

AUDIENCE MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Audience management is the responsibility of the House Manager and staff. Some House Managers, especially those in larger theatres, also function as facility managers. Facility managers are usually responsible for booking the theatre so that it is continually occupied and returns a profit to the owners, public or private. A facility manager usually has additional responsibilities.

Here we will be concerned mainly with audience management for non-professional and community theatres. While we have defined responsibilities in the broadest possible terms, many organizations with limited staffs will combine duties. Volunteers will fill many positions, but some paid staff is desirable.

Keep in mind that the average patron has two main person-to-person contacts with any theatre or producing organization - the ticket sellers and the ushers, both supervised by the House Manager. A positive encounter with either of these can often turn a one-time customer into a season patron. It's up to the House Manager to lead his staff in a positive manner.

Too often, especially in smaller theatres, an actor not cast in the current production or a volunteer who knows little about the post fills the position of House Manager. The uneducated may think that the House Manager is just a genial host. The importance of the position is not sufficiently appreciated. Hopefully, this manual will assist everyone to be more fully informed about the responsibilities of the position so all can do a better job of serving their patrons.

The House Manager is directly responsible for the comfort and safety of the audience. This can't be stressed too much. If the House Manager doubles as the facility manager, he/she will verify ticket sales on behalf of the theatre owner, be it a corporation or a municipality. It is the House Manager who takes charge in any front-of-the-house emergency.

In other words, the House Manager is in charge of all facilities except those on the immediate stage. Usually that supervision includes the box office and ticket sellers as well as concessions. In many theatres, he/she oversees the cleaning and maintenance of the house, lavatories, and dressing rooms. He/she is also responsible for seeing that fire and safety regulations are observed. This includes checking that fire and smoke alarms along with other emergency equipment are maintained on a regular schedule.

In many ways, the House Manager is like the captain of a ship -- responsible for most everything even work performed by subordinates. The position of House Manager is important in every theatre!

This manual will concentrate on the audience management duties of the House Manager and not include tangential responsibilities for ticket sales, concessions, or other possible areas.

JOB QUALIFICATIONS

Either a man or a woman may perform the duties of House Manager. The individual selected should project an air of authority, should have the ability to easily interact with patrons, and should be able to work calmly under pressure. In an educational facility, a faculty member usually supervises a student House Manager.

The best professional House Managers have a business, sales, public relations, or security background. Others have been actors or may still act occasionally. Unfortunately, the career is often overlooked by those interested in working in the performing arts. It is a position that needs dedicated professionals.

Please, no slob need apply. The House Manager must be neat appearing with shined shoes. Men will usually wear a dark suit while women wear a cocktail-length dress, tailored suit, or a gown. Above all, don't dress too far above your audience. Save the more formal wear for black-tie opening nights and fundraisers.

STAFF ORGANIZATION

The House Manager heads the house organization. Under him/her may be one or more assistant house managers. In larger venues there may also be a chief usher who has direct charge of all ushers. In smaller houses the House Manager also assumes the duties of chief usher. One or two senior ushers are usually assigned as doormen/ticket takers..

Depending on the venue, the House Manager will have some responsibility for the box office and ticket sellers. It is not unusual for the House Manager to employ a concession manager to supervise the concession sales staff if the concessions are operated by the theatre and not leased to others. The cloakroom attendant is included as part of the concession staff if that is not a separate concession.. The House Manager may employ and supervise other management and promotional employees/volunteers.

Many organizations have a volunteer coordinator who works with the House Manager in scheduling volunteers and keeping a record of their hours. Volunteers recruited by the coordinator will fill most of the positions defined here.

In some venues, it may be necessary for the House Manager to employ a staff of security personnel, especially if the house is used for rock concerts.

The House Manager may also have supervision of any parking staff or valet if that service is not sub-contracted. Since parking affects the "patron experience," the House Manager still needs to keep an eye on that outside operation.

If the theatre is located in a multi-story building, the house manager may also have supervision of elevator operators who take patrons to upper level seats. There may also be custodians and other staff members who work in conjunction and interact with the House Manager.

The chief usher controls the traffic of the theatre. It is the chief usher's duty, along with the ushering staff, to see that each patron is seated correctly and with as little delay as possible.

Nothing will give patrons the expectation of a professional production like efficiently trained ushers performing their duties in a pleasant manner with a minimum of effort.

BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE

The House Manager must arrive several hours before curtain time to check the condition of the house. It isn't unusual for a House Manager to work a ten, twelve-hour day when productions are in the house. While each House Manager will need to make his/her own schedule and checklist, here are a few items that are usually included --

- ❖ Is the outside entrance area clean, clear of paper, leaves, and other debris? Are cigarette urns sifted and filled with clean sand? Are all outside lights working including in the attraction board or marquee? Check again before intermission and before a second performance on the same day.
- ❖ If inclement weather, rain or snow, are mud rugs properly placed at the entrances to avoid tracking excess dirt onto carpets and floors? This is especially important if some lobby floors are marble or otherwise not carpeted where water could cause patron accidents.
- ❖ Is the theatre clean and neat? If not, contact the custodian to do a rush clean-up job. If there is no custodian available, do it yourself. *(Now you know why the house manager arrives so early!)* The House Manager should know where cleaning supplies and equipment are kept.
- ❖ Is house at a comfortable temperature? Does it smell fresh? (See section on Heating, Cooling & Ventilating)
- ❖ Are the rest rooms available and clean? Test flush toilets and see that hot water is available. Be sure that there is a supply of towels and soap. Check that waste containers are empty with clean liners. Restrooms should be checked again just before an intermission and again before a second performance in the same day.

