

THE NEW QUORNDON SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Notes on STAGE MANAGEMENT

Firstly it should be explained that, as a small amateur company, our stage management is not the same as it would be in a larger company. So, to clear up any confusion, take a brief look at the following;

Resident Stage Manager – This is someone who is the stage manager at a theatre. Other shows may come in from elsewhere with their own stage management. As he knows his own theatre he is top dog. He is not there to stage manage the incoming show – just to help stage manage it in his theatre.

The Stage Manager – This is the person with the ultimate responsibility for running the show and in most cases will sit with a good view of the stage, (usually on a monitor) ‘on the book’ cueing sound and lighting and making any decisions needed to ensure that the show runs smoothly and safely. They will be connected by talk-back to the Tech Crew and the DSM or ASM.

The Deputy Stage Manager – Is next in line and will take over the SMs duties if needed. They are usually backstage and usually also working as an ASM until needed as an SM.

The Assistant Stage Manager/s – Are usually backstage or wherever needed and are responsible for chasing actors when they aren’t where they should be (the ASM rarely calls actors in professional shows, they will only call them if they look like they are going to be late). They will also take responsibility for set changes and for the props table unless the show is big enough to warrant a separate props person. May also have some responsibility for costume, pulling curtains and whatever else needs to be done backstage to keep the show going.

The Technical Crew - Varies with technical level of the show but is quite often just one or two people in the sound/lighting box who will work with the SM over the talk-back system. If a team, the Technical Director, will be the leader. The SM will speak standby cues for light and sound as a double check against missing any.

HOW WE WORK (AT THE MOMENT)

We tend to work a system where our technical crew at the ‘desk’, who have a good view of the stage, are also acting as a professional Stage Manager would – cueing and activating light and sound, agreeing the start of the show and informing the ASM’s of any problems or omissions on stage.

In Rawlins and the Village Hall, if you are back stage, you cannot see the stage, so that sound and lighting cues cannot be called from there. The designations, therefore, have changed a little and may change again depending on the theatre space.

NQSC Technical Crew are responsible for;

- **Design and rigging of lighting and sound**

- **Safety of the above**
- **Running the sound and lighting for the tech, dress and performances**

NQSC Stage Management team are responsible for;

- **The safety of cast, crew and audience**
- **The smooth running of the show**

Even though our Stage Manager at the NQSC may not have the responsibility for being ‘on the book’ and calling cues we generally still call them Stage Manager.

The Stage Management’s first and foremost responsibility is for the safety of all those in the theatre and this is paramount at all times. The Stage Manager should have attended rehearsals and done a risk assessment for all things from fights to potentially dangerous sets and props. If something worries you discuss it with the director immediately. Ensure that you know enough about the play that you are not going to be surprised at dress rehearsal by the knife throwing act. Once in the theatre, update the risk assessment - basically think of everything that could possibly go wrong, no matter how unlikely, and make sure that something is done to make sure that it doesn’t.

Note: *Before we look in detail at the Stage Managements responsibilities, it should be said that it will be the director/producers responsibility to assign a stage manager for their production. In doing so the director/producer must also look at the tasks listed below and ensure that they have chosen the right person, or persons, to take them on.*

In amateur companies where the crew are working full time already it is advisable that the role of stage manager is shared between two or three people. (Look at the list of responsibilities below to see why!) In this case **it is the director/producers responsibility to ensure that all tasks are assigned and nothing is forgotten.** For instance, the roles of Propmaster, Stage Management, FOH management and Technical Director can all be clearly defined. Health and Safety should remain with stage management. For smaller productions the roles can be combined but this once again is the director’s call.

The Stage Manager

- the SM heads the backstage crew
- works closely with the Director and Technical Director. The Technical Director has overall responsibility for all technical events on or back stage but must work with stage management to ensure safety and the smooth running of the show.

Preparation

- The SM should know the play as well as the Director.
- Set – staging, furniture, etc. It will be the S.M.’s responsibility for the movement of props, furniture and scenery on and off the stage area, so early involvement in the planning stages is a good idea. View everything from a practical standpoint and if the director wants pianos and wardrobes moved between scenes then ensure he/she works with you on figuring out exactly how it is to be done. Make sure that the director has arranged for someone to be responsible for assembly and construction. If there is limited time in the venue arrange that as much construction as possible is done

beforehand and transport and storage is arranged. Enlist help of committee and cast for preparation & storage.

