

Managing the show

Training student stage managers

BY LISA MULCAHY

DON CORATHERS



The job of stage manager is arguably the most demanding task one can tackle in the theatre. Think about it: what other role requires flawless organizational skills, techie logic, great people smarts, and the ability to concentrate under intense pressure—all to help the director, designers, cast, and crew shine?

The good news: although stage managing is a formidable challenge, it's immensely rewarding. The stage manager of a successfully run production enjoys an incredible amount of pride at a job well done, plus learns a host of valuable skills that can be applied inside the theatre and to life in general.

In this article, I'll delve into the specifics of how you can introduce your students to the concepts of quality stage management. We'll cover the right way to immerse them in the process hands-on during the preparation and staging of an actual student show. A key portion of our focus will be on nuts-and-bolts matters like running auditions and rehearsals, noting blocking, and calling cues—all of which are crucial skills your student stage managers need to master. Just as vital, though, is imparting the importance of independent thinking strategies to the job. Really, teaching the principles good stage management is teaching the principles of strong leadership. A lot of what I have to say about managing a production may be very familiar to you in your work as both a teacher and a director. But I think reviewing the basics is worthwhile, especially given that these include tasks you're perhaps accustomed to doing yourself—in the case, managing a production—but are now going to delegate to students.

What it takes

Having directed many educational productions, and employed numerous student stage managers with great success, I've often been asked, "How can you determine whether a potential stage manager is suited to the job or not?" To answer that question, you have to first consider the base amount of experience and skill required for the job. Most importantly, a potential stage manager needs to have some knowledge of the director's and designer's goals for the production. He should also have some backstage experience as well (say, on a running crew).

Not many high school students will be experts in backstage procedures. However, your goal in teaching them to be stage managers (or SMs, as they are frequently called) includes many of the following:

- Schedule, organize, and run auditions.
- Organize and run rehearsals.
- Assemble and supervise a technical crew.
- Supervise actors' schedules and to meet their needs.
- Create and be responsible for a full production notebook (known as a prompt book), containing all essential information about a show.
- Write and maintain all blocking notes.
- Secure and place rehearsal set pieces and props, as well as mark rehearsal spaces with tape when necessary.
- Plan and run technical rehearsals.
- Call the show's cues.
- Plan and run each performance.

An aspiring SM ought to have some personal qualities as well. Those include:

- Practical reasoning ability.
- Good organizational skills (especially in regard to note-taking and paperwork).
- Good communication and listening skills.
- A knack for staying cool under pressure.
- A willingness to take charge with ease and an understanding of when to delegate (and when not to).

Can a student without heavy tech credits, but who is highly enthusiastic,

be a good stage manager? Yes, as long as she's committed to learning absolutely everything it takes to do the job well. A case in point: due to a conflict with school break, I was once forced to cast a student show without a stage manager—there simply wasn't anyone around who was qualified for the job. A freshman auditioned for me who didn't have a great deal of enthusiasm about acting, but was very interested in how things worked backstage. He expressed this to me as we chatted before his reading. He'd worked on the set crew for a couple of community theatre productions, and had taken the initiative to read several books on technical topics on his own. As this was a small three-actor, character-driven piece, I decided to take a chance and offered him the open SM position. He was thrilled and excited; he threw himself into the process. Throughout our rehearsal period, he asked all the right questions and, when he made a mistake out of inexperience, made it his business to learn what he should have done and doubled back to do it. He turned out to be a joy to work with.

The most effective way to train a novice SM, plus ensure that the show is managed properly, is by shadowing him appropriately. Please note that shadowing is not hovering—breathing down your student SM's neck every time she picks up her pencil to make a blocking note is not the way to inspire confidence. Before you discuss each task you assign to this individual, review it on your own, step-by-step—if it helps, write it down. Then outline the task to your student SM, explaining how it should be completed and what tools she will need to do so. Then let her give it a try, and check in after a while to see how things are going. This approach affords the SM a sense of independence as she tackles a task her own way, plus demonstrates that you trust her judgment and talent.

If you find you've got several less-than-experienced but eager potential SMs, training the whole lot of them at once can be a great idea. Here's how to proceed: hold a group meeting with all of these candidates, and explain that you will give them all an equal chance to learn stage management basics with you for a week. At the end of that time,

one of them will be assigned the SM position, and each of the others will be assigned the job of assistant stage manager (or ASM). For the student shows that follow, everyone will rotate positions, so that each student gets a chance to SM eventually.

