It’s hard to imagine but, once upon a time, there was no such thing as a “director” — at least not as we know them today. Back in Ancient Greece, staging a show was predominantly the responsibility of the playwright. In medieval times when the church presented large scale pageant plays, the role of the director more closely resembled that of a modern stage manager (coordinating how the scenery would function, making sure everyone was standing where they were supposed to be, etc.). During the Renaissance, another figure took prominence: the “actor-director.” This was a senior member of the troupe that served as master for staging and helped cultivate a performance from the cast. It wasn’t until after World War II that the modern director began to reign supreme.

Today, the director has many responsibilities. Some are microscopic, and some are monumental. Chiefly, the director must guide the team in defining the artistic shape of the production. They must set the parameters of the world that is being created. This earns them the right to have an opinion on everything (whether or not that opinion is voiced and/or heeded). And while most people would jump at the chance to be in charge, it is important to remember that with great power comes great responsibility. To be a director, you have to prove yourself a leader worth following.

Here’s how…

**1. Do Your Research**

Are you allergic to homework? Do book reports make you drowsy? Would you rather be dead than go to the library? Then, buddy, this is NOT the job for you. Like the genre itself, directing starts on the page. Before your first rehearsal, you’ll need to have a general understanding of the show’s historical context, references and themes. Even looking up the reviews of the original production might influence your interpretation. Granted, this doesn’t mean you have to know EVERYTHING… but if you intend to be a leader worth following, being a smarty-pants surely doesn’t hurt.

**2. Be Organized & Stay Organized**

The quickest and easiest way to have people turn against you is to waste their time. So, make a schedule and STICK TO IT. After all, you can’t earn respect unless you offer it. Don’t run over in a session (“Oh, just another 10 minutes!”), don’t be late (“Sorry to keep you all waiting!”) and don’t skip breaks (“You can just push through, right?!”). And be realistic with your expectations; you know you’re not going to get a production number staged in 45 minutes. Also, know what pages you are staging in that session; be familiar with them and have them handy. No one wants to work with a fumbling doofus.

**3. Don’t Over-Plan**

I know what you’re thinking: “Wait… didn’t you just tell me to research until my eyes bleed and schedule every time I’ll need to pee?” Well, yeah… BUT — this is where you have to show a little restraint. Remember: you’re the director, not the dictator; if you have an answer for every question, you’re not only doing your job, you’re doing everyone else’s. And that’s ANNOYING. Giving actors line-readings (performing the role for them instead of coaching them to find a performance) invalidates their creative input. As much as you can, allow for happy accidents. Encourage people to make their own discoveries by answering questions with more questions. When they find the answer “independently”, there is a sense of ownership that will really show in the work.

**4. Collaborate**

The best idea in the room doesn’t have to be your own. You’ve assembled a room full of talented and creative people. So… LET THEM BE TALENTED AND CREATIVE! Learn to listen; listen to learn.

**5. Study Art**

Staging is HARD. Composition is one of the most difficult concepts for young directors to grasp. There are lots of little rules: actors should stand in triangles, people need to “cheat out” to see faces, asymmetry is your friend, etc. An easy way to develop your eye is to study the [Old Masters](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Master) (basically any painter working before 1800… or anyone with the same name as a Ninja Turtle). Find paintings of crowd scenes in particular. Take note of how the artist places his/her subjects to achieve peak visibility and drama. See how you can adapt their work. After all, the proscenium stage is modeled after the frame of a painting.

**6. Steal Creatively**

Nobody likes a thief (especially not Javert…). It doesn’t matter that you saw the original production 50 times; as the director, it’s your job to figure out how the story will be told anew. Copying another production’s staging/choreography is THEFT. That work is/was someone else’s intellectual property. You can let their work influence you, sure — there’s a reason the show was successful in the first place. But steal creatively. When you see a show, take note of elements you admire. But don’t be dumb about it. You’d be surprised how inconspicuously the end of the first act of “Sunday in the Park with George” fits into the chorale of “The Pirates of Penzance.” And the audience (and critics) will be none-the-wiser. And if they are? Well, just call it an homage…

**7. Don’t Be a Jerk**

This one sounds like a no-brainer, but… ugh, you’d be surprised. A lot of what a director does is to encourage other artists to deliver their best work. That’s not going to happen when people are scared of you. You can be tough and challenging, for sure. But don’t be a bully! Like, never ever. Behaving like a tyrant is sabotage to the creative process. And be brave enough to apologize when you have to; it doesn’t make you weak to say you’re sorry when it’s due. It’s like your mother always said: treat others the way you want to be treated.

**8. Find the Humanity**

Theater is magic. To breathe the same air as artists while they create for you in real-time — it’s an experience that is unparalleled. Simply put: there is no other form that can so closely replicate real life. Those are the moments to strive for, those moments of truth. One way to emphasize this is to ask yourself constantly while watching, “Does this feed my sense of truth?” If not, consider what changes can be made or notes can be given. But remember: the sense of truth shifts from show to show. The reality of “Mamma Mia!” is very different from that of “A Little Night Music.” Always aim for truth within the construct of the reality you are creating.

**9. Know Your Audience**

Directing a show for kids? Then maybe your actors need to keep their pants on… The point is: always remain aware of the intended audience for your work. For example, the church-going crowd doesn’t like vulgarity. Even if you [BLEEP]-ing love swears, you may have to find ways to tone things down the product to meet the audience’s ethical standards without compromising your artistic integrity OR the integrity of the work as written (no one said this job was going to be easy…) After all, the audience is the reason you have a job in the first place. Respect them and they’ll respect you.

**10. Honor the Playwright**

The most important person in the rehearsal room is always the playwright; it doesn’t matter if they’ve been dead for 2,400 years (here’s looking at you, Aristophanes…). It was the playwright’s idea that brought everyone together. Therefore, it is your primary responsibility as director to tell the story as they intended. Have a crazy concept for a show? Cool. Before you try to cram it into your new-fangled box, ask yourself, “Does this idea serve the play as written?” If not, you’re editorializing. In the theater, the playwright is God. The director just gets to spread the blessed word.