THE DANCE AND OPERA STAGE MANAGER’S TOOLKIT

PROTOCOLS, PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS, AND TEMPLATES

Sue Fenty and Michele Kay
The Dance and Opera Stage Manager’s Toolkit
details unique perspectives and approaches to support stage managers beginning to navigate the fields of dance and opera stage management in live performance.

This book demystifies the genre-specific protocols and vocabularies for stage managers who might be unfamiliar with these fields and discusses common practices. Filled with valuable industry-tested tools, templates, and practical information, The Dance and Opera Stage Manager’s Toolkit is designed to assist stage managers interested in pursuing these performance genres. The book also includes interviews and contributions from a range of professional stage managers working in dance and opera.

From the student stage manager studying in Theatrical Design and Production university programs to the experienced stage manager wanting to broaden their skill set, this book provides resources and advice for a successful transition into these worlds.

The Dance and Opera Stage Manager’s Toolkit includes access to an online repository of resources and paperwork examples to help jumpstart the reader’s journey into dance and opera stage management. To access these resources, visit www.routledge.com/9780367566579.

Susan Fenty Studham has been stage managing professionally in many genres of theatre for almost four decades. She has stage managed at major performing arts venues including on Broadway, at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and the Sydney Opera House. Sue began working with dance companies in New York City in 1986 and toured extensively before relocating to Australia, where she was resident stage manager with West Australian Ballet for ten years. During her four-year tenure as Head of the BFA Stage Management Program at DePaul University in Chicago, Sue created a curriculum that introduced students to the unique world of dance stage management. Sue holds a PhD from Edith Cowan University, Australia, and a BFA from Adelphi University, New York. She is a pioneer in doctoral studies in the field of stage management and a published author on topics that explore brave spaces, intimacy and violence protocols in performing arts, supporting language revitalization in performance, and stage managing intercultural theatre.
**Michele Kay** has been stage managing for over 30 years across all genres, musicals, plays, opera, and dance, in a variety of environments including New York, Chicago, and regionally across the US. She spent several years stage managing opera regionally, including two and a half years as the resident production stage manager at the Virginia Opera. She is an Associate Professor of Stage Management at the University of Cincinnati’s College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) where she has translated her practical opera knowledge into a curriculum for BFA and MFA stage management students, many of whom have graduated to work at prestigious opera companies across the country. Michele holds a MS in Organizational Leadership and a BA in Theatre from Miami University of Ohio. She is a member of Actors Equity Association, American Guild of Musical Artists, Stage Managers’ Association, and USITT. Most recently, Michele authored the essay “Already Calm, I’m the Stage Manager” for *Off Headset: Essays on Stage Management Work, Life, and Career* edited by Rafael Jean and Christopher Sadler (Routledge, 2022).
The Focal Press Toolkit Series

Regardless of your profession, whether you’re a Stage Manager or Stagehand, The Focal Press Toolkit Series has you covered. With all the insider secrets, paperwork, and day-to-day details that you could ever need for your chosen profession or specialty, these books provide you with a one-stop-shop to ensure a smooth production process.

The Assistant Lighting Designer’s Toolkit, 2nd edition
Anne E. McMills

The Projection Designer’s Toolkit
Jeromy Hopgood

The Scenic Charge Artist’s Toolkit
Tips, Templates, and Techniques for Planning and Running a Successful Paint Shop in the Theatre and Performing Arts
Jennifer Rose Ivey

The Costume Designer’s Toolkit
The Process of Creating Effective Design
Holly Poe Durbin

The Literary Manager’s Toolkit
A Practical Guide for the Theatre
Sue Healy

The Production Manager’s Toolkit, 2nd edition
Successful Production Management in Theatre and Performing Arts
Cary Gillett and Jay Sheehan

The Voice Coach’s Toolkit
Pamela Prather

The Dance and Opera Stage Manager’s Toolkit
Protocols, Practical Considerations, and Templates
Susan Fenty Studham and Michele Kay

For more information about this series, please visit: https://www.routledge.com/The-Focal-Press-Toolkit-Series/book-series/TFPTS
The Dance and Opera Stage Manager’s Toolkit

Protocols, Practical Considerations, and Templates

Susan Fenty Studham and Michele Kay
For those who went before us, those who shaped us,
Those who we learned from and collaborated with

For our parents and families, and ever-supporting partners

For those who will continue to evolve this field
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Resources</td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 1  An Introduction to Dance and Opera for Stage Managers

