



SMOOTH



# How a stage manager's clear signals can bring the show safely home

BY LAURIE KINCMAN

WHEN FRIENDS or family ask me to explain what I do, I sometimes compare my job to an air traffic controller: I make sure all the planes stay in the air, avoid crashing into one another, and arrive on time—without actually being in the cockpit of any of them.

The stage manager of a theatrical production does not act, design, build, or direct. As a stage manager, I capture the details of the actors' blocking; create and update lists of necessary props, set pieces and costumes; use a daily report to relay key facts and questions from each night's rehearsal to the production team; and try to keep everyone on schedule so that by opening night the show is ready for an audience. Effective communication with all of the personnel on the show is the key to success. Stage managers who are tactful, timely, and specific in both their written and in-person interactions will lead their teams to opening night without any mid-air collisions or lost luggage along the way.

## Managing people

I stage managed my first show in high school. While I didn't understand all the intricacies of the job, two things were instantly clear. I was not the director of the show—nor did I want to be. But I was suddenly

in charge of telling my friends when they were late, messing up their lines, and changing their blocking from the director's instructions. I was excited about the job, but managing my peers was daunting.

In a professional theatre setting, it is fairly easy to keep personal life separate from work. But in an academic theatre setting, it can be difficult to draw that line. The stage manager does not suddenly have some sort of "teacher" status. The stage manager is not "better than" the actors or the crew. The stage manager ensures that all parts of the production come together, but that responsibility does not translate into power. It can be fun to be in the know and share details from auditions or a meeting. But think about how you would want to be treated and remember mutual respect goes a long way. The lead actor could be your best friend or the guy who dumped you last month. Your job as the stage manager is to support the actors in their work—not to cover for your BFF who can't show up on time, or unnecessarily chastise the ex when he forgets a line. Establish boundaries. Whether you are receiving money or a grade for your work, if you approach the job professionally and leave personal histories offstage, then your peers can do the same.

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# LANDINGS

If you are lucky enough to be working with one or more assistant stage managers on your show, use this resource wisely. Theatre is a team sport. Empower them to help you document the process and run the production. There is no way a single person can write down every piece of blocking, note when and where each prop moves, calculate the time available for a fast costume change, and keep track of when the actors are due for their next break. You might think of the ASM as someone with little experience who is best suited to sweeping the floor and setting out props. And as a new stage manager, you may fear competition or worry that a great ASM will be a threat to you. Big mistake.

Get your whole team involved and invested in the production at the beginning. Each member of the team can take responsibility for capturing one set of details, and the team as a whole can take on large projects and the daily set-up. You are not shirking responsibility by delegating; you are looking out for the production. Think

ahead to tech rehearsals and performances: while you are out front tackling the challenge of calling precisely timed lighting and sound cues, who will be in the best position to see why a piece of scenery did not quite make it onstage during a transition? Who is close enough to the scene shop (or the roll of gaff tape) to make an emergency prop repair just minutes before the item is needed?

Take time before rehearsals begin to talk through your team's approach. Write down how your areas of focus will intersect. Clear communication from the stage management team begins with clear communication within it.

### Managing information

In my book *The Stage Manager's Toolkit*, I describe how a stage manager assembles many details into a big picture at a single moment: "...what the scenic design drawings tell you about the stairs to your set's second floor, what the director asks an actor to do during scene three, and what the costume shop shares about the length

of the skirt that actor is wearing at the time. Just as you rely on more than one source to formulate the big picture of that moment, you will use a combination of written and verbal communication strategies to ensure the cast and production team members not only understand all of the facts but also how those facts impact one another. A rehearsal note is valuable, but so is facilitating a conversation which allows designers to discuss and coordinate their efforts. As more people become involved, especially if compromise will be needed, the stage manager should consider whether the chart or the chat best serve the production as a whole."

