

Emerging Directors: Working With A Team

**A guide for emerging disabled directors
on working with production and creative
teams, venues, performers and more**

As the work you do scales up, you're expected to know more, understand more, and work with more people. This short guide introduces you to the idea of building a creative team, exploring ways of working with everyone you come into contact with.

Written by Jamie Hale, Artistic Director at CRIPtic Arts, and funded by Unlimited, with advice from producers including Caitlin Richard and Hetty Shand, designers including Oliver Vibrans and Carly Altberg, and production manager Al Orange, Assistant Directors including Marcy Rick and Claire Beerjerez

Directing When You Have a Team

As you develop your directing pathway, you're likely to end up working with increasingly large teams. However, if you don't have formal training or a background of theatre experience, it can be quite confusing learning what to do, who does what, and how to work together.

This short guide explores some key tips and advice for working with producers, design teams, and production managers - but remember that everyone's different, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution!

Key Tips

1 Sharing

Make sure everyone is aware of what experience, knowledge, and skills everyone else has - and where the gaps might be. That way, communication is clearer, and people can learn without feeling under pressure to pretend they understand everything.

2 Confidence

Whether you've directed at this scale before or not, you're here because you've got a creative concept you believe in - so start from a place of trusting yourself and being confident in your decisions

3 Openness

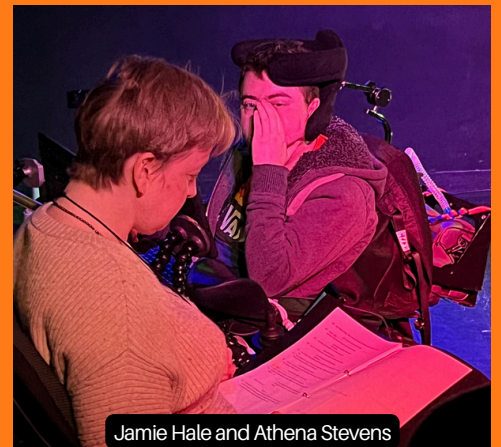
If you're open to input, suggestions, and ideas from the team, make sure people know how (and when) to express these, and when it's better not to. Empower people to share and contribute, trust their expertise - but also trust your creative direction.

4 Priorities

Work out what matters most to you - and make sure everyone knows that. This way, if there's time or resource pressure, people are clear about what matters most.

5 Ethos

Figure out who you are as a director and the ethos you bring to your work. How do you want to work with people, and what do you expect from yourself and others as you make the show. What are the ethics at the heart of your work - and of your team?



Jamie Hale and Athena Stevens

Remember Your Own Needs

As you build a team and take on an increasing amount of responsibility, important things like self-care can fall by the wayside. It's vital that you take the time to meet your own needs - to eat, to rest, and to relax. Make sure that time is built into your schedule from the start - because it's just as important as any other part of the process.

If you fail to meet your needs, not only do you burn yourself out, but your behaviour suggests to the rest of the team that this is what you want from them - and that's not safe, fair, or healthy.

Working With An Assistant Director

Being an Assistant Director gives you the chance to learn from the director in question, but is also a role in and of itself, with its own skillset. Every director and assistant pairing is very different, but your Assistant Director is likely to be able to keep track of what you're saying to actors about their performance and movement, and what you're saying about sound, lighting, and any other technical elements, and may also be able to 'run' messages and ideas between departments. They're also able to support you in embedding your creative vision.

Key Tips

1 Establish your relationship

Your Assistant Director needs to know how you want to work together - and you both need to know what each other needs to work effectively. Tell them how you want them to give notes, feedback, creative input, how you like your rehearsal reports, and anything else they need to know.

2 Share your vision

The more your Assistant Director understands about your vision for the work, the more they're able to help ensure it's embedded in the piece. They may notice things you've missed, so invite them in.

3 Bring them into the process as well as the room

Make space for your Assistant Director to be involved in discussions about staging, technical discussions, and conversations about the vision of the work. Treat them as a creative ally, not a glorified notetaker.

4 Respect their expertise

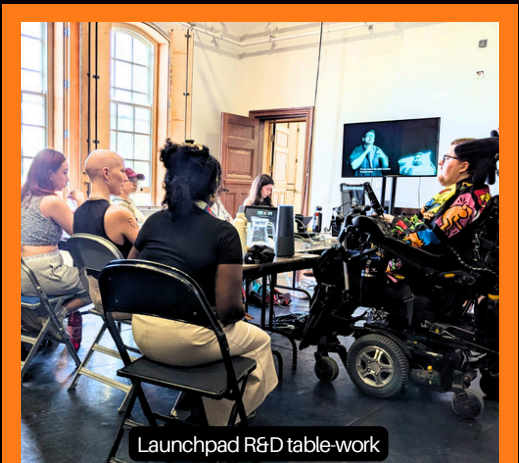
An Assistant Director brings their own experience and expertise to the relationship. Agree what their job is, and give them the support and space to do it well, instead of treading on their toes constantly.

