

**The Realities of Theatrical Production:**  
**Practical considerations for realization on onstage**

By Phoebe Roberts



When theater is produced, it becomes a series of many interlocking cogs which all work together to make a show come to be. The mechanism begins with the writer, but there are also actors, directors, designers, and technicians. There is a perspective and a body of experience associated with every person who is going to be helping bring your show to life. Most playwrights become familiar with the process of submitting your scripts around in hopes that some theater will be interested in producing the piece, but you can't necessarily know the background of the people who will be making the decision of whether or not to produce. Maybe you're expecting your submissions to be read and considered for production by directors. But maybe you've submitted to a company that always consults their technical chief to be certain it's within their capability to bring your neat but technically demanding script to life. Have you considered what someone approaching your script from a technical perspective might think of it? Maybe these people considering your script come from an acting background, and care about the experience the current casts will have playing out the show. These people's opinions arise from their experience in bringing scripts from the theory of the page to the reality of performance. Since you can't be certain who will be in charge of making these production decisions, you should try to write with an awareness of how non-writers approach a theatrical text.

The key to writing for the theater, as opposed to writing for the screen, is the taking into account of the practicalities of live performance. Of course there are obvious differences between the two. Theater happens in three dimensions, while film is in two. The events of a theater play

must be performed in real time and in the sequence specified by the text, while things are committed to film in advance of screening, and can be done out of order and reassembled in the proper viewing order beforehand. But there are other features that may not spring to mind unless you're really familiar with the workings of how theater is produced.

Consider the particular relationship between live actors and a live audience. There is a lack of physical separation between the actual people onstage and the living audience watching the show. The audience is often sitting no further than thirty feet away, and this can have particular effects on how they take in the experience. Even in a truly huge theater, we are all in the same room. The lack of physical separation creates a feeling of complicity with the action in the people watching, so it can have more of an emotional impact on them. Things that can be viscerally difficult or challenging, such as sex or extreme violence, emotionally strike the viewers differently, creating feelings in them that might not otherwise be so immediate. But audiences often insulate themselves from distressing feelings by reminding themselves that what they are watching isn't real, isn't actually happening. As the theater medium is more amenable to representational action than the cinema, plays often have a lesser degree of verisimilitude than one might expect from a film. That inability to ever forget that the theater piece they are viewing isn't real may reduce the visceral emotional impact on the audience. In "Aria da Capo" by Edna St. Vincent-Millay, when Thyrsis and Corydon murder one another, their blood is often represented by unfurling red ribbons, a stylistic choice that does not have the same gut impact as one with more realistic gore. By contrast, the screen has the advantage of being able to present intensely realistic-looking images which may temporarily overcome our knowledge that

everything seen is simulated. It may be helpful for a playwright to remember that one will not have this power to bolster the emotional resonance of their piece.

Resources are of course a continual issue when producing theater. Everything that exists in the world of the play will have to be represented somehow, and depending on how you choose to represent things, you will require greater or fewer financial, time, and technical resources. Everything costs money, but it can also cost minutes and require skills for which you must budget. In a film, it's understood that there is a greater scope to the sorts of things you can capture with a camera. It is expected to require lots of location changes, plenty of incidental extras, or the ability to encompass a huge physical area in a single scene, such as a chase scene where characters follow each other over a great distance. In a theater, however, the conventions are geared toward a smaller scope of action. Theatrical action tends to be focused on things that happen between a few people in a single, circumscribed location, such as characters having a conversation in a bar. Even when grander, more sweeping milieus are implied, such as the World War I battlefield in Nick Stafford's "Warhorse," plays tend to not attempt to encompass the vastness of troop movements or the paths of seize machines. Instead "Warhorse" usually zeroes in on immediate moments such as two soldiers encountering one another. When this play does require the portrayal of chases, miles of space, or sprawling activity, it portrays these things representationally rather than literally. Often making your play amenable to highly representative trappings to convey the meaning can make it easier for less resource-intensive productions. "Jasper Lake" by John Kuntz is set on a lake, which plays an important part in the narrative, but when it is produced, techniques such as lighting and sound effects are utilized to suggest the huge lake, rather than trying to construct an actual body of water onstage.