ASIDE: Wastebasket liners can be knotted in one corner so they fit containers snugly. If two or more performances are scheduled in one day, put several liners into each container in the morning, one on top of the other. This allows the removal and disposal of the top liner with a minimum of effort and still leaves a clean liner in place.

- ❖ If your auditorium has windows, are window curtains closed for daylight performances?
- ❖ Doors and curtains between lobby and auditorium should be fully open when admitting patrons.
- ❖ Are floor coverings and railings securely fastened so patrons won't trip, fall, or otherwise have an accident?
- ❖ Are all obstacles that might not be seen in the dark removed before patrons are admitted? Any electrical lines running across the floor should be covered with yellow tape and spotlighted. Even better, use a carpeted solid ramp over the lines. If possible, assign an usher to stand-by to insure that no one trips.
- ❖ Is proper house lighting turned on, especially in any sound-lock areas? Are exit lights visible and lighted with two lamps each? Emergency lights that turn on with any power outages should be tested periodically.
- ❖ Check that stage curtains are closed before the audience is admitted.

BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE (continued)

- ❖ Are emergency exit doors closed and fastened so that unauthorized persons cannot gain admittance to the auditorium? All night chains and/or bolts must be removed so doors are operable from the inside.
- ❖ Are any reserved sections (if working in a general admission house) ordered by ticket manager properly roped off? These would be seats for special groups or VIPs.
- ❖ Are enough programs on hand with necessary inserts such as mailing list/volunteer applications?
- ❖ Check that House Manager's phone is working if needed to summon emergency personnel? It is best to have a fully charged cell phone available as a back up.
- ❖ Waste containers available for disposal of refreshment debris? If needed, is there a container for recyclables? All containers empty with clean liners?
- ❖ Are fire extinguishers and fire hoses clear and available for immediate use?
- ❖ Is there a receptacle for the torn tickets at the front door? This receptacle should be emptied after each performance.
- ❖ Is the literature rack or table neat and well organized? Be sure that forms needed to add a patron's name to the mailing list are available?
- ❖ Are any interior displays of cast photos, reviews, etc. properly set-up and lighted?
- ❖ Doors should be opened at least one-half hour before the scheduled curtain time. It helps to get the audience into a receptive mood if instrumental music appropriate to the production is played during this time in both the lobby and in the house.

HOUSE MANAGER'S REPORT

No one needs additional paperwork, but a simple daily report form illustrated on page eight can serve as a diary of "what happened when" at a particular performance during the run. The original stays with the house office. No copies are usually needed. This record is particularly important if some patron claims, weeks later, that she slipped or stumbled and injured herself on a certain night or lost a valuable object.

The House Manager should keep this report form handy on a clipboard to add information as noted or needed. In addition to the basic information of attraction, performance date, time, and number, note the weather conditions outside. This is useful later when analyzing attendance, possibly when plotting attendance v. weather on a graph.

Note what time the house was first opened and by whom. Usually this will be the time that the House Manager arrives and deactivates any intruder alarms. Record the house temperature and turn on the exit lights. Note any burned-out lights on this form and communicate the need for replacement to the proper person, usually on a work order.

ASIDE: "Opening the house" refers to unlocking the doors of the facility for employees. "Opening the doors" refers to when lobby doors are opened to admit patrons.

The checklist is optional and just a reminder if an assistant must do the job. In some theatres the checklist is separate or may be an additional page of the report. Some theatres ask that the House Manager enter a separate house count from the box office figures. Naturally, expand or eliminate items on the form as best for your venue.

Lost and found reports are usually separate from the House Manager's report. See sample form on page nine. Indicate on the House Manager's Report the number of lost and found reports generated at that performance.

Lost and found reports are filed separately, usually by dates. Some theatres keep the file in the box office while others maintain the file in the House Manager's office. Found items are usually kept in the same office as the reports. Periodically, the House Manager should inventory items on hand and dispose of those held over 30 days.

The House Manager's Report form illustrated here allows space to record the names of volunteers or staff who worked that performance. This is useful for those organizations that keep track of the hours worked by their volunteers for awards purposes. In some organizations the volunteers each have a "time card" which the house manager or other supervisor signs after each stint.

The "Remarks" section can be expanded as space permits. Use the back of the form if more space is required. Note here any maintenance work needed and issue a Work Order. A simple form is illustrated on page ten. It is vitally important to note any accidents or problems in as much detail as possible. Include contact information for any witnesses. Photos help if available.

Note the time and name of the individual who closed the house. Again, this will usually be the time that intruder alarms were set. It is assumed that the signatory has checked all house restrooms, offices, and closets to see that all patrons and staff have departed. This same person should also check for smoldering smoking materials.

