Introduction to Production

*Introduction to Production: Creating Theatre Onstage, Backstage, & Offstage* defines the collaborative art of making theatre and the various job positions that go into realizing a production. Beginning with an overview of the art and industry of theatre, the book shows how theatre has evolved through history. The book then breaks down the nuts and bolts of the industry by looking at each professional role within it: from the topmost position of the producer down to the gopher, or production assistant. Each position is defined along with its respective duties, rules, and resources that figure in obtaining the job. Each chapter offers exercises, links to videos and websites, review quizzes, and suggested readings to learn more about the creation and production of theatre.

**Robert I. Sutherland-Cohen** is an Associate Professor Emeritus of Stage Management and Production Manager at Brooklyn College. He has been production stage manager for numerous Broadway and regional productions, as well as the New York City Opera. His diverse career in live performance presentations includes: Entertainment Operations Manager for the Tropicana in Atlantic City, Production Coordinator for Lincoln Center Festivals, and Associate Producer/Writer for Westinghouse TV. He served on the Executive Board of the Stage Managers’ Association, of which he was a founding member and former chairperson. He has taught at both Emerson College and Stockton State College, and has delivered guest lectures at Yale University, SUNY Purchase, and West Chester University. His most recent book is *Tesla for Beginners*. 
Figure 0.1 Theatre Production Organization Chart

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Introduction to Production

Creating Theatre Onstage, Backstage, & Offstage

Robert I. Sutherland-Cohen

With a Foreword by Peter Lawrence, Tony Award-Winning Stage Manager

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NEW YORK AND LONDON
To my wife Patricia

... The Most Beautiful Star in All My Productions
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ................................................. xiii
Foreword by Peter Lawrence, Tony Award-Winning Stage Manager ........ xv
Preface .......................................................... xvii

## Chapter 1: Production and Backstage Organization  

Defining Theatre Production ................................ 1
A Little Bit of Theatre History ................................. 2
Theatre Configurations .......................................... 6
   Amphitheater ................................................. 6
   Proscenium ................................................... 6
   Thrust Stage or ¾ Stage ...................................... 6
   Theatre-in-the-Round or Arena Theatre .................. 7
   Black Box ..................................................... 7
   Site-Specific Theatre ........................................ 8
Style Advantages and Disadvantages ......................... 9
Theatre Facility Layout ........................................ 10
Understanding Theatre Facility Layout: The Camelot Theatre 12
What Did You Learn? ........................................... 13
Related Exercises .............................................. 13
Additional Resources .......................................... 14

## Chapter 2: Producing Theatre  

The Role of the Producer ....................................... 17
Read the Play ................................................... 18
Securing or Licensing the Property .......................... 20
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3: Management</th>
<th>35</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Business Manager and/or General Manager</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read the Play</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Bargaining Agreements and Unions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Manager</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity and/or Press Agent</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sandbox Window Card</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Marketing and Ticket Sales</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not-for-Profit Marketing</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Did You Learn?</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Resources</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: Creating Theatre</th>
<th>49</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Playwright</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Short Review of Playwriting</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playwriting Awards</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dramatists Guild and Royalties</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dramaturg and Playwright in Rehearsal</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Theatre Creators: Librettist, Composer, and Lyricist</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Table of Contents

- Rehearsals ........................................ 56
- ASCAP, BMI, SESAC, and Royalties .......... 57
- Relating to the Other Members on the Organizational Chart ........................................ 58
- Can You Match the Playwright? ................. 58
- What Did You Learn? .............................. 59
- Additional Resources .............................. 60

## Chapter 5: The Creative Team ............... 63

- The Role of the Director ......................... 63
- A Brief Overview of Directing ................. 63
- Staging a Performance ........................... 64
- The Director’s Vision: Concept and Style .... 67
  - Concept ........................................ 67
  - Style ........................................... 68
- Basics of Directing ............................... 70
  - Composition .................................. 70
  - Picturization .................................. 70
  - Movement .................................... 70
  - Rhythm ........................................ 71
  - Pantomimic Dramatization ................. 72
- Blocking ........................................... 72
- A Musical Production ............................ 75
- The Music Department .......................... 75
  - The Music Director ........................... 75
  - The Choreographer ............................ 77
- Casting by the Creative Team ................. 78
- The Creative Team in Rehearsals .............. 79
- Additional Creative Team Members .......... 80
- Health and Safety ............................... 81
- What Did You Learn? ............................ 82
- Additional Resources ........................... 83
# Table of Contents