- Props – check who is expected to take responsibility for this. It is necessary to work closely with the props person and the director to ensure that everything needed has been found or made.
- Lighting / FX – during rehearsal you may be asked, particularly if working on a large stage, to mark up a script with exits, entrances and lighting areas, for use by the Technical Team when they come to put together their lighting plot. The director may prefer to arrange this himself /herself.
- Sound/music / FX –. Make sure you know exactly what the Director is planning and how it is likely to affect stage management and safety.

Rehearsals

1. CALL SHEETS AND ATTENDANCE - Ideally the SM should attend all rehearsals. In the professional theatre the director works out a 'call sheet' and may require the SM to handle the myriad of reasons and excuses that actors will have for not being able to make rehearsal. Make sure that everyone has a number that they can contact you or the director on and that you have all the contact details of all the cast and crew.
2. MAINTAIN A WORKING COPY OF THE SCRIPT
 - Blocking. Exits and entrances mainly, unless the director requires more or if there are technical aspects to consider. For instance the director may require more detailed blocking notes so that these can be transferred to the Technical Director's script for the lighting plot. Most Directors tend to work this off their own script though. Some directors like their S.M. to keep detailed notes of all of the actor's movements. These are not needed in the S.M. working copy for production and in general are only needed if a cast member has to be replaced.
 - Cuts to the script – keep abreast of these and ensure that they are in ALL working copies for production! Any late cuts should be transferred to the Technical Directors script who may not have picked them up.
 - Backstage FX – S.M's may be required to operate lights or special effects from backstage in which case these need to be marked clearly in your script.
 - Props – who sets them on stage at the beginning of the act OR who takes them on and off stage, when and where? Make up an accurate list and keep this and all other notes with your production script.
3. PROPS - Props should be available early in rehearsals to enable the actors to become comfortable working with them.
4. LIGHTING - Lighting is unlikely to be available for rehearsals but sound cues and music should be worked in as much as possible as well as anything vaguely technical that the actors may have to do themselves!
5. COSTUME - Make sure that costume available early in rehearsals for a dress call to check fitting and ensure that the actor is comfortable enough to do whatever it is he/she has to do in the costume.

Production Week

The Stage Manager should be in attendance for all of booked venue time and should work closely with the Director.

Safety

- Backstage – ensure that all cabling is gaffered down and walk ways are clear.
- Make sure that there is adequate lighting backstage and ensure that anything that is likely to be a hazard is clearly marked or buffered.
- On stage – the same applies as above with the addition that steps or edges of rostra or indeed anything that anyone can fall off should be clearly edged with white tape.
- Exits from the stage should be clearly marked as should entrances from backstage.
- Fire safety – You must have a plan for evacuation of the theatre in an emergency and should discuss this with FOH and stage management crew and then give the cast and crew a brief rundown of all these arrangements, preferably before Dress Rehearsal. FOH should be in charge of the evacuation of the audience and Stage Management should evacuate the cast and crew. (*Though mobiles can be a pain in the theatre the stage manager and the FOH should always have access to one.*)
- You must ensure that any regulations specific to the theatre are adhered to and that the seating restrictions are strictly complied with. (These will include the chairs being secured – usually in rows of no more than 12. and allowing the proper width of gangway between the chairs.)
- Ensure that fire exits are clearly marked and visible at all times – even during performance.
- Ensure that fire exits are unlocked and easily opened and not blocked in any way.
- Ensure that FOH people are aware that they are fire marshals for the audience and will be required to man the fire exits throughout the performances.
- Ensure that FOH and stage management know where the fire extinguishers are and how to use them. (Most venues should have a fire extinguisher specifically for electrical fires and this should be accessible to the Technical Desk.)
- Arrange for a correctly stocked First Aid Kit to be available. (*Note that the NQSC does not have a designated First Aider and any member offering first aid will be acting as an independent person under their own responsibility.*)
- Ensure that any special effects are safe and that if fire or candles are to be used they are always dealt with carefully and extinguished safely. Make provision for this with sand buckets etc. if required.
- Make absolutely sure that any staging, particularly hangings and curtains, are treated with flame retardant.
- Some venues may have a fire curtain but these venues will also have a RSM so that will be his responsibility.
- As SM you should have an exact list of who is present in the building connected with the show – and don't forget that this may vary slightly from night to night. Keep this handy for a role call once the cast and crew has been evacuated. The FOH should have a

reasonably accurate idea of the number of audience members and so evacuation should somehow include a head count if at all possible.

