

# A Play Called Easton & Potomac

by Keith Stillman  
Superintendent of the Easton And Potomac

**F**

irst let me apologize to all thespians out there who will be reading this. The sum of my acting experience, before model railroad operations, was playing Red Chief in an elementary school play with my one line,

“This looks like good place to make camp.” With that aside I want to present a side of model railroad operations that is rarely discussed: acting.

Frank Ellison wrote an article in *Model Railroader* in 1944 (long before my time) titled “The Art of Model Railroading”. In it he put forth the idea that model railroading is a play and described what was needed to go from a static layout to an active illusion. He presented the concept of realistic operations and included many of

the concepts I will be touching on here. However, since Ellison’s article, model railroad operations have evolved and the emphasis has moved from reproducing train movements to portraying a railroad. To do this requires us to step back from the trains and look at the overall illusion, including the actions of the attendees, especially those attendees who have nothing to do with the physical control of a train, such as the dispatcher and tower operators. So let’s begin.

A play has a script, producer, director, stage and actors. While each of these is a critical component to a good play, it all starts with the script. The script lays out the time and place, and identifies and defines all the characters. It is the foundation upon which the play is built.

Once you have a solid script you need someone to produce the play. This role falls to the producer who is responsible for funding the play and making sure all of the components are available.

The right hand of the producer is the director. The director’s function is to interpret the script and bring it to life. To do this the director needs a stage and actors.

The stage is used to help the audience and actors visualize the setting and contribute to the illusion being created. The actors are responsible for bringing each character to life to make the audience believe they are watching the character and not the actor.

The better each component, the better the result. Stick with me here and I will take you through each and show how they relate to model railroad operations.

**“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances...”**

**—from William Shakespeare’s *AS YOU LIKE IT***

## THE SCRIPT

As in a play, the script sets the time, the place and the roles of each character for an operating session. Your script must be solid and believable to support good operating sessions. A model railroad operation's script consists of items such as the time frame, location and type of operation. Is it set in the steam era, the transition era or modern era? Is it a Class 1 main line operation, a short line operation, a switching operation, a logging operation or a combination of these? Is timetable train order, CTC, track warrant or something else used to control the action? It should define why the railroad exists and what customers are being served to keep the railroad in operation. All of this must be spelled out in order for the actors to perform correctly. If you are modeling a prototype then your script is pretty much written for you. If you are freelancing, then writing a history to support the railroad's script can be helpful (the E&P's history is available online, for reference).

Your script will consist of many items including most of your documentation. Think of the documentation as stage directions for the actors. For example, the timetable tells each actor when they or another actor will be arriving on set or departing, when they must perform some action, or how they should react to situations their character encounters. Another example is the train cards we use on the E&P. These train cards give detailed instructions for each road job. They are part of my script and are essentially stage directions for the actor assigned to that part. The better your script (documentation) the easier it will be for the attendees to understand the setting and their assigned character.

## THE PRODUCER

This is the layout owner, be it an individual or a club. He puts up the money to build the layout—not a trivial item. He also typically assumes the role of the set builder. If you are lucky enough to be at this phase make sure the stage you build is capable of supporting your script. As producer you need to make sure all needs are provided for the director to pull off a believable illusion.

## THE DIRECTOR

In my operation's experience the layout owner assumes this role. He stands back during the action to make sure each component is performing according to the script, giving direction when needed. The director should give guidance but still allow the actors to develop their character in their own way.

## THE STAGE

This is the layout. The stage should portray the setting defined in the script. The stage must be solid and reliable. This means no electrical issues, no control issues, no track issues, no motive power issues and no rolling stock issues. If this is done correctly the stage will disappear, replaced by the illusion you are trying to create. There is nothing worse at an operating session than to have the stage rear it's ugly head and ruin the illusion you are trying to create. Dead track, signal systems that don't work, trains that constantly derail, engines that will not run and rolling stock that routinely uncouples all break the illusion you are trying to create and make it difficult for the attendees to stay in character.

Now a word about the trains: in Frank Ellison's article, and in most other articles I have seen on this topic, the trains are considered to be the actors, marionettes if you will. I take a different view. I believe the trains are part of the stage, props the actors use.

