way of designing their approach. They may need to do intensive research on a specific time period, spend time reading current news articles, view inspiring photographs and works of art, or even draw upon their own personal experience. For example, if the director is planning to direct Cole Porter’s Kiss Me, Kate, it may be prudent to critically read Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew to extract the intricacies of the characters’ relationships. In the case of Dreamgirls, the director may spend time reading news articles of Mo-Town performers of the 1960s or listening to recordings of The Temptations, The Supremes, or The Marvelettes. Either way, the director is drawing upon a variety of sources to identify the way in which the story needs to be told.

In the musical Sunday in the Park with George by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, lyricist Stephen Sondheim writes, “Art isn’t easy / Every minor detail / Is a major decision / Have to keep things in scale / Have to hold to your vision” (139-40). A musical cannot stand on the director’s shoulders alone and therefore, it is the job of the musical director, designers, choreographer, and performers (also know as the creative team) to help create the reality of a production under the director’s guidance. During the first design meeting, the director’s approach is discussed. Testing this idea on the others is by nature a synthesizing process, as the creative team must draw upon their own expertise and sources to help the director’s approach materialize. Some members of the creative team may have a hard time thinking outside of their own specialized area during the beginning design process. Hence, it is important for the director to communicate in key words or metaphors to allow the creative team to accept the director’s ideas and apply it to their own field. For example, a good director wouldn’t begin to speak about how the choreography is to be staged, but would rather speak of what the dance needs to communicate to the audience. For example, during “Willkommen,” the opening sequence of Cabaret, the director may suggest that the number should be welcoming, sexual, satiric, or exuberant etc. From then on, the choreographer is able to apply the director’s guidance to the dynamics of the dance sequence.
The hardest aspect of the director’s job in the early design meetings is to foster the ideas of all the artists involved. A costume designer may envision pencil skirts for the girl’s ensemble in a production of *Bye Bye Birdie*, but this may conflict with some of the choreographer’s movement choices. Also, a lighting designer may want to use more saturated colors inside the dream ballet of *Oklahoma!*, but this may contrast with a scenic designer’s already vibrant and colorful set. Michael Bloom states, “All production values contribute to the narrative and all stories have a progression, each design element should also evolve” (94). That is why it is important for the director to develop an approach that is specific enough for the designers to use as a guideline. However, if too many incongruities exist between the director and the creative team, the production will most likely end up in a clash of artistic ideas that do not blend enough to tell a clear story.

Martial law is defined as “law established and maintained by the military in the absence of civil law.” This may seem like a far reach, but martial law describes how the director might settle artistic disputes when collaborating with the creative team. Ultimately, the director has the final authority; however, this does not mean despotism. It means that the director must communicate how to approach the musical clearly enough so that the designers can find creative methods of supporting that approach. Sometimes this may necessitate the director to compromise some of his or her original ideas for the betterment of the team. However, if the director will not accept a designer’s idea, the rationale must accredit the original directorial approach and/or the author’s intent. Alan Ayckbourn, prominent British playwright and director, contends:

Directing is about talking and talking early. Avoid the temptation to be mysterious. Let them into your thinking. If you don’t carry them with you, later you may find, inadvertently or not, that they are lined up against you; they will begin to sense that due to no clear brief [approach], or worse, to a constantly changing brief -their own professional reputations are at stake. (118)

To expand upon Ayckbourn’s idea of “talking and talking early,” it is most important to start design meetings at least two months prior to the rehearsal process. In effect, the director is not unlike a gardener. He plants his “seed” or provides guidance to the designers and allows time for their ideas to germinate. By doing this, open dialogue can transpire and the designers will feel comfortable testing their ideas with others in the creative team. This can sometimes be challenging depending upon the actual geographic location of the designers; but all efforts must be made to get the creative team planning and talking as soon
as possible. The initial meetings emphasize that the production is a team effort and one cannot make changes to their design without affecting the other designers.

As assistant director to The Beck Center for the Arts’ production of *Hairspray*, I will illuminate some of the ideas discussed in this chapter based on my experience. The director, Scott Spence, regarded *Hairspray* as a story of hope and optimism against a backdrop of adversity. While there is a very distinct setting and style written into the fabric of the musical, his approach to telling the story was to highlight the “light at the end of the tunnel.” Amongst the cute, frothy songs and spirited production numbers, there is a simple story of a girl who seeks to right the wrongs surrounding the civil rights movement of the 1960s. From my personal reflections, I state:

The show was a major discovery process and an exploration in style. When Spence started collaborating with the designers, he had no idea that the bouffant hairstyle would be the central metaphor of the show. He really wanted to see the style of the show every time he looked at the stage. He grew up in Baltimore during the 1960s. A lot of this style really hits home with him. His family was very liberal and they knew what it was like to be supportive of the civil rights movement; they were even blacklisted sometimes.

Spence used the bouffant, the hairstyle donned by Tracy Turnblad, as a symbol for the entire show and its ultimate theme, “stand up to adversity when faced with inequality.” And the bouffant is fitting to act as this central metaphor. Not only does the bouffant literally stand tall on the head, but also represents the changing fads within a culture that was struggling to change.

The director was adamant that the style be evident in every element of the production. Fortunately, the book offers various allusions to the 1960s that indicate the time period. But outside of the obvious allusions, Thomas Meehan and Mark O’Donnell stylized the language to align with the time period. For example, the character Amber Von Tussle, the teenage antagonist, says when she wins the Miss Teenage Hairspray contest, “Thank you ladies, gentlemen, and kids. I’m now ready to *consume* the title of Miss Teenage Hairspray.” While the style is obvious in the text and therefore the characters’ dialogue, the director wanted to make sure that the dance, gesticulation, costumes, colors, scenery, acting style, and even speech patterns reflected that of the 1960s:

Visual images are always present, set, costume, and lighting design is often the most assertive ingredient of production style. But for a production to be coherent, the acting style must correlate with the visual elements. An abstract design that
houses a naturalistic acting style will send mixed signals to the performers and audience. (Bloom 95)

To emphasize Bloom’s idea of correlating visual and acting styles, Spence claims that a production needs to set up “rules” as soon as the curtain rises to allow for coherency. These rules entail presenting the style of the production immediately and not straying from it. Spence set up his “rules” by intermingling Tracy’s world with that of the TV station to show that Tracy could possibly be part of this flashy world of cameras. He intended the audience to understand that these boundaries would continue to break throughout the course of the production. An audience will accept almost anything, as long as they know what to expect.

Act I, scene 1 offers a wonderful example of how Spence could actualize his approach very early in the production. The scene begins at the WZZT television station with the popular teenage dance showcase, “The Corny Collins Show.” The dancing continues and music underscores Tracy and Penny’s dialogue. While their dialogue and physical presence invade the scene, Spence did not want their action to stop the dancing, but to pull focus from it. This way, Spence was able to stylistically make two scenes into one and still emphasize the themes of hope and optimism. This scene ultimately asks the question: can Tracy be part of this flashy world of television? As a reference, I’ve included the lyrics of “Nicest Kids in Town” and the overlapping sections of dialogue (See Figure 1). Take note of where Tracy and Penny’s dialogue intentionally pulls focus from the dancers and singers.

