

Stage Management at Bucknell

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Fall & Spring mainstage productions in the University Theatre in Coleman Hall

This manual describes a model for stage management of a large, mainstage production in the University Theatre in Coleman Hall, usually produced on Fall Parents' Weekend and Spring Weekend. Stage management needs may vary for other types of productions, such as mainstages or "workshop" pieces in Tustin Studio Theatre, Cap and Dagger's Evening of One-acts (also in Tustin), or nontraditional mainstage performances in the University Theatre. Bucknell Dance Company Performances (University Theatre in the fall; Weis Center in the Spring) have completely different needs than theatrical performances. However, this manual deals with general ideas about effective stage management which should be easily applicable to any performance situation at Bucknell.

"Professional standards in an academic environment"

The stage manager is the chief protector of the production. As a stage manager, you are responsible for shielding the director from unnecessary distractions. You also protect the actors by making them aware of what they need to do to make themselves ready for rehearsal and performance. The director should feel confident in your command of the production process as a whole.

I. Before rehearsals begin

A. Becoming a Stage Manager

It is never too early to step forward as a potential stage manager. As soon as the coming season is established each year--usually in March or April--the directors begin to think about their need for a stage manager. It is not unusual for the stage manager of the first-slot show to approach the director in the spring.

If the director of the play which you would like to stage manage is a guest artist and not yet on campus, you may ask the Director of Theatre to recommend you to this director.

As soon as you are accepted as Stage Manager, identify yourself to the secretary (T110), the Director of Theatre (T112), the Technical Director (T111), and all designers, so that they will know you are a source of information.

B. Before the auditions

1. Securing scripts

Directors often ask the stage manager to order scripts. After making sure that there is not a question over which version is to be used, look up the play in the most current Samuel French or Dramatist's Play Service catalogs (in T110). Show the listing to the secretary and she can file the order for you (order at least five more than the estimated cast size). Some texts, such as Shakespeare or Greek plays, can be ordered through the bookstore, and other texts not available in individual editions may be xeroxed (out of anthologies) at Administrative/Duplicating Services (give the text to the secretary and explain exactly how you want it to be xeroxed).

When the scripts arrive, the secretary will stamp them "Property of Department of Theatre and Dance" and number them (this is an amusing tradition which serves no actual purpose, since the scripts may be retained by the actors). You may then choose to either leave them in T110 for the actors to pick up after they are cast, or to take possession of them yourself and personally distribute them after casting.

Do retain one script so that you may order prompt scripts through Admin. Services (again, work through the department secretary). Each page of text should be centered on a vertical sheet of paper (see sample prompt script page), leaving the back sides blank. Order one for yourself, one for each ASM, and one for the director (if he/she desires one). If the scenic designer's groundplan is available now, have it reduced to 8 1/2 x 11 and xeroxed onto the back of each page of one of the prompt scripts-- this one will be used by one of your ASM's to chart blocking (see sample prompt script pages).

Whenever you get your prompt script back from Admin, put it into a three-ring binder. Keep this promptbook carefully organized; in addition to the prompt script, it should contain all schedules, rehearsal logs...the entire production paper trail.

2. Securing Assistant Stage Managers

You will need an ASM so that you can "be in two places at once." If the show is very large, you will probably need two ASMs. It is best to secure at least one by the time of auditions, so that the auditions can be run smoothly. If there is no Assistant Director, then the director may wish for you to collaborate on the casting, and in this case it will be essential for you to have an ASM to facilitate the audition.

If you need a second ASM, you may find one among the people who are not cast. Check their audition cards to see who has indicated interest in backstage work.

You should always regard the ASMs as stage managers-in-training. Throughout the entire rehearsal process, speak to them about the responsibilities of stage management; teach them everything you know.

3. Preparing for the audition

An audition space is usually reserved ahead by the Department of Theatre and Dance, but this should be verified. Advertisement of the audition is usually handled by the Publicity T.A.'s, but again, this should be verified.

Find out if the director wants to have an "open" audition--where all auditioners are able to watch each other's auditions--or a "closed" audition--with the scenes being read for the director in a separate room from the other auditioners--and make sure that the space is set up accordingly.

