



**[How to Direct a Play](#) : *a Masterclass in Comedy, Tragedy, Farce, Shakespeare, New Plays, Opera, Musicals***

by Braham Murray. Oberon Books, London, 2011

Reviewed by [Dr Charlotte Starkey](#) January 2012

A new book by Braham Murray, the fruits of his many years as a successful theatre director not least at [The Royal Exchange](#) in Manchester, is relevant to the interests of a number of groups: student dramatists, aspiring directors, designers, stage managers, in fact anyone directly involved in theatre; teachers of drama as a performance subject, teachers and lecturers and students of plays as texts both in school and university; and, most importantly, anyone who loves theatre and who loves reading a well-written narrative.

It is witty, anecdotal, informed, informative, intimate and frank. This is the work of a professional expert and Braham Murray's account of ways to approach Shakespeare as a director (followed by a discussion of producing and directing Greek drama) is one of the best practical discussions of how to approach a Shakespeare play both as text and performance that one could find today. The book is not a bible in how to direct a play; it is one man's account of what has, and has not, worked for him – a passionate, dedicated, lived and lively statement of what can happen when theatre is performing powerfully; and Murray believes deeply in the importance of theatre for the world beyond the stage.

Braham Murray is well known not just in Manchester, but also nationally and internationally, for memorable productions first at the **Century Theatre** as Artistic Director and then as Founding Director of the **'69 Theatre Company**, the University of Manchester's resident professional Company. He has been responsible for major productions at

***The Royal Exchange***

, nurturing his Company through the traumas of the IRA bombing of Manchester in 1996 and achieving international recognition for major productions with some of the greatest actors and actresses of recent decades:

*The Rivals*

with Tom Courtenay (1976),

*The Winter's Tale*

with James Maxwell (1978), famously

*Waiting for Godot*

with Max Wall and Trevor Peacock (1980), a production still fresh in people's minds to this day, and recorded hilariously in the book, then

*Hamlet*

(1983) with Robert Lindsay, more recently

*The Glass Menagerie*

(2008) with Brenda Blethyn. If he is leaving The Royal Exchange, he is going to be greatly missed even though he leaves the marvellous enterprise on very firm foundations.

*How to Direct a Play* is a testament to a prolific, very experienced and demanding master of his craft and profession. It has the tenor of a person who has always aimed for the highest possible standards in his work, expecting as much of himself as of others in production and performance,

but equally, like all those who are expert in what they do in life, marked with a significant humility in his frankness, honesty, admissions of failure and disappointment and aspirations where every situation is turned into a search for even more achievement on stage. This book has its frequent moments of adrenalin-filled excitement at witty anecdotes of working with egomaniacs but equally a huge compassion for those who depend upon theatre for their livelihoods, especially the actors and actresses approaching previews and first nights. The book is characterised by a creative tension between this restless search for perfection and the realisation that the task is never done. The writing is shot through with humour, self-mockery, admissions of failure, words of wisdom for any aspiring director (equally relevant to an aspiring artist in any medium, in fact), fully aware of the pitfalls when personal expectation and idea, rehearsal, performance, audience reaction all fail to materialise as he had hoped.

One of the values of this book for the practitioner of theatre is the meticulous manner in which every aspect of the director's role is itemised and discussed chapter by chapter, including the importance of the costume department. Murray acknowledges that every director will have their own method of working; but his analysis is valuable because it arises out of an almost confessional self-analysis of how he has developed his own working practices and dealt with the pitfalls, dilemmas and inevitable frustrations of producing major stage events. In early chapters he considers each element in the director's process, from choosing a play and a team, through casting and auditions, to working the script. There then follows an illuminating analysis, revealing the early influence of Stanislavski on Murray, of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and it is here that we discover the detail that shapes so much of the experience behind this readable book. The analysis of the significant dramatic moments (beats) and moves in the script, followed by a similarly close analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a central part of Stanislavsky's own methodology but, when seen through the eyes of a director like Murray, it emphasises the importance of every movement in the language of a text. It has its parallels in the way L. C. Knights, in a wonderful essay *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* (1933), analysed some of Macbeth's language in order to focus upon precisely the tensions and drama in the language that give depth to a play's key concerns.

In the first half of Murray's writing we enter the mind of a man entirely committed to his craft, the

Artistic Director opening a door upon his own methodology in the production and performance of a play. The subtitle of the book is so appropriate here: we are given a 'masterclass', like the student being coached by the maestro; and it is rare, outside of the performing arts, to have that kind of experience. Early in the book he describes his role as akin to the conductor of an orchestra, an interpretive artist. Whatever sense the book gives of being in touch with a totally focused, self-acknowledged power-crazed artistic director – and it does give that sense sometimes – it also frequently reminds us of just how firmly grounded it is on the humanity that drives the enterprise. There is a section on "Fear", the fear the director and the performers feel, the fear of the opening night, the fear of the possibility of failure; and it marks the distinguishing quality of the writing as a whole that the challenge to achieve perfection is rooted in the aspirations, achievements and limitations of a human being.



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