



A New Perspective for the Theatre Classroom By Laurie Kineman

Published in *TD&T*, Vol. 47 No. 4 (fall 2011)

Theatre Design & Technology, the journal for design and production professionals in the performing arts and entertainment industry, is published four times a year by United States Institute for Theatre Technology. For information about joining USITT or to purchase back issues of *TD&T*, please contact the USITT office:

USITT
315 South Crouse Avenue, Suite 200
Syracuse, NY 13210
tel: 800-93-USITT (800-938-7488)
tel: 315-463-6463
fax: 315-463-6525
e-mail: info@office.usitt.org
web: www.usitt.org

Copyright 2011 United States Institute for Theatre Technology, Inc.

a NEW PERSPEC

THEATRE

for the

CLASSROOM

by Laurie Kinckman

Traditional video documentation from the audience's point of view can be successfully incorporated in a wide array of theatre courses. The vibrancy of the art form almost demands it. Video components appeal to visual learners, provide a point of commonality for all students in the classroom, and introduce a practical application of theoretical information. In nearly every case lectures and discussions improve with the introduction of multimedia. I regularly incorporate visuals in my teaching, combining archival DVDs available for commercial purchase with YouTube clips posted by theatre companies around the country as part of efforts to publicize current offerings.

But this perspective of the show is not an effective choice for a stage management course because it presents the production without context. I tried utilizing the sources that had served

me well in my appreciation or arts administration courses, but found that here the material undercut the points I was trying to demonstrate. To be successful as a tool for educating stage managers the media needs to document not only what happens but how.

A member of the team from the first day, the stage manager first focuses on the collection and dissemination of information as discoveries are made in the rehearsal hall. This task requires sensitivity and precision in order to ensure that the entire team proceeds toward the same vision. At the end of the process, the blending of artistic sensibility and technical proficiency becomes most visible in the calling of a show—giving precise cues to the technicians about when and how to execute lighting, sound, and scenic changes.

These important skills are very difficult to develop strictly in a classroom setting because it is responsiveness in the moment that makes the work a success. The challenge is how to create a virtual learning environment which can capture important nuances in the context in which the stage manager will experience them during an actual play or musical.

Unable to find an existing source for the footage I wanted, I set out to make my own. I filmed and edited a series of short production excerpts from the stage manager's point of view for



The audience's view of a scene from *Rent*.



The stage manager's view of the show.

TIVE

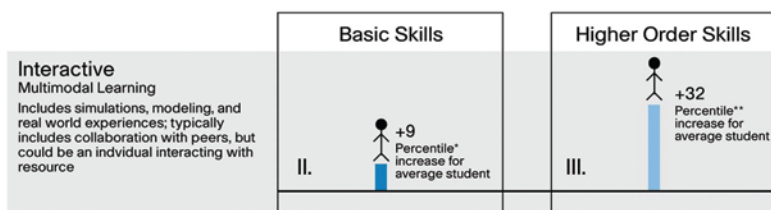
By introducing highlights from actual rehearsals into the classroom, students have the ability to observe, process, and discuss that dynamic.

use in the classroom. This introduction to the world from the rehearsal table and control booth has proven itself a valuable teaching tool. It has enabled students to respond to their team and their environment more easily and to execute their role during realized productions more successfully.

Pedagogical Precedents

Multimodal learning has become increasingly popular as technology has advanced. Although perhaps most visibly touted in distance learning as a strategy to overcome individual student isolation, the successes are no less tangible in the classroom. Multimodal instruction makes use of simultaneous verbal and nonverbal presentation of information in order to maximize the ways in which it can impact the student.

The Impact of Multimodal Learning in Comparison to Traditional, Unimodal Learning
Findings Reported Separately for Basic Skills and Higher Order Skills, and by the Inclusion or Absence of Interactivity



Research summary data regarding multimodal learning as presented in 2008 by The Meteri Group in the report *Multimodal Learning Through Media: What the Research Says*.

