

A GUIDE TO STAGE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This project illustrates my views on stage management and how that culminated into a guidebook for future Theatre TCU stage managers based on my experiences working in and outside of Theatre TCU. This work goes through the basics of what a stage manager is, what a stage manager does throughout a production, and what qualities every good stage manager should have. Through this experience, I have been able to reflect on what is truly important regarding stage management as well as how those skills transcend theatre into daily life.

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INTRODUCTION: ATTEMPTING TO DEFINE STAGE MANAGEMENT

I stumbled into stage management without really realizing what it is or what I was doing. When I started working backstage for my high school's theatre productions, I just wanted to do it all and learn everything I could about theatre. I was always excited to stay late and help put finishing touches on the set and I did everything I could to be as involved as I could. I wanted to help the production to the best of my ability and offer solutions to better make everyone else's visions come alive. I loved the creative problem solving that theatre offered, I loved figuring out how it all worked, and I loved the collaboration that happened onstage, offstage, and with the audience. I looked at my friends who ran things backstage with a deep respect and awe. When I finally got to stage manage my first show as a senior, I realized that this was what I wanted to do with my life.

When I got to college, I realized that stage management was so much more than I thought it was in high school. In high school, I mainly coordinated how things would get on and off stage while making sure everyone stayed quiet; here, I realized that stage managers also have a very active role in the rehearsal process and not only attended, but ran, meetings with the design team of a show, which were called "Production Meetings." During my first Theatre TCU crew assignment as an assistant stage manager for *Born On a Sunday*, I learned how to write down where and what all of the actors did onstage, known as taking "blocking." I learned how to take care of the actors and maintain a safe rehearsal environment, to keep track of where all of their props needed to be throughout the show, figure out how much time they had to make a costume change, and what things were important to take note of during Production Meetings. Each night after rehearsal, I watched my stage manager compile and send out a report of things and changes made during rehearsal that affected the designers and the technical aspects of the show. When

we got into the “tech rehearsals” and added lighting and sound effects to the show, I learned how the stage manager “called cues” for each lighting change and sound effect that needed to be played so things would happen consistently each time.

Throughout my undergraduate career at Texas Christian University, I have been on the stage management team for 8 different Theatre TCU productions in addition to a production at one of the top regional theatres in the country for producing the classics and a production at a small fringe theatre in London. I have even talked with stage managers working in regional theatre, on Broadway, and at Cirque du Soleil. Each experience has taught me something new about stage management, and I am still learning about what it is. The things that I have found in common in all of these experiences, however, is that every stage manager is different, but they all have to be good at working with many different types of people, organized, punctual, calm under pressure, and good at communicating with others. They are the center of communication in every production and the only member of the entire company to be with the production from start to finish. They are the ones who make the decision on what to do if things go wrong, they keep everyone else organized, on time, and informed, as well as keep a written record of just about everything related to a production. Through my own experience and the people from whom I have learned, I decided that the Stage Management Handbook for Theatre TCU’s student stage managers needed to be rewritten to better guide people through their first production, and I decided that this would be the perfect way to pass on my knowledge and experience to the students who came along after I had graduated.

THE GENERAL DUTIES OF A STAGE MANAGER THROUGHOUT A PRODUCTION

Production Meetings

Once the chair of the theatre department sends out the list of designers and directors working on each show for the next school year, the stage manager and the director begin discussing when to have production meetings. These meetings typically happen about once a week, and exist for the purpose of having the director, designers, stage managers, and head technicians all in the same room to talk about the director's concept for the production and the technical requirements for the show. The stage manager sends out reminders for these meetings, leads these meetings, enforces the deadlines set by the production manager to make sure things are being completed and turned in on time, and takes notes on what is discussed and what decisions are made to send out to the team later for them to refer back to in the future.

Auditions & Callbacks

Auditions typically take place after Production Meetings have already begun; this way, the actors can be cast to fit the overall design concept for the show that the production team has been working on. Stage managers are in charge of making these days run smoothly for the directing team. They make sure the space is clean, check each of the actors in as they come in for their appointed audition time, make sure their audition information form is completely filled out and there are enough copies made for the directors, and make sure the actors don't exceed their time limit in their auditions.

Once auditions are over, the stage manager gets ready for callbacks, which are typically the next day. For callbacks, stage managers make sure there are enough copies of all of the scenes and music the actors will be performing at the callback and distributing them accordingly. If there is a dance call, the stage manager also checks to make sure that there is a working sound

system in the room and enough open space for a large group of people to dance. The stage manager will distribute scenes and music to the actors accordingly as they check in, and send people into the room with the director as they need them.

