

STAGE MANAGERS DON'T MAKE
COFFEE ANYMORE

Thesis Supervisor:

Shannon Richey, A.E.A.
Department of Theatre and Dance

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.
Dean, Honors College

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Bryan Russell

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Abstract

Stage management is an all-encompassing job that requires a wide range of skills for a stage manager to successfully support and execute a show. They must possess practical knowledge of both the creation and production aspects of theatre, as they need to successfully communicate with personnel from both branches, and ultimately marry the two in performances.

College theatre programs across Texas utilize a wide variety of educational components to teach students the necessary skills to become a successful stage manager. Their approaches predominantly consist of classroom instruction, textbook tutelage, or practical application through stage managing shows produced by the theatre program.

This work argues that a comprehensive approach incorporating use of all three of these educational components will produce the best results where training and career preparation are concerned for beginning stage managers. While each approach has unique educational value, one single approach can only prepare students so much. Without the combined inclusion of supporting texts, classroom preparation, and practical application, students will not have a well-rounded perspective on stage management, which is essential for professional stage managers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|-------------|
| ABSTRACT..... | i |
| CHAPTERS | |
| I. INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| II. PROCESS | 5 |
| III. SCHOOL ME..... | 10 |
| IV. HITTING THE BOOKS..... | 15 |
| V. INTO THE FOLD..... | 24 |
| VI. ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES..... | 29 |
| VII. WHAT’S NEXT? | 32 |
| VIII. WORKS CITED | 37 |

Introduction

During my sophomore year at Texas State University, I was advised to take a class called “Stage Management.” At the time, I thought it would give me, as a director, a unique perspective into what goes on behind the scenes during a show. However, I soon realized that I had no clue about what a stage manager actually did, despite having worked with two stage managers for Texas UIL (University Interscholastic League) high school theatre competitions.

I had the privilege to work with my soon-to-be advisor, Professor Shannon Richey, on my first job as an assistant stage manager (ASM.) Depending on a show’s needs, an ASM can be relied upon to track the movement of props (the definition varies by company, but these are essentially moveable items that are carried or moved by actors during the play, such as weapons, books, candy wrappers, etc.), costumes (both on stage and backstage movement), or “blocking”, which is the actors’ movement on and off stage throughout the show. Despite my lack of experience, I was trusted with supervising music rehearsals with another assistant stage manager, as well as coordinating traffic flow backstage with the other ASMs during performances.

Something clicked during that show and I had to give it another shot. About six months later, I was asked to lead my first team as the production stage manager for Texas State’s Picasso at the Lapin Agile. In a nutshell, the production stage manager, or PSM, is the primary hub of information for the rehearsal, tech rehearsal, and performance process of their respective show. They notate the progress and changes that their show undergoes

during rehearsals and turn those documents into a living archive of the production called the “production book”. The production stage manager then uses information gathered from the production book and rehearsals to call the show – “calling” a show refers to the stage manager executing the technical aspects of the show through a series of verbal commands, or “cues” which prompt the technicians or ASMs to execute their tasks at the appropriate time. There were bumps along the way, misfires, recoveries, and tremendous successes for me and my team. Once we opened, I emerged from the process stronger, and I was confident that I could rise to the level of expectations that came with being a stage manager. After I successfully closed my first show, I had to do it again.

Because of the limited classes offered in stage and production management at Texas State, I began to look for other training methods that were available to stage managers in Texas. I found several books on the subject, and found that there was some good information about the evolving industry and advice for stage managers. However, many of these books require at least basic knowledge of stage management to understand the issues that these texts address. I do recommend using texts to supplement training for stage managers, but you have to lay the groundwork first.

Stage management, like many art forms, requires practical application to learn the craft. For instance, a chef may have a number of recipe books that provide the basics for them, but at some point, that chef has to be able to turn on an oven and just do it. Stage management texts offer good supplemental advice for stage managers, but they also need a solid foundation, which requires more than simply handing someone a book and saying “Now you know everything it takes to be a great stage manager, so go be a great stage manager.”

Classroom instruction is one of the best ways to lay that groundwork, because it allows students to ask questions about what they need to know and get an active response. Stage managing requires sharp people skills and a lot of foresight, which allows stage managers to be proactive, rather than reactive. That way, many potential challenges, from personality conflicts to fire hazards, can be addressed before they ever become an issue. Where one of the keys tools of the trade is communication skills, students should be able to learn in an environment that encourages them to engage in conflict resolution and refine other communication skills.

But the ultimate goal for these students is to gain experience as a stage manager, which means they need to have the opportunity to stage manage in college. Perhaps the most important opportunity that educational theatre offers these young artists is the ability to fail in the environment. I have made plenty of mistakes on the various shows I have stage managed at Texas State and I use those opportunities to learn something about myself or perhaps a new facet of stage management that I did not previously understand. Working on and producing theatre in academic surroundings provides everyone with the opportunity to learn from one another's successes and missteps; as well as guidance from professors who can help prepare their students for similar scenarios that they may encounter in professional theatre.

Preparation and training for stage managers needs to be well-rounded, as their job requires knowledge of many aspects of theatre. Because of this need, I propose that college theatre programs in Texas adapt a comprehensive training regimen for stage managers which I believe will better prepare them for a career in production stage management: A three-pronged approach that incorporates the use of all three major

educational components indicated above; classroom instruction, supporting texts, and practical application through stage managing shows both in the theatre program and encouraging outside work. If college theatre programs were to adopt this plan, I believe that students from Texas would begin to compete with graduates from colleges in cities like New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, and Texas theatre programs will see increased national recognition for their ability to produce artists with the same level of preparation as schools like Julliard and NYU.