In his article “An Integrated Model of Multimedia Effects on Learning,” author Andy Hede summarized a number of factors of learning. These include visual input, auditory input, learner control, attention, working memory, motivation, cognitive engagement, intelligence, reflection, and long-term storage (Hede 2002). By utilizing multiple learning factors, an instructor can more effectively engage students.

The specific potential for video has been categorized by Cheryl Lemke and colleagues as follows: “The power of television and video for learning lies in the use of multimedia to engage students visually, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and

civically in facets of the academic content. Visual learning can result in increased engagement as well as increased complexity, depth, and breadth of experience to improve student academic performances (Lemke 2009).”

This is particularly true in the performing arts. Theatre has a unique ability to appeal to audiences through both visual and verbal means. In order to best understand how to execute this impact, students need a learning environment which incorporates both of these components.

The Project

In large part, the success of a stage manager will be judged on his or her ability to process nuanced information. During the rehearsal period for a production this translates into the ability to understand what a director may mean as opposed to what he or she said, and to turn this observation into a well-articulated note delivered to the production team.

A rehearsal room can be a daunting place, particularly in academic theatre. The student stage manager is often reluctant to interpret the words of a faculty member and may default to presenting notes in an “as is” fashion. It is important that students learn that the stage manager’s job is to clarify and not correct the director, allowing them to become more comfortable with this relationship. By introducing highlights from actual rehearsals into the classroom, students have the ability to observe, process, and discuss that dynamic.

Perspective-changing multimedia is perhaps at its best when used during units devoted to calling cues. During the show, the stage manager is typically located in the back of the theatre, often on another floor, and is separated from the stage

by distance and physical barriers such as glass windows. He or she sits in relative darkness, listening to the production over a speaker and speaking to the technicians through an intercom system. This is common knowledge to seasoned stage managers, but can come as quite a surprise to a novice. The stage manager must develop the skills to maintain a tactile relationship to the show despite these barriers so he or she can respond

to nightly changes in energy and emotion. An advance understanding of the view they will have and the tools on which they will depend enables students to find touch points to transition with them from the rehearsal hall to the theatre and reduce the challenges posed by their environment.

Another key component of the actual working conditions is the “fear factor.” The expectations for a stage manager can be overwhelming, particularly for a student helming his or her first show. Added to this is the constrained time table on which most academic theatre productions operate. Despite spending four weeks or more on staging and character work, it is common for only a few days to be devoted to the all-important technical rehearsal period. Each night is often a one-shot affair. If a cue sequence goes well, the stage manager must remember

the relationship of his or her words to the specifics of the performances and try to replicate that success the following night. If a cue sequence goes poorly, the student must try to process the problems and make coherent notes of an appropriate adjustment for the next day while following along with the script and preparing for the next set of cues.

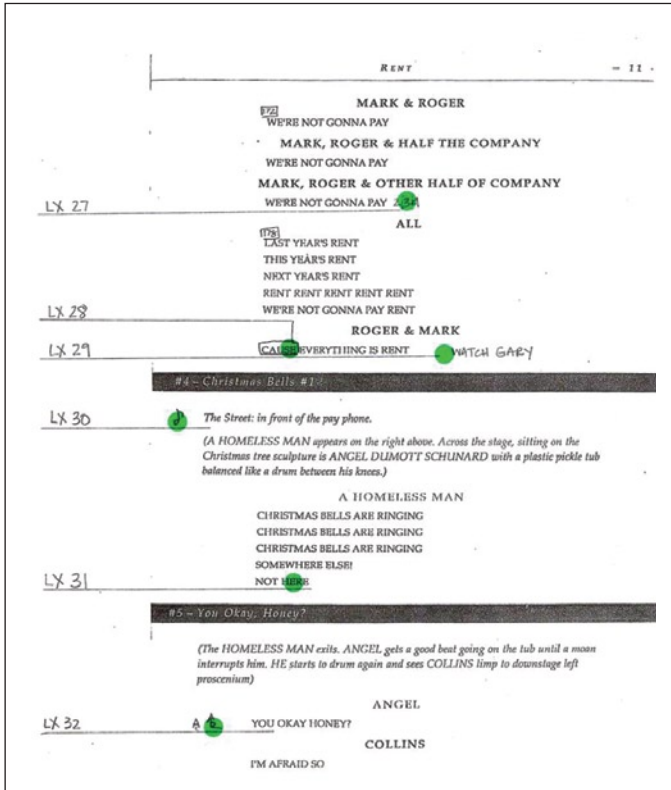
All of this can be discussed in class, but it is a relatively hollow topic without some way to make the information more relevant. To address this second set of learning objectives for my class, I sought to document a performance from the perspective of the stage manager.

