STAGE MANAGEMENT CALLING TRENDS AND INNOVATIONS

Survey and Report by David J. McGraw
February 2007

What would happen if you were hit by the proverbial bus? Although stage managers claim to be able to hand over entire shows in such a scenario, we remain fiercely independent in how we organize our productions. Despite the rise of conservatory and graduate programs, most of us learned the ropes through old-fashioned apprenticeships. There is no dominant manual for the field, no regular journal or trade magazine, no annual convention, no entrance exam to ensure basic skills or even comprehension of the core skills, and Equity lists all of our job responsibilities on a single sheet of paper. So is there a standard way of stage managing a show?

While many professional stage managers will say that they adapt their management style to the needs of the show, most of us have strong preferences in how we set up our books and how we call our shows. How similar are our calling styles? Have calling techniques evolved differently by region, age group, or type of show? Are there industry standards for notating or calling cues? Moreover, advances in lighting, sound, and stage machinery over the past decade have radically changed the way in which a show is operated. Have our calling methods changed in response to these technological advances? Have stage managers developed new technologies of our own to improve the quality of the stage operations?

In November 2006, I conducted an online survey of American theatrical stage managers to track trends in the notation and communication techniques of calling a show. This survey asked participants to provide their opinions on innovations and to predict how the field of stage management will adapt to new technologies. As Elbin Cleveland once remarked, “Stage managing is like riding a bicycle. If you don’t keep moving, you fall down.”[1]

The response to this survey was overwhelming. The initial participation goal was 100 stage managers; in the three weeks that the survey ran, 283 stage managers spent an average of 23 minutes each answering questions and providing comments. This tremendous turn-out would not have been possible without the support of the Stage Managers’ Association and the SM Network website. At least 142 survey participants were members of the SMA and the survey advertisements on the SM Network were viewed by 195 members and guests. Thanks also go to all of the stage managers who created viral marketing by forwarding the survey link to their colleagues and friends. The extremely large response generated enough data to track not only overall preferences but also trends within demographics of stage managers. In fact, the survey yielded a 266-page spreadsheet that can be used for future research in our field.

I also want to thank Hosted Survey for survey software and data collection tools. I highly recommend the company for its professional quality and excellent customer service.

The following is a summary of the survey findings. Please note that percentages listed in this summary are based on the number of responses provided for each individual question. Not every participant provided a response to each question in the survey.

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1 Lawrence Stern, *Stage Management, Eighth Edition*, (Boston: Ally and Bacon, 2006), 1.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

In order to elicit candid responses about calling techniques, complete anonymity was guaranteed for all participants. Survey participants did supply demographic information, however, to provide basic comparison groupings for subsequent questions. While 283 participants is a sizable sampling of American stage managers, the statistics of this survey are intended to indicate emerging trends rather than overall consensus.

One common perception that the survey supports is that an increasing number of stage managers are women. Of the 246 participants who reported their gender, 163, or 66%, indicated female. The survey also asked participants to indicate their age. Figure 1 shows the age brackets of 247 participants.

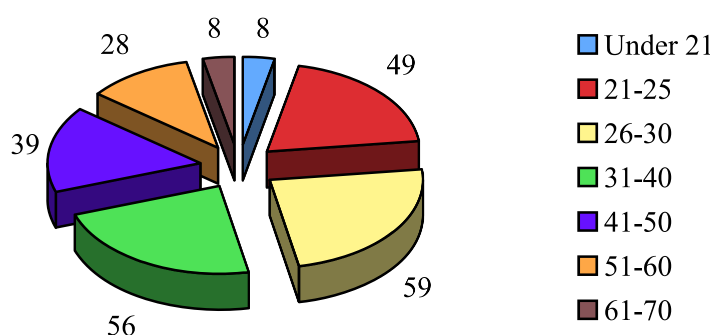

Figure 1. Survey Participation Rate by Age.

Combining the gender and age statistics reveals a noteworthy trend. While men represented 34% of the total participants, if the responses are divided by age, 48% of all participants over the age of 40 are male. Conversely, only 27% of respondents under the age of 40 are male. Once again, the number of participants is too small to certify that an early to mid-career stage manager is three times more likely to be female. On the other hand, the overall trend in gender ratios is very clear.

Survey participants also indicated their state of residence; at least 33 states and the District of Columbia are represented in this survey (Figure 2). One participant indicated residence in Canada but confirmed that responses are based on work done in American theatres. The survey was limited to stage managers who have worked on American productions to eliminate practices that are directly due to the legal and union requirements of other nations.

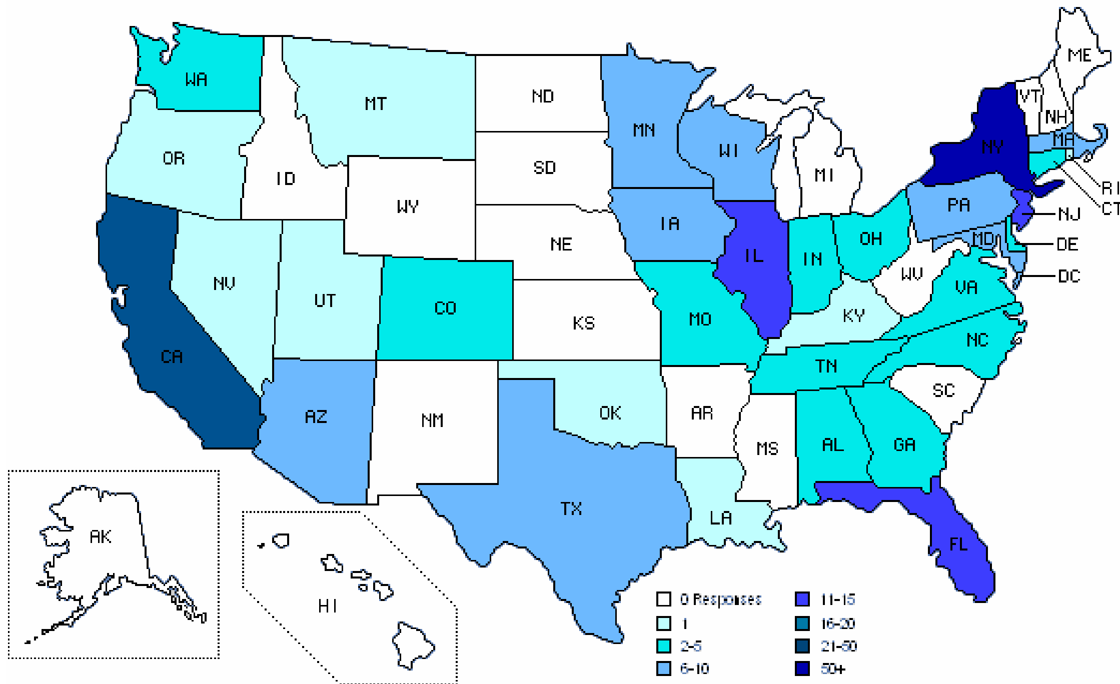

Figure 2. Survey Participation Rate by State.

Survey participants were asked a series of questions about their education, training, and experience levels. Of the 249 participants who stated their educational level, only 49 had taken at least one graduate course in stage management and an additional 64 participants had taken at least one formal course in stage management at the undergraduate level. (Some participants listed individual courses in addition to complete degrees and five participants listed both undergraduate and graduate studies in stage management.).

