

Managing a Production **by Bronwyn Robertson**

There's so much to think about, but the starting point must be the text.

In text-based theatre there are, broadly speaking, two approaches to mounting a production. One form begins with the text, the artists and a blank canvas; no production decisions are made prior to this point, and the group discovers the play together. This approach requires a longer rehearsal period and employs a completely different methodology from the pattern that I am describing, that of most mainstream companies in Britain and America. Yet the goal is the same: we hope the Muse will gracefully descend, bless the production and inspire the actors.

Work begins, in advance of rehearsals, with the creative team, and it is within this team that the Production Manager fulfils a very special function. This person literally *manages the production* including people, time, and money. As a Production Manager, your challenges are numerous.

Ideally, you will meet the Director at the very start of the project and will be part of the process as his/her relationship develops with the Designer. They will have preliminary ideas about the production and your input at this stage is invaluable. At your first meeting, you should have read the script (or a draft if it's still work-in-progress) and you should know the budget for the project. More importantly, you should know what that budget is expected to buy. If the project is small or contained then budget questions are easy to answer: the budget covers every single cost incurred. In some cases, larger organisations might have facilities available for which there is no direct charge to the production budget.

The Director will almost certainly have a vision about the artistic emphasis for the production. With this information, you can apportion a beginning budget. This isn't "set in stone" but it is a good starting point and can help focus everyone's thinking in the early days.

In collaborative endeavours everyone's contribution counts and it isn't necessarily the most expensive or the biggest item on the set that is most important. Some would argue that the items closest to the performer's body, the costume that he or she will wear, should have the lion's share of time and/or money from the production budget. Negotiating the route through these discussions will require understanding and diplomacy.

It may be that the term 'facilitator' is more appropriate and more descriptive of the duties in this position than 'manager.' Every Production Manager has his/her own style, but the quality of your relationships on and off the set is central and will dictate how much pleasure and satisfaction everyone will derive from the project.

One of the challenges of the job is dealing with a varied group of people, from time-served technicians to brilliant but inexperienced talents. If you find that you are working with someone who is not on your list of favourite people, you may wish to employ a tested tool for production harmony: imagine this person is a colleague with whom you have an excellent and effective working relationship and treat them as such. Before responding to them, ask yourself 'would my response be different if I were dealing with a favourite colleague?' Invariably the way that you respond to someone affects his or her reaction to you. If the response is still less than you had hoped, you can at least console yourself with the fact that you put the project first by behaving in a fair and professional manner. And keep trying -- these things often take time.

As the project progresses there will inevitably be complications. The secret to success is to remain calm and clear, so choices remain intact and confrontation is avoided. Ultimately, artistic decisions belong to the Director and one of your hardest duties is asking him or her to make a choice when something has to "give." Although this is usually dictated by the circumstances, and is always a difficult job, yours will be easier if your relationships are built on trust and nurtured with respect.

Each artistic project is unique. As such, each is a learning experience. Embrace your opportunities to learn and grow! I believe that the greatest contribution everyone can make is to advance in the same way as the actors, who try new things, give of themselves, and aspire to be fearless. Then, having done all in their power to succeed, they put themselves before their harshest critics -- the audience.

Everyone involved can embrace this journey – performers are generous people.