



# The Stage Manager's Skills

**T**he stage manager is, in many ways, the jack-of-all-trades in the theater. During casting and rehearsals, the stage manager assists the director as needed, runs rehearsals, and keeps track of virtually everything. During the staging and performance, the stage manager is responsible for maintaining and **calling** a list of **cues** for the technical aspects of the performance and ensuring that these are executed properly during the show. Stage managers work closely with the director, actors, designers, and technical crew during the entire production process. It is their job to ensure that the show runs without hitches.

## High School and Community Theater

In a high school setting, a play is often directed by a teacher or a volunteer. A student is frequently chosen to be the stage manager. As stage manager, he or she assists the director during preproduction activities, helps with rehearsals, keeps track of technical requirements, and conveys the director's instructions

A stage manager reviews the progress of a member of the technical crew.

to the stage crew. During performances, the stage manager makes sure that the backstage elements are in place and oversees the crew. Stage managing provides an excellent opportunity to learn about all the aspects of a theatrical production. It gives a student the chance to learn what the stage manager does and also to become familiar with a wide range of technical skills, from set design to lighting and sound.

Many cities and towns have community theaters. In some cases, a local group of amateur actors puts on performances in rented or donated venues such as school auditoriums, or town or local organization halls. This type of community theater is often organized by an individual who directs the plays. The group might put on plays on a regular basis all year round or seasonally, such as in the summer or during major holidays like Christmas or Halloween. The group might consist of a permanent group of people who perform or work as stage crew in different productions. In other cases, the director might hold auditions for each play the group performs. The participants in this type of community theater usually work at regular jobs or are retired, and they put on plays in their spare time.

There are also professional community theaters, such as summer theaters, that have a permanent facility and a paid full-time staff. This type of group is headed by a professional director, **producer**, or administrator who hires the actors and crew for the plays that are performed. These organizations might use all amateur actors and crew or a combination of professionals and amateurs. Most are nonprofit organizations, and they often offer classes and

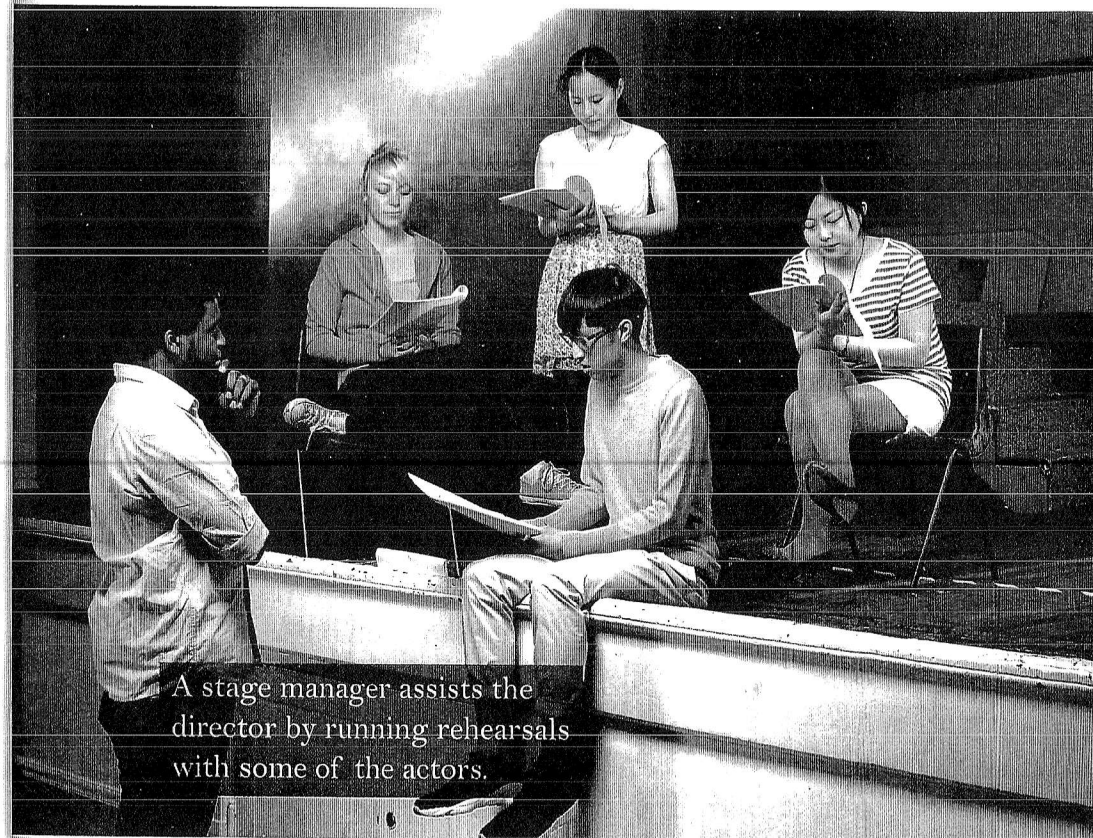
internships in addition to performing plays. When a professional community theater hires a professional stage manager, it often has a role for an intern as an assistant stage manager.