5 Share your ethos

How do you want to work? How do you want people around you to feel? What are your priorities as someone managing people? Your Assistant Director will also support with this, so make sure they understand the ethos you're bringing to work and can reflect that.



Jamie Hale directing (Shona Louise)



Launchpad R&D table-work

What's Their Job?

Their job is to assist the director. They may want to be a director themselves or may want to be an assistant director. Ultimately, they're the nexus at which the director's stated creative vision is held and then spread out to the wider team. It's a role that benefits from good organisational structures and a clear agreement for when and how to offer input within the directing team and relationship.

Working With A Producer

Directors often begin by self-producing, making all of the organisational and logistical arrangements for their work. At some point, you may begin to work with a producer. With the right working relationship, this frees you up to focus on your creative role as a director, and allows them to lead in their areas of financial, logistical and organisational expertise.

But what do they need from you and how do you get the best out of this vital relationship?



Key Tips

1 They're on your side

They are your collaborator, colleague, and critical friend. They're not there to impose unnecessary constraints on your creative vision; they're there to make it happen.

2 They're there to support you

So be transparent about your skills, expertise, knowledge, limitations, access requirements and everything you need to work successfully - while learning the same about them.

3 They know what can (and can't) be done

So if something's vital to the project, make sure they know this from the beginning - or they'll have to crush your dreams the week before opening night.

4 Keep up with their work

Their role is vital to the show going ahead, so make sure you know what they're doing, where they're at, and when they might need support or advice from you.



The Right Producer

Some producers are more focused on management and logistics, while others also have a powerful creative vision.

As you work with different producers, you'll start to understand their style, and what you're looking for from that relationship. For me, a core part of their value is as a creative partner - but that doesn't work for everyone.

Working With A Design Team

You're creating the world of your show - but it takes a team to bring that to life - and it's a team of set, props, light, and costume designers that you may well be assembling. These people are the people you're trusting to make your idea into reality - and they're trusting you to bring a clear idea, good leadership, and to support them in doing so.

Every designer is different - and every design role is also different. I talked to lighting designer, Carly Altberg, and sound designer and composer, Oliver Vibrans about what they need from a director and how to build that relationship successfully.

Key Tips

1 Communicate non-negotiables early

If you know that there's a crucial part of your show that will impact on their design work, tell them about it from the very beginning so they can factor it into their work and plans. No surprises!

2 Make access expectations clear

Audience accessibility impacts the workload for people in all roles. If you aim to include certain elements or achieve certain standards, ensure your designers know what this means for their role, workload, and expectations and have factored it into their timelines.

3 Don't expect identical timelines

While a sound designer may enter tech week with the sound almost completely programmed, a lighting designer may still be at the ideas stage. Communication is crucial here so everyone knows what's needed and when, and you're supporting them with that.

4 Avoid last minute changes

The more fully programmed a show is, the harder it is for the technical team to change it - just like changing a built set would also take far more time and effort. If you want a change and don't know how much work it is, just ask people.



Sam Zelaya (Shona Louise Photography)



Theo Angel (Isobel Greenhalgh)

Building A Team

It's not just about working in the right way - it's about finding the right people - and building the right team. It's important to meet and interview a range of designers until you feel confident you've found someone who can build on your concept, and develop it into reality.

Make sure everyone in your team (including yourself) feels valued, like their opinions matter, and like they are an important creative force, and even when things get tough, everyone will pull together.

Working With A Production Manager

If you didn't have a traditional route into theatre, and you don't have a technical background, set, sound and lighting queries can feel as if they're happening in a different language. Being a director doesn't mean you're going to understand technical elements - only that you have a strong sense of the result you want. Working with a Production Manager means you have someone there to make sure that all the decisions made around set, sound and lighting are financially and practically feasible, and don't have any unexpected clashes.

Key Tips

1 Trust them to translate

They will be translating your creative ideas between the design and technical teams, so if you don't understand what they mean by something, ask them straight away. They need to understand what you do and don't know.

2 Bring them in early

The earlier in the process you have them involved, the easier their workload is because they're able to preempt problems instead of having to fix them.