## Chapter 6: The Creative Artists

- Adhering to the Director’s Vision 85
- Scenic Design 86
- A Short History of Costume Design 90
- Costume Design 93
  - Costume Design Exercise 96
- A Short History of Lighting Design 98
- Lighting Design 99
  - Lighting Design Exercise 100
- A Short History of Sound Design 105
- Sound Design 105
- The Design Team in Rehearsal and Budgeting 106
- Unions 108
- What Did You Learn? 109
- Additional Resources 109

## Chapter 7: Implementing the Designs

- Ancillary Designers 113
- Properties or Prop Designer 113
- Costume Design Contributors 116
  - Hair and Wig Designer 117
  - Makeup Designer 117
  - Mask Designer 118
  - Hat Designer (Milliner) 118
  - Shoe Designer 119
- Design Assistants 119
  - Assistant Scenic Designers 120
  - Assistant Lighting Designers 122
  - Additional Assistant Designers 122
- What Did You Learn? 125
- Additional Resources 126
Chapter 8: Production Supervisors

The Transition Team
Production Managers
Stage Managers
Pre-Production
General Rehearsals
Technical Rehearsals
Dress Rehearsals
Performances
Post Production
Technical Directors (TDs)
Transition Team Assistants
Assistant Stage Managers
Production Assistants
What Did You Learn?
Additional Resources

Chapter 9: Production Crews

Stagehands
Carpenters
Flypersons
Properties (Prop) Persons
Electricians and Sound Engineers
Followspot Operators
Costume Department
The Dream Assembled
Stage Managers
Additional Resources
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 10: Front of House</th>
<th>169</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House Management</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and the Production</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and the House Crew</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and the Box Office</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and Security</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and Engineering</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and Ushers</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and Concessionaires</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Management and Custodians</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Did You Learn?</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Resources</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 11: The Performers/Afterwords</th>
<th>181</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Performers</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Producer</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The General Manager</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Company Manager</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Publicity Department</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Creative and Artistic Teams</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Creative Artists and Assistants</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Stage Management Team</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Production Crew</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front-of-House Personnel</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterwords</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production Crossword Puzzle</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Did You Learn?</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Resources</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossword Puzzle Answers</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Index | 193 |
Acknowledgments

Theatre production by its very nature is a collaboration of many hands, and this book about theatre production follows that model. If I were to call upon all my collaborators to take a bow upon publication for their contributions, they would fill a stage larger than any historic grand amphitheater. My career began in college and continued across national and international stages, wonderfully concluding as professor emeritus in college. I am gratefully indebted to all my teachers and professional colleagues for their patience, expertise, and creative energy. We worked together to make every production the best possible. Without their support, knowledge, and inspiration this book would never have seen the light of day. My students too have taught me so much, and I hope now with this book we will reach many other students and colleagues.

Behind the scenes, but always in the forefront of my theatrical thoughts, many deserve to share the spotlight with me. These include my mentors at Northeastern University and Boston University, my colleagues at the Chateau De Ville Dinner Theatres, the hundreds of professionals Off- and On-Broadway, those dedicated artists across regional and international theatres, the specialists at the Tropicana Casino and Resorts, and the top-flight experts at Lincoln Center and the New York City Opera, as well as fellow professors and staff at Brooklyn College.

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Family always bears the greatest weight of living through the trials and tribulations of a professional stage manager. For their continual support and joyous “Oh, Daddy,” I am grateful to be blessed with two loving daughters, Shana and Alyssa.
And, to my wife Patricia: without her eagerness for my success, always shining the spotlight on my endeavors, welcoming my return from rehearsals, performances, and repeated touring with rapturous laughter—as well as the repeated encouragement to persevere with all my undertakings—the journey to this book and through a theatrical career would have been impossible. In a word, her love has provided the most gratifying sustenance.
The theatre is a chaotic place. It can often seem that disorganization rules – scripts change, music is re-written, set pieces are cut or added, actors are re-assigned roles, budgets expand. But this seeming chaos is really just part of a process. And it’s an entirely creative process, whether one is a producer, an actor, a general manager, a designer, an actor or a stage manager. Each player in this process is lending his or her expertise to the shifting needs of a theatrical production.

Mike Nichols always said, “Everyone serves the production. And if you can’t serve it, get out of the way.”

But serving the production means different things to different professionals. For the General Manager, serving the production may mean putting it on a sound financial basis that will allow it to run and employ hundreds of people. For the stage manager, it may mean keep the production on schedule so as to be ready for the first preview. For the director, serving the production may mean working out a concept, no matter what the cost or difficulties. For the designers and technicians, it may mean collaborating to bring all the physical elements of the production to the stage in a seamless, unified fashion. For the actor, it may mean exploring his/her character with enough detail to make the performance both fully performed and real. And these competing goals are often in conflict and must be resolved.

