An Introduction to Technical Theatre
If you want to be at the center of everything and carry a great amount of responsibility and pressure, then you probably aspire to be a stage manager. The stage manager can be one of the first people to be brought on board for a production. They may become involved around the same time the creative team is assembled and begin by scheduling the initial meetings for a new production, which allows them to be involved with the entire production process. Or, they may be brought in just prior to the beginning of rehearsals. Regardless of when a stage manager’s time with a production begins, their responsibilities and focus throughout the life of the production will go through a series of changes.

In this collaborative art of theatre, careful coordination of all of the constituent elements is crucial for success. Managing the schedules and communication of all the people involved in the production is one of the most complicated parts of the stage manager’s job. From designers to crews, producers to performers, house staff to ushers, the flow of communication between individuals is central to the production. Facilitating this communication is by no means the only responsibility a stage manager assumes, but it is representative of the special glue that this person provides to a production. Coordination of calendars and schedules for an entire company is an increasingly difficult task in our modern society, yet we all must be there in the room to make this art happen. The creation of a rehearsal calendar often falls to the stage manager. To help facilitate communication among the company, the stage manager publishes a contact sheet listing each member of the company, their role in the production, and their contact information. Stage managers also frequently run the auditions by scheduling the actors, collecting their contact information and schedules, and ensuring everyone gets needed breaks to work at their best. Once casting decisions have been made, all rehearsal and performance schedule conflicts must be addressed, and the stage manager publishes a final rehearsal schedule along with a complete contact sheet.

As a central figure in contact with all aspects of the production, the stage manager is uniquely suited to see that something only communicated to some may need to be passed on to others who will also be affected. The best way to achieve this clarity is to always communicate through the stage manager (or at least always copy them on
your communication). Think of a bicycle wheel representing communication. If the company members are the spokes along the outer rim, the stage manager is at the center hub. All of the communication coming into the center and then distributed out to all concerned. For instance, if the director decides to have a performer sit in a seat in the audience, the stage manager knows this must be coordinated with the box office so a ticket for that seat is not sold for any performance. In addition, stage managers know the lighting designer needs to be aware if actors will be performing in a nontraditional acting area.

Often the members of the creative team finalizes their designs for a production around the time a play is cast. Prior to the first rehearsal, the stage manager needs to ask the designers for copies of plans and designs to facilitate the rehearsal process. The main plan required is a scaled ground plan of the stage design. The stage manager uses this plan to lay out a series of tapelines on the floor of the rehearsal space that represent key elements of the stage design. Tapelines stand in for walls, doors, windows, stairs, and major furniture elements. Often the rehearsal space is not as large as the stage space, and decisions about what and how to best represent the design may need to be made.

There’s More to Know

Laying out a tape plan for rehearsals on stage or on the rehearsal space floor requires a scaled ground plan from the set designer. This plan will be drawn to scale and may be \( \frac{1}{4} \)-inch, \( \frac{1}{2} \)-inch, or another scale set. It is standard practice for the set designer to provide a “measured plan” which lists key measurements and minimizes the amount of scale measurements a stage manager needs to interpret. When laying out a space, corners and intersections are measured from the centerline of the stage. This reference line runs down the center of the stage from the upstage wall to the downstage edge of the stage. Measuring from the centerline helps ensure the elements are laid out proportionately in the space.

A scale rule is a specialized ruler that measures in a variety of scales. It is normally a triangular ruler that reads on each face from each direction allowing for 12 scales to be represented on one ruler. Architectural rather than engineering scales are used for theatre.
After organizing initial meetings with the design team, the stage manager must look forward into the process as ideas are solidified for the production’s design. If the costume designer advances the idea that the central character will have many wardrobe changes during the performance, the stage manager can be thinking ahead about the number of backstage dressing crew needed to run the show. If special effects are being considered, the stage manager looks closely at the technical rehearsal schedule to ensure the necessary time is built in to rehearse these elements. If the production uses actors who are unionized, the stage manager (who is usually represented by the same union) looks out for elements such as raked stages or atmospheric effects like fog—the use of which is regulated by the union contract. During this phase, a stage manager’s role is to be supportive of the creative team, while at the same time informing them of the consequences of production choices.

Often a design presentation is scheduled for the company around the time of the first rehearsal so the creative team can describe designs to the cast.

### There’s More to Know

Recording the blocking (actors’ movements) is an important function of the stage manager. During rehearsals, the company may try multiple traffic patterns before they settle on the correct movement for the production. It can be difficult to remember the option chosen, and a record of the movement is vital. You can also imagine that because blocking is changed repeatedly, it must be recorded in pencil so that it can be updated throughout the rehearsal period. Stage managers tend to use a shorthand notation to record blocking in the relatively small margins of the script pages. A key to their notations should be kept with the prompt book so others can read the notations. Software is now available to facilitate blocking notation.

You will probably need to abbreviate all of the characters’ names as well as common movements and actions. An example of some shorthand notation might be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ENT</td>
<td>Enter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXT</td>
<td>Exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→</td>
<td>toward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross DS of</td>
<td>Cross US of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kneel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick Up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put Down</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the rehearsal process, the stage manager ensures a safe and productive work environment, breaks are taken as needed, and records both the blocking of the actors and notes of the rehearsal so as the show’s needs develop, all affected parties can adjust to support those needs. Daily rehearsal reports are sent to the production team with information and questions to keep the show on track.

