

Developing directing skills – David Farmer workshop

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STAR RATING



Informal and inspiring course for all wanting to gain confidence in directing or get new ideas on different techniques

Many teachers may already be familiar with David Farmer through his popular website and newsletter, dramaresource.com – a great resource that offers those teaching drama the latest news of the industry, reviews of the latest products as well as news of David’s workshops. As well as all this, David is the author of his self-published hit *101 Drama Games* and is the founder of the Tiebreak Theatre Company – a theatre-in-education company with whom he took productions all over the UK, including the West End.

The number of workshops that David offers is constantly expanding. Although most courses are held in London, David is planning to offer his first course in Manchester in February 2011. Current workshops include: Primary Drama INSET day, Drama for Special Educational Needs, The Spark, the Flame, the Fire (a new course on devising), Drama and Theatre for Young People and Developing Directing Skills.

This one-day workshop aims to offer ‘an opportunity to begin exploring many of the skills required in directing a play for the stage’. Although the website attests that the course is suitable for teachers and drama educators as well as ‘actors, amateur or semi-professional theatre directors and anybody else who would like to extend their skills’, I hadn’t expected the proportion of teachers attending the course to be so high. Indeed, with no directing experience myself, I was also a little hesitant about the use of ‘developing’ in the title – for I wasn’t sure I currently had much directing skill to be developed! However, both preconceptions of this course were quashed as the day progressed; not only were many of the 20 attendees working as drama or English teachers but many also had as little experience of directing as I did. David’s informal style of approaching the subject meant that it was flexible enough to allow those with little or no experience to get an



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idea of the basics, while giving those with much more experience an opportunity to gain new ideas.

The workshop began with a series of different warm-up games for mind and body. A number of games to encourage team work and warm up the body and voice ensued – David explained that he felt it important for directors to experience what they might ask their cast to do within a session.

The group then went on to work on status tableaux – creating still images in pairs to illustrate relationships where low and high status can be seen. Members of the group were then given the chance to direct some of these tableaux in an attempt to create contentious status relationships, showing how open to interpretation positioning on stage can be – something of which a director should always be aware.

Another exercise explored the rights and wrongs of stage blocking. David used Stephen Unwin’s *So You Want to be a Theatre Director?* (Nick Hern Books) as a starting point. As well as preparing a short script extract, each group had to commit a designated ‘blocking sin’, as described in Unwin’s book – a director for each group was selected to facilitate this. Discussion following each performance allowed analysis of what each group’s given ‘sin’ was, leading on to a debate about whether or not it is always wrong to commit these directing crimes.

Perhaps the most popular exercise of the day was Breakfast Serial, as David calls it.

It is a fantastic method for exploring the concept of subtext and shows how flexible a script can be. In the summing up of the day, many participants highlighted this as their favourite part of the workshop. Once again, everyone was split up into groups, each with a new director. The groups were asked to improvise a very short script based around the breakfast table, just two lines each, which should be memorised and largely uneventful. Everyone got to see each of the groups’ breakfast scenes. David then secretly gave each group a new scenario in which to place their memorised script; the new situations ranged from a funeral to an operating theatre.

What was so remarkable about this exercise was the journey from your initial feeling of disbelief that your script would ever work in its new scenario, to the creative revelations that occur within your group as the new performance evolves. In most cases, it was remarkably successful, to the great surprise of many of us.

David supplies support notes for all course attendees detailing the games and exercises used throughout the day, which gives you freedom to listen and engage with discussions and activities without worrying about writing it all down. Attendees also benefit from the shared knowledge of others on the course; it is a valuable collaborative learning experience. The only negative aspect of the workshop is the lack of actual directing time that each individual gets – David ensures everyone is given a chance to direct, but this time is short. It is an understandable problem – logistically there is only so much time within a one-day workshop. As David explained during the course though, it’s possible to learn techniques and ideas for directing from the side of the performer. Overall, the course is useful for both teachers who have very little experience in directing and those seeking new ideas to inspire confidence in their directing work.

For more information on David Farmer’s workshops, go to: www.dramaresource.com

Claudine Nightingale is editor of *Teaching Drama*.