

A BRIEF GUIDE TO STAGE MANAGEMENT

Gleanings from various sources

Contents

This little pamphlet distils various definitions of the role and activity of Stage Managers in Theatre and other performance art forms and events

Whilst not intended to be comprehensive, it aims to be an overview, introduction, training guide and checklist and covers:
Definitions, Role, Process, Duties, Responsibilities and Techniques

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STAGE MANAGEMENT - DEFINITIONS

Every production you do, along with every director, set or costume designer / LX designer and groups of actors you work with, will require different approaches.

Stage Management team connect people and departments for any production. It is important that they have a broad understanding of all aspects of a production, including administration, directing, designing, set building, stage mechanics, lighting & sound and of course the main principle component is the play itself.

A Stage Manager has to be able to cope with every eventuality on a production with the temperament and ability to get along with people in both the artistic and technical sides of theatre, and to understand what they do.

Stage managers should be good planners and organisers, with a knack for multi-tasking, prioritising and keeping calm under pressure and in a crisis. The work itself is not glamorous, often involving long hours and fairly boring, repetitive tasks as well as being physically demanding.

During the rehearsal period, the stage management team (often composed of 3 - a stage manager, a deputy stage manager and an assistant stage manager) acts as the lynchpin between the artistic process developing in the rehearsal room and the people physically building, sewing, assembling and making the production outside of that rehearsal room. Stage management are there to prevent ANYTHING from adversely affecting the production. Attention to detail and good communication skills are essential here. Like a spider sitting in the middle of its web, the stage manager or team should sit at the heart of the production and be the first port of call for anything concerning the show for all those involved in creating and running it.

The role of the stage manager is especially important to the director in rehearsals. Here the director and the stage manager work side by side, with the stage manager recording the director's decisions about blocking and notes for the actors, keeping track of logistical and scheduling details and communicating what goes on in rehearsals to the rest of the team. This enables the director to concentrate his or her full attention on directing.

Once the show has opened, the stage management is responsible for the management of each evening's performance. They ensure that the production continues to run with all aspects of it kept as directed and designed. The DSM (Deputy Stage Manager) will also generally cue the show, giving calls and 'GOs' to the actors and all departments, enabling the changing of scenery, lighting and sound to be co-ordinated. The ASM will frequently be 'running the wings', i.e. running other backstage aspects, particularly props. This brief description gives an idea of the variety and responsibility of the job. The company must trust their stage management team and they must be able to cope with being the people with whom the buck stops. In a crisis, it must always be the stage management that remain cool, keep their heads and cope with it; in a confrontation situation stage management must calm, soothe and mediate.

STAGE MANAGEMENT - KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

Stage managers have several key responsibilities and tasks to perform in each phase of a production, including

- scheduling and running rehearsals
- communicating the director's wishes to designers and crafts people
- coordinating the work of the stage crew
- calling cues and possibly actors' entrances during performance
- overseeing the entire show each time it is performed

In conjunction with the director, the stage manager determines the scheduling of all rehearsals and makes sure everyone involved is notified of rehearsal times, meetings, costume/wig fittings and coaching sessions. During the rehearsal phase, stage managers also

- mark out the dimensions of the set on the floor of the rehearsal hall
- make sure rehearsal props and furnishings are available for the actors
- attend all rehearsals
- notify the designers and crafts people of changes made in rehearsal

In rehearsals the stage manager records all blocking, light, sound and set change cues, in a master copy of the script called the prompt book. The information in the prompt book also allows the stage manager to run the technical rehearsals, calling each technical cue in turn to determine precisely how it needs to be timed to coordinate with the onstage action.

The stage manager and the technical director also work out a smooth and efficient plan for the stage crew to follow during set changes. Furniture and prop plans for complicated sets are drawn up by the stage manager to show exactly where the furniture and props are to be positioned on stage and sometimes in the wings.

Once the show opens, the director's work is essentially complete. Now it's the stage manager's job to make sure that every aspect of the production runs just as the director intended time after time, until the production closes.

Assistant Stage Managers are often needed in larger productions, the ASM is often stationed just offstage to facilitate communication between the stage manager (who is sometimes out in the house) and actors, as well as ensuring safety. The ASM often helps with complex set changes, quick changes offstage, or preparing the stage for performance.

