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### **I Don't Have a Clue: A First-Time Director's Guide by a First-Time Director**

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“I Don’t Have a Clue:  
A First-Time Director’s Guide by a First-Time Director ”**

written by

**Isabella Owen**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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April 19, 2023

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## **Introduction: Who Am I and What Am I Doing?**

Why do we need *another* book on the art of directing? I will admit, there is a plethora of resources out there, and I recommend that you read those, as well. However, those resources are written by experts in their field who have years of training and experience under their belt. I have zero degrees and no professional experience in directing. I am grossly unqualified to be telling you anything about directing. Which is why I am the perfect person to offer advice to a first time director!

This guide outlines my experience directing my very first full-scale production: *Clue* at Ouachita Baptist University. I will take you behind the scenes of every part of the directing experience - from auditions to strike and everything in between. If you are anything like me, you are probably quite apprehensive about the huge undertaking set before you. Don't worry, we will talk about that, too.

Don't think about this book as a step by step how-to manual. Rather, consider it a survival guide. Directing your first show is like running a marathon... except you're sprinting the entire time... and you're being chased by your cast and crew. But, don't worry! It'll be fun!

## **Chapter One: Casting and Crewing**

### **Casting**

The casting process is probably what made me the most anxious. If you are in a situation similar to mine where you are casting your peers and friends, I imagine it will make you anxious as well. I have heard that casting total strangers is so much easier, but I have yet to experience that. The best thing to do in any casting situation is put your blinders on and cast the show with the people who best fit the roles. It is the worst, but I have some tips that might help!

#### *Planning the Audition Process*

Previously, I said that the casting process is the worst. This is true, BUT that doesn't mean you can't have fun. The stress of the casting process was immense, but I was full of laughter and joy at auditions and callbacks. This is why I recommend requiring your auditionees to prepare material that will entertain and engage you. That doesn't mean have them come in and play zip zap zop for ten minutes. It can be productive while also being fun. I knew that watching monologue after monologue would not be engaging for me nor would they inform me well enough to make an accurate callback list. I decided to play a round of two truths and a lie to start the audition. This allowed them to relax a little bit and it also gave me insight into how they lie naturally. Then, I provided them with a fake scenario in which they had to improvise an alibi. It fit the style of the show, kept me engaged, kept the actors auditioning relaxed, and allowed the callback list to practically make itself. It is completely up to you how you want to conduct auditions. Monologues, improvisational exercises, cold reads, whatever you want!

### *Sending Out Audition Information*

After you have decided how you want to structure the auditions, you need to send out an announcement with the date, time, and location of the auditions as well as what the actors need to prepare. With this, I chose to include a Google form that the auditionees could fill out. In it, I asked them questions such as name, email, phone number, headshot/resume, dates of conflict, interest in tech, roles of interest, and any other questions that you need answered. I took the information from this Google form and made a contact sheet from it once the show was cast. Talk about multitasking at its finest!

### *Holding auditions*

After you send out all of the necessary information for auditions, it is time to actually hold auditions. You should get to the audition room at least an hour early to prepare your physical space and your headspace. Make sure that you have a list of characters readily available and keep your auditionees' information nice and organized. I recommend taking notes on each person as you see them and keep everything organized. In order to know what you are looking for, you need to have an understanding of the characters before you enter the audition room. Make sure that your stage manager or a helper can be there to help aid the process along. There are countless ways that you can run the auditions. I chose to do a drop in audition because I didn't have an overwhelming amount of people sign up through the Google form. I know a lot of directors that choose to do audition time slots to stay more organized. Private auditions are my preference because the actors are likely more relaxed if they are not being forced to perform for the director AND their peers. Although, audition groups can save some time if you have a large group of auditionees. Like I said, you have many options available to you. I had everyone's

information in a Google sheet, so I was able to pull all of their information up as soon as they entered the room. I also kept a Google doc open to take notes on each person. I kept very detailed notes on each person and tried to take down character traits that I noticed so that I could compare those with traits of characters in the show.

