

Getting Directions

A Fly-on-the-Wall Guide for
Emerging Theatre Directors

Russ Hope

Foreword by Dominic Cooke



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Introduction

On a Lighting Gantry

It is 2005 and I am crouching in a lighting gantry, hoping I cannot be heard, hoping to remain unnoticed. I am in the studio theatre at the university I attend where, twenty feet below, the director Peter Brook is rehearsing with the actor Bruce Myers ahead of a workshop performance of a new piece.

I was looking for my phone, which I had misplaced during rehearsals for a student play, and as I walked across the lighting gantry, I realised that something was going on below. The piece is *The Grand Inquisitor*, from the chapter in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Jesus finds himself in the Spanish Inquisition. Myers, as the high priest, interrogates an empty chair. 'If you are God, turn these stones into bread.' I realise that, if I can stay quiet enough, I might stow away with them to Seville.

What I didn't know is that Peter Brook rehearses in French. It doesn't matter that the actor and the director are English, nor that the performance will be in English. I don't speak French. Not a word.

Brook says something to Myers. He speaks, unbroken and calm, for maybe five seconds, and Myers nods and

speaks the line again: 'If you are God, turn these stones into bread.' Before, it was a threat. Now, there is compassion within, and almost a longing for God to return. The actor appears to hold two contradictory ideas in his mind at once, and the poetry of that struggle reaches all the way up to the lighting gantry.

To this day, I do not know what Brook said that could have had such a transformative effect.



This book reinvestigates that moment, broadcasting the feed from the security camera in that often sacred place, the rehearsal room.

Each chapter documents the creative process for a production by a theatremaker at the forefront of a generation of British theatre. The account is part rehearsal diary, part essay and contains the most candid interviews you will read on the challenges of working as a professional theatremaker. Each account follows a production from its inception through pre-rehearsal meetings, rehearsals, the tech process and preview performances to press night. The productions are: a new version of a Greek play, two different approaches to Shakespeare plays, a Great American Play, an adaptation of a British novel, a pantomime, a plotless live performance by a devising company and an opera. At the end, there is a short section that offers a collection of principles to help the emerging director find focus, decide which projects to pursue, and create work that excites them.

Getting Directions is a book about creative relationships, approaching problems, and learning good judgement. It is a book about a day job as much as a vocation, and craft as much as art. It aims to help you ask better questions

(of yourself, of texts, of companies) and develop your own theories and process. What it does not promise is quick fixes, for all silver bullets turn out to be quicksilver. This is to say nothing of the crime that it would be to rob you of the bittersweetness of making your own mistakes, those frustrating, exhilarating steps on the path towards developing your own voice, with its own attendant quirks and tactics.



I can't drive. When people ask why, I tell them I took lessons (which is true) and was doing well (which is not true). Then, one day I convinced myself that, living in London, I would have no need of a car and, in any case, wouldn't be able to afford one (true, not true, true). Since then, I maintain, I have had no desire to drive – buses and trains are just fine, thanks (definitely not true).

The truth is: driving scared me. A car weighs a ton and can move at eighty miles an hour, yet we've decided to let almost anyone drive one. For all I know, someone might drive his car into something fragile and valuable like someone else. Or me. Unable to compartmentalise that fear, London's roads – even the quiet back roads near my parents' house – transformed into Spaghetti Junctions and mountains. The fact that I had paid attention in my lessons and knew the Highway Code meant nothing. I would have been crazy to ask my teacher to put me up for the exam, and he would have been crazy to consider it.

Driving, like any activity, requires a balance of knowledge, skill and behaviour: in this case that means knowledge of the Highway Code, the dexterity to point

the car where you want it to go, and a temperament that's neither hesitant nor gung-ho. Anything less than three out of three and you'll be sitting at the bus stop, bursting with knowledge but utterly ineffective.

You could be reading this book for any number of reasons. Perhaps you have strong instincts but want to revisit first principles. Perhaps you excel in the abstract theory of directing but find yourself clamming up every time you're forced to communicate your ideas. Perhaps you want to know how to get a leg up in a saturated industry. Or perhaps you are simply beginning to think about plays as more than simply 'staged literature', and what the screenwriter Charlie Kaufmann once called 'the staggering possibilities of light, vibration and time'.