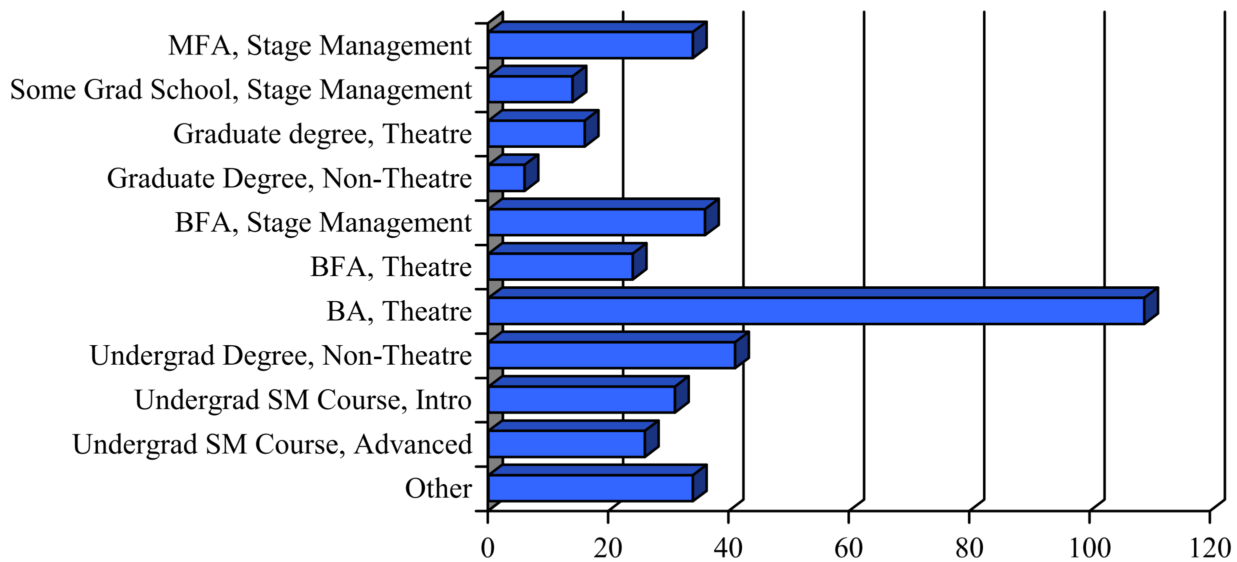

Figure 3. Survey Participation Rate by Educational Background.

The ratio of participants who have had a formal education in stage management fluctuates based on gender and age. Overall, 45% of participants have taken at least one course in stage management. When divided by gender, 49% of women have taken course while only 34% of men have done so. The division by age is even more severe, as to be expected due to the scarcity of university stage management programs even twenty years ago. Only 21% of participants over the age of 40 have taken a stage management course. In contrast, this ratio climbs to 56% for all participants under 40 years old. But segmenting by age even further reveals that 56% of participants under the age of 30 have taken a course in the field. This identical ratio for both under 30 and under 40 population segments suggests that the rise of university-trained stage managers may be reaching a plateau.

Most of the "Other" responses to the educational background question were certificate programs and credits in undergraduate programs, along with nonacademic experiences such as "School of getting out there and doing it." In fact, the participation rate in apprenticeships and other training programs was significantly higher than the rate of formal schooling in stage management.

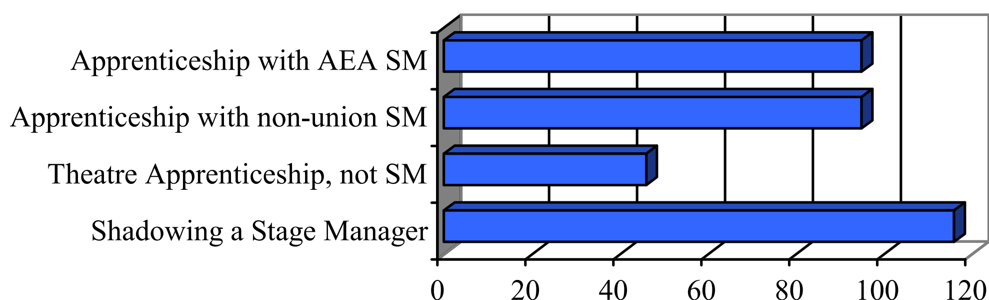

Figure 4. Survey Participation Rate by Training Background.

A number of survey participants commented about the role of formal education and on-the-job apprenticeships in the development of an early career stage manager. Most responses favored apprenticeships as the ideal learning format; a few responses even discounted the value of a stage management coursework. As one participant noted, "Education of Stage Managers is overrated; I think graduate degrees in Stage Management are farcial [sic]." Another participant approached both sides of the issue:

> I am strongly opinionated on this. If you want to become the best professional Equity theatrical stage manager, you need to observe WORKING Equity stage managers. Usually this is season long internships at regional theatres, particularly those working under the LORT contract. I have seen too many recently graduated stage managers from MFA programs who think that because they have an MFA they are ready to be a union SM. The professional world is VERY different from the university setting. They are leaving with a lot of very useful knowledge, it is learning how to use that knowledge in the professional setting that still needs to happen. A BA, BFA, MFA does not make you a great SM.

The author agrees with the latter opinion. Just as a person should be wary of hiring a lawyer who has never been in a courtroom, it would also be questionable to hire someone who never attended law school and only learned law from observing a handful of practitioners. And while comparing an MFA program in stage management to law school may itself be farcical, apprenticing for one theatre could be compared

to observing a single law firm: one would develop skills for a specific theatre and hierarchy, but those skills might not be broad enough to be transferable to other collaborations.

In order to determine if any trends are age-based or the result of integration with other arts or entertainment environments, the surveyed stage managers answered questions about their experience levels. Participants reported both how long they have worked as a stage manager and the number of productions that they have stage managed.

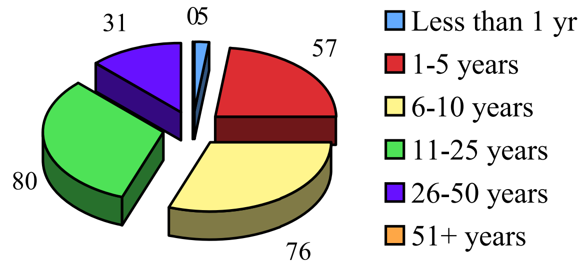

Figure 5. Survey Participation Rate by Years of Experience in Stage Management.

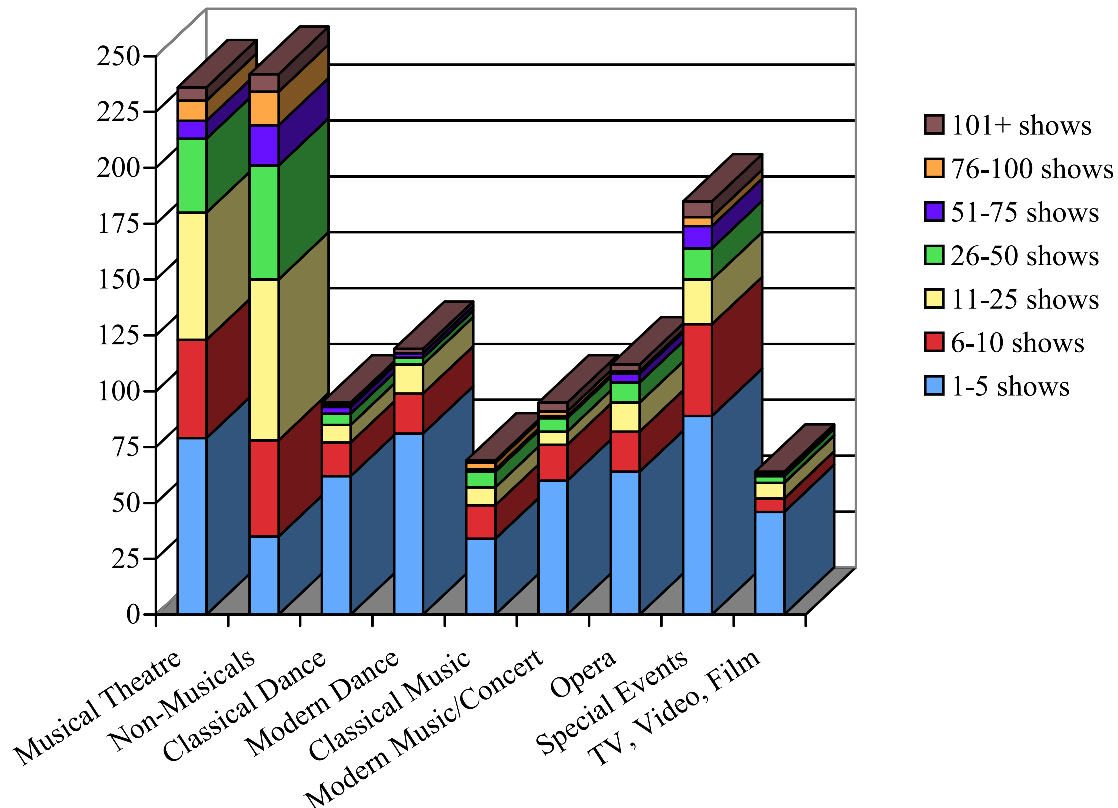

Figure 6. Survey Participation Rate by Number of Productions Stage Managed.