STAGE MANAGEMENT – PROCESS (1)

Pre - Rehearsal

Provisional Props Lists (With DSM & ASM)
Rehearsal Props
Rehearsal Furniture
Sort out Scripts
Directions, maps to Rehearsal Room for cast etc

Rehearsals

Rehearsal Room bookings
Cast List
Mark up rehearsal room
Arrange catering and team comfort (e.g. space heating, toilets)
Propping & Props Meetings with Director, Designer and ASMs
Wardrobe Calls
Liaising with rehearsals daily
SM team meetings - SM, DSM, ASM
Get plans copied
Scene changes
Quick changes
Liaise daily with each department regarding rehearsal notes

Pre-Production Weeks

Props parade with Director & Designer
Check programme with Director before final print
Cue lights & cans request list to LX & Sound depts-consult with DSM
Position of Prompt Desk-consult with DSM, LX & Sound
Work out scene changes
Get props setting list from DSM
Attend rehearsals & run throughs

Plotting Session

Set scenes-furniture & relevant props for lighting as required
Be around the stage & available
As furniture gets set in position- mark it with coloured tape
Help ASM set up props table
Check headsets & cue lights are in position

STAGE MANAGEMENT – PROCESS (2)

Technical Rehearsal

SM is the controller and senior manager of the Tech.

The SM is the main point of call for all Tech Rehearsal progress.

Chaos tends to ensue without a strong and dictatorial control over the process and flow.

Liaise with director whilst running technical rehearsal

Ensure all appropriate cast and crew are called for Tech Rehearsal

Make sure stage & theatre is clean & tidy & ready for a technical rehearsal

Before half hour call - props check with ASM

At half - check that all actors are in (collect valuables and lock away)

Dress Rehearsals/Performances

Make sure stage is ready for performance

Props check with ASM

At half hour call check all actors & technical staff are in

At Half - When set, tell FOH for opening of house

At beginners check that beginners are in opening positions-tell DSM

Once FOH have given you clearance tell DSM to start show

At the end of the show

- Lock away valuables
- Check that actors & technical staff know following days call
- Do show report with DSM

After Dress Rehearsal and First Night/Preview

Make sure copy of all running lists are collected from all technical staff & put in book
LX plots, sound plots, ASM, SM, flys, crew, dressers

Send out programmes to credited people

Clear rehearsal room of props, furniture etc

End of Production

Make sure all borrowed or hired props are returned as soon as possible

Make sure all other props & furniture are returned to props department

Clear stage & back stage areas

Clear dressing rooms

STAGE MANAGEMENT - STRUCTURE

The Stage Management team is the channel of communication between all people and departments contributing to a production. SMs are the organisers who ensure that everything and everyone is in the right place at the right time, during both the rehearsal period and performances.

The stage management team needs to be versatile, as different types of theatre companies require different qualities and skills. It is important that stage management have a working knowledge of everyone else's job, not in order to do that job, but in order to be able to empathise and understand their problems.

Stage Management need to be physically resilient – even the most organised productions require a lot of hard work to reach and maintain a high standard – and this is usually done with long working hours!

STAGE MANAGEMENT CAN BE EXHAUSTING, FRUSTRATING AND VERY DEMANDING, BUT IT CAN ALSO BE VERY EXCITING AND REWARDING.

THE COMPANY MANAGER

1. Usually employed by larger companies, they are the management's representative and the senior member of the team, but is also the person who creates the, 'TEAM' atmosphere.
2. Looks after the welfare of company members and being the confidante and problem solver for cast & crew have as well as of director / designer and technical departments on the production. So it is important the Stage Manager gains their trust.
3. Deal with accounts department for actor's time sheets, overtime and holiday pay.

THE STAGE MANAGER

1. Organises the acquiring of all props and furniture for the production and runs the stage management budget.
2. Is the communication link – to ensure that all information coming out of rehearsal reaches and is understood by the right department.
3. Responsible for organising the scene changes for the production, in discussion with the director. They also co-ordinate the stage crew.
4. Directors representative once in performance so is in charge backstage as well as being responsible for keeping the show as it was directed.
5. Responsible for tying up all loose ends at the end of the production, returning all props, furniture etc.
6. Responsible for the health and safety and fire regulations aspects of the production in performance and those working on it.