### The face-to-face factor

Even in today's era of instant communication, there is tremendous value in talking to people face to face. A personal exchange can feel important: you've taken the time to walk over to the prop shop or to seek out an actor. A conversation is also more intimate: rather than embarrass your cast member in front of others



## YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN SM TEAM ASSIGNMENTS

Laurie Kincman (SM)	Teah Crow (ASM)	Joe Reuss (ASM)
Blocking & Scheduling	Scenery	Costumes
Lighting & Sound Cues	Props	Special Effects
Prompting/Line Notes	Prompting/Line Notes	Prompting/Line Notes
Booth	SL	SR

A sample breakdown of the SM team's "divide and conquer" approach on a show.



about why he or she is routinely late to rehearsal, you have created an opportunity for him or her to share something in confidence. If the news for the prop master is that something isn't working, you avoid making a public declaration. Additionally, when talking face-to-face, you can clarify comments if you are misunderstood or ask additional questions right away if an answer is unclear.

But remember, when a conversation is in real time, you can't hit the "undo." If it turns out you did not have enough information or the right information before you spoke, you can damage your credibility. If it is a bad time to ask a question and you forge ahead anyway, you could get drawn into someone else's bad mood. In the moment, it can be tough to recognize the difference between someone who is yelling toward you (venting) and someone who is yelling at you.

#### *Actions speak, too*

Many researchers have studied non-verbal communication and how people use it to share information. According to one of the most well-known of these studies, seven percent of a message is conveyed through words, thirty-eight percent through vocal characteristics like tone and tempo, and fifty-five percent through body language including gestures, eye contact, and even posture.

So what does this mean for you as a stage manager? Listen with your ears and your eyes. The technical director may say it is okay for the director to have one of the actors punch a hole in a wall of the set during each performance, but does she have her hands on her hips, a frown on her face, and hostility in her tone? Is the crew member who broke something during last night's show crossing his arms, suggesting he expects to be blamed and is gearing up to be defensive? As you become adept at reading these signs in others, you will be able to notice them in yourself as well. Do you shy away from making eye contact, suggesting you are less confident or knowledgeable than you

really are? Do you sit at the rehearsal table resting your head in your hand, implying that you are bored by the work? As you gain experience, it will be easier to take into account that unspoken part of an exchange.

#### *Putting it in writing*

Just as some information is best shared in person, other details should be communicated in writing. In *The Stage Manager's Toolkit*, I provide some examples: "It can be quicker to post the change to next week's rehearsal schedule on the callboard than to call each actor in your cast. It will be more efficient to share an update with the entire production team in an email rather than to wait a week to announce it during the next meeting, and certainly more practical if they are spread across the country—or even just across the city. It is more effective to share large amounts of detailed information in a chart or list rather than to explain each fact over the period of an hour. And if the idea of thinking about inflection and body language is daunting, it may seem safer to share news in writing. Surely it is easier to convey a director's dislike of a new prop or the unavailability of an actor for a costume fitting when there is no chance of an immediate in-person negative response."

Generally, communicating in writing is considered to be more formal than talking in person. The stage manager does not need to write notes in paragraphs, but you should be thorough and professional. Use proper spelling and grammar, remain neutral when conveying facts, and avoid using "text speak" or trying to cram an update into 140 characters so you can tweet it. Be sure to proofread, because spell check will never catch errors with names, dates, or times. Most importantly, provide context so that your notes make sense. Email quickly disseminates information, but it cannot transport the stage manager along with the message to explain it. You lose control of a message when you hit send. Inside jokes can backfire. Also, you cannot prevent people from

forwarding a report or an individual message. Anything sent electronically can be sent to anyone, so treat all written communication as public information.

Written communication has advantages too. You can rewrite a rehearsal report note several times before sending it out, making sure it is specific and clear. You can send the same information to many people at once with email. And you can use color, font, and other design elements to draw attention to new information.

#### *Blending*

Ultimately, determining the best avenue for sharing information comes down to the stage manager's judgment. Is there too much room for misinterpretation about a note to put it in writing? Conversation. Is there not enough time to deliver a piece of information personally to several people? Email. Is this general information requiring little or no immediate action? Callboard.