This is a very fair system. First of all, chances are good that one student will emerge during that initial week as the strongest natural candidate for the position, and therefore will clearly earn the first SM spot. Students who perhaps haven't quite grasped the organizational or technical basics of the job, can still be highly involved in the process as ASMs. What's more, they will pick up the experience they need to eventually take on the SM job at their own pace. Also, any student who learns that stage management simply isn't for him can let you know that without a lot of pressure, and can move on to something else.

Finally, the ASM is not just a training position in a school production. While the assistant can learn a great deal by simply observing the work done by the SM, this is also a job with specific tasks that are as important as any other in the production process.

An ASM's duties can include:

- Aiding the SM in assigned tasks relating to auditions or rehearsals—like setting up chairs and set pieces, making sign-in sheets or signs, and keeping track of prop inventory.
- Keeping rehearsal and stage spaces clean.
- Being competent at operating lighting, sound, or set equipment (in case they have to step in for an absent member of the running crew).
- Performing tasks assigned by the SM during all tech rehearsals and the show run.

The process of guiding your student SMs through a show no doubt seems like a lot to bite into, especially if you're also directing the show and managing your students in a slew of class and individual projects. The best way to approach things is by dividing the job into four parts and walking your students through it in sequence. The four parts are show preparation, rehearsals, tech, and the show. What follows is a detailed outline of each step.

Show preparation

Primarily, this section deals with exactly what it says—the mechanics of setting up to do the show. Here's the steps:

1. Meet with the director. A student SM must understand the director's vision for the show, both conceptually and technically, as best they can. To do that, he ought to meet with the director (which could, of course, be you) as early in the process as possible and take detailed notes on the director's overall vision, plans, and goals. The SM should ask every single question he has and be certain he understands the details of the director's perspective before proceeding. Just bear mind, it's not realistic to expect a novice student stage manager to grasp every nuance of dramaturgy in a production, especially if it's a fairly sophisticated play. Precise scheduling

should be settled upon for auditions, rehearsals, and performances. If you are in fact the director, you can turn the meeting into an exercise, making sure he's asking all the right questions in order to get the information he needs. If you're not the director, you can also set up a role-playing session before the student actually meets with the director, and give constructive criticism about how he might ask clearer or more pointed questions.

2. Meet with the designers. The SM must also meet with each designer to work out complete technical details in terms of lighting, sound, and costumes. This can be an ongoing process (designers, as we all know, almost never set their plots in complete stone, preferring to adjust and tweak as the rehearsal process goes along), but it's imperative that your students have a grasp of their

overall concepts. Your students should emerge from each design meeting knowing when costume fittings, tech runs, and special dance or music rehearsals are to be scheduled; how many members of set and costume crews will be needed; what rehearsal set pieces and props must be procured; and the agreed-upon dates for tech and dress rehearsals.

3. Assemble the tools of the trade. An SM is only as good as the tools she uses to do the job. Here are the fundamental items your students should gather:

- A stopwatch to time rehearsal runs.
- A batch of pencils with attached erasers.
- Several rolls of masking tape.
- A roll of glow-tape.
- A ring of keys to unlock prop closets, dressing rooms, and rehearsal rooms as needed

The promptbook

The promptbook is the SM's most valuable tool. It should be organized by sectioned dividers, and each section should be clearly labeled in permanent ink. Each section should be organized as follows:

Scheduling. This section should contain the production's overall schedule, from auditions to show dates, blocked out on a calendar. Daily production schedule sheets come next; these should include notes on what will be done during each rehearsal.

For example:

Monday, February 6: rehearsal, 6:00 p.m. Block Scene One, Two, Three Following the daily productions sheets should be the personnel schedule, a blank calendar sheet filled in with any times or dates that specific cast members will be unavailable. Schedule sheets covering costume fittings, set design deadlines, and relevant related material may also be included at the end of this section.

Personnel. Contact sheets for cast and crew, listing everyone's phone numbers, lead off this section. Costume info (such as sizes) should be noted on a separate sheet. Audition fact sheets for actors cast should also be included in this section, as should their bios for inclusion in the show's program.

Design/tech. Costume lists/plots, lighting plots, sound design details, set info, prop lists, and any other essential piece of tech info are to be filed here.