BROOKS THEATRE

HOUSE MANAGER'S REPORT

DAY: _____ DATE: _____ () Matinee () Evening

ATTRACTION: _____

PERFORMANCE NUMBER: _____ WEATHER: _____

HOUSE OPENED AT: _____ BY: _____ HOUSE TEMPERATURE: _____

CHECK LIST:

- () Outside entrance area clean?
- () All lights working including exterior & exit lights? (Note any lights out under Remarks)
- () Is theater clean and neat? Does it smell fresh?
- () Rest rooms clean & neat? Need any deodorizing spray?
 - () Test flush toilets.
 - () Plenty of soap, toilet paper, towels, etc.?
 - () Have trash receptacles been emptied? New liners?
- () Move any obstacles that may impede patron traffic. Check for loose carpeting.
- () All emergency exit doors secured to prevent unauthorized persons from entering?
- () Enough programs on hand?
- () Waste cans for disposal of refreshment debris available, empty, & clean?
 - () Marked container for recyclables available, neat, and mostly empty?
- () Receptacle for torn tickets available at entrance door ?

HOUSE COUNT: _____ LOST/FOUND REPORT? _____

VOLUNTEERS:

Box Office: _____

Ushers: _____

Concessions: _____

REMARKS: (Note any incidents, accidents, or problems along with work needing to be done including replacement of light bulbs - continue on back if necessary)

HOUSE CLOSED AT: _____ BY _____

House Manager

THEATRE LETTERHEAD

LOST ITEM ()

FOUND ITEM ()

Description of item: _____

_____ Value: _____

Measurements: _____ Color: _____

Day & Date Reported: _____ Time: _____

Report submitted by: _____

ITEMS FOUND BY THEATRE STAFF OR PATRONS:

Item Found By: _____

Where Found: _____

Disposal: _____

ITEMS REPORTED LOST BY PATRONS:

Item Reported By: _____

Contact information: _____

DISPOSAL – () Returned to Patron () Item Disposed of as noted on back

Patrons claiming lost/found items must sign below to show receipt of claimed item.

Item(s) Above Returned to Patron on this Day & Date: _____

Signature of Patron: _____

Confirming Identification: Driver's License No. _____ State: _____

Simple Lost & Found Report form illustrated above. Check whether item is FOUND by staff or patron or reported LOST by a patron. Describe item, note day, date, and time when item found or reported lost. Add other details as requested.

Obtain signature and confirm identification before returning lost property.
Also secure the address and other contact information of claimants.

THEATRE LETTERHEAD

MAINTENANCE WORK ORDER

DATE: _____ TIME: _____

TO: _____

DESCRIPTION OF WORK TO BE DONE: _____

ANY DEADLINE? _____

WORK REQUESTED BY: _____

CHARGE: _____

Simple Maintenance Work Order form used to request work
needed done by other people and departments.

Copies may be needed for both House Manager and business
manager.

USHER & STAFF DUTIES, INSTRUCTIONS, & ASSIGNMENTS

While the House Manager is looking after the auditorium and the lobby, the chief usher supervises the ushering personnel. He/she checks that they are all present and properly groomed according to the house dress code, often dark slacks or dresses with white shirts or blouses. In some cases, ushers wear a similar type sweater or overlay in addition to badges to more easily identify them to patrons.

Before opening the house to the public, the chief usher gathers the staff around him/her and gives them necessary information and instructions. This should include a discussion of the ticket colors to be used at the performance, and the admonition to wear a smile, even when patience is being tried by an irritated or difficult patron. Ushers should be instructed to escort an irate patron immediately to the chief usher or to the House Manager if a problem is not easily settled. A checklist for instructing ushers starts on page 14.

After instructions, the chief usher assigns personnel to their stations for the performance. One usher should be stationed at each emergency exit to guard that unauthorized persons do not enter. One usher should be stationed at each door leading from the auditorium directly backstage to prevent patrons slipping backstage unannounced. These ushers must remain at their duty stations for the entire performance including intermissions. If nature calls, secure a substitute for the time necessary.

In a general admission house (seats not reserved), one or two ushers at the head of each aisle are all that is necessary. In reserved seat houses, several ushers must be assigned to each aisle to assist patrons in locating their seats. Naturally, ushers should be alert to assist older patrons as needed.

All ushers should have programs. Two programs are usually given to the man, who gives one to his lady. This may sound quaint, but does give a touch of class to any theatre. Aisle ushers should have a good supply of programs handy. All ushers should know the time(s) and duration of intermissions, as well as when the performance will end, along with the location of such facilities as rest rooms, public telephones, and drinking fountains.

In some instances, notably rock concerts and similar events, security personnel will need to be employed in addition to ushers. Under these circumstances, security personnel would replace ushers at emergency doors and accesses to stage.

It is the doorman's job to prevent any unauthorized persons from entering the theatre. One or two doormen/ticket takers should be stationed at each entrance door to insure that tickets presented are for the correct performance. Other responsibilities are detailed on page 13.

The ticket sellers, while part of the house staff under the House Manager, usually have additional supervision by the treasurer or ticket manager who organizes the box office separately from the ushering staff.

A concession manager, also working under the House Manager, supervises volunteers or staff assigned to refreshment, checkroom, and other concession stations. These may well be volunteer ushers.

Both the House Manager and the chief usher should be free to wander about where needed.

USHERS & STAFF (continued)

If at all possible, volunteer ushers should be urged to commit themselves to work each night for the run of the production. If not feasible, then try to get a commitment for multiple performances. This saves instructing a completely new group for each performance. Several additional volunteers should be on-call to substitute in case of illness or other absence.

A few producing organizations pay their "staff" ushers a modest stipend to cover transportation expenses. This is usually a set amount payable at the end of the run if the usher has worked all performances. Others may pay that stipend based on number of performances worked.

