

THE FILM DIRECTOR'S  
Bag Of Tricks

How to get what you want  
from writers and actors

Mark W. Travis

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# How To Use This Book

If you are a director, or just considering becoming a director, you will find this book enormously useful in many different ways. First, be clear on how the book is structured: Chapter One (Working with the Writer), Chapter Two (The Casting Process), Chapter Three (The Rehearsal Process) and Chapter Four (The Production Process). And then as a bonus we have Chapter Five, which contains in-depth interviews with six amazing directors. Don't feel like you have to read this book in order. Skip around. If you're about to go into rehearsal, read Chapter Three. If you're about to work with a writer, read Chapter One. Or if you are just curious about other directors and how they work, read Chapter Five.

And then check out the Table of Contents. You'll see all the tricks listed there. Pick a trick, read about it. And if you're really courageous and curious, invite some actor friends over and experiment. Read the trick out loud and then try it and see what happens.

For beginning directors I suggest that you settle in and read the book straight through. Each chapter, each trick, and each page will be a revelation to you and you will gain a deeper insight into the complex world of directing. Then move on and experiment.

For veteran directors I would suggest that you skim quickly through the Table of Contents and find those tricks that will immediately address the challenges you have faced with writers and actors. Pick through the book and you will find solutions to problems you have dealt with in the past and

you will find descriptions of tricks that you have already been using that will give you new insights into your skills.

For actors I highly recommend that you read every page of Chapters Two, Three, and Four. There is nothing like having the covers pulled off those techniques that directors use on you. And, besides learning these tricks, you will also begin to see yourself, how resistant you are, how stubborn or uncertain, and why these tricks are so important and so valuable. And you will most likely begin to recognize within yourself the tricks that you use in order to get what you want from a director. Remember, this works both ways.

And for writers, of course you must read Chapter One. It's all about you. John Badham was right when he said, "These tips were supposed to be kept secret." But now that they are exposed you will understand more clearly the complex psychological relationship between the writer and the director. Then read the remaining chapters. In the process of working with actors you will begin to understand more clearly what directors go through in order to stimulate the performances we need to make your written material come to life.

At the end of each chapter I have included Exercises (or homework) that will increase your experience of this book and help you learn how to incorporate these tools, tricks and techniques into your own directing. I suggest that you do these exercises with a partner (other than the hired actors). The more you engage in a dialogue with other writers, directors and actors as you are experimenting with these techniques, the more these tools will become an integral part of your process.

Finally, think of this book as a great guide, a menu of tricks, a toolbox that you can dip into at any time. Be willing to experiment, be willing to fail and try again. Be willing to explore this new world of directing tricks just as you would explore new restaurants, new clubs, new music, or new friends.

# Introduction

Many of you have read one of my other books, either *The Director's Journey* or *Directing Feature Films*, and you are probably wondering what I am doing writing a book with the whimsical title *The Film Director's Bag of Tricks*.

Or you haven't read any of my books and you just picked this one up because you are one of those directors who doesn't want to have to read long chapters on theories and executions and would rather have shortcuts and quick guaranteed results. Don't worry, I understand, I'm just like you. Truthfully, I think I gravitated to directing theatre (and eventually television and film) because it looked easy or I thought I could fake it. And for years I did. I mixed pure instinct and intuition with an uncanny ability to justify my choices and actions with something sounding like educated reasoning. It worked like a charm until I was finally tested during those years at Yale (where for some reason they thought we really should study and learn and apply ourselves and get beyond instinct and intuition and make rational and reasonable choices). To please the powers that be at Yale, I did the work. But quite honestly it wasn't until many years later that I appreciated what they had put me through. Now I see it all coming together. Now I see that my instincts and intuitions are based in some morass of experience and education, whether I like it or not.

Once I realized this, I thought it would be much more interesting to really test myself, really challenge myself and see if I could find the zone where everything would fall apart — where instinct and intuition would do nothing

but lead me astray. But no matter how much I pushed and probed, I couldn't find that place. Somehow my outrageous ideas and impractical approaches kept working. They kept producing amazing results. Well, as you can imagine, this was very frustrating. Not that I don't like magical results. I do. But what was displeasing me was that I couldn't prove to myself that I was the fraud I always believed I was. Somewhere in my creative world, that indefinable nether region where magical muses romp and play, there was a logical and rational force guiding the chaos. I'd push harder and the forces would keep finding the logic. Then eventually I gave up the game. I surrendered and just decided to allow myself to play. I decided to stop questioning, stop reasoning, and especially to stop trying to make sense of it all.

