A Stage Management Handbook

Introduction

This handbook provides an outline of the responsibilities, expectations, and guidelines of a stage manager for theatre performances.

Included in the handbook is a breakdown of the duties required for stage managing that follows a chronological path from the initial meetings and preparation through the closing of the show. The duties listed are the general procedures and practices found in most theatres, but are not intended as an exhaustive resource on the art of stage management.

The handbook will deal with questions such as: "What forms should I be sending out every night after rehearsal?" "What should I have prepared for the first tech rehearsal?" and "What should I be doing now," not questions like: "How should I arrange my prompt book?" or "How should I call cue?" Those types of discoveries will happen for you as you settle into your own stage management style.

Although this handbook outlines the general practices, know that every production is different and will have its own unique needs and challenges that will extend beyond the guidelines within this handbook, and that you as the stage manager will need to familiarize yourself with and address.

A good stage manager is organized, a good communicator, intuitive, relaxed, patient, pro-active, optimistic, timely, polite, and organized (again), among other things. The stage manager is the communication hub within a production and the key element for the communication of a show's many parts to be successful. Many of the guidelines listed in this handbook revolve around keeping those lines of communication open and helping to facilitate a healthy process from start to finish. Be prompt in your reports and replies, pay attention to wording used in correspondences, and stay on top of any concerns or confusion that may arise. Likewise, a good stage manager is often the center of the morale of a company.

A good show is the product of a healthy process, and that process is related to the overall morale of the company involved. The actors and crew will feed off the stage manager's demeanor; use this to help control the mood of the company for the better. Do not let your stress and frustrations negatively affect the company as a whole. The more proactive and prepared you are the more confidence the cast and crew will have in you and the more successful your work and the show will become.

The Stage Manager's Responsibilities

The manager acts as a communication link between the director and the other artists, creatives & technicians associated with a production. They function as company manager for the actors and aid the director in conducting rehearsals. Once the production moves on stage, the stage manager's responsibilities include opening and locking the theatre or studio, delivering calls to the actors for makeup and costume, setting the stage each night, calling the cues, calling entrance cues, and arranging equipment. The stage manager is required to attend all production meetings, all rehearsals and performances and strike.

Note that in some theatres, stage management responsibilities may be delegated to, or shared with, an assistant stage manager (ASM). In those cases, the stage manager determines who will be responsible for each activity.

Getting Started

Below are the basic guidelines that you should be familiar with and have accomplished during the initial phase of the production.

Script and Production Calendar
The first thing you want to do is to meet with the director to get a copy of the script and to talk through the production calendar, any important dates, and any conflicts that exist.

Meet with the Director
As soon as you have a script and have been officially assigned as the stage manager, you need to setup a meeting with the director to discuss the show and any specific short & long term needs they may have.

Meet with the Assistant Stage Manager
If an assistant stage management (ASM) position has been assigned, meet with them to discuss the show, and catch them up on things they may have missed. Also, discuss the rehearsal process and what they will be responsible for on a normal basis. Establish a good relationship with the ASM, as you will be working closely together for a few months.

Do not be afraid to delegate some of the responsibilities to the ASM; a successful stage manager doesn't try to do everything on their own, but rather knows how to delegate their duties and use their assistants effectively.

Keep in mind that, for some ASMs, this is their first time stage managing and will need some guidance throughout the process.

Attend all design meetings
There will be a series of design meetings with production staff that you need to attend (they should be listed on the production calendar).

Being at these meetings will keep you informed on the production and help prepare you for what to expect in the production process. Encourage the ASM to attend the meetings as well – it will be a good information gathering process for them

Create a Production Contact List
Create a production team contact list that includes email addresses and phone numbers for the director, designers, technical director, stage manager, any assistants, prop master, master electrician, costume shop supervisor, & scene shop supervisor. Some productions may have additional positions (choreographer, music director, etc.), other productions may not have all the positions above, or those positions may not be filled until a later date.