Obtain from the director a list of the desired audition scenes--sometimes called "sides"--and xerox them out of the script. (For this kind of small-scale xeroxing, you can use the Department's xerox key--see the secretary--in the Econ. or Sociology Dept. xerox machines in Coleman Hall. If T110 is closed and you cannot get to the key, use the faculty copier on Level Two of the Bertrand Library, and bill the xeroxing to "[director's name]/Theatre & Dance/[production account number--see secretary].") It is best if they can fit on a single page, so cut-and-paste if you have to. Each one should be labelled at the top, in large letters, with the names of the characters in the scene. Each "side" should be numbered, and there should be a master list of the "sides" for the director's and actors' reference (see sample).

Locate a large stack of audition cards. The secretary has a supply of them, and if there are none left, she can order more. These are to be filled out by each auditioner.

It is also important that you discuss the basic rehearsal schedule with the director, so that the auditioners may be made aware of exactly what their time commitment will be if they are cast. If the TD has created a tech schedule, then be sure to take it into account.

C. At the auditions

Arrive early enough to lay out the "sides," display the list of "sides," set up chairs (if necessary), and set out the audition cards with a lot of pencils. Post the audition procedure (as you understand it from the director) on a piece of posterboard or a chalkboard.

As auditioners arrive, point out the posted audition procedure to them and collect their audition cards. When the audition begins, give all of the cards to the director or assistant director. During the audition, do whatever you can to maintain a sense of organized efficiency, within the

basic procedure that the director has established. The director may or may not ask your opinion of people's auditions; do not offer your opinion unless the director invites you to be involved in casting.

D. Between auditions and callbacks

After the second night of auditions, the director will give you a list of auditioners who are to be called back. Encourage the director to call them back for specific roles, rather than having simply a list of names.

Sort out the cards of those not called back, and set them aside for later use in securing another ASM or running crew.

Type up the callback list. It should include the name of the production, the names of the auditioners exactly as written on their cards, the roles they are called back for, and the time and place of the callback session. Also thank "everyone who auditioned" and sign the page with your name and title (Stage Manager) and/or have the director sign it. (see sample)

There will probably be new "sides" for the callbacks--consult with the director and prepare these in the same way that you prepared the original "sides."

E. At the callbacks

Before the readings begin, state clearly the time and place that the cast list will be posted. In the course of the evening, clarify all rehearsal conflicts indicated on the audition cards.

At the end of the night, the director will give you the names of the cast. Ask the director how the names should be arranged on the cast list: either alphabetically according to actors' last names or according to the character list given in the script.

Type up the cast list. Be sure to include: the name of the production at the top, another thank-you to all who auditioned, and the time and place of the first cast meeting or rehearsal. Also write: "Please initial beside your name if you accept this role." Post the list on the callboard in the front lobby of Coleman by the time that you have stated (usually noon of the next day). Give a copy of the list to the director. (see sample)

II. Early rehearsals

A. Before the first cast meeting

Using the conflicts given on the audition cards, create a conflict sheet (see sample) for the director's reference.

Then meet with the director to finalize the rehearsal calendar (see sample). Also create a more specific schedule, which includes actor calls, for the first week or two of rehearsal (see sample).

Create a production contact sheet (see sample) which gives the campus box number and phone number of the Director, all designers, the Technical Director, the Costumer, stage management staff, and cast members. (For faculty and guest artists, the box number is understood to be "Theatre and Dance," so give their office phone number instead.) Also give miscellaneous numbers such as the secretary's office, Green Room, T.A. Office, etc.

Locate a stack of Hometown Release Forms. (These are usually found in T110, near the stack of audition cards; if not, ask the Publicity T.A.'s to make more.) These will be distributed at the first cast meeting.

Send copies of the contact sheet, the rehearsal calendar, and the first schedule to the director, all the designers, and the Technical Director in their department mailboxes. Post copies on the Production Callboard in the back hall of the theatre. Set aside additional copies to distribute to the cast at the first cast meeting.

Obtain a large stack of blank rehearsal logs. These will be filled out during each rehearsal.

Speak to the costumer to find out when the actors should be scheduled for costume fittings.