## Required Skills

The stage manager fills many different roles and works with people in many different specialties.

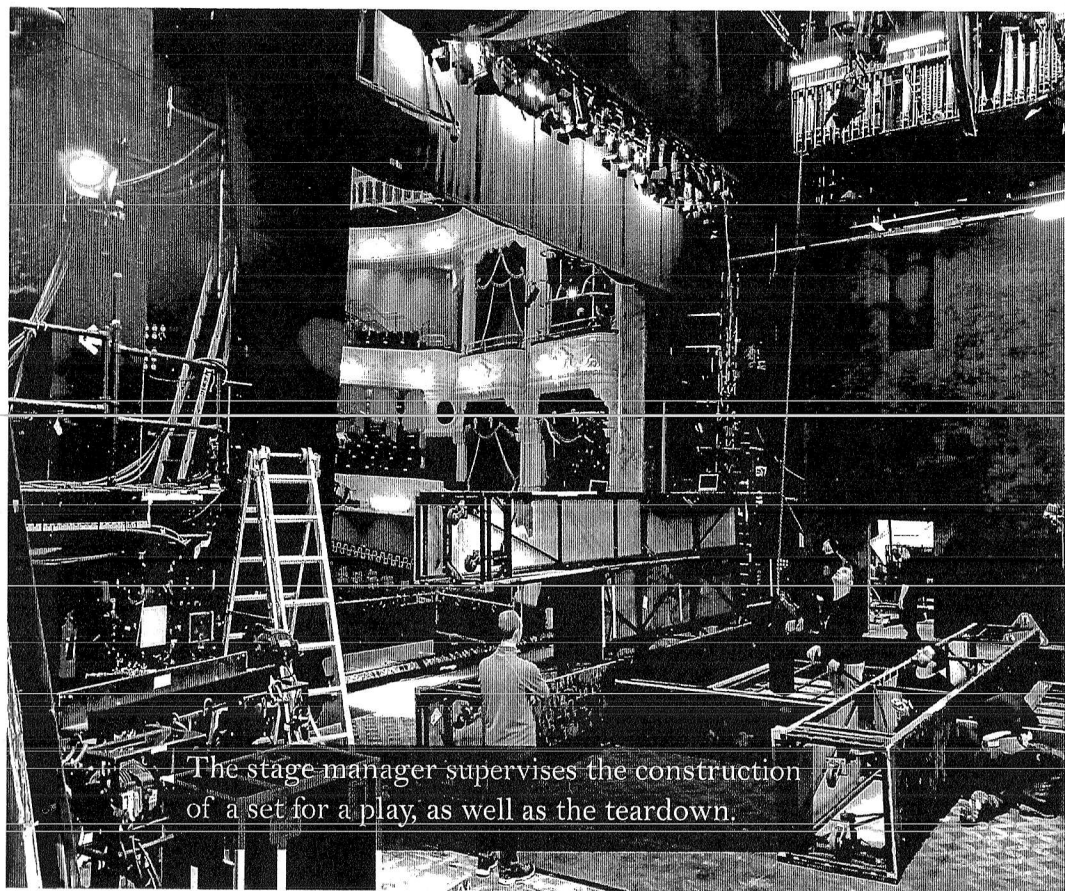
The stage manager is the director's key assistant.

He or she works with the actors, scheduling and running rehearsals, cuing actors, acting as **prompter** during early rehearsals, and ensuring that the actors



A stage manager assists the director by running rehearsals with some of the actors.





The stage manager supervises the construction of a set for a play, as well as the teardown.

are in the right place for their entrances during the performance. He or she also works closely with the stage crew. The stage manager acts as a **conduit** between the director and crew, letting the craftspeople—such as set designers, lighting and sound technicians, and wardrobe staff—know what the director wants them to do and coordinating their work. As part of this coordination, the stage manager works with the crew to plan the handling of wardrobe changes, scene changes, sound and lighting, and props. The stage manager makes notes in a

copy of the script about key elements of each scene, such as where actors should be located and lighting, sound, prop, and wardrobe requirements. This copy of the script is called the “prompt copy.” During the show, the stage manager will cue the technical crew’s activities. As with the actors, he or she must ensure that everyone in the crew is in the right place and prepared for each performance. The stage manager is also responsible for supervising the setup and **teardown** of equipment and sets used in the play.

Given the variety of tasks stage managers must perform and the different types of people they must interact with, they need a wide range of skills to succeed. Stage managers require technical skills, organizational skills, and interpersonal skills.

