

The Working Relationships of a Student Stage Manager

Introduction

During my tenure at Washington and Lee University, I have stage managed *Little Women: The Musical*, *The Dramatic Circle*, *tick, tick...BOOM!*, and *Treasure Island*. I also served as backstage/assistant stage manager for *Beehive: a 60s Musical*. In addition to my extensive stage management experience at W&L, I also acted in *The Moors* as Agatha, and directed and produced a musical, *First Date*, my senior spring term. When I began stage managing my sophomore year, there was not another student stage manager to mentor me or explain the unique challenges student stage managers face.

This honor's thesis aims to explain the working relationship between student stage managers at Washington and Lee and others working on the production in order to best prepare you for your stage management endeavors. Stage managing can be extremely fun, rewarding, and special. With the tools presented in this thesis combined with the practical guides provided by your stage management professor, any student stage manager can become successful. The goal of this thesis is to introduce you to five relationships you will form as a stage manager, focusing on the unique dynamics of being a student in that role. The highlighted relationships are between you and your stage management mentor/advisor, the director(s), actors, designers, and assistant stage manager or others on the stage management team. The best advice I can provide is to have confidence. Speaking to peers in a supervisory context or to faculty/staff as a peer requires some tact and may be difficult to navigate, but it can be done!

Working With a Stage Management Advisor/Mentor

The first person you will interact with regularly as a student stage manager is your stage management advisor or mentor. During my time at Washington and Lee I have been lucky

enough to have both an advisor and mentor in stage management. My theatre major advisor, Shawn Paul Evans was my stage management professor and advisor during my independent study in stage management and honor's thesis. He taught me how to stage manage as a sophomore and continues to help me find more efficient and easy ways to complete stage management tasks. As my stage management professor, Shawn Paul shared checklists for rehearsals, meetings with directors, and tasks to be completed before every phase of the production process. He also often serves as one of the designers on department productions (either lighting or scenic) which means I interact with him in multiple ways on the same production. When looking for advice or feeling overwhelmed, I found myself in Shawn Paul's office a lot during my junior year. While in tech for *tick, tick...BOOM!*, I met him in the call booth one afternoon to work on calling cues during an elaborate number in the show (which alone had 20 cues). It was helpful to have him there as lighting designer while I played the cast album on my phone and called the cues so he could watch and give notes when they were late. Additionally, he could see me getting more anxious as I repeatedly missed a set of cues. He finally told me to take a two-minute break and when I came back, he reminded me of his favorite stage management analogy – the firefighter hat. Shawn Paul advises his stage managers to put on a firefighter hat when things get complicated and let everything roll off your back. It is his way of saying “don't panic” and “don't take anything too personally.” The firefighter analogy has really helped. In addition to teaching me the practical side of stage management, Shawn Paul was always there when I needed mental/emotional support as a stage manager and student. Some of my favorite calming mechanisms in the theater I learned from Shawn Paul. For example, he suggested I write “breathe” in my call script before a big cue sequence, so I

remembered to take a deep breath before calling all the cues. While it may seem silly, reminding myself to breathe got me through calling *tick, tick...BOOM!* and *Treasure Island*.

In addition to your stage management advisor, you may also have a mentor. Just before the start of my senior year, the theater department hired a production manager, a new role. Paula stage managed the fall dance show and served as stage manager for *Beehive*. While I was initially nervous about how our relationship would work due to the new role, we quickly became close. She was the perfect person to vent to about rehearsals during *Treasure Island*. Paula was often in rehearsals but even when she wasn't, she understood my vocabulary and the general circumstances because of her theatre background. In addition Paula gives great advice. She has a lot of stage management experience in a variety of types of theatre such as plays, musicals, operas, and dance. She brought a different perspective from others at W&L and freely shared examples of her past stage management work. You and your mentor will likely have the most casual relationship out of all the faculty/staff members you interact with. That bond always allows you to ask your mentor questions you may be nervous to ask anyone else. Your mentor will also be able to give you honest constructive criticisms about your current projects and any previous work. Working with Paula my senior year helped me grow tremendously, mostly because she provided honest feedback and showed me more ways basic stage management tasks can be completed.

