How To Use Stage Directions

I was recently leading a playwrighting seminar when the inevitable question arose. I expected the question. It’s always asked.

*How much stage directions should I use in my script?*

I love this question. It’s right up there with ‘where do babies come from?’ You want to answer. But you’re afraid that telling the truth will expose a piece of the world some people aren’t ready to handle.

Because the question isn’t about the nature of stage directions, or the nuance of them, but the *quantity*. Always the quantity.

You’d think that strange except, in the context of new plays under development by emerging and submitting playwrights, quantity has meaning.

Emboldening my herein missive to tackle this question are comments from a bevy of theater dignitaries. Sure, you could just scroll down and read their incredible insight. But then you’d miss how stage directions are related to yoga.

**STAGE DIRECTIONS and YOGA**

Around the same time I reengineered my primary occupational focus to playwrighting was when I got into yoga. A friend nudged me. Sam, he nudged, yoga is an amazing combination of intense workout and meditative journey. A must for creatives.

Yoga is not self-directed. It’s a guided practice. As a group. Practitioners enter an open studio and position their mat and then a yoga instructor leads the class.

Again, key words here: group, open, practitioners, guided.

Now this is what happened the first time I went to a yoga class. I stepped with nervousness into the studio. I was the new guy. Actually, I was the guy. Literally. During the regular workweek daytime, when I have flexibility (BANG) to attend, the yoga studio is packed with Mommies.

And…enter Sammy G. Feel like Custer much?

But it was cool because along with my Yoga mat I brought a high-powered flashlight focused on my wedding ring. Safe and harmless non-creepy new yoga guy here!

I surreptitiously sauntered (if that’s possible) to a remote corner of the yoga studio. As I began to unroll my mat one of the Mommies, covered in Lululemon and glam-glitter body lotion, sneered at me in a hawkish voice, ‘this is my spot.’

I’m sure you know the type.

There are people who go to one class in particular, the same day and the same time of week. The regulars. The ones who grow to feel protective over a certain space they like to place their yoga mat. After many years as a regular practitioner certain people begin to feel that they’ve somehow earned their spot. As if all the hours they’ve spent attending the one class gives them some kind of special privilege. So when a new student, a first-time attendee, walks into the yoga room and sets their mat right on the spot that the many-years Yogi has been territorializing, and forms the moment when the veteran approaches the first-timer and says ‘this is my spot’…
Is the moment that entails the same false sense of entitlement that playwrights can unknowingly exude by embedding certain types and amounts of stage directions into their new plays.

Yep. I just wrote that on the internet.

We’ll get back to this.

**WHAT ARE STAGE DIRECTIONS?**

Stage directions are directions for the stage. Stage directions are script-infused communication from the playwright to the creative team and not spoken to the audience. Stage directions can specify what is happening on stage during a performance. Stage directions can be designating when characters enter and to whom characters are speaking. Stage directions can describe action and movement. Stage directions can detail visual presentation. Stage directions can be perception. They can be cognitive. Stage directions can also be context.

Stage directions present a difficult dance for writers: how much to tell, and how much to leave to the reader? While directions are crucial to understanding physical context, my most common suggestion to playwrights is to avoid the temptation to direct from the page. Provide us with the necessities in terms of location, mood and the like, and if you’re worried that a moment or image may be misinterpreted and is vital to the appreciation of your piece, by all means be specific with your intentions.

Otherwise, trust that the world, words and actions that you give to your characters are clear and specific enough to carry your meaning without dictating every glance and inflection – an overwhelming amount of stage directions can sometimes indicate an author’s lack of confidence in the clarity of their story. My favorite stage directions are the ones that remind us that the theatre is a collaborative art form and open us up as artists to answer compelling questions.

“She flies” is an evocative and potentially powerful direction that can take the interpreter down so many different paths: is this flight physical? spiritual? how do we open up our theatrical toolbox and best present this dynamic directive with our creative minds and hearts? Build the sandbox for us, then let us play.