First Rehearsal Paperwork
Coordinate having copies of the script printed for all cast, designers, and crew that wish to have one, as applicable. This may have already been done by the time you were assigned to stage management. There may be other forms or documents needed for that first rehearsal, as well, so consult with the director and designers to make sure all is ready for that first rehearsal.

Distribute the Rehearsal Schedule
Once the director has finalized the rehearsal schedule, make sure it is sent out with the daily call prior to the first rehearsal. Be sure to keep the production team up to date on any changes that may occur in the rehearsal schedule.

Create a Prop List
Collaborate with the director to develop a prop list for the show. This finalized list should be shared with the scenic designer and prop master (and the production manager, if you have one).

Obtain a Ground Plan and Tape Out the Rehearsal Space
Once the scenic designer has a finalized ground plan, request a scale printed drawing from the technical director.

Use the ground plan to develop a plan for taping out the basic scenic footprint out on the rehearsal space (and later, the stage floor). It is helpful to mark up the ground plan with a determined color code prior to the meeting for tape out, so the delineations between different parts of the set & stage can be

clearly seen. Once you have a plan, tape out the floor. This needs to be done before the first day of rehearsal.

The Rehearsal Process

Below are the basic guidelines for the weeks of rehearsals. These responsibilities also cover duties outside rehearsals that fall within those weeks.

These duties are just sampling. You will have many responsibilities (many unique to each show) during rehearsals. This is a good reason for delegating and utilizing an ASM to help achieve these goals.

Attend weekly production meetings.
Production meetings are scheduled weekly, or as needed, and you are expected to attend every meeting, (check the production calendar for the exact schedule of meetings).

During the meeting, take notes of the discussion and any decisions or issues. You may also be asked to create a Production Meeting Report, and distribute this report to the production team. The goal of the production meetings is to address any issues or questions that arise since the previous meeting. Use this time to help address any needs you or the rehearsals may have.

Attend and assist in running rehearsals
Make sure the rehearsal venue is safe for performers by having it swept and cleaned.

The stage manager (and ASM) should arrive for rehearsal at least 30 minutes in advance of the cast in order to prepare the space.

Stage management/prompt script
The stage manager is often tasked with creating a blocking/prompt script that is used to record stage movement set during blocking, as well as technical elements, such as lighting and sound cues,

You'll find examples of script notation on pages 13-15.

 Rehearsal run sheet
A stage rehearsal run sheet, like the one to the right, is a detailed document used by a stage manager to outline the planned activities for a rehearsal, including scene breakdowns, blocking notes, technical cues (lights, sound), costume changes, and any other important details needed to efficiently run the rehearsal, essentially acting as a roadmap for the entire session.

You can create your own in MS Word or Excel, or download our MS Word template.

Rehearsal sign-in
Create and maintain a rehearsal sign-in sheet for the cast and any others needed. This can be a simple MS Word table with the name of the production at the top, with a line to write in the day/time. Then list the names of those to sign in, in alphabetical order, with a place to check off each name. Print enough for each rehearsal.
At the moment the rehearsal is scheduled to begin, start calling those in the cast or crew who have not signed in. This should be done for all rehearsals, tech rehearsals, dress rehearsal, and performances.

Rehearsal reports
While not standard across all theatres, a report after each rehearsal can be very helpful. Make sure the wording of the report does not come off as a demand rather than a question, gets a clear message across, and communicates the appropriate desire. These reports can be emailed to the production team the day following each rehearsal. If the report is received after this time, it limits the production team's ability to respond to any issues that may be contained in the report.

Below are two different MS Word templates you can download and use for reports (*you must be signed into the AACT website to view these*). The one on the left has room for notating six different technical areas. The one on the right has large squares for entering information on four different technical areas of your choice.

Rehearsal Report Template 01   Rehearsal Report Template 02

Check in with the technical director
Once the set build begins in the rehearsal space, check in nightly with the technical director and/or scenic shop supervisor to get an overview of any updates that have occurred to the set since the

previous rehearsal—particularly if there are any new scenic elements and/or safety concerns you should be aware of before rehearsals.

When the crew for the production has been assigned, the technical director should provide the crew assignments. Using the provided list, create a crew contact sheet and have the production manager double-check the list.