Company Meeting & First Rehearsal

The stage manager will work with the director and production manager to set a date for the first rehearsal and company meeting, which is the meeting immediately preceding the first rehearsal when the technical crew, cast, and production team meet for the first time. At this meeting, everyone is introduced, important dates are discussed, expectations for the cast and crew are addressed, and the production team presents their concept to the cast and crew. The stage manager is in charge of alerting everyone to the time and place of the meeting, running the meeting, handing out the schedule, and making sure the cast and crew fills out their health forms and any other necessary paperwork. Immediately following the meeting, the stage manager collects all paperwork from the cast and crew while the crews each meet with their crew heads to discuss their work schedule and the cast begins their first rehearsal, a read-through, with the director.

Rehearsals

Once the company meeting is over, the cast begins rehearsing on a regular basis and the stage manager's work really gets started. The night before a rehearsal, the stage manager will have received a plan from the director for what will be done the next day. After checking to make sure that none of the actors are unavailable during that time or have been excused from that rehearsal, the stage manager will then send out a schedule to the cast and director saying what will be going on in rehearsal, where that part of rehearsal is taking place, and who will be required to attend that rehearsal. About an hour or so before each rehearsal, the stage

management team must get there early to sweep and clean the space, make sure it's safe to rehearse in, set out the props and set pieces for the start of the show, as well have the things needed later on ready to be used, and make sure everyone that is called that day is on time.

From there, stage management's duties will vary depending on what type of rehearsal it is. If it is a blocking rehearsal where the director is staging a scene with the actors and telling them where to go onstage, the stage manager is in charge of documenting blocking and staging directions, as well as keeping track of what the actors will do with any props, scenery, or costume pieces. If actors are running through scenes, stage management will also be in charge of taking line notes for the actors. This involves making a note whenever an actor does not deliver a line verbatim from the script and giving those notes back to the actor at the end of the day so that they know what they need to work on before they run the scene in rehearsal again. If it is a choreography rehearsal, stage management is in charge of making general notes on the choreography and filming what was learned that day and distributing the videos to the cast so that they can continue practicing it outside of rehearsal. Throughout all rehearsals, stage management updates the script as changes are made to it to deliver to the sound designer. Then, at the end of each day, the stage manager will send out a report to the production team that communicates what was worked that day, as well as any questions, notes, or changes to the set and costumes that could affect how it is used in rehearsals or how it is built for the benefit of the production team in preparation for the Technical and Dress Rehearsals.

The Technical and Dress Rehearsals

The technical (or "tech") and dress rehearsals are when the lighting, sound, costumes, set, and other technical elements are added and integrated into the performance. Before the first tech rehearsal, the designers, director, and stage manager often have a meeting, called a "Paper

Tech,” to discuss the placement of “cues” throughout the show. A cue is a change to one of the technical elements that happens onstage. This could be anything from the lights changing, a set piece being flown in from the fly rail, or the playing of a sound effect. These cues will be labeled with a number and abbreviation (ex. LQ1= light cue one) and the stage manager will call that over a headset to the crew member operating the board, who will then press a button or signal other crew members to make that change happen. The placement and sequence of these cues are discussed between the designers, stage manager, and director at Paper Tech, which is when the stage manager will write down the cues in their script (called a “prompt book”) that they will use to call the show every night. The prompt book is an important part of documenting the show for the stage manager. It’s vital that the stage manager call all of these changes so that they all happen consistently each night. It is understood that the stage manager is the one person with predetermined authority to make the call on what to do if something goes wrong during the show.

The first day of tech rehearsal is the first day that the crews attend rehearsal since the company meeting. As a result, one of the first jobs of the stage management team that day is to introduce the crew to their duties during the show and show them where props and furniture need to be set backstage before the show begins (“presets”). Paperwork helps this process immensely, and stage management should supply their crew with preset checklists as well as deck sheets. Deck sheets let the crew members know if they need to be helping or moving a technical element during the course of the show, whether that be moving a prop to another side of a stage, pushing on a set piece, or helping with a costume change. When everything is ready for the start of the show, the stage manager will call everyone to order and begin going through their cues one by one, calling them to their backstage crew and board operators over a headset. If something needs

to be changed or fixed, the stage manager will say “hold” into a microphone that can be heard throughout the theatre so that everyone can stop and the production team can discuss it. Good management of Tech ensures that all of the physical dimensions of a production are coordinated and this overall process takes several hours over the course of a couple of days.

Once dress rehearsals begin, the costumes are added. Extra time on these days is required to run through actors who have quick costume changes, otherwise there is not much stopping and starting and the show runs straight through. Sometimes, an audience will be allowed to sit and watch a dress rehearsal for free or at a reduced price to get the actors accustomed to performing the show for an audience and for the director to observe the audiences reactions and make adjustments before opening night.

