



YEAR ^{of the} STAGE
MANAGER | 20
21

Leading the Way in a Post- Pandemic World

Stage managers can create equitable, respectful, safe, and sustainable practices, reflective of all we've learned in over the past year-plus

BY MATT STERN

The world has changed. A global pandemic, the rising racial justice movements, and the intensifying climate crisis have altered how we live and work. The theatre industry is no exception. However, these changes have been happening while theaters have been closed, providing an opportunity for us to reflect and look critically at our own industry. We are reopening performance spaces in a world that is very different from pre-pandemic 2019. This is a new era. As Broadway and theatres across the country get back to work, there are new realities and new learning that must be acknowledged and incorporated.

Stage managers are in a unique position to have an impact on social justice, inclusivity, health, safety, wellness, and sustainability. As the stewards of a theatrical production, stage managers have always been a significant part of creating and maintaining a safe and comfortable working environment, facilitating communication among numerous collaborators, and seamlessly running and maintaining the show. As Lawrence Stern wrote in *Stage Management*, “The person who has responsibility for making the entire production run smoothly, on stage and backstage... is the stage manager” (Stern 2002). Tony honoree Peter Lawrence describes the job this way: “The complete welfare of the backstage [company] and daily interaction with all the elements of a production are the jobs of the American stage manager” (Lawrence 2015). Together, these definitions demonstrate the great responsibilities stage managers have to both the production and the people involved in making it.

As we return to rehearsals and performances, stage managers are again leading companies of actors and stagehands. The production process that we manage, however, needs to be equitable, inclusive, safe, and sustainable, reflective of all we’ve been through and learned in 2020. What should stage managers expect to be tasked with? What should we expect of ourselves? What do we expect of our employers? What are the conditions on the ground in our respective localities?

We can look at this new era of stage management by addressing the role of the stage manager in three arenas: health and safety, race and equity, and sustainability.

Health and Safety

Stage managers manage the many daily bumps, bruises, aches, and pains company members experience, including



Collaborating on COVID Panel, Broadway Stage Management Symposium, 2021 with: Matthew Aaron Stern, Lane Marsh, Michael Passaro, Kimberly Shaw, Guy Kwan, Charlene Speyerer, Lauren Class Schneider. | Photo courtesy of Matt Stern.



During the shutdown, programming to keep stage managers connected and actively discussing industry developments was sponsored by groups such as the Stage Managers' Association, Year of the Stage Manager, and Broadway Stage Management Symposium.

ensuring basic first aid is on hand. COVID-19 has cast a harsh spotlight on health and safety, and it would seem natural that the stage manager would be the person to turn to for COVID-19 related issues. However, COVID-19 management requires much more than basic first aid and CPR training. Instead of assuming new COVID-19 specific duties, stage managers overwhelmingly support the creation of a specialized COVID-19 safety supervisor, according to an informal poll on the Year of the Stage Manager Facebook page a group with (8,000-plus members). Nearly 80

percent of respondents felt it was “an unreasonable addition to my job as a stage manager...” or that the responsibility was “better suited for a compliance officer.” Stage managers often take on additional duties, but the additional duties around COVID-19 (testing, PPE, social distancing) should be the duties of a dedicated person outside of stage management.

“I got my COVID-19 compliance officer (CCO) training and one of the things stressed is that the CCO should only be doing their COVID-19-related work; it should not be combined with another position,” says Amy Witherby, a stage manager who responded to the poll. “There is plenty for the CCO to be doing and they need to focus on that—and vice versa for the stage manager.” Unions that represent stage managers agree. As Leslie Sears wrote on the same Facebook group thread, “Both AEA and AGMA have said stage managers are not to be responsible for COVID-19 health and safety checks.” The stagehands union, IATSE, does not represent stage managers, but also sees the necessity for a distinct position, separate from the stage manager. The organization’s new COVID-19 safety measures document calls for establishing a COVID-19 compliance officer. “

This CCO position shares many wonderful qualities with stage managers: organized, efficient, empathetic, diplomatic, and calm. It’s no wonder that

The term COVID Safety Supervisor (CSS) is one of a few used for the position. Some other titles that have been used to describe this position include: COVID Health & Safety Manager (CHSM), COVID Health Manager (CHM), and COVID Compliance Office (CCO). This last term, although initially quite prevalent, has some moving away from it due to concerns with its relationship to policing and implied style of enforcement. In this article, aside from direct quotes, the term COVID Safety Supervisor (CSS) will be used to define the position.