Often crews can change slightly as rehearsals progress, so periodically check with the production manager for any changes. Either the production manager or stage manager will create a list of crew call times; if not you, then get a copy of this list when it is completed. The stage manager will often help in distributing the list.

A few weeks prior to the first crew-call time, you may want to start sending out weekly reminders to the crew.

Work with the costume designer and/or costume shop supervisor to schedule costume fittings and measurements throughout the rehearsal process. It is the stage manager's responsibility to create sign-up sheets for these times, communicate them to the performers, and to get the cast to sign up for the appropriate times.

Tech/Dress Week
Tech week involves running both a step-by-step analysis of all technical elements and an actual performance that includes all the technical elements, including lighting, sound, scenery changes, props, costumes, and special effects.

Below, you'll find basic guidelines for the weeks of the production's tech and dress rehearsals, as well as preparations that should be made in advance of these weeks.

Paper Tech
The week of the first tech rehearsal will be scheduled a "paper tech" meeting. At this meeting the stage manager, director, lighting, sound, and scenic designers will talk through the script and discuss any/all cues and shifts that are planned for the show. This is the time for the stage manager to notate their script for all cues and shifts that will be initially occurring.

Do not be afraid to ask questions during the paper tech—you want to make sure you have a clear understanding of all the cues and their order by the end of the meeting.

It is also generally a good idea in the regular rehearsals that follow the paper tech to follow along and practice calling these cues, to make sure they are clear before tech begins. It's common for cue placement to change some after the paper tech, so take notes in pencil.

Performance Run List
Prior to the first tech the stage manager should create a detailed run list that clearly shows any/all onstage/backstage movements of props, scenic elements etc. by actors, ASMs or run crew during a performance.

What's included in a run list?

- *Scenes:* A list of each scene by act and scene number, including the scene's title and location
- *Changes:* Notes about set changes, costume changes, and props
- *Pre-show, intermission, and post-show tasks:* Notes about what needs to happen before, during, and after the show
- *Backstage notes:* Space for backstage teams to add their own notes

How to create a run list

1. Read through the script, scene by scene
2. List each scene, including the scene's title and location
3. Note any changes for each scene
4. Make notes about what happens before, during, and after the show
5. Leave space in the margins for backstage teams to add their own notes

>> Click here for a run list example in PDF format (you must be signed into the AACT website to view)

A run list can help ensure that everyone involved in the show knows what to do and when to do it. Meet with the technical director and scenic designer when creating this list so that you are clear on how each piece of scenery moves and how many people are needed to safely move them.
Have this ready for the first tech so that crew can easily and quickly be assigned and taught their duties for each role.

Train your ASM on each shift and let them help in training the crew, since they will be the ones actively doing the shifts during the show.

Know that during the tech rehearsals it is likely that the list will be modified as the rehearsals progress.

Prop Tables
Prior to the first tech rehearsal, obtain prop tables from the scenic shop supervisor and tape out the tables for all props. Taping helps ensure that props are returned to the same spot after use on stage. Make sure the ASM understands the layout. Do not forget to plan for the placement of props that may be too big for one of the tables.

Preshow/Post-Show Duties
Create a list of the crew's pre-show and post-show duties. Plan out the duties so that they are appropriately and evenly spread out. Example duties include sweeping, mopping, setting out props, turning on running lights, setting up for the top of the show, flying in masking, etc.

Create a nightly sign-in sheet, similar to the one used for the cast in normal rehearsals, which includes the crew.

Costume Parade
A costume parade is usually schedule about a week before the first dress rehearsal. This meeting is a chance for the costume designer, lighting designer, and director to see the costumes, on stage and under stage light, before the dress rehearsal.

Meet with the costume designer and help them coordinate and run the costume parade, and make sure the actors are fully aware of their call time for the parade.

Make-up Demo
A make-up demo may be scheduled about a week before the first dress rehearsal. This meeting is a chance to train the cast and see the make-up design, on stage and under stage light, before the dress rehearsal.

