

DEFINING STAGE MANAGEMENT

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The tasks assigned to that title differ greatly depending on the venue and production.

In most professional (LORT/Equity) theatre it's the person who's in charge of EVERYTHING that happens on stage once the director isn't personally involved with the day-to-day business of the show. The Stage Manager will warn at half hour, call tech cues during the performance, solve problems with actors, work with venue and production management, and insure the show stays true to the director's "artistic vision." (I'm certain June and other AEA stage managers on this list will correct/add to this definition.) Ideally this person will be able to read fast under adverse lighting conditions, understand actors/dancers/stagehands, be able to teach new cast members their parts, be willing to swing into any role should there not be an actor available to do it (hence the AEA jurisdiction), comprehend musical scores, be certified in first aid/CPR, be more organized than the Library of Congress, have the counseling skills of Dr. Joyce Brothers, the patience of Job, the tact under pressure of Mother Theresa PLUS Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and be a candidate for sainthood upon retirement. It is a TOUGH job and I greatly admire people who can do it well.

In most community theatres I've worked with, the Stage Manager is the tech person who's in charge of the things happening backstage during the show. Someone else calls the cues (usually the "TD") and the director is still around to manage problems with actors and others.

In a few community productions (talent shows, pageants, etc.) the Stage Manager controls the flow of performers onto the stage and communicates between the performers and the technical crew. This is akin to a TV studio's "floor manager".

And in yet other places (schools mostly) it's the person responsible for the technical needs of a show that is coming in to use the venue. He contacts the touring tech person and insures the venue is able to meet their needs for equipment and workers.

The SM is the principal point of communication in a production. This includes line notes to actors, blocking notes to designers, performance notes to producers, everything. In the absence of a production manager (very often the case), the SM sets up production meetings, auditions, the rehearsal calendar, and sometimes even the touring schedule. The stage manager is the first to arrive and last to go.

A stage manager will run for coffee. A good stage manager will have it all set up before the meeting is underway. A great stage manager knows how everyone present takes their cream and sugar.

The stage manager has to be able to accept stress from others and disperse it harmlessly into the atmosphere outside the theatre. A good stage manager knows how to set the tone and atmosphere for a production, without seeming to do so. The stage manager is cheerleader and dictator, rolled into one.

It's a hard job, and you've got to love it to do it, yet alone do it well. Stage managers typically deserve more love and support than they get, so the burnout rate can be very high.

I would say the SM is the steward of the art, in that the SM is ultimately responsible for the maintaining of the creative team's intentions. It could be said that everything an SM might do - from providing a performer an aspirin at the half hour, to calling the final curtain just right, to reminding everyone about the next day's matinee time - comes from this.

The stage manager is the individual who accepts responsibility for the smooth running of rehearsals and performances, on stage and backstage."

The stage manager should be aware of all the creative elements of the show and not have an opinion about any of them--but be able to communicate them easily and effectively to all affected parties.

The stage manager is usually also responsible for resolving conflicts between the director's vision and individual designer's ideas, as well as ensuring that all parties are communicating effectively. It is also her/his responsibility to ask the questions that no one else has thought of by being aware of all blocking and other requirements. He/she must be able to see far enough ahead to ask, "If set piece X is placed there, will actress Y be able to make it quickly backstage for her quick change with crew members Z and Q?"

The SM has everything to do with what the director does with the cast and designers. They need to document and facilitate all communication between the director and the designers. They need to record blocking notation as well as facilitate communication between director, designers and cast (rehearsal schedules, conflicts in schedule, costume fittings, etc).