Working with Actors, Part 1: Action Verbs

The most important job of a director is to get good performances. To put it another way:

Nothing matters but your actors.

Audiences will forgive almost any technical inadequacies as long as the performances are strong and true (just one example: "The Celebration"). Yes, great directors have a total command over the language of film and labor long and hard to nail the perfect camera angles, camera movement, mise en scene, and lighting. But great directors also understand that the most glorious beauty shots mean nothing if the performances suck.

My methods of working with actors come from years of doing improv comedy, from hands on experience working with actors for film projects, and from excellent Directing Actors classes I took at NYU from people like Sam Schacht and Ted Hannen.

Here's the chief principle I've learned:

Direct with action verbs rather than adjectives.

The same broad concept drives dramatic writing -- the goal is to tell a story dramatically rather than didactically, which means characters do things rather than explain things.

Bad directors tell actors: "Be more happy" or "Be more sad." This kind of direction encourages actors to make faces, demonstrating rather than experiencing the emotions at hand. It looks false because it is false, and audiences sneer when they see it.

The challenge for directors is to stop talking about results and start talking about process.

Directors who talk about results speak in adjectives -- "Now be real angry at Bob." When you direct like this, you make your actors think about trying to achieve these results, which means that instead of inhabiting their characters, they're forced to remain in their own heads, fretting about whether they're achieving the results you're expecting.

In contrast, directors who talk about process use action verbs and direct objects -- "Make Bob stop laughing at you." With direction like this, the actor no longer has to think, "Now I'm supposed to be getting mad." Instead, she can concentrate completely on her life as her character, pursue her objective, and actually get mad.

Adjectives lead to general, false behavior -- making faces.

Action verbs lead to specific action through which actors discover and experience emotions -- resulting in dramatically compelling performances.

People like to make fun of actors for asking "What's my motivation?" But that's the essential question and directors must help actors find answers or risk having lame, one-dimensional performances sink the project.

A Director Prepares

As should become apparent, directing with action verbs requires much more thought and preparation from the director, which is perfectly appropriate.

The simple truth is that most problems between actors and directors are caused by directors who simply don't know what they want.

As the director, you must know what the point of the scene is. You must know the essential
moment this scene describes in the emotional lives of your characters; you must know what your characters want, what they get, and how these experiences set them up for the next scene.

I've seen directors who have no idea of the point of the scene working with excellent actors who grew more and more agitated as the rehearsals wore on. Good actors are hungry to be directed; they long for action verbs and direct objects they can sink their teeth into -- and nothing is more frustrating to them than treading water doing meandering, pointless improvisations and exercises for directors who simply haven't figured out the point of the scene.

In short, in order to direct your actors, you must be clear in your own head about what your story is and what this scene is doing in the telling of your story.

Uta Hagen has a list of questions actors must ask in order to prepare for a scene. Here's my spin:

Six questions a director must be able to answer for each actor in a scene:

- Who am I?
- Where am I coming from?
- Where am I?
- Whom am I with and how do I feel about him/her?
- What do I want from this person?
- What am I doing to get what I want?

If you can give your actor answers to the first four questions, you've provided her with the necessary background to the scene. If you can answer the last two questions, you've found the point of the scene and the key action verb and direct object.

A little advice on dealing with character background (the first four questions): You can go into as much detail as you want with these questions -- some actors will want a great deal of information about their characters' histories. And some directors love to talk for hours about characters' pasts.

But remember that everything you discuss should be geared toward giving the actor the necessary information to tackle the scenes at hand. Choose the material you discuss accordingly - you usually have a limited amount of time and thus should concentrate on what information is essential for the actor to experience the emotional moment of the scene you're rehearsing.

The above just scratches the surface of working with actors.

More to come later, including practical examples and pointers.