Meet with the make-up designer and help them coordinate and run the make-up demo, and make sure the actors are fully aware of their call time for the demo
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Technical Rehearsals
The technical rehearsals involve the production team, crew, and cast (without costumes or make-up) and are used to introduce the lighting, sound, and scenic design elements into the show.

Use these rehearsals to perfect the calling of the cues and make any changes that are needed in the prompt book. These rehearsals are largely for the stage manager to rehearse the implementation of the technical aspects of the show, and for the designers to make adjustments to their designs before the introduction of costumes.

It's typical for the design team to update the look and sound of things during these rehearsals. These rehearsals are also used to train the crew on their duties during the show, so come prepared with all the needed paperwork to do so.

Do not be afraid to pause ("Hold!") during a rehearsal in order to go back and rerun something for the purpose of correcting an error or to better understand something.

There is a limited amount of time for each rehearsal. If time is running out, the production manager or director may need to step in to speed things along or take appropriate action.

Tech rehearsals are typically split into multiple days and run slowly, as the design elements are woven into the performance. They can be stressful and tense, so the stage manager can play a key role in keeping things moving and spirits high.

After every technical rehearsal there will be a meeting with the production team to discuss the day's rehearsal, any issues, and the plan of action for the next rehearsal. After these meetings, you can send out a rehearsal report that details the major notes of the day.

Dress Rehearsals
Dress rehearsals involve the production team, crew, and cast, and are used to introduce the costume and make-up designs into the show.

The stage manager should create a nightly timeline that lays out what the cast and crew should be doing from the moment of their call time to the start of the show.

Dress rehearsals should only be paused for costume-related issues or major issues with the show. The final dress rehearsal should be treated as though it were a public performance, and run accordingly with no stops, unless there is an emergency concerning actor or crew safety.

After every dress rehearsal, there may be a meeting with the production team to discuss the night's rehearsal, any issues, and the plan of action for the next night's rehearsal. After these meetings, you may send out a rehearsal report that details the major notes of the day.

theatre rehearsals are collaborative practices that prepare actors and the production for a live performance. Rehearsals help develop skills, explore creativity, and ensure a successful performance. That's why the stage manager's role is so important in making the process work.

Performances

The value of a stage theatre performance lies in its ability to foster empathy, promote critical thinking, provide a shared experience with a live audience, offer unique perspectives through storytelling, and cultivate important life skills like communication, collaboration, and self-expression, all while allowing audiences to actively engage with the narrative in the moment, unlike passive film viewing; essentially creating a powerful and immersive experience that can inspire and connect people on a deep level

Below are basic guidelines for the weeks of the production's performances, as well as preparations that should be made in advance of those weeks.

Performances
Once the show opens, the stage manager will take the take over control of the production's run.

Maintain a performance sign-in sheet for the cast and crew in the same manner as the previous sign-in sheets.

Each performance will involve a house manager and box office manager with whom the stage manager will need to coordinate the show's schedule. Before opening the house and starting the show, make sure you have a "clear" from the house manager. Likewise, be sure to synchronize your time with that

of house management and box office. Try not to hold the house for more than 10 minutes past the schedule start time.

Performance Reports
The stage manager may be asked to send out a performance report after the end of each performance, detailing events of the performance.

Below are two templates for a performance report. The one on the left includes sections for issues about actors and crew, notes to the house manager, problems or repairs needed, accidents or injuries, and additional notes if needed. The one on the right has fewer categories (props, costumes, scenery, and issues for the technical director, but with more room to write.

Since both are MS Word files, category names can easily be changed to meet your needs.

[Performance Report template 01](#)   [Performance Report template 02](#)

Post-Show
The stage manager's duties continue after the last performance of the show.

Strike Duties
Most productions will have a strike immediately following the last performance, in which the set and other production-related technical elements will be removed, in preparation for the next production.

In many theatres, the cast is required to stay for strike or clean-up. Work with the technical director to determine which duties actors can help with, and which are only for the stage crew.

Actors and non-tech volunteers are often asked to clean the green room, light/sound booth, and dressing rooms. Stage management is responsible for making sure the green room and control booth are clean. Also, double checking that the dressing rooms are clean (check after the wardrobe crew has finished).