Finding ways to represent a setting this way involves boiling down the aspects of the play to their essential elements to accurately depict the story. In the sample text from “Equus” by Peter Shaffer, the story demands a horseback ride along a beach, something very difficult to portray onstage! Expansive space is hard enough to convey, much less a large animal like a horse. This play chose to depict the horse-rider experience representationally, with an actor taking another actor up on his shoulders understood to be the traveling of a great distance on horseback. The audience understands this because the way the “horse actor” moves visually conveys the movement of a horse, so the other actor sitting atop him indicates us into the fact that he is the rider. These visual clues permit the message to come across even in the absence of realistic images.

When a play becomes a production, it becomes a series of events and actions that occur before your eyes. A writer who puts some thought into how that action plays once it has moved past the idea stage tends to create a more produceable piece. While the director will be the one actually implementing how those ideas physically translate into the three-dimensional performance, the writer can suggest the action in ways that appeal to the imagination. Consider the images of the play as active versus static. Will the things happening on stage seem sufficiently dynamic and engaging? Or will they seem visually flat? What level do you need to achieve to keep the tableau from becoming boring? Because the message in your words will be more effective if it is supported by the onstage activity, a writer who can suggest visually rich activity appeals more strongly to production. Theater is a visual medium as well as an auditory one, so it is wasteful to neglect that storytelling tool. Say the scene being written is a serious conversation between friends. For realism’s sake, it may occur to you as the writer to stage the

scene as it might occur in life, with two seated people having a conversation. But for all that your dialogue and themes may be snappy and effective, it simply may not be interesting to watch two people just sitting there for an extended period of time. For well or for ill, modern audiences tend to be more engaged by more activity versus less. You may want to have a lot of stillness and physical quietude, but that penchant for “more going on” is worth thinking about when designing your play. Also it allows you to utilize the visual component of the theatrical medium to convey ideas without having to literally write those ideas into the words of your dialogue. If you decide that one character moves about the room in a nervous, darting way as a visual metaphor for his internal state, or that the relative physical distance between the two characters increases apace with their emotional distance, you may give yourself a strong support while still maintaining an element of subtlety.

Important to the action of a play is the careful facilitation of how this action will be able to play out. A significant divide between theater and cinema is how that action must interact with the aspects of “real time” and “real space.” A play must unfold in a certain order of events in a performance; there’s no doing things out of the order specified in the text. This contrasts strongly with film, which is recorded ahead of time as opposed to performed live. This gives films the luxury of being able to shoot their scenes in whatever order is convenient and reorganize them however is necessary for later presentation. While we can rehearse theatrical scenes out of order, for runtime it is necessary to play them all out in the writer’s intended sequence live before the audience. This means that plays should be designed with the awareness of what production elements will need to change between a scene and the one immediately following it in order to create the smooth-flowing through line of events. This could include any technical element, from

scenery pieces to costuming to lighting, as well as any action needed to be taken by an actor. It could highly increase the produceability of your script if you work to keep these changes manageable. If you maintain the same location through multiple scenes, you will not be required to change sets as frequently, which requires less labor and less time. If something must be done and then undone— such as a makeup change, requiring application, removal, and reapplication — you have to build in opportunities for the actors to make the change without interrupting the flow of the action. Even if the action of your play is does not happen in chronological order, or the various events in the story are supposed to take place in times that are far apart, the complete performance has to be able to be achieved one scene immediately after another. The smoother you can make these transitions, the better the show tends to be received. Audiences have little patience for anything that interrupts the flow of the story and performance.

Whatever happens in your show will all need to be taken into account with front-end planning. The more complex your events get, the more preplanning and rehearsal they require in order to play out with the correct execution, and execution affects timing. This encompasses the planning of things like stunts that must happen to the actors onstage, including things like tripping over a rake, doing a backflip, or catching someone as they fall. You may need choreographers for fighting and dancing, not only to make them look right but to also ensure they happen safely. And sometimes a choreographer alone isn't sufficient for your actors to take certain actions, and you will require actors with special skills, and such actors can be difficult to find. Consider this before you include things like ballet dancers, violin virtuosos, or knife throwers.