Working with a Director

The most important relationship for a stage manager is with the director(s) of a production. A production may have one director or could have a directing team which includes an assistant director, choreographer, and/or musical director. Some productions will also rely on fight directors/choreographers and intimacy directors. At Washington and Lee, although I have

worked with directing teams, there is always one main director who is in charge of coordinating everything and bringing the vision together. References to the “director” in the following section refer to the main director.

The first meeting you have as a stage manager with the director of a production is the most important for setting expectations for your relationship, the production, and establishing a good rapport. When the director is a guest artist and not yet on campus, zoom or another video chat program is a good alternative to in-person meetings. Texts or emails do not work well for this initial communication because you may miss nuances that will be clear face-to-face. When possible, meet with the director as early in the production process as possible, ideally at least 1 week before auditions. You should come to the meeting prepared to discuss the production, your relationship with the director, and the challenges you may face during the term (all detailed later in this section).

When discussing the production at your initial meeting with the director, use the checklist provided to you by your stage management professor or advisor. The thorough checklist covers everything you should talk to the director about including their vision for the piece, how they will structure rehearsals, and basics regarding the needs of the production.

At your first meeting with the director, you will lay the foundation for the rest of your relationship. You and the director will need to work as peers during the semester and collaborate effectively. As a new student stage manager, I struggled because I did not feel comfortable offering my opinions or taking initiative with adult directors (either professors or visiting artists). As I became more experienced, I gained more confidence talking with the director up front about how we would communicate and when collaboration would be necessary. The initial conversation can be very awkward, especially if you do not have a previous relationship with the

director. It often starts by simply recognizing as a student, the director is in an inherent position of power, but you hope to collaborate and work with them as a peer as much as possible. By beginning the conversation with a recognition of the untraditional nature of your relationship, directors will begin to understand more about who you are and who you want to be as a stage manager. Typically, directors will encourage or at least offer for you to call them by their first name, which I believe is the first step in working with a director as a peer rather than a traditional student-professor relationship. Next, it will be important to establish when you two can check in on the production and how you are working together. Check-ins should occur weekly and have their own dedicated meeting time outside of rehearsals or production meetings. I often struggled to establish a regular meeting time with directors because of conflicting schedules and some directors did not think consistent meetings were necessary. In lieu of regular meetings, I met and talked with directors as issues came up. Discussions as needed worked fine, but having proactive conversations before issues arose would have prevented later issues. Especially as a new stage manager, consistent communication with the director outside of rehearsal provides a space to learn, ask questions, and raise concerns.

Next, you and the director should establish a preferred method of communication. It is important to remember the method could vary based on the content and context of the communication. For example, with Darnell, the director for *tick, tick...BOOM!*, we decided texts would be used for quick questions or communication that needed immediate responses; however, we agreed longer communication or any communication including documents (such as paperwork, reports, etc.) would be done via email. If emails needed to be seen quickly a text would also be sent along the lines of “Hey, just sent you an important email regarding — please let me know if you have any questions or want to chat about it!” Our agreed upon method

worked great and allowed us to have excellent communication throughout the production.

Setting expectations can be particularly useful when the conversation is collaborative, giving you an opportunity to include your opinion on how you like to communicate.