Be aware that from now on, you (and the director) will need to be present at the weekly production meetings held by the Dept. of Theatre and Dance, Tuesdays from 12:10 p.m. until around 1:00 p.m. It is up to you whether or not you require your ASMs to attend these meetings.

By the time of the first cast meeting, you should feel well in command of the situation and ready to assert yourself confidently as the stage manager of the production.

B. At the first cast meeting

This first meeting may take various forms: it may be a meeting in the Green Room, during which the director and designers discuss the production with the actors, or it may also involve a readthrough of the whole play.

In any case, you should begin the meeting. First, introduce yourself to the cast and explain your function as stage manager, making it especially clear that the actors are to approach you, not the director, with scheduling concerns and other random business. Also introduce your ASMs.

Distribute the Hometown Release Forms and have the actors return them immediately (submit the completed forms to the Publicity T.A.'s). Distribute contact sheets, calendars, and first-week schedules. Review the calendar with the cast. Hand out scripts (unless actors have already picked them up in T110) and have the actors write their

B. Booking the cues

In the week prior to tech week, you will need to meet for anywhere from one to three hours with the Director, Technical Director, Lighting Designer, and Sound Designer--the "design team." Together you will establish the placement of all light and sound cues (and, if applicable, fly cues). In the margin of your promptbook, draw a circle for each light cue and a square for each sound cue, with a line connecting the symbol to the cue word or action in the text. Inside the symbol write the number (lights) or the letter (sound) of the cue. (The TD will probably suggest leaving the circles empty for now; you will fill in the light cue numbers during dry tech.) Make sure that you understand what the designers want as they describe these cues to you.

C. Dry Tech...Cue-in...Level Set

On the Saturday before opening, from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. until 11:00 p.m., tech week begins with "dry tech" (also called "cue-in" or "level set"). You will sit out in the house at the tech table with the design team. The light and sound operators will be in the booth, and the TD will communicate with them via headsets. The ASM which you are most interested in training should also be at the tech table, observing. The other ASM should be available to "walk the stage," to show how an actor will appear in the light.

The TD is in charge of this day's work, and but is your responsibility to understand and become immediately familiar with every cue. By the end of the evening, all light cues should be programmed into the board and numbered, all sound cues should have had levels set and been lettered, and your promptbook should be ready to go for the next day's cue-to-cue.

D. Cue-to-cue

Your crew call for this day should be well ahead of the designated start time. The ASMs will be responsible for setting up running lights and clearly labelled props tables before the cue-to-cue begins. From now on, each one of them will be assigned to one wing and be on headsets during the rehearsal or performance. The ASMs are now in charge of the wings; they are your eyes and ears for the backstage areas. They give places calls to the actors, maintain order among the actors, assist with props disasters, handle actor injuries, etc. They should remain on headsets at all times, and inform you if they are going to leave headsets for any reason.

There will be no more prompting at all. Actors should be instructed that they may no longer call "line." Most importantly, explain to the actors that you will be working through the show from cue to cue, often reworking a cue several times and usually jumping over large sections of the play where there are no cues. Make sure that the monitor is on (see TD) so that the actors can hear the action in the Green Room.

Speak to your board operators, explaining to them that you will give a "standby" and a "go" for each cue; they are not to ever take any action unless they hear the word "go" from you (or, during these technical rehearsals, from the TD).

When you are ready to begin, have your ASMs call "places" and get on headsets--you are still stationed at the tech table with the design team, but this time you, not the TD, are communicating with the board operators. (However, be aware that the TD will continue to come onto headsets to instruct the light board operator in reprogramming of cues.) You are now in charge--nothing happens unless you give the "go." You give the call to stop, although a member of the design team (particularly the TD) may request that you do so at any given time. If you make a slight error in the timing of a cue call, and you understand your mistake and how to correct it, you should tell the others at the tech table that you are aware of what needs to be changed and that you feel you can go on to the next cue. However, if a member of the design team says, "No, there was a larger problem, we have to stop," then stop, and go back over the cue.

By the end of the cue-to-cue, you should be aware of which cues are very clear for you and which ones you will need to work out more clearly in the tech runthroughs.