Process

The job description of what a stage manager does varies to some degree depending on the company they are working for. In my experience, I've had the opportunity to stage manage in academic and professional environments, and in those experiences my job description varied to suit the needs of the company. Provided are the general expectations of a professional stage manager, as listed by Actors' Equity Association (AEA), the union for professional actors and stage managers in the United States, created a list of "duties", which Mike Lawler included in his book Careers in Technical Theatre (2007). These duties help define what is expected of stage managers under Equity guidelines (Lawler, 22). The duties that I would like to highlight are:

- "Shall be responsible for the calling of all rehearsals, whether before or after opening."
- "Shall assemble and maintain the Prompt Book which is defined as the accurate playing text and stage business, together with such cue sheets, plots, daily records, etc., as are necessary for the actual technical and artistic operation of the production."
- "Assume active responsibility for the form and discipline of rehearsal and performance, and be the executive instrument on the technical running of each performance."
- "Maintain the artistic intentions of the Director and the Producer after opening, to the best of his/her ability, including calling correctional rehearsals of the company when necessary and preparation of the Understudies, Replacements, Extras and Supers, when and if the Director and/or Producer declines this prerogative."

The first duty speaks to a stage manager's responsibility of calling a rehearsal. In this context, "calling" refers to the assembly and sometimes supervision of a rehearsal or

performance. “Call time”, a typical phrase used in many theatres, is the expectation set forth by the stage manager and director of arrival and work times.

The second duty is likely the largest job for a stage manager leading up to technical rehearsals and performances. On every show, the stage manager creates what is called the production book, which is a complete documentation of every aspect of the production that they are working on. Stage managers track “blocking”, or the actors’ movement on and off stage throughout the show. They also keep track of any changes to the script, as well as tracking the movement of props, costumes, and scenery throughout the play. The information in the production book is then used to create the base of a “prompt book”, which contains the stage manager’s calling script and any other paperwork that is relevant to technical aspects of the show and performances. Think of the production book as a journal and the prompt book more like a road map. One archives the story of how you got there, and the other ensures you take the same path and arrive at the same destination every night.

The third duty can really be split into two separate responsibilities, as they are both fairly large demands. The first part alludes to the stage manager’s responsibility for helping to maintain a professional work atmosphere in the rehearsal space. This speaks to a stage manager playing an active role in establishing the tone of rehearsals. It also encourages collaboration between the stage manager and director. If they form a partnership and present a united front to the cast, that cohesion will spread to the company and instill confidence in the director’s vision and the stage manager’s ability to execute it. A stage manager who can instill that confidence from the director and cast can

establish themselves as a leader of the company, which will go a long way once technical rehearsals and performances begin.

The second part of this duty is that the stage manager is responsible for calling a consistent show. The designers and directors work together to create different “cues” (individual technical moments, like lights dimming or scenery movement) that are then given to the stage manager. Once technical rehearsals begin, the stage manager is responsible for calling the show and pausing when something needs to be adjusted in order to fine tune each technical moment.

Stage managers also learn how to assemble and polish their calls as the show develops through technical rehearsals to produce the best possible moment for the audience. If a show included a dramatic kiss at the end of a song, and the director and lighting designer wanted the lighting to mirror the dramatic moment in the scene, that impacts how the stage manager calls that light cue. They need to observe what the lights are doing to the scene. Is it a fast color change? Is the light closing in on the actors slowly to isolate them from the rest of the scene? These are all aspects that may affect the way a stage manager executes this moment, and while there are numerous discussions about how this moment may feel, many stage managers have to find a breath or small twitch in the actor or call the moment on the upbeat of a musical number so the light change is visible on the downbeat. In these moments, stage managing becomes very much like live film editing. We are given the tools and the ultimate goal, and we have to make the best decision that will support that moment each night. While in motion, a stage manager needs to feel empowered to make these decisions as needed, rather than simply referring to their script as if it has all of the visual answers.

The fourth duty is fairly self-explanatory; the stage manager is responsible for maintaining the director and producer's combined visions once the show opens. Once the stage manager takes the reigns, they ensure that the show stays consistent, and they make and distribute any notes to the cast and crew in order to maintain the quality of the show. Stage managers also integrate any new cast or crew members into the show through rehearsals and by providing new personnel with the paperwork that they have already created regarding job responsibilities for previous company members.

I would like to clarify that not all professional stage managers are in Actors' Equity and that the Equity guidelines do not necessarily apply to all stage managers. Many theatre companies in Texas do not operate under practices governed by Equity, which opens the door to varying job descriptions for stage managers based on the needs of those particular companies. Based on my experience and in speaking to my advisor and peers, many of those companies still try to create a structure that is similar to the guidelines that Actors' Equity have put forth, usually due to working with a company comprised of both union and non-union members, but the process is different for everyone.

For instance, I have worked in a converted classroom which was designed for experimental and no-budget shows at Texas State on two separate occasions. Both times, my job included operating at least one technical element of the show while calling the other elements to another show operator. While this is an unusual situation for many stage managers, as most theatres that can afford to hire show operators will do so, it also served as a learning tool for me in multitasking and staying ahead of the action on stage to prepare for upcoming technical elements of those shows. It also is not uncommon for

new stage managers working with theatre companies that operate on a smaller budget to have similar experiences, as some producers would rather have fewer personnel if it means they can pay the actors and crew for their work.

