CAN I IGNORE THE STAGE DIRECTIONS?

A Stage Directions Guide
for Theatre Educators and Students

by David Lindsay-Abaire

DRAMATISTS GUILD

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Lights up on a Director and a Dramatists Guild Rep.
The director dials a number. It rings.

DG REP. *(answers the phone)* Hello, Dramatists Guild.

DIRECTOR. Hi, I'm directing a play and several of my actors are upset because I handed out black Sharpies and told them to cross out every stage direction in the script.

DG REP. Oh. Why would you do that?

DIRECTOR. Because I was taught that all stage directions are optional. They're not really part of the play, so we can ignore them. Could you help me explain that to my actors?

DG REP. Unfortunately not. Because none of that's correct.

DIRECTOR. Of course it is. Stage directions aren't even written by playwrights, they're just blocking notes that a stage manager wrote down during rehearsal.

DG REP. That's a common myth, but it's not true. Stage directions are written by the playwright.

DIRECTOR. But they're in *parentheses*. Which means they're just *suggestions*.

DG REP. No, they're not suggestions, they're directions. They are literally called stage *directions*. They tell everyone what's going on, when to exit, when to enter…

DIRECTOR. That's been a problem actually. Entrances especially. I have an actor in the role of Godot, and we just can't agree about when he arrives.

DG REP. Godot…*arrives*?

DIRECTOR. *(chuckles)* Of course. You can't have these guys waiting for the entire play and not have Godot show up. What a letdown *that* would be. It's a good play, you should read it.

DG REP. I have. And I don't remember Godot being in the cast list.

DIRECTOR. I wouldn't know. I crossed it out.

DG REP. *(beat, stays positive)* I'm so glad you called today. It gives me the chance to clear up a few misunderstandings you seem to have.

DIRECTOR. Misunderstandings?

DG REP. When you license a play, you agree to perform the play *as written*. That includes the words, the title, the cast list, the character descriptions, the setting—

DIRECTOR. But I feel like some playwrights are trying to direct the play from the page.

DG REP. They're not. They're just communicating what's essential to the story they've written. There's some wiggle room of course – no reasonable playwright will object to someone exiting stage left if they wrote stage right – but most writers put stage directions in for a reason.

DIRECTOR. But isn't it the director's job to interpret?

DG REP. Of course. In fact, some stage directions are *meant* to be interpreted. Take for example, "Impossible Stage Directions" – which are often whimsical and not literal. Like, "Darrell suddenly sprouts wings, leaps in the air, and flies to the moon."

DIRECTOR: Impossible!

DG REP: Only if you think literally. Sometimes it's the director's job to find a creative way to honor the writer's intention. Some stage directions are poetic, some are practical. Some – like "beat" or "pause" – indicate an emotional shift or realization within the character,

DIRECTOR. Oh I always cut those ones. They just slow things down.

DG REP. *(pause)* Okay, think of it this way - what if you performed Beethoven after crossing out every "forte," crescendo and rest?

DIRECTOR. I'd still have all of the notes.

DG REP. And none of the music.

DIRECTOR. But I've seen wonderful productions that radically reimagine plays and musicals and the stage directions are totally ignored.

DG REP. Yes, and either those scripts were in the public domain, or the director got *permission* to make those changes.

DIRECTOR. Permission?

DG REP. Yes, if you *really* want to change something, you can reach out to the playwright. Or the licensor. And if that doesn't work, contact us at questions@dramatistsguild.com. If the playwright is a member, we can help forward your question.

DIRECTOR. And what if the writer says no?

DG REP. Then the answer is no.

DIRECTOR. So what should I do instead?

DG REP. You tell me.

DIRECTOR. *(beat)* Pay attention to the stage directions? Ask why the playwright wrote them? Talk about them with the actors and designers?

DG REP. And if you want to change something major?

DIRECTOR. Get permission.

DG REP. And if you want to black out all the stage directions with a Sharpie?

DIRECTOR. Don't.

DG REP. Well done.

DIRECTOR: This has been incredibly helpful.

DG REP. I'm glad.

(Godot walks into the director's office. We may or may not see him.)

DIRECTOR. Oh, the actor playing Godot just walked in. *(whispers)* I should probably tell him that he's not in the play.

DG REP. In that case…shall we go?

DIRECTOR. Yes, let's go.

(They do not move.)

End of Play.

Want to explore stage directions further? The Dramatists Guild Education Resources webpage offers tools for incorporating them into your own writing, teaching them to others, and exploring what they can do on the page and onstage.

The **DRAMATISTS GUILD** is the national, professional membership trade association of theatre writers including playwrights, composers, lyricists, and librettists. The Guild was established for the purpose of aiding dramatists in protecting both the artistic and economic integrity of their work.

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