Often you will need multiple methods. Early blocking rehearsals are notorious for generating many prop notes. A follow-up visit to the shop provides the opportunity for in-person clarification of last night's report. A question for several designers can be posed at a production meeting, with notes from the discussion reflected in the meeting's minutes. You might announce tomorrow's rehearsal schedule at the end of the day and then post it on a show website so actors can refer to it. Duplication can be helpful, especially if it is mixing active (announcements and discussions) and passive (postings and email) distribution methods.

#### **Managing the process**

An effective stage manager can discuss the small details of a show as well as the big picture. The stage manager is in the best position to identify potential problems. Do you need a duplicate of an important item? With so much stage time, what is the likelihood it could get lost or broken, and how would that impact the performance?

# Anatomy of a Rehearsal Report

PERHAPS THE SINGLE most important piece of communication generated by the stage manager is the daily rehearsal report, sent out to all the members of the production team. The report should include any artistic, technical, or facilities notes that come up during rehearsals, as well as questions that arise from the director, actors or even you. This sample report demonstrates how to capture all of the details of a single day's work.

## Some important tactics to note:

- The report uses both white space and lines to guide the reader around the document.
- The production team is more concerned with individual notes than with the rehearsal rundown, so those items are in a slightly smaller font. Providing the next day's schedule helps to ensure that key items for that rehearsal will be available.
- Notes are written in complete sentences using "please" and "thank you" when appropriate.
- During blocking, the director discovered a problem with sneaking actors in place behind the castle door. By posing a question about this in note twelve, the stage manager allowed for the scenic designer and director to discuss the situation and find a solution.
- The stage manager should expect that production areas will read their own notes thoroughly, the miscellaneous notes quickly, and the notes of other departments not at all. Direct a designer's attention to out-of-area notes. In this report, the costume designer is asked to read two prop notes.
- Trying to write out a number of small score cuts for the lighting designer would have been tedious and less effective than discussing them in person. But alerting him that the information is en route allows him to plan to spend some time on the problem.
- Indicate when there is nothing new for a department, rather than

REHEARSAL REPORT		
Production: <u>Young Frankenstein</u>		
Date: <u>Wednesday February 5</u>		
Stage Manager: <u>Laurie Kinman</u>		
Assistant Stage Managers: <u>Teah Crow, Joe Reuss</u>		
Guests: <u>None</u>		
Call Began : <u>6:30 pm</u> Breaks: <u>7:55 (10)</u> Ended <u>9:30 pm</u>		
Late: <u>Madrzak (15), Steidl (exc)</u> Absent: <u>none</u>		

Rehearsal Breakdown		
Time	What	Who
6:30-7:05 pm	Act Two Music with Gary	Full Company except O'Hara, Sreen
7:05-9:30 pm	Review Blocking from Top of Act II (with music) and then keep going	Beyer, Boydston, Bush, Cooke, Cornwell, Costello, Farnshaw, Gray, Holloway, Holmes, Johnson, Katschke, Madrzak, Masterson, Mian, Napolski, Novak, O'Hara, Schneider, Steidl, Taylor, Varels, Ward, Williams, Wilson, Youngren

Next Rehearsal Thursday February 6		
Time	What	Who
6:30-8:30 pm	Choreography: "Family Business"	Beyer, Boydston, Cooke, Gray, Holloway, Madrzak, Masterson, Steidl
8:30-9:30 pm	Choreography: "Surprise"	Beyer, Boydston, Cornwell, Gray, Katschke, Steidl, Ward, Williams

