

# HOLD THAT THOUGHT

## The role of the Stage Manager

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It is often a thought over which I ponder- why would anyone want to work backstage on a Theatre show when the performers get all the attention and praise?

Personally speaking, you can get as much satisfaction from being part of something very special without necessarily being the 'star', if you are prepared to work as part of a team, and share the praise, and criticism which may well come your way.

Looking at an area specifically, in this case, Stage Management, the roles that are covered are varied. Essentially you have the leader, the Stage Manager, who is as the job title suggests the manager and will co-ordinate the team. How far their actual remit will stretch will depend on the size of the staff of each organisation. The deputy Stage manager will usually be the most involved in the rehearsal process and cueing (also known as running) the performance. The Assistant Stage Manager will find the props for the show, and help wherever needed. They will work on-stage during the performance.

Many Stage Managers like to be the one who 'runs' the show, as this role involves one the most with the performance as a whole. This is because you are in the rehearsal room and although not directly collaborating with the creative process, you are watching it unfold and documenting it.

The work of Stage Manager, in particular the DSM can be summed up by the Stage Management Association in their publication *Stage management- a career guide* where it states 'The welfare of the actors is of paramount importance. Making sure that they and the director have the optimum conditions with the best atmosphere and least distractions in which to work is the ultimate goal'

I like this quote as it is very clear about where the stage manager is aiming. On a practical level, having a rehearsal space that is big enough, warm enough and quiet enough may seem obvious, but the smallest thing can distract an actor, and be enough for them to lose their train of thought. The rehearsal room is a private place, a place of creation and experimentation and a place where the performer feels very exposed. There are no special effects, costumes or pieces of scenery to hide behind here. This is why the DSM needs to ensure that the conditions are just right to enable the creative processes to happen.

Simple things like having refreshments always available make a big difference. It is not only the actors who enjoy a cup of tea- after a long day on the book you may well want one yourself. Other important factors include having an accurate mark out (a plan of the set taped to the floor) and rehearsal props and items of costume. People often joke that actors cannot walk and talk, and certainly cannot talk whilst using props.

In this scenario I would ask someone to read a short poem whilst pouring a cup of tea, adding milk, sugar and stirring it and handing it to another person. It is not as easy as it looks. That is why you need all items in rehearsal, so the actor can learn when to do the actions as they learn their lines.

There is something quite magical, and indeed a great privilege to view a production from the read through, through the rehearsal process to the technical, first night and the run of the show. How the dynamic changes, how characters develop and how ideas come and go.

Whilst you are being a silent part of this (except prompting and filling in for sound effects) you are busy recording the process in the prompt script (also known as the 'book') and preparing the rest of the team for the next stage, when you move into the performance space.

I recall a director I was about to work with asking me not to make any artistic suggestions during rehearsal, but to make any comments after when the actors had left the room. I would say that this is a very sensible way to run things, after all the director is in overall charge. Of course some directors would not appreciate any artistic suggestions, so one must gauge the person, and keep quiet if necessary.

The move into the performance space for the DSM is when they at last get to be creative. This, on the face of it may seem difficult as you are told where all the cues are to go by the various members of the creative team. However the skill is to be able to see the overall effect they are trying to create, and call the cues to make this happen. This will not happen straight away, but by the second Dress you should be starting to do this. Always admit your cueing mistakes, so the creatives know that you will be able to achieve their visions.

I find that as you get into the run, then you automatically start to tweak. You must be very careful to not overdo this, as you must remember that you are aiming to maintain the director's overall vision. The ability to do this comes with practice and experience.

There is such a great feeling when you cue a difficult sequence correctly, and you really do share in the applause at the end of the performance. You do equally share the pain of a flop, after all you will have worked as hard as the actors, however, you will not be associated with the failure as the performers and director will be.

Of course you can work hard, and create the best conditions and the show can still be awful. As a professional you need to be able to distance yourself from this. It is of course disappointing, but not every show will be a huge hit.

Working as a stage manager means you can often secure more permanent employment and not have to be travelling all the time. I have never come across a 'Casting couch' scenario; usually you get jobs by the strength of your CV and of course, word of mouth. Having taken a break from Stage Management, I realise how addictive the Theatre can be, and I hope to one day be able to experience the thrill of running a show once again.

#### Works Cited:

Various SMA Members/ABTT/Equity- *Stage Management- A Career Guide* (2005) London

Available as a download from the website  
[www.stagemanagementassociation.co.uk](http://www.stagemanagementassociation.co.uk)