Post-Mortem

A theatre post-mortem is a meeting after a production to analyze what went well and what could be improved. It's a chance to celebrate successes, learn from mistakes, and plan for the future.
Purpose

- *Celebrate:* Recognize the team's accomplishments and strong choices
- *Learn:* Identify areas for improvement and ways to fine-tune the production
- *Plan:* Consider how to meet goals for future productions
- *Communicate:* Share feedback and ideas to improve communication and working practices

Typically, a post-mortem is attended by production staff, but could also include cast, crew, and front-of-house staff.

- A moderator or small group leads the discussion
- Everyone is encouraged to share opinions and feedback
- The discussion should be a safe space for candor
- The team should evaluate whether the production met its goals

Final thoughts

You will not find a single definition of a stage manager, because the job description varies from show to show, venue to venue, director to director, producer to producer, situation to situation."

One director may expect the stage manager to tape the stage, make the coffee, take the notes, and call the show--period. Another director may expect a very participatory stage manager, using them at auditions, script readings, design meetings and actively encouraging their input during the rehearsal process. Once the show is up, the director steps back and the stage manager is given the director's trust to maintain the show to the director's standards by giving notes, running brush up rehearsals, and so on.

As a result, a stage manager's skill level, both technical and interpersonal, frequently dictates the individual job description. Perhaps that is why the classic book on stage management, Lawrence Stern's *Stage Management: A Guidebook of Practical Techniques* (Allyn and Bacon), does not provide a job description. Stern's sole comment along these lines is on page one: "The person who has responsibility for making the entire production run stage smoothly, on stage and backstage, in pre-rehearsal, performance, and post-performance phases, is the stage manager."

Stern does outline the many possible functions of the stage manager, but notes that these represent "many more methods for stage management than should be applied to any one production, and you will need to use your judgment in determining which will be most effective for you."

Wise counsel for any stage manager—or anyone wanting to become one.

APPENDICES

Blocking/Rehearsal Script

Below is shown a common way of producing a rehearsal script that allows notes to be made on stage movement, lighting, and sound. Script pages alternate with a blank page for the notations.