3 Don't dictate changes - discuss them

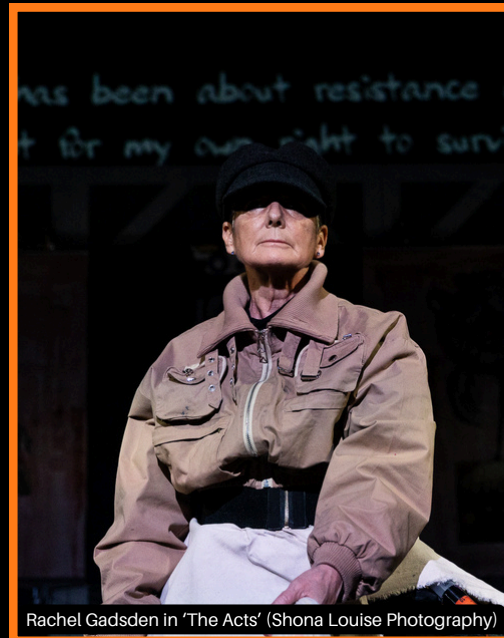
A small change for you could create an enormous cascade of technical issues for them - so if you want to change something, make sure you've talked to them about the scale of the workload involved and taken their feedback on board.

4 Take "no" for an answer

As with a producer, sometimes they will have to say "no" to something - it might not be safe, affordable, or feasible. If this happens, pivot to finding other options; don't blame them.

5 Tech week is their time

You need rehearsals to get the performers ready - they need tech to get the technical elements ready. Make sure your performers are ready so tech week can be run the way it's needed.



Rachel Gadsden in 'The Acts' (Shona Louise Photography)



Jessi Parrott & Chelsea Wiercx (Isobel Greenhalgh)

What's Their Job?

Between technical, creative and venue teams is the Production Manager. Their role is to make sure that all the technical elements of the show will come together and work. They can support the wider design team, ensure that the technical team embed everything the designer needs, and navigate any complexities if the venue's facilities don't match the show's plan.

Working With A Venue

Without a venue to put work on in, you will struggle to put it on! Finding a venue can be challenging - and when you've got one, they're likely to require lots of information, from marketing packs to technical riders. Producers and Production Managers (if you have them) will do a lot of this work. If you're a new director, you're likely to be working with venues that are used to working with new directors - so remember that they're your ally, and if they want to know anything from you that you don't know how to do, you can just talk to them and ask for that support.

Key Tips

1 Meet their deadlines

They will want various marketing and technical pieces of information by specific deadlines. Make sure you meet those.

2 Have an accurate technical rider

Work out exactly what you need (lighting, sound, and video, any props or set requirements, anything 'special' (flying, traps etc)) and health and safety / risk assessment paperwork and share with the venue fully, completely, accurately, and when they need it. If you need help constructing this, tell them and ask them for it.

3 Build a good relationship

As soon as you begin working with the venue, establish who your key contact is and build a really positive, professional relationship so that if any problems come up, they're easy to resolve.

4 Use their expertise

Whether with the technical rider, your production schedule (which explains what you're doing when and for how long), or marketing assets, if the venue needs something and you don't know how to do it, be honest with them and ask them for help and advice.

5 Treat their space and teams well

Take care of the venue and its equipment, be polite and constructive with their teams, and they're far more likely to have you back. If problems arise, address them professionally.



Samuel Brewer and Aarian Mehrabani in 'Bad Blind Person' (Shona Louise Photography)



Peyvand Sadeghian and Matthew Robinson in 'Over the Moon' (Shona Louise)

What's Their Job?

The venue provides the space your show will be in, but a lot more around that. They're likely to be handling ticket sales, audience access requirements, Front of House staffing, and may be providing technical teams to programme and/or operate the show. Working with them positively will really help make your show a success, from perfectly-timed tech to sell-out shows.

Working With Performers

As a director, whatever the size of the team you're with, the performers will be at the heart of it. Having a good relationship with performers is vital, because you're trusting them to bring your vision to the stage, on the night. Without that, tension and mistrust can hold a piece back and prevent it becoming everything it has the potential to be.

The job of a director is a very psychological one - you need to know how to motivate people, how to support them, how to get the best from them - and how to encourage them to do things they don't necessarily want to do.

Key Tips

1 Collaborate, don't dominate

Performers will struggle to do things well if they don't want to be doing them, so build a collaborative relationship with them where they trust you to attend to and respond to their concerns.

2 Ask questions instead of offering answers

When you're talking to performers, sometimes it can work better to frame your suggestions as questions - instead of "try that again but with more intensity", ask "how would it feel to try that again with more intensity", getting them bought into the idea you're presenting.

3 What is the performer trying to achieve

Sometimes a performer is trying to achieve a specific effect or intention but it isn't landing. By asking them what they're trying for, and telling them what you're receiving from the audience, you can show them the gap, and they can understand what needs to shift.

4 Everything can be tried

Sometimes you'll try something unexpected and it will work fantastically - and sometimes it won't. Create an environment where before refusing an idea entirely, people typically agree to try it.