Scenery/Technical Direction (Mandy and Ron):	
11. Could there be a place in the bookcase unit for Frederick to put back the 3 books he is holding at the top of I-7?	
12. Is it possible for an actor to get to the upstage side of the castle door unit without being seen?	
Props (Mandy)	
13. Please ADD (3) suitcases for three female passengers in I-3, in addition to those already on the prop list.	
14. Frederick will use the stethoscope in both I-10 and II-2.	
15. The stone fell out of Elizabeth's engagement ring when she tossed it offstage tonight. The ASMs found it and put it in the ring box.	
Lights (Nick):	
16. Laurie has some additional score cuts in and "Family Business" to give you.	
Costumes (Joe)	
Please see prop notes #14 and 15	
17. Thank you for Igor's cape and hood—it worked great and he did not have any problems hearing or tripping over it.	
FITTINGS	
Thursday February 6	
1:00 pm- Connor O'Hara	
1:45 pm- Katy Williams	
Friday February 7	
1:00 pm- Mitchell Gray	
1:15 pm- Casey Schneider	
Sound (Ron):	
No notes tonight, thank you.	
Miscellaneous:	
No other notes tonight, thank you.	

Thanks everyone,  
Laurie Kinman, SM

simply leaving the box blank. This makes it clear that there are no notes.

- Share good news as well. The costume shop allowed Igor to work with some costume pieces in rehearsal. Note seventeen documents that everything worked. This is useful because the designer was not at rehearsal to see how it went.

—L.K.

I recently closed a production of *Young Frankenstein*. We spent several rehearsals and meetings talking about prop brains. Early in act one, a brain appears in a glass jar. Later in the act, Igor carries a brain onto the stage—where it is dropped and stepped on. Finally, just moments later, that same brain is transplanted into the head of Frankenstein's monster. In theory, each of these three moments was separate enough for the same prop to be used, and the actors' entrances and exits made this possible. As the production manager for the show I supported the cost savings of using only a single prop. But as the stage manager, I could not help but worry. What if Igor damaged the brain when he stepped on it? We could likely glue it back together for the next day, but what prop would be inserted into the monster's head? What if the brain rolled into the orchestra pit when it was dropped? I communicated these concerns in a production meeting and the director and designers were able to visualize the scenarios themselves and support the acquisition of a second prop. Using my team's tracking notes I charted a plan so that a single backup would ensure the show could go on. And sure enough, the brain did roll into the orchestra pit during two separate performances!

One of the toughest things to learn as a stage manager is when to step in. If a costume rips or a piece of scenery breaks during a performance, of course your problem-solving skills take over and you find a temporary fix. But during rehearsals, when the full staff is working on the show, the situation is different. It is your responsibility to present problems—not offer solutions. Through the rehearsal report, the stage manager speaks up if that a scene change is taking longer than the piece of transition music the sound designer has provided, if a piece of furniture is too heavy to be carried by the actor tasked to do so, or if an actress in a long skirt has been blocked to run up a flight of stairs. It is not your place, however, to inform the costume designer that

the skirt needs to be shortened or request that the props department pull a lighter piece of furniture. Be careful not to imply that someone on your team has made a poor choice or done a bad job. Have a solution ready, in case you are asked, but be prepared not to be asked. You have fulfilled your responsibility just by presenting the facts, allowing the correct personnel to work on the solution.

I never told the director or designer to go buy a new prop brain. And I didn't just order one myself. I laid out the details and shared my concerns for potential problems onstage. When asked, I shared that the brain in the glass jar from the first scene could double as the transplant brain and that the stage management team could track it to the correct location for the actors to bring onstage. And that question only came my way after the team decided acquiring another brain was a good idea and wanted to

know if we needed two or three. The stage manager was the best source of the information. My opinion had a valid place at the table. Potential problem communicated, discussed, and solved.

EXPERIENCE BUILDS confidence. I have been in this business for decades and have never thought for a moment that I am done learning. Be tactful, timely, and specific; listen with your ears and your eyes; trust your team, and you will grow in the job. A successful stage manager is not someone who has all the answers. A successful stage manager knows what questions to ask. ▼

*This article draws on Laurie Kincman's book The Stage Manager's Toolkit, published by Focal Press. For more information, visit Focal Press online [www.focalpress.com/books/details/9780415663199/](http://www.focalpress.com/books/details/9780415663199/).*

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