–Eric C. Webb, Director of Creative Development for Davenport Theatrical Enterprises

**CROSSING THEM OUT**

Stage directions have a precarious position amongst those who work in the theater. They are both deity and deified. This is because there’s a unspoken level of inherent conflict between the exacting wishes of the playwright and the creative unfurling from the script by director, actors and design. Along the supply chain of expressive communication, stage directions flirt between one role demanding specificity and another of relaxed collaboration.

You must have heard by now the oft-spoken treatise espoused by some directors that they cross out all stage directions as soon as they get a new script. Isn’t that hilarious?

Actually, I’ve seen this happen with actors, too. Another true story: I once arrived at a table read for a new play of mine. I offered to bring hard copies of the script. I get to the room and pass out the scripts and take a seat. Which is when the actor starring in the lead role immediately seated to my left started blacking out huge blocks of text in the script. Awkward pause moment. I’m like, ‘ummmm…what’s up?’ He’s like: ‘What?’ I’m like: ‘Well, you’ve got a big black marker and raking it across the page.’ He goes: ‘Yeah, I’m crossing out all stage directions.’ I’m like: ‘ummmm…but they’re important.’ He goes: ‘Only to you.’
I never forgot this.

As a director I regard stage directions with ambivalence. If there are many, very detailed descriptions of realistic locations and clear direction notes on what should happen on stage, I’m usually uninterested. It suggests to me that the playwright has a very clear idea on how he’d like the play to be done, and will be unhappy if it’s any different. Those writers I happily encourage to direct it themselves and then walk away. If there are no stage directions, that suggests to me that the writer is open to having every production of the play take a different direction, and she lets the work fend for itself.

A play like any artwork is like a child born adult. It has parentage, but once born has to stand on its own feet. Stage directions are scaffolding. They don’t belong integrally to the work, they are hints for the production. They can be helpful or a hindrance. In any event, the writer is best served by acknowledging the collaborative nature of theatre, and once the play is handed over to a director, it's out of their hands.

–Katrin Hilbe, Workshop Theatre and Articulate Theater Co

**GLUTTONY FOR THE WORD**

Most of us writers spent a lot of time reading. Writers are readers. I bet you read a lot more than you write. So we have a gluttony for the word. We relish in and frolic among language.

For me, this influence goes back to the O’Neill-ian style of play creation. I remember in high school studying the Works Of The Masters. I read published pages drenched with opulent and florid prose explained the set, style, mood and character emotional states. When I first got into playwrighting I expected this semi-novel, semi-script approach to be the norm.

Oh, but I am in the here and now writing you, this is no longer the norm. Not for Submitting Playwrights. A Submitting Playwright, someone without commission or patronage, creating on spec and sending to literary managers and festival producers and artistic directors through a general solicitation campaign, should know this is anti-norm. For Submitting Playwrights, plastering your scripts with an overdose of instructive particularities can turn off evaluators.

Why? An abundance of stage directions carries the unfortunate stigma of a writer who isn’t necessarily open to others applying their own creativity or interpretation to a script. Stage directions can sometimes doom a potential production because they can imply: this is the only way my play can be done and the only way I will allow it to be done.

Consider there are some theaters out there that don’t even consider stage directions under their artistic mission.

As a producer, I actually ignore stage directions when I first read a submission. To explain: my theatre company, The Pulp Stage, does plays where no physical actions take place in a scene. The purpose of doing this is to create readers theatre pieces that need nothing more than entrances (stand up from the chair) and exits (sit down).

While our format is unique for contemporary theatre, the discipline of less-is-more extends to Shakespeare and especially the Greeks: What information (about setting and stakes) can you smuggle into the dialogue itself?

–Matt Haynes, Artistic Director, The Pulp Stage

**PAUSE FOR LAUGHTER**
Now, before you say: Sam, my stage directions are VERY important and my script is NOT the same without them... allow me to give you another true story.