If your organization does not have enough members to cover front-of-the-house needs, consider recruiting help at local schools and from the senior centers. Service and community organizations can sometimes be enlisted to serve. Just be sure they get plenty of thanks and publicity!

The full staff of ushers and doormen should arrive and check-in with the chief usher at least one-half hour before the house opens to the public - usually one hour before curtain. This allows the House Manager or chief usher time to instruct any new volunteers, assign stations, and to call a substitute if someone is absent.

Volunteers who commit for the run should be given the most responsible positions and the option of shorter hours on evenings when not all personnel is needed to serve the entire evening. Naturally, stations should be rotated. All but one usher on each aisle can usually be released early if requested.

A "thank-you-for-volunteering letter," illustrated on page 16, can express the organization's appreciation for serving while communicating policy in a friendly manner. This letter should be sent two weeks before the show starts. Include the dress code required by your house.

Each usher should be instructed to bring a working flashlight. The small lights powered by two AA batteries are the easiest to carry and use. The theatre should have extra batteries along with a few extra flashlights for those who forget.

Ushers may be asked to aid in starting the applause and in sustaining it for curtain calls. If so, the chief usher must delegate a knowledgeable person to start the applause at the proper places so that other ushers can join. This help may be needed for plays where it may not be clear to the audience when they should applaud. A play with many scenes can confuse an audience. A little help from the staff can cue the audience and help the moral of the actors.

It is important to note that ushers should wait to open any doors/curtains to lobby until the applause has started so as not to inhibit or distract the audience.

During the performance, ushers should be instructed to remain standing at the head of the aisle to assist seating latecomers. By continuing to stand, ushers are easily identified by patrons in need. Standing ushers also have a better view of the house to immediately spot any problems.

ASIDE: Some directors feel strongly about distracting an audience during the first few minutes of a production and request that latecomers not be seated until a certain time. The theatre's policy regarding the seating of latecomers should be communicated clearly to all ushers and posted just outside the auditorium doors. If latecomers will not be seated immediately, that policy is usually included in all advertisements.)

DOORMAN/TICKET TAKER

For most purposes, the doormen are considered as part of the ushering staff and are interchangeable.

It is the doorman's job to see that everyone who enters the theatre has a ticket for the immediate performance. He/she must also see that smoking regulations are enforced for those entering.

In a general admission house, the doorman takes the ticket(s) from each the patron and checks that the tickets are for the correct performance. The doorman then tears the ticket in half and drops half in the ticket box, and returns the other half to the patron.

ASIDE: Tearing the ticket prevents it from being used again. The ticket portion retained by the ticket taker is deposited into a box at the door. These ticket stubs can be counted later as an audit to record how many tickets were used at that performance. Giving the patron the remainder of the ticket allows an usher to seat the patron correctly in a reserved seat house. That ticket stub also allows for reentrance should the patron decide to step outside for a smoke or to visit a nearby bar. It does happen!

Depending on theatre procedure, passes for general admission houses may be accepted by the doorman who collects them. Other types of prepaid tickets such as memberships, activity books, and season tickets may be accepted at the door without having to exchange them at the box office, depending on house policy.

In a reserved seat house, all patrons **MUST** have an assigned seat. Patrons who present any type of pass must be referred to the box office for a seat assignment. Otherwise the ticket is torn as above. One half is placed in the ticket receptacle and the other half given to the patron.

In most reserved-seat houses, the doormen also act as "splitters." This means they look at the seat number on the ticket and direct the patron to the aisle closest to their seat. Doormen who also act as splitters are usually senior ushers with a comprehensive knowledge of the theatre's seating plan.

Doormen should greet everyone with a smile and say something like "good afternoon" or "good evening" depending on the time. If known, patrons should be greeted by name. This goes a long way to personalizing the theatre.

Doormen may be called upon to refuse admission to undesirables. In such cases, he/she should always call the House Manager or chief usher to do the actual refusing so as not to block the door for other patrons. It helps to have a "panic" button available at the door that automatically pages the House Manager and security personnel. It's always better to have several staff members when ejecting a patron or refusing admission.

At least one doorman stays on duty in the lobby for the duration of the production. Doors are closed several minutes after curtain to keep out intruders. Doors are then only opened for ticket holders. The doorman on duty may also check if sirens or other noises might indicate a problem for the patrons.

RECAP -- INSTRUCTING THE USHERS

With so many theatres using all or a large percentage of volunteer ushers, it is necessary to review a number of items with the volunteers and staff before each performance to insure a smooth operation.

- ❖ Introduce the House Manager and any permanent staff who will supervise ushers. Explain that each usher is a representative of the theatre or production company and must conduct himself/herself in a professional manner at all times.
- ❖ Distribute any badges or other identification material needed to mark volunteers as ushers.
- ❖ Confirm that all personnel are properly dressed according to theatre dress code with shoes shined.
- ❖ Check that each usher has a working flashlight
- ❖ Review approximate time(s) and duration of intermission(s) along with time that performance will end.
- ❖ Review location of drinking fountains, restrooms, and public telephones.
- ❖ Review policy for seating latecomers.
- ❖ Review the location of all fire exits including those backstage that may not be marked. Discuss emergency evacuation plans.
- ❖ Review emergency procedures such as handling a patron medical emergency. Explain that only an authorized person such as the House Manager is allowed to call outside emergency personnel.
- ❖ If seats are reserved, explain the row and seat numbering plan of the house. It helps to have a large diagram available as the plan is reviewed.
- ❖ Show samples with colors of tickets acceptable for that performance. All personnel need this information so that a patron is not seated by accident. Include any passes used for direct entrance without exchange at box office.
- ❖ All ushers should be alert to assist older and disabled patrons as may be required before, during and after the performance.

