

NOTES FOR PROSPECTIVE NEW DIRECTORS

This is a brief and rough guide as to what is required when thinking of directing a major production, particularly for the first time. It's only intended as general advice – you are free to deviate from these guidelines if you want providing the committee is kept informed.

For further advice, information or help on this matter, a member of the committee can be contacted by email at: committee.carlton@gmail.com

Step One

Selecting a Play

The most important and obvious first step is to try and find a play that you feel both passionate and excited about. One that you would love to see performed under your direction.

From beginning to end, the rehearsal schedule can be a somewhat stressful time for a Director, so you need that connection, passion and excitement from the play you select, to carry your enthusiasm right through the period of rehearsal to show week, thus keeping it fresh for both you and your cast.

There are a few important issues to consider when selecting a play, to ensure it is something suitable for Carlton's membership and for the venue.

Studio at New Wimbledon Theatre

At the Studio, the audience can be situated on one, two or three sides of the theatre and the capacity would vary depending on this. For previous Carlton productions, the usual layout has been that of the audience on just the one side, making use of the tiered benches but consider that the other options are open to you. The benches have a capacity of 50 and we would usually place two rows of chairs in front of them to reach the official capacity of 66.

The Studio is basically a blank canvas to do with as you wish. Without flats and scenery it has the possibility of three doors that can be used for exits & entrance – two stage right and one stage left via the box office (though the Studio prefer this not to be used as it requires the main entrance to be left open during performances), plus a fourth door leading to an optional raised area behind the main stage that can be used as extra space or curtained off, with the option to connect it to the lower main stage via stairs, or not. While the space is very versatile it is not enormous, so consider your staging options carefully. Inserting flats or other background scenery is certainly an option, but this can make scene changes difficult if you want it changing during the play. We don't have the facility for complex machinery or other highly technical staging requirements, which might rule out certain types of play, but there's a lot that can be done with the space available and a bit of creativity.

Cast size is also an important consideration. Carlton has a large membership and needs to provide enough parts each year to give most of our members a reasonable chance of being cast in something. For productions at the Studio, productions have been done with anything up to about 18 cast members; more than this is probably starting to get unwieldy. Anything below about 8 cast members is probably too small to do here – Carlton is looking into other venues where we might put on smaller productions for the future, and there is always the possibility to do extracts from small-cast plays at our annual Showcase instead.

We also have a diverse membership in terms of age and gender, so it is helpful to have plays that have potential parts for older and younger men and women. Having said that, this is something we can aim to balance across the whole year, so don't feel you can't pitch a play that has predominantly parts of one gender for example. Gender blind casting and allowing females to play male parts (and vice versa) is also an option you could consider if choosing a play with mostly parts of one gender. Note also that for safeguarding reasons it is not usually feasible to include children in our productions, which might also make some plays difficult to stage.

One final consideration is budget. The budget for our productions is fixed at £1,200. Apart from venue booking, rehearsal space and some publicity, which is covered by the Committee, this budget has to cover all your costs. Plays which have very expensive requirements might therefore be difficult unless you can find some way to make savings.

If you are struggling to come up with ideas for a play but are still interested in directing, the Carlton committee has a list of possible play suggestions for you to choose from – email us at committee.carlton@gmail.com and we will send you the list. You might also find inspiration here, where you can browse a large database of plays by genre, period or country: <https://www.stageplays.com/>

Step Two

Choosing Your Backstage Crew

It is crucial that you surround yourself with an experienced team of backstage support.

You will need a **Stage Manager**, to not only assist you and your cast throughout the production week, but also throughout rehearsals, when they are required to make notes on blocking, work out required props, entrances and exits, etc.

One or more **Assistant Stage Managers** are optional but always welcome, particularly if the Stage Manager is unable to attend rehearsals at any point or if you have a particularly large and complex cast and props list. If you are using the stage left entrance at the Studio for many entrances / exits its often good to have an Assistant Stage Manager stationed here to manage props as it is not connected to the main backstage area.

A **Producer** might be helpful for larger productions to oversee several tasks. The Producer should concentrate on events leading up to the show, for example, managing publicity and monitoring ticket sales, getting programmes designed and printed, liaising with the committee and venue, obtaining props/costumes etc. You are welcome to do this yourself, but it might free up your time to have someone manage these aspects of the production for you. In most cases, a member of the Committee will be appointed as your Producer.

Some Directors like to also have an **Assistant Director**, particularly if they have a large cast to manage or if you are going to be absent at any point and want someone to cover for you during rehearsals. This would also give you the option to divide the rehearsal room into two (there is a dividing screen which can be closed) and have you and the Assistant Director rehearse different scenes in parallel.

You also need to appoint someone to operate **Sound/Lighting**. There is help available on the day of the get-in, to program the lighting desk, but you do need someone to operate the sound & lighting during the week of the performance. You might want this person to help design the sound and lighting plan for you as well. In a technically complex production you might need two separate operators for sound and lighting; in a simple production this can just be one person.

