

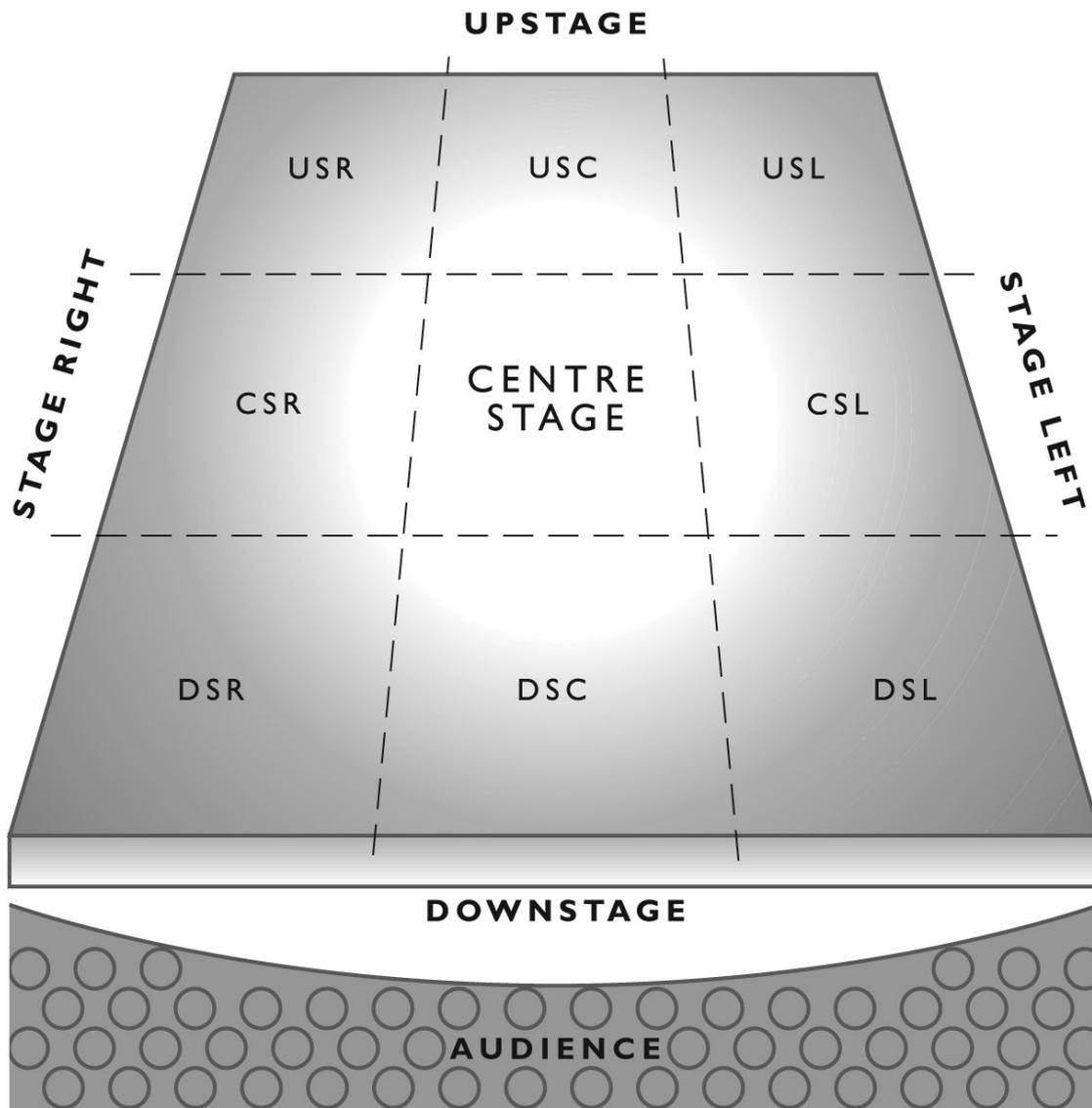


Stage directions

Scripts consist of dialogue and stage directions. These indicate what the cast should say and do in a performance. Playwrights do not write stage directions for every move. A script is a guideline open to interpretation by those who are to perform it. So how do actors work out their moves?

First of all, a quick 'tour' of the stage:

Floor plan of stage



This floor plan is of a typical proscenium arch theatre, where the audience sits in a block facing the stage. There are many other stage–audience configurations in different theatres but this is the most common one.

All positions on stage are from the actor’s point of view, as they stand facing the audience. ‘Stage left’ is to their left. ‘Downstage’ is down towards the audience. ‘Upstage’ is further away from the audience. ‘Onstage’ is any position from which the audience can see the actor, and ‘offstage’ means the actor is in those areas where they cannot be seen by the audience. The expression ‘upstaged’ comes from the theatrical term when an actor is forced by another actor to turn upstage, turning their back on the audience and therefore losing the audience’s focus.

‘Blocking’ is the process of working out the major moves and positions of the actors. The stage is divided into nine imaginary squares, like a chessboard. If the director and the cast all know the terms for these areas, it is easy to discuss blocking. For example, the director may say: ‘During the next speech, move from upstage right to downstage centre.’ The actor may say: ‘I feel it would work better if I cross to upstage left’.

Some directors will decide on the basic blocking before beginning rehearsals with the cast. There is a risk, however, that the actors will end up performing like live puppets, having little connection between what they are saying and what they are doing. Most blocking is worked out during rehearsals, with actions linked directly to the dialogue. Actions onstage should always be performed for a purpose, with meaning and in character.

When the time comes to get actors up and moving, when it is time to work out the blocking of a play, it is important to keep some basic points in mind. Actors must be seen and heard by their audience. Their moves should seem appropriate for their characters and the situation, and they need to feel comfortable. So what factors need to be considered? Most of them are common sense and there are no set, absolute rules but the following points are important:

What the audience can see

Sight lines refer to the boundaries of the area of the stage that can be seen from any seat in the auditorium. Upstage right and upstage left are areas that cannot be seen from every seat in many theatres. Some sets also restrict the view of some audience members. If there is a large cast, this can cause problems for the actor who should be the focus at a particular time. The actor should generally be facing downstage when delivering lines.

What the audience can hear

If an actor faces upstage, it can be very hard to be heard. If other actors are moving during a speech, this can also make it hard to hear dialogue.

What is appropriate

Blocking should reflect the relationships that exist between the characters in a scene. Someone of high status or importance should be in a strong position onstage. Characters who are comfortable with each other stand or sit closer to each other than strangers. If a character is not supposed to overhear the comment of another character onstage, they should not be positioned too close. Movements onstage should also seem to flow naturally. Any action should seem logical and necessary within the terms of the scene and the characters. Another practical consideration is costuming. If the actor is wearing a restrictive or heavy costume, this will have a direct effect on what movement is possible.



What looks good

Theatre is a visual art and one major component of the ‘picture’ is the composition made by the actors. Where is the audience’s eye drawn? Who is the focus? Is the ‘picture’ well balanced? Does it look natural? It is all well and good to have actors standing in interesting groups, but does it look awkward, contrived or artificial?

Rehearsals

If possible, rehearsals should be held on the stage or in a space that is the same size as the stage. Theatre company rehearsal rooms are marked up, usually with tape on the floor, with the dimensions of the stage and all the necessary details of the set such as doors and furniture indicated. This means that the set design must be completed before rehearsals begin, allowing the cast to work out their moves accurately. When the costumes have a major effect on the movement of the actors, it is usual to rehearse for at least part of the time in clothes that are similar.

The positioning and movement of actors onstage are crucial elements in any production. Blocking should be developed and refined during rehearsals as a natural process.



Acknowledgements

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