

Jagoda Szelc

What We Say to People:
The Psychodynamics of Working on a Film Set

www.polishtheatrejournal.com

Publisher

Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw

Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

Jagoda Szela

What We Say to People: The Psychodynamics of Working on a Film Set

I am an ardent proponent of the view that we live within our language, and it has the power to create our reality. People learn to speak in the first two years, but in fact they continue throughout their whole lives to learn what they want to say, and also often have to unlearn to say things they do not want to say, but do say out of pernicious habit. All wars start with language. Language is a combat weapon. Language is a force. It is language, for example, that allows us to call an animal 'meat', an act that has fundamental consequences for all life on our Earth.

Language is a tool for describing the world and composing definitions, a medium of cultural codes. Freedom means one thing for a Pole and something else for an American or a Kurd. All court trials start by defining terms and putting the starting point into words, and seek to achieve unanimity concerning the course of events.

Communication is an art form.

All of this is fundamental to a director's work: we work with language. We are always compelled to think about what we are saying and what the words we speak actually mean. The problem is that directors do not learn, and are incapable of speaking to people, although the ability to communicate properly is the foundation of the profession. Perhaps this is why it will be many years still before I can call myself a director.

My words will be the words of a craftswoman and not an artist; a story about a workshop, not an artwork. I respect myself as a craftswoman. I understand that the better a craftswoman I am, the better an artist I become. In my work, one affects the other. I came to this discovery after four years working on two feature films and a decade making short films. I am working on an academic subject I call 'film set psychodynamics'. In my view, it should become a compulsory part of the curriculum at film schools. After graduation, directors are completely unprepared for work, because they do not know what their duties and competences are.

I am aware that I do two jobs at the same time on a film set. First, I am the director of the film and make artistic decisions. Second, I am the leader of the set and am responsible for how the film crew works together. Each role is an equal commitment to me: my task is to pursue artistic goals, while calculating and saving other people's time and energy. Some people call that respect, but for me it is responsibility. It is a mistake that no one teaches this to novice directors.

I see working on a film set as having four stages. The first stage, unfortunately often overlooked, is forming a group – choosing the right people for the team, from actors to the set personnel. It is important that the people know that they were chosen deliberately on the basis of their skills. That will allow them to avoid tension resulting from the desire to show what they can do. By demonstrating that we conduct this process deliberately and carefully, we reduce tension in people. Team members chosen hastily, at random, or because of who they know, tend to want to take every opportunity to prove their worth to the director. I have my own ritual for forming a group. I meet all the actors, technicians, and artists in one place and always say the same thing: ‘We will all make mistakes, and that’s OK. What’s not OK is the way we try to hide them.’ It is very important for the people on set to be autonomous in their work, because to act fast we cannot make all decisions ourselves at the same time. It should be important to us to let others adjudicate certain choices for us, as we are concentrating on one action, i.e. directing. In unhealthy relations, there are moments when heads of artistic departments come to the director with the most trivial questions because they are frightened of being punished for making the decision themselves. That also shows that we prepared them for the work badly. A well-prepared crew will know what to do, because it has been discussed many times before.

The second stage of the work is building relationships between the members of the group. This is the moment for learning each other; finding out what language and definitions each of us uses; what we like, what not, what doesn’t work. Refraining from using the words ‘everyone’, ‘everybody’, and ‘nobody’, and saying ‘please’, ‘thank you’, ‘sorry’, ‘hello’, and ‘goodbye’, is also part of running a good workshop and maintaining friendly relations.

The third stage is the actual work on set: making the film. We do not make the artistic decisions there, because they have to happen earlier, so that everyone coming to work knows what his or her duties are, is prepared, and feels autonomous. This will stop people from encroaching on each other’s competences, which they usually do as a result of chaos and a strong need to prove their expert position. This kind of organization not only makes work easier, but also allows us to cope with crisis situations better, silence our fears, and make our abilities more visible. It is a space for being creative, if necessary.

Many problems result from directors’ tendency to treat working on a film as a kind of duel or battle. This kind of approach is immediately reflected in the language used. The director gives commands and uses words and phrases like ‘we have to overcome it’ or ‘it must be beaten’. This language generates roles of losers and winners, resulting in a situation where nobody in fact does what they are told or asked to do, but instead everyone focuses on fighting for themselves.