In a scene from one of my favorite films, *Shakespeare In Love*, written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard and directed by John Madden, a theatre manager, Philip Henslowe (Geoffrey Rush), is being threatened by a financier, Hugh Fennyman (Tom Wilkinson):

HENSLOWE

What have I done, Mr. Fennyman?

FENNYMAN

The theatres are all closed by the Plague!

HENSLOWE

Oh, that.

FENNYMAN

By order of the Master of the Revels!

HENSLOWE

Mr. Fennyman, let me explain about  
the theatre business.

(they stop)

The natural condition is one of  
insurmountable obstacles on the  
road to imminent disaster. Believe  
me, to be closed by the plague is  
a bagatelle in the ups and downs  
of owning a theatre.

FENNYMAN

So what do we do?

HENSLOWE

Nothing. Strangely enough, it all  
turns out well.

FENNYMAN

How?

HENSLOWE

I don't know. It's a mystery.

“I don't know. It's a mystery.” That's how I feel about directing. It is truly mysterious. I have no idea how or why it works. Oh yes, I know, I have written two other books about directing where I explain in great detail how it works. And I have been praised by some of the finest directors in Hollywood for “taking the mystery out of directing” or for “making clear what we have all understood only by instinct.” Fine, so I have the ability to bring clarity to a process that is as vague and confusing as the Bush Administration's

foreign policy. And I am glad that this clarity is helpful to so many. But, honestly, way down deep inside I do know that all of us, all directors, are simply practicing sleight-of-hand. Not only do we create an illusion of reality (on the screen or on the stage), but we are also very adept at creating the illusion that we know what the hell we are doing. Not a bad job if you can get it.

About a year ago I was teaching one of my directing workshops in Cornwall, England. I was fortunate enough to have been invited by the Media Centre Cornwall to help initiate a new program intended to stimulate and support the filmmakers of Cornwall. And I was doubly honored to have Michael Wiese, my publisher, attend the workshop. As I was trying to cram what should have been hours and hours of teaching into a few days, I found myself wanting to take shortcuts. "Cut to the chase," said a little voice in my head. Now, being one of those persons who listens to the voices in his head (and often has heated debates with them... more on this later), I found myself saying: "Let me show you a trick." And I would demonstrate a shortcut, a technique, a 'trick' if you will, that would produce the desired result almost instantaneously. This is when the muses are really having a good time. They are at their most mischievous. They know they are going to dazzle. They know it is all artifice and trickery and that it creates the illusion of reality. The muses are wicked and wonderful, devious and delightful, not to be trusted and not to be ignored. Thank God we have them.

And after I had demonstrated five or six tricks, Michael turned to me with that twinkle he gets when he knows he has a brilliant idea. "I know what your next book should be," he said. I looked at him with both dread and delight. Delighted that he had an idea for a new book. Dread that I would have to plunge myself once again into that painful process called writing. "The Film Director's Bag of Tricks." Well, once again he was right. And once again I stalled for as long as I could.

There are a lot of reasons for this book and quite likely none of them are any good, but they will have to suffice. The reality is that for over a dozen years I have been teaching directing all over the world. And it is true that through my style and approach to teaching this elusive craft I have saved directors years of exploration and trial and error by just demonstrating what I lovingly call a 'trick.' Truth is that I don't know what else to call these short cuts. You could call them tools or techniques and that makes it all sound much more legitimate, but in reality they are tricks. They are sleight-of-hand. And most often the writer, the actor, and even the audience is seduced into thinking that something quite different has occurred.

