

# **Ardent Resources**

## **WHO DOES WHAT: The Stage Manager**

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### **What is Stage Management?**

Stage management comprises the organisation of all the practical and technical aspects of rehearsals and performances including running rehearsals for the director, ensuring that those in the creative and technical teams are made aware of decisions made during the rehearsal process, managing the work of the backstage crew, managing performances and providing cues for actors, sound, lighting and other effects.

It covers both the management of the backstage area of a venue and the operation of the theatre-making process.

### **The Stage Manager's Role**

During rehearsals, the stage management team are responsible for ensuring that all necessary resources are available: rehearsal props, furniture and costumes, the acting area, a safe working environment for the performers and attending creative team and also compiling the book: taking the script and plotting moves and cues for sound, lighting and effects.

After the dress rehearsal, responsibility for the performance moves from the director to the stage manager, who, with their team and referring to the book prepared in rehearsal, ensures each performance is smooth, as rehearsed and keeps to schedule.

In most companies and for most productions, the stage management team will comprise a stage manager, a deputy stage manager and two or more assistant stage managers. The stage manager (SM), in addition to leading the team, holds overall responsibility for managing rehearsals and performance which includes providing a report for every performance to the general manager, production manager and director if

they are still under contract. They would also hold responsibility for both the health and safety and risk assessments.

It is usual for the deputy stage manager to compile the book during rehearsals and liaise with the stage manager, if they are not sitting in on rehearsals, on practical decisions which need action such as finding a specific piece of furniture or obscure prop. The deputy stage manager (DSM) will normally run performances, giving cues via a headset to the stage crew as the action progresses which will leave the stage manager free to handle any issue that arises such as a performer not being ready. The assistant stage managers (ASMs) will set up the acting area for rehearsals, source props and prepare them for use, keep the rehearsal room tidy, ensure refreshments are available and, during performance, ensure props are prepared and available for the performers and, when necessary repair and replace them. In smaller companies, ASMs may operate sound and other technical effects, assist performers with quick costume changes and move furniture, scenery and props in scene changes.

Until the mid-1970s, ASMs would also have smaller acting roles in repertory companies. Being an “Acting ASM” was often a route into an acting career or a first job after drama school. Many producers and directors began their own careers in stage management; given the breadth of the role, it provided a good opportunity to learn about theatre-making and to gain experience on a range of productions and in a range of companies.

### **Other Related Roles Explained:**

#### The Resident Stage Manager

Many venues which are “receiving houses”, i.e., they take in visiting productions and visiting companies, have a Resident Stage Manager (RSM) who is responsible for maintaining all the theatre’s facilities which relate to performances: lighting, sound, fly tower, dressing rooms. With the increasing use of software to programme the technical functions at venues, the RSM has had to learn new skills and develop digital knowledge and expertise; in the last twenty years, this role has been renamed as Technical Manager or Technical Director and is considered to be part of the venue’s management team alongside marketing and front of house. During performances, the RSM is responsible for the backstage area and the SM for the production, the wings and the onstage area.

## The Production Manager

A Production Manager has a wider range of responsibilities to the Stage Manager and their team. They maintain a production schedule for the design, workshops and technical team and liaise with the creatives to ensure all the practical elements of a production are completed within the allotted time frame and within the allocated budget. Production managers usually work on several shows at once and maintain an overview of them all at their varying stages of progress.

Stage managers usually work on one show which they know in detail; they liaise with the technical and workshops teams to verify that what is being prepared is as intended, they are the link between the practical teams and the rehearsal room. Some theatres with resident companies used to have a post called Stage Director which was a hybrid of production and stage manager. After pressure from Equity who complained that the title was confusing, it was eventually phased out.

## The Company Stage Manager

In order to distinguish between the stage manager who is with a visiting company and the stage manager who works for the venue, the term company stage manager (CSM) evolved. It is also used in large theatres and theatre companies where there are several shows playing at once and each production has its own company. When a visiting company arrives and leaves a venue, the RSM and the CSM will work together to plan and manage the “get-in” and “get-out”. The RSM will need to facilitate the process for the visiting company and lead the work of the venue’s crew loading and unloading props, furniture, scenery and costumes.

## The Company Manager

A company manager is responsible for the performers and stage management on a specific production. They handle pay and personnel issues as well as providing pastoral and welfare support where needed. On touring shows and on shows produced by a large organisation, they are the bridge between the performers and stage management and the producer’s office. On small touring productions, the company manager and the company stage manager are occasionally combined as one role which is then known as the Company and Stage Manager. As with the company stage manager, large theatres, where several shows are

playing at once or are in the later stages of rehearsal, each production may have its own company manager who will be the link with the senior management of the venue or the company.

### **Development of the Stage Manager Role**

The greater use of technology to deliver performances and contribute to theatre-making has enhanced the stage manager's role. Stage managers have become proficient in computer related tasks such as preparing a CD of downloaded music and sound effects to be used during performances. With the number of performance-based tasks that are cued and actioned using software, the range of skills deployed by all members of the stage management team has changed; a working knowledge of information technology is now essential.

### **Is the Stage Manager a Creative Role?**

A stage manager is not usually thought to be part of the creative team; it is part of their role to support the director, designers and performers to make theatre. When stage managers are used to working with a specific director or group of performers and they are a trusted and welcomed presence in the rehearsal room, their opinion may be sought on where furniture should be placed, when a sound effect should commence, from which part of the set, a performer should enter. Trust and confidence in an experienced stage manager can lead to their being encouraged to participate in the rehearsal process.

In performance, the DSM will often need to make a snap decision when to cue a sound effect, music or lighting change in order to respond to the action which will inevitably vary from one performance to the next; that, in itself, is a minor creative act. Their poor judgement could take attention away from the performers and the text. Unless there is an assistant director remaining with the production, after the first few performances, the director's responsibility for delivering a performance moves to the stage manager, whose job is to ensure consistency. In some companies, the stage manager will take understudy rehearsals, weekly word runs or the run-through at a new venue on tour. It seems reasonable therefore that stage managers are not part of the creative team at the beginning of the rehearsal process but they join towards the end and are often the sole member during a long run.

## **LINKS**

If you want to know more about stage management, the following may be of interest:

<https://stagemanagementassociation.co.uk>

<https://getintotheatre.org/blog/what-does-a-stage-manager-do-theatre>

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