referenced here features me calling a production of *Rent*, and utilizing an infrared stage shot and one of the conductor on two separate small monitors. (Since that time, cue lights have been installed in our theatre and are now part of the equipment to be documented.)

Supplemental documentation of the performance with a digital audio recorder was necessary to capture the intercom communication. It is over the headset system that cues are called, questions asked, and problems solved. The ongoing dialogue is a key aspect of calling a show as the stage manager must navigate this secondary narrative while the actors are on-stage delivering lines.

It is important that the data be collected all on the same night, as those nuanced moments to which students must become attuned will lead to slight variations. It can be impossible to match up the stage manager's narrative with the cues as they happen if the footage is from separate performances.

To provide additional context, I made copies of the relevant pages from the stage manager's prompt script, on which notes and cues are written. These pages would be shared with the class when the footage is viewed.



A page from the *Rent* prompt book.



The stage manager's booth.

Collecting Data

To create the virtual environment, I filmed both a rehearsal and a performance in progress using a digital video camera. For the rehearsal footage, the camera was located behind the table at which the stage managers sit, capturing their view of the room and the conversations they listen to and participate in.

The rehearsal footage was complete with this single source and would be prepared for classroom use with relative ease. Much less technology is in use in the rehearsal room, and because the stage manager has a close physical relationship to the action, less focused editing would be required to bring the environment to life.

A similar technique was used to capture the correct performance perspective. Rather than placing the camera in the audience for a shot isolated on the stage, it was located in the back of the stage management booth so that the show was again captured in context. Students are able to see both the show and the stage manager's view of it. The sample footage



The infrared camera's view of the stage.

■ The Recording Process

- * Place and test the camera until the angle allows viewing of both the stage manager and the stage itself. Establish a wide enough shot to document location of the prompt script, placement and use of cue lights, video monitors, etc.
- * Be sure the camera is capable of recording the feeds from the video monitors without distorting on screen.
- * If the audio recorder allows, opt to capture intercom feed off battery power rather than plugged in to avoid a hum that will be difficult to cancel out in editing.

■ Other Equipment You Will Need

- * Hard drive space to store individual files (the *Rent* files take about six gigabytes for a two-and-a-half-hour show)
- * Video editing software capable of combining multiple video and audio sources and allowing you to trim the video, add effects, and control selective focus.
- * Audio editing software capable of sharpening individual audio tracks, adjusting balance, pitch, and EQ as needed. Ideal if linked as part of a suite to your video software for ease in importing changes back to the movie file.



The conductor monitor.

