

*Stage Management: The Education Gap and Backstage Reality*

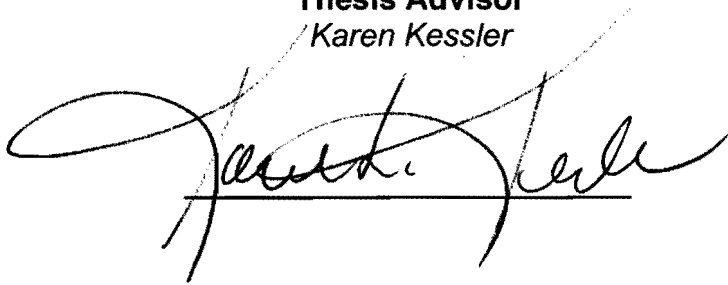
**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

**by**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Kessler', is written over a solid horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop on the left side.

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## Abstract

Stage management is a growing major in universities across the nation. Despite being an increasingly popular focus for undergraduate students in various theatre programs, there is a large gap that exists between the educational settings in undergraduate programs and the professional theatre realm. The largest issue that stands between the stage manager student and the professional realm is the list of questions: what is a stage manager? What does a stage manager do? Why is a stage manager a crucial role for theatrical productions? Are stage management skills actually useful in everyday situations? Once these important questions are answered for stage management students, and theatre practitioners, the disconnect that exists between the educational systems and the professional world can be bridged and fixed by educational programs across the board.

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## Author's Statement

When deciding upon a topic for my thesis, I wanted to delve into something that few people understood, something that is a large part of my life. My major has helped shape who I am over the past four years, but few people honestly understand what a stage manager is and why this major is so important for the theatre world. While researching for this paper, I have realized how far stage management has advanced over the past five or six years in the higher educational setting. About five years ago, few universities had a stage management track in their theatre programs. Now, it is common for larger universities to allow students to focus their theatrical studies on the difficult subject to teach. Hopefully, this work will uncover some of the basic information about this elusive major and career choice while informing the reader about the issues that still remain for stage management students in undergraduate programs.

There are numerous jobs within a theatre company, ranging from the jobs that everyone has heard of to jobs that are not commonly recognized. The jobs that are not commonly known typically outnumber the list of commonly recognizable jobs. Some of the jobs that individuals are familiar with include the actor, director, costume designer, and understudy. The careers that the outside world is not familiar with carry titles such as stage manager, house manager, artistic director, scenic artist, just to name a few. In this overview, the reader will be exposed to one of the jobs that the general theatergoer knows next to nothing about: the stage manager.

The questions, what is a stage manager, why are they important to the theatrical creative process, are the skills stage managers use practical in everyday life will be answered. Furthermore, the paper will discuss the disconnect that exists between the classroom explanations of what a stage manager is and the practice of stage management. Finally, the reader will examine potential ways to close the gap.

What is a stage manager? There are countless ways to answer this question. Starting with describing the outline of what a stage manager does is one of the simplest ways to define what a stage manager's role consists of. In the classroom, stage managers are taught that they are the organized, efficient communicators that merely assist the director. However, in actuality, stage managers act not only as the director's assistant, but also as an equal with the director. To understand this difference, it is pertinent to know the detailed

requirements of a stage manager in action. In the work *The Art and Craft of Stage Management*, by Doris Schneider, a stage manager's responsibility is explained, as "Collaboration and its facilitation is one of the stage manager's primary responsibilities. It is the heart of the theatrical production" (Schneider 2). Daniel A. Ionazzi says in *Stage Management Handbook* that the main role of a stage manager as "to distribute information and, more than that, to keep the lines of communication open in both directions" (Ionazzi 101). Mike Lawler, author of *Careers in Technical Theatre*, suggests that, "The stage manager collects and tracks every detail pertaining to the production, including information regarding props, costumes, scenery, special effects, sound, lighting, blocking, backstage crew, dialogue, performers, and much more" (Lawler 14). However, Ionazzi also clarifies that, "There is no one job description for a stage manager that applies to every production" (Ionazzi 10). The work *Stage Management: A Guidebook of Practical Techniques*, by Lawrence Stern, is recognized as one of the earliest books published to specifically focus and highlight stage management and how to prepare stage managers for the working environment outside of the educational setting. The book uncovers the problem with the ever-elusive stage management position, and explains, "There is no definitive list of duties of a stage manager that is applicable to all theaters and staging environments" (Stern 5). Stern does, however, enumerate the characteristics that are tremendously important for a stage manager to exhibit. The author explains,