Fewer personnel can also lead to company members taking on multiple jobs. Whereas Actors' Equity guidelines prohibit theatre companies from requiring stage managers to distribute contracts or paychecks to company members, a non-union affiliated theatre may incorporate tasks such as this (which would normally fall to a production or company manager in a union house) into their stage manager's job requirements. As a result, the lines between job assignments can get a bit blurry. Being aware of company expectations as well as understanding the scope of the job will help stage managers make informed decisions when they come across these job opportunities. But regardless of size and scope, stage managers are customarily utilized for their ability to learn a show and ultimately call it; and for their ability to keep a production organized and help maintain a professional demeanor during rehearsals and performances.

School Me

Of more than seventy five colleges in Texas that offer bachelor degrees in theatre, I have found less than fifteen that offer classes that focus on stage management, and only seven that offer more than one course about stage management. That means that, in the state of Texas, seventy-five percent of the colleges in Texas that offer theatre degrees do not have a formal stage management training structure in their program. Even more surprising is the fact that, out of the seven schools that do offer multiple courses in stage management, only one of those programs (the University of Houston) offers a bachelor's degree in stage management.

Having one class that encompasses all things stage management is setting our students up for failure. My first stage management class consisted of students ranging from graduate directors preparing for their masters' thesis to students like myself who had no experience and only a faint idea of what a stage manager's job consisted of. I was also fortunate that students in the class were required to participate in field work as ASMs and other related assignments such as festivals during that semester. I mention this because, while the subject matter of the class piqued my curiosity, the opportunity to dive into a large production and the active classroom discussions that helped put my work into perspective were what ultimately convinced me to pursue stage management as a career path.

I think most stage managers would benefit from a structure that gives them support from a professor while still offering them the chance to experience field work. If

students have multiple classes that focus on stage management that cover a variety of topics, then they will have a strong opportunity to grow in their community. For example, start with an introductory class that discusses the job descriptions of stage managers in different environments as well as how stage managers plug into a production in a regional theatre that hires in versus a company that hires one production stage manager to oversee multiple shows in a season or has a resident stage manager on staff who supervises incoming and over hire stage managers. You can also introduce examples of tracking paperwork and blocking and calling scripts to help prepare those stage managers for ASM positions in which they will likely help generate some of that paperwork.

Offering multiple classes also raises awareness towards stage management in theatre programs and provides guidance, while giving the students opportunities to work in a variety of aspects that fall under stage management, such as working as an ASM or production assistant (PA) simultaneously and the opportunity to discuss working in alternatives besides theatre such as opera or dance. These field work opportunities give students an opportunity to work with experienced stage managers and observe other students' leadership styles to help form their own approach to supervising a team of their own.

Subsequent courses can then prepare students to take on the role of the production stage manager by allowing them to engage in team building exercises. These courses can also provide opportunities to sharpen communication and calling skills through drills that are designed to take the students out of their comfort zone and challenge them to stay focused in a high pressure situation. Stage managers can then put the skills that they develop from these classes into practice as they continue to work on more productions.

I would like to clarify that I am not merely asking for more lecture based classes that serve to inform stage managers of their jobs but don't engage them. Students need to be able to interact and learn from one another as well as their professor in an active conversation. With as much of the communication responsibility that stage managers take on, students have to be able to approach their team members in a professional manner and there needs to be room for their personality to fold into the mix. This is a person that is going to be in the rehearsal room every day with a director, actors, assistants, and a number of design personnel, all of whom bring their own style and personalities into the room. A collaborative approach in the classroom can help set the expectation that stage managers need to be able to function as part of a larger whole.

While there has only been one official stage management course at Texas State thus far, professor Richey has created a hybrid lab/seminar style class titled "Stage Management Practicum", in which stage managers within the department can discuss a wide range of topics, from understanding Equity contracts to practicing calling skills and conflict resolution. Texas State's theatre department has also announced the addition of a new class that professor Richey will be teaching: "Production and Company Management for the Arts." Although this class will not exclusively focus on stage management, it will help to raise awareness and interest in the growing stage management community at Texas State. I would love to see additional classes offered as the program continues to grow, but at least these new courses are a step in the right direction.

This brings me to the programs that have only one or no formal stage management classes for their students. Even if students are allowed to stage manage shows, there are fewer opportunities for growth outside of self-evaluation. Having

outside perspectives that offer fresh ideas is crucial to growth, because it allows students to hear honest feedback and get out of their own heads. If they encounter problems and they are on their own, then it can be easy to fall into the trap of “that didn’t work, so it must be wrong”. For instance, suppose a director expresses frustration to a stage manager during a rehearsal after a piece of furniture wasn’t set properly or a prop went missing. Whatever the reason for the mix up, that student may perceive the frustration as a scolding, and could interpret that to mean “I suck at my job”.