E. Technical rehearsals

Create a checklist of stage management and technical crew duties so that you can set-up quickly and efficiently (see sample). Use this checklist before every rehearsal and performance from now on.

During the technical rehearsals (Monday and Tuesday), the action should be continuous unless there is a major problem. As before, you make the call to stop, although the TD may continue to ask you to stop if necessary. Costumes may be introduced at one of these rehearsals, but not make-up. The director (and designers) should take notes and give them to you after the runthrough, rather than speaking to you during it. If there is no Assistant Director, you should find someone to come in and take notes for the director.

It is up to you whether or not you allow the actors to watch the show from the house during the technical rehearsals. If you and the design team are not distracted by the actors slipping through the caliper to get to their

entrances, then let them do so. If this becomes a problem, simply tell the actors they must clear the house and await their entrances in the Green Room.

F. Dress Rehearsal

At the Wednesday dress rehearsal, full performance conditions should be in effect, including: starting the run at the scheduled performance curtain time; actors using full costumes and make-up; all crew wearing black; no actors in the house; no one onstage or crossing through the calipers after "house open," etc. You should move up to the booth, but leave the tech table in the house with a headset on it so that you may still communicate with the TD in an extreme emergency.

G. Preview

On Thursday night, there is a free preview. The design team will continue to watch and take notes from the house. The rest of the audience may be composed of English classes, high school classes, friends of the department...or no one at all. You should be at performance conditions by now, and all you will need to do is strike the tech table into the backstage. At "house open," prop open each door, place a stack of programs (these are usually delivered to T110 by 5:00 p.m. on this day) by each one...and run the show.

H. Performance

The Box Office will be run by the Box Office Manager (a Publicity T.A.), so you will not have to be concerned with this at all. The entrance of the audience will be overseen by the House Manager, whom you should be concerned with. Make sure that the House Manager: 1) has a House Management manual and understands it; 2) understands that the house may not be opened to anyone at all until you state that the house may be opened; 3) understands precisely when the show will start and what the policy is for admitting latecomers (which you have established in discussion with the design team). Once you are confident that the House Manager knows what is going on, leave him/her in charge of the front-of-house and do not allow yourself to become concerned with either the Box Office or the House Management.

At the intermission, instruct the House Manager to flash the lights when you feel it is time, and tell him/her to drive the audience back into the theatre.

I. Photo call

If done properly, the photo call does not have to be unendurable hell. In advance, obtain from the director a list of the desired photos (usually twenty), described by the line which is to be spoken. The final list should show the lines, the actors who are in the photo, and the light cue and scenery needed. (The photos should also be in backwards order--from the curtain call, backwards through the show). Distribute copies of this list to the light board operator and your ASMs. Post several more copies around the backstage area for the actors' reference (see sample).

The date of the photo call will be given on the TD's master tech schedule. After that performance, the actors should remain in costume and wait in the Green Room until the house has cleared. Any parents or other random audience members who remain in the theatre to take photographs may do so, but you must instruct them to remain behind the official photographer(s) and to not use flash. As soon as the photographers are set up, call the actors to the stage and begin.

Explain to the actors that: 1) you will ask for a line; 2) the actor will deliver the line and all onstage will play the moment; 3) you will call "freeze" and they will freeze; 4) they will not move until you tell them that the shot is finished. Then check that the photographers are ready, and set up the first shot. You will know that each shot is finished because the photographers will tell look up from their cameras and tell you that they are done.

After the last shot, you will need to have your ASMs keep the stage clear for a few minutes while set shots are taken.

J. Strike

Strike is held after the final performance, usually until 1:00 a.m.. All actors and crew are required to stay and work for the entire time, and it is your responsibility to enforce this.

After the performance, you and the House Manager should go straight into the house and stand at the caliper entrances to prevent anyone from coming up onto the stage or going into the backstage. Audience members wandering around during a strike--even during the first few minutes--is extremely dangerous and cannot be tolerated. Politely explain to stubborn parents that their children will be sent out to the lobby to greet them.

The TD is responsible for co-ordinating the strike; your primary responsibility is to see that all of the actors and crew are doing the work which he has assigned to them. No one will be required to remain past 1:00 a.m.

Written by Bryan Clark, 11/91