All directing is sleight-of-hand. Think about it. Whether it is stage or film, all we are doing is telling a simple story. Perhaps it is a complex story, but regardless, it is a story with a beginning, middle, and end. We are telling this story in a compressed time frame (usually about two hours) because of the attention span of our audience. Novelists don't have this restriction. They can write long and detailed stories because the time commitment for the reader is flexible. But in theatre, film, and television, we have a window of time with the audience. So we compress our story, we create a 'script' that will guide us through. We rehearse, shoot and edit using sleight-of-hand in order to make the audience feel or believe that something real is actually happening. And like the audience at a magic show, our audience wants to believe. They want to believe in the magic. They don't want the magician to explain how it is done. Yes, I know, deep down inside we all want to know, but once we are told, once the curtain is lifted, we will immediately resent the magician because he has destroyed the illusion.

Let's face the facts. We are in a business of illusion. We create and tell stories that are not real, not true. They may be based on a true story, but what is happening on the screen

is not true. Even the most determined documentaries are a reworking of what may have been true at one time. So we are in the business of selling myths and imaginings. We rest on the audience's suspension of disbelief. We manipulate the audience and we pull a veil over their eyes and ask them to believe.

And as directors we are always using sleight-of-hand to get writers and actors to deliver what we need so that we can create our next illusion. That's what this book is about: The tricks we use with writers and actors in the process of creating an illusion.

If you have read one of my other books, you may have noticed that this book has a totally different tone. It's lighter, a bit more irreverent. That's because we are looking at the directing process through an entirely different lens. We're going to pull back the curtain and expose an aspect of directing that many directors use but may never admit. It's not just that we create illusions, it is that we, as directors, are willing to do almost anything to get what we want, to get the job done. We may not be proud of these techniques, but we know that they work. We know that when the clock is ticking, the sun is going down, or the actress is about to quit, we have to pull a rabbit out of the hat and get the job done.

Basically, no matter how you look at it, we directors are alchemists. My favorite definition of alchemy: *Any magical power or process of transmuting a common substance, usually of little value, into a substance of great value.* Perfect. That's what directors do. We take that common substance that is of little value and make it into something of perceived great value through some magical process.

Let's get started.



# The Alchemist Hires Some Assistants

Now that we have the writer and the script moving in the right direction, it's time to add some more members to the team.

The actors.

Hmmm... Actors... A curious collection of creative creatures. In Chapters Three and Four we'll get deep into the delicious process of eliciting magical performances, but first we better look at the selection process.

## The Casting Process

Remember, we are merely humble storytellers, no different than the poets and bards of ancient times who traveled from town to town, spinning their stories to the delight (and sometimes horror) of their listeners. But we are also filmmakers and we don't get to 'tell' our stories, we get to 'show' our stories, and we need some curious creatures (often known as actors) to portray our characters. And now we are at the selection process. And just like all other stages of bringing this story to life on the screen, we

will be employing as much magic and sleight-of-hand as necessary.

### Relationships

Relationships are tricky, aren't they? You never know. The person you are just now meeting could end up being a significant person in your life, or not. Could be for five minutes, five years, or the rest of your life. And you know that the way it gets started is significant. Those first moments of connection can deeply influence how the rest of the relationship goes.

Within the casting process we have a great advantage. As each actor walks in we know that we are potentially at the beginning of a significant relationship and we know pretty much how long this relationship could last. And, since we are the director (the Alpha horse) and this poor unsuspecting actor is looking for a job, we are in a great position to get this relationship off on the right foot. Sleight-of-hand? Absolutely.



#### TRICK: INSTANT RELATIONSHIP

Just like a master magician has to gain the confidence of his audience, a director has to gain the confidence and trust of the actors. And the first meeting is crucial.

### The First Meeting

As the actor walks through the door... be there. Don't think you have to establish some 'directorial mystique' by being inaccessible and mysterious. I know a lot of you do this, by instinct or design, and you feel it works for you. You like a display of superiority. You establish a bit of distance and definitely give off the impression of importance and authority. Good. If it works for you, go for it. If you're eventually getting the profound, deep and rich performances from the actors that you so desperately need for your films, fine.

But I know I can't do that. I would know that something is missing. I can feel it at the edges of the relationship... at the line between the known and unknown is lurking some indefinable extra tone/quality/nuance that is the difference between a good performance and a great one. And as the master magicians that we all aspire to be, we want to stimulate every apprentice to the point of greatness. We want what exists at the edge of known and unknown. We want to see the magic that will sparkle and dazzle even our eyes.