STAGE MANAGEMENT - PRE-PRODUCTION ACTIVITY (1)

Rehearsal Room.

The rehearsal room should always be booked, set up and ready before the first member of the company arrives. Stage Management should usually arrive in the rehearsal room at least half an hour before rehearsals are due to start.

First Day.

After discussion with your director set the chairs out as directed. You may need to put a table in place for the director, designer and DSM

As everyone that you don't know arrives introduce yourselves to him or her and explain who you are.

Set the MODEL & COSTUME DESIGNS out on display for the company to see.

Directors & Designers Initial Talks / Read-Through

Very often the director will give a talk on how they envisage the play and how they intend to rehearse it. The designer may show the model to the company explaining the design concept and the workings of the set. It is useful to put a copy of the groundplan and costume designs on the wall of the rehearsal room for the company to refer to during the rehearsal period.

Most directors will do a read-through of the play. This must be TIMED, scene by scene and an overall timing of the play. The director will refer to these regularly during the rehearsal period.

After the read-through the director may divide the play up into smaller working units, possibly smaller than the scenes. These must be taken down accurately because the rehearsal calls will correspond to the units.

Cuts.

The director may make cuts to the script before or after the read-through (or both). The DSM must put the cuts in the book accurately so that they don't prompt an actor with a line that has been cut.

Contact Lists.

It is very important that Stage Management have a contact number for everyone involved in the production.

STAGE MANAGEMENT - PRE-PRODUCTION ACTIVITY (2)

Running of Rehearsals and Director / DSM Position in Rehearsals

At the beginning of the rehearsal period the DSM needs to discuss with the director the position of where they would like to sit, the director usually sits where the audience will be. The DSM should set up a table in a suitable place (most often where they are going to cue the show from).

Prompt Script

The DSM writes down in the book all the actors moves (this is called blocking). When the actors have learnt their lines, ('off the book') the DSM will have to prompt. Any information about the production that occurs during rehearsals should be put into the prompt script, e.g. LX cues, Sound cues, Fly cues, Scene change, Quick-change information etc.

Post Rehearsal Communication

The DSM should take notes of all the information for every department that comes out of rehearsals: Anything that the director mentions during rehearsals that will affect the technical departments should be noted down. E.g. LX, Sound, Props, Wardrobe, Production Management, Construction, Scenic Art, Stage Management. Notification of run-throughs and run-through timings should go on the rehearsal notes. Rehearsal notes should be done and distributed at the end of each day. Each rehearsal note is numbered.

Props & Furniture.

The DSM should keep a note of all props & furniture settings. The DSM can then refer to the setting lists when setting up to rehearse any scene. Furniture positions should be marked with tape on the rehearsal room floor, (different colours for different scenes). These marks will later be transferred to the stage. The DSM should pay great attention to how props and furniture are used in rehearsals and pass the information to the relevant department e.g. glasses that are likely to be knocked over and broken, furniture that is stood on, special effects etc.

STAGE MANAGEMENT - PRE-PRODUCTION ACTIVITY (3)

Props Setting

The DSM should start to build up a props settings list (where all the props need to be set for each scene) from the beginning of rehearsals. This can go on the rehearsal props setting list so that you have the information for every time a scene is rehearsed.

Towards the end of the rehearsal period, when run-throughs are being done, these scene by scene props setting lists need to be made into one complete list of where everything is set at the top of the show.

Props should be set on tables around the rehearsal room to represent where in the theatre the props tables will be set. It is important to have a substitute prop for every single prop in rehearsals and as new props are added substitutes must be provided.

The DSM should confirm all props used, because even if they are on the provisional props list, things may get cut or added as rehearsals progress.

Actual props should be used in rehearsals before getting to the technical rehearsal as much as possible, so that time is not wasted sorting out problems that could be done earlier.

Production Meeting Minutes

The DSM and SM should take notes of all points that are discussed during the production meeting. They should be typed up and distributed to all the technical departments by the DSM or SM.

Plotting Sessions

The DSM should attend all plotting sessions (LX & Sound) to put the cues in the book with the director and designer. Make sure that you have the same cue number as your operator. The DSM can help the director and LX designer with actor's positions during the LX plotting session. Standbys for the cues should be put into the book before the technical rehearsal.

