

ALL IN IT TOGETHER

A crisis during a performance of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by the Seattle Theater Company illustrates how theater shows require teamwork. The production was very complicated, with hundreds of light and sound cues, and used thirty-six computer-controlled projectors. That's in addition to dozens of costume and set changes. Things were looking good after a great tech week, and the run was off to a lucky start.

Their luck did not last. One night, in the middle of the play, the pregnant stage manager fainted in the control booth. While the wardrobe staff attended to her, the assistant stage manager sprinted from backstage to grab her headset and continue giving cues from the prompt book, the copy of the script with all the cues in it. Although the stage manager was whisked off to the hospital, the show continued without interruption. Neither the audience nor the actors knew that the show had been saved with great teamwork! According to the entertaining and informative book *Technical Theater for Nontechnical People*, mother and baby were fine.



The stage manager usually is at the back of the auditorium, giving light and sound cues through the microphone on her headset.

Technical theater includes not only lighting and sound but also scenery, properties, and costuming. You'll all be working together to create an engaging, memorable world in which the actions of the performers take place. If the costumer creates a yellow dress, you'll know not to throw a blue light on it, or the audience will instead see a green dress. Suppose the props master has made a lightweight trunk that will be easy to **strike** (move it on/off the stage). But the director wants it to appear difficult to move. You could provide the sound effect of a heavy box being dragged. By applying your skill and creativity, you'll have come up with a solution that will please both the director and the props master. Best of all, you'll be "strutting your stuff" as a genuine team player.

Teamwork, communication, and respect combine to let everyone enjoy doing their best. There are even competitions for technical people. Each year, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln hosts the International Thespian Festival for high school students and teachers. The Tech Challenge at the festival showcases the different crews competing at their specialty. Search the internet to see what theatrical tech challenges are coming up in your state or region.

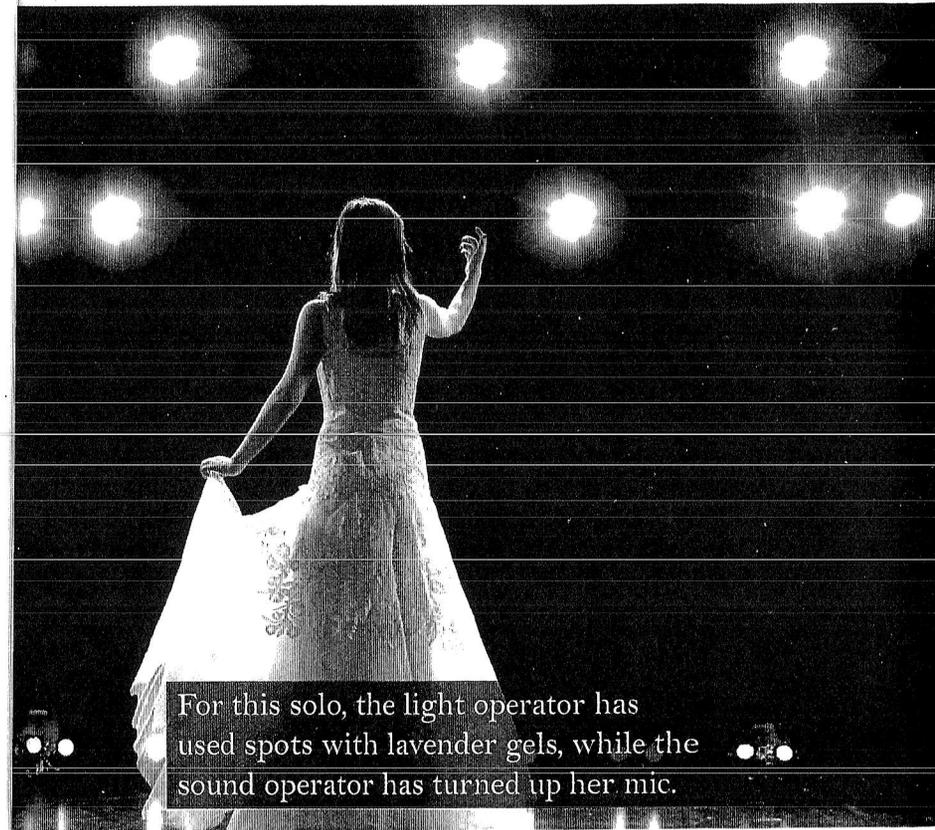
Taking Your Cue

The stage manager is responsible for coordinating the cast and crew. He or she works closely with the director to make sure the director's vision is carried out in the actual show. Most plays require both a stage manager and an assistant stage manager. It's the stage

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manager who will be giving the light and sound cues (and set cues) during the performance, usually from a booth at the back of the auditorium. The assistant stage manager will be managing from backstage. To hear just what that sounds like, see the For More Information section and check out the video link *Stage Manager Calls Cues for "Hairspray."*

A cue means two things. It is the *moment* that you do something, and it is the *something that you do*. This "moment" might be signaled by an action, such as a performer entering the stage, or it might be signaled by a line from the script. (The latter are called "line cues.") The "something that you do" could be adding



For this solo, the light operator has used spots with lavender gels, while the sound operator has turned up her mic.

blue light or fading out a sound, like the sound of birds chirping.

Cues are typically numbered—for example, “Light cue 75” or “Sound cue 20.” Depending on the preference of the stage manager and the nature of the show, the stage manager may give a thirty-second warning and call “standby” about one or two lines before the cue. Whether you’re running the lights or managing the sounds, after you hear the number of your cue, you wait until you hear the stage manager say “Go,” which signals the exact moment to take the action. Depending on the practices or conventions of your theater, you may respond with a confirmation such as “75, thank you.” Then you’ll immediately prepare for the next cue.

Just about any production can make it hard for you to concentrate if you’re running the controls for light or sound. You might find yourself laughing at a well-delivered, humorous line, or holding your breath during a dramatic moment. But be careful! You could miss your next cue!

Of course, the actors have just as much responsibility to stay focused. If they improvise a line that they’ve forgotten, you’ll never hear them say the **line cue** that you have listed on your cue sheet. Or if they delay an entrance, you might have lit an area of the stage with no one there. Each team member—cast and crew—has to concentrate on doing his or her particular job.

The word “go” is such an important word in technical theater that most stage managers will not use this word unless they want you to take an action *right now*. Instead, they might explain what they

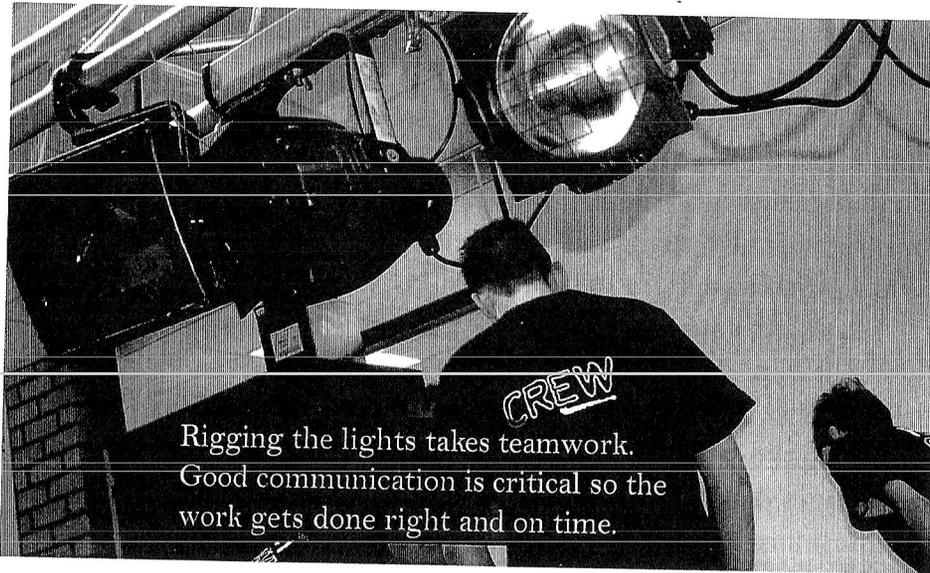
want like this: “For light cue 75, when I say the go word, I want you to black out the stage lights for three seconds. Ready? Standby ... Light cue 75 ... Go.” And *then* you’d cut those lights for just three seconds. Blackouts are done occasionally for effect and traditionally at the end of each act. (Lights are commonly blacked out or dimmed after each scene.)

Usually, the stage manager won’t tell you *what* the cue is—in this case, **blackout**. You’re only hearing the number of the cue because the stage manager is calling lighting cues as well as cues for sound and for set changes. Your “light (or sound) cue list” has all the specific information about each of your cues. You can see why it’s critical that you keep your cue list up to date, so it matches the prompt book. Calling cues well is a skill, so it helps to remember that everyone is learning and getting better with time, including the stage manager.

Working with a script that is brand new? Be sure you and the stage manager are using the same version of the script, with the same page numbers. A lot of confusion can result if the playwright has been modifying the script between performances and possibly changing the pagination. You and the stage manager need to be on the same page, literally!

Teamwork Makes It Work

Here’s an example of when teamwork is needed. Say that you, as the lighting director, want a dead black scene shift during a murder mystery. A completely black stage is great for dramatic impact and creating suspense. However, the director needs the **running crew** to make a complicated change in the set. They’re



Rigging the lights takes teamwork. Good communication is critical so the work gets done right and on time.

not going to be able to do that either quickly or safely unless you, the director, and the other designers come up with a different plan.

For example, together you might decide that you only dim the lights, but add a strobe effect for dramatic effect, while the sound designer adds some suspenseful music along with the sound of ominous footsteps, maybe those of the murderer. The crew is now able to make the set change safely while the audience holds their breath in anticipation of what comes next.

Keeping the stage manager informed about changes is another example of teamwork in technical theater. Are you planning to place any speakers or other obstructions backstage? Then you need to tell the stage manager. She'll also need to know about any backstage work that will be happening during the performance.