While I am a fan of learning through execution, I also understand that young theatre artists need training to understand the demands of professional theatre, regardless of their particular discipline or interest. Professor Richey likes to remind me that “if someone on your team seems [agitated], ninety percent of the time, it has nothing to do with you.” She likes to remind me of this because I can get bogged down when I make a mistake, and sometimes people need that outside voice to get back on the horse after they fall off. This brings me back to the confrontation with the [possibly agitated] director. In this situation, it can be intimidating when a director berates a stage manager in front of people, especially if the director is a professor. But if that stage manager has a support system with other students and/or a professor, they can address the problem and find a solution moving forward. They may not be able to solve it immediately, but having a discussion in retrospect can help prepare that stage manager for other potential conflicts that may come up in the future.

In this particular situation, it could be that a couch wasn’t set correctly and the director was voicing his concern because the set-piece is needed for an actor to launch themselves into after a fight sequence, and the actor is relying on the correct placement to

safely gauge their fall. On the other hand, the director may have just found out that a key costume piece will not be available before opening night, and that the costume won't function without it. There are a lot of variables to consider here, and no "right" answers to solve the problem.

When situations similar to this occur in a rehearsal at Texas State, the stage managers in professor Richey's "Stage Management Practicum" class are able to discuss ways in which we might overcome an obstacle like this. Not only do these conversations help the stage manager in question navigate a potentially sticky situation, it also allows the other stage managers to compare their methods in a safe environment. The students can then develop their own approach to overcoming conflicts in their own rehearsals. If every student had classroom support with an advising professor and their peers, they can start to have these crucial conversations and share ideas and experiences with one another.

Hitting the Books

In my quest to find what educational opportunities were available to stage managers in Texas, I encountered some courses that seemed to lean too heavily on using text books to train stage managers. While I believe that books about stage management do offer supplemental information and another perspective for their readers, I don't believe that a book can effectively teach someone how to be a stage manager. I also suspect that some authors of stage management books feel the same. Instead, I propose that they be used to provide stage managers with an outside perspective about how to become an effective stage manager. Because many stage management classes use books as a training tool, I would like to explore the benefits that recently published stage management books offer to their readers and how they can be effectively integrated into stage management curriculum.

One popular text is a paper titled Stage Managers Do Make Coffee (2000), by Carissa Dollar. Dollar focuses the majority of the paper on her personal experiences as a young stage manager and how she was forced to develop her skills on her own, as she did not receive much formal training from her college theatre program. The paper was written to help other young stage managers, who may also be without guidance or support in their environments, learn from her mistakes and triumphs.

The fact that this paper has become popular reference material for many stage managers suggests that Dollar's experience may be the case for many stage managers. In

Dollar's paper, she points out her own introduction to stage managing at her college theatre department:

"My freshman year of college I had expressed an interest in stage management. The next fall I was chosen to stage manage the first show of the season. I was both excited and a little overwhelmed. I knew the basic job description, but I had never even served as an assistant" (2).

As strange as it may sound for an academic environment to throw a student into the fray with no prior training or experience, it actually isn't that uncommon. Dollar states that "Too many people are pushed into stage management without the training or experience needed to fulfill all of the responsibilities of this important position" (Dollar, 2). Dollar continues into her process running a cue-to-cue, which is typically the first portion of technical rehearsals for a show. She states "I was totally unprepared" and "the lack of organization and preparation was my fault" (Dollar, 2). While I applaud her for taking the responsibility of the set back, the reality is she was not trained to properly prepare for her technical rehearsals.

Throughout the paper, Dollar includes job descriptions as well as helpful information to new stage managers, such as paperwork samples and advice for overcoming common pitfalls for new stage managers. She also encourages her readers not to shy away from mistakes or apologize for them, but instead to take them in stride and learn from them.

Where my opinion differs from Stage Managers Do Make Coffee is in the inconsistent tone that I believe distracts readers from the purpose of the paper. To me, the title of the books suggests that the stage manager is a subordinate member of their team. I doubt that was Dollar's intent, but it creates the image of someone making coffee for their boss because they don't really serve the process. There are other sections throughout

the paper that have a similar feel to them, and I don't think that Dollar's intent was to put stage managers in their place. In fact, she makes a point to say that stage managers are artists, which should empower the reader. This seems to be more in the vein of what Carissa Dollar wanted to say with this paper, I just think that the message gets a bit muddy and that she could have included some more encouraging words for her readers.

Lawrence Stern's ninth edition of Stage Management (2009) is "intended to be a practical manual on how to do the work of a stage manager" (Stern, 1). The book was originally written by Lawrence Stern in 1974 when he was directing at a local theatre in Los Angeles. The book provides readers with applicable information about Stern's approach to stage management. It includes chapters that cover characteristics that Stern feels a good stage manager should have, text analysis, paperwork templates that are utilized throughout the rehearsal process, and advice for calling a show.

There is a lot of information that a stage manager can pull from this book and add in their toolbox. For instance, Stern begins his chapter about working with a director by stating "...it is important to maintain a clear understanding of the director's function and a working relationship that will help his or her aims to be carried out smoothly" (Stern, 110).

The primary challenge of utilizing this text is that it was written to be a field manual for stage managers who were hired to work at one particular theatre in Los Angeles. As such, much of the advice that the book provides applies largely to smaller theatre companies. For instance, there is an entire chapter that covers budgeting responsibilities, which would typically fall to a production manager or producer in many theatres. Including it in this book can give readers the impression that the stage manager

is in charge of the production's finances, which is not necessarily the case for many stage managers.