Preparing Class Material

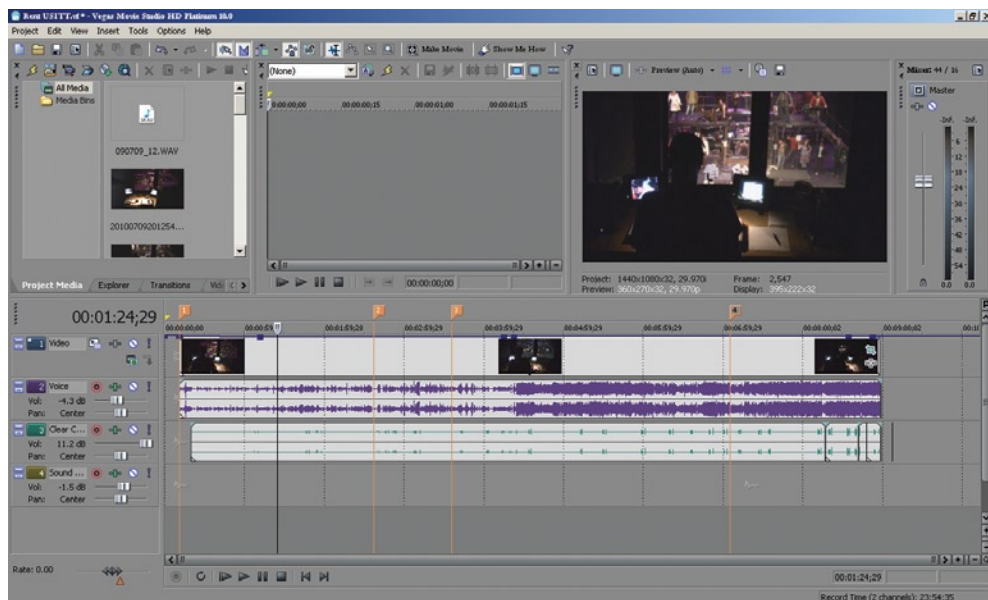
The digital video and audio footage were edited together using Sony's Vegas Movie Studio HD software suite. My software choices were ultimately governed by previous hardware choices made by my department—the PC in my office and a wonderful digital video camera with large internal hard drive but no capability to export via FireWire. This article references this camera and those PC-based tools, but a variety of software options exist for instructors on both the PC and Mac platforms. They can range from simple to complex, and from relatively inexpensive to significant investments. For my purposes, the Sony suite provided a solid mid-range set of editing tools, but any number of similar options will suffice.

Video editing software is necessary so that the individual digital components can be combined to create the most successful instructional tool. More sophisticated programs will support nuanced manipulation, but having class material that delivers this new perspective is far more important than having footage that does so looking as if it came from a Hollywood studio.

The Editing Process

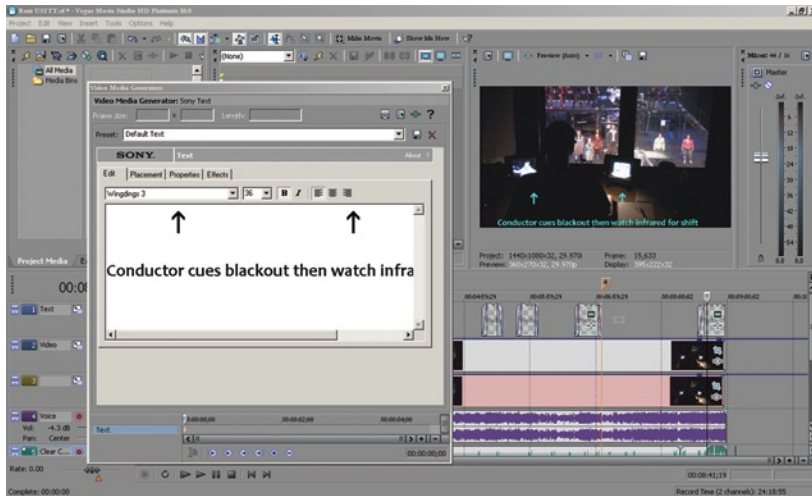
Import the video and audio tracks and get them appropriately lined up. No matter how noble the effort to push the record button on two devices simultaneously, there will inevitably be a slight discrepancy. The placement of the tracks on the editing timeline can be adjusted to correct this. My recordings featured a video track and two audio tracks. I have separate tracks for the native audio on the video camera and for the headset chatter recorded directly from the base station. You may find that the camera's audio track also captures the stage manager talking in the booth. This can be both a blessing and a curse when attempting to line up the two audio files. Given the choice, I recommend keeping the audio files distinct.

In the editing software, Vegas Movie Studio HD, the lower section of the master editing screen has visual representations of the tracks stacked in numerical order: track 1, video from the camera, is on top; track 2, audio from the camera, is in the middle; and track 3, audio from the intercom system, is on the bottom.