Judith Weston’s book *Directing Actors*¹ was a very important read for me when developing my conception of film set psychodynamics. Weston highlights the power in the language of consent, used to demonstrate respect for one’s colleagues, but which also has the important function

1 Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1996).

of cancelling out actors' fears. Saying 'pick the microphone up quicker' to an actress turns this movement into her main task in the scene. The actress focuses on this comment differently than she would if you gave the message 'you could pick the microphone up quicker.' It is also common to use a phrase that is impossible to put into practice: 'Great, same again.' Imagine someone asking you, for example, to make another cup of tea that tastes identical, in exactly the same way. If you say 'Great, do it again in a similar way,' then for the actress that basically means the same, but without causing a sense of paralysis. And that brings results.

Various civilizations have used, and continue to use, magic words, owing to their effectiveness in venting and relieving psychological problems. The actors I have worked with came to their first rehearsals with a high level of anxiety, usually concealed behind a cloak of exhilaration. They are frightened of time pressure; they take responsibility for their partner, the scene, remembering the script. It is my job as the director to reinforce the curiosity and excitement, while also reducing the anxieties and stress.

The strength of words is extremely important, and saying platitudes has absolute power. I do not use the word 'action' on set, as it sounds like a command to me. I leave it for extras, because it has become an element of the vocabulary they know from pop culture. 'Now' is more interesting, meaning the moment when something happens. I love the words 'I see.' Saying them is tantamount to assuring the person you are working with that you can see their interest, joy, or satisfaction at a take, or their sadness, fear, annoyance, or lack of understanding.

The fourth stage is breaking up the group, something that, in my experience, is often overlooked. Psychodynamics has taught me that towards the end of the process, people who have worked together tend to argue with each other or attack the leader. The vision of the end of the task and suddenly finishing their activities overnight rouses defence mechanisms. So the dispute is not usually caused by a genuine problem with work, but the desire to make separation from the group easier. To deal with that, I hold a wrap party when we finish shooting (in the theatre, the post-premiere party can have the same function, although here the situation is less dramatic as the play will still be performed; the end is much harder in a film). It plays the role of an alternative, positive conclusion to the collaboration, easing the feeling of painful separation. The actors themselves should also not be forgotten. While schools sometimes have fantastic instructors who devote their time to teaching how to enter a role, usually few people pay attention to the process of leaving a role – which can be dangerous. As far as possible, I try to make the actors I work with aware of that. Inability to leave a role behind frequently ends in a profound worsening of mood, depression, or even alcoholism. People often do not have their own private rituals for leaving a role, and are unable to regenerate emotionally and physically. Acting burns them out.

Of course, the methodology and system of work is different for every project (although I don't like that word in the context of a film or play), which makes us feel powerless. This is why we need to be all the more sensitive to the need to build it architecturally for each new film – to plan how we are going to work on the group.

My observations show that a pyramid system is in force on Polish film sets. At the top of the pyramid is the director, who is the person with the highest position. Further down come the screenwriter, camera operator, production designer, actors, and technicians, with the runners at the very bottom. The director's status is real, of course; with it come obligations, but also privileges – at the end of the day it's my film. A lot of people want to believe in the story of a joint effort and a joint production. Unfortunately, these words often become an alibi for transgressions and abuses of colleagues. I don't believe in that system, just as I don't believe in sentimental assurances about the collective nature of the work. What I do believe is that we are equally deserving of respect. But that is not the case with regard to competences and levels of anxiety.

The sloping relationship operates only from the position of the leader, who has the most duties. But the pyramid does not reflect the truth about film work, because removing any element causes the construction to fall apart. I believe in horizontal systems, phalanxes radiating out from the director. People are important in many ways, and must feel that. If a director's work were solely about giving orders, what would we need directing diplomas and acting and film schools for? A hierarchy exists, but we must understand where it is needed, and even essential. However, this cannot be allowed to cause any loss of respect.

