

Theatre Tardis

Meredith Fuller

My play *Stalk, Stalking, Stalked* was selected for final release at Stagewrite 2002—a season of 6 plays performed at DANCEHOUSE, Carlton, Melbourne.

Interested in type behaviours, I observe the director and actors over the 8 week project, from the initial production meeting to rehearsals to performance. What are the clues that stand out for me? Will my behavioural notes and type predictions be accurate when I later determine their type?

Within two minutes of introductory comments, the **Director** has efficiently established his expertise and intelligence. I trust him and mentally intend to surrender to any changes or tweaking—a difficult thing for this infp writer to do. He volunteers that he selected my play because my schematic, non-narrative writing appealed, and he is attracted to my shifting perspectives and ambiguity.

He pushes me to articulate my essence of the play. He confronts and stretches me. I struggle to condense the complexity in my head so that I can respond to his pointed question. I cannot. I feel defensive as I try to capture the essence of my intention and meaning, whilst excited by the learning opportunity he offers:

What is your play's core theme? What is the premise in two words? Explain why this title? Justify how your title locates your underlying meaning.

I feel a tad distressed that I haven't adequately conveyed my meaning and summarised my objectives. I try again. His sharp thinking and creativity impress me as he quickly absorbs my tripartite vision and understands what I wish to convey, despite my fumbling explanation. *Let's play with it*, he invites. I suspect he already has a strategic plan in mind but, sensing my emotionality, is shrewd in his choice of language with me. He builds on my ideas, and I swallow the anxiety I feel, because the elegance of his design and the rewards of our collaboration thrill me.

Within ten minutes of our meeting he has suggested ways to make a tight triangular structure, eliminated one character, edited out several pages, and asked me to write an additional scene. He has selected his cast and checks that I am comfortable with his choices: *I have worked with them before, so they know what I expect, and I know they will deliver.*

He has also identified the core of my play in three words: *trust no one*. I trust him.

The production team of several dozen people is well organised and the process is managed like clockwork. The technical run-throughs for lighting and sound seem overwhelming. There are detailed instruction sheets for every aspect.

I learn that, despite their preference for artistic considerations in ordering the plays, functional issues usually prevail. Although any order is possible, it is slightly preferable to place a play with no set second on the program. This enables an efficient, seamless and slick evening, vital for the audience. My play is moved to second, despite our preference for third, simply because the first and third plays have sets and props, while my set is minimalist.

I am reminded that we live in a sensate world.

The Director shows strong and thoughtful leadership and makes his expectations clear. He schedules all rehearsals and encourages our input and self-responsibility.

We'll read through the script twice. Then I'll ask for your initial thoughts, and we will continue to polish and integrate our decisions, he says to us.

At the beginning of the subsequent rehearsals he asks, Are there any thoughts or concerns after our last rehearsal?

I notice that his early schema from our first rehearsal is used for the performances—we workshop many possibilities, but go full circle to return to his initial map.

There is one exception. Immediately prior to the first performance he has an inspiration for some choreography and briefs the actors. It is a tribute to his style, and the trust he has engendered with the cast, that they are all eager to attempt the tricky change. It works beautifully, a key point of suspense and menace that will reverberate for the audience long after the play is over.

Assume the audience is intelligent—use sparse writing and nuance. Make them work hard.

I like to work with minimal narrative, and use movement and physicality, darkness and light, to convey.

Keep the play energised by working to twenty hours rehearsal. After the first couple of reads, it is expected that the actors know their lines.

The Director is big-picture and visually oriented. He juggles complexity and weaves a constant stream of ideas and images. There is a still strength as he orchestrates this piece of art. His subtle control and absolute conviction of where it is going and how well it will work strike me.

Actor 'Betty', delightfully apologetic, arrives late to rehearsals. Talented and sensitive, she has many projects on the go. The Director works closely with her, giving her regular positive feedback. If he wishes to change her interpretation he gently interrupts, calls a quick break, then quietly joins her and amiably suggests a change of emotion or movement.

If it doesn't have the desired effect, we can go back to the original, or try another way in, he says. His recommendations invariably enhance and improve. Betty's part requires a gruelling kaleidoscope of emotions. He helps to give her the rhythm she needs to effect the snap changes within a compelling characterisation.

I am in awe of the effort and reflection that the three actors collectively give to their roles, and how adroitly they work together to ensure that their characterisations hang together well.



Actor 'Jill' arrives either very early or late, and always brings some food to share. Exuberant and witty, she facilitates a sense of camaraderie and enjoyment. Her friendliness, perceptive observations and ideas instil a team identity. She gives a controlled, powerful portrayal of her character, the linchpin that holds the play.

Actor 'Scott' brings a subtle stillness and wealth of experience. The Director allows him space to evolve his character, and is extremely supportive and encouraging of Scott's more reserved, less accessible process. His performance is inspired, and his mellifluous tone adds greatly to his foreboding presence on stage.

The Stage Manager, pencil in hand, races through the script and calculates the practical steps required. He raises sensible, functional points I'd never have considered. With boyish charm and humour, he makes us laugh when he says he hasn't got a clue what this obscure play is about, nor is he interested:

Initially I fell into a trade, cabinet-making, because I made such good sets for school plays. But I love theatre and comedy, so I've trained in stage management. I find it hard to do, because it's so ordered and I get frustrated having to hear a play over and over at rehearsals. But it's a smart way to stay in theatre, and I want to eventually do comedy routines.

The Director crisply advises the Stage Manager about budget, precisely what he wants him to procure, and then leaves him to his own devices. Astutely hands-off, he is not at all perturbed that the Stage Manager does not supply all the props until the night of the dress rehearsal. Everything magically appears via networking the right people.

The Director painstakingly plays with different line deliveries as he relentlessly pursues the best outcome. Disguising his impatience whenever we lapse into tangential storytelling or silliness, he calmly calls us back into focus when he senses we've exhausted our need to laugh and are able to move on. There is no hint of frustration or irritation—he slows his pace of thinking and task orientation to accommodate our needs.

This is a Director who gets the best out of the team by intuitively understanding individual differences and wisely managing each member according to their needs so that his vision will be expertly executed. He develops a following of respectful actors who are eager to work on his projects. We are left in no doubt that this is a person who has commitment to excellence, complex design skills, a high risk-taking propensity, and quiet determination to put his innovative architecture on Australian theatre.

So, just what are the types of the cast and crew? All is revealed on page 28, at the end of the script of **Stalk, Stalking, Stalked**. ▶