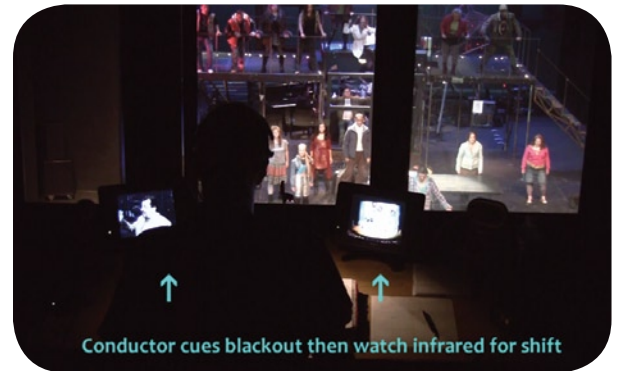




Highlighting or spotlighting portions of the video image can direct the student's attention. On the left is the original footage, in the middle, the spotlight effect has been added on a duplicate track, and on the right is the combined footage.



Text and other visual cues can be added in their own track and inserted to appear at appropriate moments in the video.



Select the portion of the production to use for the clip, and trim the video to just that material. This will make it much easier to navigate the timeline. It will also create a smaller file size, which will reduce the amount of time it will take for footage to render and make it easier to move the files between computers.

Clean up audio as needed to reduce noise and sharpen tone. The video software has independent volume controls for each audio track so you can determine the appropriate relative balance of the show versus the call and modulate that balance throughout the movie. More detailed editing can be done in a companion audio editing program.

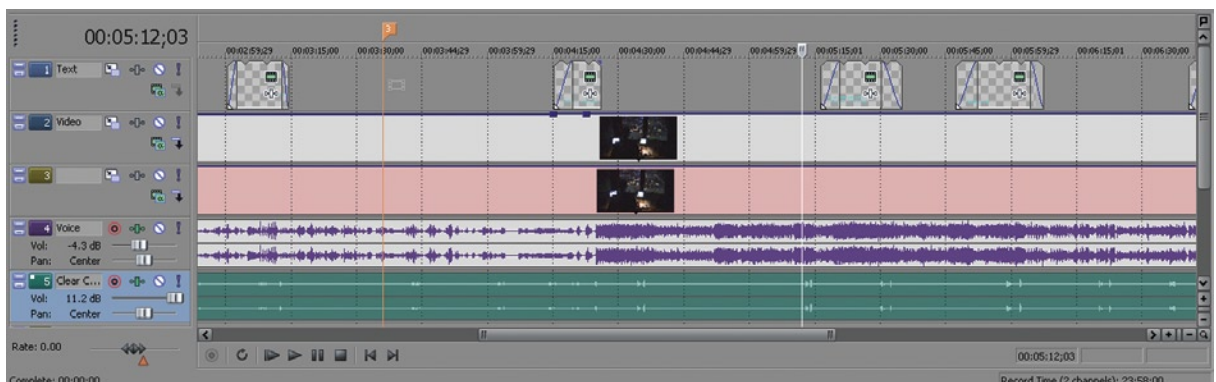
Duplicate the video track. This will allow you to add effects without losing the original footage. On the second video track, you can help to selectively focus the

student's attention by adding effects such as a "spotlight" and dimming the main video source.

Add a text track to the movie. By incorporating text, you can offer explanations of what to look or listen for in order to call cues. Text can be placed in very specific locations to allow precise notification, and can be set to fade up just before the important event, last as long as needed, and then fade out.

According to theories on guided discovery, "(it) is effective because it helps students meet two important criteria for active learning: (a) activating or constructing appropriate knowledge to be used for making sense of new incoming information and (b) integrating new incoming information with an appropriate knowledge base (Mayer 2004)."

By guiding their experience with this footage, I am able



The master editing screen now shows five tracks: text, video from camera, "spotlight" video, audio from camera, and audio from intercom system.

to focus the students' attention to individual details. This allows them to expend effort learning how and why these moments are important, rather than first having to identify these key details on their own.

For example, approximately ten seconds before the stage manager will call a cue making use of an infrared monitor, a note can appear on screen directing the students' attention to it. This ensures that when the moment arises for the stage manager to rely on that equipment, students in the class are watching for it and can assess how it aided the calling of the show. If left to discover the monitor on their own, students might be distracted by the sudden blacking out of the stage and notice it too late or not at all.