- Perspective                                                             2
- A Very Brief History of Opera                                           2
- A Snapshot of the History of Dance                                      7
- Expectations of the Stage Manager                                      18
- Acknowledgments                                                       19
- Notes                                                                  19

## Chapter 2  Organizational Structures, Personnel, and Communication

- Organizational Structures                                              22
- Unions, Unions, Unions                                                 29
- Communication                                                          30
- Final Thoughts                                                         32
- Note                                                                   32

## Chapter 3  Pre-Production

- Meeting the Team                                                       33
- Getting Started                                                        35
- Building a Working Score                                               36
- Creating the Stage Manager's Score                                     40
- Opera-Specific Paperwork                                               42
- Dance-Specific Documents, Blocking, and Tasks                          49
- Opera Blocking                                                        58
- Preparing the Rehearsal Venue for the Company                           60
# Chapter 8

**Specialist Shows, Unique Companies, and Changing Landscapes**  
167  
Isabel Martinez Rivera, Associate Director, Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo  
167  
Nykol DeDreu, Stage Manager, Kinetic Light  
169  
Nancy Pittelman, Stage Manager, Radio City Music Hall, 2005–2023  
171  
Lillian Hannah U, Stage Manager, Bangarra Dance Theatre (Australia), 2018–2020  
174  
Betsy Ayer, Stage Manager, Susan Marshall & Company  
176  
Erin Joy Swank, Stage Manager, Freelance  
179

# Chapter 9

**Employment in Dance and Opera**  
183  
Networking  
183  
Resumes  
184  
Cover Letters and Interviews  
186  
Final Thoughts  
187

**Glossary**  
189  
**Appendices**  
195  
**Index**  
201
As a lifelong fan of the arts and a career theatrical stage manager, the opera and dance worlds have not only intrigued me as a patron, but they have left me curious as a professional. With my focus being in theatre, I have always yearned for the chance to learn more about the inner workings of opera and dance. These are worlds steeped in tradition and great history. As a stage manager, it is imperative not only to know the nuts and bolts of management of these genres, it is also imperative to know and understand the specificity involved in these long-standing traditions. In their text, my colleagues and friends, Ms. Kay and Ms. Fenty, have provided us with this and so much more. Their book provides anyone with a working knowledge of stage management – from students to seasoned professionals – a plethora of information to add to their existing toolbox. It is excellent at drawing the similarities between not only opera, dance, and other performing arts genres, it also provides specific, on-point information about each discipline. It is a wonderful addition to any curriculum, program, and bookshelf. The stage management community has been longing for a text like this for so many years and at last it has arrived!

– Christy Ney, Stage Manager
SUE’S STORY

I didn’t grow up with dance, I wasn’t a kid who took dance classes or anything. I came up through the ranks of crew, a ‘techie’ who was offered a stage management position on a play in 1980. It wasn’t until my third year at university in New York that I formally stage managed a dance show. The dance captured my imagination. I could see how the technical elements layered into the production helped convey the story. As a stage manager, I would be part of the delivery of that story by responding to the dancers, the dance, the music, the design, and the audience on a daily basis. By being focused and engaged in each moment, I would be able to determine the careful placement of each cue point, placing me within a team of storytellers.

Later that year, I stage managed the first of many Nutcracker tours in my life. In the mid-1980s, the companies I worked with were generally New York-based and toured the US, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. How I perceived performance, dance, and what my role was within this world shifted with every production. It was a space that had fewer restrictions than traditional theatre, and a little less financial stability as well, but a great deal of adventure as we travelled the world. These early tours would shape my trajectory and personal evolution as a stage manager. Some of the main learnings were that performance can encompass many things and that there is more than one way to stage manage a show. I realized if I was open to possibilities my life would be enriched by these experiences.

In 2019, I attended the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) conference as a mentor for the SMMP: The Stage Management Mentor Project. It was held in Louisville, Kentucky, where I had ‘cut my teeth’ as a professional stage manager at Actors’ Theatre of Louisville (ATL). As I wandered through the preview of the exhibition floor at the Convention Centre with fellow stage managers, we came to the Routledge book tables. I mentioned that there was no Dance Stage Manager’s Toolkit book, to which author Jay Sheehan responded: “You should write one.” That’s how it started.