### **Humble Director**

So, drop the 'greater than thou' attitude, embrace humility, and allow your aspiring apprentices to feel confident and comfortable and safe. Greet each actor at the door with something like:

“Hi, I'm the director and I just want you to know what an honor it is to meet you and I look forward to working with you.”

The seduction has begun. The relationship has begun. Sleight-of-hand? You bet! Deceptive? Only if you are not sincere. Effective? Absolutely. When was the last time you were greeted with such warmth and acceptance? Remember how it felt? How safe you felt? How respected you felt? That's what we are going for here. We are starting out each and every relationship (whether they last five minutes or the length of the film... or beyond) with this subtext:

“You are welcome here. I honor and respect you.”

### **Setting the Stage: Creating the 'Safe Zone'**

We're starting to develop a very delicate relationship. We know it and the actors know it. And like any good relationship, it will be filled with confidence and a feeling of safety. But 'safe from what?' you might ask. Good question. What's the danger? Why do the actors need to be protected?

Remember when you were a child, five or six years old perhaps, and your parents or guardians would be doing their best to guide you through your day? “Don’t touch this. Don’t eat that. Stay out of the street. Don’t go there, that’s not safe. Don’t play with that. Stay away from that person.” Do you hear all that negative information? Good intentions poorly stated. All we heard then was “don’t, don’t, don’t.” Raising children is not easy. And as a good parent knows, there are two basic rules that will work wonders: Create clearly defined boundaries and then, within those boundaries, allow total freedom. That’s right, total freedom within well-defined boundaries. This will allow the child to feel safe while also allowing the child to fully express him/herself. This approach works the same way with actors... at any age. Create strict and clear boundaries, then set the actors loose like little wild animals. They’ll be happy, free, expressive and feeling so very safe. And like the best sleight-of-hand, both you and the actor know what you’re doing. There is an unspoken bond, a contract and an agreement. No different than a parent and a child.

### **Boundaries**

Here are some examples of boundaries you need to create in the casting process:

“Here’s the material I would like you to read.”

“Here’s where I’d like you to be (in this chair, in this end of the room).”

“You will be reading with this actor (the reader).”

### **Freedom**

The freedom part goes something like this:

“I’m not looking for anything specific here.”

“I just want to see your impulses, your instincts.”

“Surprise me.”

You are telling the actor that they have total freedom to create, express, and explore following their own instincts. There will be no judgment. This is precisely what they want and need to allow their creativity to flow. You have removed the cloud of criticism (a vital element in your relationship with actors, a world without criticism) by saying, “I’m not looking for anything specific here. I want to see your impulses and instincts.” The freedom that this permission allows is vital, and sadly most directors do not realize it.

When an actor reads a script or even just a scene, she immediately has some preconceived idea of what the director might be looking for. It’s usually a cliché or a formulaic rendering of a character or a scene. Most actors will be reluctant to venture very far from that preconceived idea during a casting session because they want to get the job. But if you give them permission to experiment and explore, if you tell them they can journey outside the box and even surprise you — what a gift! And you are really saying to them: “Nothing you do can be wrong,” and that is the most crucial gift of all. Now the actor is totally free and that is your goal.

### **Speed Dating**

The casting process is not just you auditioning the actors. Whether or not they can play the role effectively is only a small part of this process. One of the key aspects of casting has to do with relationships — working relationships. You are exploring the potential relationship between you and the actor. And, in a subtle way, it is also the actors auditioning you. Okay, they don’t have a vote, but they do have an opinion.

More specifically, will you be able to work with this particular actor and will this actor be able to work with you?

It would be really nice if we could just hand out a questionnaire and get it all resolved in a much simpler way. But that won't work. We need to find more surreptitious ways of extracting this information. Think of this as a form of 'speed dating.' And the better you are at it, the better the results.

### The Character of the Actor

First, one thing has to be clear. Most of the actors who are auditioning for you want the job. And those who don't will find some way to sabotage the process so you don't need to worry about them. For the actors who do want the job you have to keep in mind that they are going to do pretty much anything to get it. They will be charming, flexible, available, vulnerable, tough, determined, sure of themselves, etc. Or they might come across as frightened, insecure, aggressive, elusive, difficult, or demanding. So how do you know if this is the real person? In this moment the actors are putting their best foot forward, putting on their best face. In many ways this is who they are when they are under pressure. But who will they be when this pressure is released — only to be replaced by the pressures of rehearsal or production?

