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Stage Management 101 and 102

By

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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Fine and Performing Arts Program
Honors College

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Date

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Date

Stage Managing 101 and 102

Stage management is one of the fundamental positions in the theatre. A stage manager is the direct line from director to designer to actor. How to take on this important role takes time to learn. I have been a student at East Tennessee State University for four years. I came in as an actor and decided half way through my time here that I wanted to become a stage manager. I managed my first show, *Dead Man's Cellphone*, in the Spring of 2018. I then stage-managed my second show, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, in the fall of 2018. In being a part of these shows, I saw a noticeable difference between my first experience and my second experience as a stage-manager.

I want to compare the two experiences, while focusing on my position as a stage manager. My goal is to identify skills I can improve upon in the future, how to continue to improve upon what I do well, and to shed some light on the experience for those who might want to pursue stage-managing in the future. I will examine the two shows I participated in and how they were similar and different. I will cover technical design, actors, type of script, type of director, among other things.

What is Stage Managing?

The goal of any theatre is to put out a good show. In order to do that you need a team. There are producers, directors, designers, technicians, and actors all working to create a production. One of the crucial members of that team is the stage manager. A stage manager's skills include being organized and patient. The most important quality of a stage manager to me is their ability to be in a leadership position. Leadership includes patience, organizational skills, and adaptability. The job of a stage manager includes the following.

- Running production meetings.
- Printing out audition forms, sides, and rehearsal schedules for auditions
- Supervising rehearsal

- Recording blocking and lighting, sound, and deck cues, plotting properties and costume quick change needs during the rehearsal process
- Making a fitting schedule
- Facilitating communication among the director, designers, and actors.
- Creating and distributing production meeting, rehearsal, and performance reports
- Running the performance- including coordinating with the front of house

These are the basic responsibilities of a stage manager. We are the facilitators of a show. We make sure things go according to plan. Even if things go wrong, we take control of the situation and make things right. Stage managers act as a leader for the actors and a communicator for the designers and directors.

Show One: *Dead Man's Cellphone*

The first show I stage-managed was “Deadman’s Cellphone” by Sarah Ruhl. This is a show about a woman who finds a man dead in a café, and she takes his cellphone. She starts meeting his family and in order to spare them additional grief, begins telling lies about a man she never met. I found this production to be the less complex one of the two I stage managed. It did have many technical cues in terms of calling lights and sound, but it was all straight forward and laid out in the script. The script is challenging because although the show has a clear linear timeline, with a beginning, middle, and end, it still has some absurd situations and the cause and effect were exaggerated.

The production venue was the Campus Center Building 205 performance lab. It has a room capacity of 70. One of the challenges about this space is that I would not have a clear line of sight to the action on the stage. The booth for this space is in a separate room. I would have to watch the show through a live feed from a closed circuit camera. I did not think this was a negative, but it definitely made me nervous about the whole process. My main weakness as a

stage manager is my total lack of technology skills, and if something went wrong, I would have no clue what to do.

There were things that I had confidence in going into this show. The cast size is relatively small. Even with the addition of the director added “sprite” characters, it was only nine people. So in terms of attendance and scheduling fittings it was not too complicated. It was not a large cast and I did not have to keep up with as many people. I also had worked with a majority of the actors and actresses in the show. They were my friends already. This gave it a level of comfort.

The director of this show was Melissa Shafer. The costumes were designed by Andrea Marshall and created by Beth Skinner. The lights were designed by Rebecca Milhorn. Sound was designed and created by Ryan Leonard. The set was designed by Delbert Hall and the technical director was Zack Olsen. William Cate was the house manager. The costume, lights, and sound were created by fellow students. Therefore I was not the only one in a production meeting that was new to the process. This gave me a bit of confidence in what I was doing because I did not feel that I was being looked at so closely.

Most shows have creative challenges from the beginning. *Dead Man’s Cellphone* was no exception. The first challenge I faced was that I had never stage-managed before. I had served as an assistant stage-manager *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress* the previous academic year, but I still had a big lack of understanding for the job. Luckily, the previous fall semester I had taken a Theatre Management class. This class was taught by Melissa Shafer, who would be directing my first show. This was both an advantage and a problem. It was helpful because I knew exactly what she expected of me as a stage manager before I even started. I felt more prepared. However it also created this pressure for me to not make any mistakes.

