

Hold, Please:

As theatres embark on massive overhauls of their systems and structures, it's time for stage managers to hold producers and organizations accountable, and our peers and ourselves accountable, for creating more equitable theatre environments

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In October 2020, the authors of this article released “Hold, Please” on HowlRound (www.howlround.com), breaking down five of the characteristics of white supremacy that we saw manifesting in the field of stage management: perfectionism, urgency, quantity over quality, power hoarding, and objectivity. We knew that this list was far from exhaustive and only a steppingstone of a much longer path towards equitable theatre environments.

Act 2



The “Hold, Please” essay brought a lot of support and a flurry of sparked conversations across the theatrical community. Stage managers said the experiences we discussed were far too recognizable and sometimes even caused their departure from stage management altogether.

We want to ensure this conversation continues and that the work unpacking white supremacy doesn’t fizzle out as people lose steam. In that spirit, we gathered again to unpack the remaining characteristics of white supremacy listed in Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun’s “Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups.”

Take Me or Leave Me **Defensiveness**

Despite an outpouring of support, the reaction to the first installment of “Hold, please” was not entirely positive. Unsurprisingly, some people got defensive when we put their long-used and well-loved methods into question. Defensiveness is commonly the first

and most stubborn barrier to meaningfully addressing white supremacy and other areas of structural change.

The reaction often went something like, “*a perfectionist work ethic has served stage managers for years. Calling perfectionism ‘white supremacy’ all of a sudden is disrespectful to those of us who have spent years working hard in this industry. You’re pitting people against one another!*”

Because of the desire to lean on either/or thinking, many people conflate critique with an attack. Any questioning of our actions is a threat to our moral character that must be stopped. And by bringing up our defenses, it requires the critic—often the person being harmed by the behavior in question—to shift the narrative. Now, instead of explaining the ways in which perfectionism has caused actual harm, we’re focused on soothing the ego of a single person who has positioned themselves as the center of the narrative.

Theatrical leaders constantly bombarded us with speeches, emails, and

social media posts uplifting the importance of theatre and why we need to give back to our communities (i.e., donate to their organization). But, as soon as these same people are asked to share some of their personal influence with their community, an iron wall of defensiveness comes up painted with words about “doing their best” and “working hard to get where they are today.”

This fear of losing power is a big motivator for the defense response, but we’re not here to assuage anyone by saying you don’t have to worry about losing power. Because you do. If you want to create a more just world that is less reliant on white supremacist culture, you need to be willing to share your power. Be generous, be collaborative.

Redefining theatre practices and doing deep internal reflection is going to be uncomfortable. There is no question about that. But once you’ve broken through this first wall and learned to wade through these feelings of defensiveness, rather than getting lost in the rubble, you’ll actually be able to address the myriad other problems waiting behind it.

Don’t Rain on My Parade

Fear of Open Conflict and the Right to Comfort

When this wall of defensiveness arises in the rehearsal room or when addressing instances of racism, ableism, transphobia, and other aggressions, it is easy to conflate comfort with safety. You grit your teeth, power through, and try not to make matters worse by speaking up. Maybe you share a meaningful glance with a coworker, or on occasion, pull someone aside to ask if they’re okay. Still, in the face of conflict, people shy away from taking meaningful actions to address the aggressor’s acts directly.

We’ve acclimated to the belief that brushing conflict aside or quietly addressing it behind closed doors is the best option. It may feel right in the moment, but the least disruptive option is rarely the safest for the group in the long run. This lack of transparency broadcasts to other people in the room this behavior is okay. And while it soothes the aggressor and those in power into comfort, it does just the opposite for those being harassed—it tells the people looking to you for support

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that you are okay with this behavior and that you won’t stand up for them if it happens again. As we transition to this new paradigm, we must get comfortable being uncomfortable.