As dance stage managers, many of us didn’t have formal training in the specific genre, we learned as we went, adapting our foundational stage management skills to fit the situation; experiential learning. Because of this, each of our processes developed in their own way. So, there are many approaches to stage managing dance, and a plethora of paperwork samples. In this book, I am sharing mine. I have also invited others to comment, share, and have a voice in this book.

When I spoke with Routledge’s senior editor about the book, she was interested in combining it with opera. Serendipity led the way here, in Louisville. At ATL,
way back in the early ’90s, I met Michele Kay, who was an intern stage manager there. We share the same mentors, Debra Aquavella and Lori M. Doyle, and have quite similar training. After our early shows, I went back to New York City to continue in dance and new developments, touring extensively. Michele went to New York and Chicago, specializing in plays and musicals, and then eventually in opera. After decades, which included my relocation to Australia (later returning to the US to teach in Chicago), it was as if the stars aligned in 2019 that we were in Louisville together again for the USITT conference when this book project first developed. My most sincere thanks to Michele for joining me on this adventure. I can’t imagine embarking on this path of writing, collaborating, debating, and tag-team editing across continents with anyone else.

MICHELE’S STORY

As Sue mentioned, I was an intern at Actors Theatre of Louisville and then returned a few years later where I reconnected with Sue launching a friendship that has spanned three decades and two continents. I continued stage managing traditional theatrical productions, plays and musicals, until several years later when I moved to Chicago and found myself at a membership meeting at Actors Equity Association. In a brief conversation with the front desk receptionist, I mentioned being new to Chicago and she said she wanted to introduce me to her friend ‘Bula’ who stage managed operas. Being new to town, I was willing to accept any professional introductions.

I worked with Bula that summer on two productions as an assistant stage manager. Other than cueing singers onstage, assistant stage managing wasn’t all that different than what I had experienced in theatre until one rehearsal when I learned how different opera singers were from actors. We were rehearsing in a warehouse owned by a board member of the company. One day during rehearsal, a supernumerary knocked a florescent bulb out of a fixture with a spear or pole and rehearsal ground to a halt. That part was “normal,” I cleaned up the mess, but that’s where the “normal” stopped. Rehearsal didn’t resume once the mess was cleaned-up. One of the lead performers left the room and refused to return. The stage manager and AGMA rep convened with the staging director, a discussion ensued, and it was decided that the singer would not be returning to rehearsal for three days due to the toxicity of the contents of the florescent bulb. At the time I was stunned; I could not imagine that happening in a theatre production. Now I realize how smart that singer was, and that they were protecting their very fragile instrument, their health and their voice.

After that summer, I didn’t do another opera for several years. Then fate brought me to the tech table of a musical I was stage managing where the lighting designer leaned over and asked me if I did opera. I said, and this makes me chuckle now, “I do musicals; how different could they be.” And with that, I stepped into the opera circuit for several years, eventually landing at the University of Cincinnati where I now teach stage management and mentor stage managers through opera, dance, musical theatre, and plays. I realize that when I teach stage management, I mostly frame everything through the lens of stage managing an opera with the caveat that to stage manage the other genres you cut back from the scale of an opera production. I had no idea that opera could be a part of my career. When I graduated
from college it never occurred to me to add opera or dance to my skill set. Now, I couldn’t imagine letting my own students graduate without having an opportunity in either or both genres.

I love the genre. I love its scale and its structure. I love the formality and the tradition. And I love that, like Shakespeare, modern opera directors take a lot of risks conceptualizing new productions of very old pieces. In 2019 I saw a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Cincinnati Opera. I found myself in tears as the young lovers came to their tragic demise. The staging and music were so beautiful they carried a story I’ve seen a dozen times over to a place that could still touch my heartstrings. That’s opera.

When Sue asked me to join her as a co-author, I’d like to say that I jumped at the chance, but really, I was scared. Then she suggested that we start with Chapter 3: Pre-production, and it was like putting on my favorite sweater. I hope you come to love these art forms as we have and that our shared experience, along with Pro Tips and examples from friends and colleagues, gives you the confidence to try something that may seem scary to you as well. I’d like to thank Sue for inviting me along this journey, being extremely patient along the way, and nudging when necessary to get across the finish line.