### *Holding Callbacks*

Alright. Auditions are done. You have probably had a very taxing day, and it isn't even over yet! I recommend making a callback list while it is fresh on your mind. I was filling my callback list out as auditions were going to make it as easy on myself as possible. If you are interested in an actor on any level, put them on the callback list so that you can see them again. On the flip side, don't call somebody back if you are not seriously considering them. It is not only a waste of your time, but also a waste of their time. It is important that you specify that those called back may be asked to read for a role that they were not called back for. In my case, I ended up casting somebody in a role that they were not called back for. Once we got to callbacks, I realized that they were perfect for that role.

Organize your callback list by character and then list all of the actors called back for that role below. In addition to sending out the callback list, you should also send out the callbacks materials as well. Some people prefer to do cold reads at their callbacks. This is not my preference because, instead of watching acting, I am watching reading. The earlier you send out callback materials, the better the callbacks will be. By giving actors time to prepare, it makes your decision so much easier when it comes to casting.

You need to have a callback order in mind to keep things going smoothly. Try to be respectful and considerate of everyone's time. Once you stop considering somebody for a role,

dismiss them. The more thorough notes you take during callbacks, the easier making the cast list will be. Go scene by scene and make sure that you have everyone read at least once. If you called them, use them. The rest of the callback process, for me, was just a matter of trying out different pairings and taking notes. Do your best to try and focus on obtaining as much information as possible. Don't think too hard about the cast list yet. Let the notes that you take aid you in that process later.

### *Creating the Cast List*

Trust your notes and trust your instinct. Casting your peers is very difficult. I would advise against spending hours upon hours stressing over casting. Deep down, you know what the best fit for your show is. Don't make everyone wait just because you are scared of hurting somebody's feelings. You will inevitably disappoint somebody... that's just one of the perks of being a director! In my case, I knew who the best fit was for each role and cast as such. I did, however, reach out to everyone who auditioned (whether they were cast or not) and offered to share my notes with them and my reasoning as to why I made the decision I made. Something I always love is getting feedback and closure, so I tried to provide that for my peers. If anybody has an issue with the cast list, it is up to them to talk with you about it. You cannot control what others will say about your casting, but you can control how you react to it. It will be difficult at times, but remember that in this setting, you are the director, not just a student. Do not engage in gossip or the spread of rumors or any drama. I do not tell you this to discourage you from directing, but to inform you that it is not always rainbows and butterflies. But we will talk more about that later.



## Crewing

In my case, I chose my stage manager, my assistant stage manager, and my set designers. I had a few students reach out to me about specific jobs that they were interested in. The students in the practicum class were assigned to the rest of the roles. I was very fortunate to have such a full crew. If you do not have the same luxury as I did, I would search for people with at least some understanding or experience in the job that you are looking to fill. Do not neglect the crew when it comes time for the show. Just because they do not start as early on in the process as the actors does not mean that their job should be valued less than the actors. Without members of the tech crew, your show would quite literally be incomplete: no set, no lights, no sound, etc. While you may not painstakingly choose your crew like you choose your actors, you should treat them all equally as members of your production.

## **Chapter Two: Rehearsals**

### **The Rehearsal Schedule**

Making the rehearsal schedule is one of the biggest jobs that a director does before the rehearsal process begins. Before you even hold auditions, you should have everyone send you a list of all of their conflicts. Conflicts need to be seriously considered when you are casting. Regardless if somebody is right for the part or not, if they can't be at half of the rehearsals, they may not be right for the production.

### *Structuring the Rehearsal*

You need to have an outline of a rehearsal plan. I recommend blocking chronologically. It makes the most sense and it avoids confusion relating to continuity. If you block out of order, actors will have to put in unnecessary effort later on trying to figure out how all of the scenes fit together. In addition to this, you could also find problems with your blocking not lining up from scene to scene.