You might want to create other backstage crew posts depending on the type of production – shows with songs might want a **Musical Director** while those with dance or other complex physical action may want a **Choreographer**, while depending on your artistic needs you may want a **Costume Designer, Set Designer, Hair/Makeup Designer** or **Artistic Director**.

The size and composition of your backstage crew is up to you; some productions might only have a Director, Stage Manager and Sound/Lighting Operator, while others might have a team of 8 or more people involved. Bear in mind that we would normally expect the Director, Stage Manager and Producer to be fully paid up members of Carlton, while other people assisting in a more minor capacity could join as Associate Members or just be granted a time-limited Associate Membership by the committee just for the duration of the production. The Director and Stage Manager will also usually be expected to pay production fees like members of the cast.

Finally if you are a first time director for Carlton, it is a requirement to have a **Mentor**. This is usually an experienced director and/or someone on the Committee to act as a link for you. They should be able to help or advise you during the rehearsal period – this person might also double up as one of your other production team members.

This might seem like an intimidating list of roles to fill, before you even start to worry about casting – don't worry! The Carlton Committee can help you to find people to fill most of these roles if you don't know anyone suitable, though if you are able to draw on people you already know and trust that is obviously good. A good priority is to get a Stage Manager as early as possible, as they will likely need to be involved from the start, while other roles such as Sound/Lighting or Assistant Stage Managers can likely be filled later on, once you've already started rehearsals.

Step Three

The Auditions and Read-Through

Once you have found a play you feel you are keen to direct, you will need to organise auditions. These are usually held over at least two nights – usually a Tuesday and Thursday, which are the days Carlton has booked every week at Lantern Methodist Church, Wimbledon – our usual rehearsal venue. Sometimes directors may want to allow more audition nights to give more people a chance to attend, or to hold call-back auditions in case of a difficult decision; this is perfectly fine but bear in mind it will eat into your rehearsal period. If you do need to run call-back auditions to help you decide, try to minimise the number of shortlisted people called back so that they can be focused and not risk wasting peoples' time.

Various directors have their own styles when it comes to auditions. Some ask people to prepare audition pieces in advance, others simply provide extracts for people to read on the night. Some directors like to include movement workshops or other aspects to their auditions as well – however you want to do it is up to you. Carlton can provide a camcorder for you to record auditions with if you want the chance to re-watch some of them afterwards to help you come to a decision. Keep in mind that plays that have rights will incur additional costs if you wish to use sections of the script as audition pieces and make them available ahead of time.

You need to ensure that the audition process is as organised and as fair as possible however. Directors should have a panel including themselves and at least one, preferably two, other people (usually their Stage Manager or Producer and someone from the committee) to help advise them on casting decisions. It is sometimes hard to predict how many people will turn up for auditions – if a lot of people show up you will need to be strict with time to ensure everyone gets a fair chance to be seen. If in any doubt how to audition your play, you can ask a member of the committee or your mentor for advice.

It is always advisable to have a read-through of the play as well before rehearsals begin to give you an idea of how the play will sound. Some directors prefer to have an open read-through before the auditions which anyone can attend, in order to encourage people to attend the auditions. Others prefer to have a closed read-through after the auditions, just involving the actual cast once they have been chosen, as a way to get the cast introduced to one another and give them a good overview of the play. It's up to you which of these approaches you prefer.

Step Five **Rehearsal Schedule**

For both yourself and your cast, it is always wise to have a well-planned rehearsal schedule. This not only gives you a guideline as to how well you are progressing, but also allows for some of the cast to have the evening off, and of course saving them a wasted journey if they are not required for the scenes being rehearsed that night. Equally, it also provides the cast with the key dates they are required, including the tech and dress rehearsals. It's worth reminding your cast right at the beginning to make sure they are free and have booked their diaries for the show week, including the tech and dress, and not forgetting that there is a matinee performance on the Saturday. The last thing you want is to find out the week before that someone can't make one of the shows – which has happened!

Try to get the full availability of your cast at the first meeting after the auditions and then work out a schedule that minimises the number of missing people when you rehearse each scene or group of scenes. Remember, this rehearsal schedule is never set in stone, and can be altered if necessary. You may want to leave one or two rehearsals nearer the end unplanned, so you can use them later for whatever you feel needs extra work. Remember to try and manage one or two full run-throughs of the play before show-week as well; if people are doing a full run for the first time on Dress Rehearsal night it can often throw up unforeseen issues!

If you will need additional rehearsals, for example to rehearse songs or complex choreography, we have the option of booking additional rooms on one or two Saturdays, but this should be kept to a minimum and only used if strictly necessary. Let the committee and your cast know well in advance – ideally on your director submission form - if you intend this. Additional rehearsals will be taken out of your budget.

At the first rehearsal, give your cast a deadline by which you expect them to have learned their lines, so that they have a target to work towards – it's up to you how long to give them or how strict you want to be, but try to be realistic in your expectations. It's normal for people to still be needing prompting for a few of their lines a couple of weeks before the show, so don't panic if that's the case, but by last week of rehearsals it is often a good idea to start refusing to offer prompts any more when lines are missed – this will get the cast used to the idea of extracting themselves from any on-stage difficulties and helping each other out to get the scene back on track, as there will be no prompt available during the show.