Now we share with you the work of several years of writing and more than seven decades of industry credits between us. We hope that our experiences and musings guide you in your paths as you enter these performance genres. We look forward to seeing where you will take this industry, and how stage management and its processes will continue to evolve as you continue on this journey, responding to its ever-changing discussions and technology.
Sue thanks her husband, Ian Studham, parents Rita and Ron Fenty, and extended family who have supported not only this book, but her whole unpredictable career path and traveling shenanigans.

Michele would like to thank her husband, Karl Siemsen, and their children, Karl and Parker, without whose support she would get nothing done.

Together we thank our teachers and mentors, our editors, and the many people who have inspired, contributed to, and previewed these pages – and the curious who will read them.

We gratefully acknowledge:

Lucia Accorsi
Deb Aquavella
Betsy Ayer
Christine A. Binder
Daryl Brandwood
Fiona Boundy
Rosie Burns Pavlik
Jon Buswell
Lawrie Cullen-Tait
Phil R. Daniels
Nykol DeDreu
Maria Fenty Denison
Lori M. Doyle
John Flak
Kristina Fluty
Susan Giles
Cary Gillett
Laura E. Glover
Connie Grubbs
Robin Guarino
Hannah Holthaus
Sandra Kaufmann
Ivan King AO
Randy Klein
Hugo Aguilar Lopez
Sarah Lozoff
Craig Lord-Sole
Jonathan W. Marshall
David McAllister AC
Danielle Micich
Kyle J. Morrison
Samantha Murray
Christy Ney
Megan Parker
Chrissie Parrott AO
Nancy Pittelman
Jenny Poh
Jo Pollitt
Isabel Martinez Rivera
Deborah Robertson
Rowan Rozzi
Lorraine Sanders
Jay Sheehan
Neil Sheriff
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Karl Siemsen
Ian Studham
Erin Joy Swank
Angela Swift
Stacy Taylor
Amy C. Thompson
Molly Tipping
Shona Treadgold

Lillian Hannah U
Nancy Uffner
Stacey Walker
Shauna Weeks
Meagan Welsh
Evangeline Rose Whitlock
Bugs Bunny

Arts and Culture Trust of Western Australia

Dance Kaleidoscope

His Majesty’s Theatre, Perth Australia

The Museum of Performing Arts, Perth Australia

West Australian Ballet

The student and alumni stage managers at the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music (CCM)

The University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music Opera and Theatre Design and Production programs

United States Institute of Theatre Technology

Upstage Designs

USITT Stage Management Mentor Project

The production staff of the Virginia Opera from 2001–2003

The students, mentees, and colleagues who have explored dance stage management in workshops, ‘Stage Management Variations,’ and master classes in Australia, Indonesia, and the United States
Online Resources

We have included resources on Routledge.com, so be sure to check in for templates, samples, and interesting online links for further information. URL: www.routledge.com/9780367566579.
Welcome stage managers! We are delighted that you are interested in stage management for dance and opera. There are many reasons for transitioning into these genres and a variety of ways to acquire the information needed to be successful. Not sure where to start? Well, you are not alone. Let’s face it, every dance or opera stage manager out there once experienced their ‘first time stage managing’ these shows. They may not have been sure of what to expect, but they wanted to be part of these genres. Here, with this book, we hope to set you on your path to success in these fields. Within these chapters are tools that you will need in your toolkit to be well on your way to a fulfilling career in dance and opera stage management.

There is an old saying: you don’t know what you don’t know. Our goal is to introduce you to the differences between stage managing a play or musical and stage managing dance or opera so that you know what to expect and are not caught off-guard by these variations. In the past, it was not unusual to be hired as the stage manager in any one of these genres without prior management experience or training as so many stage managers either came to the position from being a performer in the genre or learned the ropes of the business on the job. However, in today’s industry, if you are interviewing for the job, there will be a presumption that you do in fact know the ins and outs of these performing genres. With that in mind, we decided to put our ideas, experiences, and approaches on paper to give you an understanding of what the stage management role encompasses and prepare you for a discussion of company expectations as you step into this world of music and movement. No matter what your current situation or your reason for seeking this information, we are glad you are here! So, let’s get started!

We have written this book to demystify stage management for dance and opera. In doing so, we’ll share a brief history of the development of the genre with you to help you place your role within it. Then we move on to your collaborators, organizational structures, and unions before diving into the procedural chapters. We’ll also look at terminology, operational processes, approaches to the rehearsal room, technical rehearsals, and so on! Once we’ve taken you through to closing the show, you will hear from industry professionals about variations to the processes we’ve