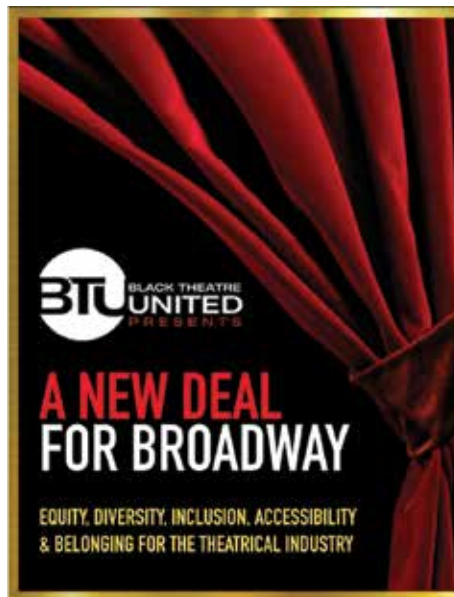
veteran Broadway stage managers and early career stage managers alike have taken courses, received certificates, and been hired to work as COVID-19 safety supervisors, another term for CCOs. However, there is too much work required to combine the CCO and stage manager roles into a single job. Combining them will only compromise both positions. Our process is served best when stage managers can be stage managers. Working with a COVID-19 safety supervisor ensures company safety, and allows the stage manager to focus on their duties to manage the production process.

Employers must hire a separate COVID-19 safety supervisor, and stage managers, union and non-union alike, should support this need. Stage managers will always keep a look out for health and safety, but in this new era, stage managers need to be clear about their need to collaborate with a COVID-19 safety supervisor to ensure they can stage manage effectively. In fact, the USITT reopening guidelines are quite explicit in this regard, stating: “The Health and Safety Coordinator (HSC) will work with stage management and producers to adhere, implement, and oversee the production’s overall health and safety plans. The HSC is not a stage manager and does not perform any stage management tasks.”

If a stage manager is tasked with COVID-19 health and safety duties, it puts them in a difficult position with the creative team they are supporting, and both jobs will suffer. The separation of duties will provide the best adherence to safety protocols and allow stage managers to do their best job managing the production process.

COVID-19, however, isn’t the only health concern that stage managers will face in this new era. Awareness and understanding of mental health issues have moved to center stage as well, particularly mental health challenges of the 10 out of 12 rehearsal days and the 6-day work week.

We’ve seen a rise in the movement to end the practice of 10 out of 12s (10 hours of rehearsal in a 12-hour span), which are incredibly draining on a company, both mentally and physically. The website, nomore10outof12s.com describes them this way: “A 10 out of 12



Black Theatre United held a summit and worked for six months with representatives from across the theatre industry to create this document which outlines commitments to create more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and accessible theatre. Read the document here at: <https://www.blacktheatreunited.com/new-deal/>

day is not just a 12-hour day for most theatre workers. For designers, technicians, stage managers, and other theatre workers, it can easily be a 16-hour day or longer.” In addition, a growing chorus is advocating to move toward a five-day work week, instead of the more typical six-day week, to alleviate mental health, safety, and quality of life issues.

“When we release ourselves from the 10/12-the-show-must-go-on mentality, we gain the opportunity to build

new people-centered processes and a more equitable future,” says Chaira Klien, artistic producing director of Baltimore Center Stage. Shea King from Columbia Basin College adds, “I can say with confidence that it has re-invigorated my spirit. The tech process is just as energetic and enjoyable as the five-day rehearsal weeks due to the healthy conditions and efforts to respect everyone’s time.”

As makers and managers of the schedule, stage managers are in a position to propose changes to the old ways of scheduling and promote better practices. Options like those mentioned here support mental health and safety and focus, not on the number of hours rehearsed, but the quality of the time spent in rehearsals. By demonstrating to directors and producers the value to both the production and the people, stage managers can advocate for these positive changes.

The use of sick days is another health and safety issue to address. Sick days have typically always been used for physical ailments, so the way a stage manager responds if someone calls out, citing the need for a “mental health day” instead of a typical “sick day,” can greatly affect a company. A compassionate response will go a long way to maintain the positive and safe work environment we value.