BLOCKING - ABBREVIATIONS

Prompt Side Stage Left

PS

Opposite Prompt side is Stage Right

OP

(Also known as bastard prompt where the SM/DSM station is situated there)

Stage left

SL

Stage right

SR

Upstage

US

Downstage

DS

Centre stage

CS

Downstage left

DSL

Downstage right

DSR

Upstage left

USL

Upstage right

USR

Centre stage left

CSL

Centre stage right

CSR

Ent

Enters

Ex

Exits

X

Crosses



Turns



Crosses DSL



Crosses USR



Crosses DSR



Crosses USL



Travels
towards SL



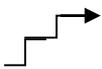
Travels
towards SR



Short pause



Long Pause



Upstairs



Downstairs



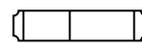
Chair



Table



Stool



Sofa

Bench



You can use whatever you want as long as you present these at the front of the prompt script in the form of a key.

STAGE MANAGEMENT - SHOW RUNNING & POST PRODUCTION (1)

Routine Procedure

The Stage Management team should establish a routine, so that preparation for the show is always done in the same order and nothing gets forgotten.

Pre-Show Checks

- The DSM should switch on all necessary equipment (prompt desk) an hour before the half so that if something is not working there is plenty of time to fix it and test cue lights, monitors, show relay FOH & backstage.
- Two members of the team should do a props & furniture check i.e. all furniture, set dressing and props have been set correctly. Check all doors and windows are working properly. Check that offstage areas are set.
- Live effects tested that are operated by the DSM e.g. doorbells, telephones.
- Wings and entrances are clear, clean and tidy and fire exits are clear.
- LX and Sound departments have completed their pre-show checks.
- Front of House Clearance (FOH)
- At the half-hour call the company and verify the signing in list.
- Once all the company and technical staff is present, the set, furniture and props are set and LX and Sound are in their pre-set the Stage Manager should inform the FOH manager that they are ready to open the house.

During the Show

The DSM is responsible for cueing the show as was decided upon during the technical and dress rehearsals. The DSM should give LX and Sound cues, flies, scene changes and actors performances in order to keep the show running as the director requires.

Curtain Calls

The director usually arranges these at the first dress rehearsal. It will involve the DSM cueing the sequence and calling the company for the curtain call if all the actors are not on the stage at the end of the play. The Stage Manager or DSM are responsible for the number of calls, not the actors. The DSM should have all the necessary cue lights on standby (e.g. for LX and house tabs).

Photo Calls

Photographs of the production will usually be taken at a dress rehearsal. The actors must be warned that a photographer is present at that particular dress rehearsal. Sometimes there may be a separate photo call and Stage Management must ensure that the stage is set up for the correct scene, furniture and props are set and that costume and lighting is available.

STAGE MANAGEMENT - SHOW RUNNING & POST PRODUCTION (2)

First Night

Before the first night a list of running times must be given to the FOH manager, bar, box office and reception.

The company may be nervous for the first night so tact, patience, understanding and sensitivity should be used when necessary.

After the show the DSM should write and distribute the show report. This should include show times, show staff, audience numbers, any technical sequences that went wrong; any notes to technical departments that need working on before the next performance. Also any mistakes or problems that the actors had. There is a section for the SM to comment on things that happened backstage that the DSM might be unaware of. The show report should only go to the relevant people; it should not be put up on a noticeboard for general consumption.

As soon as possible the SM should collect everyone's running lists and put them in the prompt copy so that should a member of the show crew be off someone else can do their job.

Understudy Rehearsals

On a long running or touring production understudy calls may have to happen. The SM and DSM often take these at least once a week. It is important that the blocking is up to date so that the understudies know what to do and where to go.

Get Out

Stage Management is usually responsible for returning the props and furniture from where they came from. It is very important that any hires are returned as soon as possible.

The DSM should make up a show envelope, which consists of the prompt copy and all running and setting lists, calls, notes, groundplans, and programmes. The prompt script goes into the archives and should any information be needed from that production or it is remounted the envelope can be accessed.

The prompt copy is the property of the company or the theatre not the DSM.

PROMPT SCRIPTS

THE PROMPT SCRIPT IS THE PRODUCTION BIBLE:

The prompt script or prompt copy ...