I'm leading a playwriting class when an attendee asks about the formatting of stage directions. The writer was uncomfortable about her formatting of stage directions because she had a specific direction she was using over and over. She felt unsure whether to format as a separate line or embedded within dialog. But she was adamant about using this stage direction because she wanted the actors to understand they needed to pause for audience reaction. And that without the stage direction the actors wouldn’t understand that the dialog was supposed to be funny. The repeated stage direction was: **Pause For Laughter**.

Pause for laughter.

So this is an extreme example but it takes us right to the core of the issue which is about playwright protocol. Would you ever walk into a rehearsal and tell an actor how to read a line? Would you ever in front of those actors tell your director how to direct the play?

*Then why are you doing it in the script?*

But I get it. I mean, just look at all the text messages getting sent these days. The electronic imprint is a poor medium for human interaction because intent is susceptible for being misrepresented or misinterpreted. We’ve increasingly taken to punctuating our messages with emotional identifiers. What’s a written message these days without an emoticon or gif to emphasize our goodwill and happy tone?

I see this usage as an effort on improving clarity. I want you to know that I was JK! B-) XD :-J LOL! This message is sent from a happy person! Playwrights are happy people!

Pause for laughter.

We are becoming more habituated with infusing definers into our definitions. Which might not be to your advantage when porting this human/technology evolution to your playwriting. Character motivations? Very important to make those clear in your dialog. How those characters need to speak and what they mean when they’re speaking and where they need to stand and what the stage needs to look like around them? LMAO!

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**Stage directions are tricky. I can’t tell you how many scripts I stopped reading after a few pages because the stage directions were too specific or too elaborate. I had to train myself not to pay too much attention to them. If you can’t envision how you’re going to accomplish what’s being described it’s easy to dismiss a great script out of hand. My favorite stage directions are questions.**

They’re so sneaky! If you ask me if the woman with no arms and no legs floats off stage at the end of Act I I can’t not imagine that, but because it was a question I don’t feel like I have to create it. They let playwrights plant ideas, but leave room for interpretation by the director and designers.

—Meg DiSciorio, Artistic Director, Swandive Theatre Company

**SHAPE TWO VOICES**

I was told years ago by several playwriting veteran superiors to keep stage directions to a minimum. If you’re working on a new play as an emerging playwright, Sam, then get out of your own way. Your job is character, conflict and situation. That’s all people want to see on the page.

However, in shaping my own voice for the stage I’ve sort of built a secondary voice for the page. If you’ve read my scripts (you’re reading my scripts, right?) you’ve seen that I’ve tried to shape two voices.
It is true that the playwright’s primary function is to furnish the dramatic conflict so that other artists and designers are provided the platform on which to position their own craft. And yet…there’s something missing to me when I leave all other elemental pieces behind. Perhaps this is tantamount to encroaching on disciplines outside my realm, but infusing elemental, emotional or positional direction is part of the way I’m playing the game.

And the way I play this game is by generating a second voice on the page. The playwright’s voice through the characters and dialog is the main voice. But there’s also a voice to those reading your material. A second voice. And what if you could use this opportunity to wedge your second voice as a foot into the door of evaluator acceptance?

What if your stage directions were funny? Wry and ticklish? Provocative and challenging? What if your stage directions were done in a way that created their own internal story? The audience doesn’t see this. But the people who do are the ones going ‘I might want to work with this writer.’

As a director of new plays, I’m obviously working closely with the playwright in the rehearsal room quite frequently. As we go through the process of developing and rehearsing the piece, the stage directions can be an incredible roadmap for the actors and designers and myself towards greater understanding of the play, and the writer’s intention.

A costume designer or sound designer may go through the play utilizing the stage directions to learn what the playwright’s choices are telling them…and we discuss them in process.

An actor may look at them as a synthesis of behavior they study when considering the whole journey.