In addition to the topics above, you should also plan on discussing the following with your director at your initial meeting. First, discuss your academic schedule with the director and look at the production calendar with your academic calendar. As a student, you will not be as readily available some days to meet about the show or answer questions. It is important to establish what days are “good” and which are “bad/busy” days. Comparing your academic calendar with the production calendar can help you realize how your assignments line up with the phases of the production process. For example, when I stage managed *Little Women: The Musical*, my busiest week academically with midterms/papers/presentations/etc. was the same week as we were recording audio for the show and when the director would not be at one of the rehearsals. While we did not discuss academics until January when I got my syllabi (our first meeting was in November), having a conversation about how to get ahead on some work and potentially taking a day off from rehearsal earlier in the busy week gave me peace of mind. Every director I worked with while at Washington and Lee was extremely understanding of my academic schedule. As stage manager, you are at every single rehearsal and often the first in and last out. I routinely spent 20-25 hours during a normal rehearsal week in Lenfest working on the show before, during, and after rehearsals. The busy academic life of W&L students can make it difficult to find time to prioritize classes, especially if you typically do homework at night (I quickly shifted my homework schedule to work in the afternoons so after rehearsal I could wind down and go to bed). Directors are a great resource for helping with academic planning and learning to balance academics with the show.

Another challenge that may arise because of your student status is the potential for actors or other students involved in the production to share or vent about the production. For me, the most difficult part of serving as student stage manager involved working with student actors hence why it will be discussed in depth in the next section. In your first meeting with the director, it is important to discuss what boundaries you will set with the cast and how you should respond to any negative feedback about rehearsals from members of the cast. Dealing with actor feedback can be awkward and some directors may avoid the topic as they think students will not air their complaints during the process. Everyone will hit a point when they are stressed or frustrated and have negative things to say – even with the best directors. Having a clear plan on how to handle actor feedback is crucial to your success as a student stage manager.

After your initial meeting with the director, you should meet with the director on a weekly basis, as mentioned above, to check in on how the production is going and any issues that have arisen during rehearsals. Issues can be practical problems such as “we only have 3 tables, but we need 4” or scheduling issues that require time to work through. You may also want to discuss any problems or questions you have as stage manager or how your working relationships with others involved in the production are going. As you reach a new phase in the production process, you should plan for your meeting with the director to be a little longer so you can go through all the new items on your checklist. Shawn Paul’s checklists for each stage of the production process cover everything you will need to discuss with the director. Bring the checklists to your director meetings and you will be fine!

Your relationship as a stage manager with the director is crucial for a successful production. You will need to collaborate with the director on a day-to-day basis and eventually, the director will hand you the reins to the show, trusting you to effectively and efficiently run

everything! Because you will spend so much time together, it is natural to get frustrated or annoyed every once in a while. The key is when you need to vent, find someone not involved with the production to talk to, or talk to a mentor or advisor in the department. If you need to have a conversation with the director about something upsetting you, do so in a clear state of mind and do your best to calmly bring up the issue in one of your private meetings.

Before discussing your other relationships with people involved with the production, confidentiality between you and the director must be discussed. Information shared with you by the director will often be extremely sensitive and should never be shared with others working on the production, especially students. My first-time stage managing, I was let into the “decision room” with the director and musical director after auditions for *Little Women*. I sat quietly as the director and musical director decided which students would be called back for which roles and later listened to them discuss each actors’ pros and cons while finalizing the cast list. At some points in the conversation, the director and musical director asked me questions about the actors’ behavior outside the audition room and if I had a preference between the two final choices for Jo March (the lead). Conversations after auditions and throughout the process with the director should always be kept confidential. If an actor asks you why they were or weren’t cast in a particular role, advise them to talk to the director and share you cannot comment on the decision-making process. Sharing confidential or sensitive information the director told you with other parties working on the production is the fastest way to lose the director’s trust for the rest of the process.