During the rehearsal process, the creative team is invited to see a few rehearsals so they can see how the show is progressing. The first of these invited rehearsals is commonly called a stumble-through. This rehearsal occurs soon after the entire show has been blocked, and the actors try their best to represent all of the movement in the rehearsal so designers can get a sense of the shape of the show, of how the set is used, and, for the lighting designer, where people stand. Later, as the show continues to progress and develop, run-throughs are scheduled so designers can see the progress again prior to technical rehearsals.

Toward the end of the rehearsal process, it is common for productions to incorporate sound into the rehearsal room. The playback of cues and music is handled by the stage manager and allows a better integration of sonic elements prior to technical rehearsals. It may also allow the stage manager to record sound element cues into their prompt book.
In order to make sure the stage manager has all the various cues recorded in their prompt book, some more complicated productions may require a paper tech session, when the director and designers are present to talk through and coordinate the placement and timing of cue sequences for the production. These cues are fine-tuned during the actual technical rehearsals, but may need to be discussed in advance to make the most of the time in the theatre with a full production staff. In addition to the actual cues called to make changes in lighting, sound, and shifting scenery (also: video, spotlights, effects, music), the stage manager places warning cues in their prompt book so crew who have been idle for long periods of time are made aware they have a cue coming up soon.

**There’s More to Know**

Cue light systems have become standard for many theatres. This system of colored lights allows a stage manager to communicate “warning,” “stand-by,” and “go” commands to both actors and technicians without audible communication. Lights are placed backstage in areas visible to those needing the cue, and a relay station in the stage manager’s booth allows them to turn each light on and off.

After the sets and lights have been loaded into the theatre, several special rehearsals and showings may be scheduled. A spacing rehearsal might be scheduled to allow actors to become familiar with the set. A lighting rehearsal may be called in which the lighting designer shows a director preset cues or “looks” without the performers being present. A costume parade may be scheduled to see each character in their wardrobe under the stage lights for final adjustments. A sitzprobe may be scheduled for a musical performance wherein the cast and orchestra rehearse together in the performance space (most often seated) without following show blocking.

Prior to technical rehearsals, the stage manager ensures all prop tables are set up and labeled, headsets are available for crew as needed, adequate safety lighting is available backstage, and amenities such as fresh water and off-stage chairs are set for the cast.

The technical rehearsal process requires the stage manager to change their focus from the protected environment of the rehearsal room to the busy and complicated environment of the performance space. They are now in charge of the stage crew as well as the cast and have the design team on site finalizing their work as well. Timing is usually tight with much to be accomplished. Many of the people now involved have never seen this production in rehearsal, do not know the cast, and need to be led through a process that involves a great deal of communication. Much of this communication is accomplished over a headset system rather than face-to-face. All of these elements must become coordinated into a working unit, and this is the new focus of the stage manager. Again, clear communication is crucial in this process.
Some productions conduct a two-part technical rehearsal process beginning with a dry tech, when the performers are not present, allowing the crew to become familiar with the elements they control and to rehearse their cues and shifts with stand-ins as needed to represent the cast. The next step is a wet tech, which incorporates the actors. There is certainly value in separating these rehearsals, especially if there are many shifts in a show or when safety is of particular concern. Other companies may begin with a wet tech, incorporating everyone at once. This choice makes more sense if the actors actually help move items in transitions or if many costume changes are integral to the performance.

Once the technical rehearsals are complete and the cues and shifts are established and properly recorded into the prompt book, the production moves into dress rehearsals. The stage manager’s focus must adjust again. Now the entire company is engaged, and rehearsals begin to run as if they were public performances. Actors inhabit dressing rooms, calls to places are made over intercom systems and backstage monitors, and everyone works in every corner of the theatre space. The stage manager keeps all of these individuals focused and on schedule. The stage manager now takes the reins in hand to drive the performance, calling all the cues, breaks, and, if necessary, holds. They also continue to produce daily reports of all rehearsal activity.

Many companies hold preview performances prior to the official opening of a production. These previews allow the company to adjust to the presence of the audience. They can be especially important in establishing comic timing. Over a preview period it is common for the company to hold work sessions during the day to continue to refine the performance and to incorporate adjustments based on the public’s response from these shows. During this time, the stage manager again switches focus from operation to rehearsal and then back to operation.

Once the show officially opens, the stage manager’s focus shifts again. The director’s contract is often at an end, and the stage manager now becomes responsible not only for running the show, but also for maintaining the integrity of the production. It is the stage manager’s new responsibility to ensure the production looks and sounds the same on the 400th performance as it did on opening night. If an actor or operator begins to stray from that performance, it is the stage manager’s job to let them know they need to come back to the work that was set by the director. Actors and stage managers are represented by the same trade union to clarify this role, which might seem disciplinary within a company. Sometimes a stage manager is called upon to run put-in rehearsals for replacement performers who take over roles in a running production.

During all performances the stage manager checks to ensure the stage space is safe, all necessary elements are functioning and in place, all personnel are accounted for, and the show is generally ready to entertain its audience. A half-hour before the show’s start time, the stage manager makes a series of announcements to the company letting them know how long they have prior to places call. If required, the
stage manager also runs a **fight call** to ensure actor safety prior to opening the house to the public.

Once a performance has concluded, the stage manager checks in with all departments to ensure everything is prepped for the next show. Costume repairs or any other needed work is scheduled so things will be in place for the next performance. When a show closes at the end of its run, the stage manager normally prepares the prompt book and all notes on running the production for the theatre’s archives.

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**For Further Exploration**