If, during the rehearsal process, any of us feel a stage direction is confusing or an impediment, we discuss them in process. But when it comes to rehearsing a new play: the practice of taking someone else’s art without them being in the room and eradicating it feels anti-collaborative and zero sum in its behavior. We’re making art, comrades — it’s all a process of uncovering and discovering together. Ask a question; we can all work harder through a challenging rehearsal moment to understand why the written word is on the page.

—Jeremy Cohen, Producing Artistic Director, The Playwrights’ Center

**BUT DON’T DO THIS**

But doing this second voice approach can lead you astray.

I’ve seen many scripts with gruff and street-slang dialog countered by stage directions of expansive, lofty, academic, essay-style diatribes. As if the writer was going: I’m an impressive person. Don’t do this. Focus on the play and not your sense of self-importance. Damn, I just wrote that on the internet.

I’m also going to write this – please avoid line reads with dialog. I’m guilty of this. I catch myself parenthetically prefacing dialog with intended timbre [Warmly but with a trace of tenderness] and manner of speaking [Smartly but polite]. You think doing this is 100% absolutely necessary. It is not 100% absolutely necessary.

Another don’t do this – avoid using 4,006 words at the start of the play describing the set. Save it for when your play gets published. For your submitting script I suggest using as few words as possible for establishing the stage layout. I don’t want to bore readers with a history lesson or the background of the story or why I’m writing it. My goal is to get people as fast as I can to Scene One.

**ENTITLEMENT**
Remember the yoga story? ‘This is my spot’? Happened a few PageUps ago?

I called it a false sense of entitlement.

Having attended group fitness classes for over a decade, I find that psychology is predicated on a fallacy that differentiated status has been earned because of senior commitment to a particular place. That presence over time has earned some sort of self-appointed elevation of a person’s stature and authority.

As I wrote, if you go to these group fitness classes then I’m sure you all know the type.

And if you work in theater then I’m sure you also know the type.

The overuse of stage directions by playwrights can come across like entitlement.

You’ve been working on your play for a year. You’ve thought about it, researched it, wrote it, rewrote it, turned it over in your mind many nights. How can anyone possibly know more about this play than me?

Let me ask you – why would anyone want to know more about this play if you already know it all?

I like to know just enough about where and when we are (the establishing directions) and as little as possible — though anything necessary — about everything else.

—Michael Gnat, Actor, inaugural IT Award nominee, Indie Theatre Hall of Fame

Michael has neatly given a two-pronged approach for considering the playwright’s use of stage directions. There is the necessary, the immediate and tenable, particularly if there’s anything, as Michael told me, requiring clarification as counterfactual or counterintuitive. Then there’s the harassing that seems more ‘you must’ than ‘you might.’

**THERE’S LESS I KNOW ABOUT THIS PLAY**

Like most of my articles serving the general playwrighting public I try to offer that there are no right or wrong answers. In this case, there is just an awareness of how certain groups of theater professionals will respond to new plays and submissions based on prevailing industrial norms.

IMHO the important thing to remember is that each play is different. Playwrights should be imagining their play for the stage. Playwrights should know what’s necessary for their work and write confidently towards that image.

To this point, I’ve even written a short play in which the whole script is one long stage direction. No dialog.

The collection of above quotes to me signify one thing — how we use stage directions can speak to the type of collaborator we are as much as the play we’re trying to create.

So you know what I do now? I don’t have ‘a spot.’ Each time I step into the yoga studio I choose someplace different. I convince myself that this is my first time and there’s a lot I don’t know about myself and a lot I don’t know about the world around me.

And whenever I finish a script, and go to hear it read, or prepare it for submission, or go into rehearsal, or attend opening night, I intone the following: There’s a lot I don’t know about theater and there’s even less I know about this play.

It may not be true. You may know more about a specific play than anyone else ever will. But with this attitude you’re using each new script as the founding of a unique partnership in which creative solutions arise from collaborations between fellow artists contributing different ideas, perspectives and skills.
You’d be surprised how much yourself and your stage directions might change along the journey.