Working With Actors

While a student stage manager’s relationship with the director can initially be awkward to navigate because of the inherent power imbalance, I always found relationships with actors in the

production most difficult to manage. Difficulties seemed to arise from working with actors on shows who were my friends. Working with friends can be difficult because boundaries need to be established that may feel odd at first. When serving as stage manager on a production with a close friend in the cast, I always talked with them briefly before or just after auditions explaining to them that as the stage manager for the production, there will be some elements of the process I must keep confidential. Additionally, I always clarify boundaries regarding venting versus a genuine complaint. With some directors and actors (depending on your relationship and discussions with both parties), you may not mind an actor who is also a close friend venting to you about rehearsal or the show. With friends, I always make sure to ask the actor if they are venting or voicing a concern they want me to bring up to the director. Drawing a line may be difficult and so my recommendation is to ask your friends working on the show not to vent to you about the rehearsal process; however, we are human. If your best friend is working on the show and needs to vent just remember to confirm they are venting and do not want you to take their concern to the director. If a concern you feel needs to be shared with the director comes up when an actor is venting as a friend, you should talk to them about sharing the information with the director. Actors involved in the show should ALWAYS be encouraged to bring concerns they have directly to the director. When actors talk to directors, the director can ask clarifying questions and come up with a plan to address the issue with the actor directly. If an actor is truly uncomfortable bringing a concern to a director, they may ask you to share it; but my advice – only agree as a last resort.

When working with student actors who are heavily involved in the theatre department and are also friends, they will likely already know your role as stage manager. When I stage managed *Treasure Island*, I was one of four senior theatre majors working on the production

(there were only 5 theatre majors in my graduating class). It was fun to work with my fellow theatre majors because we all knew each other really well and had not yet had the opportunity to all work on a project together. It was easy to work with my peers in that case because they understood that as the stage manager, sometimes I needed to keep everyone on track. For example, if people are too loud backstage during rehearsal you need to ask them to be quiet. Or, if people are still in the dressing rooms chatting after you call places, you need to kindly hurry them upstairs to begin the show! Keeping everything under control as a stage manager definitely becomes more relevant once you are in rehearsals late in the process, technical rehearsals, and performances; however, keeping everyone on task can be a challenge throughout.

When working with new student actors or actors from outside the theatre department, introducing yourself and your role is crucial. At your first rehearsal prep meeting with the director, you should have discussed allotting 5-10 minutes during the first rehearsal to introduce yourself, your role, and share important information with the cast all of which will be detailed on a checklist from your professor. The first conversation typically includes setting expectations for checking email, explaining emergency procedures, and complying with deadlines. When introducing your role to the cast, be clear on the responsibilities of a stage manager and how you hope to work with them. Mention it is your job to keep track of all production details such as blocking, props, entrances/exits, technical elements, and schedules. I always encourage actors in the first rehearsal to put my cell phone number in their phone and text me so we can communicate easily. I also share I am always available if they have any questions and my preferred method of communication. Communication during the first rehearsal sets you up for a productive working relationship with the actors in the show.

There is no magical answer for working with student actors. Establishing your working relationship with friends in the show before rehearsals start is crucial because it sets the expectation that you will be an authority figure during the production. Sometimes a private conversation allows you to emphasize your responsibilities because respect will make the process run more smoothly. Even after five productions, I do not have all the right answers because every show, director, and actor are different. One of the things my friends in theatre always say is in rehearsal I am “stage manager Emily” and outside of the show I am “friend Emily.” While I think it is funny they reference me as two completely different people, it does mean I am doing my job – separating friendships and my personal life from rehearsals and the production. Ultimately, the goal is to separate (as much as possible) your personal life and relationships from the work you are doing as a student stage manager.

Working With Designers

The next group you can expect to interact with regularly is the designers and other adults working on the production. Designers include the costume designer, lighting designer, scenic designer, props designer, sound designer and engineer (normally the same person but could be different), video/projections designer, and technical director. While the technical director is not a designer, your relationship is similar. Typically, the designers are faculty, staff, or professional guest artists. Similar to the director, your relationship with the designers may feel awkward at first because you will be working with them as peers rather than in a traditional professor-student or staff-student role. You will interact with the designers in 4 main contexts: production meetings, rehearsal reports, individual follow-ups, and technical rehearsals.