Render the edited footage and export as a self-contained movie. The master editing screen now has the three original imported files, plus the duplicate video and text tracks. It is complete at this point and can be processed and turned into a movie file. Your output choice should be based on the intended method of playback. The Sony software, as do most programs, accommodates exporting for playback in Quicktime or Windows Media Player, and other formats such as .avi or .mp4.

The Outcome

By utilizing this type of digital documentation, I have been able to tap into four of Hede's factors: visual input, auditory input, learner control, and cognitive engagement. The visual and auditory inputs are obvious—students are being presented material to both see and hear. Learner control is introduced through students' ability to pause the action and process individual moments at their own pace and as many times they desire.

Cognitive engagement comes as a next step to the material presented here. After the first successful introduction of the digital footage, viewing additional performances of the same show can demonstrate the slight differences that occur from night to night.

In addition to the primary performance footage, I captured the same moment in the show over several subsequent performances. (In actuality this began out of my desire to have options to choose from when editing, but upon viewing the footage I discovered this secondary benefit and ran with it!) Students see and hear the stage manager work from the same script-but making the minute adjustments to the call necessary for that performance. This provides the opportunity to evaluate the differences and discuss how and how quickly the stage manager assessed the need for such changes.

At the conclusion of these class activities, the student stage managers are then able to take this pretraining experience and integrate it into experiential learning situations when they are sitting in that same seat, calling cues for their own shows.

Much has been written about the need for preparation in order to successfully integrate this type of material into the classroom. Known as the Pretraining Principle, this work suggests that students learn better from interactive multimodal learning environments when they receive pretraining that activates or

provides relevant prior knowledge (Mayer and Wetzell 2002). Essentially, the theory calls for providing sufficient background to make the new material easily understood, particularly if it comes in a technical or multimedia format. The advantage is lost if the technology inhibits the learning process.

But while pretraining would normally be satisfied with the introduction of the basic terminology and technology prior to using multimedia materials in the classroom, this sort of digital documentation takes the principle a step farther. The media itself becomes expanded pretraining for the experiential learning which will come with an actual production assignment and the practical application of all skills from the classroom.

Implementation and Conclusions

Since first utilizing this new digital perspective in my classes, I have observed calculable changes in the quantity and quality of student learning. The rehearsal footage has become a key component of the section of my introductory class focusing on rehearsal hall dynamics. The short clip shows an exchange from day of blocking. The director stops to ask the stage manager a question about the set, processes her response, makes a decision about how to proceed, and gives that information to the actors involved.

The class watches the entire exchange and the subsequent actions of the stage manager to implement the decision. I then lead a discussion with the students regarding which elements would be important to relay to the designers and how best to

THE VIDEO IN ACTION

The finished *Rent* training video is available on the USITT website at www.usitt.org/tdt/StageManagementTraning/. The following time code markers identify locations of the added instructional enhancements.

- 0:50 added text to draw focus to the conductor camera
- 2:50 pointing out upcoming visual cues
- 5:06 a counting guide—if you are calling from the libretto you will still need to place the GO on a specific beat, but need a different way to document that if there is no lyric.
- 5:38 a simpler version of counting out a measure
- 6:31 another complex counting sequence
- 8:25 preparing to navigate a scene shift during a blackout

...control the content of the digital world,
prompting the next action as a show progresses
and experiencing a range of outcomes based
on their accuracy and choices.

write those notes. Students take time in class to compose those notes for a mock report, and then receive a copy of the actual report generated by that rehearsal. As a group we compare the class responses to the “real version” and discuss the choices made. This learning—combining visual, aural, and written



**You light the darkness.
plotLight handles the details.**

**Introducing the world's first intelligent online
lighting administration and paperwork tool**

powerful
intelligence

accessible
anywhere

collaborate
freely

promote
yourself

LDI 2011:
Booth #1516

or, available anytime:
www.plotLight.com

Access to plotLight requires an internet connection, a supported device, and acceptance of the plotLight Terms of Service.

components—helps prepare them for their own rehearsal process. First-time stage managers take away an improved ability to analyze moments in rehearsal and write articulate notes to the production team, as well as increased self-confidence when working with faculty members.