Venue

- Check booking times with Director / Committee and keep an eye on the clock through all rehearsals – which will invariably run late. Remind the Director fifteen to twenty minutes before the end of the time booked that he is about to be chucked out.
- Key holders. Some venues will have premises officers or caretaking staff who will be on hand to lock up once the agreed time has been reached. The Director or Stage Manager should make every attempt to be the last to leave the venue and to check in with the premises officer before leaving themselves. For some venues a key holder will need to be designated and must be prepared to take responsibility for the security of the building and for being the last to leave the premises. Enlist cast support for clearing & maintaining tidiness.
- Support venue caretaking / admin staff – the company may need to use that venue again so be polite and helpful at all times even if the venue staff are annoying you. Any complaints that actors, stage management or production crew have relating to the venues or staff should be referred to the committee and handled by them on behalf of the company.
- Please remember to consider and make arrangements for the safe keeping of valuables. Actors will bring cameras, watches, jewellery and money and leave them in the dressing room. Quite often the dressing room is deserted and vulnerable to thieves.

Technical set up – Get In

- Work very closely with the lighting and sound crew and/or Technical Director. Give the technical team priority, ensure they know well in advance the timetable and are happy with it and give them the time they say they will need. Never forget the basic safety rules.
- Be aware that the tech crew, usually under tight time constraints, have much heavy and dangerous work to do.
- Be aware also that they need to access all parts of the stage **when** they need to access them. They will not take kindly to actors rehearsing under them or SM's building sets around them. This is a danger for all concerned.
- Even a small screw dropped from a height can do serious damage to a skull - a spotlight can kill. (*Wear hard hats. Yell 'HEADS as a warning' if something is dropped from height but the safest thing to do is to ensure that the tech crew are allowed time to do their job safely and are not pressured or tired.*) You may find that, in some venues or for some shows, you can work around each other quite happily but never forget the basic safety rules.
- No one should ever go up a ladder without someone else being present. Ladders used should always be of the safest possible for that venue. Wear hard hats.
- Once lights are hung according to the pre-designed lighting grid, they will still need to be pointed and focussed. This is another job that takes time and effort. Hopefully, then the crew are ready to work their lighting plot into the computerised system. There will still be the odd adjustment to be made and if set is in the way it will have to be moved.

- The sound system also will need to be set up and cables run all over the place to power it. (*Sound systems in some venues can be a bit ropey so, unless we know it is state of the art, we must be prepared to provide our own.*)
- There should be a fire extinguisher specifically for electrical fires on hand by the 'desk'. Most venues should have them and it should have been recently checked.
- About this time try to arrange to have the talkback set up and checked and ensure that batteries are available and that everything is charged and working well.

SET /STAGING

- Again this can be hard and heavy work and it is advisable to put lots of thought into the easiest (and safest) way to achieve the best effect in the shortest possible time.
- If your director has arranged for lots of heavy furniture to be moved in between scenes, discuss this with him/her in advance, and make sure that you have all the help you need to do this without injury to anyone.
- If time constraints in production week are pressing ensure that the set design is such that it can be constructed and painted elsewhere and just put together at the Get In.
- Remember that you are unlikely to be able to do much towards set construction, if indeed anything, until the lights have been hung, pointed and focussed to the TD's satisfaction. (*In some productions and some theatres it may well be possible to build the set first of course but check this well in advance.*)
- If you as Stage Manager consider anything to be dangerous refer to your director and the set building team and try to find an acceptable solution. Stagework is inherently hazardous so don't be too officious and do approach the problem with the intention of finding a solution.
- Stairs and steps are always a problem on stage – ensure that they are clearly visible to the actors, even under variable lighting, are as non-slip as possible and make sure that you point out the potential hazards repeatedly to the actors!
- Ensure that all edges of rostra on stage and back stage and all steps (risers) are clearly visible. Also exits and entrances and the front of the stage. If the set design itself has not made them visible then mark them with white gaffer tape – even if they spoil the design. Check through the tech rehearsal that all remain easily visible in the varying stage lights. If there are to be total blackouts ensure that the actors are aware of them and rehearse any movements made during them.
- It should go without saying but make very sure that all scenery is anchored, secure and in no danger of falling.
- Back stage – can be very dangerous, especially with limited light as in some venues. Minimise the trip factor with gaffer and high lighting tape and ensure that anything that sticks out and cannot be moved is buffered and can be clearly seen, especially if it is head height.
- If actors are coming off into darkness try to ensure that they can see enough to move safely to their next position. Someone on stand-by with a torch if there is no other option,
- Enforce the 'no running back stage' rule vigorously and the 'no watching by entrances or exits' rule likewise.
- Ensure that back stage is as comfortable as possible for the actors and that arrangements are made for access to the loo – some will need it, quite desperately at the last moment!