Our job is to get behind the façade. We want to meet the real person. And of course there is a trick.



### TRICK: CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT

As long as you remain in the casting and audition process the actor will feel the pressure and respond accordingly. Your job: Change the environment.

Years ago I was casting a play, and was in the final stage of casting the four lead men. This was truly an ensemble piece and I had to be sure that these four men would work well together. Which meant I needed to know more about them. As I was running the final callbacks with about ten different actors it became evident to me that I was not getting beyond

their performance abilities and seeing the actors for who they were. In frustration I informed all the actors to just sit in the waiting room and that I would call them when I needed them. After about ten minutes I wandered out into the waiting room to go to the men's room and get a cup of coffee. They were all there — sitting, talking, reading. I could feel a shift of energy as I entered and walked through the room. It was that 'shift of energy' that I wanted to get past. After going to the men's room I returned to the waiting room for my coffee. Again I felt the shift as I entered the room. 'He's in the room' was the feeling. 'The director is in the room and I better be on guard, be attentive.' I got my coffee and then rather than leave the room I sat down. The moment I sat I could feel another shift. 'Now what is he doing?' was the feeling. I asked one of the actors something innocuous, something unrelated to why we were all there. It could have been about the weather or politics or anything. And a conversation began. Some joined in. Others remained more silent, removed. Some made attempts to assert themselves. Others were more reticent, respectful. Some had strong opinions. Others seemed undecided or uncertain. In other words, I was beginning to see who they really were. It was not performing or acting. And if I felt that someone was performing, I assumed that that was part of their personality. It was during this benign conversation over a cup of coffee that I began to formulate my final decisions on how to cast those four roles. Truth is, the casting of this play could not have been more perfect, and I attribute a lot of that to this serendipitous, unplanned moment.



#### **TRICK: A WALK IN THE PARK**

You may argue that this is not a trick. And you'd be right. There is nothing devious, hidden, or sleight-of-hand at all here. In fact, it is on the opposite end of the spectrum.

When you are in the process of selecting those apprentices, those collaborators who are going to be instrumental in the creation of your characters, there is a little voice in the back of your head saying, “Do you really want to spend the next three months (six months, a year) with this person?” Bottom line: I realize that no matter how much I audition or observe these actors, I really don’t know them. So when it comes down to those final decisions, it is time for “a walk in the park.”

It goes something like this.

An actor has been called in for the final callback. Perhaps I have had him read with another actor, often not. The actor comes into the room or my office and all I say is, “Let’s go for a walk.” And we are up and walking, out of the room, out of the office. If it is in the city we walk through the streets. If it is in the country (where I live and have my office) we will find ourselves climbing up a hillside. Either way, it is just the two of us — walking and talking. The topics of discussion? Almost anything but the film project. Anything. Weather, food, women, men, politics, the environment, cooking, families, parents, birth, death... and primarily ourselves. What am I looking for? Connection, intimacy, safety, trust, honesty. We don’t have to agree (best when we don’t). We don’t have to have had similar experiences. But we need to be comfortable connecting on the most intimate levels. We both must feel safe with each other.

True, this really isn’t a trick. There is no way to manipulate such a moment, to make it turn out the way I want. Either the connection and comfort are there, or they are not. Either the trust is felt, or it isn’t. This is perhaps the most important part of the casting process.

And now that we are cast and ready to begin work we need to move into the rehearsal process and see what tricks we can employ there.

With these exercises, use the same script that you downloaded after Chapter One.

**EXERCISES:**

1. Select key scenes from your script for the main characters that you want to use in the audition process.
2. Make specific notes on each character: What you are looking for. Type? Attitude? Characteristic traits?
3. Select a few key tricks from this Chapter that you want to use. (Instant Relationship, Change the Environment, etc.)
4. Call in a few actors (two or three) to read for these parts. Of course they know that you are not doing a real project and only experimenting.
5. Run a casting session. Use the tricks whenever and wherever you can.
6. After you have finished, sit with the actors and ask them to share their experiences with you. This is when you will really find out how the tricks are working.