Keeping quiet also puts the burden of speaking out on the shoulders of BIPOC folks and the others who are often the most vulnerable to backlash. It furthers a narrative of BIPOC folks being too “sensitive,” too “loud,” or too “difficult” to work with. It is up to every single one of us to call out racist comments or jokes, even if it makes the person who said it uncomfortable, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Part of your job as a manager is to ensure the safety of everyone in the room. Your personal comfort and the comfort of people who are skinny, male, cis, white, or able-bodied cannot come at the expense of the safety of everyone outside of those circles.

If you’re someone who struggles with confrontation or holding these uncomfortable conversations, just like any other skill or muscle you want to develop, you’ve got to take time to practice speaking up and moving through—rather than around—discomfort. Otherwise, when the moment comes, you won’t know what to do, and your body’s automatic adrenaline response will override your intentions. You can practice scenarios with a friend or, even better, sign up for a workshop in bystander intervention or conflict resolution.

For stage managers, in particular, there is an idea that we are expected to “set the tone of the rehearsal room,” which is often similarly equated to ensuring comfort for everyone within. But in truth, the tone is also heavily created

and influenced by the director, creative team, producers, and broader systems surrounding the production. That false sense of control puts stage managers in a difficult position that ultimately, sets them up for failure. We’re given the expectation that we need to create a safe work environment, even so far as being listed as a go-to on the organizational harassment policy. However, producers rarely give us the resources, training, and institutional power to follow through in creating safe working spaces.

The power we do have is to help chip away at those walls of defensiveness and build muscles to handle difficult conversations by speaking up. Ask for training when you see stage managers listed in a company’s reporting structure. Speak up when the board member mixes up the names of your show’s two Black actors. These moments feel awkward to us now because we have historically been taught to avoid them. If we are going to be expected to set the tone of a room, then let’s set a safe tone by actively asking if everyone is safe vs. if everyone is comfortable. By asking that, we can help distribute the power in the room, so we’re not helpless against these aggressions.

Ten Duel Commandments ***Worship of the Written Word***

From emails and reports to prompt books and paperwork—communication is at the heart of the art of what we do as stage managers. The documentation process is crucial for keeping people across teams on the same page and aware of the many changes that occur during rehearsal and performances.

The issue lies where communication veers into a fixation on what is written down—when rehearsal reports become scripture and anything unwritten is brushed aside.

This worship of the written word works hand-in-hand with external expectations of perfection placed upon stage managers and internalized ideas of false objectivity. Stage managers may spend so much attention getting reports and paperwork exactly right that their other duties fall to the wayside. It's additionally strenuous to put so much focus on written reports when they're often put together at the end of an already long and exhausting day.

Stage managers are expected to be expert communicators, but despite communication inherently being a two-way street, this is not necessarily an expectation for every person on the production. The burden of keeping all parties up to date on all aspects of the production isn't achievable if all parties aren't given similar expectations to share information.

Both Sides of the Coin

Either/Or Thinking

We see the arbitrary binaries of either/or thinking all over the place, and they affect us subconsciously. Union/non-union, Broadway/regional, plays/musicals—it is inevitable that certain connotations will come to mind about the different identities and experiences of the people around you. But for stage managers, these binaries can manifest in making biased hiring decisions, stifling creativity, and over-simplifying complex issues.

Leaning on either/or thinking as a

seemingly efficient way to make decisions can also impose a sense of urgency that hinders authentic and freely given consent. Either/or thinking can show up as a bias to say yes and is especially prevalent in situations of bodily autonomy for performers. When directors and choreographers ask performers yes-or-no questions like, "George is putting his hands here. Is that okay?" they often feel pressured to say "yes" in fear that saying "no" will paint them as "hard to work with." This binary framing isn't a genuine choice between two equal options. It's a covert demand directed toward a single answer. If you don't feel comfortable saying "no" without repercussions, any "yes" is meaningless.

Instead, stage managers can make room for genuine consent by asking open-ended questions like, "The director wants to try having George put his hands here. How do you feel about that for this moment?" This steps away from either/or binaries and the profoundly ingrained compulsion to say "yes" by starting a conversation. It opens the door to collaboration and creativity, to figure out what would work best for this moment and these actors. What was once a single artistic choice is suddenly a world of possibilities.