Auditions. A copy of the "sides" (audition material the actors will read) should be here, as well as a list of auditioners' names and time slots, plus a character breakdown, that features a short but descriptive paragraph on each of the play's characters.

Book. A full copy of the show's script should be included here. Any musical score that's included lives here as well. This copy of the book will be marked with blocking in pencil.

Rehearsals. This section encompasses diagrams in regard to how the rehearsal space should be set up, plus rehearsal prop notes. Daily rehearsal note sheets detailing what was accomplished during each rehearsal can be compiled as the rehearsal period progresses.

Run. A second copy of the script, including set blocking notes, to be used for noting tech cues, is important enough to warrant its own section. Also included here: tech notes; program copy; ASM assignment sheets; pre-show checklists; show run checklists; and post-show/strike checklists.

Miscellaneous. It's useful to have someplace to file whatever miscellaneous notes, messages, and details that don't seem to belong in any other section.

Make sure your student SM has included copious amounts of blank paper to each section of the prompt book, so she can make notes as often as she likes. A pocket in the front of the binder can hold pens, pencils and measuring tape. Also, please bear mind that your student manager should use this sample book set-up as a guideline only—the bottom line is she should organize their prompt books in whatever manner feels most comfortable to them. One final tip: encourage your SM to make two *exact* copies of the same book, in case one should get lost. It might seem to make for a little extra work, but it's well worth it if the original prompt book turns up missing.

—L.M.

- Scissors.
- A basic first-aid kit (band-aids, etc.).

4. Create a prompt book and learn how to use it and maintain it.

Every SM needs a complete prompt book. It's customarily a binder stuffed to bursting with every tidbit of information pertaining to a show. (See the sidebar on page xx for promptbook details.)

5. Get a grasp of the audition process. An SM's role at auditions is, essentially, to keep the proceedings running in efficiently. When teaching the basics, explain that an SM's first audition duty is set-up; she should post audition sign-up sheets (with designated time slots), then photocopy a sufficient number of sides in advance. Every director run auditions different, but on the day of auditions, an SM's duties may include:

- Providing the director with a list of those who will be auditioning, and when.
- Setting up the audition room as the director specifies, and a comfortable waiting area, with chairs, outside the audition room.
- Checking in auditioners as they arrive, and providing them with audition materials.
- Escorting each auditioner into the room and introducing him/her to the director.

- Taking careful notes regarding the director's opinions of each auditioner.

If the director elects to hold callbacks, the SM posts a list of auditioners included. When the final cast list is set, this too should be compiled and posted by the SM.

Rehearsals

Once the show is cast, the SM should consult the director one final time about any adjustments that should be made to the rehearsal schedule. After it's been set, the SM posts notice of the date and time of the show's first rehearsal—the read-through. Reading the script aloud as a group for the first time ought to be a relaxed and fun experience. The SM can ensure this step in the production process goes well by making sure the rehearsal space is well-organized, with enough chairs and space for everyone involved in the read-through.

Another important function the SM performs at the read-through is personnel organization. He should hand out sheets to each cast member, asking them to write down their contact info, clothing, and shoe sizes for costumes (if applicable), and any schedule conflicts they may have during the rehearsal period. This information can then be used to make company con-

tact sheets and update schedules if necessary.

When it comes time to start full rehearsals, the SM needs to set up an atmosphere that's a little more serious. One of the critical facets of his job is to enforce punctuality; one cast member arriving late to rehearsal can disrupt that whole night's schedule. The SM is who actors call if they are running late.

In general, it's very important for an SM to keep friendly, open lines of communication fluid with each and every member of the cast. The cast members should feel they can ask any question or present any problem they are having to the SM, and have it addressed promptly and respectfully (see the sidebar on page xx addressing the issue of a student SM's authority).

Blocking rehearsals are most directors' preferred first order of business. An SM's job is to mark (with masking tape) areas on the rehearsal space floor where set pieces will actually be during performance. To do this, the SM needs to measure and block out the room space as it corresponds to the measurements of the stage where the play will be performed (if rehearsals are in a separate space; if not, then simply marking set piece space will do). The SM should measure each set piece (or get measurements from the designer)

How much authority should the student stage manager have?

