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On Acting

Clean and messy

Finding the right balance in blocking

BY JON JORY

I SOMETIMES WONDER what blocking is for. I know, I know, theatre needs the visual. And it often takes us places we know in our bones, such as the kitchen, the living room, and the backyard. In such cases, familiarity provides an entry point into the play. “Oh, I’ve done that,” we think. “I’m at home here.” Theatre also gives us visual pleasure in the same sense that dance does — but, again, often it’s a pleasure found in common places. Yes, and yes again.

On a crucial level, blocking is there to clarify the text, and at those choice moments of clarification we don’t want to be doing too many things at once. Blocking shows us where to look and highlights what we need to hear. It is a theatrical reality that it’s hard for the audience to see and hear at the same time. If something wonderful is going on physically and visually, can we really hear the wonderful things people are saying?

At key moments, blocking needs to be focused on making the point — no more and no less. When the director doesn’t know the point (emotional, intellectual, or both) underlying the visuals, blocking can look nonessential or simply messy, and it can distract from the lines. Blocking should give focus to a key piece of dialogue, behavior, psychology, or story. Too much going on, too loud, or too fussy, and the whole scene feels like an uncleaned room.

Yes, characters engaging with props or pacing about can create welcome details, but pare these choices down to the essentials that



make the point you want to make. Clean focuses. Clean has a beginning and a middle and an end. This is why in Shakespeare much of the physicality takes place at the end of lines — to keep focus on the words.

On the other hand, sometimes this paring down can go too far. Overdoing clean leads to a mechanical efficiency in the way blocking is handled. This results in actors whose gestural vocabulary seems devoid of spontaneity, complexity, and life. Nobody ever seems indecisive, each gesture is clarified, each line has a key word,

each posture seems contrived, and nothing surprises. This is not just a cleaned room, it is, pardon the grimness, rather like an open cassette viewing.

So, what to do? The general idea is to be clean on the important stuff and messy on the easily understood moments. The understanding that we seek — and that results in a “director’s vision” — is the balance of clean, messy, and crucial in the play’s physicality. Let’s drop in on the scene where Romeo and Juliet wake up after

their first night together and deal with the reality that Romeo will be killed if he is found in the room with her. Let's take one of Juliet's speeches, which comes just after Romeo's line, "It is not day."

It is, it is: hie hence, be gone,
away!

It is the lark that sings so out of
tune,

Straining harsh discords and un-
pleasing sharps.

Some say the lark makes sweet
division;

This doth not so, for she divideth
us:

Some say the lark and loathed
toad change eyes,

O, now I would they had
changed voices too!

Since arm from arm that voice
doth us affray,

Hunting thee hence with hunt's
— up to the day,

O, now be gone; more light and
light it grows.

Yes, I know, it's all glorious Shake-
speare, but we're not doing it on the
radio. So, you, the director, need to
pick the most important moments.
Me? I'd say these include the first line,
"It is, it is: hie hence, be gone, away,"
the part in the middle where she says,
"This doth not so, for she divideth
us," and the last, "O now be gone." I
would make sure that nothing physi-
cal will distract from those moments,
that the words and internal emotions
are in the clear. Romeo won't be mov-
ing, Juliet won't be moving, and noth-
ing will distract from the feelings.

The rest of the time, people can do
stuff, look away, talk over each other.
Juliet can toss Romeo his clothes,
and Romeo can put them on. Both of
them at one time or another can go
to the window, and Juliet can look
out the door to see if anyone is com-

ing. Thus, we take a shot at mixing
clean and messy to provide texture
and focus on the power of the words
themselves.

Always do your blocking with the
important moments in mind, just as
you do naturally in life. You're at the
bar drinking a martini: When do you
take a sip? You're playing ping pong:
When are you still? The mix of clean
and messy not only exists in reality,
but it also delivers the interior lives of
characters and tells the story behind
the script.

Sometimes you want a big physi-
cal moment before the big textual
moment, sometimes after. The ac-
tress smashes the bottle against the
fireplace, then turns and says simply,
"You have to leave now." Sometimes
she says, "You have to leave now,"
then she smashes the bottle. Messy
and clean, clean and messy, in their
eternal dance.