## Technical Skills

The stage manager needs to understand a variety of technical aspects that go into producing a play. Although stage managers do not need to be experts in every technical aspect of theater, such as lighting and sound, they need to have a basic understanding of those activities in order to work with the technicians who perform them. There are many books available that provide information on the technical aspects of theater, including amateur productions. In a high school production directed by a teacher, the director will explain what is required. The stage manager will need to learn how to write up a cue sheet and must understand basic rehearsal techniques.

Often the director will run rehearsals with some actors, while asking the stage manager to rehearse

other performers. The director of the play will make decisions as to the actors' **blocking** (placement and movement), **stage business**, and the desired emotions, gestures, and vocal expressions. The stage manager must note how each scene is to be performed so he or she can run rehearsals with the actors. One way to learn the technical aspects involved in putting on a theatrical performance is to become a student intern at a professional community theater.

## Organizational Skills

Few positions are busier or require engaging in a broader number of activities than being a stage manager. Furthermore, performance dates are set, so everything must be completed by opening night. Getting everything done on time requires excellent planning and organizational skills. Stage managers must keep accurate lists of all technical, backstage, and onstage requirements. They must be able to break the requirements down into specific tasks, communicate the requirements to the crew, and keep track of their progress, ensuring everything is ready when needed. Stage managers must be able to multitask.

In the theater, the unexpected is the rule. Stage managers must be able to think on their feet and deal with problems that arise unexpectedly. They must not become stressed out by the frantic pace of activity. Organizational skills allow the stage manager to manage his or her time and schedule. This means being able to keep track of the technical elements—costumes, lighting, props, scenery, and the

like—that need to be completed, and then checking on the activity of the crew regularly to ensure that everything is ready when it needs to be. Stage managers must also have excellent time management skills, which means being able to prioritize everything that needs to be done, then dealing with the most important things first. It may require the stage manager to delegate some of these activities to the appropriate technical staff. Time management skills allow a stage manager to do what needs to be done for the play and still have time for other aspects of his or her life.

Stage managers must pay attention to detail. They are responsible for making sure that props, crew, and cast are where they are supposed to be. A missing prop, a misplaced piece of furniture or **set dressing**, or a missed cue can cause a problem during a performance.

## Interpersonal Skills

Much of a stage manager's time is spent working with other people. He or she must tell people what needs to be done and when to do it, and must do so without antagonizing them. Stage managers work with people in a wide range of positions and with different personalities and **temperaments**. Stage managers must be tactful—that is, sensitive to others' feelings. They must be able to correct people without sounding arrogant or disrespectful, and get people to do things without ordering them around. When dealing with the crew, they must explain the director's instructions in a way that encourages cooperation. When rehearsing

actors, stage managers must be able to give criticism and suggest improvements without offending or insulting people. Their job is to present criticism with an attitude of trying to help the actor give the best performance possible. Stage managers must have patience with actors and crew who are, after all, volunteers. They must be able to handle frustration and address problems without acting angry or upset. The stage manager sets the tone for the entire crew. If he or she remains calm in the face of a problem, this will encourage others to do so as well.