The question of how much authority a student SM has in regard to his peers is something you need to address. In a professional or community theatre setting, of course, the SM's word is law; he is expected to exact strong disciplinary leadership if needed to keep a production on track. Obviously, a student SM or ASM getting tough on his classmates in the same way is ill-advised and inappropriate. How, then, do you encourage your student SMs to run a tight ship without awkwardly alienating or power-tripping their peers?

The best way is through stressing the concept of mutual respect and teamwork. Let your entire cast and crew know that everyone contributes equally to the production's ultimate success—no matter how prominent a job (such as the stage SM) or brief the role (the walk-on extra). As supervising instructor (and likely director), it's important that *you* enforce discipline, not delegate that task

to the SM. At your first group meeting, explain to the company that the SM will be monitoring punctuality and making certain cast and crew do certain important tasks, but that you are ultimately in charge. The SM can and should bring personnel problems to your attention, but not try and solve them independently. If this policy is clearly stated and understood by all students participating in the production, there should be no confusion or resentment on the part of the cast and crew toward your SM; likewise, the SM won't be tempted to overstep her bounds.

If you do see signs that your SM or assistant SM is throwing their weight around inappropriately (speaking disrespectfully to a cast or crew member, for instance), address the problem immediately with both the SM and company member present. Clearly letting your SM know she is out of line once will usually clarify the correct boundaries and behavior.

—L.M.

in order to get precise dimensions; this will make cast members comfortable moving around from the outset of blocking. (If the actual set pieces can be used from the beginning, terrific.)

As the director begins blocking the actors' movements, the SM must note the blocking in her script. To teach your student SM how to write blocking notes, start by familiarizing them with the shorthand glossary commonly used to write notes. These might seem obvious, but don't assume your student already knows them.

For the sake of review, here's the basics:

SR—stage right
SL—stage left
USR—upstage right
USL—upstage left
DSR—downstage right
DSL—downstage left
C—centerstage
X—cross
EN—entrance
EX—exit

While this shorthand language is very basic (a professional SM's blocking notes can get much more complicated), it's easy to learn and very functional, which is key when teaching your students. Blocking movements using these designations should be made along the left hand margin of each script page, next to the lines the movement occurs in tandem with.

For instance:

ACT I, SCENE I
*A Transylvanian castle,
midnight. The wind
wails as the moonlight
slowly illuminates*
V EN USR *VAMPIRE, stalking out
of the darkness.*

The notation "V" stands for the character name "Vampire." Lines or arrows can be drawn to indicate specific points in the line as the blocking corresponds to them. Again, keeping notes as simple as possible will not only make the process easier for your students to learn, but will make referring to the notes during future rehearsals quick and clear. Always instruct your SMs to make their blocking notes in pencil, so they can be

changed easily without making a confusing mess out of script pages.

It's also an SM's job to "run" the rehearsal for a director. This means not only calling rehearsals to order and announcing breaks, but staying "on book" for the entire rehearsal. To be on book is to follow along with the script so the director can refer to any particular point he likes without keeping a script in hand, or in order to call out a missed line if any actor makes a mistake. Basically, an SM needs to be everyone else's eyes and ears during the rehearsal process, while watching and listening intently himself. During and following every rehearsal, a good SM takes notes to record problems, questions, or simply keep abreast of events as they happen.

Tech

Once the show has been fully rehearsed, it's time to guide your student SM through the tech elements of the production. Here's the steps, in sequence, she should follow:

1. Check in with the director, design team, cast, and crew. Before technical rehearsals officially start, the SM should touch base with all members of the production team and make sure every element is ready to roll. If a set piece isn't finished or a costume needs to be replaced, for example, she should get the solution to that problem in the pipeline as quickly as possible.

2. Do a "dry" and "wet" tech run through. Make certain your students understand the difference between "dry" and "wet" tech. For the sake of review: Dry tech is a run through of all technical cues (lights, sound, and set changes) without actors present. Wet tech incorporates the actors into the show with all technical cues operating. Dry tech always happens first.

3. Write and call cues. The process of writing and calling cues is key to the success of how a show is run. Explain to your student SM that he needs to be able to communicate with *all* crew members running equipment, whether it's via a headset or—less likely—intercom system when doing the cues. In my experience, for large or mainstage shows, it's useful to have one ASM stationed stage right, another stage left,

and perhaps one more backstage. The SM himself should, of course, sit in a hidden but centrally located spot (usually an overhead light booth) where he can see every last square inch of stage action.