To set up the “rules,” as Spence puts it, he had Penny and Tracy enter down-stage-right and cross to center-stage, right in the middle of the TV studio. After Corny and the Ensemble members complete the first section of “Nicest Kids in Town,” they immediately and stylistically split right down the middle, center stage, to create an alley for Tracy and Penny in which to travel on their way home from school. The dancers continued to dance in this formation while a shift in light let the audience focus on Tracy and Penny walking down this “alley.” Immediately after their dialogue, the focus shifts with another lighting change to the apartment on stage left. The dancers continued to dance and form a new position just stage right of the apartment scene where Tracy and Penny continue to watch “The Corny Collins Show” on their television set.
Act One – Scene One

(TV Station WZZT and the TURNBLAD home simultaneously. Monday afternoon.)

“THE NICEST KIDS IN TOWN”

CORNY COLLINS

(spoken) Hey there Teenage Baltimore!
Don’t change that channel! ‘Cause it’s time
For the Corny Collins Show! Brought
To you by Ultra Clutch Hairspray! For
Hair that holds up even in a NASA wind Tunnel!

ENSEMBLE

OH-OO-OO-OO-OO-OO-OO-OO

EV’RY AFTERNOON
WHEN THE CLOCK STRIKES FOUR
BOP-BEE-BA, BA-BA-BA-, BEE-BA

A CRAZY BUNCH OF KIDS
CRASH THROUGH THAT DOOR
BOP-BEE-BA, BA-BA-BA-, BEE-BA

THEY THROW OFF THEIR COATS
AND LEAVE THE SQUARES BEHIND
OW-OOT, OW-OOT

AND THEN THEY SHAKE IT,
SHAKE IT, SHAKE IT

LIKE THEY’RE LOSING THEIR MIND
YOU’LL NEVER SEE THEM FROWN
‘CAUSE THEY’RE
THE NICEST KIDS IN TOWN
NICEST KIDS IN TOWN

EVERY AFTERNOON
YOU TURN YOUR TV ON
NA, NA, NA, NA, NA, NA-NA-NA-NA

AND WE KNOW YOU
TURN THE SOUND UP
WHEN YOUR PARENTS ARE GONE
NA, NA, NA, NA, NA, NA-NA-NA-NA

AND THEN YOU TWIST AND SHOUT
FOR YOUR FAVORITE STAR
OOH

AND ONCE YOU’VE
PRACTICED EVERY STEP
THAT’S IN YOUR REPERTOIRE
OOH

YOU BETTER COME ON DOWN
OOH

AND MEET THE
NICEST KIDS IN TOWN
NICEST KIDS IN TOWN

TRACY

Hurry, Penny, hurry – the show’s already started! We’re gonna miss it!

PENNY

I’m hurrying, Tracy, but my mother says I’m not allowed to perspire!

TRACY

C’mon!

PRUDY

Edna, is my laundry ready?
EDNA
*(EDNA is slaving away at her ironing board next to a huge stack of laundry. PRUDY is picking up her laundry.)*
Who wants to know? Sure it is, hun. Come on up. That’ll be three dollars.

PRUDY
*(Digging in her purse) That’s pretty pricey for a few pairs of pettipants.*

EDNA
I’m sorry, Prudy Pingleton, but there were some extra charges. Some of your personal stains required pounding on a rock.

*(TRACY and PENNY enter.)*

TRACY
I’m home!

EDNA
Four o’clock. Guess I don’t need to ask who got detention again. Tracy Turnblad, mind your manners and say hello to our guest.

TRACY
Hell, Mrs. Pingleton.

EDNA
And you, Penny?

PENNY
Hello, Mrs. Pingleton…I mean…mother.

EDNA
*(To PRUDY)* Teenagers. They just love watching that Corny Collins.

PRUDY
Delinquents. It ain’t right dancing to that colored music.

EDNA
Don’t be silly, it ain’t colored. The TV’s black and white.

*(PRUDY exits with her bundle, shaking her head in disapproval.)*

**Corny Collins Ensemble**

NICE WHITE KIDS
WHO LIKE TO LEAD THE WAY
AND ONCE A MONTH
WE HAVE OUR NEGRO DAY!
AND I’M THE MAN
WHO KEEPS IT SPINNING ROUND
MISTER CORNY COLLINS
WITH THE LATEST, GREATEST
BALTIMORE SOUND!!

SO EV’RY AFTERNOON
DROP EVERYTHING
WHO NEEDS TO READ AND WRITE

**Ensemble**

HOO-HOO
HOO-HOO
HOO-HOO
NEGRO DAY!
AAH, AAH
AAH
HUH! HUH! WOOO
SOU-OUND!!
BOP-BE-BA, BA-BA-BA-BA, BE-BA
(Corny Collins)

When you can dance and sing

Forget about your algebra
And calculus
You can always do your homework
On the morning bus
Can’t tell a verb from a noun
They’re the nicest kids in town

Roll call!!

(Ensemble)

Bop-be-ba, ba-ba-ba-ba, be-ba
Ow-oot
Hoot, ow-oot

Ow-oot, ow-oot

Nicest kids in town
Oh-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo
Roll call!!

(Each council member says his or her name)

I’m Amber, Brad! Tammy! Fender!
Brenda! Sketch! Shelley! IQ! Lou
Ann! And I’m…Link!

Tracy

Oh, Link, kiss me again and again.

Edna

Turn that racket down. I’m trying to iron in here.

Girls

(Screams) Ahhhhh!!

(Corny Collins)

So, if ev’ry night you’re shaking
As you lie in bed

And the bass and drums
Are pounding in your head

Who cares about sleep
When you can snooze in school

They’ll never get to college
But they sure look cool

Don’t need a cap and a gown
‘Cause they’re the
Nicest kids in town

They’re the nicest, nicest
They’re the nicest, nicest
They’re the
Sugar and spice-est, the nicest kids in
Kids in town

(Ensemble)

Aah
Aah
Mony-mony, ooh, mony-mony
Aah, aah, aah, aah

Mony-mony, ooh, mony-mony
Hoot, ow-oot

Ow-oot, ow-oot

Nicest kids in town

They’re the nicest, nicest
They’re the nicest, nicest
They’re the
Sugar and spice-est, the nicest kids in
Kids in town

Corny Collins

Yeah! And that was our new dance of the week – the “Stricken Chicken.” We’ll be right back.
This direction is a far cry from realism, which is exactly what Spence intended. The audience would accept the fact that script and score could be merged into one. Spence approached this musical by creating a seamless and stylistic production, which ultimately led to faster transitions and a closer connection with the musical’s themes of hope and optimism.

This scene in the original Broadway production, directed by Jack O’Brien and choreographed by Jerry Mitchell, was staged a little differently. Instead of having the stage split into two sections (TV studio and Turnblad apartment), O’Brien and Mitchell created a moveable apartment, which traveled to center stage while the ensemble danced around it. Tracy’s world literally invaded the TV studio. One of the obstacles in Spence’s production was focusing the audience’s attention to the correct part of the stage, which he tried to manage with lighting. In the Broadway production, the moveable apartment was elevated and towered over the dancers. In Spence’s production the entire scene was conducted on the same level and sometimes on the same plane; some focus was lost due to the amount of movement occurring on stage. To ensure the attention was on the correct character at the correct time, the use of levels may have been beneficial. Perhaps something was lost during the collaboration process? Could the lighting designer and/or scenic designer foresee the focus problem? Ultimately, Spence decided a virtually blank stage would be easier for transitions and more cost effective in the long run. All members of the creative team followed Spence’s direction and assisted in the focus problem.
CHAPTER THREE

THE DIRECTOR AND THE DESIGN TEAM: “THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS”

“Of all the arts, theatrical design is unique in its collaboration. Relating to other designers and their ideas in a positive manner not only is exciting but also forms the very basis of collaboration” (Parker, Wolfe, and Block 283). Sally Bowles in the musical Cabaret needs a space in which to stand, clothes to wear, and ultimately needs to be seen and heard. With this in mind, the design of a production is comprised of the ideas from the director, scenic, costume, lighting, and sound designers. They work in both the contextual world (adding depth to the story) and the practical world (making sure the actors can be seen and heard). Designers do not always have the same artistic vision and differences may arise during the design process. The director will not act as a trammel, binding the designers’ ideas to his or her approach, but will nurture the designers’ ideas to aid the approach. Ming Cho Lee, prominent scenic designer and co-chair of the design department at the Yale University School of Drama, states, “Vision is a point of view. There is a personal commitment to it. It comes from one person, a leader’s connection with the work, and why it is important to the work” (Ebrahimian 98). The designers’ job is not only to realize the director’s approach, but also to strengthen it.