The nature of the stage presents interesting challenges when it comes to directing the focus of the audience. Unlike in film, we have no camera lens with which to direct the audience's eyes, and so it is difficult to make parse the stage in smaller pieces than the whole. Still, there are tricks. You can design the action to pull focus to one place or another within the whole, and this gives you more control of the audience's attention. In the elaborate Broadway production of *Spamalot*, the production employed actors performing humorous distractions on one end of the stage so the Black Knight actor could put on an apparatus that would enable him to have his legs "cut off" without anyone noticing on the other. Additionally, audiences often sit very far away from the actors, limiting their ability to notice small things— small props like rings, small expressions like the raising of an eyebrow or the quirk of a lip, and small gestures like the tightening of a fist. Theater is inclined to broadness for this reason, as subtle details tend to be lost in the distance. Compare the general nature of theatrical acting as compared to film acting. Film allows a very close and detail-oriented view of the piece or specifically the actor's face, and so the acting tends toward the more strictly realistic, an effort to literally imitate the way real people behave and speak. For the stage, the acting tends to be stylized to some degree or other, because the slight exaggeration helps convey the meaning across the distance. The upshot of this is that the need for your choices to READ to the audience— what you intend to be going on must reach their perception. It doesn't matter in theater if you've got the cleverest idea in the world; if it doesn't READ, it doesn't WORK.

Flow of performance has its requirements as well. A show should progress quickly and smoothly. Transitions such as set changes that take too long interrupt flow and cause audiences to mentally check out. Still, you must balance this with the need to leave sufficient time to allow

necessary changes to be accomplished by the cast and crew. Keep in mind the time and effort required for actions to be undertaken by people in the real world. An actor cannot change clothes in zero seconds, for example, so giving time, or even whole scenes, between costume changes makes things flow more smoothly. Complex changes can require large crews, and actors may need help backstage to be ready for upcoming scenes. Even things that happen as part of the show, such as traversing the stage, pulling focus, entering, and exiting, all take time. A director with a good eye for translating your written story into onstage action can help balance these things, but you need to give them material to work with. Show that you have considered how actors are to occupy the space at any given time, how they are to interact with the properties and with each other. Demonstrating that you have composed a framework of activity that is meant to weave seamlessly together indicates an awareness of the needs of performance. It gives an overall impression of professionalism.

The technical aspects of theater that make it a reality should never be ignored. Not all theaters are spacious, on or off the stage. They may lack some things you take for granted in other places, like wing space, a backstage area, or a dressing room. Theater spaces also have their own set of rules and to work in them you will be obligated to abide by their operating codes. Safety regulations can include things like no open flames or no bare feet, so it may behoove you to be flexible on the elements of your play that might fall on the hazard list. If you're too insistent about them, you may just argue yourself right out of your hoped-for performance space.

All theatrical elements have physical realities that affect production. Props have weight and take up space; if they are carried on, the only way they leave is if they're carried off again. It's very easy to write a scene where you lose track of the things your actors interact with, and when actors try to perform it they discover that the chain of events relating to these items does not make logical sense. Also, an actor can only handle so many props at once. In this sample scene from "Sherlock Holmes: the Final Adventure" by Stephen Dietz, it's not immediately obvious how clumsy the handling of the props is for Irene Adler when you read it.

IRENE ADLER. He won't enter before Mr. Holmes, remember?

LARRABEE. (*A threat.*) He will if I call for him.

IRENE ADLER. (*Lifts the revolver.*) If you do that, I'll use this. I want a new life, James. And for that I need resources. In exchange for the King's money; I shall give you this photograph. (*She now produces the photograph.*) So simple, really. A man and woman beside the sea. But from one image, a thousand complications are born.

LARRABEE. Give it to me and I'll get you the money.

But I played this role, and it is pretty awkward to keep a gun leveled when you have to dig out a photograph from your Victorian dress that doesn't have any pockets and show it around and look at it and finally put it away again.

Speaking of a Victorian dress without any pockets, costuming can present challenges to the smooth flow and movement of a play. If you need elaborate period looks, you'll likely need a designer and/or sewer with a lot of expertise to achieve them, not to mention a big budget. This also affects what actions your characters can perform onstage, because some costumes accommodate physical activity better than others. A fight scene where the character wears stilettos and miniskirt might not be safe or even possible for the actor to perform. And as mentioned before, quick changes require the right amount timing and precise design choices. You

can't get anything that requires lacing, be they corsets or shoes, on and off quickly. As for makeup, the more elaborate it is, the more it has to be preplanned and fixed for the show. It probably cannot be changed partway much if it's very involved, which can preclude things like double-casting. Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" has a traditional double-casting of Oberon and Titania with Theseus and Hippolyta, which can be very convenient. But many designers like to put the fairies in elaborate makeup to help make them look otherworldly and inhuman— such a design choice could add a lot of visual richness, but would it be possible for those actors to seamlessly change between characters their require a lot of makeup that must be removed and reapplied? Also, actors sweat under lights, so if a show relies on makeup to convey its ideas, there needs to be time and manpower for things like touchups. Hopefully neither the sweat nor the makeup will rub off on your fancy costuming, which may or may not be possible to spot-clean. Also, fake blood can be a real pain with all the mess it makes. That requires someone to do the costume washing every single night, cleaning the stage, the properties, and anything else it may splatter on.

