

BLOCKING & STAGING

TMI Creative Arts Flex Period

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WHAT IS BLOCKING & STAGING?

What is the difference between reading a play and actually “doing” a play? It is the fact that when you “do” a play, you are embodying the text – we are not only saying the lines but we are telling the story and moving as if the scene is real. This movement and visual story telling is what we call blocking and staging the show.

While blocking and staging are terms that are very similar and in some cases can be used interchangeably, they do in fact have two very different meanings. **Blocking** refers to the precise positioning and movement of the actors, props and set pieces on a stage in order to authentically tell the story. **Staging** refers to the process of selecting, altering, adapting, modifying or dressing a space for a play or film. It involves all decisions regarding the production of the play and making decisions about what will/will not be on the stage.

BLOCKING

The placement and movement of actors on a stage is a vital tool used to tell the story. Blocking can tell you about the attitudes of the characters towards each other and their environment. It can also help the audience understand an inner meaning existing in the scene that is contrary to the dialogue. Blocking should make the story and the dramatic/comedic purpose of the scene so obvious it could be understood without words.

Basic Functions of Blocking

- Reflecting authentic behavior of the characters – we want to imitate real life, and the movement of a character can tell us just as much and sometimes more than the words.
- Reflecting the relationships between characters
- Give focus to certain characters at certain moments
- Allow the audience to see exactly what they are meant to, or making sure they don't see something they aren't meant to see (either on or off stage)
- Reflecting the status of the characters on stage
- Logistically, blocking helps characters get on and off stage when they need to and can help differentiate between scenes/times/locations
- Helps actors navigate their way around the stage and use/avoid any set pieces
- Exploring the entire stage instead of staying stationary for the entire play – you have a full stage so use it.

Stage Orientations and Emphasis

The stage is broken up into 9 imaginary sections according to the actor's point of view:

Up Stage Right <i>(USR)</i> 8	Up Stage Center <i>(USC)</i> 7	Up Stage Left <i>(USL)</i> 9
Center Stage Right <i>(CSR)</i> 5	Center Stage <i>(CS)</i> 2	Center Stage Left <i>(CSL)</i> 6
Down Stage Right <i>(DSR)</i> 3	Down Stage Center <i>(DSC)</i> 1	Down Stage Left <i>(DSL)</i> 4

AUDIENCE

Each section of the stage holds a different level of importance/status, and these are indicated by the numbers below the directions. Having a character stand downstage center automatically gives them the highest status in a scene. Center stage is the second highest position to stand. The left hand side of the stage (Stage Right) will always be higher than the right (Stage Left) because we read left to right. Adam Meggido of Extempore Theatre says when an actor is losing confidence during an improvisation, they tend to find themselves drift to the back of the stage. But instead they should walk to square 1 or 2 to raise their status and deliver a strong line to get them and the scene back on track.

Directing Attention

In the medium of film and television, the audience does not have the luxury to choose what to look at like they do in a live performance. Their attention and focus is on whatever the director chooses to be in the shot. But on stage, the audience's attention is divided between different characters and places. It is especially important for the director to use the blocking to help direct attention and focus to where it needs to be.

Some things to consider when directing attention:

- Audience's eyes are drawn to movement – if it moves, they will look at it.
- Audiences are drawn to intensity. This can either be physical intensity (one character grabbing another, two characters being very close etc.) or emotional intensity.
- Sightlines are very helpful in directing attention. The audience will look where the character is looking.
- If you have a lot of characters on stage and need the audience to focus on one character, consider having them stand out of the crowd. Our eyes are drawn to difference.
- Consider who is the most important character/what is the most important moment in the scene and how the blocking will help or hinder that moment from being significant.

Strong vs Weak Movements

Blocking can help establish the status of characters and assists in telling the audience whether or not the character is accomplishing their objective or not. Movement of the character can be broken into **strong** and **weak** movements.

Strong Movements:

- Rising from a chair
- Straightening up
- Placing weight on both feet
- Placing weight on the forward foot
- Raising an arm
- Moving toward something
- Moving downstage

Weak Movements:

- Slouching
- Stepping backwards
- Sitting down
- Placing weight on the back foot
- Lowering an arm
- Moving away from something
- Moving upstage

Strong movements indicate the character has the power/holds higher status in a scene or that the character is getting what they want – they are achieving their objective. Weak movements indicate lower status and communicate to the audience that this character is struggling for some reason. Again, the point of blocking is to authentically tell a story in visual terms, and knowing the personality of the character, knowing their objective in the scene, and knowing their status will help you as the director determine what they need to do/how to move in order to make it clear for the audience.

Motivation For Moving


Blocking and movement must always appear to come from the character in the moment. There is nothing more awkward and distracting than seeing an actor move across the stage because ‘that is what the director said to do on that line’. Both the actor and the director are responsible for making sure movement has a motivation.


A director can instruct an actor to move by giving them direction in terms of motive and objective – e.g. to better observe, to be near something, to get closer to something or someone, to stretch, to pick something up, and so on. This helps make sure that movements are given a justification and impulse and are not just arbitrary directions like ‘move stage right’ or ‘step toward Johnny’ or ‘cross upstage left’.


For an actor, they need to understand that there will be instances when the director asks them to move a particular way or do a particular action because they are setting something up for the next scene. Or it is because they need to hit a certain mark for lighting, camera angles, etc. In these cases it is up to the actor to determine what their motivation is for moving that way. They need to consider what their character’s objective is in that scene, their relationship with the other people on stage, to their environment, and their response to what has just happened in that moment. Therefore, when they are notating their movement in their script they understand the motivation and are not just recording simple movements.