Organizational ability is one of the primary qualities of a good stage manager. Leadership ability is another. The stage manager must

be able to influence the staff, cast, and crew. He must be a take-charge type and a self-starter. He must be the kind of person who has the capacity to accept responsibility. (Stern 6)

Stern further explains that “a good stage manager keeps his mouth shut and his eyes and ears open . . . [is] alert to what is going on around you . . . thinks ahead . . . is considerate . . . keeps his sense of humor . . . is punctual and dependable” (Stern 265-271).

In order to begin to fully understand what stage managers' duties consist of, one must understand what “collaboration” truly is. Schneider describes collaboration as, “A process performed by artists sharing their individual knowledge, experience, and responses in a guided atmosphere of trust, flexibility, and openness, fostering the evolution of a new and unified entity: an idea, an emotion, or a vision” (Schneider 2). Schneider goes on to further explain, “The stage manager is the guardian of the process, encouraging participation, clarifying misunderstandings, and protecting creative exposure” (Schneider 2). Without a stage manager present, typically individuals become frustrated and miscommunication occurs because individuals are not guided to discuss matters with open minds and non-personal terms. Sometimes, tensions arise merely because the individuals discussing a show cannot solve issues without making them personal, attacking statements. The stage manager helps ease the tension by guiding the conversation and creating a neutral environment in which to talk.

In general, stage managers have a specific set of characteristics and a loose list of required responsibilities. Since there is a lack of a definite description of a stage manager's official duties that can easily apply to every work situation, the stage manager must work in close contact with the director and theatre company to ensure that every need is being met. The stage manager should work with their employers to fully understand what their role is in the company so the show is a successful piece of work. Stage managers can typically use their commonly shared personality characteristics and basic knowledge of what is expected of a stage manager in the majority of theatrical work settings. The stage managers should be able to easily adapt to a variety of situations and work environments, especially with the guidance of the theatre company and director.

Why do theatre companies use an entire production team to work on a show? The book *Facilitating Group Communication*, by Lawrence R. Frey, clarifies, "The general reason for living, learning, and working in groups is because groups potentially are more effective than individuals" (Frey 2). With this idea in mind, the process of producing a theatrical work, a daunting task for two or three individuals to complete, makes sense. Frey further explains

"The specific reasons for why groups can be more effective than individuals are well documented and include . . . 1. The ability of groups to: search out and pool greater amounts of information 2. Bring to bear on the problem a greater number of approaches and greater (collective) knowledge (Frey 2).

An entire production team and staff can foresee problems that may arise and proactively find ways to solve the issues. Furthermore, a production team can more effectively delegate tasks to the appropriate individuals, giving each member a smaller project to work on, thus making the entire production come together more quickly and smoothly.

Why is the stage manager an important role to include in a production team? It is crucial to fully understand the role and the responsibilities associated with the title. The wide array of responsibilities that a stage manager undertakes is what makes the stage manager a pertinent position in every production. Without a stage manager, lines of communication are strained and confusing because numerous production staff members are attempting to collaborate and communicate to one another at the same time without any sense of structure. Besides the stage manager, there is not another individual person that relays messages, sets up meetings between the director and various designers, and ensures that every attempt at communicating is as clear and efficient as possible. Stage managers are also the control center of every situation. The stage manager is in charge of knowing every detail about the show, communicating with each designer, director, actor, crew member. The stage manager is also responsible for guaranteeing that the show will open successfully. Furthermore, the stage manager must check that all the requirements are fulfilled for the show to continue to run smoothly after opening. In addition, the stage manager must guarantee that the director's vision for the show is not muddled or changed by the actors once the show has opened. When there is a lack of communication



and management, the show is not thoroughly planned out and does not retain the proper elements necessary to keep the show running successfully. Without a stage manager present, tempers flare, frustration surfaces, and there lacks a neutral party, in most cases the stage manager, to calm the situation and intercede when necessary.