### *Making the Schedule*

Once you have an outline of a rehearsal plan, it is time to make the schedule. It may seem like a behemoth of a task, but I promise it is not that bad. I chose to start by choosing a time for rehearsal that would work for every day. This helped the actors to never be confused as to what time rehearsal was because it was the same every single night. From there, it was just a matter of inputting my rehearsal outline into the available rehearsal days. I chose to use Google Sheets (the Google equivalent of Microsoft Excel) to make my schedule. (Side note: I took all of my notes and kept all of my records in a Google Drive folder so that I had it with me wherever I went.

Once again, totally up to you!) I had three separate columns for the date, time, and what we were covering in each rehearsal. Any additional information such as specific breakdowns of when characters and personnel would be called was added later in the daily call.

### *Changes in the Schedule*

Before we get into this next section, I want you to take a deep breath in. Now let it out. All done? Good.

The schedule you spent oodles and boodles of time on? Yeah, that one. It is tentative. It is always subject to change. Especially in educational theatre, some unforeseen conflict is bound to show up. One of the main things I learned through directing is that you always have to be prepared for things to not go your way. A general rule that I liked to follow throughout the rehearsal process was to always let my actors know about changes to the schedule at least 24 hours in advance. I would always err on the side of scheduling too many rehearsals and surprising them with a night off as opposed to not scheduling enough rehearsals and adding one at the last minute. Time and energy are precious things and they must be respected.

### Running the Rehearsal

Once you have made the schedule, stick to it! Have your stage manager send out a daily call with the date, time, people needed, what you will be working on, and any other notes that you or your stage manager deem necessary. While your cast has the master schedule, it helps combat any confusion if you reiterate what you will be doing that day.

## *Leading*

I will start off by saying that running a rehearsal as a first-time director is incredibly intimidating. The fact that I was directing my peers and friends made it even more nerve-wracking. The best way to start this process is to set boundaries and ground rules. Here are the rules that I set before I started my first rehearsal:

- At initial blocking rehearsals, you must have your script and a pencil in hand.
- Do not talk when I am giving notes.
- If we come across an issue, let me try to solve it before you try to give me suggestions.
- Come off-book when the schedule says that you should be off-book.
- I will respect your time and energy if you will respect mine. This means come to every rehearsal prepared.
- I am not good with confrontation, so don't make me confront you.

For the most part, these rules really worked for me. I highly recommend coming up with your own set of rules that will serve your weaknesses or insecurities. This will help to show that you are serious about being efficient and productive.

When I first found out that I was going to be directing the show, my main concern was my self-proclaimed lack of leadership skills. If you relate to this, my advice to you is to discuss this concern with your faculty advisors and/or mentors. Their advice helped me to build a good foundation. One thing you have to realize is that, while you are directing your peers and possibly even your friends, your job is to direct. It took me a while to figure out what the dynamic was

between me and my cast. Eventually, I was able to talk to them as my friends and also as my cast. There is no need for you to take on a completely different personality as a director. You will NEVER be able to please everyone. Such is life.

Early on in the process, it is important to create a sense of community. One way to do this is to have a beginning ritual to each rehearsal. This can be a warm-up game, a daily question, anything you want! I chose to ask everyone what their “wins” were for the day. These can be as big or as small as you like. Some examples of some “wins” I heard throughout the process are “I woke up;” “I went to class;” “I am alive;” “I got a job;” “I had a good breakfast;” “I passed a test!” Especially in an educational environment, we can all get burned out and discouraged very easily. To combat this, take just a few minutes to cultivate a positive environment by celebrating yourself and celebrating each other!

### *Dealing with Conflict*

It’s going to happen. Whether it’s complaining, heated disagreements, or rumors - conflict is inevitable. The best way to deal with this is with open communication. Do not engage in petty talk or passive aggressiveness. This is not productive and will only contribute to the problem. Talk in private with whomever is involved. The bottom line is that you all have the same goal in mind: to have a good show. You do not all have to be best friends.

If the problem persists, whatever it may be, seek counsel from a mentor. As a general rule, never be afraid to ask for help as a first-time director.

