

Blocking a Play

by Rosalind Flynn

5 Blocking is the theatre term for the actors' movements on the stage during the performance of the play or the musical. Every move that an actor makes - walking across the stage, climbing some stairs, sitting in a chair, falling to the floor, getting down on bended knee – falls under the larger term “blocking.”

WHOSE JOB IS IT TO BLOCK THE PLAY?

Sometimes the play's director determines the actors' movements and positions on stage.

10 Some directors “pre-block” scenes – map out the actors' movements outside of rehearsal and then give the actors their blocking. Some directors work with the actors during rehearsal and make blocking decisions by having the actual human beings perform the movements; these directors try a variety of movements and stage positions, see what works, make adjustments, and then set the blocking. Other directors, especially when they work with experienced actors during rehearsals, ask the actors to follow their
15 instincts about when to move and the blocking becomes collaborative work.

WHEN PLAYWRIGHTS PROVIDE BLOCKING IN THE SCRIPT

20 In some plays, the playwright provides blocking notes in the text of the script. American playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote detailed specific stage directions that include not only movements but notes on the characters' attitudes and emotions as well.

Here is an example from Act I Scene 1 of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Edmund's dialogue is accompanied by stage directions in italics:

EDMUND

With sudden nervous exasperation.

25 *O for God's sake, Papa. If you're starting that stuff again, I'll beat it.*

He jumps up.

I left my book upstairs anyway.

He goes to the front parlor saying disgustedly,

God, Papa, I think you'd get sick of hearing yourself.

30 *He disappears. Tyrone looks after him angrily.*

Some directors remain true to the stage directions provided by the playwright in the script, but directors and actors are not bound to follow those directions in the way that

they are bound to use the playwright's dialogue strictly as written. The words that the actors playing characters speak must be delivered precisely as they appear in the script; only with the playwright's specific permission may lines of dialogue be changed or omitted. It is not imperative, however, to adhere to the playwright's blocking ideas.

5 Actors and directors are free to make their own movement choices.

Some directors appreciate scripts with detailed stage directions. Some directors prefer scripts with little to no blocking ideas within the text.

SOME OF THE BASIC FUNCTIONS OF BLOCKING

Ideally, blocking should enhance the story on the stage by:

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 - reflecting the authentic behaviour of the characters – a character's movements can reveal just as much and sometimes more than his or her words do.
 - reflecting the relationships between and among characters.
 - giving the focus to certain characters at appropriate moments (helping the audience know where to look).
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 - allowing the audience to see what they are supposed to see and not what is meant to be hidden – either as part of the play or an accidental peek back stage.
 - creating effective stage pictures – strong, pleasing, horrific – that convey the meanings and moods of the play.
 - making effective use of the set.

20 BLOCKING NOTATION

Once a scene has been blocked, the actors must execute the same movements during rehearsals and performances. Thus, actors must memorize their blocking as well as their lines. During blocking rehearsals, most actors use a pencil to note their blocking in their scripts – pencil, not pen, so that if the blocking changes, the pencil marks can be erased and the new blocking noted.

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Actors and directors use a sort of "shorthand" for blocking notation. Rather than write out "Walk downstage right and stand behind the sofa," however, an actor would make notes using abbreviations. Any stage movement from one area of the stage to another is called a "cross," and a quick way to indicate cross is the use of an "X." So, an actor's blocking note to self for the above blocking could look like this: "XDR to US of sofa."

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adjustment	úprava
to remain	setrvat, zůstat
to omit	opomenout, vypustit
imperative	nezbytně nutný
to adhere	dodržovat
to reveal	odhalit
to convey	sdělit, vyslovit
to execute	vykonat