Blocking Positions


Blocking Positions: (strong - realistic)

 Apart & Facing - medium distance, comfortable, little or no tension, ideal for intro and setup.

 With more distance or when near walls, affect is one of caution or being on edge

 Close & Facing Confrontation, intense, or intimate. Near climax or resolution.


 Forward/Behind - One character is closed to the audience (back to audience). The other character, open to the audience, is dominate as the attention of the audience is focused almost entirely on him.


 Both open to audience. Both can draw interest of audience. Opportunity for use of MASK device (displaying emotions or actions visual to audience, but not other player - masked feelings vs. honest feelings). In this position, the mask device can be used by both players.


These blocking positions can be modified by using the one-quarter front position or the three-quarter back position. Below are some of these variations:




Other Blocking Positions: (weaker - sometimes theatrical)

 Apart - Open to Audience - Ideal for displaying inner thoughts, recall.

 Close - Open to audience - Inner thoughts, recall, with more tension.

 Apart - Facing Away - Open conflict, no agreement.

 Close - Facing Away - Mutual conflict, with increased tension.

STAGING

Staging is more than just the set or stage itself. It is your interpretation of a piece - how you choose to put it on display for people to see. It involves everything you do to bring the drama to life. There are many different things to consider when staging a play:

- What do you want to achieve through performing this play/scene?
- How do you want the audience to respond?
- What message are you trying to send?
- What stage type works best for your drama?
- If you do not have a choice in what stage you play on, then what are the pros/cons to the stage you have? What are the strengths it presents, and what challenges may you need to work through?
- What style/dramatic form best suits your vision and the script?
- Who is your audience?
- Who are your actors?
- What technical/design elements are available to you/what will you choose to use? (*Costuming, make-up, lighting, props, scenery, music, sound effects etc.*)

Types of Stages

Proscenium Arch

- The “arch” acts as a frame creating a window through which audiences watch the action.
- Gives everyone a good view as the actors only have to worry about the audience on one side.
- Simplifies trying to hide things from the audience – stuff that does not need to be seen can simply be put in the wings created by the arch of the stage.



Thrust

- Stage is surrounded by the audience on 3 sides.
- The fourth side is used as the background.
- Gives greater intimacy between the actors and the audience than the proscenium
- Directors need to pay greater attention to blocking to ensure set pieces/movements don't leave one side of the audience blind to the action on the thrust.



Theater In The Round

- Stage is positioned in the center of the audience.
- Good for dramas requiring audience interaction
- Creates a very intimate atmosphere
- Also called Arena Theater



Traverse Stage

- Audience are seated on two sides of the stage
- Very similar to a catwalk
- Also known as an alley or corridor stage
- In some cases, both ends of the stage may be accessible, or one side may be used as a backdrop like this image.
- Usually requires minimal props and set pieces
- Greater chance of the actors back being to part of the audience



Site – Specific/Environmental/Promenade Theater

- These types of theater are performed in unconventional settings such as a hotel, a park, a train station etc.
- **Site-Specific Theater** is performed at a unique and adaptable location specific to the play usually unassociated with theater.
- When the location is meant to emulate the setting of the story exactly it is called **Environmental Theater**.
- In some cases the audience is encouraged to move and follow the action from place to place in one room, or it may involve multiple locations. This is known as **Promenade Theater**.
- All of the above types of theater encourage the audience to actively participate in the scene. The lines between life and performance are blurred.



Styles of Theater

Understanding the style of the script that you are producing is instrumental when deciding how you will stage your play. If it is a piece of naturalism, you are going to want the set to look as real as possible. But this may not be appropriate if you are producing an expressionistic piece of theater. Here is a brief list of the different styles:

- Classical
- Commedia dell Arte
- Theater of Cruelty
- Symbolism
- Naturalism
- Realism
- Expressionism
- Absurdism
- Modernism
- Postmodernism
- Physical
- Verbatim
- Brechtian
- Classical
- Epic
- Musical
- Comedy
- Improvisation
- Tragedy
- Melodrama
- and so on...*

The Fourth Wall

The fourth wall is like an invisible screen between the actors and the audience. When the play runs with the audience as passive observers keeps the fourth wall intact. There is no direct contact between the audience and the actors. The play happens as if the audience is looking through a window just observing the action. However, when the audience is addressed directly, and/or direct eye contact is made the fourth wall is broken. The audience is actively engaged in the drama. Sometimes the script calls for the fourth wall to be broken, but usually the choice lies with the director. And whether or not you choose to break the fourth wall will influence the special relationships between characters and the audience and the type of stage you choose.

Use of Technical/Design Elements

The style of the piece, the message you want to send, and the type of stage you use will all influence the decisions you make regarding the design of your performance. The style will heavily influence the costuming and make-up, whether it needs to be natural and life-like or more symbolic. It will also determine the lighting state – does it need to convey a specific time and place, or is it more important to convey a certain atmosphere or mood? The stage type will also be a major determining factor. A proscenium stage will need a different lighting configuration to a theater in the round. If your piece is promenade you need to consider if there will be any lighting available to you and/or if you need them. A play performed in transverse will require a different approach to set design than one on a thrust stage.

Conclusion

Blocking and Staging are an integral part of telling an authentic, powerful and entertaining story. As the director you have a choice about how the play will appear on the stage. However, it can be easy to overthink it and see blocking and staging as a daunting task. The best thing you can do is make sure you know your piece inside and out and trust your gut. Do what you feel is going to tell the story the best way possible and don't apologize for making bold decision.