Many successful designers assert they are servants to the author’s original intent as well as the style in which the design team decides upon. However, to come to an agreement, all designers must be flexible throughout the design process, which is initiated at the first design meeting. Some directors find it easier to communicate their idea with images rather than words and may request the designers come to the meeting with pictures, paintings, or sketches. Whatever the case, it is paramount that the director discusses the musical, discerns a method of collaboration, comes to an agreement on a timetable, and outlines a way to proceed with the design process (Bloom 82).

At the subsequent design meetings, the director calls his designers back to the table to discuss sketches, renderings, colors, atmosphere, set elevations, and sound. These meetings
can take a few days, a few weeks, or even a few months to agree on the design. Ming Cho Lee states:

I would say the best collaboration is when you have a leader, usually in the person of the director, who has an overall vision – an approach that he or she would like the play to have. If it’s exciting enough, all the designers and actors somehow go for the same vision. (Ebrahimian 98)

As stated in Chapter 2, the director is the leader of the creative team. His overall vision, added to that of the designers and actors, will achieve a truly collaborative piece of art. Throughout the course of the production and rehearsal process, changes are likely; however, once the creative team’s approach is unified, all changes should be within the director’s approach.

While all of the designers create the visual and auditory entities, or the environment of the production, that of the scenic designer’s is often the most vital. The scenic designer’s role is simply to create the physical environment in which the story takes place. How he or she creates this can be broken into two segments: emotional, the rationale for his choices; and compositional, the manifestation of that rationale. Like all designers, research may be conducted in style, time period, production history, and underlying themes of the musical. The director may even suggest a certain area of research that will guide the designer. When the director examines sketches, a series of questions may arise: How does the set assist in achieving the author’s goal? Is the designer connecting to the production based on the team’s approach? How does the set inhabit the theatre? Will this design inhibit or assist the actors’ movement? The scenic design is the most immediate of the designs as it is the key visual component. Consequently, colors need to be decided, materials need to be ordered, and carpenters, technicians, and painters need to be hired.

In the design meetings the director asks for a series of sketches and ground plans. Depending on the scenic designer’s process, these can vary from simple pencil or pen sketches or computer aided designs (CAD); they may even incorporate extensive use of color. After the director has approved the sketches, some designers prefer to do a small scale-model to proffer a representational example of the physical space, but the most practical representation of the design is the ground plan. A ground plan will assist the director in staging, the lighting designer in lighting plots, the costumer and actor in movement and characterization, and the choreographer in dance. However, the director takes
every designer’s points of view into consideration when the set is developed. What happens if a scenic designer creates a tight staircase for the musical *The King and I* that doesn’t allow for Anna’s enormous hoop skirts? Or what happens if a scenic designer’s raked stage is too steep of a grade for dancers to dance across? John Lee Beatty, prolific American scenic designer, states:

> Their [the other designers] unique points of view will provide insights to the production that may differ from the set designer’s contributions, and their ideas can be instrumental in developing the production style as well as influencing the floor plan and the setting. The entire design team needs to work hand in hand throughout the various stages of the design process. (Ebrahimian 68)

Like the scenic designer, a costumer’s research is valuable in preparing for crucial design meetings. Candace Hoffman, Tony nominated costume designer, states that she usually comes to initial design meetings with a binder full of pictures or images that captures the essence of how she feels about a play or musical (Ebrahimian 75). Since most designers read a play or libretto through the lens of their specialty, they often bring different types of research to the design table. If costuming *Spring Awakening*, a designer may bring photographs or paintings of provincial German students at the turn of the 20th century, or perhaps a specific piece of artwork will contain a color palette that heightens the vision of the production. Hoffman states:

> I want to be as open to and affected by things they [the other designers] bring to the table as I am by the things that I’ve brought myself. Maybe somebody has this brilliant image that guides the whole production to a new place. At that stage of the game I think it’s really important to stay open – to be receptive, but to come to the table with a lot to offer as well. (Ebrahimian 75)

The director can collaborate with the costumer more effectively when speaking in more relative terms than specific terms. For example, if the director wants a costume to be red, the costumer can read into this many ways. The idea of “red” is too specific and could stifle or confuse a costumer’s ideas. If the director speaks in more relative terms, a better choice would be, “I’m looking for something hot or explosive.” Instead of the idea being “red,” which is very specific, the costumer can make any color or fabric hot or explosive. Imagine polka dots, burlap, or plaid being hot or explosive; the ideas are limitless. This can be a wonderful way for the director to connect with the costume designer and allow for creative expression on both sides of the table.
The costume designer’s function is not to merely dress the characters in appropriate costumes befitting the director and design team’s approach, but more so to enhance the character’s journey. Consequently, the costume designer holds a remarkable relationship with the actor. He or she pays special attention to a character’s arc, objectives, actions, and movements. Commonly actors do not feel they have fully embodied a character until they put on a costume. While the costumer’s designs are rooted in the production and not necessarily in what the actors imagine, the actors’ ideas should be considered as well. If a contrasting idea arises, the director may be called upon to settle the dispute. Another major avenue of the costumer’s collaboration is with the choreographer; the construction of a costume could hinder the dancers’ movements. However, with effective collaboration, the costume could heighten the dance and the dance could complement the costume. For example, the character Peggy Sawyer does a series of paddle turns and maxi ford steps in the original Gower Champion choreography for the song “Go Into Your Dance” in 42nd Street. These dance steps cause her dress to flare out in a circle below her. To create this iconic image, the choreographer and costumer must work together to achieve this desired effect.

Since the scenic and costume designers’ work must be realized well in advance, the lighting designer has the advantage of observing the production as it unfolds and develop the design during rehearsals and sometimes with a working set. This is not to say they lose creative freedom in the production design, as they are included in early design meetings. The function of lighting design can be, but not limited to, illuminating the stage, directing focus, setting the atmosphere or tone, identify the time of day, progressing the story through transitions, and even revealing or altering the form of an object. A lighting designer’s research must then be applied to the libretto, author’s intent, and the director and design team’s approach. He investigates textures, colors, music, historical periods, weather, daytime, nighttime, sunrise, sunset, and any extrinsic quality of light.