The survey also asked participants to identify their primary occupation. Of the 249 respondents who answered this question, 167 participants, or 67%, indicated stage manager. Seventeen participants, or 6.8% of the total responses, listed employment outside of the arts or education.

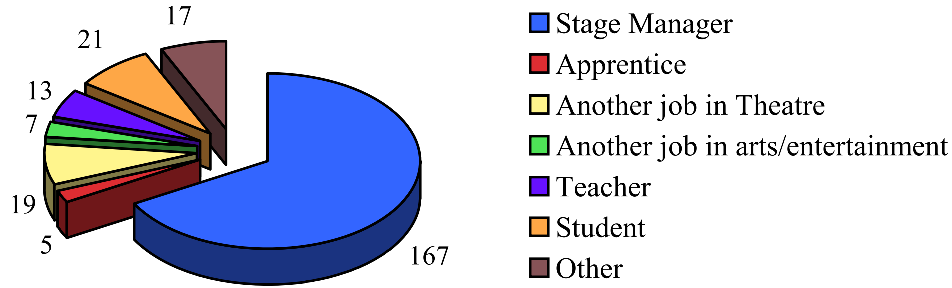

Figure 7. Survey Participation Rate by Primary Occupation.

In order to determine how currently active the respondents are in the field of stage management, the survey also asked whether each participant had worked as a SM, ASM, or a PSM in the past year. Of 234 responses, only 17, or 5% of the survey participants, have not worked on a stage management team in the past year. Six of those seventeen participants who had not stage managed identified themselves as over fifty years old.

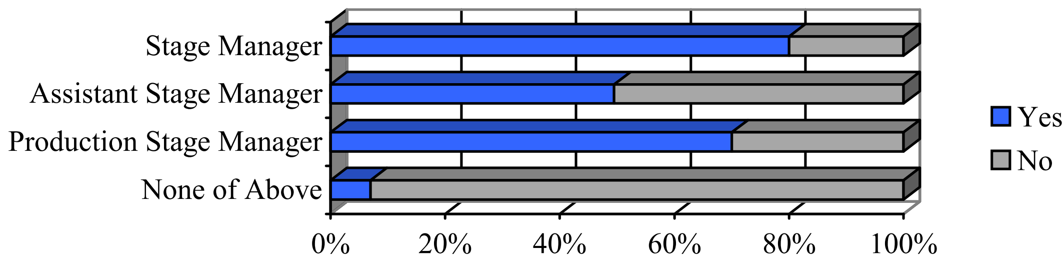

Figure 8. Participation Rate by Stage Management Position in Past Year.

The survey also asked about union affiliations and professional memberships. As noted earlier, members of the Stage Managers' Association were very active in this survey, comprising 68% of all respondents. Moreover, of 209 participants who answered this question, 81% are members of Equity.

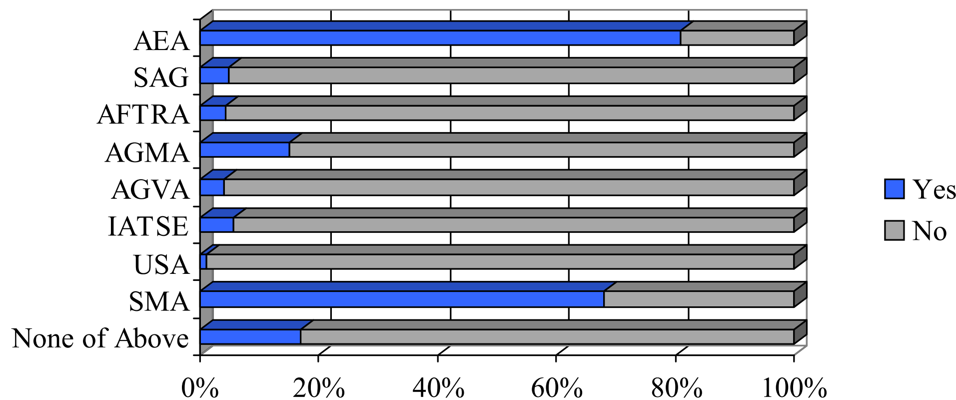

Figure 9. Participation Rate by Union/Association Membership.

CALLING SCRIPTS

In order to better understand how stage managers call cues, the survey first asked participants how they record cues. The calling script is often referred to as the production bible. Yet, despite its importance to the production, the majority of stage managers reported great flexibility in how they create the calling script. Figure 10 shows the frequency of the major methods of script creation for 268 survey responses.

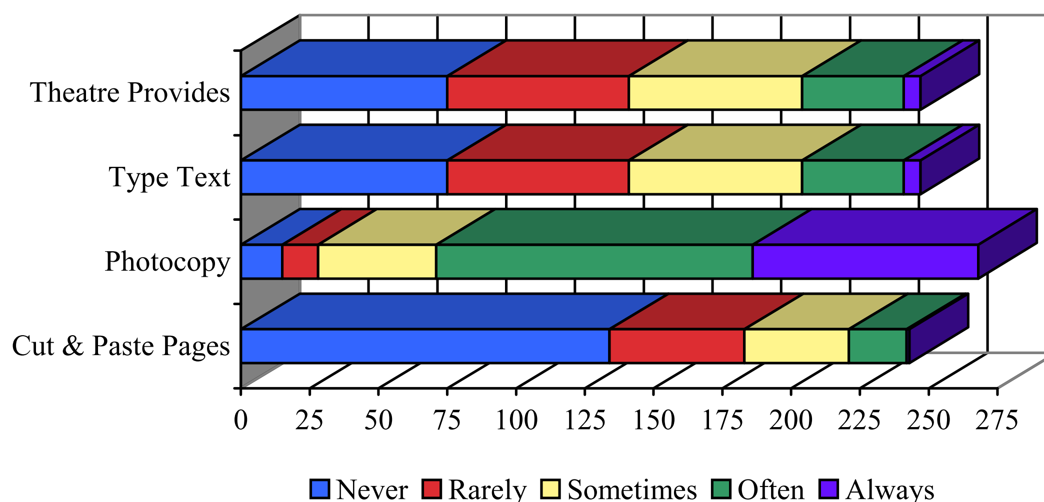

Figure 10. Frequency of Use for Calling Script Creation Methods.

One stage manager commented that photocopying a copyrighted script is illegal, but "we all do it." Lawrence Stern, in his seminal book *Stage Management*, contacted the major theatrical publishers to determine whether creating a photocopy for the stage manager's calling script is permitted under the fair use clause of the United States Copyright Act. The 1976 Copyright Act included four factors to be weighed when determining fair use:

- The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes
- The nature of the copyrighted work
- The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole
- The effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work[2]

Publishers issued conflicting opinions whether the calling script met the fair use requirements, but most publishers agreed that if the theatre purchases a separate script for the stage manager, then the stage manager is free to enlarge and photocopy the material.[3]

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2 Kenneth P. Norwick and Jerry Simon Chasen, *The Rights of Authors, Artists, and Other Creative People*, (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 19-20.

3 Stern, 28-29.

Many commented that the popularity of electronic documents for new plays – with the benefit of being able to easily adjust margins and insert information – has made this format very desirable for all scripts. Space can added for cues in long dance numbers and scene transitions. Several stage managers noted, however, that care must be made to include notes on the pagination of the actor and designer scripts for reference in production notes. Participants were split about whether, if none exists, the stage manager should create an electronic version of a printed script. Some found the process to be "a vast waste of valuable time" while others found it be "the best preparation for a calling script." Other stage managers sidestep this issue by instead increasing the photocopy scale (typically to 125-135% of the original acting edition) and cutting the pages to leave room for addition information. One lucky stage manager noted:

> The theatre I am currently working for provides the typed text. I create my call script in word [Microsoft Word], using comment boxes, callouts, text boxes, etc. For musicals, I scan the score in as a pdf and use the snapshot tool to import the score into the word document.

Stage managers were split on whether to use a separate script for their blocking notes: 153, or 55.8% of those surveyed, use separate calling and blocking scripts. Those favoring a single script find it more efficient as they do not need to transfer blocking notes for cues and as two scripts at the tech table can be "cumbersome." A popular reason to use separate scripts is if a production employs multiple stage managers who call the show. One stage manager can monitor blocking from the rehearsal script while another one calls the show. Another justification for two scripts is to have a separate copy available for understudy rehearsals. Based on comments to this question, the decision whether to combine blocking and calling scripts is based more on the length and complexity of the production than individual preferences. Yet one stage manager had a very personal reason for creating multiple copies:

> I like to have several copies so I can feel free to angrily scribble out cues that are being changed for the sixth time or so – gives me a stress release without the repercussion of ruining my script!