This past year I incorporated the performance footage in a section of my advanced stage management course focused on the musical and observed similar improvements. Students watched the footage for the first time at the beginning of the semester. Even after this minimal exposure to their future surroundings, I saw more honest starting self-assessments from the students about their current cue calling skills and areas for improvement. The video returned as part of detailed discussions and in-class exercises about calling cues, along with the additional variations of the same song on different performance nights. Analysis of the call, the corresponding placement of cue notes in the prompt script, and responding to variations in performances from night to night took on new depth.

At this point, I have only used the footage on the campus on which it was shot, but the idea of this new digital perspective has applications not reliant upon such familiarity. I am currently prepping a stage management workshop for a group of students I have never met, and who have never seen my theatre. With only a few adjustments, the material promises to enhance that experience as well. My vision for that application follows this general outline:

- 1: Watch a clip of the “audience version” of the production, asking students to look for cues. Provide a blank copy of the script pages for students to note what they see and when they think it might have been called.
- 2: Distribute actual pages from the prompt script and watch the audience version a second time. Students can note cues more precisely and start to see the difference between where a cue is noticeable and where it is called.
- 3: Watch the “from the booth” version. Now students can experience the actual call of the show, with their attention directed to specific visuals, important musical sections and how to count them, and the secondary narrative taking place over the headsets allowing the cues to be executed.

Incorporating this new teaching tool has made me a better teacher. I am able to provide my classes a reference point which is both specific to stage management and common to all students in the room. Assignments, discussions, and exams are able to explore detail rather than having to stay deliberately broad to reach students with little to no background. I am able to tailor individual clips to previous class questions,

allowing me to present a multimedia answer that will resonate more strongly with students and stay with them longer.

I began this process with very little video editing experience. I knew what I wanted as an end result and experimented until I found a way to make it work. As I continue to refine my filming and editing skills, I am researching options to go a step further and create a more interactive virtual environment, one in which learner control is not relegated to the pause and rewind buttons but instead mirrors the interplay present in today's computer games. Students could control the content of the digital world, prompting the next action as a show progresses and experiencing a range of outcomes based on their accuracy and choices.

Nothing will ever replace learning on your feet in the moment. But the growth of my program has not been paralleled by an increase in the number of productions in our season. This means that not everyone will get the amount of practical experience I might wish, or at the time they might want it. By developing a way to make the classroom time more useful, I can bridge the gap between participants and opportunities. ❖

Laurie Kincman is an AEA stage manager and an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, heading the Stage Management and Arts Administration emphases in the Department of Theatre Arts. She is a member of USITT and the Midwest Regional Section.

Sources

- Hede, Andy. 2002. "An Integrated Model of Multimedia Effects on Learning." *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia* 11 (4): 177.
- Lemke, C., E. Coughlin, and D. Reifsnieder. 2009. *Technology in schools: What the research says: An update*. Culver City, CA: Commissioned by Cisco.
- Mayer, Richard E. 2004. "Should There Be a Three-Strikes Rule Against Pure Discovery Learning?" *American Psychologist* 59: 14-19.
- Mayer, R.E., A. Mathias, and K. Wetzell. 2002. "Fostering Understanding in Multimedia Messages through Pre-training: Evidence for a Two-stage Theory of Mental Model Construction." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 8 (3): 147-154.

Boston University College of Fine Arts School of Theatre

Explore, Innovate,
and Create the Future
of American Theatre



Hedda Gabler, 2011

BFA and MFA Programs

- Design
- Management
- Production

Artisan Certificates

- Scene Painting
- Stage Management

Collaborate with our renowned faculty design team, headed by:

James Noone, Scene Design

Diane Fargo, Scene Painting

Mariann Verheyen, Costume Design

Mark Stanley, Lighting Design

Ben Emerson, Sound Design

www.bu.edu/cfa

**BOSTON
UNIVERSITY**

An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution.