



# Responsible for everything

*What it takes to be a stage manager*

BY MIKE LAWLER



**Y**EARS AGO I was crewing a show in one of these big houses in Southern California—the kind with a maze of basement level service hallways and anonymous areas that provide space for dressing rooms, laundry rooms, green rooms, trap rooms, and a myriad of others. The stage manager asked me politely to go down into the maze to buy a soda from a vending machine for him.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Um, I don’t know, surprise me,” he said.

As I wandered through the seemingly endless halls below the stage

*Michele Kay worked as a professional stage manager in New York, Chicago, and Norfolk, Virginia before joining the faculty at the University of Cincinnati’s College-Conservatory of Music last year.*

searching for a soda machine, a booming voice came through the PA speakers that hovered above me.

“This is God,” it said, “and I want a Diet Pepsi.”

It was, of course, the stage manager. I learned early that respecting and obeying the stage manager goes a long way whether you are an actor, stagehand, designer, or director, but most SMs would never go as far as likening themselves to a god. Nor should they. In fact, stage managers will be the first to tell you that while their responsibilities are immense, they are as fallible and likely to mess up as the rest of us.

### **A manager for the stage**

Stage managers, as a group, find it difficult to fully detail what their duties actually are because they do *everything*.

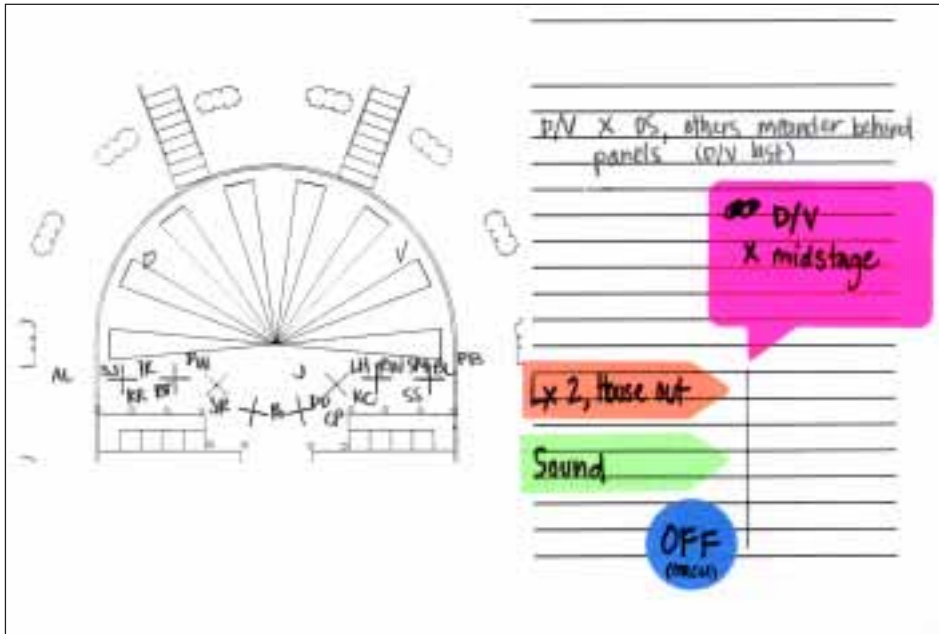
“I am a manager like any company has a manager only I do it for the stage,” explains Michele Kay, a professional SM who teaches stage management at the University of Cincinnati. Lawrence Stern, author of *Stage Management*, a manual for stage managers and theatre students first released in 1974 and now in its eighth edition, describes the stage manager as the person who ensures that “things run smoothly onstage and backstage, before, during and after the production.” Finding your way past vague explanations is tricky when it comes to a typical professional stage managers job. At one point Stern advised me simply, “Read my book.”

Above all else, stage managers are responsible for tracking and coordinating information. “I coordinate everything that occurs within the rehearsal hall; I communicate that to those outside the rehearsal hall,” Kay explains. “Then I call cues for various operators to run the show.” Rick Cunningham, head of the stage management program for the University of Delaware’s Professional Theatre Training Program

(PTTP), views his primary task as facilitating information between the various collaborators involved in a production. “I see a play as a series of conversations and my job is to manage those conversations. I manage people, not things,” he says. This makes paperwork a big part of the job.