With all of this information in my head, the process of stage managing began with auditions for “Dead Man’s Cellphone” which were set for the mid-January, the first week back from winter break. We immediately started out with problems. The first one being weather. It was scheduled that we would have auditions on Wednesday, the other production, *Mr. Burns*, would have auditions on Thursday, and then we would have simultaneous callbacks on Friday. It snowed the day before auditions and the school closed the next day. *Dead Man’s Cellphone* had to move to Thursday, which wouldn’t have been such a problem if we had the space. But the space was taken on Thursday, therefore we had to do auditions in the hallway, outside of the Bud Frank Theatre, while the *Mr. Burns* singing and dancing auditions were going on inside the theatre. Each audition was disrupting the other, unintentionally.

Other than that slight problem, I felt very good about auditions. I had audition forms ready, I had my script, even the props list already made. I even brought cough drops for the actors. I was fully ready. As part of the class I had taken the semester before, I had to prepare all of the forms and lists that usually would wait till the production meeting. At the end of the audition process, Melissa and the director of the other show, Cara Harker, sat down and talked about casting options. After some negotiating, they each came up with a cast for the two shows. I emailed our cast later that night with information about the first rehearsal, a table reading where we would sit down and read the script together as a cast for the first time. Then the process of production really began.

After the cast list was sent out and actors were notified of their positions, I received a message from one of the cast members that same weekend, asking to call him. He told me that he did not realize some of the material was as suggestive as it was. He was concerned because as a senior he wanted his family to be able to see the show. He was not sure if he would be able to

invite his family due to the adult content. So, for a moment, we thought we would have to re-cast a character.

I emailed, texted, and called the director to make sure that she knew what was going on immediately. She then sent an email to the cast member and myself that stated that he should have read the script before auditioning so that we would not be in the position to have to re-cast someone. The email also stated that she would like the actor to make a decision as soon as possible. He then responded by agreeing to do the role.

Next were production meetings, where all designers, director, and the stage manager meet to discuss the show and it's making. Production meetings were the newest to me. I knew what they were, but I was still unsure how to go about running a meeting. The first meeting I was able to sit back and simply let the director speak. I was not really in charge. After the first meeting, I was still nervous. I was not sure what was appropriate or unnecessary for a report. I pulled my technical director, Zach Olsen, aside and ask him to read my reports. As the meetings went on, I felt more comfortable in my position. Here is an example of my first production report.

**ETSU THEATRE AND DANCE PRODUCTION
MEETING REPORT**

Show: Dead Man's Cellphone Date: Friday, October 20, 2017
Director: Melissa Shafer SM: Erin Teaster

Meeting Breakdown:

- **Start: 8:15 am**
- **End: 9:00 am**
- Absent members: N/A**

Next productions meeting: November 29th, 2017

Script: N/A

Costumes:

- Thinking black bases, with more colorful with changeable “accessories” to indicate scene changes.
- Discussion of logistics and scene changes for costume changes.
- Need 20-minute fittings as soon as its cast.

Props:

- Most importantly the phones (smartphones/flip phone), a phone will need to be broken!
- Things on the café table
- The diner scene needs props
- Martini glasses
- Kidney lamp, it will need to be broken!

Set:

- Wanting a minimalistic set. Roughly 18” x 18” x 18” blocks (4) blocks, (2) 3ft square tables
- Needs masking panels for crossover and entrances.
- Not wanting to be to architectural.
- Max seating is 60

Cast Notes:

- Wanting “sprites”, with minimalistic costumes, to move sets and create that magical effect. She doesn’t want them to disappear. Open to discussion.
- Talk of doubling Gordon and Dwight as well as Hermia and The Other Woman.

Misc. :

Lights:

- Possibility Grace Arrowood to do lights.
- We spoke of cheap seasonal lights to make an effect

Sound:

- Film noir underscoring
- Creating an sound landscape.

Schedule: N/A

Crew: N/A

Makeup:

- Looking for a make-up artist in a class.

Figure 1. Production Meeting Report

The next step was to start the rehearsal process. This is where we block a show. This means that the director goes through each scene and tells an actor/actress where to be when. After we had gotten into the rehearsal process, about two weeks in out of the four, an actor emailed me and said that she would not be able to attend rehearsal one night because of foot pain. Since we were in the middle of the rehearsal process, the director made the decision to email the actor and say that they did not have to continue to show up if they thought their injury would affect their performance. The actor decided to drop the show. Therefore we had to re-block all of the scene transitions with the “sprite” characters that were added by the director. But that only took one rehearsal. It was not too much of a set back.

The next problem was that another role might need to be re-cast. At the very beginning, an actor who was playing a very large role got very sick. He was not able to show up for the table read. That was fine but as the week went on, he was still sick. The director began to get worried that the actor would not be able to show up to rehearsal. And seeing as we only had four weeks to rehearse, he needed to be there. She made the decision that if he was not well enough to be at the first rehearsal he was called to then he would have to be re-cast. In the end he got better, and he came to rehearsal, and he was able to fulfill the role.

Once these cast issues were settled, the rehearsal process went really well. The set was simple, so not having the actual show set, and just rehearsal cubes to work with, did not affect the process too much. We had all the props that we needed almost immediately. Blocking was easy to keep up with too. Our director knew what she wanted each scene to look like, so what she gave them in the beginning we kept. I didn't have to make any adjustments to my notes. I did

not even have to write down the fight choreography because the fight choreographer, Bobby Funk, wrote and typed it out for me. The actors got their lines down relatively quickly. Here is an example I have of an average rehearsal report.

<p>ETSU THEATRE AND DANCE REHEARSAL REPORT Show: <i>Dead Man's Cellphone</i> Date: Director: Melissa Shafer SM: Erin Teaster ASM:</p>
<p><u>Rehearsal Breakdown:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Start: 7:00• Break: 8:15-8:25• End: <p><u>Next rehearsal will be at 12:00 pm Saturday (2/17/2018) night!</u></p>
<p><u>Script:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We had two members of crew not show up, one because of sickness who told us prior, and one did not show up.• First we did the introduction of tech week to our actors and crew• Then we quickly ran fight call• Then we ran Act 1 with lights and sound (roughly)• The after a ten, we ran Act 2 with lights and sound (roughly)• Then we ran notes
<p><u>Costumes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The real glasses that we have for Dwight are hurting him because of the prescription.
<p><u>Props:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We still need to get a bigger spoon• Print more copies of "Tale of Two Cities"

Lights keep falling out of the latterns
<u>Set:</u>
<u>Cast Notes:</u> BE READY FOR TECH!!!!!!
<u>Lights:</u>
<u>Sound:</u>
<u>SM:</u>

Attendance	
Melissa	X
Erin	X
Angel	X
Alex	X
Matthew	X
Callie	X
Caroline	X
Vianna	X
Claire	X
Caleb	X
William	X
Bell	X
Bailey	X
Madelyn	
Collin	
Ryan	X

Figure 2. Rehearsal Report

Once working rehearsals were over and tech began, and it started to get a little rough again. Tech rehearsal is where all of the sound, lights, and costumes start to be added into the show. The first two days went pretty well. Those first days were also stressful. On the first day of dress, the tech team and I moved back to the booth instead of working from the audience. What I was worried about was the camera not working so we wouldn't be able to see. The camera

worked, but the sound just stopped working. This was a huge problem because the show revolved around a cellphone and the cellphone ringing. After about thirty minutes, the sound came back on. I am still not sure if it was the mixer board, the speakers, or some kind of bad cable, but the sound worked for the rest of rehearsal. At the end of the day, we replaced the board just to be safe. During the show the sound was fine.

The show began and I was nervous yet excited. I came in with a check-in sheet that the actors and crew signed when they got to the venue so I would know everyone was there. Then we began to check lights, sound, and get prepared for the show. Then the show began.

Of course, I cannot just do the show without a problem. During the last show we had a light issue. The lights worked, but the operator and stage manager did not. At one point we either pressed go too early, or the operator accidentally double clicked, but the stage went black. She and I both scrambled to find the right button to go back. We opted to type in the former cue instead and we got the lights back up. It ruined one of the bits of comedy in the show, but the show went on and we were fine. At the end of each show I needed to write a performance report simply describing the show and the audience that night. I had never filled one out, but the house manager, William Cate, was a former stage manager. He helped me fill out my reports. Here is an example of a performance report.

SM: Erin Teaster

ASM:

Dead Man's Cellphone

Director: Melissa Shafer

Performance #: 1

2/21/18

Start Time	7:30	Props: No notes
End Time	9:13	
Total run time	1.43	
Notes: Crew Call: 6:00pm Cast Call: 6:30 pm House opened: 7:00		Costumes: No notes
House problems: None House count 60 (sold out) Lovely, lively, and engaged crowd, including Dr. Bach and Dr. and Mr. Joy		Set: No notes
Lights and Sound: Intermission music should be louder.		Cast and Crew: Great show Everyone!

Figure 3. Performance Report

Looking back at the process, it was easy. I had the guidance of my stage management professor with me through the whole process. I still had many responsibilities, but they were simple compared to what I would do in the future. I did not know this at the time, however, and I was stressed about it all. Even though I had all my lists and charts ready to go before the show even started, I for some reason felt unprepared. I think this was because I was putting so much pressure on myself to do well.

Going into the next show the next semester I planned on relaxing. Not necessarily being lazy, but I did not want to put all that pressure on myself anymore. It did me no good and when I was stressed, I made more tiny mistakes. I think I had the right idea to not pressure myself, but I did it a little too often. Going into the first rehearsal, I had read the script, but that was it. I had made no lists or prepared anything. I was going in a bit blind. Especially since I had a new director. The training wheels had to come off and I had some catching up to do.

Show Two: *Jack and the Beanstalk*

The second show that I stage-managed was “Jack and the Beanstalk” by Chris Stiles. This is a telling of the classic children’s tale with a humorous twist. The script is written to be flexible. The writer even made a note saying that some characters can be doubled, cut, or cast as two different people. This gave the director freedom to give many actors a chance to perform. Something that I think makes this script special is that we added on a preshow and post show, written by our director, so that the show would be 55 minutes long as opposed to 20-25 minutes.

This show was a polar opposite from my first show. With the cast size, dance, and space consideration, this show was brand new territory. However even with all of the differences, I still felt less stressed. I had a bit of experience under my feet, and I felt like I knew what I was doing. Even though this show had so many new experiences for me, I was more excited to do something new. I was ready to learn instead of being nervous and wanting to impress.

The amount of differences in this show was kind of ridiculous. The most fun difference being that the director was adding a pre-show and post show bit on. Even more interesting, she wrote the add-ons as we were rehearsing the show. There was an element of constant change that I had to keep up with in terms of script, blocking, and keeping up with the actors.

This show was also very dance heavy. The added portion at the end was a dance battle, with very little spoken word. The beanstalk in this show was a silk apparatus. The actors would climb the silk as if it were the beanstalk, do choreography, and climb back down. This forced me to release control somewhat. I can’t write down the choreography in words. All of that relied on the actor keeping up with their part and practicing outside of the rehearsal space.

A circumstance of this play that wasn’t really a problem, but more of a change, was the space. Instead of the small theatre, we used the Bud Frank Theatre. This is a full proscenium

stage, with seating of 207. The backstage was a real backstage and not an office space we borrowed. The booth was also in a place where I could watch the show, and not rely on a live feed.

Another difference between my first and second show was the amount of people in the cast. There were 20 people in this cast, even after people dropped. Which was a big transition from my nine people. Most of these actors are also first semester students at ETSU. They were not familiar with the level of theatre that we were doing. They had to adjust to our standards, and I had to help them with that. Which I was happy to do, but it was a responsibility I had not had as a stage manager yet. It was also crazy trying to get all of these people into a costume fitting while also respecting the other show being produced at the time at ETSU and their schedule. I also did not have as many friends that I had the first time. It is common for stage managers to work with new people all the time, I had just not done that yet.

Along with all of the other changes going on, I had an assistant stage manager for this show. I had no clue really what the assistant stage manager's job really was. I had not bothered to look into her responsibilities until she became part of the team. I decided to let her write down blocking along with me. She would also be my backstage correspondent during the show.