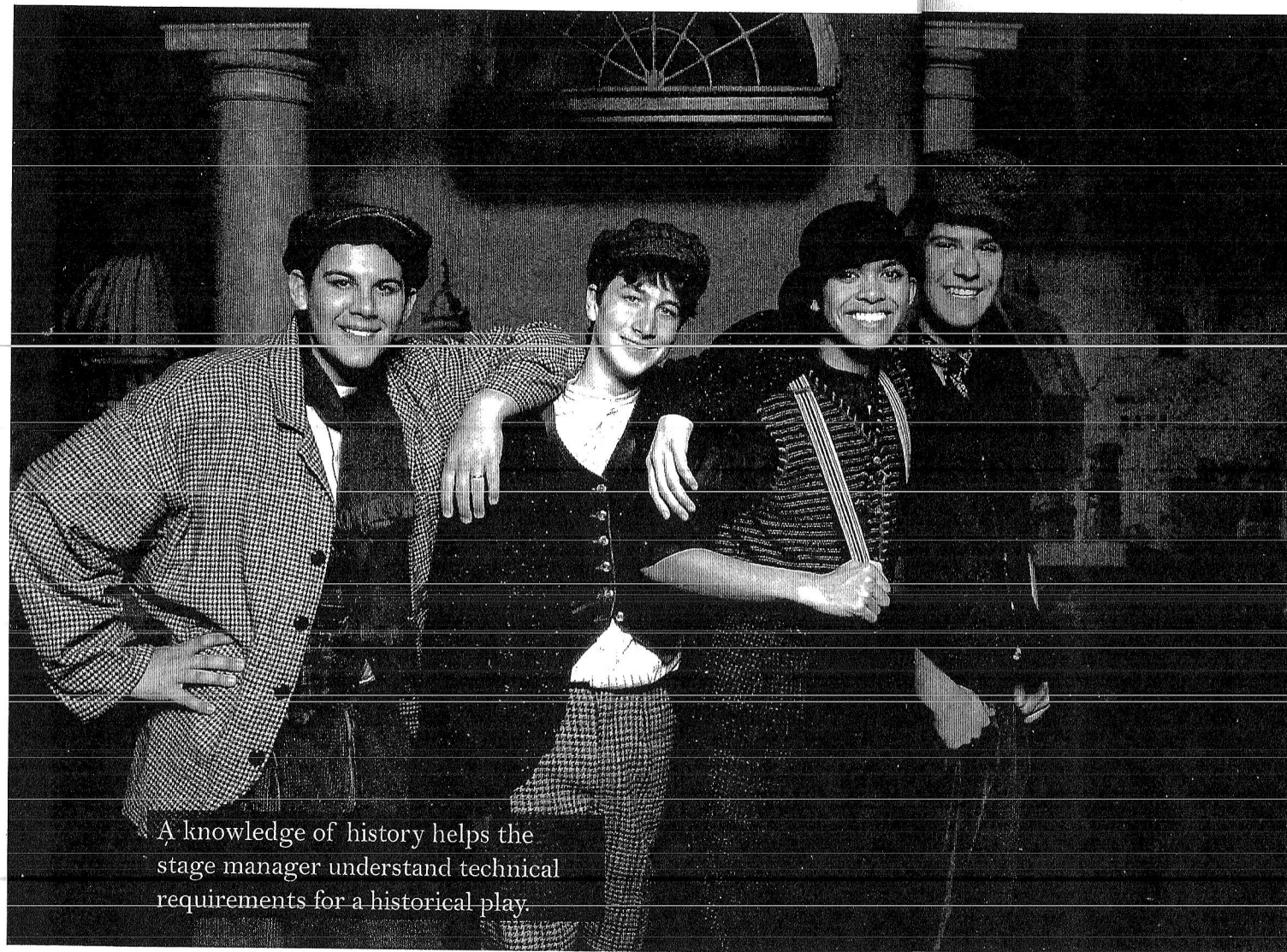
Stage managers must be reliable and able to work unsupervised. The director relies on the stage manager to assist him or her by seeing that instructions are conveyed accurately. Stage managers may have to work long hours and apply themselves to a task even when they'd rather be doing something else. Various problems are likely to arise when preparing a play. Some difficulties will be technical, and others may be issues involving cast or crew. In the case of serious interpersonal problems, the stage manager will want to inform the director so he or she can deal with the issue, but many problems can be solved by the stage manager alone. Stage managers need to persevere, even when faced with a variety of problems, and overcome obstacles without becoming overwhelmed. Problem-solving skills allow a stage manager to analyze a situation and define possible solutions or alternatives. Even if the director will be the person to make the final decision, presenting the director with viable solutions can save time and make the director's job easier. However, the stage manager must know when a problem or person is getting out of hand and get the director involved.

## Developing Stage Management Skills

In high school, you can start developing the experience and background that will allow you to be successful as a stage manager. There are two types of background you will need. The first is general knowledge. When you are working on theatrical productions, you will be involved in plays from different periods of history and different cultures. Even within a single country, people and attitudes can differ greatly. High school English courses can help you learn about literature and the use of language. Learning the rules of grammar and syntax helps you understand how language works. In addition, learning to write and speak clearly and accurately will help you communicate successfully with the cast and crew. Studying history helps you to understand the context in which a play takes place. This knowledge will help you understand what the director is trying to achieve in his or her approach to the play and will clarify the requirements for the sets, costumes, and props.

The second type of knowledge you will need is directly related to the performing arts. If your school has a drama club or a course in drama, you may want to participate as a stage manager or assistant to the person directing the play. If a teacher is directing a school play, see if there is a need for a stage manager to assist with the production. If not, volunteer for other behind-the-scenes work. Doing so gives you hands-on experience, a chance to perform the tasks required to produce a play, and knowledge of





A knowledge of history helps the stage manager understand technical requirements for a historical play.

in your area and ask if they have student intern positions. These are unpaid positions in which students perform a variety of behind-the-scenes tasks. Larger community and summer theaters often employ professional actors and staff, who can provide invaluable information. Above all, to be a good stage manager, one must be ready to accept a great deal of responsibility. This is something that you can practice while in school by accomplishing the tasks you are given by teachers on time and to the best of your ability, and by correcting any mistakes without making excuses.

the terminology of the theater. Many community theaters need help with the production aspects of the plays they perform. Volunteer for behind-the-scenes work or see if the director can use you as an assistant. Community and summer theaters often have positions for interns. Contact the local theaters