

DIRECTING THE HIGH SCHOOL PLAY - BE A VISIONARY



Directors need to have a vision for the play. That means ALL directors: professional, community, high school, etc.

Why is it important to have a vision? Because vision gives a play a unifying factor. It gives the play a drive, a look, a tone. Having a vision can bring clarity to a not-so-clear play. It helps students focus on the bigger picture. It adds to the overall experience. A vision gives a director purpose; it's the creative element the director brings to the table. And quite frankly, it's fun.

Visions do not have to be complicated and esoteric. The simpler the vision the easier it will be to convey to the cast, crew and designers.

There's nothing wrong with a vision of fun and frivolity – just make it clear. Then be consistent with what you're trying to achieve.

For Example

I directed a version of ALICE IN WONDERLAND. The line of dialogue that really jumped out at me after reading the book was from the tea party: "We're all mad here so you must be too." I thought it was interesting that Alice's response was that she didn't want to be mad, like she didn't want a cold.

My vision was to focus on the madness of Wonderland and see if the other characters could make Alice crazy as well. I also had a technical vision for the play, which was to make all the fantastical elements practical for school use.

I created a clear physical division between the Wonderland characters and Alice. Alice was the only character with flesh showing – all the others were as inhuman as possible. I had a trio of girls play the Cheshire Cat instead of one to emphasize the madness of the world.

The Wonderland characters also treated Alice poorly; shoving her, towering over her, pinching her. They hissed at her from the darkness. She was not of their 'world' and the only way she could be is if she changed; became more like them. This is how a vision translates to the stage. The audience saw a production of ALICE IN WONDERLAND, but the show (from me, to the teacher creating the props, to the girl playing Alice) had vision.

Where Does Vision Come From?

It truly is the fun part! Highlight the one word, the one image, the one action that speaks to you in the script. Find music that represents the story, the main character. Give each character a colour. Find magazine pictures, pictures of art, sculptures, anything that can help you and everyone you talk to about the play, SEE the play. Create a scrapbook. The more visual the vision can be, the better.

Continued Over...

Exercise

Find a way to describe the play using the five senses. What is the taste, touch, sight, sound and smell of the play? This is an excellent exercise for student directors who may have no idea that directors need a 'vision.'

Exercise

Play 'What If?' with the text. What if ROMEO AND JULIET took place today instead of the 11th century? What if SWEENEY TODD was set in a mental institution where the patients played their own instruments? What if the alienation of the main character was shown in the costumes with everyone else in black?

Always Keep In Mind... Stay true to the playwright's intention. You can't come up with a vision and then rewrite the script to suit the vision.

Another Example

HAMLET as a metaphorical contrast between LA and New York. That Claudius and Gertrude are 'LA' people; they're tan, they wear bright colours, Polonius wears Hawaiian shirts and a bad rug. Gertrude looks like she's had a facelift. Claudius is Hamlet Senior's much younger brother so he's closer to age and looks to Hamlet.

Hamlet, on the other hand, is New York flung into a human being - he scowls, he wears a lot of black, combat boots and a satchel, he smokes. Ophelia also dresses like this because she loves Hamlet. But hers is a more subtle, or really, a less successful look. She's such an awkward girl. Maybe she hides the black under a bright sweater so Polonius doesn't find out. Maybe she has a secret tattoo. Both she and Hamlet have incredibly white skin in comparison to everyone else around them.

The new Denmark is kind of like a party, a luau where the Beach Boys are always playing and the light streams across the stage like bright sunshine. It's a big change after much darkness.

Colours: Bright vs Dark

Texture: Sun and Sand vs City steel

Sound: The Beach Boys vs hard guitar and drums

Sight: Hamlet looking incredibly out of place on a beach

The play has a clear visual conflict, there's a clear colour palate for costumes, lights and set. There's a defined sound to the play. There's a set direction. There's a simple visualization of light and dark, which plays in opposite to who are the light and dark characters in the play. This is how a vision can work for you.

Still Stuck?

See plays and try to decipher the director's vision. If you can't, think about why not. Maybe it's because there isn't one...