One Singular Sensation

I'm the Only One, Individualism, and Only One Right Way

Despite theatre's inherent collaborative nature, the expectations and ethos around stage management seem contradictory to that. In the process of keeping an eye on the broad scope of departments and individuals required to

maintain a production, the role of stage manager begins to inhabit the anti-collaborative position of an all-knowing individual and the person most capable of completing any task.

The individualistic nature of stage management manifests as production stage managers (PSMs) who are labeled as the sole voice for directors and production team members' questions. This can go so far as actively discouraging assistant stage managers (ASMs), production assistants (PAs), and interns from contributing ideas or even speaking up in general. Framing the PSM as the only useful person blocks delegation, causing PSMs to overfill their plates. This viewpoint of self-exceptionalism minimizes the work and capabilities of their teammates, creating a culture of distrust and barring an abundance of insight from team members whose voices could uplift the production if they weren't being shut down.

This way of operating also stems from the incorrect belief that competence is a zero-sum game. "*If my ASM knows this answer, and I don't, they're undermining my authority in the room.*" In actuality, it's important to remember that the PSM and ASM are part of a team working toward the same goal. Denying this works against the good of the whole by slowing down processes in favor of your ego.

It also works against the PSM's own well-being by unnecessarily overloading their plate with duties outside of their job. By buying into the adage "if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself," you're only making things worse for yourself. Pushing yourself to do everything on your own compromises your time and health and prevents you from growing and seeing new points of view.

Perpetually self-delegating also gives the wrong message to those around you, leading to the belief that if producers want something done, they can just hand it off to the stage manager, regardless of whether it's actually within the realm of their duties—which, continuing the cycle, harms those coming after you to a theatre that now believes that part of a stage manager's job is to be overworked and take on the tasks nobody else wants. So when the next stage manager says no to unpaid overtime,

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replacing lights, and beyond, they are labeled as the “problem.”

Setting these boundaries is difficult, but part of that process is letting go of the unrealistic and ego-indulgent expectations that you’re the most competent person in the room. Bringing in new voices, opinions, and methods does not minimize your achievements; it expands your toolbox and creates space for you to focus on your actual job at a healthy pace. And when your coworkers do well, be sure to give credit and appreciation for their work, and if you see someone’s work getting miscredited, speak up. This goes not only for ASMs but for the myriad other people working tirelessly behind the scenes to make productions run—assistants, administrators, carpenters, front of house, wardrobe, crew, and beyond. Not only is this the nice thing to do, it helps serve as a reminder that everyone in the room can be a valuable resource for advice and expertise.

On that same note, individualism can manifest in assuming that everyone in a specific role thinks, acts, and has the same physical capabilities as you. Assigning a particular task to a stage manager or ASM without discussing their physical ability or previous knowledge can create a block in open communication. For example, Quinn was once asked to complete a task that, as a disabled person, she will never be able to do. In this, she was thrust into a situation where she either had to openly disclose her disability to her coworkers or be marked as incompetent because she isn’t able to do anything requested of her at a moment’s notice. Discussing the varying abilities of your team and others around you is vital to

create a space where individuals feel free to speak openly about what they have knowledge of and where others on a team can fill those spaces or teach.

Individualism works in the opposite direction as well; while misdirecting spotlights of praise, it also keeps broader systemic issues in the shadows. When you’re focused on the individual level, it’s easier to believe that problems that arise are caused by and can be fixed by removing “one bad apple”—that if this single individual is given a talking to or (on the rare occasion) fired, then the issue is resolved. But we know that isn’t the case. Abuse of power and the harm it causes is widespread in the theatre and beyond. When we focus on single incidents or don’t speak up because we believe an issue is only affecting ourselves and our show, we miss all the other people affected and those who will be affected in the future.

The Company Way Only One Right Way

Starting at a new theatre is always tough, especially one entrenched in history and tradition. Navigating the culture of a new company is like walking through a minefield. Who has been there the longest? Who is an ally? Who should I avoid? Who influences if I will get hired again?