The next challenge may be the most difficult for stage managers—caring for our own mental health. Maintaining work/life balance is something many



The May 2021 Broadway Stage Management Symposium featured a panel of stage managers and social workers focused on the mental health of stage managers.

stage managers struggle with, often giving our time and energy at the expense of our own health. In May of 2020, the *Broadway Stage Management Symposium* featured a panel of stage managers and social workers focused on the mental health of stage managers. In August, USITT featured a panel with the organization *Behind the Scenes* highlighting the mental health resources they have available. “Even without the uncertainties of life in a pandemic, the unique environment and stresses of working in the entertainment industry are extremely challenging. It’s critical to make sure you, and those you care about, stay healthy; mentally and emotionally as well as physically,” said the greeting on the registration page for the panel.

Race and Equity

In the days following the murder of George Floyd, we experienced a new social awakening. We See You White American Theatre (<https://www.weseeyouwat.com/>) published a powerful, critical, insightful, and thought-provoking treatise enumerating the many ways systemic racism has infected the theatre and detailing how our industry needs to change.

To be an effective leader in rehearsal and performance, it has become clear that new learning and understanding about race and equity must be part of a stage manager’s skill set. Only with new tools can we combat the systemic racism that is embedded in our culture. During the shutdown, many members of the stage management community have embraced the responsibility of educating themselves.

The Year of the Stage Manager Facebook group became a meeting place for stage managers to lean into these conversations, learn in public, and rebuild our process in order to do better. The group’s founder, Amanda Spooner, told *American Theatre* magazine, “I think what stage managers should be doing right now, as much as they can, is learning exactly how white supremacy culture functions in the performing arts. What am I doing to dismantle white supremacy culture? You can’t dismantle it unless you know it, unless you see it. When stage managers go back, and their role is as a middle manager, you



Anti-Racist Stage Management Panel, Broadway Stage Management Symposium, 2021 with: Tiffany L. Robinson, R. Christopher Maxwell, Cody Renard Richard, Narda E. Alcorn, Ron Vodicka, Lisa Porter, & Beverly Jenkins. | Image courtesy of Matt Stern.

can pretend that because you’re not legally a supervisor, you can wash your hands of it. But you’re lying to yourself because you’re clearly an authority in the room. You’re clearly functioning as someone who is guiding a project and guiding priorities and keeping clear goals” (Pierce 2020).

One way to begin this process of learning is reading and discussing important books such as *White Fragility* by Robin DeAngelo and *How to be an Anti-Racist* by Ibram X. Kendi. During the shut down, discussion groups sponsored by YSM and The Stage Managers’ Association (SMA) were places where stage managers could share their understanding of cultural differences, the impact of micro-aggressions, their own privilege, and how white supremacy has been built into many of the systems we have accepted.

Ira Mont said, if stage management is “fundamentally...taking care of the human beings working on a show” (Pierce 2020), then we need to develop a much better understanding of how what we say and what we do affect BIPOC company members and perpetuate a culture of white supremacy. Readings and discussions and self-education are a necessary step for stage managers to realign our actions with the values of equity, equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Some stage managers have written about the systemic issues in our industry. The insightful article “Hold, Please,” written by six BIPOC stage managers (Flores et al. 2020) points to

the vital importance for stage managers to critically assess their process. “For stage managers in particular, we must be mindful of the ways we facilitate our rehearsal and performance processes. Choosing not to practice continual self-reflection and adjustment perpetuates harm to ourselves, everyone around us, and particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of color” (Flores, Maxwell, Meredith, Murphy, O’Connor, Smith, & Waters 2020). The article gives specific examples of how concepts like urgency, perfectionism, objectivity, power-hoarding, and more contribute to white supremacy culture.

Leading stage management educators, Narda E. Alcorn of Yale and Lisa Porter of UC San Diego, collaborated on an article on *Howlround* to help stage managers “emerge from this lengthy COVID-19 pause prepared to navigate a new production landscape” (Alcorn and Porter 2020). Some of their detailed strategies for stage managers include:

- “Intentionally incorporating anti-racist language can prioritize the deconstruction of systems of oppression.”
- “Establish boundaries when racist language is part of the content of a play, clearly stating how that language will be used by different members of the company.”
- “Speak up as an ally and stage manager, taking on the responsibility of disrupting and interrupting racist aggression towards non-white colleagues who have been harmed.”

- “Recommend that the director and creative team open conversations about race... For example, opening conversations about costumes, hair, and makeup are especially important since, even within a multiracial cast, the default might be to white skin color and hair texture.”
- “Question microaggressions that are typically normalized in the production process, like a White colleague commenting that a Black actor speaks Shakespeare well...”

By critically looking at our practice, we discover “there are so many places we, as stage managers, can be culpable in perpetuating white supremacy”(Alcorn and Porter 2020).

The 2021 *Broadway Stage Management Symposium* brought together some of these authors and other stage managers to discuss Anti-Racist Stage Management. The discussion was passionate, insightful and demonstrated the importance of evaluating our own processes. Stage managers will be on the front lines when issues arise and need to take personal responsibility to learn to see and discuss race issues and to foresee and address concerns. This is critical to creating the safe and equitable spaces we want our theatres to be.

The Stage Managers’ Association (SMA), the professional organization for stage managers across the country, released a statement in June 2020 that states: “We at the Stage Managers’ Association stand with those who are committed to fighting oppression, racism, and hate. We can do better. We must do better. We call upon all stage managers to pledge to respect everyone in the room and everyone at the table to read, to listen, and to learn so that we can understand individually how to help make the rehearsal room and the performance stage a place for joyful creation, with mutual respect and collaboration for all people working together in the artistic process” (SMA 2020).

Access and diversity in stage management is also part of the new era of stage management. Stage managers are actively creating avenues to bring more stage managers of color into the tight-knit networks that have a huge impact on a stage manager’s career. Broadway and Beyond: Access for Stage Managers of Color has created networking events



Broadway Stage Manager, Michael Rico Cohen, backstage at the Lyceum Theatre. | Photo courtesy of Broadway Green Alliance.

and an online database of stage managers of color. Cody Renard Richard and Broadway Advocacy Coalition created a scholarship program for BIPOC theatre makers (www.codyrenard.com/scholarship). The SMA promoted the Black Theatre Caucus a social media program to highlight 101 Black Stage Managers that comes with free membership in the professional association and the *Broadway Stage Management Symposium* (with the support of BIPOC stage managers) created scholarships for stage managers of color to attend the professional development and networking conference for free (Rabinowitz 2020).

In the months preceding Broadway’s re-opening, the Broadway Advocacy Coalition launched a new program called Reimagining Equitable Productions. This program held workshops with the company of several Broadway shows, including their stage managers, to acknowledge the past and pave a new way forward, setting new standards and methods of communication (Huston 2021). In August 2021, Black Theatre United (BTU), an advocacy group for black theatre artists founded during the shutdown, published *A New Deal For Broadway*. This document is the result of BTU’s founding members bringing together numerous theatre workers, theatre

owners, producers, union leaders, creators, and collaborators to develop an extensive agreement of new standards. It's no wonder that one of Black Theatre United's founding members is Broadway stage manager, Lisa Dawn Cave.

These programs, agreements, and the many discussions our community has been having will give stage managers more tools and better language to emerge from the shutdown as better leaders, allies, and advocates for this new age. These new skills that apply to race also apply to gender identity.

Efforts toward equity also apply to gender identity, another area where the leadership of the stage manager is important. Incorporating respectful use of pronouns allows a stage manager to set a tone of inclusion. A colleague keeps the book *A Quick and Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns* by Archie Bongiovanni and Tristan Jimerson on their stage management table. Company members would be curious and ask about it. This educates company members and sets an important example. Leadership helps bring a better understanding of diversity, in all its manifestations, to our industry. The theatre should be a welcome and safe place for all, and stage managers set this tone with their actions.

In the new era of stage management, stage managers can become important allies and advocates by engaging in self-education, welcoming challenging discussions, listening, learning, and creating an equitable and safe space for the creation of theatre.

Climate Crisis

Even before the pandemic and shutdown, the climate crisis was an important issue. The introduction to Congress of the Green New Deal spotlighted the United States' great challenges and opportunities. In the theatre, we've been moving slowly toward greener practices, yet the intensity to implement new sustainable ways to work has been invigorated during the shutdown and the time we've had to reflect and envision our post-pandemic return to work.

The Broadway Green Alliance (BGA) has been around for decades and has made many strides to help our industry work in a more sustainable way.

During the shutdown, Director Molly Braverman, along with many other theatre makers, created the *Green Re-Opening Toolkit* for theatre artists and stage managers.

"As we consider how to reopen our theatres and return to work, we have the opportunity to further integrate sustainable solutions into our protocols. Prioritizing health and safety does not need to come at the expense of the environment. In fact, the COVID-19 crisis shines a spotlight on the inextricable link between the health and safety of our people and our planet" (Banta et al. 2021).

During the shutdown, BGA produced a webinar, "It's Possible: Sustainable Stage Management (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vE_qQfXJyQk), which featured stage managers discussing greener practices that can make a significant impact in our world and our lives. For example, stage managers traditionally use a lot of paper: in/out sheets, daily and weekly printed schedules, monthly calendars, daily report, etc. All of this paper could be eliminated with programs like Virtual Callboard, Prepared, ShowBuilder, Cue to Cue, Stage Doc, Scriptation, Stage Write, Theatron, and more. Numerous technologies can help stage managers and production managers be more efficient and greener at the same time.

The Broadway Stage Management Symposium has featured these companies and more in the webinar series SM Tech Friday (www.broadwaysymposium.com/sm-tech-fridays) to help us use our down time to learn new technologies. Green practices also took center stage at three different sessions at USITT this year: The Sustainable Production Toolkit, Climate Crisis and Theatre, and Sustainable Solutions for Reopening Theatre. The BGA was also featured at the 2021 *Broadway Stage Management Symposium*.

Stage managers are embracing sustainable practices and demonstrating to producers and employers that green practices can be economical as well as environmentally friendly. You can learn more about the Green Re-Opening Toolkit at www.broadwaygreen.com/greener-reopening-toolkit and join the growing movement to bring greener practices into the new era of stage management.

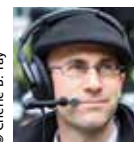
Caring for People

The role of the stage manager includes tracking and noting the many changes that occur throughout the production process. During our industry's shutdown, stage managers have still been managing change, but of different type. The world is different than when we went into the shutdown in March 2020. This new world requires new tools for stage managers to lead the way into this new era.

Stage managers can advocate for COVID-19 safety supervisors and a fresh look at our schedules, as well as a better understanding of company and our own mental health. Stage managers can re-evaluate their practice, remove racist language and harmful practices from use, educate ourselves on how white supremacy culture may be embedded in our practices, listen and lean into difficult conversations, and incorporate more stage managers of color into our networks. Stage managers can also incorporate greener practices and use more efficient technologies to reduce carbon footprints, waste, and harm on the environment.

In the *Art of Leadership*, Donald Walters writes, "Genuine leadership is of only one type: supportive. It leads people: It doesn't drive them. It involves them: It doesn't coerce them. It never loses sight of the most important principle governing any project involving human beings: namely, that *people are more important than things*" (Walters 1987).

Stage managers know this well and the new era of stage management is based on this universal theme. Stage managers will continue to care for people, but now with eyes and ears more open, with more knowledge, and better tools to address the challenges the pandemic has revealed.



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He has Stage Management credits on 20+ Broadway productions including: Finding Neverland, On The Town, Doctor Zhivago, Side Show, Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark, Death Of A Salesman, An Evening with Patti LuPone & Mandy

Patinkin, *The Little Mermaid*, *Wicked*, *Fiddler On The Roof*, *The Phantom Of The Opera*, *Enchanted April*, *The Full Monty*, & *Grease*; *National Tours*: Mandy Patinkin: Dress Casual and Diaries, John Lithgow's *Stories By Heart*, Billy Crystal's *700 Sundays*, *Les Miserables* & *Grease*. *Other credits include: International performances of Lord of the Rings Symphony Concerts*, Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular, and Blue Man Group at the Hollywood Bowl. *Matthew has stage managed for numerous corporate events around the world for clients in tech, auto, pharma, financial industries, and many virtual online events. Matthew is an alumnus of UC San Diego, serves on the faculty at SUNY Purchase, is a member of the Board of Directors of the Stage Managers' Association, and a proud AEA member. For more info about Matt, his blog, or the Symposium visit www.broadway-symposium.com.*

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