PROPS

- Set up a props table in an accessible but not right in the way area.
- Any weapons must be particularly well looked after and not left anywhere that the public has access to. For any show using weapons research the current health and safety advice and be aware that this can be quite rigorous.
- Ensure early on that all the cast are aware that props must never be removed from the props table except to be used on stage. Most actors know this but any inexperienced members in the cast may not...

GREEN ROOM/CHANGING ROOMS

- This may be immediately backstage or it may not. You should agree fairly early on where you expect the actors to wait during the performance and make arrangements accordingly.
- The actors should be able to hear the progress of the play either through talk back or because they are close enough to the stage. If we ever work anywhere that this is not possible (not very likely) it would be the Stage Management's responsibility to call 'standby' for every single cue and would mean an awful lot of running about.
- Try to arrange that water and cups are available or that the cast is aware that they must bring their own.

WARDROBE.

- Some plays will have more costume changes than others. During rehearsal check what costume changes there are and approximately how long they will take. Some may need to be done immediately backstage, others may be done in green room or dressing room.
- Arrange help for any actors who have very quick changes.
- Ensure that any costumes needed backstage are available and properly hung so that they don't get lost.
- The dressing room will need to be organised with rails, chairs and at least one full length mirror. Provide safety pins and sewing kit.

SEATING

- In many venues the seating will have to be arranged by the company and this can be a long, hard job. Try to get plenty of help for this – but put one person in charge. It's amazing how many opinions people have when it comes to the position of a chair!
- In some venues, it is a matter of health and safety that rostra or any other construction belonging to the venue is erected and dismantled by their staff and there will probably be a charge for this but if there are people available to help they won't say no and it gets the job done quicker.
- In all venues there are seating regulations to comply with. For instance, to have more than twelve chairs in a row before there is an aisle of a specified width with free access to a fire exit.
- All chairs should be secured to each other in the rows. (Some venues don't insist on this but it is still quite a good idea.)

- Obviously there must be no danger of chairs falling off anything and the maximum seating numbers must be strictly adhered to.
- We should always provide access for wheelchairs and an area should be chosen that will enable FOH to station the person in the wheelchair swiftly and with least amount of fuss. Equally, thought should be given and arrangements made to ensure that disabled persons are seated within easy access of a fire exit should an evacuation be necessary.
- Having seen to all that, you are left with trying to make your audience as comfortable as possible. Make sure the heating is on if necessary and keep the lighting welcoming (avoid stark neon lighting).

TECHNICAL REHEARSAL

- Work out exactly what you are going to do and how you are going to do it with the Technical Director and the Director.
- The NQSC tends to call all the actors for the Technical Rehearsals and this really is the safest way. Dress and make-up should be worn and checked under the lights so that any problems can be ironed out prior to Dress Rehearsal. Ensure that all actors are called and are aware of this.
- Cue to cue run of play. This is NOT a rehearsal for the actors. It is a rehearsal for the Technical Team and to a certain extent for Stage Management. But the play is very unlikely to be run in its entirety and will run from technical cue to technical cue. The actors can find this boring and frustrating.
- Fights, dances, music and any songs should also be rehearsed at Tech as well as any special effects. The actors should be primed to take note of lighting areas and to firm up their own personal blocking – so that they know exactly where to stand to be in light!
- Arrange to be on talk-back and standing by at all times to call and marshall actors.
- Include props in the rehearsal if you can but running cue to cue this can prove to be a bit chaotic. Take the time to point out to actors where the props and props table will be situated though.
- Prompt – if you use one. I would always advise against it. If the actors don't know their lines well enough to work without one, they shouldn't be on stage. If things go horribly wrong the S.M should be able to pull things back with a prompt from off stage – but this also is to be avoided.
- Risk assessment completed. Make sure that one copy goes to the company secretary.