The collaboration between the director and the lighting designer can be exciting due to the nature of the designer’s work. Light isn’t a tangible element, but an omnipresent ethereal energy that affects the audience’s perception of the production. Michael Bloom suggests:

Lighting is the most abstract of the design elements. An exchange of pictorial imagery can be an effective way of talking about it. Again, telling the story of the
play and the ways in which it might be communicated should be the basis for early discussions. (93)

Commonly the lighting designer speaks in terms of mood and atmosphere; consequently, so should the director when collaborating. The lighting designer manipulates the qualities of light through color or saturation, intensity, and texture. Color and saturation affects the atmosphere or mood of a scene. Saturation refers to the purity or tint of a shade of color; a primary blue has a completely different effect than a pale blue. Intensity refers to how bright or dim an object could be illuminated. And lastly, texture assists in adding dimension and tangibility to an object by adding layering effects that breakup a surface or even indicate windows, time of day, vegetation, etc. A lighting designer has many instruments in which to achieve the design, but more importantly the director should be familiar with the properties and qualities of theatrical lighting and how they can affect the totality of the production. However, the director needs to understand that the lighting designer’s work is contingent upon the available equipment. The director cannot “demand the stars” if the lighting designer cannot create them with limited equipment.

Like the lighting designer, the sound designer has the luxury of applying his work to what has been built over the production process. A common misconception in musical theatre is identifying the role of the sound designer and the sound mixer. These two positions can overlap and to confuse things even further, sometimes the designer is also the mixer. But to clarify the blurred line between these two positions, the sound designer must work closely with the director and music director to develop the aural aesthetic of the production. He or she is responsible for understanding the director’s approach, the story being told, the focus of dramatic beats, and the balance of sounds projecting into the auditorium. Some sound designers are even required to find sound clips such as thunder, trains, cars, etc. to add in telling the story. The designer works closely with the construct of the entire production, but the sound mixer works more on the amplification and balance of the sound. He or she requires an acute ear for shaping hugely complex layers of sound that includes the orchestra, actor body microphones, sound clips, and any offstage microphones. The mixer will work with the sound designer to understand the type of sound they are trying to achieve. The sound of a rock-concert-themed production such as Altar Boyz is going to be very different from that of an American folk opera such as Porgy and Bess. The sound mixer’s job must be accomplished in a very limited time frame to balance and equalize the
different instruments of the orchestra with that of the actors’ voices during tech rehearsals. The director collaborates with the sound team by simply having a sensitive ear to orchestra balance and volume and how sound can focus the action and manipulate the atmosphere.

Scott Spence, director of *Hairspray*, is an affluent director in the Cleveland area. Most of his productions are created with many designers with whom he has collaborated throughout his career. Due to his relationship with these designers, he felt comfortable collaborating via email and telephone. For this production, he never held any formal design meetings where designers could bounce their ideas off of one another. Like most productions, Spence started collaborating with the scenic designer, Ben Needham. Given Spence’s direction of being able to “see the style every time you looked at the stage,” Needham explored the idea of creating a set similar to the 1960s rapid-fire comedy show, *Laugh-In*. The set comprised of three proscenium-style arches that grew smaller in succession as one traveled upstage. As stated in the previous chapter, the three arches gave the illusion of a bouffant hairstyle, the same hairstyle donned by the leading character, Tracy. Cut into the middle arch were two doors, one on stage left and one on stage right. Through these doors the cast made entrances and exits, which operated as the portals to the different locales needed for the musical. A myriad of trucks with TV cameras, vanities, furniture, and even a giant can of hairspray were rolled into the scenes at various moments.

To ensure the other designers were being included, Spence forwarded the ground plans and color sketches for feedback. Earlier sketches were discarded as they left little space for the choreographer to build his dances. Ultimately this came at a cost, as the new sketches didn’t include levels that could have created unique stage pictures and helped direct focus during the large dance sequences. The lighting designer saw the sketches and immediately knew what the director was looking for. He was then able to come into tech rehearsals and light the production with ease. Many challenges were put upon the sound mixer as he managed 14 microphones amplifying the orchestra, 20 body microphones for the actors, and 3 stationary microphones used for back-up singers offstage. But with meticulous patience, the mixer was successful in balancing all of these sounds.

Spence’s laissez-faire approach to collaborating worked with all of his designers save one, costume designer David Glowe. Spence’s original costumer withdrew from the production due to personal issues, so Spence resigned to working with a new costumer.
Joining the team late in the process created some complications for both director and costumer. From my journal, I state:

The director’s vision to Glowe was “fun, period, and Broadway musical,” so he went with that. Working with different directors has its ups and downs especially those with a very specific idea in mind, limited budgets, fabrics, and time. He had two things to keep in mind from the beginning; first, making sure the colors and patterns did not clash with the set; and second, deciding which scenes had to be the showstoppers. *Hairspray* had an extremely large cast, with that in mind he tried to give each character a color that was consistent throughout the show. If a color did not work he kept a style (i.e. business suits for Velma).

The standard for most costume designers is to create sketches for the director to approve. This ultimately led to many frustrations during the rehearsal period. Glowe did not believe in creating sketches and insisted on presenting the costumes to the director during fittings. In Spence’s defense, any director is very busy during the rehearsal process and may not have the time to inspect the costumes during fittings. However, Spence understood that he needed to work with the costumer’s process in order to get results. Glowe was creating sudden solutions to costuming, but Spence understood the constraints on the costumer would be too much to insist on seeing drawings. Glowe was very creative, but overwhelmed having been brought in later in the design process. While there was disintegration in collaborative processes between the director and costume designer, Spence understood he had to compromise some of his methods to ensure progress was being made on the production design.

Prolific director and choreographer Michael Bennett commonly worked with the same team of designers: Robin Wagner (scenic), Theoni V. Aldredge (costume), and Tharon Musser (lighting), nicknamed the “dream team.” This team of designers was so attuned with one another that they created such remarkable and award-winning productions as *A Chorus Line* and *Dreamgirls*. With *Hairspray*, and most musical productions, rarely does the director find a “dream team” of designers that align with the creative approach. Every now and then the director will lead a creative team that works in perfect collaboration to create an extraordinary production. As seen through Spence’s leadership, one can expect differences in the creative processes of designers. It is advantageous for the director to remain flexible to allow for the creative freedom of the designers.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE DIRECTOR AND THE CHOREOGRAPHER
AND MUSICAL DIRECTOR: “THE MUSIC THAT MAKES ME DANCE”

The design team is present in both musical and non-musical productions, but the musical genre requires additional creative artists. The design team is limited to the scenic, costume, lighting, and sound designers, but the term “creative team” incorporates the choreographer and the music director. They are integral to the design of the production, which is why they are part of the design meetings. However, the choreographer and musical director work closest with the director and actors during the rehearsal process. Thus the director should develop a common language and rehearsal process with both of these pivotal positions.

The director and choreographer are involved with the staging and will work intensively with the performers. Robert Berkson highlights this relationship even further:

To the director, the choreographer serves artistically as expert, interpreter, collaborator, and consultant of movement. He translates certain visual aspects of the director’s concept into physical realities, and assesses exactly what is needed in the earliest stages. (6)

First, it is important to identify which musical numbers the choreographer will create and which ones the director will stage. There might even be times when a choreographer and director work together in staging a single musical number. For future reference, a choreographer creates dance sequences while the director creates musical staging unless the director is acting as the choreographer as well. Musical staging includes the movement of actors during a song that doesn’t require intricate dance. However, there is a gray area between this and choreography as musical staging sometimes incorporates dance steps. For example, if the director decides to choreograph a small dance sequence into a “staged” number, the audience may think it was the choreographer who created it. Whether it is good or bad choreography is immaterial, because the goal is to unify all the elements (music, staging, dance) of telling the story into a seamless unit despite whose work it is. Some of this
confusion may be cleared up in the program credits, such as: “Musical staging by…” or an asterisk next to a song denoting the director’s choreography. In so doing, the director is instilling the creative integrity of the choreographer and himself. The reputations of both the director and choreographer are at stake.