The biggest change was the difference in directors. When it came to working with Melissa, I almost knew what to expect because I had an entire class with her before being her stage manager. I also had worked with Melissa in the scene shop before. I already had a relationship with her before we started. Cara, on the other hand, was brand new to me. I had never had a class with her and I had never worked with her on anything. I had heard what it was like to work with her from my fellow students, and to be completely honest, I was nervous. No one said anything negative, but they did say that her style was more sporadic, and she liked to

change her mind a lot. I knew that I had to be on top of recording blocking and what she would want to do with each scene.

This show was directed by Cara Harker. Costumes were designed by Beth Skinner, assisted by Eulalah Prater. Set was designed by Jonathon Taylor. Lights and sound were designed by Melissa Shafer. My assistant stage manager was Callie Jenkins. Zach Olsen was the technical director.

Auditions were different this time. Instead of individual initial auditions and conjoined callbacks, everything was together. This new format was made to let the students get used to how auditions are in the real world. With the new format in mind, I had to prepare audition forms and audition sides. The director provided me with both. I then had to get in touch with the stage manager for the other show. There was a slight confusion on who was getting forms and how many. After some text messages back and forth we figured it out.

This time around, I had a very lax approach on the day of auditions. The first time I came to auditions with *Dead Man's Cellphone*, I dressed nice, I brought cough drops for people, I was very prepared. When I came to this audition I was in sweat pants, my things were freshly printed and that was all we had. We had no schedules to give. I even was eating dinner as people came in. To be honest, I was not the best representation of what a stage manager should be at auditions. This was the first time new students were really being introduced to the staff and fellow actors. It was not my best moment.

Auditions went very smoothly. Callbacks went the same. The directors, the other stage manager and I stayed after. This time I was not involved at all in the choosing process. I simply sat back and let them do their thing as directors. The director later contacted me with a full cast list of 23 actors. Instead of me sending the emails, she sent them. This was fine but it was a very

clear indicator of the change in directors I was worried about. Immediately after the cast list was sent out, we had someone drop because of time commitments. This did not bother us.

After auditions, I felt a little better. At this point I had realized in production meetings that even if I had prepared and made a props list and other things like that, it would have been pointless because the director simply had other ideas that I did not know about yet. Additionally, most aspects of the show would be improvisational. They would be made up as we went along. Even the director had no idea what would happen.

The cast was set and the rehearsals began. Rehearsals for this show were a bit more complicated. We had to set aside time for the *Fairy Tale Minute* characters to come in and improv and create the preshow. The director would give them a story and they would improv the story in under a minute. This then gave her a base to write her pre-show script. We also had to have dedicated dance rehearsal where we would choreograph and practice the dance battle add-on at the end of the show. On top of that, we needed separate rehearsals outside of our regular rehearsal time to work on the aerial choreography. Very different compared to my previous show. It was definitely a learning curve.

In terms of the rehearsal process, we did not have many problems. The biggest thing that came up was that one of our dancers got an injury halfway through the rehearsal process. But we were able to re-do the choreography with no real issue. After blocking and working rehearsals ended we moved on to tech rehearsals. And it of course was stressful. But after the first days, we really had it down, especially since we had gotten to work with the silk apparatus during the rehearsals. The lowering and raising of the silk took time, but it was simple once we figured it out. I just had to make sure to get my timing right. Here is an example of a rehearsal report from this show.

ETSU THEATRE AND DANCE REHEARSAL REPORT

Show: *Jack and the Beanstalk*

Date: 9/20/2018

Director: Cara Harker

SM: Erin Teaster

ASM: Kallie Jenkins

Rehearsal Breakdown:

- **Start:** 7:00 pm
- **Break:** 8:30-8:40, 9:35-9:45
- **End:** 9:48

Next rehearsal will be at 7 pm, Monday (9/24/2018) night!

Script:

- We worked all of the aerial moments and transitions in the show.
- We did a full run of the show, including Fairy tale minute.

Dance:

- We ran the dance battles at the end.

Costumes:

- Jonathan's cow costume worked, but he still has some worries about the fit.

Props:

-

Set:

- Thank you for getting the silk in.

Cast Notes:

- Remember that Fairy Tale minute players are off book on Monday.
- We don't have rehearsal tomorrow! But you still need to be looking over those lines and blocking please. I will get you next week's schedule as soon as I have it from Cara.