DRESS REHEARSAL

Always treat the Dress Rehearsal as a performance

CHECK LIST

- Backstage crew ready
- Communication links with TD & crew / green room. Make sure that the cast can hear the progress of the play in the dressing room/green room.

- Set / staging complete
- Props – check the props just prior to the performance and double check that all the actors know where everything is.
- Prompt – if you use one...
- Cast are present – With a large cast it is an idea to run some sort of sign in system because it is possible to be unaware that some one has not arrived until the point when they should make their entrance!
- Costume / Makeup – remember any quick costume changes and be on stand by to help.
- Backstage areas safe
- Rehearsal starts on time
- Maintain awareness of cast entrance / exits.
- Maintain quiet backstage as well as the no running and no watching by entrances rule. Watching can be a danger because some exits are precipitous and in addition it can be a damn nuisance when required actors are trying to get on and off the stage. Discourage it unless you are sure it causes no problems. Make sure that you and your team are also not in the way.
- Wear practical black / dark clothing & shoes

PLEASE NOTE: All cast should know their own cues, they should all be following the progress of the play and they are all responsible for their own entrances. The stage management is NOT responsible for calling NQSC actors for their scenes.

The SM working script should be marked up in advance with all entrances AND, a page or two before that, with a 'stand by' or 'call' cue. When you get to that point check that the actor is either in the right place and ready to go on, or (if you are not doing anything else particularly pressing) find him and remind him that his cue is due in case he/she has forgotten. If you time your 'stand by' cues right and, if the actor is sensible, you should not have to look for him/her. Once in place it is the actor's responsibility to know when to go on and they generally like to be left alone to time their own entrance. If it is getting perilously close to a cue and an actor has not appeared then you may have to go and look for them – if this happens report it to the director.

Performance

The Stage Manager has control of the production along with the Technical Director.

Points to consider:

- As for Dress Rehearsal
- Arrange that the half, the quarter then, ten minute, five minute and standby are called to all actors and crew.
- FOH
 - Check FOH team are ready and are aware of all their duties, especially those relating to safety issues.
 - Arrange that they have flashlights or similar in case they have to seat latecomers once the show has started.(We can't afford to turn latecomers away so that every effort to seat them must be made.)

- Arrange for interval refreshments for cast (if required).
- Ensure that you and your ASM's have sufficient light to read your working scripts and have flashlights handy to assist backstage. Remember that actors will be coming from a brightly lit stage to, possibly, a comparatively dimly lit area and may need assistance.
- Ensure that all props and scenery are set before the audience arrives – particularly if working on an open set. Also that the lighting is sufficient for the audience to seat themselves safely and that ambient music is playing if required.
- **Arrange with FOH and/or Tech Team, for House Lights to be switched off at the necessary points and on for interval and at the end of the show.**
- Remind cast not to be seen in costume by audience prior to show / interval / post show unless the director is deliberately using it as some sort of scene-setting.
- **Start on time.** It is very annoying to be kept waiting for a performance that is late starting. Don't let your actors tell you that they are not ready. Start without whoever it is if you can but give them a thorough roasting if you can't and make sure that they **never** do it again.
- Agree all arrangements for the start cue. All actors, musicians, dancers, crew and tech crew must be in position and ready and there should also be liaison with FOH to arrange the closing of doors, house lights etc.
- Concentration is key. By all means enjoy yourself but don't allow yourself to lose track, even for a moment!
- Arrange with the Director and Tech Crew how long the interval is to be and ensure that some sort of signal is given to the audience five minutes or so before the second half is to start.
- It is unlikely that the venue will arrange cleaning for you. Bear in mind then that at some stage before the next show someone will have to clean and check the seating and foyer area. The venue should deal with the toilets but may not. Ensure there is toilet roll etc. You may well hand some of these jobs off to FOH or other volunteers but it is still your responsibility as stage manager to ensure that someone does it.
- Clear and clean the backstage and dressing room areas as well, or insist that the actors do it themselves.
- Ideally, after each performance the theatre should be cleared and re-set for the next night's performance. This is sometimes not possible because of time constraints and is done the following afternoon/evening.
- Actors should be responsible for their own costumes but remind them.
- Props should be returned, replaced and then re-checked just before the next show.
- Check with the tech crew that everything is powered down before leaving the venue and that there are no problems.
- The last person to leave NQSC venues each night should be either the Director or the Stage Manager, either or both of whom may be key holder to the venue. You must ensure that all power has been switched off, that no one has been left behind locked in a lavatory and be available to assist and chivvy stragglers. Politely remind those who hang around that it is unfair to keep the key holder waiting and, if they do it on a regular basis, inform them that they may have to pay the additional hire charge for the extra time in the venue. That should shift them.