For rehearsals, as previously stated, we usually have a two-hour slot booked on Tuesdays and Thursdays at Lantern Methodist Church, Wimbledon from 7.30 – 9.30pm. This time can go by very quickly so you will need to have strong time management to get the most out of rehearsals – and make sure your cast are arriving promptly so that you don't lose time waiting for people to turn up. In turn, try not to keep your cast too long past 9.30 as this will drain their enthusiasm as well as risk us being charged extra. For full runs in the week before the show you may want to ask the committee to extend your room bookings to 10 or 10.30pm – let us (and your cast) know well in advance. Consider also giving your feedback after long run rehearsals in the last couple of weeks by email afterwards rather than taking up scarce rehearsal time by delivering it all in person.

Usually, people like to go to the pub after rehearsals as a good opportunity for socialising – it's advisable for the director to join them and stay on their cast's good side!

Step Six **Communication**

Throughout rehearsals and the actual week of the production, it's always important to communicate effectively with all concerned. Ensure that everyone is fully aware of what they should be doing, from Stage Manager to the member of cast with the fewest lines. Your Mentor / Producer will help you liaise with the committee and venue and ensure that programmes, flyers and posters are produced on-time, listings put up at the venue and in other media, costumes and set procured and delivered at the right times etc.

It is important to be in touch with the Studio staff in the final weeks running up to the show. They will need to be aware if you plan to use the box-office doors for cast entrances during the performance so they can put necessary security in place to leave that entrance unlocked. It may also be necessary to tell them about any specific requests you have such as bringing in additional lighting or asking permission to paint the stage floor.

If you think one of the cast or backstage crew is struggling with something at any point, make sure you talk to them immediately and see what can be done to help. As director please *don't* feel you have to do everything yourself, but it is ultimately your job to make sure everything that needs doing is being done by someone! Similarly, though, feel free to ask for help yourself from the committee whenever you need it – they are there to support you throughout the process.

Enjoy every minute of your show, from conception to the cast party. Directing a play can be hard work, but it's also a hugely fulfilling experience and it's great to see your vision brought to life by a wonderful cast and share in their joy at performing it. Just remember that everyone, from the cast to backstage crew, is doing this as a hobby for their own enjoyment, so it's important to make sure they're all having a good time as well. If you feel that anyone is unhappy for whatever reason, make sure you check in with them and listen to their concerns. It's important to make sure that nobody's health and wellbeing, including your own, is put at risk. It's also your responsibility as director to make sure that the cast and crew are inclusive and treating one another with respect, and that poor behaviour is dealt with appropriately. If you have serious concerns about the behaviour of someone involved in your production, please inform the committee as soon as possible so that appropriate steps can be taken. Thankfully Carlton generally has excellent experiences with friendly and inclusive cast and crew so this is rarely a concern.

Step Seven **Show Week**

The venue booking times will be confirmed to you by the committee, but usual practice is for the get-in and tech rehearsal to take place late Sunday morning into the afternoon. This is often a long and sometimes exhausting process of ensuring all the costumes, props and set are delivered and stored appropriately at the theatre, that the lights are rigged to the correct positions and the lighting and sound boards are programmed with the correct cues. It will save you time if you have planned and informed your lighting/sound operators about all lighting and sound cues in advance; ideally they should have observed a rehearsal in the final couple of weeks to familiarise themselves with the play ahead of time. Also make sure that transport has been arranged for any large items being brought to the Studio – it's no use having loaned a large piece of furniture if you have no way to get it there!

A member of the Studio staff should be on hand to assist on the day. If possible, it's good to do a quick run-through of the play this day but there is often not enough time to do more than run the key technical cues and make sure they are set up and the Lighting/Sound operators know what to do. The Studio is usually strict about ensuring we vacate the premises on time each night so overrunning is not an option – you will have to be extremely strict about your time management here. You or your Stage Manager will need to inform all cast/crew about the signing in/out procedures at the Studio. It's usually fine to leave things backstage overnight, but check with the Studio if you want to leave any staging/set out on the stage overnight as they sometimes have other people using the room during the daytime.

On Monday you will want to run the Dress Rehearsal, ideally as if it was an actual performance with the full set/costume/props/tech as the real show. Give people any final notes, particularly if you've realised something doesn't work as you'd imagined it would now that you're in the actual venue, but try not to change too many things at this stage! Then from Tuesday the performances will begin – make sure cast arrive promptly, ideally an hour before curtain up every night to give time for costume, makeup and a warmup. It's entirely up to you if you want to watch the performances from the audience or stay backstage with the cast. On the last night, you'll need to rally all cast and crew to help clear the venue of all props / set / costumes before the Studio locks up for the night – make sure someone has arranged transport and storage for them. It's then traditional to have a party for cast and crew to celebrate what has hopefully been a great show week!