The candor of survey participants was also apparent when they were asked if they create a back-up copy of the calling script while in performances. As one stage manager noted, "I usually don't have time to even get my original calling script in perfect order so making a copy of it hasn't even crossed my mind."

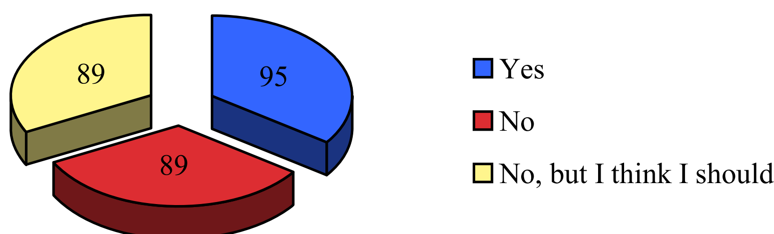

Figure 11. Number of Survey Participants Who Create a Back-up Copy of the Calling Script.

The decision to create a back-up copy also often depends on the length of the show's run and whether an assistant will be calling the show. Respondents noted that an added benefit of the electronic version of calling script is easy duplication for assistants and archival copies. Often this back-up copy is stored in a separate location. One forward-thinking PSM even uses a stage manager understudy in case of sickness or family obligations, so the back-up copy is held in reserve. Another respondent confessed to removing the calling script from the booth only to be caught in a massive snowstorm and wishing a back-up copy existed while traveling for four hours to make a twenty-minute trip to the theatre on a performance night. In *Stage Manager: The Professional Experience*, Larry Fazio shares the story that every stage manager

dreads: losing the only copy of the calling script.[4] A warning from several survey participants was to never try running the calling script through a photocopier feeder: the horror story of shredded pages and lost post-it notes should serve as a cautionary tale for all.

If the script exists as an electronic document, then a stage manager could choose to type the cues. The surveyed stage managers had very strong opinions on whether to seize this opportunity and, if so, when to type cues into the script.

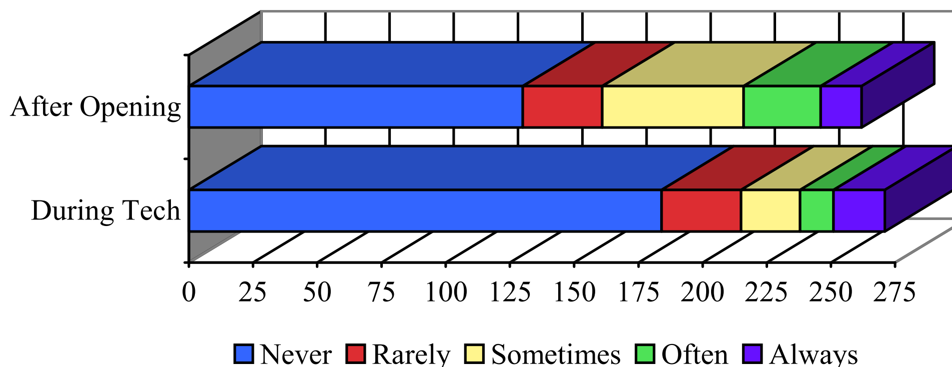

Figure 12. Number of Survey Participants Who Type Cues into Calling Script

A number of stage managers reported that the time required, particularly during tech, to record cues was the primary reason for not typing in them into the script. When asked for a comment about typing cues, one survey participant simply wrote, "Get a life." Several respondents agreed with the sentiments of a stage manager who enjoyed "a certain old-fashioned satisfaction in being [able] to do that part of my job with a pencil and eraser." Again, the length of the show and the need for multiple stage managers to read the cues clearly were the major considerations in choosing whether to type cues. One survey participant summarized the dilemma:

> I do this only for long running show[s], tours, or shows where it is certain there will be another, remounted production. Typing in the cues is very work intensive and I find my time better spent working out the understudy/swing tracks once the show has opened, and cleaning up the blocking book in prep. for understudy rehearsals. The writing of a calling script is a very personal thing. Every stage manager has their own style, and if you take 8 SM's and their calling scripts and put them together you will find each one is very different. The "make your script readable by any stage manager, in case you get hit by a bus" rule, is impractical even with a typed script. Any calling script, even a clean, neat typed one, would need to be explained to someone taking over a large production. A typed script does not make it automatically possible for any SM to sit down and call the show.

A number of stage managers, including the survey author, favor typing out the cues at the top of each act and possibly the end of show and curtain call. Many of these cues – house lights to half, house out, blackout on stage, etc. – are repeated in the same order each production with changes only in the timing, so it is actually more efficient to prepare a template and type in specifics for each production. These

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[4] Larry Fazio, *Stage Manager: The Professional Experience*, (Boston: Focal Press, 2000), 201.

templates often include other pre-show and post-show checklists that are applicable for every production within a given theatre.

Several stage managers have tackled the obstacle of time-intensive typing sessions by creating tools to streamline the process of inputting cues. Matthew Shiner, PSM for the Shakespeare Theatre, needed to create typed calling scripts both because his theatre's rehearsal schedule required him to hand off shows shortly after opening and because one production from each season is selected a year later to be remounted in a summer performance series. Mr. Shiner records his cues in technical rehearsals using the traditional paper and pencil approach and then transfers the cues using the callout function in Microsoft Word. It now only takes few seconds to add a cue or standby and equally easy to move the cue if the designer makes changes. In fact, 91% of those who type their cues use Microsoft Word, 6% use Microsoft Excel, and the remaining 3% use other word processing programs such as Appleworks.

An even more contentious issue than typing in cues is calling the show directly from a computer. Thirty-one stage managers who participated in the survey have called a show from a computer rather than a paper copy of the calling script. Satisfaction with this method was evenly split: 3% strongly do not recommend the practice, 31% do not recommend, 31% had no opinion, 31% recommend, and 3% strongly recommend this new approach. Among stage managers who have never tried it, the general opinion was that the risks far outweigh any benefits. The lack of trust in the reliability of computers is paramount for many stage managers, especially given that the computers would need to operate flawlessly for thousands of performances to be considered an acceptable risk. Another concern is the glare of the computer screen interfering with the stage manager's ability to switch between watching the stage and looking at cues. On the other hand, a stage manager who has called directly from a computer noted that it allows the caller to watch the stage more easily rather than needing to look up from a book. The author wonders if a calling script monitor next to a video monitor of the stage, or even a single monitor with a text overlay, would enable stage managers to better track the performance while calling cues. More than any other question in the survey, the issue of calling from a computer elicited the most negative feedback while also generating interest in new technologies for some stage managers.

Those stage managers who choose to call from handwritten cues on paper copies of calling scripts nevertheless have a variety of methods for notating their warnings and cues. Survey participants reported whether they use stickers, post-it notes or flags, or highlighters to distinguish or draw attention to their cues. They also noted if they used different colors or shapes for different types of cues.

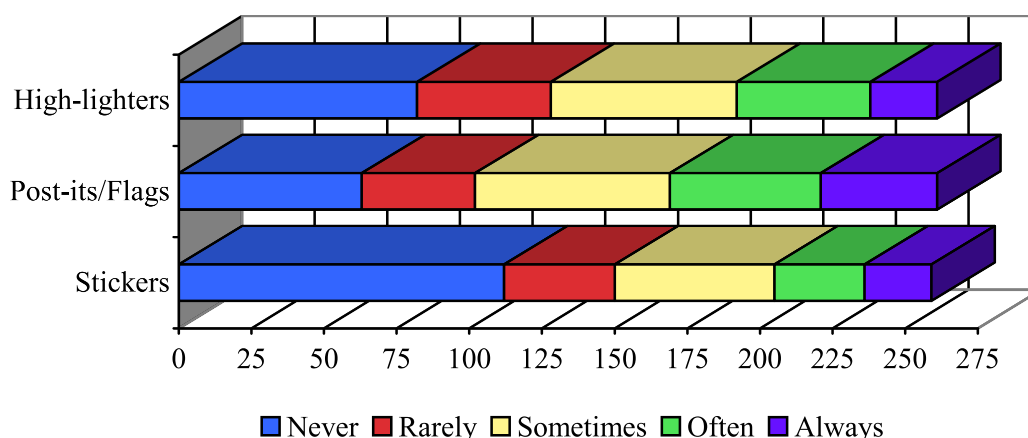

Figure 13. Frequency of Use for Cue Marking Methods.