Production meetings will occur every week during the pre-production and rehearsal process until technical rehearsals. During my time at Washington and Lee, production meetings

always occurred on Monday afternoons after the department meeting ended at 2:00 pm. As a junior and senior, I was able to amend my class schedule so I did not have afternoon class on Mondays and could attend production meetings. You absolutely do not need to move around your schedule. I really enjoyed being at production meetings and learned so much as a stage manager and about the show that it was worth attending if I could fit the meeting into my schedule. Your main job during production meetings is to take notes and listen. Another important role you may have in production meetings is to remind the director of questions they had for designers or discussion topics they wanted to bring up. For example, while working on *tick, tick...BOOM!*, the director often asked me to keep a running list throughout rehearsals of questions or topics for the production meeting. At the end of the production meeting, he often asked me to review the list to ensure we did not miss anything so we could address it before the end of the meeting. Production meetings can also be an opportunity for you to raise questions with the designers. Remember, you are an important member of the production team and there are no bad questions! Typically during production meetings, each designer has an opportunity to talk, and people will ask questions related to the designer's element. At the end of an element's discussion, the person leading the meeting will say "anything else for [costumes]?" This is the perfect opportunity to ask a quick question. If the answer to your question has not yet been decided or if it is a longer answer, the designer or director may simply say, "we haven't figured that out yet" or "let's chat about that later." Do not be insulted by a delayed answer, it simply means the production meeting with everyone is not the best place to address the question! Production meetings are one of my favorite parts of the production process because you get to listen in on decision making that ultimately impacts the final look and messaging of the show.

Most importantly, remember you should not share anything discussed in production meetings with actors until the designers and/or director decide to share.

In addition to production meetings, you will interact with designers after each rehearsal when you send out the rehearsal report. Rehearsal reports are an important aspect of the production process because they keep everyone who was not at rehearsal up to date with any questions or discoveries from rehearsal. Your stage management advisor or mentor will give you an in-depth review of how to fill out a rehearsal report. For now, you should know that rehearsal reports are the most consistent way you will communicate directly with designers and the production team. Because the rehearsal report is a written document, remember others may misread or misinterpret the content. Try to always phrase things as concisely and simply as possible and of course, proofread! If the director has a question about a design element, ask it as a question. If it is a change being made simply write the change factually. Adding too many “pleases” or “if we can” when the director is clear about the choice can lead to confusion.

In addition to rehearsal reports, individual follow-ups with designers will ensure everyone is on the same page. Because rehearsal reports can get misinterpreted easily and are sent to everyone on the production, some notes for an element may best be addressed face-to-face. When planning to follow up in person, I typically include a brief sentence in the rehearsal report for the designer such as “we want to add a light isolating the down stage right area of the stage for page 14, I will swing by your office later to discuss.” A heads-up gives the designer an opportunity to think about the note in advance and lets them know they can expect you later in the day. When following up with a designer, remember are there simply communicating the director’s wishes, not making decisions. If the conversation reaches a point where the designer is asking you questions beyond what the director discussed with you, tell them you don’t know but

will find out! Admitting when and what you don't know is always better than pretending to know or making a decision when the director should be involved! Individual follow-ups with designers can be awkward because you are working with them as peers. I remember the first time I told my major advisor, Shawn Paul, a note in an individual follow-up during the rehearsal process for *Dramatic Circle*. I went to his office, communicated a very specific lighting effect the director wanted, and he asked a few clarifying questions. It was so weird answering my advisor's questions about a project rather than the other way around, but I adjusted!