ASIDE: When assisting an older or sight-impaired patron, the usher should lead by lightly grasping one elbow. This gives the usher more control to steady or hold a patron should that patron stumble. This is much better than leading by a patron's hand.

- ❖ Under no circumstances should ushers give any medications, including aspirin, to any patron or to offer to bandage a cut. Most insurance companies dictate these procedures to avoid liability. Ushers should be told to refer patrons to the concession stand where packets of two aspirin can be purchased by the patron.

RECAP -- INSTRUCTING THE USHERS (continued)

- ❖ Explain that ushers should not try to placate an irate patron but should ESCORT the patron to the House Manager or other supervisory personnel to resolve the problem. *(This explains why several ushers are needed on each aisle)*
- ❖ Review procedure for handling notes from patrons to actors. Review any procedures for patrons to visit actors backstage after the performance.
- ❖ Explain that ushers may need to aid in starting applause. Designate someone to start so that ushers can follow the lead of that person.
- ❖ Assign positions for the performance and review individual procedures for that position.
 - ❖ Doormen
 - ❖ Everyone entering must have a ticket for that performance.
 - ❖ Smokers must extinguish smoking materials outside before entering.
 - ❖ Greet everyone with a smile and say "good afternoon" or "good evening" as appropriate. Greet patrons you may know by name.
 - ❖ Look at ticket, and direct patron to aisle nearest his/her seat
 - ❖ Tear ticket, deposit one half in container and return other half to patron
 - ❖ Call supervising personnel if necessary to refuse entrance to anyone or if any security problems
 - ❖ Ushers assigned to stage and emergency exit doors
 - ❖ Explain that duty is mainly security - not to allow unauthorized entry.
 - ❖ Aisle ushers
 - ❖ Review procedures for opening and closing lobby to auditorium doors/curtains at intermission(s) and at end of performance so as not to inhibit applause.
 - ❖ Station several ushers at auditorium doors to escort patrons to the proper row and seat. In reserved seat houses, it helps to have an extra usher part-way down the aisle for those "*who don't need help...we know where we are seated.*" All ushers should have supply of programs.
 - ❖ Concession workers (may be ushers assigned to concession stands during intermission)
 - ❖ Review items available.
 - ❖ Price list of all items posted with separate copy for workers.
 - ❖ Check to be sure that all can make change.
 - ❖ Explain any necessary procedures.
 - ❖ Hat & Coat Checkroom will need a supply of 2-part numbered tickets and hangers.

LETTER TO VOLUNTEER USHERS.

This letter thanks the volunteer and confirms the dates of service, arrival time, and just what theatre entrance should be used. This should avoid any misunderstandings. At the same time the letter reminds the volunteer of the dress code and gives additional information and requirements.

This letter is best when prepared by computer so that parts indicated can be personalized for each volunteer. Each theatre will want to adjust the dress code to their standards.

Change the letter as necessary for your theatre. Letter should be sent at least two weeks before opening.

(Use letterhead of theatre or producing company)

Date:

Dear ___insert name___:

Thank you for volunteering to serve as an usher for ___(insert production name)____. Efficient, friendly ushers are necessary to insure that our fellow patrons have an enjoyable few hours of live theatre. With your help we can insure our guests the same comfort and safety you would want for a guest in your own home.

This will confirm that you have agreed to serve on: _insert day, dates, or each performance or similar_

Please arrive at the theatre by _____time(s)_____ to allow time for any last minute instructions. Please use the far right door and knock on the glass for entrance.

Please call us at ___phone number___ if you won't be able to serve as indicated above. We ask you give us 24 hours notice when possible so we have time to arrange for a substitute.

DRESS: Ladies are asked to wear a dark skirt or slacks with a white blouse or sweater.

Men are requested to wear dark slacks with a white shirt or sweater.

Coats & ties not required.

Dark dress shoes are requested. No athletic shoes, please.

FLASHLIGHT: Please bring a working flashlight. Many find that a small light using two AA batteries is the most convenient to carry and use.

To insure the safety and comfort of our audience, we ask that ushers remain at their posts for the full performance or until released by the house manager. Most volunteer ushers will be needed for about _____amount of time_____ each performance.

Again, we sincerely appreciate and thank you for volunteering your valuable time to assist our community theatre.

Cordially,

Signature

House Manager

PROCEDURE AT CURTAIN TIME

A vital part of the House Manager's direct responsibility comes at curtain time. It is the House Manager who checks the box office to see if there is a waiting line for tickets to the current performance. If so, the manager holds the curtain as long as possible to accommodate these ticket buyers.

ASIDE: Holding or delaying the start of the performance is a delicate subject. Patrons who organized themselves and arrived on time have a right to expect a prompt curtain. Usually no one minds a curtain that is five minutes late, but delaying the presentation longer is an insult to regular patrons.

Now that we have cell phones, pagers, and alarm watches, it is often necessary for the House Manager or a delegated assistant to make an announcement requesting that these devices be turned-off or placed on silent mode so as not to disturb others in the audience.

The House Manager need not appear on stage. This and other announcements can be made over the audio system or by use of a pre-recorded tape or cartridge.