A Few Ground Rules →

1. The chapters snip and pinch time. As most rehearsal processes share a common ancestor, I have focused on the elements of each process that seemed most remarkable or instructive. For example, one chapter might emphasise casting, or the tech period, whilst another passes quickly over those sections or omits them entirely. This is not to say that a conversation in one chapter did not happen in some version in another, or that each director did not have something to say about each part of the process.
2. When we are searching for answers, it can be tempting to focus on craft to the extent that we create a depersonalised system. The reality is that any work that is of value will be personal and idiosyncratic to its maker.

3. Part of the director's job is to tailor process to purpose. With that in mind, this book does not claim to give the definitive account of a director's mind or imply an unchanging process. It merely captures a particular process that worked for a particular production at a particular point in time.
4. Any comparisons I draw between individuals or processes are mine alone.
5. The gendered pronoun for a director will reflect the gender of the director in that chapter.
6. Because our focus is on directors, the protagonist of each chapter is more fleshed-out than the company. To refer to a director by name, then to 'an actor', 'the actors' or 'the company' could be interpreted as suggesting two sides of a conflict or a lone-wolf auteur against a crowd, but nothing could be further from the truth. I cannot overstate the contribution of actors, as individuals and as a group, to each production.

**Matthew
Dunster**

Troilus and Cressida

by William Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Globe

Matthew Dunster directs, writes, teaches and acts – and probably in that order. He has directed new work (*Mogadishu*, Royal Exchange, Manchester; *Love the Sinner*, National Theatre; *The Frontline*, Shakespeare's Globe), large-scale Elizabethan productions (*Macbeth*, Royal Exchange; *Doctor Faustus*, Shakespeare's Globe) and worked on adaptations that push notions of theatricality (*Saturday Night Sunday Morning* and *1984*, Royal Exchange; *The Fahrenheit Twins*, Barbican). As a writer, his plays include *Children's Children* (Almeida Theatre) and *You Can See the Hills* (Young Vic). He teaches drama to many different groups of people, and is an associate artist of the Young Vic.

‘Directing isn’t about playing loads of games... it’s about detail, and detail is about craft. It’s taken me a long time to get to a place where I’m comfortable in my process, and where the cast are respectful but we can have fun. Getting there takes guile, graft and the help and guidance of others.’

Matthew Dunster



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➔ Paul Stocker (Troilus), Matthew Kelly (Pandarus) and Laura Pyper (Cressida)

Troilus and Cressida by William Shakespeare

Opened at Shakespeare's Globe, London, on 22 July
2009.

Creative

Director **Matthew Dunster**
Designer **Anna Fleischle**
Composer **Olly Fox**
Choreographer **Aline David**

Cast

Ulysses **Jamie Ballard**
Paris **Ben Bishop**
Andromache **Olivia Chaney**
Hector **Christopher Colquhoun**
Agamemnon **Matthew Flynn**
Achilles **Trystan Gravelle**
Menelaus/Alexander **Richard Hansell**
Thersites **Paul Hunter**
Aeneas **Fraser James**
Pandarus **Matthew Kelly**
Priam/Calchas **Séamus O'Neill**
Cressida **Laura Pyper**
Helen/Cassandra **Ania Sowinski**
Nestor **John Stahl**
Troilus **Paul Stocker**
Diomedes/Helenus **Jay Taylor**
Patroclus **Beru Tessema**
Ajax **Chinna Wodu**

Musicians **Joe Townsend, Jon Banks, Ian East,**
Phil Hopkins and **Genevieve Wilkins**

To: the cast of *Troilus and Cressida*

Date: 23 May 2009

Subject: Welcome

▶ 1 Attachment [Troilus_rehearsal_draft.doc]

Hello Cast,

I just wanted to send a note with the rehearsal script (see attached).

I have worked with some of you before, and I think the work I have done editing the script will feel pretty tame to you guys.

To those new to the way I work – don't worry about any ideas contained in the stage directions: they are first ideas and not prescriptive. Your ideas will always be better than mine and I look forward to hearing them.

My rules on approaching anything are simple: CLARITY – STORY – DRAMATIC EFFECTIVENESS. I want it to be clear and exciting.

In getting the play down from its massive 28,500 words to around 21,000, sometimes the iambic has been ruptured. Ruptured, but never disregarded. I know how it works and have only made sacrifices where I felt it would improve the chances of a modern audience understanding the text.