Stern also included excerpts from other artists with work experience in a wide range of theatre companies. However, I would have liked to see a broader approach from Stern in regards to working in regional theatre and commercial theatre in this book. Many theatres operate under producer-driven or venue-driven guidelines that are often informed by available resources such as space, personnel, and time. Therefore some of the guidelines that Stern poses in his book will not necessarily match up with the expectations of different theatres across the country. One of the primary differences that establish a stage manager's job description is whether or not the theatre is union-affiliated. That distinction alone can impact time spent in rehearsals, cast and crew size, and how the stage manager and director form their relationship with the cast. There are a lot of variables that can affect a stage manager's job, and I would have been interested to see Stern go into more detail about functioning in those different circumstances.

In Stern's defense, Stage Management was "never intended to be read cover-to-cover... I wanted to be able to hand my stage managers a book and say 'Please read Chapter 8 on blocking notation so that you'll know what to do tomorrow'" (Stern, 1). However, Stage Management has since become one of the most commonly used books to educate stage managers. The irony is, Stern shares in my opinion that "you don't become [a] stage manager by reading a book" (Stern, 1).

Thomas Kelly's third edition of The Back Stage Guide to Stage Management (2009) was written after he retired in 2008. Kelly's book takes the reader through the process of a production, from pre-production meetings and auditions through closing.

The book encompasses a lot of information for stage managers, including several conversations relating to the process of regional theatres, a who's who of technical theatre personnel, and how stage managers fit into the landscape of theatre with new technology being incorporated into theatre companies around the country.

For visual learners, The Back Stage Guide to Stage Management is a match made in heaven. The book is packed with samples of paperwork, spanning from calling scripts and cue-sheets to calendars and tracking sheets of all shapes and sizes. The book also contains an appendix for technical terms and more elaborate paperwork samples. The samples provide a jumping off point for stage managers who are generating their own paperwork by giving them a glimpse into various tracking tools that are utilized in a number of theatre venues.

Kelly's book also provides readers with a section titled "Career and Job-Oriented Organizations and Publications" (Kelly, 198); in which he lists online resources that stage managers may find helpful as they continue their careers. The list includes the Stage Manager's Network and other online forums that encourage stage managers to discuss a number of topics about stage management and the theatre industry; as well as job search resources for stage managers.

As inclusive as this book is, I don't believe it was intended to be handed to a beginning stage manager to serve as their only guide. Kelly uses a lot of industry terminology throughout the book; and the detailed advice that Kelly provides about maintaining a show and necessary leadership qualities suggest that many chapters of the book are aimed at readers who already have a vested interest and understanding of stage management. I think that this is an excellent supplemental book to recommend to stage

managers, but it requires a background in stage management to be able to get the most out of it.

A Survival Guide for Stage Managers, by Mary Ellen Allison, is a how-to guide aimed at novice stage managers to provide them with “a concise handbook that details the multiple functions and responsibilities of a stage manager” (Allison, x). The book tracks through the process of a stage manager’s journey on a given show from planning auditions to the final performance.

Allison begins by introducing readers to a stage manager’s primary partners both in and out of the rehearsal space. She also includes a broad picture of the “theatre hierarchy” to help offer a sense of scope. One of the first things that caught my eye was how she addressed an issue that is not always discussed in other stage management books; and that is the role of the director in many educational environments. Allison states that a stage manager should “Never forget that you work for the producer”, and immediately follows that thought with “In an educational situation, the director is usually the producer” (Allison, 3). This passage sheds a lot of light on an often unclear situation that is common in college theatre programs. The director, who is usually a professor or graduate student, is typically given the highest authority.

While this position may be a matter of necessity in an academic environment, the power dynamic can give students an incorrect impression that the director is the stage manager’s direct supervisor. However, in most professional settings, the stage manager and directors are hired by a production manager or producer who oversees their work. In some community theatres, it has been my experience that the producer also serves as the director on some shows, which can put the stage manager in an unusual role of being

hired by their director. The reason that this distinction needs to be addressed is that stage managers need to be able to participate in solving conflicts that can come up in rehearsals, but that power is diminished if they feel like they can't mediate disagreements with the director for fear of losing their job. While some directors in college environments may carry most of the influence in the room, students need to be made aware that theatre companies outside of academia will not necessarily share that same dynamic.

Another inclusion that I really enjoyed was in Allison's "Final Thoughts" section of the book. Under the title "Your Future", she advises her readers to "not take the information in this book as gospel" because "this is *my* idea of what the job of the stage manager entails" (Allison, 155). She goes on to say that she hopes that stage managers "use this as a spring board for [their] own ideas" (Allison, 155). The final thoughts and this section in particular really help to put everything that Allison talks about into perspective. This philosophy echoes that of professor Richey, in that they both advocate for students to engage one another to hear as many opinions and experiences as possible. Professor Richey also invited frequent guests to her stage management class to provide her students with another perspective to pull from.

I would have liked to see a few excerpts or ideas from other stage managers, which is a method that Carissa Dollar and Lawrence Stern utilize in their stage management texts. While this book covers a wide range of venues and duties of a stage manager, it's all coming from one point of view. Part of what appeals to me about using texts as a teaching method is the opportunity for students to hear other perspectives on

the subject of stage management. Even quotes scattered through the book or references to other stage managers' work styles would help give this book a more inclusive finish.

This brings me back to my general experience with text books about stage management. They can be utilized to provide supplemental growth and act as a sounding board for ideas from different stage management approaches. However, I don't believe that a stage manager can pick up any of these books and learn the job without any additional support. In fact, many of these books were written by stage managers who either trained with a program that did not have classes that focused on stage management, or who have worked with students from schools that operated in a similar fashion.