In order to properly manage the many conversations taking place, the stage manager collects and tracks every detail pertaining to the production, including information regarding props, costumes, scenery, special effects, sound, lighting, blocking, performers, backstage crews, dialogue, and much more. Each aspect of the show is recorded and made into a list or report. Stage managers, or their assistants, known as ASMs, will eventually compile a mountain of paperwork that includes props lists, costume tracking sheets, blocking notes, line notes, and daily reports. Much of this paper will end up in a stage manager’s promptbook, or “bible,” which also includes their annotated script. They will use this usually massive notebook binder to run the show. When the production closes, the production manager will keep the “bible” for future productions of the same show or as a reference for future shows that may have similar needs.

Stage managers stay on top of this wealth of information by keeping each member of the production team as informed as possible throughout the entire process. The primary way they do this is by producing rehearsal reports after each rehearsal and distributing them to everyone involved in the production. Many stage managers will continue this process after the show opens by distributing performance reports following each performance. Communication and record keeping such as this is key to managing the large number of details that are changed or added daily during the rehearsal process. Because there are so many departments involved in a typical professional theatre production, stage managers must keep on top of the progress and problems of each in order to facilitate communication between them all.



A portion of a page from the promptbook prepared by Heather Toll, one of Michele Kay's B.F.A. stage management students, for a CCM production of *Side Show*. These blocking notes are for the top of Act I. The eyeball symbol on the hot pink sticker reminds Toll to watch Daisy and Violet and confirm they have crossed midstage before calling the light and sound cues on the orange and green arrows.

### Calling the show

A stage manager's duties shift once technical rehearsals and performances begin. This is when the SM will put to use all of the information that was so meticulously tracked during pre-production, and begin the task of "calling the show." This is the term used to describe how the SM instructs crewmembers of a production, such as the light and sound operators. With the stage manager "calling cues," each member of the technical crew will know exactly when to execute their assigned tasks.

The stage manager is also responsible for maintaining the look and feel of the show once the director has moved on from the project—usually once the production has officially opened. In addition to calling the cues properly so that all technical aspects of the show remain constant from show to show, the SM must also ensure that the integrity of the show remains intact. This includes the look of each actor, the condition of every prop and piece of scenery, and the focus of all lighting instruments. In short, the SM is accountable for maintaining the show

as it was directed and designed. When there are problems during a performance or there is preventative maintenance that should take place, the SM will put it in the performance report and distribute it to all concerned personnel of the theatre.

### Zen and the art of stage management

There are several books about the stage manager's job that are worth reading (see the list below). New Jersey-based stage manager Gregg Brevoort might have a new one up his sleeve. "I have wondered if maybe I should write a book, *Zen and the Art of Stage Management*," Brevoort says. "I find that an even keel and level-headedness best serves a stage manager."

Brevoort is not alone in this belief. The majority of professional stage managers interviewed for this article commented on the importance of the ability to remain calm in the midst of a storm. "I'm rare in my low-key nature and patience under adverse conditions," says Richard Costabile, the production stage manager for Hal Holbrook's touring production of *Mark Twain Tonight!* Michele Kay shares this trait too. "Even when I feel like there is steam coming out of my ears I have the uncanny ability to remain calm," she says.

This ability to perform and work with others calmly while dealing with the stressful situations typical of theatre reveals itself as an important asset for successful stage managers. Of course, even the most seasoned veterans find themselves in difficult situations that make it nearly impossible to remain calm. "When a friend fell backwards into an orchestra pit, that shook me," says Kay, describing one of the more harrowing events she's experienced. "But generally I'm very calm as a stage manager."

Because entire production teams look to the stage manager for support and guidance in stressful times, this is an important lesson for young stage managers to learn. "After all," explains Costabile, "it's only a show. We

### Recommended reading

*Recommended by the stage managers interviewed for this article.*

*The Backstage Guide to Stage Management*, by Thomas A. Kelly, Back Stage Books, 1999

*From Page to Stage: How Theatre Designers Make Connections Between Scripts and Images*, by Rosemary Ingham, Heinemann, 1998

*Stage Manager: The Professional Experience*, by Larry Fazio, Focal Press, 2000

*Stage Management*, by Lawrence Stern, Allyn & Bacon, 2005

*The Stage Management Handbook*, by Daniel Ionazzi, Betterway Books, 1992

don't have a patient on the operating table."

### **Teaching stage management**

According to the pros, practical experience is the most effective way to learn the craft of stage management. "I would rather see first hand what works for other stage managers, than to look for guidance from a textbook," Brevoort says. Putting it plainly, Cindy Poulson, who teaches stage management at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, says, "practical experience beats everything else." And judging by the successive editions of his book, Stern seems to agree. "Since initial publication in the early 1970's, my book has evolved from a manual for stage managers to a textbook for future stage managers," he says. "I believe that the most effective way to teach is to thrust the student into doing it."

Not just anybody can put on a headset and call a show, though. "A lot of stage management can be taught, but if someone doesn't have it, they won't be a successful stage manager," Kay says. The "it" is what Kay refers to as an "inherent ability." "All the classes in the world won't make me a better singer," she says. "The same can be said for stage managers."

### **Equity and stage managers**

Most professional SMs are members of Actor's Equity Association (AEA), a labor organization that represents theatre actors and stage managers in the United States. Stage managers play a critical role in the union, commonly known as Equity, and are responsible for seeing that its rules are followed during the entire production process.

The definition of the duties of a stage manager posted on the Equity website (at [www.actorsequity.org](http://www.actorsequity.org), in the document library section) provide some insights into the job responsibilities at the professional level. Among other things, the list notes tasks such as calling rehearsals, maintaining a promptbook, and "maintaining the artistic intention of the director and the producer after opening..." Though

common practice for non-union stage managers, the Equity list also states that SMs should not shift scenery or run lights, order food for the company, or handle contracts.

When and if to join AEA is a big question for up and coming stage managers, and the advice that they encounter is usually quite diverse. The SMs featured in this article have contrasting views as well. Cunningham, who has headed up PTTP's stage management training program for sixteen years, advises young stage managers to join AEA "as soon as you can." But Kay disagrees. She advises students to avoid rushing into the first Equity gig that comes their way. "Just because it is there, doesn't mean it should be taken," she says. "Once you make the choice you cannot go back." That is, as a union member, you will no longer be able to work on non-Equity shows.

Both Costabile and Poulson offer similar advice. They agree, as does Kay, that being able to compete for AEA jobs is critical for determining when the time for joining AEA is right. Without proper qualifications and experience, vying with more experienced professionals for work at Equity theatres will be extremely difficult.

Poulson raises another important consideration: where do you plan to live and work? She encourages novice SMs to seriously research how many Equity stage managers the community can support. One thing all of the pros do agree on is the importance of consulting stage managers who work professionally in the city you want to live and work in. They will have the best information about how to proceed—both in terms of when to join AEA and how to find entry-level gigs in your area.

Another great resource is AEA itself. According to Maria Somma, an Equity spokesperson, a good way to gain experience as a stage manager while earning credit toward Equity membership is through their Equity Membership Candidate Program, or EMC. In this program, you can work

for theatres under Equity contract while training to be a professional stage manager.

### **You'll get to Broadway someday**

Poulson's advice for how to become a good stage manager is direct. "You need to know how to think, ask questions, and solve problems. You need to understand literature, art, history, and so much more [because] you need to be able communicate articulately about so many things. Get a good education," she says. "Theatre is not for dummies." As for the details of excelling as a stage manager, Kay believes you must have thick skin, but also be capable of compassion. "Don't take anything personally; likewise, when you reprimand, attack the problem, not the person," she says. "Treat people with dignity, trust, and respect and you will get the same in return."

"Take it slow," Kay says, "and you'll get to Broadway someday."

*Mike Lawler is a freelance writer who has worked professionally in technical theatre for over ten years. He lives in Austin, Texas.*