When time to start the performance, the manager signals any stragglers in the lobby with a warning buzzer or makes the call "curtain going up" as ushers close the auditorium doors. The House Manager then signals the stage manager that the house is ready. The stage manager cues the overture (if there is one) and the performance is on.

While the above is standard procedure, the House Manager may well give the stage manager advance notice by saying something like "take the curtain up in five minutes." This gives the stage manager time to get everyone ready and the House Manager time to get the stragglers to their seats.

This same procedure is followed when restarting the show after an intermission.

DURING THE PERFORMANCE

The chief usher stands at the rear of the house alert for any disturbance, be it an ill patron or a noisy customer. The chief usher and staff are ready to calmly take charge in any emergency. In larger houses, another usher stands near the chief usher to notify the House Manager of any problem.

At least one doorman remains on duty in the lobby while the production is in progress. This doorman is responsible for the security of street and lobby doors. These doors must be closed during the performance to keep out intruders and distracting noises.

If fire engines are heard close by, a staff member should check to see that the fire would not endanger the theatre or patrons.

Latecomers should be seated with as little disturbance as possible according to agreed procedures. Ushers using flashlights should shine them toward the floor.

As time permits, the House Manager should quietly check to see that all ushers are at their stations, all exit lights are lighted, and that the house temperature is at a comfortable level. In other words, he/she is actively watching over the comfort and safety of the patrons, not sitting with his feet on a desk.

During the first act the House Manager may make a rough count of the audience for the house report and work with the box office to verify ticket sales. He/she will also check with the concession manager to see that all is ready for intermission sales.

DURING INTERMISSIONS

The chief usher, knowing when intermissions are scheduled, will have aisle ushers stationed ready to open doors or curtains to the lobby as the act ends. The doorman will be ready to open the outside doors to those who wish to step outside for a smoke.

Ushers should be readily available to answer such questions as the length of the intermission and the location of facilities. Literature about the producing organization should be available in a rack or on a table in the lobby. Additional programs should also be available. Proper forms and pencils should be handy so that patrons can add their names to the organization's mailing list.

It is the House Manager's duty to see that smoking regulations are observed. The House Manager may also assist in the supervision of the refreshment concession and any retail concession selling performance-related clothing, CDs, etc.

Before ending the intermission, the House Manager must check to see that all patrons using the restrooms and concessions have been accommodated. If patrons are still waiting, extend the intermission as necessary.

Procedure at the end of an intermission is the same as at the start of the performance.

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

After the audience has departed the House Manager and staff quickly go over the auditorium looking for any lost articles left behind. These lost articles are turned in to the House Manager and reported on a LOST & FOUND REPORT illustrated on page nine. Patrons should report lost or found articles on the same form.

Before locking up for the night and setting the alarms, the House Manager must check all offices, restrooms, dressing rooms, and other areas to be sure all patrons and staff have departed. All lights should be turned out except authorized night-lights. Some houses leave the exit lights on at all times, other houses allow the House Manager to turn them off as necessary. All doors should be checked to see that they are properly locked.

If the House Manager leaves before the stage manager, it is important that the stage manager be informed so that no one exits through the house doors and possibly leaves them open. If this is the practice, the stage manager must set the alarms.

It is important to note on the House Manager's Report who closed the house at what time and set the alarms.

ASIDE: Some theatres hire a night watchman, often a student, who locks up and remains inside all night. Sometimes the theatre facilities will be cleaned at night with the night watchman serving as security.

HOUSE POLICIES

It is important to discuss and set basic house policies ahead of time so they may be stated in the program along with appropriate signage. Some theatres enclose a list of house policies when mailing season tickets. Post copies of house policies in offices and locker rooms for viewing by staff and volunteers.

Smoking: Most theatres prohibit smoking in any part of the building including backstage. In many states, this is part of the fire code. Consider the following wording for signs and programs -

*No smoking is allowed in the theatre or lobby. If you must smoke, please step outside.
Be sure you have your ticket stub for easy re-admittance.*

Food & Drink: Are food and drinks allowed in the auditorium proper or must they be consumed in the lobby or in an outside patio? This policy may dictate how drinks are served - in a can or in a cup.

ASIDE: There's nothing worse than the noise of an empty soft-drink can or bottle rolling down the ramped floor of the auditorium right in the midst of a soliloquy.

Naturally, this policy may need to be adjusted for outdoor venues and a particular attraction. Some venues search patrons as they arrive to be sure no one has any bottles or other items that might be thrown. Be sure to post a number of signs advising patrons of such policies.

Photography: Many theatres prohibit all photography, including video and/or audio taping, unless authorized in advance by management. Suggested wording for signs and program might be -

Flash photography is prohibited at all times during performances for the safety of cast, crew, and audience. Still photography without flash, video, and/or audio taping must have prior approval of the House Manager.

Beepers & Cell Phones: These are the bane of us all! One actor told of a patron in the front row who got a call during a performance and proceeded to talk to the caller at length! Suggested wording for signs and printed program might be something like -

Beepers, cell phones, and other electronic media that buzz or ring MUST be turned-off or placed on silent mode so as not to disturb the performance nor other audience members.

ASIDE: Before beepers and cell phones it was common practice to offer doctors and other patrons who might expect urgent calls during the performance the option of leaving their name and seat location with the box office. Calls would come into the box office and an usher would quietly notify the patron of the call.