Rather than repeating the cycle, I think that educators can learn as much from these books as the students they are written for. With the amount of knowledge and advice that can be taken from these stage managers, I believe that the best solution is to use these texts as a call for college theatre programs to re-assess their current curriculums. The predominant issue that these stage managers have run into (which typically led them to write the book) is a lack of formal training. Rather than just throwing more books at students and expecting a different result, let's offer a more rounded approach that includes a variety of training methods to reach as many students as possible.

But I am not advocating for fewer books in the classroom, in fact, I think that students can learn a number of applicable skills from reading. I also think that giving these students a chance to hear the types of preparation that didn't work for the writers of these texts will help them find the guidance that they want. Then they have the option of seeking other college programs that offer a comprehensive approach, or they can talk to

their professors about increasing the amount of training that their current schools offer.

It's certainly worth the conversation; and I think that raising the expectations, both of the educators and the students, can only get better results.

Into the Fold

It cannot be stressed enough, how important it is for stage managers in their theatre programs to have as many opportunities as possible to experience working in a wide variety of shows in conjunction with classroom and textbook support. It allows the students to take what they have learned from the classroom and texts and put it into practice. Frankly, it is also the best way for stage managers to strengthen their resume, which will open doors for outside work and internships after they graduate.

Collegiate theatre is many theatre artists' first opportunity to begin to learn the process of professional theatre and the expectations that will be placed upon them after they graduate and enter the industry. In my research to see what types of training were offered to theatre majors, I noticed that some programs do not advise their students who are seeking training as an actor or director to take classes that speak to the other jobs in theatre. Because of this, their best opportunities to learn how their stage managers, designers, and various assistants and specialized positions affect their work and the overall performance is by working on shows. However, if there are no student stage managers present in the process, all of the student artists are missing a vital team member to share the learning experience.

In Stage Managers Do Make Coffee, Dollar describes "an actor friend of mine's" first impression of what stage managers do before he worked with Dollar on a show (Dollar, 3). He had previously formed the opinion that "stage managers just sat out in the house and ate candy" (Dollar, 3). I have also encountered a few artists at Texas State who

were not aware of the job that stage managers do. In fact, I was one of those artists before I started this journey.

The primary reason I am advocating for simultaneous practical application that coincides with classroom and text support is because I think it creates an environment that encourages discovery. If the curriculum is structured too rigidly and requires stage managers to take certain classes before they ever get thrown into the mix, then there's a potential for stagnation. If stage managers are only given stage management theories, and expected to wait a semester or two before they are allowed to put their skills to use, then it's likely that they won't retain some of the information that they discussed in class by the time the stage managers are in rehearsals and performances. Likewise, if a problem occurs in a rehearsal or performance and they are in a class, the stage manager can bring that up in discussion. It also gives the students an opportunity to put what they are learning in class into perspective. If the discussion is covering props tracking, and an ASM is currently working on a show in which they are primarily tracking props for their show, that conversation becomes immediately relevant to them.

I also believe that practical application is the best way to raise interest in stage management. On paper, or even in a classroom setting, it's very difficult to explain the process to someone who is completely new to the subject. For example, my field work as an ASM on As You Like It began a few weeks into the semester. Before I started working on the show, parts of the conversations in class just weren't clicking because I had nothing to ground it in. If we were having a discussion about a typical timeline, in which we listed the different aspects of a stage manager's journey, starting with auditions and ending with the final performance, I would be completely lost. But once I dove into

the process, the conversations in class and the sections from Stern's Stage Management book began to make sense because I could ground them in the work that I was doing. I only taken an introductory course that required me to wait a semester before starting my field work, I can't say that I would have continued down this path. Stage management already has a murky job description for many beginning theatre artists who are starting college. College programs should be the place that sheds light on the issue and provides clarity. Part of that clarity comes from someone throwing you in the deep end (equipped with brachial flotation devices) and letting you swim.

Practical application is where the people skills really come into play. Rehearsals are students' first glimpse of collaborating with their team members, and offer them the chance to start building professional relationships and develop the leadership style that works best for them. The PSM has to utilize all of their skills that they have been developing. They must rely on their ability to effectively and efficiently catalog their show and keep their production team updated on the progress of the show through rehearsals. They must also be confident in their leadership skills, as they will need to delegate job assignments to their assistants that will impact the backstage space during runs. The PSM will need a full bag of tricks to lead their team through the rehearsal process and into performances. Likewise, the ASMs will need to incorporate all of the skills that they have been learning from classroom and text instruction to learn the show and be ready to help run backstage once technical elements begin to be put into place. Whether it's their first show, or their fourth musical, they will face challenges, and they will recover from them. And if they run out of tricks, that's when the fun begins.

Mistakes are part of the process, even professional stage managers experience hiccups from time to time; the key to success is the stage management team's ability to recover from them and improvise if need be to keep the show running smoothly. A stage manager's improvisation skills will also come into play when they call a show, as unexpected glitches can happen backstage that require assistance from ASMs or crew members, such as an actor's dress getting caught in a door and tearing. During a situation like this, the PSM has to be able to efficiently direct traffic in order to fix the problem without the audience ever noticing that something went wrong. Can the dress be fixed before it's needed again? Is there a backup dress? Has someone informed wardrobe personnel of the tear? The PSM has to stay on top of the situation while calling the show, so they have to trust their ASMs to be able to carry out whatever plan of action that the team comes up with. Giving students opportunities to overcome problems like this offer great on-the-job training and can help them develop a number of skills while still making sure that the big picture (the show) doesn't suffer when things get hairy backstage.

