

University of Wisconsin

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Production Assistant Guide

T & D 379

Tenets of a good Stage Manager

The following is only one of several possible definitions of a good stage manager: (these tenets are borrowed from Lawrence Stern's book *Stage Management*)

1. *Good stage managers assume responsibility.* You are the one that must make things run smoothly and efficiently. You must be proactive. This is not a passive/aggressive job.
2. *Good stage managers keep their cool.* You must maintain control of both yourself and the situation.
3. *Good stage managers keep their mouths shut and their eyes and ears open.*
4. *Good stage managers think ahead.* "Don't just sit there, anticipate!"
5. *Good stage managers are considerate.*
6. *Good stage managers keep their sense of humor.*
7. *Good stage managers are organized and efficient.*
8. *Good stage managers are punctual and dependable.* "If you are not there on time or early, or cannot be depended on, you simply cannot be a stage manager."

This manual is not intended to teach you how to stage manage, but rather to give you a guide as to what works best for assisting the stage managers at University Theatre.

JOB DESCRIPTION

DUTIES:

Assisting the Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Manager in the upkeep of day to day needs of the production, including, but not limited to, pre-production work (prep week), daily rehearsals, transition into the theatre, tech week, and the run of the performance. All this will occur under the direct supervision of the Stage Manager of the given show and the Production Manager. Ultimate responsibility for the rehearsing, running, and maintaining rests with the Stage Manager of the show.

This is a learning process and should be fun and educational.

- **During the prep week:** have a working knowledge of the script and assist the SM and ASM in prepping the rehearsal hall and producing paper work for the show.
- **During the rehearsal phase:** keep track of props, set up props and maintain paper work relevant to the upkeep of the show. The PA might also be asked to distribute paper work to the required parties. You will need to keep a production book (a Xerox copy of the script). The student must bear the cost of the copy.
- **During the tech phase:** Assist in running the deck including giving appropriate paper work to the run crew so that the crew may have a working knowledge of how to set and run the show.
- **During the run of a show:** work with the deck crew in running and maintaining the backstage aspects of the show.

The Production Assistant will be expected to perform other duties as assigned by the Stage Manager and Production Manager.

Prep Week

One-week prior to rehearsal starting, Stage Managers go through a week of preparing the show for rehearsals. This entails taping out the floor, preparing paperwork and several discussions with key staff people. Below is an example of University Theatre's prep week to do list.

Paper Work:

- Obtain groundplan
- Plot Groundplan
- Rehearsal Calendar
- Tech Calendar
- Performance Calendar
- Local contact Sheet
- Scene breakdown
- Obtain/create proplist
- Costume plot
- Costume sketches
- Scene shift plot
- Sign in sheets
- Phone cards
- Welcome letter
- First day schedule
- Valuable bags & Labels
- Coffee
- Xerox script
- Reduce G.P.
- Tab scenes

Distribution:

- Calendars & contact sheet FULL STAFF

Actor Packets:

- Welcome letter
- Calendars (reh, tech, perf)
- Contact sheet
- Phone cards

Dir of UT/Bus mgr/Prod. mgr:

- Post perf discussions
- Arrange talk to company date
- Returned contracts
- Actor conflicts
- Designer & Staff R/T dates and times
- Publicity shots
- TV/Still shots
- Bios and headshot needs
- Special Performances

Costumes:

- Knee pads
- Measurement needs
- Rehearsal clothes (skirts, hats, coats)

Director questions:

- Rehearsal times
- Lunch preference
- How to handle breaks (5s or 10s)
- First day schedule

- Pub Calls
- Designer & Staff R/T
- Actor conflict list

Rehearsal Hall

- Pull old tape
- Clean hall
- Set up call board (calendars, contact sheet)
- Set up coffee/tea
- Tape floor
- Pull rehearsal props
- Pull rehearsal furniture
- Establish Prop Viewing date
- Establish Prop tech wk check in point
- Check office supplies
- Tissues
- Bell box
- Tape player
- Pencils
- Spike tape
- Paper towels
- First aid kit

Musicals

- Tape dance numbers
- Number of rehearsal spaces
- Music distribution (to company)
- Music stands
- Slip no more for floors
- Towels
- Phillips screwdriver (taps)
- Set up a place for dance bags etc
- Rehearsal pianists
- Number of pianos needed
- Tune pianos
- ADD choreographer and musical dir. To dist list
- Check to see if there is an assistant choreographer, director, musical director, composer.
- When does orchestra join tech
- Is there a sitz probe
- Dance Captain



Rehearsals

During the rehearsal process you will be responsible for the following items:

- Keeping the rehearsal hall clean.
- The set-up of props (setting props at the top of the day for the scene that will be worked on first).
- Keeping track of props.
- Keeping track of costumes.
- Distribute daily notes and rehearsal schedules (if needed).
- Keeping “on-book” and the taking of line notes. Usually you will only be on book until the Stage Manager has finished taking blocking notation. (this is something that is at the discretion of the stage manager).
- You may be asked to take some blocking. This would be an exercise for you in the development of your stage managing abilities.
- **MOVE.** Always be alert as to what is happening in rehearsal. If you see that we are going to be starting a scene again from a certain spot, get out of your chair as quickly as possible and reset the scene. If an actor or director sets props, we have not done our job. **Do not run, but do move with a purpose.**
- Be thorough in your paper work. Keep it up to date and neat. Do it as if someone else would have to come in and take over for you.
- Understand the lines of communication. On occasion your stage manager may have to leave rehearsal, you may have to run the rehearsal for a moment. If you are asked a question, do not be afraid to say you do not know the answer if you do not. Just state that you will find out the information as soon as possible. Always keep your stage manager informed of information that you have encountered. Remember that the Stage Management team must present a united front, so sharing of information is vital.
- When it comes time for the staff run through, make sure that you have called and informed the run crew (costumes, deck hand, and any additional crew) of the time.
- Always write things down. You may trust that you will not forget an item, but trust that you will. Always back yourself up by writing information down.
- Make sure the actors and director are happy. Do little things for them. The little things will add up to big favors and trust from the actors when you will need it most.
- **ASK QUESTIONS.** There are no dumb questions, only dumb answers. So do not be afraid to ask about things you do not understand.

Transition into the Theatre

The move into the theatre can be quite the adrenaline rush. Everything happens so fast and at times it will feel as if you do not have time to get everything done. Trust that everything will get done. Advance planning can make the move into the theatre a smooth process. Below are some tips on moving into the theatre:

- Make sure your paperwork is in order for techs. Generally you should have prop presets, prop moves, and shift sheets done prior to the staff run thru so you can give these items to the run crew. (Also have a contact sheet and a performance calendar ready for the crew as well.)
- Make sure that there is a time set-up for props and Stage Management to pick up props and costumes and move them to the stage. Usually when you move to the stage for the *actors onstage* session on Thursday night stage management will put the bits and pieces you have used in rehearsal into the dressing rooms. These items are placed here so the actors will have access to them during the staging rehearsal. The actors will move into their dressing rooms on the first 10/12 (generally Saturday).
- Make sure that each of the actors has a valuable bag. The valuables lock up varies from theatre to theatre. See your stage manager to see where valuables will be safely stored. Valuables should be picked up when the stage manager makes the 15-minute call. Don't forget to give the actors back their valuables at the end of rehearsal (this may sound dumb but many an SM has forgotten to do this.)

Here is an extended list of things that I tell the Stage Manager prior to tech:

SM Pre-Tech Checklist

- Make arrangements with Costumes and Props for transfer of rehearsal items to the stage.
- Expectations Meetings: (what will and will not be at tech along with ETAs)
 - Sound
 - Sets
 - Props
 - Costumes
- Discuss with electrics tech table needs
 - Placement
 - Monitor (video)
 - Headset
 - Light
- Develop Song order list for posting backstage
- Confirm Tech week schedule with Production Manager
- Confirm Tech week schedule with Cast & Crew
- ASM to pre-cut glow tape.
- Contact crew for staff run thru
- Prep paperwork for crew:
 - Shift charts
 - Prop preset lists
 - Contact sheet
 - Performance Calendar
- Create Front of House letter.
- Check with costumes about dressing room assignments
- Create dressing room door signs

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- Prep valuables bags.
- Locate brown craft paper for prop tables. Plot these tables out prior to actors arriving. Yes, they will change.
- Prep hall for Sitz Probe
- Create sign in sheets for cast and crew (be sure to include techs)
- Create spike matrix (measure spike marks from hall for transfer to stage. I cannot stress how important this is!)
- Prep space prior to actor arrival
 - Water
 - Spike marks
 - Props set in place
 - Glow tape in obvious spots
 - Check for safety hazards
 - Check for costume snag points
- Create list of things to accomplish at:
 - Spacing rehearsal
 - Each tech
 - Discuss these items and talk about expectations.
- You will have sensory overload when you go into the space. Several people will be talking to you at the same time. You must remain calm, focused & pleasant.
- You will need to be aggressive/assertive during tech. The key to this is using your voice. No one will pay attention to you if you cannot be heard.
- The second part of this is to be nice. 'Please' & 'thank you' are key; don't use these and you will be greeted with the hairy eyeball by your cast and crew.
- You MUST be pro-active. For every hour you spend planning going into tech will save 5 hours in tech. Trust me on this one. Do as much prep work as you can prior to going into the space.
- ASM's: stay close to the stage. Don't wander off and become a social butterfly. While keeping your cast and crew happy, it is imperative that you are aware of what is happening onstage. During spacing rehearsals, never be more than 10 feet away from the action. Have spike and glo tape on hand. When the SM calls "hold" or "stop please" (notice the word please in there?) make sure you appear onstage so if any instructions are to be given, you are ready. It also shows that you are paying attention.
- Make sure the floor is swept and mopped prior to starting tech.
- Break in the action: Prior to starting up again, make sure that all parties are ready to go. That means actors, crew, designers, musical director, choreographer and most importantly, the director.
- Give a clear "stop please" if you need to stop the action. "When you're ready" when you are ready to start the action up again.
- Keep everyone in the room aware of what is happening. If the lighting designer needs to stop the action, find out why and how long and then inform your cast as well as the house. Make sure the director knows.
- Remember, everyone is looking to you to drive this ship. Drive it kindly and efficiently.
- Once tech is complete (prior to opening) cut your spike marks down to a subtle yet seeable size.
- After that is complete, seal tape with packing tape. Be just as subtle with this tape as well. This will prevent your spike marks and glo marks from coming up and/or getting unraveled and dirty (gross).
- Glo tape rule. Be smart with the size of the piece of tape you put down. Bigger is not better.
- Make sure the space is ready for costumes to come in.
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Techs