Performances

Once performances begin, the director and designers are no longer in constant contact with the show, and the reigns of control are passed over to the stage manager. It is the stage manager’s job to make sure the show keeps its original integrity and is performed with consistency. If the stage manager notices an actor stops getting a laugh somewhere or isn’t delivering a consistent performance, it is their job to work with the actor to problem solve to get the performance back to where it was originally. After every performance, the stage manager will send out a report to the production team that details anything that needs to be repaired, the size of the audience, audience reactions, anything that went wrong, and other general notes about the performance. The stage manager is the constant gardener of the performance.

THE QUALITIES OF A GOOD STAGE MANAGER

There are many qualities of a good stage manager, however many of the professional stage managers I have spoken with say that the most important thing about a stage manager is

that they are good with people and can work well with many different personalities. In order to do that, they need to be tolerant and patient. They cannot clique with part of a cast so that they can be open and friendly and keep everyone involved as much as possible, creating an environment that everyone feels safe to work in.

Almost just as important as people skills, good communication skills are another extremely important attribute of a good stage manager. In order to keep everyone informed about what is going on in rehearsals or meetings, a stage manager should be able to express themselves clearly and concisely in order to get their point across. In order to do this, they need to find the balance between too little and too much information so that everyone has exactly what they need to do their jobs and be able to politely and courteously deliver that information.

Organization is also crucial in stage management. Stage managers are in charge of keeping track of a lot of information and you need to have a way to organize things so that you or someone else can access it quickly. They need to keep copies of the most updated versions of all paperwork and information with them at all times so that you can make sure that everything going on is going to work with the most up to date information you have on things.

Stage managers must always be punctual. Everyone needs to be ready to begin rehearsals and meetings at the predetermined start time, and this includes you. However, since stage managers are typically in charge of starting the day, this means that they need to be early to make sure that everything is set up and ready to go and sort out any last minute problems that may pop up or people that are going to be late. Getting there early gives you time to handle anything that comes up before you start and therefore makes everything go more smoothly. They are also enforcing a schedule, so punctuality is essential in getting things started and keeping things running on time.

Efficiency is another highly valued quality in a stage manager. The ability to get things done thoroughly and quickly will help you immensely. Learn how to manage your time, as you need to get people new information and changes about things out to people quickly, as it could effect what the shops have to do that day or schedule changes could affect an actor's work schedule. Getting these things handled early gives you as much time to plan and prepare as possible and be hugely beneficial to you in the long run.

THE STAGE MANAGEMENT KIT

A stage manager's kit holds everything anyone could possibly need during a production. There is a variety of office supplies (scissors, stapler, paper clips, rubber bands, pens, pencils, tape, highlighters, etc.), a small pharmacy (cough drops, cold & flu medicine, antidiarrheals, cough drops, decongestant, ibuprofen, bandages, gauze, ace wraps, medical tape, ice packs, etc.), personal hygiene items (makeup wipes, deodorant, mints, razors, shaving cream, hair ties, bobby pins, etc), and an assortment of tools (sewing kit, hammer, needle nose pliers, super glue, chalk, screwdrivers, etc). This kit is to help the stage manager be prepared for any situation in case of an emergency and be able to keep the actors comfortable and ready for a performance.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED AND PASSING THE TORCH

Through my experiences in theatre and stage management these past four years, I've learned much about theatre as an art form and the things required of a stage manager. I wanted to compile my experiences and the lessons I've learned into a resource that future stage management students could use upon arriving at TCU so that they could be better off than I was starting out and have an updated resource to fall back on. This could serve as a sort of legacy that I leave behind to aid in growing Theatre TCU's stage management program. This handbook could aid them beyond what they would learn in the classroom and give them advice from the

perspective of someone who has already gone through the program and been in their shoes. It gives them a variety of examples from different people to follow when they approach a production and are trying to figure out how to do things, in addition to giving them a place to turn to when they get stuck.

Writing this handbook also gave me time to look back and really consider how much I've learned about stage management and the things that I believe to be important to it and just what's important for working in theatre. It's taught me the importance of versatility and flexibility and how adaptable stage managers need to be in order to work with so many different people. Furthermore, it's great that in a profession that needs to be so organized, stage managers still are all very different and do things differently, and that the person behind all of this organization and these spreadsheets can contribute to and help create the art that is being made onstage. Looking back on my journey as a stage manager has also made me realize how working on becoming a better stage manager has just made me a better human in every day life. Stage management has taught me how to be confident, even in a situation I haven't prepared for, and to remain calm in those situations because I have seen how things will always work out in the end. Most importantly, it's taught me that leadership is a two-way street, it's more than just one person being charge of other people and telling them what to do, you also have to earn that group of people's trust and respect, and go out of your way to show them that you have their best interests at heart.