5 Pick your battles

There are only so many times you can shut down an idea, change a rehearsal, or do something your performers are really unhappy with. Make sure you don't do this unnecessarily as it will generate bad-will.



Tatum Swithenbank (Shona Louise)



Elvis Died of Burgers at Liberty Festival (Shona Louise)

What's Their Job?

The performer *performs* - but it's also their job to translate your acting vision into the movement and sound they create on the stage. They're probably the most important relationship in the team, and will need your support and backing throughout the rehearsals.

The more you work *with* them, not *against* them, the better an experience you will have as a director and the more you'll get out of them.

Bringing It Together

The first time you sit around a table as director with a large team, it may feel overwhelming - but with the right team, it will be a collaborative, constructive experience, working to make the show a success. Keeping it this way is about understanding what motivates people on the team, what would make them dig their heels in, what they're afraid of and what they feel confident in, what makes them feel valued and rewarded, how to make them feel heard, and how to create and share an environment in which they have the courage to try new and different things, experiment, and be flexible when you ask that of them.

Key Tips

1 Set the tone early

As a director, you set the culture for the room. Be punctual, prepared, and respectful from the beginning, expect good behaviour of others, and ensure you always demonstrate it yourself.

2 Share the vision

Your creative team can only deliver the show you imagine if they understand it. Keep coming back to it in meetings and rehearsals, clarifying ambiguity, and answering questions.

3 Keep a safe, supportive space

People will do their best creative work when they feel safe. Make sure that the tone and energy match where people are, and that everyone is included. Address tension quickly but respectfully and don't let small issues fester and become big issues.

4 Model flexibility when it's needed

It can be hard to "kill your darlings" and let go of something that really mattered to you, but practicalities will sometimes require this of you. Show a willingness to bend and to let things go, and that will inspire other people in the team to feel safe to do so themselves.

5 Acknowledge, thank, and celebrate

People are going to remember far more how you made them feel than the details of what you asked for. Show genuine appreciation privately and publicly, and remember the success of your work had many parents, not just you.



Self & Other rehearsals (Shona Louise)



DL Williams (Shona Louise)

What's Your Job?

You are the conductor of this orchestra.

You bring everyone's individual contributions together, shaping them into the whole you imagined for the piece. You respect everyone's creative integrity and use it to serve your vision. You support, encourage, and develop everyone as you work with them, maintaining the atmosphere and ethos you've imagined for the piece of work.

Jamie Hale



Jamie Hale is the Artistic and Executive Director of CRIptic Arts, a pioneering disabled-led UK arts organisation, as well as being an award-winning poet and playwright. They specialise in supporting and developing disabled people and disabled-led organisations in the cultural sector, from creative work to creative careers. Jamie also works as a consultant to cultural organisations, and the non-profit, third-sector, and local and national government across access, equity, people, policy and practice, and is one of the 10 most influential disabled people in performing arts, television and radio (Disability Power 100, 2024).

With thanks to the following for their contributions and advice:

Caitlin Richards

Caitlin is a Producer and proud working-class Northerner with 6+ years' experience making events and shows happen. Caitlin began in the charity sector special events and fundraising, working with the RHS, British Red Cross, RADA and English National Ballet. She moved into producing in 2021, co-producing the CRIptic Showcase and later producing comedy at a major London club. As Lead Producer at CRIptic Arts since 2021, she supports deaf and disabled creatives to make bold, brilliant theatre - including my show, NOT DYING.

Hetty Shand

Hetty has worked across the industry for the past 30 years on large and small projects; national & international; indoor and outdoor; regional and touring, from the National Theatre to Actors Touring Company. Currently she is Consultant Producer for The Coronet Theatre Notting Hill & Graeae Theatre Company, where recent projects include THE PARADIS FILES an opera, a New Writing Festival and coming up BAD LADS.

Oliver Vibrans

Oliver is an Ivor Novello award winning Composer, Producer and Sound Designer based in the UK. Oliver has composed music for the concert hall, theatre, film, art installations and radio.

Carly Altberg

Carly is a Neurodivergent Scenographer and Educator for theatre and live events. Her main practices are in lighting and set design. With an MFA from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, she is an academic who explores design for and with neurodivergent audiences. Past work includes: Elvis Died of Burgers, Beat Flys (Blink Dance Theatre), The Juno Show (JunoBirch & AEG Presents), The Burnt City (Assistant-Punchdrunk International), Isabel Larosa: Heaven Doesn't Wait tour and more!

Al Orange

Al is a highly experienced Technical Director and Production Manager whose work has spanned decades - from running her own circus company to leading technical design and production on large-scale tours, collaborating with theatre companies like Tangled Feet and Company of Others.

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