The techs can be a frustrating time. At the same time they can be great fun. The key thing to remember during tech is keep your eyes and ears open and your legs moving. Here are some other things to remember:

- Don't be late. Don't ever be late.
- Don't forget to sweep and mop the stage. Your stage manager will assign this duty.
- ALWAYS keep a pencil and paper handy during tech. Information is fast and furious and we have little time to try and recall any items that was discussed before.
- Make sure that you have Kleenex, water, and cups available both stage right and stage left.
- Please keep the prop room clean, efficient, and organized. Occasionally the property master has to retrieve props from the prop room and it helps if the room is neat.
- THURSDAY NIGHT: the things you want to make sure are there for the Thursday night rehearsal are props in the places they should go, therefore making sure that the prop tables are properly covered is an important thing.
- SATURDAY & SUNDAY (10/12): these are long days, but you must stay alert. A lot of information is gone over (and over) these few days. There may be the temptation to hang out and talk, resist this temptation. Please stay either stage left or stage right in earshot of the stage. If there is a break in the action onstage, please come onstage to see if the actors need anything or if there is any information you need to receive.
- At the end of each tech day (and previews) we do a notes session with the director and staff in the house. No notes are taken by stage management (other than items that apply to us).
- The crew will ask you when their next day calls are. Generally it should be 1 hour prior to the actor call. This will depend on the size of the show.
- JOB COM: this is your link with your SM. If they call you and you happen to be busy with something else, pause what it is you are doing or whom you are talking with and respond to your SM. Otherwise they are likely to make you crazy by calling you nine thousand times until you answer. Make sure you have it on and turned on ½ hour prior to the actors call.
- Keep your paperwork current.
- Take care of the actors!

The Run of the show

You have finally seen many weeks of hard work come together into a show. Take time to congratulate yourself, take a deep breath, and move into the next phase of the process. Running the show may seem easy, but this is when your tact and resolve come into play. You are the eyes and ears for the SM who is in the booth and cannot see or hear what is going on backstage. You must become a diplomat. There are situations that you will be able to handle by yourself (of course informing your SM what has happened) and then there will be times that you will need to bring in the big gun, your SM, or the bigger gun, the Production Manager, to handle the situation. These are some of the things to be aware of when running a show:

- Make sure that you inform the SM of just about everything. For example, if a prop breaks and you call the prop master to fix it, make sure the SM knows so they can put it into the show report.
- Maintain running areas (backstage, onstage, prop tables, props storage and any extra storage areas used).
- Be present. Make sure the actors know you are around.
- Make sure you have the show set by ½ hour. Also make sure all of your check and double checks are done by this time as well.
- Check the sign in sheet at ½ hour and let the SM know that everyone is in or let them know who is not present.
- When the show gets reviewed, sometimes a copy of the review makes its way backstage. **Please make sure that the common areas remain free of reviews.** Some actors become highly agitated when they see a review.
- Have a good time.

Strike (post show duties)

You may think that once the actors take their final bow that you are done with the show. Ah, not so fast. There are a few duties that one must tend to before you are onto your next show. They are as follows:

- Clean coffee supplies and take coffee mugs back to the stage management annex.
- Clear prop tables and prop storage of brown paper used during the show.
- Return valuable bags to the SM office.
- Take down show paper work: dressing room signs, running lists, sign-in sheets, etc.

Emergency procedures

- TBD

People you should know

Here is a list of people you should know and what they do:

- David Stewart Production Manager
- Norma Saldivar Director of Theatre
- Barry Robinson Business Manager
- Dennis Dorn Technical Director
- Jim Greco Costume Studio Supervisor
- Ethan Aberg Lighting and Sound Studio Supervisor
- Chuck Ethan Scenic Studio Supervisor
- Sue Ragusa Props TA
- Linda Essig Chair of Department
- Glo Theisen Box Office Manager