An understanding of the majority of these things comes from knowing what it's like to be onstage and backstage, and how that reality affects production. Do you know how hot it can be under those lights? Wing space tends to be dark and crowded, if there is any at all, so it makes it difficult to see what you're doing in the wings. Where will you keep the members of your technical crew needed for runtime— do you have the space to keep them hidden, and if you don't, can you do something such that seeing them makes sense? Backstage etiquette requires quiet so as not to disturb the show, but if communication is necessary for coordinating runtime activities, how will that communication be achieved in a way that doesn't disrupt the action

onstage? Ask yourself if it is worth it to keep actors in roles where they stay backstage until late in the show, or where they leave early and never come back. The production is paying that person for their time, and if the role has so little stage time, it may not be that important to your piece after all, so perhaps that is money best saved for something else. Being more familiar with how the elements of production work will better your understanding of what your play truly needs for its best expression. This will help you decide what flourishes can be dispensed with so as to allocate more focus and resources to those aspects that really contribute to the soul of the piece.

These are all examples of the limitations of the medium and of the industry. Limitations are a fact of life. The most serious one of all tends to be money. Money is required to produce any piece of theater, even if it's not with a professional company. Even excluding the salaries all the involved professionals such as actors, designers, technicians, and staff, costs can come from any number of other places from venue rental to properties purchases. All the elements typical of production— space, set, costumes, makeup, lighting, sound —cost money, and the more elaborate any element is, the more expensive it will be to include. Also people with the requisite skills to implement these elements can be difficult to find in addition to being expensive. These people are the carpenters, the sewers, the makeup artists, anyone who has a specialized talent. Remember that a designer—the person who designs the set, costumes, sound effects, or lighting on paper— and the person who can implement the design— who actually makes the property— are not necessarily the same person. A person who can decide on a fancy red dress for the main character's costume might not be also able to sew it, which would necessitate hiring an

additional person. A production is very likely to always be operating on a strict budget— hence the limitations.

But what that comes down to for you as the writer is making the limitations work for you. If you have to double-cast, is there a significant reason why these two characters are played by the same actor, other than necessity? Perhaps it can be used to draw a parallel and create continuity between characters, as one production of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” intended with their double-casting of Caesar and his nephew-heir Octavian. Or perhaps it can be used to underscore just how extremely different characters are, such as how in John Godber’s “Bouncers” each of the four main actors plays an adult male bouncer, a young male clubgoer, and a female twentysomething. If done deliberately, double-casting could be really enriching to the world of the show. If your budget is minimal, can you make minimalism work for you? “The Elephant Man” by Bernard Pomerance uses minimalism to make its point about John Merrick’s deformity by choosing to present him to the audience as completely physically normal. The divergence of what the audience sees about him and what they hear the characters say about him informs our reaction to how his condition is treated, while neatly dispensing with any need for complicated makeup and prosthesis. Necessity is the mother of invention, so you often find that when you test your creativity and resourcefulness, you come up with interesting, significant, and meaningful designs that you wouldn’t have if you had written with no production limitations of any kind.

All of this comes down to awareness of the situation for which you are writing. How can you get this awareness? The best way is to get involved in the producing of theater. Spend time

with all the various cogs, the actors, the directors, and the technicians. Listen to their stories, because every one of these has lists of things that they hate seeing in scripts. Scripts that give off the impression that the writer “just doesn’t get it” have a much worse chance of seeing production, because they’re not written for production. They paint you as an amateur rather than a professional. You can take classes in acting, directing, technical design, if for no other reason than to give you more ideas for what you want your play to look like, for all the possibilities you could include. Show respect for every aspect of the job; don’t dismiss something just because it doesn’t interest you. You never know what dedicated designer can help bring your show to the next level. And if you want these theater artists to support your craft, you should support theirs. Finally, see lots of theater! Support your art! The more people who see theater, the more theater productions will get put on. Your scripts will become more produceable, and they will be more likely to see your script as something that suits the needs of production.