Inevitably, you will encounter someone who says something akin to, “in order to succeed and climb up the ladder, you need to play the game.” What is the game? Well, the game is all the unwritten rules that have become tradition. The artistic director only talks to the “talent,” so don’t bother them. This technical director will respond to you

only once you have proven you know how to explain it to the director better than them. If you want to be the PSM, you need to survive three seasons as an ASM and not make the PSM look bad. Fridays are “No Pants Friday” in the booth, etc.

It’s time to start making the implicit explicit. If a company has unwritten rules that you find problematic, talk about it. Ask, “why do we do it this way?” Do not take “because that is how we have always done it” as an acceptable answer. There are traditions that should not continue because they cause harm. The first step in healing that harm is acknowledgment that the practices have caused harm.

Part of that is examining how stage managers are taught to be stage managers. Many colleges in the U.S. have outstanding programs and classes that focus on stage management. However, your education is greatly influenced by your individual educator’s opinions. Stage management educators must take into account that there is no one right way to stage manage. There are different styles, different techniques, and specializations for different genres. If you asked five professional stage managers the same question, like “how do you tape a floor?” there is a high probability that you would get five different, and correct, answers. People teaching stage management need to be open to sharing different techniques and ensuring their students know that their way is not the only right way.

In this new paradigm, people-first policies need to be the priority over money-first policies. We no longer live in a world where companies invest in employees’ professional development or have the expectations that they will take care of you when you retire. Yet, companies expect employees to stay loyal and with a company for decades. Theatre is no different.

To make sure that we get out of the “play the game” mentality, we need to look at hiring practices and criteria to ensure we cast a wide net of applicants. Give more people the opportunity to interview and have a conversation with you. Look at the company policies and ask what they do to keep employees around, especially BIPOC employees. Ask how they treated their employees

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during COVID-19. Interviews are a two-way street. If you don't like their answers, it's okay not to want to work there.

Mother Knows Best (Only One Right Way) and Paternalism

The balance of power between the stage managers and ASMs can be very fragile—especially when working in educational environments. While the two roles inherently hold different responsibilities, the title of “assistant” creates a dynamic where the stage manager is seen as the boss or “better” than the assistant stage manager. Because the stage manager will be the primary contact for the director, there are often times (specifically during tech weeks) when the assistant stage manager will be assigned more tasks without consulting them or with very late notice. This assumption by the stage manager and director that the assistant stage manager will take on the responsibility without asking their input broadens the power dynamic in the stage management team where one is more knowledgeable than the other. These paternalistic practices can, in the moment, be seen as the easy, fast way to solve an issue. However, as we have discussed, the need for urgency can disenfranchise voices and stifle the opinions of BIPOC in certain situations. Perhaps the stage manager assumes they are making a decision for their peer that would make the backstage flow easier, yet these leaps in judgment actively exclude assistant stage

managers from being treated as equals in their work.

Especially within an educational environment, relationships among the stage management team can be strained if paternalism manifests. For BIPOC students, the practice of being talked over, assumptions regarding their abilities, and other acts of paternalism are normalized within this environment and carry with them as they move into professional spaces. This cycle persists and continues to harm, specifically, BIPOC members of stage management teams.

Looking at the stage manager-director relationship, directors will occasionally take advantage of their power and authority and make decisions for the production without disclosing them to the stage management team. When directors take control of the production in this way, it removes stage managers from the lines of communication they are supposed to be facilitating. Being clear at the beginning of production about the specific director and stage manager expectations and communication styles can erase these moments of paternalism.

Gimme Gimme (Gimme) Progress Is Bigger, More

Art is a beautiful thing, and what we do as artists is also beautiful. But often, we make sacrifices, compromising our own beauty for the beauty of the art. Everyone wants to get to opening night and everyone wants the show to

happen, but at what cost? As stage managers, we make these sacrifices for the good of the team because we don't want to be accused of not being a team player and impeding the show's progress.