While acting as head communicator during the creative process, stage managers run production meetings. According to the book, *Technical Theatre for Nontechnical People* by Drew Campbell, production meetings should always include the heads of each and every department. Also, "production meetings are for sharing logistical information and for solving problems involving time, space, and money" (Campbell 202). Production meetings are useful because all of the designers (set, make-up, costume, lighting, sound, etc.) and the director discuss requirements for the show. The members present also detail the design ideas with one another to create an atmosphere that flows well onstage. The stage manager takes extensive notes and is in charge of dispersing that information to the designers, artistic director and other individuals. This gives everyone a reference point to go back to and check how the show is progressing, what items the director is looking for, and any other information the stage manager finds necessary to take note throughout the process. After production meetings, the stage manager sends out the notes in a report: the production meeting report. The production meeting report details everything discussed in the meeting. The idea of someone taking meeting minutes for these types of meetings may not

seem important. The stage manager's notes keep confusion at bay. The notes reduce the number of excessive emails sent to the production team.

Another important skill stage managers need to hone is the ability to communicate efficiently in writing. As Peter Maccoy states in his book *Essentials for Stage Management*, "Being able to communicate effectively in writing is an essential skill. The stage manager needs to use the written word to communicate . . . with members of the production team . . ." (Maccoy 48). If a stage manager cannot effectively communicate the notes from rehearsal or meetings in writing, the designers, actors, and other production team members may become confused. Confusion allows for misinterpretation and miscommunication to occur. Maccoy gives an outline for stage managers to follow when communicating in written form so the information is clearly stated: "As a general rule of all information conveyed in written form must be: accurate—it must state what is meant or required accurately; brief—using ten words when two will do is not helpful; clear—there must be no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation" (Maccoy 49).

Another reason why a stage manager must be able to properly communicate in written form is to pass along information in the prompt book. Ionazzi details, "The prompt book is the official text for the production. This script includes all changes, additions, and deletions to the text; all necessary blocking and staging information required to recreate the show; and all cues and warnings for the production" (Ionazzi 33). J. Michael Gillette, the author of *Theatrical Design and Production*, defines a cue as "a directive for action, for example, a

change in the lighting” (Gillette 5). This means the stage manager’s prompt book essentially details every aspect of the show in written form. If a stage manager is ill and cannot call a performance (cue the stage crew and board operators when to change the set, lights, sound, etc.) an assistant or production stage manager will step in for the performance. The prompt book must have exact information as to when something happens on stage or backstage so that another individual can properly, and safely, call the performance without the show’s stage manager present to assist.

In addition to demonstrating superb written communication abilities, stage managers must be able to communicate effectively in face-to-face situations. This skill becomes important for running meetings and obtaining information for the show. As J. Dan Rothwell surmises, “Communication is a process because changes in events and relationships are part of a continuous flow” (Rothwell 11). With this in mind, it is important to consider why in-person discussions are quite useful to a stage manager. A stage manager can acquire details for the show immediately instead of waiting for an email reply or phone call to answer a simple question. Furthermore, Peter Maccoy details “Feedback is easier and often more effective in face-to-face communication. A number of key skills are associated with this: listening, questioning, responding, summarizing, assertiveness and awareness and appropriate use of body language” (Maccoy 42). When in person, a stage manager can use the aforementioned methods and techniques to assist them in receiving the information they are seeking, while bypassing potential problems that other forms of communication have. For instance, if a stage

manager emails a designer with an urgent question, it may take a few hours, or even a couple of days, to receive a reply. A stage manager may have a series of questions to ask after the primary question is answered. Again, there is a lack of immediate responses and feedback when emailing, so finding a response may take more time than necessary. Maccoy outlines three ideas to consider when communicating: basic assertion, empathy, workable compromise (Maccoy 45). If the stage manager is assertive, displays appropriate empathy and knows when to include workable compromise, any form of communication can be effective and efficient.