Before the director communicates with any choreographer, he or she should build a foundation of dance vocabulary. Even a general understanding of the types, forms, and styles of dance will aid in communicating with the choreographer. For example, the director who can say, “I’m looking for hoofing and a ‘into the ground’ kind of feel to this tap dance, not unlike Ruby Keeler” will be more effective in communicating the vision a dance sequence. Perhaps the director wants to recreate the stylizations of Agnes de Mille in a revival of 110 in the Shade. He or she would then speak of de Mille’s expansive use of space or specificity of gesture. George Balanchine, Agnes de Mille, Robert Alton, Gower Champion, Bob Fosse, Michael Bennett, and others have made significant contributions to musical theatre dance; perhaps their dance vocabulary can suggest what style the director envisions. However, the director must trust that the choreographer has researched the subject matter and time period and should be allowed artistic freedom in developing the dance:

It is important that the director and the choreographer agree upon the boundaries of artistic authority. Even though the show may be patterned to the director’s general scheme, the choreographer should still have a measure of artistic freedom within that framework. There are times when a director has definite ideas about how part or parts of a number should look in order to achieve a certain effect. Nonetheless, since both the director and choreographer deal with visual aspects of the performances and share a responsibility for directing the cast, mutual respect and courtesy are important to maintain. (Berkson 8)

Once establishing which songs the choreographer will create and what style the dance should be in, the next step would be to identify what the dance sequences illuminate for the characters or storyline. How does the dance number contribute to the telling of the story? What actions occur throughout the dance number? What is the end result? What moods or feelings are associated with the dance, and how should the audience respond to the dance? This is a good list of questions the director and choreographer could discuss before the choreography is created and rehearsed.

Every director and choreographer works differently; sometimes a director and choreographer’s rehearsal process will be similar, sometimes it won’t. This can be exceptionally challenging when working together to stage a musical number. For example,
in Frank Loesser’s *Guys and Dolls*, there is a large opening sequence entitled “Runyonland.” Throughout the course of this musical sequence, characters enter and exit in pantomime depicting the various denizens of the “underbelly” society. Let us say that the director and the choreographer have come to the conclusion that they will both be involved in the staging of this monumental opening sequence; the director will shape the storytelling, character path, and transitions and the choreographer will create the style of movement. Ideas to keep in mind are: which characters come on first, who enters and exits when, what is the primary focus at specific moments, and what style should the work be set? This seems like a daunting task when faced with the additional opinions and ideas of the choreographer and actors, but if developed before rehearsals and staged as a team, the product could be productive and visually stimulating.

The same careful communication in the director-choreographer relationship can be applied with the musical director. The musical director is not only responsible for teaching the correct notes to the actors, but also developing the shape, feel, and style of all the music in the production. “Rodgers and Hammerstein can put the notes and lyrics on paper, but if the musical director doesn’t execute them correctly, they are meaningless” (Peithman and Offen 84). The vocal score to Stephen Sondheim, Hugh Wheeler, and C.G. Bond’s *Sweeney Todd* proffers an eerie, but powerful sound that can only be achieved by scrutinizing the intricacies of the music. In the song “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” the ensemble needs to provide a large menacing sound when they enter singing “Swing your razor high Sweeney / Hold it to the skies. / Freely flows the blood of those who moralize” (2). However, in the same song, they must also bring a different kind of vehement intensity that speaks to the slyness of our antihero, “Inconspicuous Sweeney was / Quick and quiet and clean ‘e was / Back of his smile under his word / Sweeney heard music that nobody heard” (2-3). The beauty of Sondheim and other composers and lyricists like him understand the connection of music and text. The director of musical theatre should be sensitive to this as well.

Similar to the collaboration with the choreographer, the director should develop a certain vocabulary, this time pertaining to music. He doesn’t need an advanced theory of music, but the director should be able to recognize basic music terminology, such as: tempo, crescendo, decrescendo, ritard, staccato, legato, and dynamics (forte, pianissimo, etc.). For the most part, it is up to the musical director and the actor to discern the best use of these
stylizations in performing the song, but the director will have a say in this process as well. For example, the director may interrupt a song to develop a particular acting moment or stage business. Suppose the director wants a song to come across in a more comedic manner, he or she may speak with the musical director on how to drive a particular verse to reach a comic effect. “In the case of the vocal director, explain how you see the choral numbers integrating with your basic vision of the production. Then ask how he or she can help you reach that goal” (Peithman and Offen 107). Patience and exploration may be in order as the interpretation of a song can take a long journey in the rehearsal process up until opening night.

Apart from owning a basic musical vocabulary, the director must understand the structure of a song. Rarely do characters break into a song and dance on a mere whim; as theatre scholars, we understand there is a point for each musical number and why the character sings it:

When you approach a verse as a way to particularize the song to the specific character and moment in the show, then you can allow it to develop on its own terms, rather than as ‘that thing you have to sing before you get to the part that everyone knows.’ (Peithman and Offen 8)

The following questions are a good starting point for the director to communicate with the musical director. Does the song have a verse that introduces the character’s situation? Does the song begin with the chorus or refrain? How many refrains are present and what is their significant effect over the song? How can the bridge of a song offer a transition from one verse to another? These structural questions ultimately lead into a more in-depth analysis of why a character sings a song at that moment and how it affects the production.

How much time the director allocates for a musical director and choreographer can affect the quality of the production. This factor relies heavily on the abilities of the actors. In a professional production, the director may be working with very skilled performers; therefore, the rehearsal time for learning the music and rehearsing the dances may be minimal. In more amateur or educational productions, the director may have to appropriate the time used for staging scene work to extra dance rehearsals. This can be daunting, but it is important for the director to communicate how much time is allowed for the musical director and choreographer to develop the songs so the cast doesn’t fall behind in the rehearsal schedule. As a general note, the choreographer needs more time in developing and
rehearsing the dances than the director needs in staging scene work. Far too many productions suffer as a result of inappropriate rehearsal time for music and choreography. As a result, actors may be short-tempered, choreographers may change choreography too often, or musical directors may feel cheated. It is best to develop an appropriate schedule that takes into consideration the needs of the musical director, choreographer, and actors based on the amount of material to be learned and skill level of the performers.

In collaborating with *Hairspray*, Scott Spence realized that the opening number, “Good Morning Baltimore,” would require the talents of the musical director and choreographer, as well as his own in order to achieve a seamless opening number. Many large musical theatre productions open with an enormous musical number to energize the audience. “Good Morning Baltimore” does exactly this by incorporating dance, character introduction, staging, theme development, story exposition, and the entire ensemble. The lyrics describe a city of bums, rats, and even flashers crowding the street. However, the lyricists, Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, wanted to show a world where the characteristics of Baltimore fuel Tracy to achieve the things she wants. Spence wanted to emulate this optimism and hope in the staging of this musical number. From my journal, I note:

> It is important for the audience to see that the Baltimore Tracy creates in “Good Morning Baltimore” is her version of this gritty city. The bums are friendly. blacks and whites dance together. The rats are happy to see Tracy. This may not be a true representation of Baltimore in the 1960s, but it sure represents the optimism Tracy impresses upon the show.