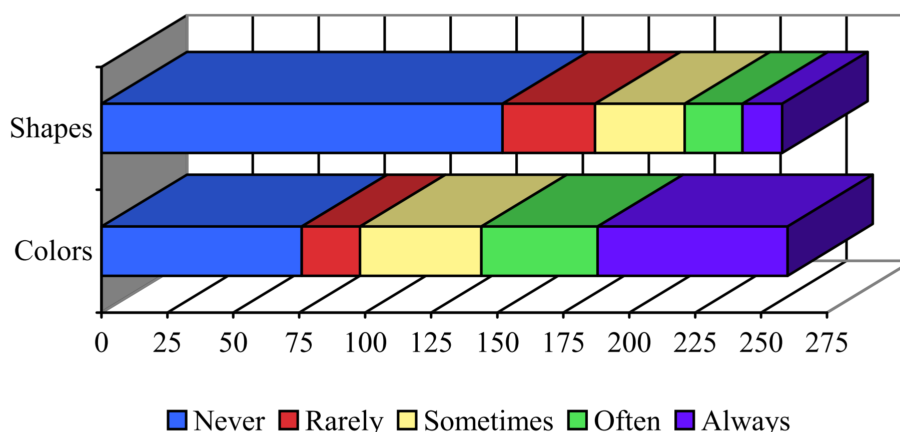

Figure 14. Frequency of Use of Color and Shape in Cue Markings.

Paper flags were popular for drawing attention to cues within scores, as were translucent stickers that allow the stage manager to see the musical notes underneath. Post-its were popular for the ease of moving cues but this advantage is also a liability: many stage managers were concerned that post-its would detach from the script page at inopportune times. One stage manager noted that colors and stickers can make the task of photocopying a back-up script more laborious. Another warned that color-coding could become confusing if the show will be passed along and a subsequent stage manager has color blindness. Yet another participant combines practices: she/he uses post-its during tech and then transfers the cues to pencil prior to opening.

Survey participants also reported their preferred colors and shapes for each type of cue. There was no major consensus on color codes but a few favorites did emerge. Of the stage managers who use color to distinguish cues, 49% prefer yellow for lighting cues, 29% prefer either blue or green for sound cues (the two colors scored equally), and 30% select red for rail cues. Some stage managers will use one color for warnings and another for actual cues. One respondent only uses colors in the calling script for cue lights. For shapes, 44% use circles for lighting cues and 34% use squares for sound cues. Otherwise color and shape designations depend more on personal preference and availability of materials.

While many stage managers do not use unique shapes for cues, the majority have used colors and stickers or post-its to mark their cues. Nevertheless, those stage managers who only use pencil for cuing made their beliefs known in the comment section. One participant was certain that "use of the above are not the industry standard." Another stated a strong dislike for all of the other approaches:

> A clean, easy to read script is best. If I was hit by a bus, my replacement shouldn't need [my] super spy instant decoder ring to decipher it. The ring would probably be with me in the hospital.

Another issue of personal preference is where to list the cues in the script in relation to the text. The vast majority of stage managers (92%) use the side margins for cues; other cue placement locations include directly over the individual line of text or on the opposite page of the calling script. There have long been anecdotes of how right-handed and left-handed stage managers use opposing margins. As Figure 15 indicates, however, left-handed stage managers were also more inclined to use the right margin of the calling script.

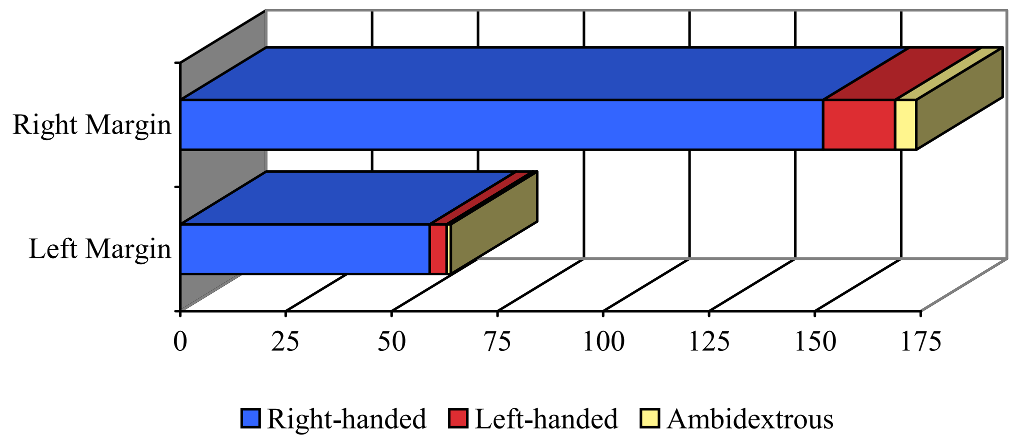

Figure 15. Choice of Cuing Location Based on Dominant Writing Hand.

In addition to the exact placement of a cue, some stage managers will record additional information for each cue. One hundred and twenty-six stage managers, or 48% of respondents, generally write in cue counts. Many of these stage managers will only note very short cues or cues that must remain in synchronicity with other cues (i.e., lights that fade with a change in sound volume). A significant number of stage managers also make marks to cue themselves when to start saying a cue. These so-called "talk marks" are most often dots or asterisks or grammatical carets (^).

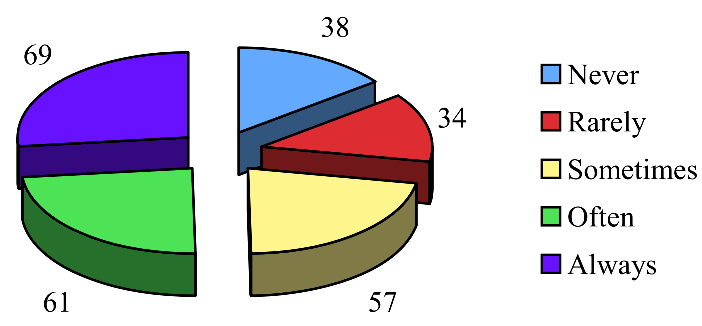

Figure 16. Frequency of Use of Marking When to Start Speaking a Cue.

A final note on the creation of calling scripts comes directly from a survey respondent:

> Writing the book is everything. You must find a method specific enough so that you can tech the beginning pages of a show on one day and maybe not return to it for several days, and then know EXACTLY what you meant at the time you do return.

CALLING TECHNIQUES

Just as a stage manager enjoys a great deal of flexibility in the formatting of a calling script, there are a number of cue terminologies and calling styles that can be employed in any given production. Survey participants responded to a series of questions to determine how they signal their crew members to execute technical cues in a theatrical production.

Most cuing consists of some form of cue announcement followed by the actual cue. A majority of stage managers, 76%, call the announcement of the cue the "standby." A smaller group, 19%, use the term "warning," 2% use "ready," and 2% don't use any kind of announcement other than the number of the cue. How far in advance of the cue this announcement occurs also varies by stage manager.

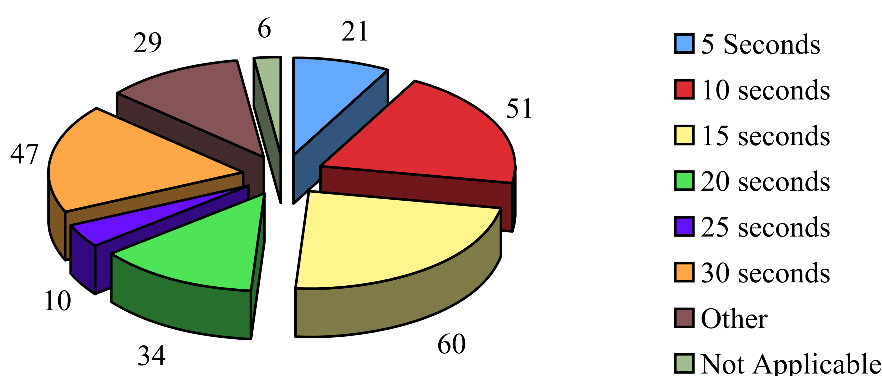

Figure 17. Timing of Cue Announcement in Preparation for Actual Cue.