DISASTERS

These can happen and you will be the one most likely to have to handle them. Let's take the least important one first

A NO SHOW

- An actor is taken ill/fails to turn up/is injured or ill on stage and unable to continue. The old adage that 'the show must go on' is true in most cases. You will know from a general consensus whether there is some pressing reason why it really can't. If your director is on hand then the decision of who takes over what should be in their hands initially. If not then it is down to you. Before you grab the book yourself and leap out heroically to fill the void – be very honest with yourself as you are probably not the best choice. Stage Managers are vital and are of far more use backstage. Get another cast member to fill in. It is acceptable for an actor stepping in at the last moment to read the part but, if it is a lead actor, then cancel if it is early enough to do so. (An under rehearsed actor stepping in, even if he swears blind he knows all the words will be a disaster. Insist he goes on with the script.) For short runs of only three or four performances it is not practical to work with understudies, however having a couple of cast members in mind and primed to take over if the worst should happen is an option that your director should bear in mind. If there is a last minute replacement, a simple announcement to the audience at the beginning of the performance should take place. **Don't** go into detail – just say who is replacing whom.
- If any of the stage management or technical crew are unable to work you probably have a much bigger problem but will doubtless soldier on somehow, enlist the actors or FOH help if you need it.
- Members of the audience can be taken ill. Your FOH should be primed and prepared to deal with this. In most cases the audience member can be quietly removed and FOH should then be able to deal with the problem. On occasion it may be felt that the person should not be moved (e.g. suspected heart attack) in which case FOH should contact stage management. Keep calm whatever happens and don't over react. However, it may then be necessary to clear the theatre until the ambulance arrives. Fingers crossed that this never happens.
- **If a fire is detected or the fire alarm is activated the building must be cleared.** If the tech crew can make an amplified announcement then prime them to do it if necessary. If not the stage manager should take centre stage and make the announcement. Hurling on to the stage screaming 'Fire' at the top of your voice is not advisable. 'Ladies and Gentlemen we have to ask you to evacuate the building, please leave the building in an orderly fashion by the nearest exit. The Front of House Staff will direct you,' should be enough. Premises officers will be on hand at most large venues to assist.

'Strike' or 'Get Out'

Points to consider:

- **Ensure that the whole cast and crew are aware that they are expected to help at the 'Get Out'.**
- Oversee the work to ensure that it is done safely and work with the technical crew and director to trouble shoot problems
- Organise teams for specific jobs
- Work with Technical Director for removal of technical equipment
- Check all areas are clean and tidy before leaving

- Support / work with caretaking / admin staff at venue
- You may still be involved with bits and pieces after the show, returning costumes or props etc but otherwise will have earned yourself a well-deserved rest!

Lastly, bear in mind that all venues are different and that all productions are different. We hope that these notes and guidelines provide some tips for those who have not stage managed before and that they help you avoid a few pitfalls. The key, as always, is organisation.

A good working relationship with the Production Team and the actors is also essential for an enjoyable and, hopefully, not too fraught production. Good luck.

COMPILED BY Sharon Scott, Nigel Scott, Helen Morris and with thanks to the Latimer Players.

Updated March 2015 by Sharon Scott