It may not always be smooth sailing. For instance, in my first experience working outside of Texas State's theatre department, I struggled working with a company that was new to me and with a director that I sensed did not trust me. My approach to stage management did not blend with his expectations of stage managers and we never really meshed. There were struggles to be sure. I take responsibility for the challenges that we experienced along the way and I learned how to develop a stable working relationship in spite of our differences. This is something that all stage managers should be prepared for. Even if a student encounters a situation that seems like a negative one, sometimes the struggle can be turned into a positive and teach us what we most need to learn.

My next opportunity to work outside of an academic environment allowed me to incorporate the lessons from my previous experience and build a very strong relationship with my director and cast. I closed a musical in an intimate space with a company comprised of adult and youth cast members with shotguns and dances and immediately transitioned to an outdoor venue in the summer with lots of bug spray and dogs who occasionally found themselves center-stage during performances. Since this was a summer show and I was not in classes, I saw it as a unique opportunity to see how I could hold my own in a rehearsal room with a director, cast, and venue that was new to me. Although I knew professor Richey would be available if I ran into any snags that stumped me, I wanted to see how much of my training I could incorporate if I did it on my own. This project gave me the opportunity to look back on my previous experiences in order to plot the best course of action for me to take as I stepped into a new environment. My confidence grew as the process seemed to come more naturally to me, and the show went up successfully.

Building a strong body of work can be a tricky task because stage managers typically have to have experience to get experience. It even can feel like a catch-22. If we spend the bulk of our time on classroom hours and text books, students will learn a lot but are unable to apply their education. Encouraging students to work on school productions allows them to get a sense of the job expectations and why the skills that they perfect are so important. Providing them with academic show opportunities will help them build up their resumes and hone their skills. This experience can also serve to bolster stage managers' resumes, and the work can generate more work.

Additional Educational Opportunities

This spring semester, I was invited to attend the American College Theatre Festival (ACTF) regional competition in Shreveport, LA. I was able to meet with more than thirty students representing a diverse collection of schools spanning across 6 states in the southwest region. During the festival, each stage manager is asked to bring their production book from the show that they were invited to represent and participate in group interviews to discuss their approaches and experiences. The interviews are meant to serve as a learning tool for the participants and allow the different stage managers to share new ideas and leadership styles. As the stage managers spoke about their shows, it put into perspective the training I've received and the type of education that I long to see achieved.

For instance, there was one stage manager who did not have access to a class in stage management but had prior experience in high school and was interested in continuing her training at the collegiate level. To help supplement her experience, she went onto the USITT (United States Institute for Theatre Technology) website and pulled samples of paperwork that helped her generate her own forms that she and the ASM used during the show. She also referred to the USITT website to help steer her in the right direction in regards to the expectations of a stage manager and how to work with her production team.

Conversely, I also met with stage managers who seemed over-coached by their advisors going into the competition. For instance, one stage manager arrived at the

interview with three 2-inch binders and two separate journal pads from which she called the show. While her approach was detailed, I wondered how feasible it would be to hand her prompt book over to another stage manager. Furthermore, the process she described seemed very distant, almost as if there were aspects of her work that weren't necessarily her decision, but rather a practice that has been passed down from previous stage managers and professors in the program.

But what concerned me most while I observed some of the stage managers was, ironically, the professors that came to interviews and workshops with them. There were a number of instances in which a professor would interject comments and speak for their student, either to reinforce something the student brought up or to defend them from potential criticism. While part of me understands the instinct to step in and protect your student, I firmly believe that we have to allow our students the opportunity to defend their decisions; and if they fall then we have to trust that they will get back up, or we begin to hinder their ability to learn and recover from their mistakes. By bailing out the student when they encounter challenges and conflicts, we are denying them the opportunity to really handle difficult situations that may arise on a production outside of school. Their first opportunity to encounter adversity should not be on their first paid contract with no support system to help them learn from potential missteps along the way.

Perhaps the most striking story from a student I met at ACTF was a sophomore from a relatively small theatre program who essentially taught himself how to stage manage without the support of a stage management advisor. He was assigned to a fairly large show as a stage manager and was also recruited to assist designers with two design aspects of the show. In some academic environments, due to the smaller number of

students in the program, stage managers may be asked at times to wear multiple hats on a production. Despite his heavy workload on the show, he took on the challenge with a remarkable drive to learn throughout the process, and he successfully closed his first show.

When he learned that he was nominated to attend the festival, he jumped at the opportunity to observe other stage managers from around the region and soak in everything he could. What impressed me most about this stage manager was his embrace of the festival as a learning experience. Many stage managers arrive at the festival, myself included, prepared to compete as if this were a competition for a job; but he was a breath of fresh air, and he reminded me the real purpose for ACTF: not to show off what you can do, but to appreciate the work and share our experiences to learn from each others' successes and setbacks as well as our own. These stage managers, and many others like them, are what inspire me to write about how we can set our students up for success. Because there is no question that the talent is out there.