Lost & Found: Wording might say something like:

*The management is not responsible for personal apparel or property of patrons.
Patrons are advised to take their coats and wraps with them whenever leaving their seats.
Lost and found articles should be reported to the House Manager or the Chief Usher.*

ASIDE: If the theatre operates a checkroom, mention of that can be added above with a wording such as "The management provides the services of a checkroom for coats, hats, and other items."

HOUSE POLICIES (continued)

Refreshments: For general use, the wording "*Refreshments will be available in the lobby during intermissions*" can mean either that refreshments are available gratis or for a fee. If refreshments are free, use something like "*Coffee will be served in the lobby during intermissions courtesy of the Community Players.*" Naturally, this policy must be set in advance.

Box Office Hours: Box office hours should be posted at the box office for all to see. Some theatres also place that information in the program.

Unpaid Reservations: Theatres that accept unpaid reservations must have a clearly stated policy on how long these reservations will be held before being released for sale. One policy might be:

*Unpaid reservations will be held until 10 minutes before advertised curtain time.
At that time, unclaimed tickets may be released and sold to waiting patrons.*

ASIDE: Note that the wording is "advertised curtain time." That wording saves problems when the curtain is late.

Doors: Consider a policy on when theatre doors are opened to the public. Most theatres set a policy of opening lobby doors 30 to 45 minutes prior to the advertised curtain time.

Parking: Theatres without enough on-site parking often arrange for patrons to park in a nearby lot or parking structure. Signage informing the patrons of this arrangement needs to be posted along with notices at the box office or in the ticket envelope.

Arrangements must also be made for busses. While there must be room at the theatre entrance for them to load, busses can be parked several blocks away during the performance as the driver usually remains with the bus.

Any arrangements for off-site parking should be discussed with the theatre's insurance carrier to be sure that all are properly protected.

Notes to Actors Backstage: Set a policy on how ushers should handle patrons who wish to send a note backstage to an actor or staff member. Consider routing all notes through the chief usher who will take them backstage after intermission to the stage manager for distribution.

Visits Backstage: Most theatres limit visits backstage to after the end of the show. Because of privacy, space, and accident concerns, some theatres prohibit backstage visits. A number of smaller theatres have the cast come out into the audience after the show to visit with friends. Whatever is decided, set a policy and post it.

ASIDE: When setting policy about backstage visit by patrons, it's important to consider the possibility of accidents to those unfamiliar with stage hazards. Professional theatres often require that guests backstage be escorted to their destination and that cast members then escort their guests back to the door. This is another item to check with your insurance carrier.

Seating Latecomers: As mentioned previously, many directors have strong feeling on seating latecomers. This is a policy that may well change with each production and director. If latecomers won't be seated immediately, be sure to post necessary signage at the box office and in the lobby. That helps take the blame off of the poor volunteer ushers just following orders!

HANDLING EMERGENCIES & OTHER PROBLEMS

The House Manager is in charge of all emergencies that arise in the front of the house. Written procedures for all emergencies should be developed before need in consultation with the theatre's attorneys and insurers. Staff should be given copies of all procedures so they can be discussed at group meetings. With discussion and preparation, the staff reaction will be calm, automatic and in concert.

ASIDE: Unfortunately, as we all know, problems don't come along one at a time. A second problem does not wait for the first to be solved. Procedures need to take this into account so that an assistant house manager or chief usher can jump in and act as necessary. That's a staff working together!

All accidents, emergencies, and incidents must be recorded on the House Manager's Report. It is important to get contact information for any witness(es). Accidents to employees, workers, or volunteers should be handled as dictated by the house insurance carrier. House Managers should have a supply of the proper Workman's Compensation forms immediately available.

Many House Managers carry a cell phone at all times for immediate communication. This saves hunting a house phone that may be busy or not working. Consider having a small disposable or digital camera available to photograph any accident scene.

Have emergency contact information available in the front office and backstage. The list should include all utility companies with account numbers. While most emergencies can be handled by calling 911, it is helpful to have the regular phone numbers for police, fire, and hospitals. In addition, have emergency contact information for the theatre owner, public or private, and the insurance carrier.

FIRE: The fire department should ALWAYS be called for any fire, no matter how minor. Any delay by staff thinking that a small fire can be handled without such a call is foolish and subjects the organization to liability.

In case of fire, the house lights should be turned on, and the House Manager or stage manager should address the audience, calmly advising them that there is an emergency (never mention the word "fire") and that patrons should leave quickly but orderly by the nearest exit. The orchestra, if there is one, should continue playing while the audience exits. The same procedure would be used in the event of an earthquake, bomb threat, or similar emergency.

ASIDE: In the absence of an orchestra, play an audio tape of a march. For some reason, crowds usually respond better to a march than to other music. Audio should always have a march tape available.

It is best for the House Manager and staff to have some plan in mind as to where the audience will go when evacuated. Unfortunately, much depends on the circumstances. Have several areas in mind, as a good place to assemble today may not be the best place in a particular situation. Again, be prepared!

In the days of paid ushers, it was routine for ushers to know the location of fire extinguishers and hoses. With volunteer ushers, it is best to leave any use of fire extinguishers or other apparatus to the theatre staff and professionals.

ASIDE: Improper use of a fire extinguisher could spread a fire. Experience in handling a fire extinguisher can be gained with the theatre's fire protection vendor comes to recharge the extinguishers each year. Most fire departments will also assist on request.