### *Blocking*

Come to each blocking rehearsal with at least a general idea of what you want to happen in the scene. The way that worked best for me was drawing out my blocking for each scene on a piece of paper. I started by sketching out a very simple aerial view of the floor plan. Then, I would label characters by the first initial of their character's name and, if I was feeling especially organized, I would color code them as well! To show movement, I would draw lines with arrows in that character's color. If you are a visual person, I highly recommend this. Having everything sketched out beforehand not only helps you with initial blocking, but it can also help the actors to see a visual representation of their placement and movement.

### *Giving Notes*

This was one of my favorite things to do while directing. This is where you get to fine tune the show into the production that you want it to be. The style of giving notes that worked best for me was constructive criticism. You have to have a good balance between positive and negative. If you praise your cast all the time, they will not strive to be any better. On the flip side, if you criticize your cast all the time, they will resent you and not want to invest any time and energy into your production.

The hardest part of giving notes is patiently waiting for a good time to give them. I really struggled with perfectionism and I wanted to stop the scene anytime something wasn't up to par. However, if you never let the actors run things, they don't even have an opportunity to make acting choices and it also hinders them from gaining a solid understanding of the flow of the piece as a whole. The process that worked the best for me was to let them run whatever we were

working on, and then I would give notes and clean. Do your best to keep your notes concise. The longer you ramble, the less they will retain.

In addition to this, do not let actors or crew members give other actors or crew members notes. If they have an issue, they need to come to you first so that you can fix the issue.

I recommend being as thorough as possible with your notes. Your show can always be better. That is the beauty of live theatre! Your cast and crew may occasionally get annoyed at how detail oriented you are, but the end result is worth it - and they would agree!

### **Chapter Three: Behind the Scenes**

One major thing that I didn't realize when I first began my directing journey was just how involved the director is in every aspect of the production process. While the director's main job is working with actors, the director also has a hand in the technical aspects as well. A lot of this may seem self explanatory, but a little over explanation never hurt anybody!

#### *Stage managers*

The role of the stage manager is to communicate details to the cast and crew. They are the liaison between you and everyone else involved in the production. Your stage manager needs to be extremely organized. In the early days of the rehearsal process, the stage manager will send out daily calls, rehearsal reports, and any other important information that will keep production running smoothly. Once it is time for the actual show, the stage manager will call the show - lights, sound, shift, you name it! The stage manager is NOT your assistant, but rather a very valuable member of your production team that, quite frankly, works magic.

#### *Props*

The director should give as many details as possible to help props people pull the correct options. The props crew also gets to put their own personal touch on things. If it doesn't align with your vision or conflicts in any way with the show you are creating, speak up. Props and set dressing tends to happen a little bit later in the process, but your props people should at least pull placeholders for your actors to use in rehearsal.



### *Costumes*

As a director, you need to meet with your costume designer to discuss and compare your visions for the show. Remember to stay accurate to the script and to the playwright's intentions. While costumes will not be officially incorporated until dress rehearsal begins, the process should begin relatively early on. Initial costume fittings should be happening during the early rehearsal process and should continue until the costume is completely finished. The costume designer should be in constant communication with you and should send you pictures of the state of the costumes at each fitting. This is not only to keep you updated, but to make sure that you do not have any changes that you want made. Your costume designer should come to dress rehearsals and take notes to make sure that everything is working properly.

### *Set*

Get started EARLY on the set design. One of the very first things you need to do in the directing process is meet with your scenic designers. Before rehearsals begin, they should have come up with a director-approved floor plan and have it taped out on the stage so that you know the space that you will be working with. This also helps you to identify any possible problems in the initial design.

### *Lights*

The bulk of the lighting process will happen during tech weekend, but it is never too early to start discussing possibilities for lights with your lighting designer. I often forget how significant lights are to a production. It truly does add so much, so take extra care to make sure it aligns with your vision.

