

Performance

Rehearsing a play

The first day of a rehearsal period usually involves:

- the director talking about the play and the production, describing their vision of the play and how it will work
- the designer showing everyone a model of the set and describing how it informs the play and how it will work in technical terms
- a look at sketches for costume designs
- a reading of the play



Ben Chaplin ('George Coulouris') in 'Me and Orson Welles'. Dir Richard Linklater. Copyright CinemaNX Films One Ltd 2008. Photo: Liam Daniel

Once the rehearsal period gets under way, the director will work with actors to explore and reveal the intricacies of both the character relationships and the themes of the play. Detailed work on the text will inform decisions about staging in terms of physical relationships (where people are in relationship to each other on the stage) and what 'props' (everything you see in a play that is handled as part of the action) they will need. As rehearsals continue, the shape of the play will become clearer – there may be further cuts to the text – and the actors' performances will begin to develop. The director will also be involved in extensive production meetings at which the ongoing work of the creative team will be assessed and discussed. At this point, the production manager becomes significant. This is the person who is responsible for all the practical aspects of the production – construction, furniture, equipment, planning the technical aspects generally. After several weeks of rehearsal (this can vary between 3 and 6 weeks in the UK although some companies have 8 weeks or more), the production moves into the theatre for technical rehearsals.

This is in stark contrast to films, where the process requires a different kind of rehearsal. In film, rehearsal is usually done 'on set' with technical considerations being taken into account as much as performance. In theatre the rehearsal process is about 'practicing' the production so that it will be ready to be performed in front of an audience without mistakes. In film the rehearsal process relates only to the scene that is being filmed but the process of character development and interpretation is ongoing and the director can do as many 'takes' of the actor's performance as they want to. Therefore the actor is always potentially playing to the eventual audience, whilst at the same time able to make mistakes or interpretive errors the audience will never see.

Technical rehearsals

This hugely important part of the production process usually takes several days. The set is up, the costumes are ready and the actors have their first chance to experience the world they will be playing in. Technical rehearsals are rehearsals for EVERY technical aspect of the production:

- Exits and entrances of actors
- Sound cues (when a sound effect happens and its level)
- Lighting cues (when there is a change in lighting)
- Any furniture moving/scene changes
- Music
- Any 'special' effects – smoke, water, fire etc.

The lighting and sound designers will have been working on their design, which is now ready to be integrated into the production. The stage management and production team will have been working on how to achieve difficult scene changes or special effects. At this point, all the creative decisions that have been made can be viewed as a whole and any last-minute changes can be made. It is often at this point that the production is most severely put to the test. All those involved confront the concrete reality of the choices and decisions they have made, unseen difficulties or dangers may arise and may necessitate changes, ideas that seemed great at the time are revealed to be problematic – and above all, the pressure is intense as the deadline for the production to be ready approaches.

When all the technical rehearsals have been completed, there is a dress rehearsal that is a run-through of the production, as it will be seen by the audience.

Preview performances allow the production to 'settle in' and offer a chance to 'tweak' any technical aspects that require it. Then, finally, it's time for the 'First Night' when the critics will be allowed to give their verdict on the result of everyone's work.