It is from this very tumult, this clash of competing goals – and often of competing egos – that the theatre is born. It is collaborative in the best sense of the word – a group of professionals corralled together to accomplish a single goal. To tell a story in the clearest, most entertaining way possible – and, in the commercial theatre, to have it run long enough to make a profit. This sounds simple enough, but it is one of the most difficult processes in all the arts. If it were easy, all shows would succeed. But approximately 75% of commercial productions fail. And they fail because some of the members of the production team didn’t “serve the production.”
Either through artistic failure, financial restriction or sheer inattention, some parts of the show were let down.

Robert Sutherland-Cohen’s book details what is the responsibility of each of the many professionals who must grapple a production to Opening Night. The book is an excellent guide for anyone trying to figure out how to bring order to the apparent chaos of the theatre. And his organization charts are a very handy way to visualize this process.

Robert has worked extensively in the Broadway and regional theatre, and is an Emeritus Professor at Brooklyn College. And so he has a unique perspective on how both the commercial and non-commercial theatres are organized and how they operate. He has the teaching skill to lay out this chaotic process in a logical way which students wanting to enter the professional theatre can understand.

As a long-time professional stage manager, I found Mr. Sutherland-Cohen’s book to be an excellent refresher course on theatrical organization. And I particularly appreciated his “Fast/Good/Cheap” triangle – a basic tenent of any business, but especially of the theatre.

It is often said that, “The theatre is no fit place for an adult.” Well, Robert Sutherland-Cohen’s book is written by an adult for adults.
Our initial interest in theatre might have been sparked by witnessing an outstanding performance. However, there is much more that occurs onstage and behind the scenes that is worth explaining. Such work is carried out by a host of contributors other than actors for the creation of a theatrical event.

This book is intended for the person who in all truth and honesty wishes to learn about the collaborative support team that exists behind every performance. It is for a reader who desires to explore the multitude of opportunities and job possibilities that might lead to a fulfilling career in theatre. The serious person who embarks on this journey and expects to succeed will look beyond the excitement of opening nights and resounding applause. Theatre can be a rewarding career that combines almost single-minded dedication with much sacrifice. The fulfillment of successful collaboration, a necessity in all forms of theatre, is practically its own reward. Notice that we do not mention a monetary reward initially. With time, doors for more potential creative opportunities and a variety of employment paths could possibly open to the talented, the trained, and the skilled practitioner.

Theatre is part of that world we call “show business” for a reason: the “show” and the “business.” There is an element of glamour to each of them. Yes, you can gain entry as a single actor performing your own, self-written, one-person play on a street corner or webcam, and solicit applause as well as donations from others. Yet these actions hardly sustain a career, or attract an audience on a consistent basis.

Bitten by the theatrical bug, inevitably many of you who thought about presenting a play in one fashion or another quickly realize that eventual success does not come from performing on a street corner. Perhaps this same street-corner actor has written a play that could be potentially performed in a space with a specific playing schedule, garnering positive reviews, and returning a monetary award to our performer. In order to gain this measure of reward it is highly unlikely the individual would have been able to do it alone. Understandably this solo performer had to collaborate with a number of individuals and assume a number of roles that are common to all theatrical productions before being justly rewarded: producer, theatre owner, publicist, ticket seller, and a paying audience to name a few.

All this seems straightforward. But wait, our performer’s enthusiasm is getting ahead of reality. There are many practical steps along the way and many more opportunities for possible realistic success in theatre.
It is here that we begin our exploration of these many opportunities. Let’s start with a look at an organization chart for a large-scale musical (see Figure 0.1). Typically, this same chart could serve for any amateur, community, not-for-profit, or commercial production. A number of the chart’s job positions may be consolidated or eliminated depending on the varied skills required of the personnel engaged for the production. For instance, a quick look at the chart would reveal in all probability that a musical director and the attendant staff could be eliminated for a non-musical. In addition, the scale of the production could also be determined by economic factors. For a presentation in a very tiny theatre the entire management staff might be consolidated into one person who sells tickets, performs the duties of usher, and cleans the building. In essence the organizational chart will serve as a guide to the many and varied job positions that this book will present for someone who wants to get into theatre as a potential career.

There are many in-depth books and specialty courses on how to become a playwright, a producer, a general manager, a director, an actor, a scenic designer, a costume designer, a lighting designer, or other specialty designers, as well as guides to the various technical positions that comprise theatre production. This is not one of those books. This is a book about responsibilities and certain decisions that a theatre specialist has to undertake in order to contribute to the potential success of a production. In short, this is a book that endeavors to present a broad overview of theatre organization, lines of responsibility, and process.

