

The Lines Between the Lines

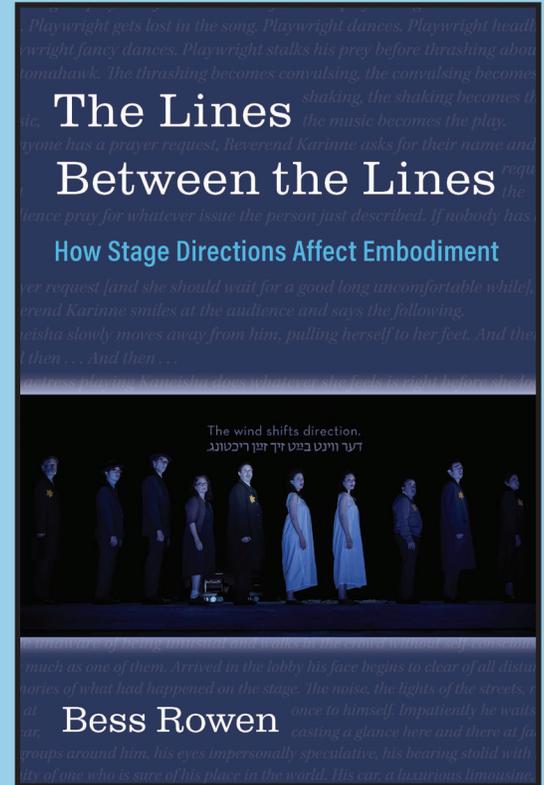
How Stage Directions Affect Embodiment

What is the purpose of a stage direction? These italicized lines written in between the lines of spoken dialogue tell us a great deal of information about a play's genre, mood, tone, visual setting, cast of characters, and more. Yet generations of actors have been taught to cross these words out as records of previous performances or signs of overly controlling playwrights, while scholars have either treated them as problems to be solved or as silent lines of dialogue. Stage directions can be all of these things, and yet there are examples from over one-hundred years of American playwriting that show that stage directions can also be so much more.

The Lines Between the Lines focuses on how playwrights have written stage directions that engage readers, production team members, and scholars in a process of embodied creation in order to determine meaning. Author Bess Rowen calls the products of this method “affective stage directions” because they reach out from the page and affect the bodies of those who encounter them. Affective stage directions do not tell a reader or production team what a given moment looks like, but rather how a moment feels. In this way, these stage directions provide playgrounds for individual readers or production teams to make sense of a given moment in a play based on their own individual cultural experience, geographic location, and identity-markers. Affective stage directions enable us to check our assumptions about what kinds of bodies are represented on stage, allowing for a greater multitude of voices and kinds of embodied identity to make their own interpretations of a play while still following the text exactly.

The tools provided in this book are as useful for the theater scholar as they are for the theater audience member, casting director, and actor. Each chapter covers a different function of stage directions (spoken, affective, choreographic, multivalent, impossible) and looks at it through a different practical lens (focusing on actors, directors, designers, dramaturgs, and readers). Every embodied person will have a slightly different understanding of affective stage directions, and it is precisely this diversity that makes these stage directions crucial to understanding theater in our time.

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