## THE ACTORS

The real actors are the session attendees. Once everything else is in place it comes down to the attendees to pull off a successful session (illusion). In a play, the better the actors know the script and portray their characters, the more believable the illusion. The same goes for an operating session. The better the attendees know the script and portray their characters the more believable the illusion. As with plays, operating sessions have lead actors, supporting actors and extras. Each role is

**The E&P's history is available at**

<http://www.easton-and-potomac.com/ep/ephistory.html>



## THE LEAD ACTOR



## THE SUPPORTING ACTORS

important to the overall result. And any character can detract from the overall result.

The lead actor, as the name implies, has the larger part. This is the character that defines the story, the character the story is built around. The lead actor is the reason for the script. The lead actor in model railroad operations can be any role and will differ depending on the type of operations. But typically the lead actor is the dispatcher, yardmasters or local train crews.

While the supporting actors have parts that are critical to the story they are there to support the story of the lead actor. To provide situations for the lead actor. The supporting actors can also be any role but typically will be the operators, yardmasters and local train crews.

And as with plays, operating sessions have extras. While still important to the script, they exist to fill in the story and enhance the illusion. The extras are any attendees not identified as a lead or supporting role. Typically the extras are the assistant yardmasters and through train crews. (If the operation setting is focused on main line operations, the high priority train crews may become the lead or supporting actors and the other train crews the extras.)

On the E&P the lead actor is the dispatcher. All the other attendees are there to provide situations to support the existence of the dispatcher's role. The supporting actors are the operator and yardmasters. It is their actions that provide major input for the actions of the dispatcher. And of course there must be extras to finalize the illusion. The extras on the E&P are the assistant yardmaster, extra train crews, local train crews and through train crews (freight, passenger and mail). These crews provide background action to complement the actions of both the lead and supporting actors.

## STAYING IN CHARACTER

Now we get to what I believe is the most important component. No matter which you role you are assigned, you need to stay in character during the session or the illusion will be ruined. When you come to an operating session you are essentially telling the layout owner that you want to fill



The Easton & Potomac is on the web at [www.easton-and-potomac.com](http://www.easton-and-potomac.com) and [eastonpotomac.blogspot.com](http://eastonpotomac.blogspot.com)

a role and play the part. It is your responsibility to assume that character and stay in it so the illusion contributes to the overall quality of the session.

When you are assigned a position you are actually assigned a part to play, to act out. You should understand your character. To understand your character you must know the script and know how your character should act in the various situations that come up during the session. You should know what rules govern your character's actions and what information your character would have at any given time. And you should not break character. Breaking character breaks the illusion that is being created.

As in a play, even though you know what is coming, you need to act as though it is new to you when it happens. For example most layouts are small and line of sight information is readily available that is not readily available to the "real world" character you are portraying. So you should not use it during an operating session. Acting on information your character would not normally have is a form of breaking character. Step back. Think about your character and act accordingly. The session will be much more believable if you do.

Another form of breaking character is not treating the illusion as if it is real. For example in a play a character might be shot and die. While the actor portraying this character is obviously not dead, not treating this character as dead would break the illusion and completely ruin the play. An example of this during an operating session might be ignoring a red light knowing that nothing is coming. On the E&P I have an RF&P crossing. There is never any traffic on the RF&P (only the tracks are simulated) but a random interlock controls access to the diamond. If an attendee runs the red interlock knowing full well there is no traffic on the RF&P track, they break the illusion that I am trying to create. Try to stay in character and deal with the issue presented.

Also if you find yourself just "running trains" then you probably have broken character. Usually an operating session is structured around observing the rules of the road and the activities of the "real world". If these are not foremost in your mind when attending a session, you have broken character and the illusion the director is trying to create. How can you tell if you are just running trains? One example would be if the session is run under



## STAY IN CHARACTER

timetable train order and you are not aware of your departure times at each station then you are just "running trains". You have not read the "script" and are not in character.

Just as William Shakespeare said in *As You Like It* "...one man in his time plays many parts...", at an operating session you will probably be asked to play more than one role. If so, you should make sure you understand each assigned role, read any script available that pertains to each role and then develop the character for each role. And of course stay in character for each role as you are portraying that role. Don't let the roles overlap by using information from one role to guide another if that information would not be readily available to both. Keep your characters separate and believable. Make sure each supports the illusion the layout owner is trying to create.

Hopefully I have shown how a model railroad operating session is analogous to a play. How understanding your character, then taking on and staying in character will contribute to the illusion the layout owner and attendees are trying to create. So the next time you attend an operating session take a moment to understand the setting, read the script (documentation) and develop your assigned character. Then concentrate on staying in character. You might find you have more fun. And that is after all the reason for attending one of these things. 🚂