The final circumstance during which you will interact with designers is during technical rehearsals. Technical rehearsals are my favorite part of the rehearsal process but are often the most stressful for everyone involved in the production. Because of the long hours, it is easy for everyone (actors, directors, designers, and even stage managers) to be more easily annoyed or defensive. Despite the high stress environment, technical rehearsals can be the most fun part of the process because the production starts to really come together. Before the start of technical rehearsals, you will talk with the lighting and sound designers about cues you will call during the show. The designers will either talk you through each cue and tell you where it goes or give you a list of cues with information on when they should be called for you to put in your script. I prefer talking with the designer personally, but getting a list of cues can save time. One thing I recommend asking the designers when they give you cues is what the cue does. As stage manager, you know the show very well and will notice if something happens early/late, knowing what a cue does allows you to adjust your calls if something goes awry. Additionally, you want to know if the light cue you are about to call is a blackout for safety purposes. I find it very helpful to know what each cue does and often write it in my call script. With over 200 light cues no one can remember all that information off the top of their head (except maybe the designer)!

During pre-tech meetings with designers and during technical rehearsals, your job is to ask questions and prepare yourself for your tasks during the show. You need to be as confident as possible walking into performances; so, ask questions if you have them. During the technical rehearsal phase, there will be many changes happening between rehearsals. Frequent conversations and interactions with designers will be more important than ever. Designers are really fun to work with as stage managers because they are so creative and find ways to tell stories with their design elements most people in the audience will never fully appreciate. You get to be part of the small group of people who understand why the audience feels the way they do based on everything that happens onstage, enjoy it!

Working With a Stage Management Team

The final group warranting discussion is the stage management team. As a student stage manager, you will likely get paired with an assistant stage manager or serve as an assistant stage manager. Remember, the stage management team is a team, you are all working together to create the best show possible.

When working as an assistant stage manager, you may not have all the conversations mentioned above with designers; however, you attend all meetings with the director and should have frequent conversations with the stage manager. How you choose to separate responsibilities will depend on the stage manager, production, your experience, and learning goals. Regardless of the specific tasks, as assistant stage manager you will be responsible for defined elements of the production. Frequent conversations among members of the stage management team are important to ensure consistency in your documentation for the production. My first experience assistant stage managing was on *Beehive: The 60s Musical*, my last stage management credit at Washington and Lee. Officially, we called my role backstage manager, basically an ASM. I

worked closely with the stage manager on the project, Paula Fritz (a staff member), throughout the process. Before each phase, we met to discuss standardized formatting for all documentation and split up tasks. For example, I was ultimately responsible for tracking and ensuring the proper execution of all set changes during the show. Managing scenic changes was a major task because in the 90-minute show, there were 17 scene changes that required moving 3 stair units, 4 panels, and sometimes included the scrim or other props. At first, I was a bit overwhelmed, especially because until *Beehive*, I had only worked on unit sets (no set changes). Paula helped by giving me a few templates to choose from to create tracking documentation for the crew. Ultimately, I used a combination of her templates and added a few of my own things to make the document most useful to Paula, the crew, and me. The show ended up being successful in part because Paula and I frequently discussed the process and what was coming later in the week or production schedule.

When you are the stage manager and working with an assistant stage manager, it is your responsibility to take the initiative to set up meetings with the entire stage management team. SM team meetings should cover everything discussed above and, as the stage manager, you will be responsible for leading the meetings and answering the ASM's questions when you can. Working with an ASM can be great for a plethora reasons. ASMs help with the workload, provide someone to bounce around ideas with, and are another set of eyes on documentation to proof-read and make sure the communication is clear to others on the production.

Conclusion

As a student stage manager, your working relationships with others in the production and on the production team will be crucial to your success and the success of the production. Working with faculty and staff members as peers rather than in a more traditional relationship

can be difficult to navigate. You will slowly learn how to handle conversations and written communications. When working with student actors, especially people you know outside of rehearsal, you can avoid misunderstandings by setting boundaries and expectations early. Stage managing as a student at Washington and Lee changed my career trajectory. While I think I might have still applied and gone to graduate school for creative producing, I would never have stage managed professionally the summer after my junior year nor accepted a job as a production assistant for the summer after my senior year. With the right advisors and mentors, you can easily find success as a student stage manager at W&L.