Where I have chopped things around, the original is always there for us to go back to. Likewise, let's keep looking for cuts and places where our modern understanding of dramatic language can help us tell his brilliant story. Let's collaborate with Shakespeare. He was a populist – he would want people to get it and be excited by it.

Having spent so long getting inside the play, I am convinced of its brilliance. I can't wait to take you all inside its dark heart. Every character wriggles with complexity.

Rehearsals are simple. From day two we'll do circuit training and stretches for the first 45 mins (you'll all be dicking around in togas and sandals so it's in your best interest!) and for most of the first two weeks we will read and read and read.

Everything points to a strong Homeric show full of anachronistic surprises. I can't wait.

I'm off to Croatia in about five hours so I for one will be tanned and beautiful when we meet!

Looking forward to it.

Matthew

Shakespeare's Globe →

It is an uncharacteristically warm morning on the South Bank of the Thames. An ice-cream van is parked outside the entrance to Shakespeare's Globe, its queue snaking towards the Millennium Bridge. In front of the theatre gates, a tourist photographs her son as he gives his best 'Alas, poor Yorick', a Flake '99 standing in for the skull. As the ice cream melts down his wrist, the kid accelerates his half-remembered speech: something about 'I knew him well...'

I am at the corner of New Globe Walk and Bankside, looking at Shakespeare's Globe, an oddity of wood and thatch sandwiched between the chrome and glass of twenty-first-century restaurants and bars. A blue plaque on the wall in front of me reminds passers-by that this institution, so quintessentially English, was the vision of an American, Sam Wanamaker, who founded the Globe Theatre Trust in 1970 and pursued the project until his death in 1993, four years before the theatre presented its first season.

In 2008, Dominic Dromgoole became the second artistic director of the Globe following Mark Rylance, an actor known for his shape-shifting, mercurial performances. Like Rylance, Dromgoole combines a classical appreciation of Shakespeare's work with a love of the raucous; the bearpit on which the new Globe is modelled.

Earlier in his career, Droomgoole served as artistic director of the Bush in West London, a prolific new-writing theatre, where he premiered work by writers including David Harrower and Conor McPherson.

As part of his first season, Droomgoole commissioned a piece from the playwright Ché Walker. *The Frontline* was a head-on, high-speed collision of the Globe's legacy with the present. Set in modern-day Camden, a company of hoodies, asylum seekers and lap dancers took to the Elizabethan stage with sneakers and boom boxes to celebrate and dissect all that London is and could be.

To direct *The Frontline*, Dromgoole hired Matthew Dunster.

Matthew Dunster →

I first meet Matthew at the Young Vic, after a matinee performance of his play *You Can See the Hills*, which he also directs. It is midweek and the theatre is two-thirds full. Matthew sits on the back row, his arms spread across the empty seats either side. As the house lights go down, he kicks his feet up on the seat in front. He reacts as if he doesn't know how the story ends, laughing at the jokes and leaning in to the tension.

After *The Frontline*, Dominic Dromgoole invited Matthew to return to the Globe, this time to direct a play by Shakespeare. Dominic suggested *Troilus and Cressida*, one of the few in the canon that the theatre had yet to produce in a full-scale production, and which Matthew hadn't read, either when Dominic suggested it or when he agreed to the job. He tells me this and he registers my surprise:

People tend not to believe me when I say that, but I wanted to do a Shakespeare play I didn't even have a sense of. I've acted in some of the others or I've read them, but I don't know anything about *Troilus and Cressida* so I can treat it as a new play, and that's exciting. Of course, once I read it, I realised how difficult it's going to be. I had to read the script twice before I understood a word of it.

I leave thinking this is bluster; the boasts of a director who wants the first notes I make to be that I have just met a 'maverick'. At home, I pull my *Complete Works* from the shelf and flick past nine hundred pages to *Troilus and Cressida*.

Damn.

I have to read it twice too before I understand much of what's going on.

A Quick History Lesson →

The story of *Troilus and Cressida* is ancient, and has passed through many tellers. It begins seven years into the siege of Troy, when the war has reached a stalemate. The demigods of Greek mythology – Agamemnon, Ajax, Achilles, Hector, Menelaus, Paris and Helen – are siloed in their camps, breaking the monotony with skirmishes. A Trojan prince, Troilus, falls in love with a young woman, Cressida, whose father defected to the Greeks, but their love is short-lived: the Trojan generals agree to trade Cressida for one of their own, a soldier languishing in a Greek prisoner-of-war camp.