HANDLING EMERGENCIES & OTHER PROBLEMS (continued)

MEDICAL: Theatre emergency procedures must clearly state when to call for emergency medical assistance and who will authorize the call. This eliminates any wasted time, confusion, or duplication of effort. Naturally, the House Manager should defer to any trained medical personnel who may be on the scene. Be sure to secure names and contact data of such medical personnel. Record the names and contact information for any independent witness(es) on the House Manager's report.

Regretfully, theatre employees can no longer give patrons any medications including aspirin tablets. Patrons who request such innocent items should be referred to the concession stand. Most theatre concession stands now sell small packages of assorted pain tablets displayed on a card. This card, with several dozen packages stapled to it, can be purchased from grocery wholesalers.

ASIDE: This rule may seem baffling because our natural impulse is to hunt-up an aspirin tablet or whatever is requested to assist and please our patron. The problem, of course, is that ushers are not medically trained and could make a mistake that could injure a patron with unknown allergies. Buried deep in most of today's theatre liability policies is a phrase that says something like "insured is not covered when dispensing medications or practicing medicine."

Years ago large theatres and amphitheaters would have a nurse on hand during performances to serve both patrons and employees. That practice has largely stopped because of insurance costs. Employees and staff are sent to pre-approved medical facilities for treatment. Emergency medical technicians (911) are called to treat patron medical emergencies. Having said all of the above, most theatres still maintain a small first aid kit to treat minor cuts and scrapes incurred by workers.

ASIDE: That friendly doctor who, in past years, rushed to the theatre to aid a patron in distress has long ago sold his horse and buggy!

Many theatres and other public gathering places now have portable defibrillators that can be used to keep a patron alive until medical assistance arrives. If your facility has such an aid, be sure that key staff members are trained in its use.

ASIDE: Key members of the house staff should be trained in CPR (Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation). The policy for using it should be discussed in advance with the theatre's attorneys and insurers. Most states now have Good Samaritan laws that absolve the giver(s) of CPR from any liability. .

Sadly, it does happen that a patron will have a heart attack, seizure, or similar medical emergency during a performance. Often, that necessitates stopping that performance, lighting the house lights, and removing the patron by ambulance. While this doesn't happen often, it does happen.

ASIDE: Murphy's law dictates that the afflicted patron may well be a bit corpulent and sitting in a center seat well in from the nearest aisle so that an inordinate number of patrons are inconvenienced.

House and stage staff along with the actors should prepare for such medical emergencies in advance. Usually, the house manager will call the stage manager for house lights. When house lights go up, actors freeze on stage just before a stage blackout (no curtain!) and then quietly leave the stage to wait for the production to resume.

After the medical emergency, house lights dim as the actors take their places and the performance continues. It is a good idea to rehearse this procedure at least once with each new production.

HANDLING EMERGENCIES & OTHER PROBLEMS (continued)

DISTURBANCES: Noisy patrons should be warned, as nicely as possible, to be quiet. If, after two warnings, the patron(s) has not quieted down, quietly request that he or she leave, and that the theatre will refund his money. If any trouble, call security or police to assist.

Again, who will call the police and under what conditions should be agreed upon in the written procedures so that all staff will react in concert.

Note the name(s) of any patron(s) ejected and the circumstances on the House Manager's Report.

Noises or disturbances outside the facility that may be heard by the audience should be investigated immediately for any potential impact on the safety of your audience.

POWER OUTAGES: Most houses today have emergency battery lamps that light automatically if the power fails. This startling, unexpected light change will happen on both the stage and in the auditorium. Decide who will maintain communications with the power company. Often, this job will be delegated to the stage manager or assistant stage manager as a power outage affects various light and production computers as well as lighting.

Depending on the illumination provided, it may be possible to continue the production with the emergency lights. This must be determined in advance. Cast, crew, and staff must know what has been decided.

ASIDE: Turn off the power manually to check what illumination remains from the emergency lights. If the area has frequent power outages, it may be wise to add an additional "footlight" emergency light so that the production can continue.

If the production is to be stopped, staff should be prepared to announce that there has had a power outage and direct the audience as needed. What to do depends on where in the production the outage happens and expected duration. The key is PLANNING so that everyone's reaction is automatic.

HEATING, COOLING AND VENTILATION

One of the important duties of the House Manager is to see that patrons are comfortable. Many older theatres and auditoriums have noisy fans or heating systems. Staff will need to know the location of and the proper way to operate heating and ventilating controls. Noisy fans may need to be switched off at the start of the performance, and on again at intermission.

When the manager first arrives at the theatre, he/she should immediately check the house temperature. In most cases, it will be around 68 degrees. If not, the manager must either heat or cool the theatre, as necessary. Remember that the body heat of patrons will add to the auditorium's temperature. A house that is too warm or too cold will adversely affect the audience reaction to the performance. It is good to check house temperature several times during each show.

ASIDE: Only experience with a particular house will tell the House Manager as to what degree he/she must heat or cool the auditorium to compensate for the body heat from the expected audience.

Air in the house must always smell sweet and fresh. If the house has been closed all day, it may be necessary to open some of the emergency doors and start the fans to freshen the air.

At times, cans of old stage paint will have been left backstage. They give off a very nauseating odor when the paint starts to ferment. Usually the House Manager can simply put these cans out in the alley and request the stage manager to see about disposing of them as soon as possible.