One key element that is integral for everyone involved in a production is to read the play. How this becomes of major importance for practically every job position will be elaborated upon in the course of your reading this book.

Readers may find beginning inspiration in their initial reading of the book. There will be many forms, charts, drawings, illustrations, and exercises that are sprinkled throughout the book as supportive figures related to the text. Just reading this book may enlighten many. However, greater enrichment for learning about the theatrical production process will be gained by thoroughly engaging with the many exercises, activities, e-resource hyperlinks, and additional suggested resource materials. In particular, these include:

- **LEARN MORE**: Text box callouts for this book’s e-resource (at www.routledge.com/9781138657779) provide hyperlinks for additional material and videos, as well as suggested exercises that bear directly on the text as you are reading it.
- **RELATED EXERCISES**: Opportunities for the reader to stretch their imagination and begin thinking about the decisions that a person in one of the positions on the organization chart must make in order to successfully complete their job.
- **FURTHER DISCUSSIONS**: Suggested participation with classmates and teachers on topics relevant to each of the chapters.
- **WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**: A few questions and answers that conclude certain chapters and serve as self-guides to essential material contained in those chapters.
• **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**: Provided at the conclusion of each chapter for additional research material in print form as well as web resources in order to advance in-depth knowledge on the past, present, and perhaps future specific to the subject covered in that chapter.

Hopefully this book will spark your interest and lead you to embark upon a glorious theatre career. The greatest reward will come from getting out and seeing “live theatre.” Enjoy and attend with an open eye!
DEFINING THEATRE PRODUCTION

A quick glance at the production organization chart (Figure 0.1) at the beginning of this book demonstrates how a theatre production is structured, in its relationships and responsibilities, much like virtually any corporation. Indeed, Nike, Coca-Cola, Ford Motors, or British Airways all have an organization chart. In our case the chart could relate to a specific production, such as the *Phantom of the Opera* or *Hamlet*. The positions relate to the different jobs that comprise the making of a theatrical production.

Take this opportunity to glance at the organizational chart and think back to any theatre production that you may have attended. It need not be a large-scale musical performed on Broadway or in the West End. It may not even have been a musical at all. In fact, it might have been a play specifically for children, or any piece staged in a high school, a church basement, a community hall, a local professional theatre, or even your own college drama auditorium—which we will touch upon in the pages ahead. It took many people holding different job positions while working in collaboration to realize the production that you attended.
Our organizational chart stands as an example of the many different kinds of job positions it might take to reasonably present a truly large musical production. As it happens, some of the positions may have had their duties combined or eliminated if music were not a component of the production. Many lines of reportage change as a production moves from inception to performance, as we shall see in the coming pages.

For those of you new to theatre many of the job positions on the organizational chart may be unfamiliar. Those of you who have had some exposure to live theatre may have already developed some ideas regarding what each of the positions attempts to accomplish. Hopefully the novice theatregoer and those that have attended live theatre with some frequency will come to appreciate the time, effort, talent, and money it takes to put on a show as you read further.

In the succeeding chapters we will elaborate on how the different positions (jobs) work in collaboration with one another in order to realize a successful production (the live theatrical presentation in a particular space), for it is the production that is the resultant dream which the many positions on the organizational chart working in collaboration hope to successfully realize.

It should be noted at this point that the term “production” is used interchangeably to define the process of making live theatre and to describe the fully staged event. For the moment let us look at the three major divisions of job positions for those who participate in the process of making a theatre production. These three divisions of responsibility are: management (business), creative (talent), and technical (construction and running crews). Figure 1.1 delineates the job positions for each division. Of special note is the position of stage manager, which invariably straddles all three divisions throughout the production process. This unique position will be discussed fully in a later chapter.

During the production process any one position may have to consider not only the execution of their own job, but also how they affect others to effectively perform their own respective tasks. Invariably, what someone on the management side of production does may affect how someone creatively produces their work, as well as how a technical person performs the job. This type of interdependence among everyone within the organization signals the need for everyone to be part of the collaborative process; awareness of this is intrinsic to possible success in the theatre. It is the process and the decision making undergone by each position within these three divisions that we will be examining in the pages ahead.

A LITTLE BIT OF THEATRE HISTORY

Remember that sole street-corner actor we started with in the Preface? In essence that actor is not that far removed from the very first actor, Thespis, who stepped out of the chorus before a gathered Greek audience numbering in the thousands around the 6th century BC. Thespis not only recited; he also portrayed a character through movement, possible vocal changes, and perhaps had interactive spoken exchanges with the chorus. The chorus was a group of people...