What Figure 17 does not indicate is that many stage managers vary the lead time of the announcement based on the complexity of the task: operators of automated light and sound boards need only a few seconds to prepare while complex scene shifts or pyrotechnics might need more than thirty seconds to begin final preparations for the cue. The majority of surveyed stage managers, 168 or 65%, order the announcements by department. Eighty stage managers, or 31%, list the announcements by chronological order within the show. For those who order by department, most prefer to start by listing the lighting cues. Sound cues are often listed second, but after the first two departments, the order of the other technical areas varies widely.

In order to confirm that a standby has been heard by the appropriate technician, many stage managers request a verbal response. These responses are often simply the name of the department ("lights," "sound," etc.), which 54% of polled stage managers prefer, or "standing by" (or "warned" or "ready" depending upon the original announcement), which 43% of respondents prefer. The other 3% favor a combination of the two types of responses or some other simple verbal signal. Stage managers often determine whether to require a verbal confirmation based on the experience level of the crew member and the type of cue announced, as evidenced in Figure 18.

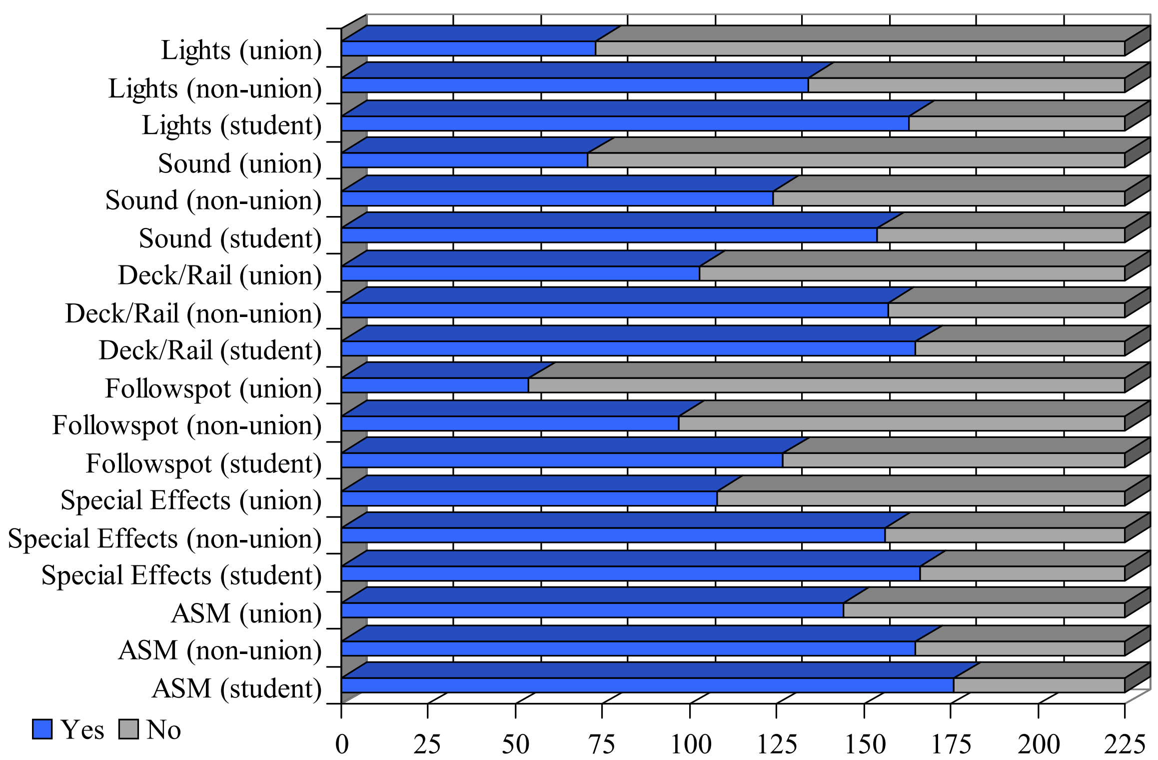

Figure 18. Verbal Confirmation of Cue Announcements by Department.

In addition to the standby, some stage managers use a second, earlier announcement as an advance warning. As indicated in Figure 19, these warnings are primarily used for major scenes shifts, fly rail cues, and special effects. Several survey participants use these warnings as “wake up calls” for operators who have not had a cue for several minutes. A few also reported that, in addition to the verbal response to the cue announcement, they ask crew members to report “cue complete” if the cue is not visible from the stage manager’s calling station and concerns the safety of other crew members or the cast.

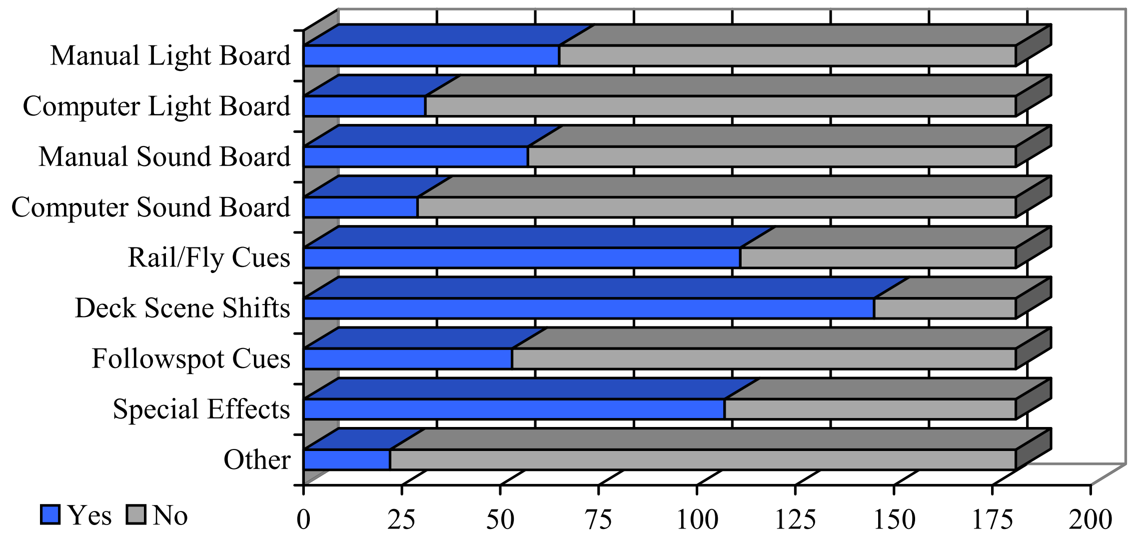

Figure 19. Use of Advanced Warning in Addition to Standby by Department.

Another personal preference is the choice of names for cues created by the lighting designer. Some stage managers follow the preference of their board operator, but Figure 20 lists the most popular terms with "n" representing the cue number.

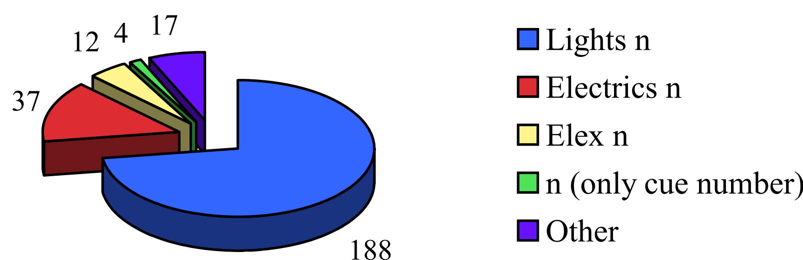

Figure 20. Preferred Terminology for Cues Created by Lighting Designer.

In certain situations, nonverbal cuing techniques are more effective or discreet. Of 257 responses, 225 stage managers, or 88%, have used cue lights to signal crew members. Rail crews often prefer cue lights for the safety concern of headset cables becoming tangled in the ropes. Cue lights can also coordinate the movements of large deck crews without the need of headsets for each technician. The majority of stage managers, 59%, use "home-made" cue light systems created by the theatre. Several participants who use home-made cue lights believed that commercial systems were limited to New York City, but use of commercial systems among 70 NYC-based stage managers was the same as the overall average.