Even in childhood, at early stages of education we learn to label people and generate excessive humility in them. This is very clear to me when I look at my own experience. We grow up – girls more so than boys – amid maxims resembling Buddhist koans: 'The humblest calf sucks the most milk,' 'Be careful not to get lost in the crowd.' Among the places with the most violence are playgrounds. I hear how parents speak to their children there. They love them and have the very best intentions, but when a child falls over (which is normal when a child moves), gets scared, starts crying or screaming, or feels pain, they say, 'What were you running for? Everything's OK, calm down.' For the child, though, everything is not OK. The negation and attempt to diffuse the situation and quickly change the child's emotional state denies him or her the chance to experience the moment. It provokes dissociation. This is cognitive illiteracy: we do not know what the things we say are, their deeper meanings and consequences. As a result, we are also unable to identify when we experience verbal violence. Playgrounds are an excellent place for observing how not to communicate on a film set.

I am not a filmmaker. I am someone who directs. I do not plan to do this for the rest of my life, and I am not attached to this identity. I practise directing and thereby give myself the chance to make mistakes. When I notice a reaction to anxiety (attack, flight, freezing), I expose it and say it out loud. I often apologize to actors, and from conversations and observations I see that this is rare. When I was starting out as a student with a crew of fifty people, I had no problem with my status, I wasn't paralysed by shyness or consumed by guilt, because I owned up to my mistakes.

I'm a smart cookie. I make films for very little money compared to the average on the film market. But competition is growing in the industry, there's an explosion of productions, 'everyone is making films'. I use the atmosphere on set and work culture to make sure that the best technicians

will want to work with me, even if other conditions are not the best. Decency pays.

There is an old English proverb that goes something like 'One man is not mankind.' Our humanity is established in a group; we are a social species. If people observe violence among the members of the group on a film set, whatever the job (technician, gaffer, actor), the thought occurs to them: I could be next.

I would like to develop a curriculum of Film Set Logistics and teach my younger colleagues, because this is the area where I see the biggest deficits. I teach work hygiene, I expose the potentials of fear, and say what violence words can contain. I teach confrontation, signalling downright oppressive language, saying 'I don't consent,' 'That's very unpleasant,' 'It takes away my strength and chance to develop at work.' Yet the system still does not see how important and significant this field is for the next, increasingly aware generations. I do not know whether it will be possible to develop this trend, although I discern a profound need for work focused on psychodynamics. I am uncertain whether the people who participate in my workshops later find any application for what I try to teach them. Perhaps it gives them support in the post-traumatic stress following studies at artistic schools. Perhaps it comes back at critical moments at work. I do not take responsibility for the effects, though, because that would be exhausting. I believe that pride in small steps reinforces change and continuing with healthy behaviours. Doing a small thing, one 'flash', is often a massive achievement. And this pride must also be learned.

I believe that when we generate social changes, it is vital to keep a sense of value in what we do. What do we do in situations when we encounter micro-aggression, I wonder? What makes us decide to react or not? At one point I felt obliged to react to every situation of violence, and as a result I was a shadow of a person. Therefore, I gave myself permission not to react when I don't have the energy, or to do so not always in a confrontational way. As someone teaching at the Łódź Film School, the main thing I can do is contribute to the emergence of a new generation of directors – 'new' not only in terms of age, but in particular in a mental sense. I do as much as I can. This practice helps to build a craft that is new and good, giving the people involved in it a sense of safety. The time of cowards is coming to an end.

Translated by Ben Koschalka

Works cited

Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors: Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1996

ABSTRACT

Jagoda Szelc

What We Say to People: The Psychodynamics of Working on a Film Set

Film sets, where technicians and artists work in tight collaboration, are a specific, hasty, time-driven places, which frequently generate both positive and negative stress. As male and female directors and leaders we are obliged to pay attention to the ways we run a team of people. It is our duty to manage mental and emotional dynamics within a group in a healthy manner. Unfortunately, there is a number of false myths regarding this peculiar profession, which are worth considering and posing a question, whether they actually serve our work. The misunderstanding lies in an inept identification of who a director is, what he or she does and which tools they should use when cooperating with people.

Keywords: community, film school, film production, psychodynamics.