## *Sound*

I cannot contribute too much to this section. The one and only show I directed came with music and sound effects, so we didn't have to go out and handpick specific sound effects or songs. However, if you do have to go in and handpick sound effects and music for your show, I would give a list of things that you need to your sound designer and ask for a few options for each. This gives you options to choose from while also allowing the sound designer to design the sound.

## **Chapter Four: Putting It All Together**

### **Tech Week**

Ah, yes! The dreaded tech week. It's extremely tiring, but don't worry! I have some tips to help you!

#### *Dry Tech*

The first piece of advice that I can give to you is to come prepared. Throughout the process, you should constantly make notes of what cues need to happen where and have an idea of what you want it to look and sound like. I promise, this will make the process go so much faster. Yes, your tech crew is wonderful and can do things on the fly. But, just because they can, does not mean that they should have to. The more prepared you are, the less hostile the stressful tech weekend environment will be.

When it comes to dry tech (working on writing cues with the technical crew without the actors), patience is a necessity. It takes time to make everything exactly right. Pro tip: pray and bring snacks.

#### *Cue to Cue*

Adding the actors can seem like a very daunting task. There are now SO many people involved it can easily become overwhelming. Lucky for you, cue to cue is a relatively slow day. The main goal of going cue to cue is to slowly incorporate the tech elements into the show. This is also a chance for the stage manager to learn the best way to call the cues for the show. This is the first day where the stage manager begins to take over. Once again: prayer and snacks.

## *Dress Rehearsals*

Lights, sound, costumes, props, set... the whole shabang! It's finally time for the dress rehearsal. This is the most fun part, in my humble opinion. The very first full dress rehearsal will be awful. It is just a fact. If your first full dress rehearsal isn't an absolute dumpster fire, then you don't need to be reading this. You're the best director ever.

Most of your notes will be tech related. It is best to give tech their notes first when the run is complete. This is because you can get most of their notes out of the way while the actors are getting out of costume. It also helps if you meet with the crew members one on one and explain exactly what you need from them.

This is your last chance to fine tune your show before you set it out on its own. Take advantage of the time that you are given and don't feel guilty for wanting to make it the absolute best that it can be. Now, this does not mean that you should hold your cast hostage in the theatre and make them run the show three times each night. Run it once each night, give notes, clean if you must, and move on.

I will say that warming up with your cast and having a little meeting before every dress rehearsal (and every show, for that matter) really does help keep that sense of community and it helps to keep up the positive environment. Dress rehearsals cause a lot of stress for a lot of people, so it is important that you keep morale up and encourage your cast and crew.

## **Chapter Five: Letting It All Go.**

This was hands down the most difficult part of the process for me. I know I have said that a lot of things were difficult, but this time I mean it. Nobody ever tells you how strange it feels to sit among the audience of your own show knowing exactly how it should go, but having no more control over the outcome. You cannot control what your actors do once rehearsals are over. Turn it over to the cast and crew and try to enjoy it. You also cannot control what the audience will say about your work. You have to be confident enough in it to be proud of the final product without needing validation from other people. Reserve your seat. Wear a fun outfit. Watch the show without taking notes. Enjoy watching your work come to life. The beauty of live theatre is that it is ever changing. You will never ever see the same show twice.

### **Conclusion: Who Are You and What Are You Doing?**

I directed a show and wrote about it. I hope that you, the first time director, found some comfort in my short little survival guide. The purpose of this guide is to help you find your bearings and build a foundation before you actually start directing. Now, it is time for you to decide how you want to approach this journey. The possibilities truly are endless. In reality, you could take all of my advice, and it will still be nothing like you expected! That's the best part of being a director, no matter how prepared you think you are, there is a surprise around every corner.

Above all else, remember why you are doing what you are doing. When you are overwhelmed, think back to why you love creating theatre. Be confident in who you are as a person and that will contribute to your confidence as an artist. I learned so much about who I was even though I had no idea what I was doing. After reading this, I hope you learn something about yourself and (hopefully) know a little bit more about what you're doing. Don't worry! Have fun!