The following are the lyrics of “Good Morning Baltimore” (See Figure 2). Notice what is said about Baltimore that seems grotesque, but could be depicted in an optimistic way. Before creating this colossal musical number, Spence decided the most effective means of collaboration was to allocate specific jobs befitting the creative team’s expertise. Spence decided the way to achieve this was to create a storyboard with the choreographer detailing each specific moment. The musical director, Larry Goodpastor, decided how many actors they needed to create the appropriate sound, and Spence decided which type of characters would inhabit the scene (bums, paperboy, police officer, hot dog vendor, etc.). As stated earlier, the director tries to unify all the elements (music, staging, dance) in order to tell the story as seamless as possible. Take note of how this could be achieved.
Prologue

“GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE”

(The curtain rises on TRACY TURNBLAD in her bed. The time is around 7 a.m. on a Monday morning in early June of 1962)

TRACY
OH, OH, OH,
WOKE UP TODAY
FEELING THE WAY I ALWAYS DO.
OH, OH, OH
HUNGRY FOR SOMETHING THAT I CAN’T EAT
THEN I HEAR THE BEAT

THAT RHYTHM OF TOWN
STARTS CALLING ME DOWN
IT’S LIKE A MESSAGE FROM HIGH ABOVE
OH, OH, OH
PULLING ME OUT
TO THE SMILES AND THE STREETS THAT I LOVE

TRACY
GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
ENSEMBLE
GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
EVERY DAY’S LIKE AN OPEN DOOR
AHH-ARH...
EVERY NIGHT IS A FANTASY
...FANTASY
EVERY SOUND’S LIKE A SYMPHONY
GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
AND SOME DAY
GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
WHEN I TAKE TO THE FLOOR
OOH – OOH
THE WORLD’S GOONNA WAKE UP AND SEE
AAH – SEE – EE
BALTIMORE AND ME

OH, OH, OH
LOOK AT MY HAIR
HOO – OOT
WHAT “DO” CAN COMPARE
WITH MINE TODAY?
MINE TODAY.
OH, OH, OH
I’VE GOT MY HAIRSPRAY AND RADIO
HOOT
I’M READY TO GO
READY TO GO
THE RATS ON THE STREET
OOH – OOH
ALL DANCE AROUND MY FEET
OOH – OOH
THEY SEEM TO SAY
OOH
TRACY, IT’S UP TO YOU
UP TO YOU
SO, OH, OH
DON’T HOLD ME BACK
‘CAUSE TODAY
TODAY
ALL MY DREAMS WILL COME TRUE
MY DREAMS WILL COME TRUE

GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
THERE’S THE FLASHER
WHO LIVES NEXT DOOR
AAH – AAH
THERE’S THE BUM
ON HIS BAR ROOM STOOL
BAR ROOM STOOL
(TRACY)
THEY WISH ME LUCK
ON MY WAY TO SCHOOL
GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
AND SOME DAY
WHEN I TAKE TO THE FLOOR
THE WORLD’S GONNA WAKE AND SEE
BALTIMORE AND ME
I KNOW EVERY STEP
I KNOW EVERY SONG
I KNOW THERE’S A PLACE
WHERE I BELONG
I SEE ALL THE PARTY LIGHTS
SHINING AHEAD
SO SOMEONE INVITE ME
BEFORE I DROP DEAD
SO, OH, OH
GIVE ME A CHANCE
‘CAUSE WHEN I START DANCE
I’M A MOVIE STAR
OH, OH, OH
SOMETHING INSIDE OF ME
MAKES ME MOVE
WHEN I HEAR THAT GROOVE
MY MA TELLS ME NO
BUT MY FEET TELL ME GO
IT’S LIKE A DRUMMER
INSIDE MY HEART
OH, OH, OH
DON’T MAKE ME WAIT
ONE MORE MOMENT
FOR MY LIFE TO START
I LOVE YOU BALTIMORE
EVERY DAY’S LIKE AN OPEN DOOR
EVERY NIGHT IS A FANTASY
EVERY SOUND’S LIKE A SYMPHONY
AND I PROMISE BALTIMORE
THAT SOME DAY
WHEN I TAKE TO THE FLOOR
THE WORLD’S GONNA WAKE UP AND SEE
GONNA WAKE UP AND SEE
BALTIMORE AND ME
BALTIMORE AND ME
BALTIMORE AND ME
BALTIMORE AND ME

(ENSEMBLE)
GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE
OOH – OHH
WAH SEE-EE
HOOT
HOO – OOT
WHERE I BELONG
HOOT
HOO – OOT
BEFORE SHE DROPS DEAD
OOH
OOH – OOH
MOVIE STAR
OOH – OOH
MAKES ME MOVE
WHEN I HEAR THAT GROOVE
OOH – OOH
OOH – OOH
OOH
INSIDE MY HEART
ONE MORE MOMENT
FOR MY LIFE TO START
GOOD MORNING
GOOD MORNING
WAITING FOR MY LIFE TO START
I LOVE YOU BALTIMORE
AAH – AHH
FANTASY
I PROMISE BALTIMORE
TAKE TO THE FLOOR
WAH...SEE
GONNA WAKE UP AND SEE
YES, MORE OR LESS
WE ALL AGREE
SOMEDAY THE WORLD
IS GONNA SEE
...AND ME...
Martin Céspedes, the choreographer, helped to tell the story through specific character focus, composition of movement, and business occurring around the stage. I found:

Cépedes was pretty adaptable in terms of choreographing a show. Sometimes he comes with an idea in mind and will organically play with the actors. But he was limited when it came to the disparate abilities of the actors. He continually simplified the movements until it looked right.

Fortunately, when it came to staging the number with the performers, Spence was able to work with the actors’ characterization while Céspedes manipulated the movement and transitions. Rehearsals can easily be stressful if not prepared, or it could be a very pleasant one if a common rehearsal process is established. Together, Spence and Céspedes created a storyboard that illustrated which and where the specific characters would enter and what their basic action would entail. Ultimately the number starts with Tracy in her bed and ends with the entire ensemble on the streets of Baltimore. All of the characters that were dictated by the lyric and of Spence’s invention assisted in solidifying the theme of hope and optimism. But each of the characters needed a style of movement that helped define them. A hot dog vendor is going to move differently than a prostitute, but they both needed to be optimistic. Spence and Céspedes worked together with the actors to create not just a street scene, but hope and optimism.

One of the problems in developing this musical number was aggrandizing the vocal strength of the ensemble. The entire orchestra and the lead vocals were amplified through the audio system, but the theatre did not have the resources to have each member of the ensemble wear a body microphone. Knowing this, Goodpastor reminded Céspedes that the dancing shouldn’t be so physical that the audience would lose the sound of the vocals. To strengthen the vocal sound, not all of the performers were dancing at the same time and offstage microphones were utilized for back up singing. Luckily, this created a layering effect where the audience could hear and understand all of the vocals as well as focus on the most important group crossing or dancing on the stage.

Due to the meticulous collaboration between Spence, Céspedes, and Goodpastor, this monumental musical number was staged without stress and it proved to be a qualified success. The relationship between the director and his choreographer and musical director is a delicate one. Since they all work with the physical movement and sound of the actor, their individual roles as a creative artist are closely related.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE DIRECTOR AND THE ACTOR: “I’M ALWAYS TRUE TO YOU IN MY FASHION”

Actors are graduating from musical theatre programs across the globe, which offer a variety of pedagogical approaches to performance. And while trained actors employ the methods of Stanislavski, Chekov, Meisner, etc., no two actors work exactly the same. For collaborative purposes, the director can obtain greater results by synthesizing his or her process with that of the actors who come from a variety of training backgrounds:

They [the director] need the ability to bring together all these disparate talents [actors] with their countless different attitudes and working methods, and persuade them to work together harmoniously and with a certain mutual respect. It can be done, but it’s sometimes not easy. (Ayckbourn 146)

The director trusts the actors will conduct research on their assigned role and thus be prepared with fresh ideas. But out of this, a large question remains – how does the director merge his or her process with a variety of actors who all work differently?