Use an ASM to note tech cues in the right-hand margin of a script. Although in the promptbook sidebar I stated it was smart to keep two *separate* scripts, one for rehearsal blocking and one for show run, it's best for the SM to copy blocking notes from the rehearsal script onto the left hand margin of this show run script before tech begins, so that everything is in one place. The easiest way to write (and call cues) is by using the "warn—standby—go" system, which works like this:

1. About seven lines before a lighting cue, note, "warn cue 35."
2. About three lines before the lighting cue, note "standby, cue 35."
3. In the end of the line prior to the cue, note, "go, cue 35." Or, in simple techie shorthand:

LX—electrics/lighting cues
S—sound cues
Spot—spotlight
Doors—set piece doors opening or closing (any set piece effect can be noted in this way).

Here's a sample of a written cue sequence, putting everything together:

VAMPIRE
This is my castle! **LX35: warn**

WOLFMAN
No! It's my castle!

VAMPIRE
Mine!

WOLFMAN
Mine!

VAMPIRE
Get Lost! **LX35: standby**

WOLFMAN
Scram!

VAMPIRE
Vamoose!

*A blinding flash of lightning slashes
through the window.* **LX35: go**

In calling each cue, I think it's a good practice to use the first name of the crew member who will be carrying out the cue, as a number of light and sound cues could be ready to go at or near the same time.

For dry tech, you can rehearse "cue-to-cue"—skipping all of the dialogue unrelated to tech. When it comes time to insert actors, during wet tech, some directors like to run through the entire show (as they will again at dress rehearsal). If your SM can convince (politely) the director that cue-to-cue will be easier and less time-consuming, the actors can simply say the lines immediately prior to a cue so that it can be rehearsed.

4. Assume there will be tech problems. Delays and snafus during tech are inevitable. Still, although an SM can't prevent or predict every difficulty, a few easy points of planning can resolve issues more quickly. First off, stationing an ASM at key points backstage can allow an SM to know about a problem almost instantly, as the assistant can communicate what's happening via headset as soon as he becomes aware of it. Next, an SM's headset allows her to check in constantly with any crew members who appear to be having problems executing their cues (or who may simply be goofing off). One thing to remember: counsel your SM about who is delegated to do what. Obviously, the most reliable crew members ought to be responsible for the most complicated tech duties.

No matter what kind of dilemma a student SM faces, encourage her to use her problem-solving instincts to put out the fire. A good SM always has faith in her judgment, and every bit of experience racked up, no matter how small initially, helps reinforce a sense of capability. Assure your students they can master tech and they will.

The show

On opening night, it's time for your SM to put every bit of organization and prep into practice. Before show time remind him of the importance of his prompt book, adding that he should review all of the pre-show checklists inside it, making sure set pieces, lighting,

sound, actors, and crew are in place and ready to go.

An ASM should have actors initial a sign-in sheet as they arrive so everyone's kept track of (in fact, this practice should start during wet tech). At a half hour before show time, the SM should call, "half hour" to the cast. Also, he should let them know when it's fifteen minutes and ten minutes to showtime, then call "places" at five minutes.

During the actual show run, an SM needs to remember to keep a cool head. If a mistake occurs, it's best to stay calm, deal with things as best you can, and then just move on. Following the show, your student SM should go over the post-show to-do checklist, and then meet with you—assuming you're the director—to review how things went.

Here's some questions you can recommend a student SM ask himself in order to help him evaluate his own performance:

- What do you think you did best in terms of running the show?
- What do you feel the least secure about in terms of your duties?
- How well do you think you did communicating what you wanted to your crew?
- How would you change the way you dealt with the crew, or the cast, next performance?
- What skill do you feel you need to run through on your own before the show tomorrow, and why?

Frequently checking over a student's prompt book for solid note-taking and cue-writing can do a lot to boost her confidence before opening night. Make it a point to be available to answer questions during each step of production process. Most importantly, celebrate your student SM's accomplishments with them. Being an SM or ASM requires dedication, hard work, and courage—qualities that always deserve a huge round of applause. Always point out that the work they do is just as important as that of any actor or technician. And make sure that praise is shared with the entire company. In many ways, a SM has a thankless job, so everybody needs to know and appreciate the value of this individual.

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