There has to be a balance in the academic theatrical environment. To me, the most successful stage managers at the conference were those who were allowed to flourish in their surroundings, and had support from formal classroom instruction and an advising professor when they needed help to overcome some of the challenges that came their way. The leanness of theatre programs that have support for stage managers does not seem to be a conscious decision to ignore the subject, but rather an oversight. If we raise awareness and interest in the subject, then we can open doors for more students to join the conversation.

What's Next?

These setbacks and triumphs make me ask the question: what's next for these students and their respective theatre programs? With the presence of interested stage managers who could use the guidance of a more experienced professor, will they develop that program? The current trends of Texas colleges suggest that they will be left to develop on their own without an appointed stage management professor. I believe it is time to change that trend.

The arts industry is one of the most competitive job markets in the country and college programs continue to produce an abundance of talented theatre artists who are ready to work straight out of college and the hunt is only getting more competitive. One of the best ways for beginning stage managers to get a foot in the door and fortify their resumes is to work as interns or apprentices with professional theatre companies. These internships offer stage managers an opportunity to work in a professional environment under the supervision of seasoned theatre artists to guide them. In many ways, internships can function as an extension of a stage manager's education. Many of the lucrative internships that are offered across the nation tend to be just as competitive as job offers for production stage managers.

I am currently in the hunt for one of these internship opportunities and I have relied on my training at Texas State to help me stand out against the competition. My process began with my trip to ACTF. As part of the festival, the stage managers were asked to create a resume and a personal statement reflecting how we approach stage

management as a whole. That work formed the basis for letters of intent and the interview process for these potential work opportunities. I have also worked with professor Richey and a number of the stage management students at Texas State to hone my interviewing skills and to compare resumes to see where improvements could be made. These conversations have had a direct impact on my interviews, as I have progressively gained confidence and become more comfortable talking to potential employers.

Students across Texas should all have access to advisors and fellow students who can help them prepare to step into the industry by putting their best foot forward. However, part of that development has to come from past experience. Texas colleges can better prepare their students for a career in stage management by incorporating a combined approach. With experience in the field, and the outside perspectives of text books and classroom discussion, these stage managers can learn to speak intelligently about the process, which is the expectation that employers have when they interview potential prospects.

But it's not enough to merely practice interviewing skills. Before companies start contacting stage managers for an interview, they look at resumes and letters of intent to start separating qualified stage managers from the pack. This is the area in which I believe that Texas schools can improve the most. If Texas schools begin to adopt my proposal of a combined approach, I believe that students will more enticing candidates for these work opportunities. As I stated earlier, one of the best ways for stage managers to get work experience is by being active in their school productions. It demonstrates a proactive attitude and a willingness to learn, which is appealing to potential employers. Those who continue their training start to develop their key skills and turn them into

strengths that will help them lead a production. As the students progress through their programs, they can spearhead larger productions and start to separate themselves from other applicants based on their experience on a particular type or scale of shows that can appeal to internships and make them more marketable to professional theatres.

Furthermore, once these students are able to secure an internship or job offer, the clock starts ticking for when they need to start looking for jobs that interest them after their internship completes. As one job finishes, another door opens up. The most successful stage managers have to be in constant forward motion to enable them to transition from one job to the next quickly to secure their employment, and to keep their skills sharp.

An academic environment can offer similar circumstances, but with more manageable stakes. Many college theatre programs rehearse multiple shows at a time so they can create a fluid season with shorter stints between performances. If students are encouraged to work in an environment like this, then the attrition of searching and interviewing for jobs while getting ready to graduate starts to seem natural. The pace at which they train directly impacts how well they will be able to hit the ground running once they start stage managing professionally.

When I began my journey as a stage manager almost three years ago, I had some idea of what I was getting into but not much. In *A Survival Guide for Stage Managers*, Mary Allison states that stage management “is a thankless job” (Allison 4), but I wouldn’t necessarily agree with that. It is true that we are not visible to the audience. Where an audience member may be able describe roughly what an actor does or a director, the same may not be true for their understanding of stage managers. The amount

of appreciation from actors and technicians for what I have contributed at Texas State is all the thanks I need.

As I look back, I remember that the job description what interested me in the first place, and the experience is what sealed the deal. From my first job on As You Like It to my final production of Richard III, I have helped shape performances that blew the doors off and left audiences dazzled at the raw power of theatre. I have met people along the way who have become good friends and great artists. I have been blessed with the opportunity to work and learn in a program that encourages students to get their feet wet early as well as the guidance from a mentor who has been there for me through thick and thin. My training has helped me to understand what a job as a stage manager really entails and has allowed me to polish my calling, organizational, and people skills.

Professor Richey also worked with me to improve my interview skills as I sent out resumes to over thirty companies who were offering internships and apprenticeships around the country. At this point, I have utilized those skills in eight interviews. As I look forward, I know that I have been given the tools that I need to succeed; and the only way that I know how to repay that gift is to share what I have learned with those who may not have had the same opportunities. I encourage professors and students alike to examine the facts that I have presented and see where their own programs can improve.

For a number of programs in Texas, stage managers are not properly prepared for a successful career but it's not too late to change that. By raising awareness for students who are interested in this career path, as well as equipping them with an arsenal of skills that they will need moving forward, we can begin to form a new plan to educate our stage managers. By combining the three primary educational approaches of classroom

instruction, textbook support and practical application, schools in Texas can begin to forge a reputation for producing well-rounded stage managers who are ready to enter the industry. This is a large undertaking but there are a lot of hungry students out there and I think we owe it to them to provide the best education possible.

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