Besides acting as the central communicator and neutral party for the show, stage managers also communicate call times, dates, rehearsal schedules, and a myriad of other information to actors and crew members. The stage manager must keep these important details in mind, ensuring that everyone is informed. The stage manager also guarantees that the actors know when to arrive to rehearsal and have the proper information of what will be worked that day. This helps the director and actors to use the rehearsal time in the most valuable, proficient manner possible. If the stage manager lacks this ability, or forgets to inform the cast of these requirements, rehearsal could be delayed and completely wasteful because actors may not show up to the rehearsal. This lack of planning usually causes the director to shift the schedule and waste precious time in order to fix the mistake. Stage managers also keep the important dates for the director in mind. If an actor informs the director, and stage manager, that they must miss a rehearsal, the stage manager should remind the director so

proper scheduling occurs. The director should not create a schedule and arrive to the rehearsal hall merely to find out the stage manager forgot to remind them of the actor's absence because more time will be wasted figuring out a back up plan for the day.

The question of whether or not these skills are practical in everyday life is a common concern. Individuals doubt the practicality of the array of skills stage managers learn and practice. Stage managers are taught communication, conflict management, time management, and social skills. A stage manager must also learn how to "people watch." It is important that stage managers take in their surroundings, especially how the actors, crew, director, designers, etc. are acting and responding to situations. The stage manager can act as a buffer by requesting that the team take a five minute break to give them space and time to clear their heads if an argument seems to be on the horizon; the stage manager can also steer the conversation back to the original purpose, especially during meetings, when the topic starts to wander. Whether the topic ventures to non-related issues or issues that could easily be discussed in private between the director and designer at a later date, the stage manager needs to assess their surroundings at all times, and be able to take immediate control of problematic situations. Typically, when there are problematic situations, they are left to resolve themselves. In such situations individuals become hostile, people begin to shut down, and the meeting becomes a waste of time and loses purpose. With these valuable tools in hand, stage managers can easily transition these skills into everyday circumstances to enhance their life. For instance, stage managers

know how to appropriately schedule time for required tasks throughout the day, allowing for the proper amount of travel time, etc. in order to make the day run much smoother than it normally would.

While applying the skill of assessing the situation and reacting appropriately, stage managers must be tactful and respectful. When a stage manager witnesses an inappropriate moment arising in rehearsal or a meeting, the stage manager should casually take control of the situation until the moment disperses. The stage manager could also address the issue and act as the neutral party to resolve any resulting conflict. Also, stage managers are in charge of communicating with people when stress levels are beyond normal levels and frustration pervades the room, resulting in a hectic, tense environment. The stage manager must remain tactful, respectful, and calm while easing the situation and pushing through the difficult times. The stage manager should remain calm during the most stressful moments at this point, steering the situation in a productive path (Lawler 17). As long as the stage manager keeps their mind clear, remembering that the team is counting on them to pull through and lead them to the grand opening of the show, the stage manager can take control.

Stage managers act as leaders in rehearsals, production meetings, technical rehearsals, and during the performances. The author of *In Mixed Company*, J. Dan Rothwell, says, "There are three primary qualifications for retaining leadership. 1. You must demonstrate your competence as leader. 2. You must accept accountability for your actions. 3. You must satisfy group members' expectations" (Rothwell 153). Rothwell explains, "Finding the optimum

balance between productivity and cohesiveness is an important goal for all groups (Rothwell 71). The person maintaining the leadership role should prove that they deserve to be the person in charge, assisting with every aspect of the production. Not only should the leader prove their competence, recognize responsibility for their actions, and meet the expectations for their job, but also they should try to bring the group (the actors, designers, crew members, etc.) together and help create a cohesive, safe environment for everyone to work and interact in. The stage manager should also maintain control of the situation and ensure that everything is accomplished for production while creating a safe atmosphere for the actors and production team to collaborate together. Ultimately, it is the stage manager that is responsible for guiding the show to success. As Lawrence Stern says in the book *Stage Management: A Guidebook of Practical Techniques*, "The person who has the responsibility for making the entire production run smoothly, on stage and backstage, in the pre-rehearsal, rehearsal, performance, and post-performance phases, is the stage manager" (Stern 1). If the stage manager remains in control, acting as an apt leader, the duty of making the show run smoothly is much easier. In that instance, individuals know their roles and what tasks must be completed for the production. The stage manager is accountable for monitoring the situation to keep things progressing properly.