Forty-four stage managers reported that they request verbal confirmation of the cue light standby, but the confirmation that the cue light is operating properly may come from an ASM rather than from the crew member using the cue light. One commercial system includes a backstage button that turns on a green confirmation light at the stage manager's console. This system received mixed reviews from stage managers who have used it. Reactions to using cue lights in general ranged from "I love cue lights!" to "Hate 'em. Much rather call cues verbally." Another stage manager summed up the potential of cue lights: "Cue lights can be awesome or a nightmare." Several remarked that all cue light terminals should have two bulbs in case one burns out. One stage manager advised that "home-made" systems should include a master switch to throw all the cues at once "without the use of all my fingers or a ruler/dowel." Another participant urged stage managers to use a practice cue light switch box to create kinetic memory. This respondent also shared a story of a stage manager needing several months to fully learn the call of a Broadway production due to all of the effects trigged from cue lights.

In addition to cue lights, there are a wide variety of other non-verbal cuing techniques at the disposal of creative stage managers.

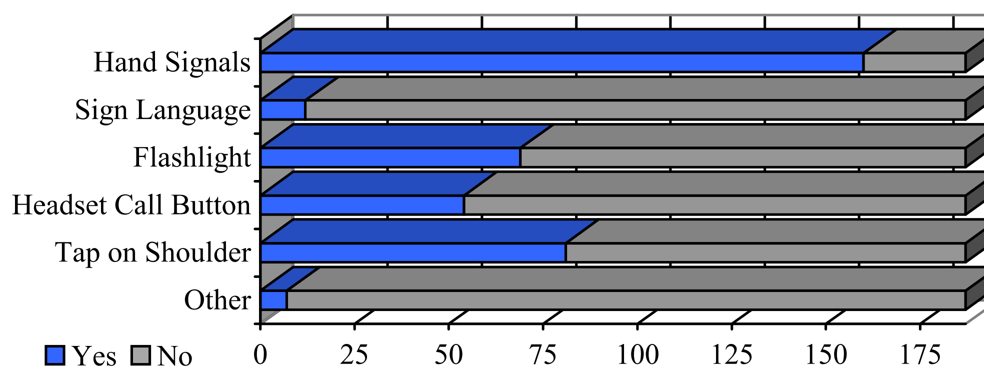

Figure 21. Use of Additional Non-Verbal Cuing Methods.

Some of the "Other" non-verbal techniques from Figure 21 include waving colored flags atop a hill for outdoor drama and the 'NASCAR' approach of arms up for a standby and down for the "go." A respondent noted that in working for a theatre for the deaf, one had to use all non-verbal cuing techniques, some of which the respondent still utilizes in theatres with hearing technicians.

Another survey question that generated a large number of comments was whether the stage manager allowed some crew members who are on headset to execute cues on their own. One hundred and seventy stage managers, or 66% of all responses, have allowed certain crew members to take cues on their own initiative. Followspot operators, wireless mic operators, and supertitle operators are the technicians most often permitted to take their own cues. A number of stage managers will also give deck crew some autonomy if shift cues are not visible to the stage manager or if they must be completed in sequence with other backstage crew members. Some stage managers allow light and sound board operators to execute bump cues that are triggered by onstage visuals such as throwing a light switch or picking up a telephone. In all of these cases, however, the stage manager continues to give the cue announcement to confirm that the operator is ready. Some stage managers call this type of cue a "soft go" or "OYO" ("on your own"). Nearly every stage manager commented that the decision to give the technician some autonomy is always based on a deep level of trust. And some stage managers remain very opposed to this practice as the crew member should focus on the operation and execution of the cue rather than its placement. An analogy is an orchestra: any professional musician can perform well by just following the score, but a conductor unifies and sharpens the entire orchestra's performance. One stage manager commented:

> The only way to have a coordinated show is for one person to call the cues. If for any reason I don't call a cue in the usual place I do not want the operator to "protect" me. I may be delaying for safety or any other reason.

Several participants shared the reasoning behind their calling styles:

> You must be calm, clear, and decisive. I explain how I call cues to each new person I work with and am extremely forceful about no talking during stand bys and not allowing anyone to say "go" except me. I always say practically the same things for each stand by sequence and for each execution. I want it all to be predictable and calm. Makes for a smoother show.

> I try to always be polite, pleasant, and modulated. I often will comment immediately (time permitting) if a cue was executed especially spiffily.

> To my mind, calling a show is all about keeping it absolutely consistent for the crew. I never leave out a warning or cue call even if I'm sitting right next to the lightboard operator, because there might be a dresser backstage also going off of those same warnings and cues. Also, during performance I never, never (well almost never) allow chatter on headset – it's a recipe for disaster.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Many stage managers inherit shows already in performance or receive co-productions. The number of performances allotted for observation, shadowing the current stage manager, and calling the show with feedback will vary by production and by theatre company, but there are some industry-wide trends.

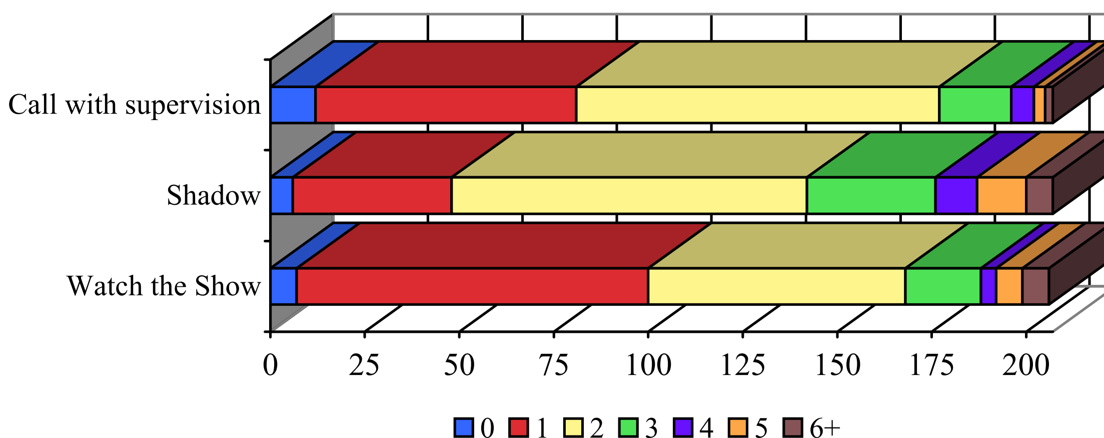

Figure 22. Average Number of Performances for Learning to Call a New Show.

Most stage managers, 88%, found the amount of allotted training time to be sufficient for their needs. To aid in the learning of shows, 56% of the polled stage managers have used audio recordings and 49% have used video recordings to practice their calls. Those who have used audio and video recordings have found them to be very useful tools, but their availability is greatly limited by union and copyright restrictions. Audio and video recordings also tend to be useful primarily on established musicals or technically complicated straight shows. One veteran stage manager offered the following advice:

> It sure would be nice to have a video to train an incoming stage manager, so that training can be done other than in a performance situation, but it is difficult to get permission for this. I find that when training someone to take over for me, they need to watch the show first, then make their own calling book in their own style. Then they watch/listen to me calling, following along in their own script making corrections and tweaks and writing in notes and helps. Then I like them to call any sequence in the show they feel comfortable with, a page, a scene, a song, a shift – anything no matter how short or insignificant. This gets the onus off "the first time" and begins to give confidence to the stage manager taking over AND begins to get the crew used to the new voice and calling style. Then we move to the calling of each act and finally the entire show. A takeover of a technically difficult show can be very stressful both for the outgoing and incoming stage managers. The majority of the work is done during performances and you want those to go seamlessly, never giving the performers any consciousness that there is someone different at the helm. The process is usually not fun!

To supplement the questions about educational backgrounds and job training, the survey included several questions about stage management texts and software. Participants reported whether they had read any of a list of nine popular stage management books and then ranked them by preference.