Depending on the size of the technical staff, there may also be a technical director as part of the team.

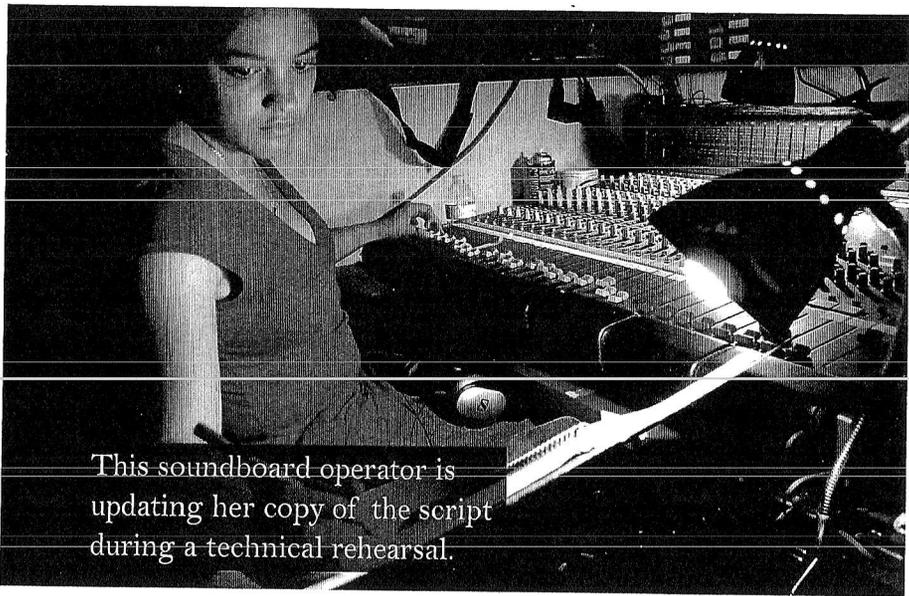
The technical director may oversee everything tech, including lighting and sound, or may be responsible for overseeing the set and props. It's more common, however, for the stage manager to coordinate the work of all the crews and the actors. For example, which needs to happen first? Hanging the lights or placing the scenery? You won't be able to lower your lights to working height if there's going to be scenery in the way. Teamwork is the name of the game and an important skill you will master as part of a tech crew.

Your Attention Is Vital

During a performance, the audience realizes that the actors and singers need to be on their toes, so they don't forget a line or a lyric. What the audience often fails to realize is that you, as a lighting or sound operator, have just as much at stake. Without your sharp attention, an actor might be speaking in the dark or a singer might be performing with a dead mic. While some may see that as too much pressure, you find it exciting. It's part of what makes the final applause sound so very good.

A professional lighting operator has some great advice for techies: When it comes to the actual show, it's important to remember that it's a performance. You need to stay engaged and fully present. Otherwise, you could miss a cue, only to have an actor walk on stage and start to speak without your having turned on his mic. So you really have to stay involved in the performance.

School, college, and community theater production typically have rehearsals that last several months. The



This soundboard operator is updating her copy of the script during a technical rehearsal.

lighting and sound designers need to be active from the start. Operators who will run the controls for sound and lighting, plus the **follow spots**, need to be on set for tech rehearsals and for every show.

If you're going to be involved from the first meetings, through set up and tech rehearsals, to the final show, that's a lot of time! Before committing to a production, you'll want to get a specific calendar from the stage manager. After all, you still have to leave time for your schoolwork and other responsibilities and activities. Once a production gets started, it's a real problem to stop and train someone new if they've had to replace you.

Fame Gets a Blackout

There's a funny "lighting blooper" that happened during a professional performance of *Fame*, a musical about high school performing arts students, that

illustrates just how important it is for every member of the team to do his or her job—without taking shortcuts. A substitute operator was going to operate a new lighting desk (another name often used for the control board). He got a crash course in using it and felt ready. After all, about 90 percent of the time, the job of the desk operator (also called a Head LX) is to push a large "go" button when the stage manager calls the cues. For example, "Light cue 49 ... Go." When the operator pushes the "go" button, the next programmed effect occurs.

OK, so back to our story. Everything was going fine until the operator had to make a small adjustment to a cue because one of the spotlights was a little out of line. This particular cue was for the finale of act 1 when the cast performs the title number, "Fame." The cast strikes a hugely impressive pose, the music comes to a crescendo, a series of spotlights creates a dramatic pattern, and the audience applauds wildly. Normally.

But this time, when he hit the "go" button: blackout! A cast of thirty is onstage singing the end of the big number—the title song—and it's all happening in total darkness! And 1,200 people in the audience are wondering, huh?

What was a very big blooper happened because of a very small mistake. Instead of saving the adjustment by hitting "shift + update," the operator only hit "update." The second mistake he made was that he forgot to test the change. Any programmer would say, "After you save it, *you have to test it.*" This techie learned a valuable lesson about how important his job was for the success of each performance.