<u>Lights:</u> •
<u>Sound:</u> •
<u>SM:</u> •

Attendance	
Erin	X
Kallie	X
Cara	X
Levi	X
Jonathon	X
Hunter	X
Kenny Allen Tyler	X
Taylor	X
Eulalah	X
Kylie	X
Hannah	X
Toby	X
Gracie	X
Trynity	X
Vianna	X
Clara	X
Faye	X
Laura	X
Madisen	X
Kim	X
Ben	X
Aimee	X
Shelby	X
Mykyla	X

Figure 4. Rehearsal Report

Tech came went and the shows began. This show was of course a children’s show. It was performed in the mornings for school children of all ages. We all enjoyed having our personal time back before the show even ended. Most performaces went very smoothly. No one was injured and most cues were spot on, except for the last performance. At the end of the show, the

silk is supposed to be safely lowered, unhooked, and carefully taken off stage. A solid minute before this is supposed to happen, the crew member up in the grid unhooks the silk to be lowered. The last performance her hand slipped, and the silk drops with a heavy thud to the stage. Everyone (including myself) just looked at it. After I gathered myself, I asked over the intercom if anyone was hurt. Everyone seemed fine. No actors were hit and they continued on as if nothing had happened. Here is an example of a show report from *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

<i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i>	
SM: Erin Teaster	ASM: Kallie Jenkins
Director: Cara Harker	Performance #: 5
10/10/18	

<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Start Time</td> <td>10:00 am</td> </tr> <tr> <td>End Time</td> <td>10:52</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total runtime</td> <td>52 mins</td> </tr> </table>	Start Time	10:00 am	End Time	10:52	Total runtime	52 mins	<p>Props: The rainbow candy cane cracked during the show. It didn't break, but it might need to be looked at before tomorrow.</p> <p>Costumes: The string and ball came undone on Jonathan's right leg for the blow-up costume. He put the string and ball in the pocket with the fan motor.</p> <p>Set: No notes</p>
Start Time	10:00 am						
End Time	10:52						
Total runtime	52 mins						
<p>Notes: Crew Call: 8:30 Cast Call: 8:30 House opened: 9:25</p> <p>House problems: Thank you for fixing the curtain rod. House count 212</p>	<p>Cast and Crew: Call times for the next show are as follows @5:30pm-Aerial Actors and crew @6-Women @6:15-Hunter @6:30-Men +Mykyla @7-GO Good Job Actors!!!</p>						
<p>Lights and Sound: No notes</p>							

Figure 5. Performance Report

In terms of this show as a whole, I did not do a terrible job. But I see areas where I could have greatly stepped up my game. In rehearsal I was lax on recording blocking. There were

multiple times where the director asked for blocking and I did not have it. My assistant stage manager was more on top of that than I was. I also had trouble with fittings. I did well for having a cast of 20 people, but I had some scheduling mess ups here and there.

My biggest flaw was how I handled the drop in the final show. Afterwards I was chatting about it and discussing it in a very unprofessional way. I should have kept my composure and not said anything except “we will figure out what happened later. Right now we know that everyone is safe and that is what is important.”

Final Thoughts

If I were to look at both shows together as a whole experience I would say it was a positive and educational experience. Each show in itself was a completely different experience in terms of what kind of show it was and what I as the stage manager was expected to do for that particular show. If I looked at my growth between the shows, I was lacking.

During *Dead Man's Cellphone* I was ultra-prepared. I had everything in perfect place before the semester of the show even began. I kept up with my actors and their schedule. I did a good job as a whole. During the show I let myself get too stressed. Looking back, I see that as an advantage. My nerves kept me on the top of my game. During *Jack and the Beanstalk*, I told myself not to think too much about the process, which led me to being lazy when it came to recording blocking, among other things.

I gained more knowledge during *Dead Man's Cellphone*. I gained knowledge on how to make a form. On how to call a show. How to keep up a prompt book. During *Jack and the Beanstalk*, I used all of that information again. I did nothing particularly new in terms of how to do my job. I did have new content (dancing, large cast size) but how I dealt with that was the

same structure. I learned a lot throughout these shows and I hope it helps me in the future as I develop a career in stage-management.