The stage manager, in addition to the plethora of jobs and duties listed above, must create paperwork in order to make information easily accessible during rehearsals and for the entire production team. The paperwork can consist

of a multitude of things, including a contact sheet, rehearsal report, production calendar, production meeting report, performance report, sign-in sheets, scene breakdowns, props lists, etc. The stage manager is also responsible for distributing the paperwork or information to the appropriate individuals.

One of the first pieces of paperwork the stage manager creates is the rehearsal calendar. The rehearsal calendar details what days, times, and at what location rehearsals will take place. These are usually subject to change, with scheduling conflicts arising or the pace of rehearsals being different than anticipated.

One of the next pieces of paperwork the stage manager creates is the contact sheet. This consists of "a list of addresses [usually email] and telephone numbers of artistes . . . directors, designers, stage management" (Maccoy 84). There are various versions of the contact sheet; the stage manager must create different versions in order to provide the proper people with only the information they need. For instance, one contact sheet may only include designers and directors while another may include only cast members (Campbell 200).

Before rehearsals begin, the stage manager will create a scene breakdown, which lists the characters that appear in each scene of the show (Maccoy 71). This allows for the stage manager to correctly tell the actors who needs to be at rehearsal at what time. By doing so, this ensures that no one is missing from a scene and there are not actors present that are not needed in the scene, wasting their time sitting and waiting in the rehearsal hall.



Another key piece of paperwork the stage manager will create is the props list. The props list is similar to the actor scene breakdown because it details what props are on stage at what point in the show, who carries them on stage, which side of the stage they exit or enter on, what they look like, etc. (Maccoy 74). This information becomes extremely pertinent when crew members are in charge of handing props to actors in the wings, or pre-setting pieces before the show starts. The crew members have a place to double check the props and how they should be set up for the show so that no errors occur.

As with most majors and areas of study, there is a disconnect that exists between the classroom explanations and details of what a stage manager does and the actual practice of stage management. There are potential approaches to help close the gap between the classroom and actual practice to make the transition from higher education settings to professional theatres that most stage managers wish to find employment at after graduation.

As undergraduate students, stage managers are told to be adaptable, versatile, and helpful. However, Doris Schneider explores the idea that the higher education setting has difficulty training stage managers. Schneider says,

Our higher education system is challenged to prepare stage managers who can be looked to not only for management but also for input . . . In this increasingly more mechanized and specialized society and profession, each participant in the theatrical process must be encouraged to use creative resources, make judgments, and take risks rather than slavishly follow a list of tasks. (Schneider 3)

Lawrence Stern analyzes the issue and exclaims, “. . . there are few provisions for training in stage management. It is often assumed that anyone can do the job reasonably well who has a mind to, without previous training or experience . . .” (Stern xi). This issue is quite relevant to undergraduate stage management majors. There are minimal stage management classes for majors to take. Most of the knowledge a stage manager gains as an undergraduate student is purely through application and experience. Stage managers cannot sit in a few classes and be expected to learn the facts and methods useful for stage-managing.

In contemporary times, the role of stage manager is no longer an unskilled, untrained worker attempting to run a show, but an educated, dedicated person that must know more about the theatrical process than nearly every other position in the theatre world (Schneider 1). Now students have countless colleges and universities to choose from when interested in studying stage management. Students can choose colleges that have a declared, titled “Stage Management” major, or a program that allows students the freedom to major in a “Theatrical Studies” degree with stage management experience. With universities offering stage management courses, more students will gain the knowledge of what a stage manager does and how crucial the role is to a theatrical production and process.

According to Daniel A. Ionazzi, “Stage management is more art than science . . . the stage manager should certainly have a knowledge of the varied components that go into the creation of a piece of theater” (Ionazzi 9). Most

stage manager students struggle with this idea. In class, students are often taught to be managers, not artists. Students label themselves as such making the transition to "artist" is excruciatingly difficult. The students view themselves as merely a behind-the-scenes stage manager that cannot have any involvement in the artistic, collaborative process that occurs. Doris Schneider warns stage managers "As a collaborator, you must listen not only with an open heart and mind for the voice of a colleague's muse, you must also evoke the gentle voice of your own" (Schneider 215). Again, stage management undergraduate students are conditioned to think that they do not have a voice or hand in creating a beautiful piece of theatre besides managing the process and people, when that conundrum is not entirely true.

The stage management guide, *Stage Management and Theatre Administration* by co-authors Pauline Menear and Terry Hawkins explain that a stage manager must be versatile and completely understand the various jobs of others in the theatre in order to anticipate problems that may arise or help coordinate the multitude of areas that are collaborating to create a single piece of work (Menear and Hawkins 7). Lawrence Stern claims that stage managers must know more about the theatrical world than is necessary in order to have a list of solutions available for any given circumstance (Stern 2). Some higher education programs are attempting to close this gap between the classroom, college-level setting, and the professional theatre setting; now, most programs offer a wide variety of classes for stage managers. Professors and other theatre workers should encourage student stage managers to take a wide variety of classes and

attend workshops and seminars to continue to learn and press their realms of thinking. In order to close the gap between the classroom and actual practice, some programs, like Ball State University, have an extensive list of related theatre courses for students to take in order to fully appreciate and grasp the various roles in the theatrical process.

Stage managers are explicitly told that adaptability is a required trait. Adaptability is fundamental when working in a creative field with a highly creative process because “there is no ‘one way’ to do something” (Kelly 24). Stage managers are told to be adaptable and allow for changes to occur while attempting to find a suitable way to accommodate for the changes; however, students are given specific ways, or rules, to do certain tasks and deal with explicit situations. The issue is that stage management students do not wish to go against the established rules for their university and program, but sometimes there is more than one “proper” method of doing something. Most of the time, what works for one show and one person does not work for another. In order to allow student stage manager to be more adaptable, theatre programs should have a list of general rules and regulations that everyone must follow, then a list of things that stage managers may find alternative solutions and methods for in order to make the process smoother for the team.

In conjunction with specific lists of rules that stage managers must follow in the educational setting, there are barriers that can make it difficult to navigate issues in the educational setting. Because of the non-professional circumstances surrounding the instructive environment, students are bound to follow school

policies at all times. Campbell explicates, "Stage managers are helpful people. They have to be. Their job description includes words like "Eye of the Hurricane" and "Safe Port in a Storm." They are the communication link between everybody and everybody. This puts them in a position of uniquely intense stress" (Campbell 199). Sometimes it is difficult for student stage managers to act as the "Eye of the Hurricane" when they are surrounded by professors and faculty members, instead of peers. When superior individuals work in the same environment as students, the lines of rank can become quite muddled, making it increasingly difficult for the stage manager to be in charge. If the stage managers were not students, the issues may not exist.

In conclusion, there are generally more hidden, unknown jobs in the theatre world than what is known to the general public. One of the most important unknown job title is the stage manager. The reader discovered the answer to three difficult questions: what is a stage manager, why are they crucial to the theatrical process, and are the skills stage managers use applicable in everyday life. In addition, the disconnect between the classroom explanations of what a stage manager is and the practice of stage management outside of educational institutions were highlighted and examined. The separation that still exists between the classroom and the professional theatre world was clarified. Ways to successfully close the gap between the classroom and professional world were analyzed and considered. The reader caught a glimpse of the backstage life that most individuals never learn anything about. For those interested in stage management as a career or simply as a creative process, these disparities are

necessary to consider when taking into account the effort that is essential to put forth when mounting a production. Stage management is a fulltime commitment and a thankless job. However, the rewards are endless: watching the cast grow together as a family, witnessing the show progress from a reading to a work of art on stage, and the thrill of calling the show without missing a cue, are invigorating. Stage management is an art form in itself.

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