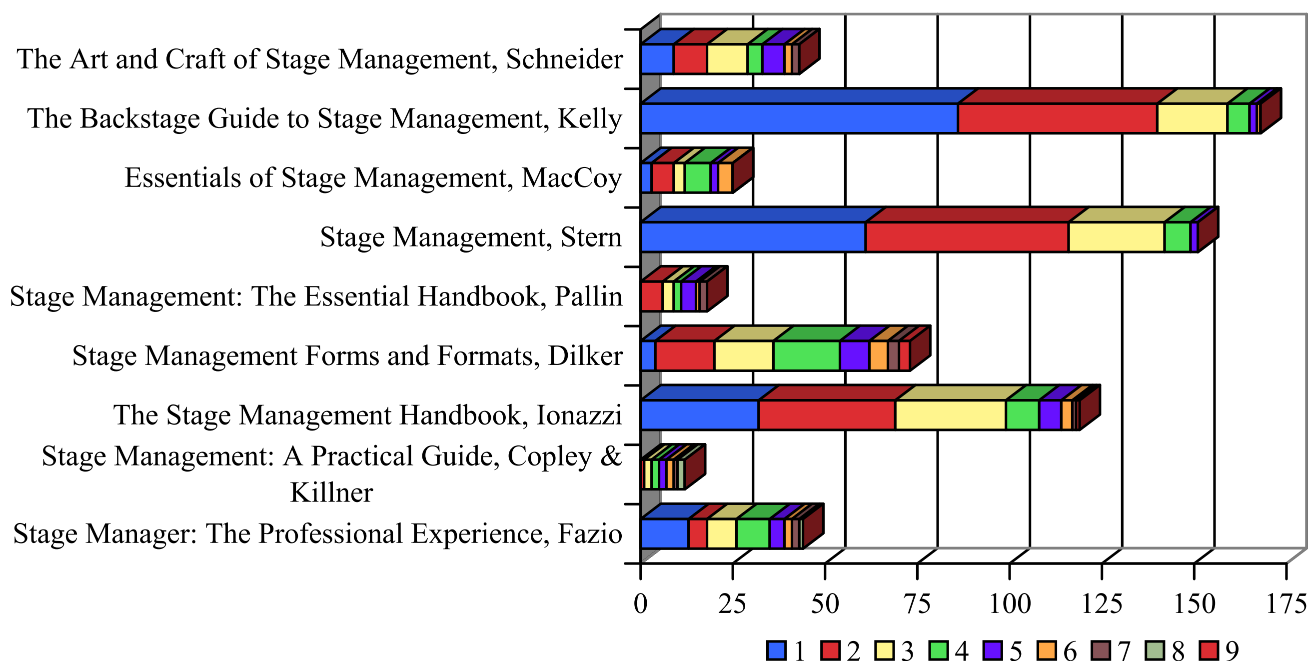

Figure 23. Stage Management Books Read and Ranked by Popularity (1 = favorite text).

Several participants responded that they ranked their favorite stage management texts more for nostalgia of their introduction to stage management rather than for the book's overall usefulness. When asked to comment on the books in general, many stage managers shared the views of one respondent: "Often painfully dry, redundant, and built as stage management appreciation more than a useful guide." For these commentators, the books often offer useful suggestions for specific issues, but not a strong general approach to the field. Some survey participants noted that the books, like a formal course or degree in stage management, do not prepare stage managers for the career as well as mentorship. Lawrence Stern, in his book *Stage Management*, agrees:

> …you don't become any kind of stage manager by reading a book, not even this one…. Can you learn to drive a car or fly a plane by reading a book?[5]

Thomas A. Kelly, in the conclusion of *The Back Stage Guide to Stage Management*, also notes the limitations of stage management textbooks:

> I believe experience is the best teacher. Hopefully, some of my experiences described in this book will help the learning stage manager. However, one's own experiences, in any endeavor, serve as the ultimate graduate course.[6]

With the exception of Larry Fazio's *Stage Manager: The Professional Experience*, none of the texts are written for the intermediate or veteran stage manager. There appears to be a sizable market for college textbooks on stage management, but few books or articles are available that could be considered

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[5] Stern, 1.

[6] Thomas A. Kelly, *The Back Stage Guide to Stage Management, Second Edition,* (New York: Back Stage Books, 1999), 195.

“continuing education” for the professional stage manager. The lack of professional research and forums for discussion limits the ability of the stage management community to explore and adopt new practices in the field.

Very few survey participants have used stage management software. Only 32 stage managers reported using any kind of theatre management or stage management computer program. Many participants confessed that they did not even know that such software existed. But several of these stage managers wanted to know more about the programs and their applications. As is the case with stage management books and articles, new software can become a tool for innovation.

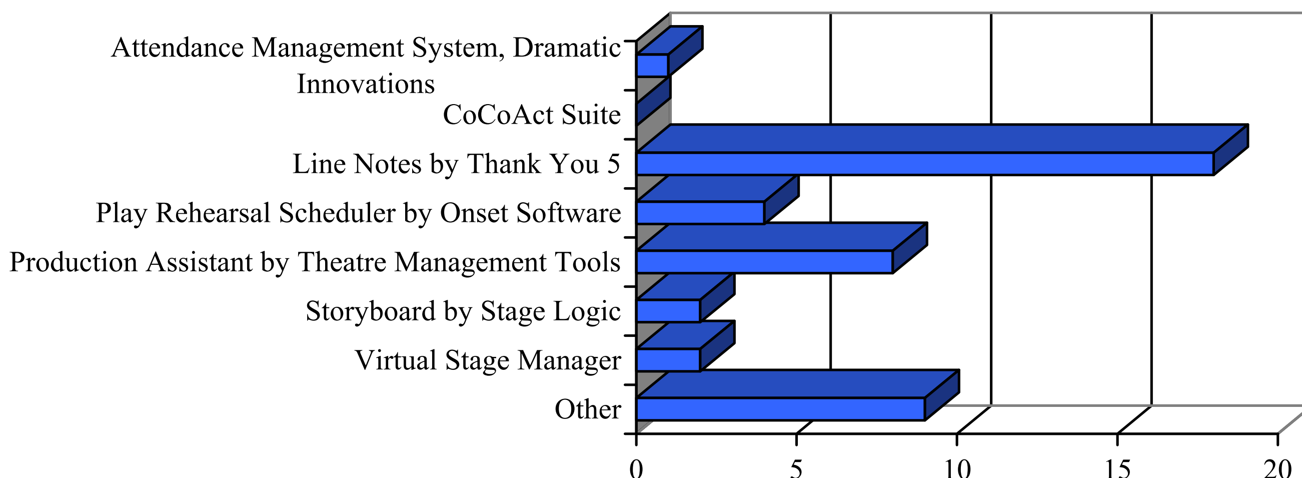

Figure 24. Use of Stage Management and Theatre Management Software.

Conclusions

The stage managers who participated in this survey were remarkably candid and introspective in both reporting their cuing practices and explaining why they have chosen certain calling techniques. Eighty-nine participants admitted that they didn’t create back-up copies of their calling scripts even though they believed it to be a good practice (Figure 11). And many commented that they used various cuing techniques only out of tradition and had not fully considered the alternatives. A humorous story emerged that a stage manager working on the Radio City Christmas Spectacular had difficulty calling the show immediately after answering this survey because he was analyzing why he called cues the way that he did. Many survey participants were very certain of their choices and approached the survey as an opportunity to share their experiences with other stage managers. For many stage managers, best practices and innovations are shared through word of mouth. In the final comments section of the survey, one stage manager wrote:

> I am very interested to see the results of this survey. As stage managers, you rarely get the chance to observe many other SMs at work and I am still thirsty for new ways to do my job to the best of my ability.

Although groups such as the Stage Managers' Association and discussion sites such as SMNetwork.org are growing, the dearth of forums for professional stage managers continues to keep the community fractured and isolated. Actors, designers, and technicians have multiple trade journals and conventions; why do stage managers, experts at disseminating information, not have more outlets to share new ideas and technologies?

There are glimpses, however, of greater unity and improved communications. Just the fact that 283 stage managers answered this survey demonstrates a strong interest in sharing ideas. The survey comments sections alone filled 121 single-spaced pages. The Stage Managers' Association is considering forums to discuss some of the issues raised in this survey. The SMA is also strengthening the role of its regional representatives, and "SM Drinks Nights" and other social events are appearing in many regions.

As communications within the stage management community improve, focus must be placed on innovations within our field. Otherwise, we will find ourselves trying to manage twenty-first-century productions with twentieth-century systems and techniques. The fact that American stage management is such a decentralized field hinders consensus-building but encourages entrepreneurship and innovation. Several survey participants noted that current stage management software offerings do not meet their needs. But the programs will only improve if enough users invest the time and energy to provide feedback and drive the market with purchases. Stage managers should be encouraged by both their peers and their producers to explore better ways of managing information and running productions. But one twentieth-century principle that we should continue to embrace is the concept that we are not in direct competition and that advances made by one team should be shared for the betterment of all. We must continually make the case that we are vital to production even as automation reduces crews and improves quality control. As a community, we must find ways to keep moving or we will all fall down.

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