The process of answering this question does not start with the first day of rehearsal, but with casting. Some directors contend that a successful production is 90% casting because most of the director’s approach will be realized through the actors. Whether one believes this or not, casting remains a monumental task that requires careful detail communicating with and observing each of the actors auditioning. Before the audition commences, the director often assists the actor in providing a character breakdown, which lists a general description of each character highlighting both physical requirements and personality traits. Bloom suggests, “A casting breakdown is one of the rare instances when a director has to describe the characters in adjectival terms rather by action and objective” (105). By describing each character in adjectival terms, the director allows the actor to audition freely without the constraints of playing exactly to what the director wants to see. Consequently, an actor’s audition can influence the director’s vision. A common mistake is casting an actor because they matched a singular aspect of the director’s approach; this may yield a one-dimensional characterization on the actor’s part. For example, say the director is auditioning male actors
for the role of Billy Bigelow in a production of *Carousel*. He may want a burly, 6’2”
baritone to carry the role. Any number of actors may have this specific physical type, but if
they cannot reach the emotional depth similar to that of the character, he probably won’t be
the best choice. A stronger casting choice is an actor who is versatile with their performance.
The director can test this versatility by redirecting the actor’s choices and actions to see if he
can follow direction.

Working with actors in rehearsal is the most visible and precarious of the director’s
functions. Theoretically, the director should exercise a dual point of view: on the large scale,
he must not to lose sight of the production’s totality; and on the smaller scale, he must foster
the actor’s creativity. Robert Cohen and John Harrop state:

To create a balanced production with a disparate group of actors, the director will
need to sense how to approach different actors, tune into their rhythms, help them
fit their working methods into a harmonious ensemble, and thus create a
consistent style for the production. (169)

This “style” Cohen and Harrop allude to relates to the director’s process of communicating
the approach. The director can achieve this harmony through a variety of methods.
Manipulation is a common device used to coerce an actor into making choices of the
director’s design. It may seem devious, but the director opens a comfortable relationship by
allowing the actor to come upon solutions they think they have designed. Alan Ayckbourn
contends, “An actor’s choice can be stronger than a director’s because the actor then owns
that choice” (145). Often directors choose to give all blocking responsibility to actors,
allowing them to create and build the scene on their own terms. This mode is good for
establishing trust, but the director’s approach and pacing could be lost. A slight trade-off
entails developing a reciprocal give-and-take relationship. This may balance the director’s
ideas with the actors’, but even this can be problematic due to the disparity of the actors’
abilities. Some actors require constant reinforcement to build their confidence or to
propagate clear choices. In contrast, some actors need a constant “brow-beating” to feel they
are being carefully critiqued. However, the power of suggestion proffers the director to
safely redirect the actors in addition to developing a comfortable and creative relationship.
Instead of ordering a command, the director may suggest, “Why don’t you try sitting during
your monologue,” or “Deliver the same line, but try it with a vehement whisper and see how
that goes.” Through suggestion the director gives the actor the freedom of choice whatever the case.

As stated in the previous chapter, a musical demands more time to the learning of music and dance and little time for scene work. Thus the director must carefully plan what needs to be accomplished for each rehearsal. Undoubtedly the rehearsal process may vary given the rehearsal time, cast, and material. For the sake of discussion however, the rehearsal process may be broken into three sections: beginning rehearsals, middle rehearsals, and final rehearsals. The beginning rehearsals offer the director a chance to learn how an actor can work rather than how an actor should work. Since the director yields substantial results through channeling their abilities, the director identifies how each actor works very early in the process. For beginning rehearsals, the director may decide to work primarily on objectives, beats, and actions while others prefer to give the actors basic blocking and then explore action. Some directors like to begin the rehearsal process with theatre games or readings. I find the best way to realize the natural beat structure is to read the scene with the actors immediately before it is staged then discuss actions. Whatever the case, the director should communicate his or her process and allow for the actors to explore creatively within this framework.

The middle rehearsals could be the point when the actors perform the scenes “off-book,” or without the aid of their scripts. The director has the chance to reinforce blocking or reevaluate actions. However, since the actors are trying to link moments together in greater detail, contrasting ideas may emerge. The best way to handle this would be to treat difficult moments as discoveries. When the director encounters obstacles in rehearsal, it may be the time to revisit given circumstances, rethink choices of action, or upgrade them (Bloom 153). While time may be of the essence during middle rehearsals, exploration should be permitted for an actor to fully realize the character they are portraying.

The final rehearsals permit the actor little time for exploration as the director focuses on technical elements of the production. The actor may become intimidated in working with new set pieces, props, costumes, and crewmembers. The way to get the most from this period is to adopt a confident demeanor and to organize these rehearsals so the actors can adjust to the new changes. Sometimes an actor cannot embody the character until he or she is working with the set and wearing the costume(s). The director doesn’t want to stifle an
actor’s ideas; however, the integrity of a production could be compromised if an actor is continually changing movements or actions during the late stages of rehearsal in their newfound costume.

The cast of *Hairspray* was comprised of well-seasoned equity actors, professional non-equity actors, and beginning actors. It was difficult for director, Scott Spence to work to the ability levels of each cast member, but he remained constant in balancing the actors’ creativity with his personal style of directing. First, Spence gave the actors basic blocking, and then garnered the time for the actors to develop their respective characters. Figure 3 is a transcription of the song “You’re Timeless to Me” sung by two well-seasoned actors with an expansive professional resume. From my journal, I found:

Spence staged the song as light-hearted as possible. These two characters offer a comic relief in the midst of the production’s rising action. The scene takes place in the Har-De-Har Hut, Wilbur’s joke shop, so they used a lot of props (rubber chickens, whoopee cushions, etc.) to aid them and to keep it light-hearted. The actors have a lot of experience and Spence wanted to shape the song, but gave the actors some flexibility.

In Figure 3, the left column lists the director’s musical staging while the right column lists the actors’ contributions. Notice how the director first gave the direction and allowed the actors to fill in the gaps with business or “shtick” which furthers the characters’ reality. In this scene, Edna and Wilbur, Tracy’s parents, come to terms with growing older.