Shakespeare probably knew the story through the versions by Chaucer and Homer. But where Chaucer treats his subjects with wry humour and sympathy, Shakespeare hunts them for vanity; where Homer sees heroes,

Shakespeare sees a boil to be lanced. In Shakespeare's version, the war is a chaos fought over a 'whore and cuckold' from which no one will learn a damned thing. Thersites, the knowing fool, says it best: 'Nothing [but lechery] holds fashion.'

Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* has long confounded critics, audiences and theatremakers alike. Without a protagonist, veering between comedy and tragedy, and with an ending that raises more questions than it answers, it was consigned to that drawer marked 'problem play' where it gathered dust for best part of three hundred years. There is some suggestion that it may not even have been performed during Shakespeare's lifetime. In the late sixteenth century, the dramatist John Dryden tried to make sense of the play, only he didn't 'make sense' of it so much as edit out the bits he didn't understand, reordering scenes, adding and removing dialogue and killing Cressida in the play's final third to allow Troilus to rise as a traditional revenge hero. Dryden's *Troilus and Cressida* remained the favoured text until the play went out of fashion, remaining unperformed until the horrors of the First World War prompted society at large to reinvestigate the gulf between the ancient warriors they'd read about in books, and the unprecedented horror they now read about in the newspapers, or witnessed first-hand.

It could also be argued that modern audiences, schooled in the fractured narratives of contemporary cinema and the slow-burning ensemble stories of television, are simply better primed to respond to the play's structure. Either way, Matthew isn't interested in critical baggage. 'People obsess over whether it's a tragedy or a history play or a comedy,' he says. 'The answer seems obvious: it's all of them. If we celebrate those complications, I think the audience will accept them.'

The Text and the Space →

The Globe has an imposing character of its own. Half the audience stands, and performances happen in the open air without amplified sound. In the daytime, actor and audience share the sunlight – every face is visible – and the quality this creates is difficult to pin down, even to those who have worked in it. A magnetic field hums between the play and the space that Matthew would be ‘a fool’, he says, to ignore. A production at the Globe requires a bespoke response.

Conceiving a production, a director has two main sources of inspiration:

- The Text
- The Performance Space

Directing a production for the Globe can be a disarming experience as it robs the director of two of the main tools of contemporary theatre: recorded sound and focused light. The reason for this is an artistic policy that the theatre calls ‘original practice’. Enforced to varying degrees depending on the production, original practice ensures that the audience’s experience of the production reflects the aesthetics of Elizabethan theatre. Yes, the auditorium is fitted with a sprinkler system (after all, the original Globe burned down!), and yes, there may be video monitors backstage, but these are usually hidden from the audience.

Then there is the space, which is infamously exposing, large and open on three sides. Complicated sets tend to obscure many in the audience’s view, and are cumbersome to set up and strike from the stage. The Globe’s immune system seems to reject them as a body might reject a transplanted organ.

In an interview with the *Guardian* in 2009, Dominic Dromgoole explained how the ‘well-fashioned miniature’ doesn’t work at the Globe: ‘You have to tell big stories here... big lungs, big action, big thought.’ Whilst Matthew favours stillness generally – ‘I don’t think an actor should move unless the character needs to’ – his experience directing *The Frontline* taught him that a production at the Globe needs to keep moving, lest it exclude some section of the audience.

Does this mean that a production at the Globe must be more theatrical? Matthew grimaces at the question. He asks me if I just used ‘theatrical’ as a synonym for ‘big’. I nod, and I think I may have stepped into a bear trap. ‘West End musicals tend to be larger than performances in studios,’ he says. ‘Would you say that either is necessarily more *theatrical*?’ ‘No,’ I say. ‘Of course I wouldn’t.’ The trap closes around my ankle. ‘A theatrical experience doesn’t mean a diversion from something naturalistic or truthful,’ Matthew says. ‘It simply means one group of people presenting something to another.’

Defiant, I run through the list of potential spanners in the works of creating some idealised production: the daylight, the exposing stage, the combination of seated and standing audience members. Does Matthew feel on any level that there is a compromise in being asked to develop a production with so many outside considerations? ‘No,’ he says. The bear trap twists my leg off. ‘It’s my *job*!’