Sometimes, producers will take advantage of the collaborative nature of theatre, using it as a means to siphon additional work hours out of stage managers without compensation. This becomes especially detrimental to stage managers who do not have the benefit of union protections. For example, during Alexander's tenure as a non-union stage manager on *A Little Night Music*, he and his assistant stage manager didn't get a single day off in the two weeks between the first rehearsal and opening weekend.

Theatre is a business at the end of the day. So it makes sense that one of the priorities of a production is to make money. Too often, though, things that can be easily measured are more highly valued than things that cannot. Institutions and producers are not actively thinking about the process, just the product. “This show sold out quickly, so we extended and added performances.” Great! But how many of those extension weeks were nine-show weeks? How did that affect the morale of the company? “Well, we paid them overtime!” But overtime pay cannot replace recovery, work-life balance, and quality time.

Stage managers must be concerned with the physical safety of the company, of course, but also the psychological safety and the instances that may not seem like a direct threat. Chris Waters worked on the world premiere of a Broadway-bound musical in 2018 with many of these issues. The creative team was aggressively arguing every day; the company would have to take 45-minute breaks while they fought it out. The theatre leadership would pop in from time to time, but there was no genuine concern about the trauma this was putting the company through. One member of the stage management team was seriously injured during the design run, and as soon as they were taken to the hospital, the producer said, “let's take five and continue.” Stage management reported these issues over and over, and the theatre leadership only saw that the show was selling out, and there was a

buzz about it. After closing, not a single person from the company was asked to be a part of a postmortem—the theatre deemed the production a success and moved on.

Why We Tell the Story

Words into Actions

Even through the excitement of a transition back to in-person productions and a semblance of normalcy, it's crucial not to become complacent and brush off these harmful traditions within our practices. We cannot put this work on pause as we focus on COVID-prevention practices. We must hold these two crucial cultural shifts at the same time and understand how they work hand-in-hand in the process of developing safe environments for BIPOC individuals. What is the point of returning if we are simply returning to the same inequitable space? How effective are safety measures if they are built upon previously ingrained discrimination and exclusion of BIPOC individuals?

With heightened safety precautions poised to fall under the responsibility of the stage management team, this added strain doubles down on the importance of being mindful in the way we assign duties and operate with others. We need to keep an active eye on ensuring stage managers aren't overburdened with work outside of their paid role. As we know, COVID-19 has disproportionately affected communities of color, and we will need to advocate for the safety of our BIPOC bodies and keep those needs at the forefront as we develop safety protocols.

Ultimately, we as stage managers do

have the power to help make changes, but we must be courageous and vigilant. Don't be afraid to stand up, because you are not standing alone in this. There are countless members of the theatre community who have been put into similar environments and situations, and it's time to band together and listen to one another. Theatres are going through massive overhauls of their systems and structures, and we must use this time to move from discussion to action. Do not let people tell you these problems are unsolvable. Do not allow excuses that perpetuate inequities as the norm. We have the tools. It's time to hold producers and organizations accountable. It's time to hold our peers and ourselves accountable. This is your call to action. Go.



Miguel Flores earned his B.A. in music from California State University Los Angeles. Born and raised in the Los Angeles area, he has been a

theatre professional for the last 20 years, working in opera, theatre, new works, and music education. Flores was the music teacher at a public high school in California for two years before returning the LA theater scene as a stage manager, and then traveling the United States to ASM operas. He worked in St. Louis for 5 years as an associate production manager before moving to New England to be the production manager at North Shore Music Theatre. He is happy and excited to go on a new adventure working with the Revels Community.