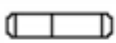Right-handed version   Left-handed version
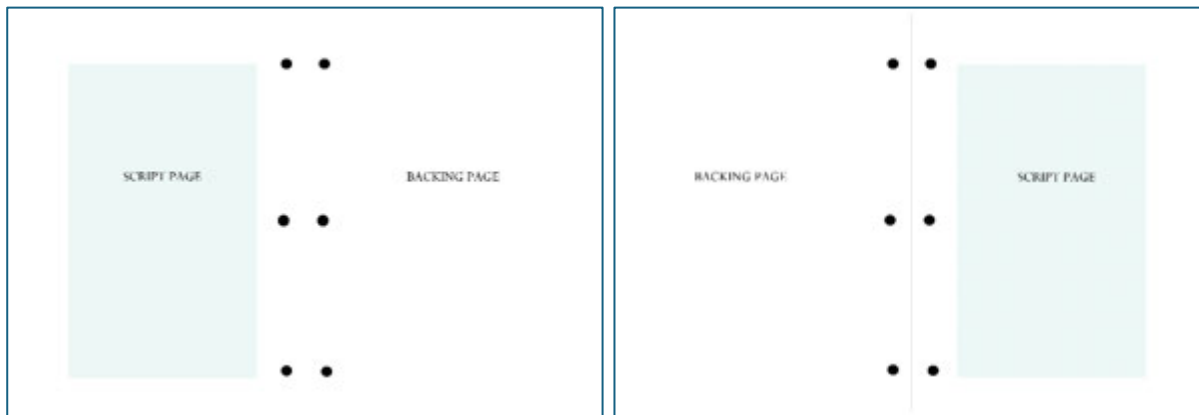
Prompt book in use
Below is an example of a blocking script page with notations used by one stage manager:
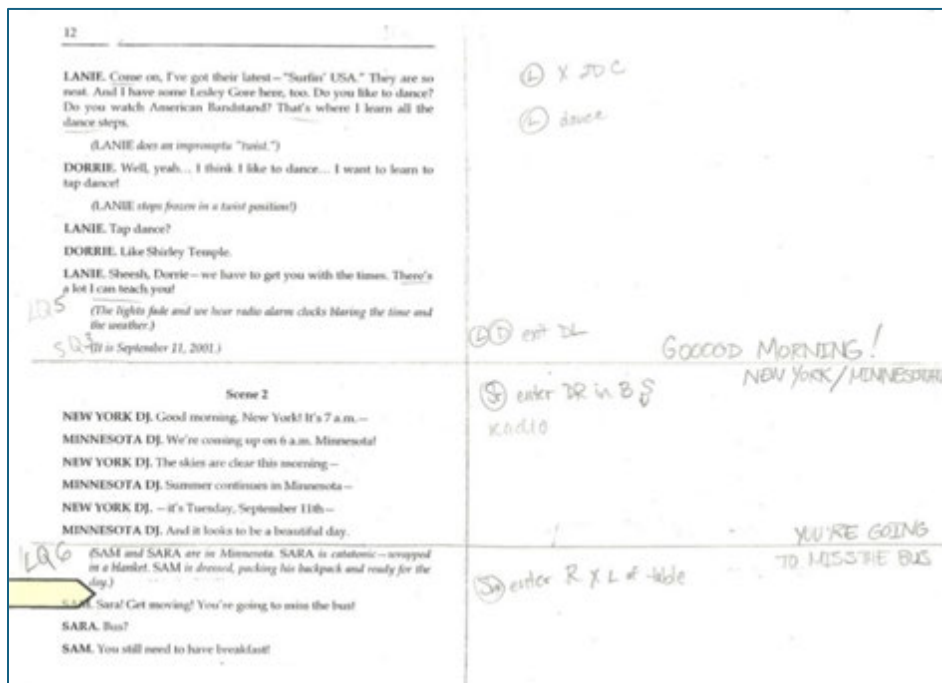
Sample Blocking Notation

Some of the common blocking notation can be seen below:

Prompt Side Stage Left	PS		
Opposite Prompt side is Stage Right	OP		
Stage left	SL	Stage right	SR
Upstage	US	Downstage	DS
Center stage	CS		
Downstage left	DSL	Downstage right	DSR
Upstage left	USL	Upstage right	USR
Center stage left	CSL	Center stage right	CSR
Ent	Enters	Ex	Exits
X	Crosses	⌐↻	Turns
(arrow)	Crosses DSL	✕	Crosses USR
✕	Crosses DSR	✕	Crosses USL
→	Travels towards SL	←	Travels towards SR
(arc with dot)		(arc with dot)	Long Pause
(stairs up)	Upstairs	(stairs down)	Downstairs
(chair symbol)	Chair	(rectangle)	Table
○	Stool	(sofa symbol)	Sofa
Bench		(rectangle)	

NOTE: You can use whatever notation system you want, as long as you provide a list like the above at the front of the stage management script or prompt book.

Technical Prompt Book

A similar book can be created to include technical notes, such as set movement, lighting, and sound.

THE DRUMS OF SNOW

THE DRUMS OF SNOW

PAGE 45

JULES
Say "What" again! C'mon, say "What" again! I dare ya, I double dare ya motherfucker, say "What" one more goddamn time!

Brett is regressing on the spot.

JULES
Now describe to me what Marsellus Wallace looks like!

Brett does his best.

LX Q23 GO
STANDBY FLYS
Q4

BRETT
Well he's... he's... black –

JULES
– go on!

BRETT
...and he's... he's... bald –

JULES
– does he look like a bitch?!

BRETT
(without thinking)
What?

LX Q24 GO

Jules' eyes go to Vincent, Vincent smirks, Jules rolls his eyes and SHOOT Brett in the shoulder.

Brett SCREAMS, breaking into a SHAKING/TREMBLING SPASM in the chair.

LX Q24
FLYS Q4 GO