- is often called 'the book' containing an accurate record of the production.
- is used for understudy rehearsals.
- is used if a production is remounted or comes back into the repertoire.
- is used to keep the show as was directed during performances.
- needs to be neat, tidy and easily understood so that anyone could take over

If 'shorthand' is used for blocking make 'a key at the front of the script.

PROMPT SCRIPT CONTENTS

- Accurate script containing all cuts, rewrites and actors pauses.
- Clear and simple to understand particularly the blocking.
- All cues that are in the production: LX, Sound, Flys, Follow Spots, Scene Changes, Special Effects (Pyros), Actors cues etc.
- All the cues should have a description next to them in brackets.
- Backstage calls for actors and technical staff.
- Front of House (FOH) calls for calling the audience into the theatre.
- Complete setting lists for props and furniture.
- Running lists (crew, ASM, dressers etc).
- Scene change plots.
- Costume plots.
- Fly plots.
- LX & Sound cue sheets.
- Cast lists.
- Contact lists.
- Actor / scenic breakdown (Availability list).

PROMPT SCRIPT PREPARATION

- Glue or insert script pages with a blank or lined page accompanying each and every script page. Sometimes a script page may need to be divided into 2 prompt script pages if there is a lot happening. This applies equally to scores.
- Highlight the stage directions –makes it easier to skip over when prompting.
- Divide the blank page into two columns, one for blocking and one for cues and calls.
- Put tabs at the side of the page to denote the act or scene.
- Always have a diagram of the set at the top of every page for putting actors, furniture and props positions.
- Use your blocking shorthand to note the actor's moves. Write a number on the script where the actor moves and write the same number on the blank page opposite followed by the description of the move. Always start at number one at the top of each new page. Leave a space between the moves so that you can add extra moves later. Use a light pencil and always have a rubber. Moves may change regularly during the rehearsal period.

JULES
 Say "What" again! C'mon, say "What" again! I dare ya, I double dare ya motherfucker, say "What" one more goddamn time!

Brett is regressing on the spot.

JULES
 Now describe to me what Marsellus Wallace looks like!

Brett does his best.

BRETT
 Well he's... he's... black -

JULES
 - go on!

BRETT
 ...and he's... he's... bald -

JULES
 - does he look like a bitch?!

BRETT
 (without thinking)
 What?

Jules' eyes go to Vincent, Vincent smirks, Jules rolls his eyes and SHOOT Brett in the shoulder.

Brett SCREAMS, breaking into a SHAKING/TREMBLING SPASM in the chair.

Door Cue USL Mr Jones



LX Q23 GO
 STANDBY FLYS Q4
 STANDBY LX Q24, 25

LX Q24 GO

CALL Mr Edgerton

LX Q24 }
 FLYS Q4 } GO

Check Dressers put kettle on for interval / Fans on

STAGE MANAGER PRODUCTION WEEK CHECK LIST

Furniture marks transferred from Rehearsal to Theatre	
Quick change plots completed & talked through with dressers	
Liaise with departments working set & props for scene changes	
Scene change plots completed, photocopied & talked through with all crew members	
Props Setting List completed with ASM and DSM	
All Furniture ready in theatre for LX plotting session	
Prompt Desk in position & working for LX Plot	
Cue Lights in position & working before LX Plot	
Headsets in position & working before LX Plot	
Attend LX Plot (set up for scenes, Mark stage with tape)	
Dressing Room Lists	
Signing in Lists	
Check 1 st Aid box – well stocked & complete	
Fire Evacuation Meeting with all technical & Acting Company	
Attend Sound Plot & take notes	
Help ASM set up props & Furniture for Tech	
Talk through running of Tech with director & DSM	
Introduce Technical Staff to Company at Technical rehearsal	
Confirm with Box Office seat numbers	
Confirm with Box Office running times of show	
Liaise with FOH Manager regarding running times & FOH Info (Strobes, smoking, nudity, language, gunshots)	
Check Risk Assessments before Tech	
Preparation for Fire Regulation Visit (Flame Plot / Smoking Plot)	
Check Fire Curtain & Sprinkler & Isolation with technical staff	
Check position & types of Fire Extiguishers	
Liaise with PM & Director at end of each session to establish schedule for next day	
Attend Director's technical notes sessions	
Book Photographer for Dress Rehearsals	