R. Christopher Maxwell (stage manager) hails from Little Rock, Arkansas, and currently resides in Harlem, New York.

During his early years, he earned a BA in theater arts-dance and sociology from The University of Arkansas in Little Rock. As part of his journey, he spent several years working in the Chicago not-for-profit theatre circuit, and special events management for the historic Navy Pier Entertainment. He also received an MFA in stage management from Columbia University's School of the Arts. He aspires to use his education and experience to center the voices of marginalized communities and advance the work of other queer artists and the diaspora of colored people. In his career, Maxwell hopes to explore new mediums and untold stories. Recently, he joined the adjunct faculty at Pace University and the University at Albany, SUNY. He is the co-founder of the Black Theatre Caucus, and third-year stage manager at Actor's Equity Association for which he serves as an Eastern Regional Delegate. He also serves as New York Metro Regional Representative for the Stage Managers' Association. Off-Broadway Credits: (ASM) Eco Village, Safeword - EBP Productions; American Moor - Red Bull Theater. Regional Credits: (ASM) Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles; Dreaming Zinelle; Black Like Me (PSM) - St Louis Rep; and Iron John: An American Ghost Story (PSM) - Manhattan School of Music.



John Meredith (they/them/their) is an arts administrator, producer, and AEA stage manager. Stage management credits include

1776, SIX (American Repertory Theater); Pass Over, Fun Home, Small Mouth Sounds, Men on Boats (SpeakEasy); Wig Out!, Shockheaded Peter, We Are Proud to Present... (Company One); A Guide for the Homesick, after all the terrible things I do, 2017 Summer Workshops (Huntington Theatre Company); The Hotel Nepenthe (Brown Box); and Fiorello! (Berkshire Theatre Group & Off-Broadway Transfer). In addition to stage managing, they help lead StageSource's Gender Explosion Initiative for trans and non-binary inclusion and the Line Drawn Initiative for harassment prevention in the arts. Meredith was also the associate producer of the inaugural two annual MTA Playwrights Labs, created to connect student playwrights with professional actors and directors. Outside of the arts, they work with progressive campaigns and organizations at ActBlue. They hold a BFA in stage and

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production management from Emerson College. Learn more at www.johnmeredithstage.com.



Alex Murphy is a New York-based stage manager having worked on the off-Broadway productions of *Romeo and Bernadette*, and *Two's a Crowd*. Recent productions include a workshop of *The Unwritten Law* with *Two River Theatre*, *An Iliad*, and *How I Learned What I Learned* for *Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival* and a virtual production of *Songs for a New World* with *Canadian Music Theatre Project*. Previously, Murphy was the resident stage manager for *Kansas City Actors Theatre* in *Kansas City, MO*, for three seasons, working on such productions as *Death and the Maiden*, *And Then There Were None*, and *Skylight*.



Quinn O'Connor is a stage manager currently based in Los Angeles who has worked on a variety of productions and events including *Long Beach Opera*, *The Fountain Theatre*, and

Opera UCLA. O'Connor has also collaborated with *East West Players*, a regional theatre in downtown Los Angeles, to craft and improve on disability access initiatives within their theatrical programming. She is currently completing a degree in theatre and disability studies from UCLA and continues to work on access in theatre for underrepresented communities. She hopes to continue working at the intersection of theatre and disability access, both in audience experience and broader representation to create an accessible future for all.



Phyllis Y. Smith is a production manager, live events technician, producer, and arts administrator working primarily in Boston. In Smith's nearly two decades of working in theatre, film, and events, Smith has worked in capacities as a production stage manager, production manager, technical director, electrician, carpenter, event coordinator, producer, and everything in between. In addition to working in live events and film, Smith is also the senior director of operations

at the *Boston Center for the Arts* and a member of the *Front Porch Arts Collective* of Boston.



Chris Waters (he/him) is an AEA stage manager based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Waters has worked internationally with the *Shanghai Children's Art Theatre*, Off-Broadway at *The Public Theater*, and regionally at *American Conservatory Theater*, *Aurora Theatre Company*, *Berkeley Repertory Theatre*, *The Curran Theatre*, *Magic Theatre*, and *Z Space*, among others. Favorite productions include *Harry Potter* and the *Cursed Child*, *Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations*, and *A House Tour of the Infamous Porter Family Mansion* with Tour Guide *Weston Ludlow Londonderry*. Waters holds an MA in theater management from *UC Santa Cruz*.

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