Spence applied a give-and-take approach in collaborating with the actors playing Edna and Wilbur. He exercised his ideas, but allowed the actors to build off that foundation. For example, when Spence directed Edna to sit on the whoopee-cushion, he granted Edna to play it as she chose. Another option included Edna discovering the whoopee-cushion, but the actor felt that it would be more rewarding to play it as an embarrassing act. Some “star treatment” was called for in staging this song. The actors playing these roles are popular Cleveland actors who were a major selling point for the production. Spence didn’t want to compromise their creativity to which Cleveland audiences have come to know and love. This song only offers a glimpse of actor-director collaboration Spence employed throughout the rehearsal process. The same kind of direction wasn’t appropriate in working with ensemble scenes where he shepherded large groups of people. But what he did do for the ensemble was to ask for little “shtick” or business they could bring to their character(s). For
Figure 3. Transcription of “You’re Timeless to Me.” The boxes on the left include the director’s staging; the boxes on the right include the actors’ contribution. Source: Shaiman, Marc, Mark O'Donnell, Thomas Meehan, and Scott Wittman. *Hairspray*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema, 2003. Print.
“YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME”

WILBUR
STYLES KEEP A CHANGIN’
THE WORLD’S RE-ARRANGIN’
BUT EDNA, YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME
HEMLINES ARE SHORTER
A BEER COSTS A QUARTER
BUT TIME CANNOT TAKE WHAT COMES FREE

YOU’RE LIKE A STINKY OLD CHEESE, BABE
JUST GETTING’ RIPER WITH AGE
YOU’RE LIKE A FATAL DISEASE, BABE
AND THERE’S NO CURE
SO LET THIS FEVER RAGE

SOME FOLKS CAN’T STAND IT
SAY TIME IS A BANDIT
BUT I TAKE THE OPPOSITE VIEW
CAUSE WHEN I NEED A LIFT
TIME BRINGS A GIFT
ANOTHER DAY WITH YOU

A TWIST OR A WALTZ
IT’S ALL THE SAME SCHMALTZ
WITH JUST A CHANGE IN THE SCENERY
YOU’LL NEVER BE OLD HAT
THAT’S THAT!
YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME

EDNA
FADS KEEP A-FADIN’
AND CASTRO’S INVADING
BUT WILBUR, YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME

HAIRDOS ARE HIGHER
MINE FEELS LIKE BARBED WIRE
BUT YOU SAY I’M CHIC AS CAN BE!

YOU’RE LIKE A RARE VINTAGE RIPPLE
A VINTAGE THEY’LL NEVER FORGET
SO POUR ME A TEENY WEENIE TRIPLE
AND WE CAN TOAST THE FACT
WE AIN’T DEAD YET!

Director:
Scene starts with Wilbur sitting on Stage Right bench. Edna stands Down Stage Right of bench.

Actor:
Wilbur tries to place whoopee cushion with Edna seeing. She almost catches him twice before he plants it.

Actor:
Wilbur stands and crosses Center Stage.

Actor:
Wilbur twists and offers hand to Edna still standing Down Stage Right.

Actor:
Wilbur crosses to Wilbur and reciprocates Wilbur’s affection.

Actor:
Wilbur mimes pouring two shots with bottle of “ripple.” Throws imaginary bottle and glasses on “ain’t dead yet.”
I CAN'T STOP EATING
YOUR HEAIRLINE'S RECEDING
AND SOON THERE'LL BE NOTHING AT ALL
SO, YOU'LL WEAR A WIG
WHILE I ROAST A PIG
HEY! PASS THAT GERITOL

GLENN MILLER HAD BRASS
THAT CHUBBY CHECKER'S A GAS
BUT THEY ALL PASS EVENTUALLY

YOU'LL NEVER BE PASSÉ
HIP HOORAY!
YOU'RE TIMELESS TO ME

YOU'RE LIKE A BROKEN DOWN CHEVY
ALL YOU NEED IS A FRESH COAT OF PAINT

AND EDNA, YOU GOT ME GOIN'
HOT AND HEAVY
YOU'RE FAT AND OLD, BUT BABY,
BORING YOU AIN'T!

SOME FOLKS DON'T GET IT
BUT WE NEVER FRET IT
CAUSE WE KNOW THAT
TIME IS OUR FRIEND

Edna mimes eating a leg of ham. Spins back in and offers the ham to Wilbur.

Edna crosses back to Wilbur and accidentally body checks him to the ground on “Hip Hooray!” Realizes her folly and helps him back up.

Wilbur crosses Stage Right in a circular motion ending Up Stage Center. Edna does the same on Stage Left.
(WILBUR & EDNA)

YEAH IT’S PLAIN TO SEE
THAT YOU’RE STUCK WITH ME
UNTIL THE BITTER END
AND WE GOT A KID
WHO’S BLOWIN’ THE LID
OFF THE TURNBLAD FAMILY TREE

EDNA

YOU’LL ALWAYS HIT THE SPOT
BIG SHOT!
YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME

WILBUR

YOU’LL ALWAYS BE DU JOUR
MON AMOUR
YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME

(TWO BAR MUSICAL INTERLUDE)

EDNA

YOU’LL ALWAYS BE FIRST STRING

WILBUR

RING-A-DING-DING!

WILBUR & EDNA

YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME
YOU’RE TIMELESS TO ME
YOU’RE TIMELESS…TO ME.
example, in “Good Morning Baltimore,” one ensemble actor was told he would play a “bum with rats” and that he would be “walking” his pet rats on a leash. The next rehearsal the actor decided that these rats weren’t ordinary rats, but super strong rats that would literally jerk and pull him along. Amazingly enough the idea worked great, and when he had to stumble on stage with two rats on a leash the audience exploded with laughter. This was what Spence intended, and he achieved this from his actor without telling him exactly what to do.

“The director and actor are both on the same side. They are trying to achieve a mutual understanding, not always stated, and work together for the final good of the play and satisfaction of each other’s creative needs” (Cohen and Harrop 232). There is a perpetual list regarding what the director should and shouldn’t do when collaborating with his actors. Unless the director will only work with the same group of actors on every project, every experience will be different because each actor has his or her own process in creating authentic characters. For the sake of art and collaboration, the director is more successful in fostering the actor’s creativity rather than eliciting a personal interpretation.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: “ONE”

This project report has not only examined the functions of the musical theatre director and the creative team, but more importantly how he or she will be truly successful in creating a masterful work of art by unifying the team within a singular vision while allowing for individual creativity. The director’s artistry or aesthetic in approaching a production is distinctive to that director’s personal style. It is my hope that the reader obtains a greater sense of how the director applies this artistry to his or her collaborators. With the design team, the director has the advantage to work on an external scale to discern how the approach can visually materialize; consequently, the director’s approach may be influenced by the opinions of the design team. Much of the aforementioned collaboration is done in the pre-production process; however, the choreographer and musical director have the advantage of working closely with the director beyond pre-production through the rehearsal performance process. This triad of collaboration must establish an etiquette that proffers productivity and artistic exploration during rehearsals. The balance between the actors and the director is a delicate one. Perhaps the director can be most successful in collaboration by endowing the actors with choices and options in character development.

There is one inconstant variable: how can the director conduct his collaboration when every experience will be different? Since no two directors, designers, choreographers, musical directors, or actors prepare and work exactly the same, the director is in a complicated position each time a new project commences. One thing that has been stated throughout this project report is that the director must remain flexible. He or she must face the task at hand and determine how the creative team can produce the desired effect.

There is a fine line between what makes a good director and a bad director. But a certain rule of thumb is that a production will always benefit from the attention of a collaborative director. The director who effectively collaborates with his or her team members will notice a uniformity of style and positive work ethic. Some theatre scholars contend the director’s approach is not theirs alone or could not be fully developed without
the assistance of the creative team and actors. This notion will surely infuriate many despot directors who feel that the production’s style is their creation only. If the director adopts this ideology, the production would no longer serve the story, but a solitary vision isolated to the director’s artistic needs.

Perhaps the reason why most audiences or reviewers will focus on the acting, scenery, choreography, or lights is because the director’s work will literally not be seen in a production. However, the director’s work will be seen and heard through his or her collaborators. They are the true reviewers and observers and will carry on the director’s examples of fostering creativity within this remarkable art form.
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