



# Guide to "SMing"

## The basics

The job of a Stage Manager (SM) at the ADC Theatre is different to that usually covered by the term in the professional world. In Cambridge the SM basically runs the show from the stage manager's desk for the duration of the performance, taking responsibility for everything that happens on stage. The SM is in charge of all health and safety (particularly fire related) issues whilst the show is running, and cues lighting, sound and scene changes from the Prompt Book. The SM also tends to be the person to whom all problems encountered by actors or crew are reported.

For shows in other venues, the job mainly involves helping the cast and organising the movement of set and props.

This guide aims to form a step by step, fairly comprehensive guide to being a stage manager for the Amateur Dramatic Club. Although it focuses on the ADC Theatre where the job is understandably more complex, parts of it will also be of use for those SMing elsewhere.

## Props

If you are SMing a good size show you may have a Props Manager or Assistant Stage Manager (ASM) who will take responsibility for getting props. If not, and on most shows, one of the first things you will be given or should ask for is an accurate list of props, which you are then responsible for obtaining ready for the technical rehearsal at the latest, and more often for the last rehearsals before that.

It will help you enormously with your planning for the show if you request a scene by scene list from the director, as you can then see what each prop is for and when it is used. You should also agree with your Set Designer (SD) and Technical Director (TD) which items of furniture are to be counted as props and which as set, as this can be an area of controversy.

The Amateur Dramatic Club has a props store in the Theatre scene dock run by the Club Designer. Items are free to borrow for ClubShows, so just email them and arrange a time to view the store. As a Clubshow you can reserve props in advance and collect them just before the show. An online catalogue of the props store contents is currently under construction, but still check the store carefully for the requisite item before spending money on another! You should ensure the safe return of all props borrowed, as well as those you have bought yourself, to the props store at the end of the run.

If you have to buy your props, check your list and discuss an appropriate budget with your Producer. Once this has been set, you must not exceed your budget limit without first consulting your Producer and the Junior Treasurer or you may be personally liable. The best places to buy props are charity shops and factory stores or the Cambridge Market. Particularly unusual items can be hired if necessary but be aware that this can be expensive. Think creatively – restaurants in Cambridge will sometimes lend or hire chairs or tables if you need a matching set, for example.

There are safety issues that need to be considered when props are on and off stage; please see the health and safety section of this guide for more details.

## **Guns**

The ADC Theatre owns a number of blank firing guns for use on the ADC stage. If you wish to use one, the appropriate licence (included in schedule B of the Theatre hire details given to the Producer) must have been applied for in advance. You need to read the licence conditions and be trained in handling the gun by Management. Safety instructions must be passed on to those using the gun in the performance. Blanks and the gun should be collected by the SM before the show begins and returned with used and unused rounds at the end of each performance.

## **The Book**

The SM compiles the show 'book' or prompt book – fundamentally an annotated script –from which the show will be run, during rehearsals. This should be done according to a fairly standard system so that the book itself is the only necessity for running the show and anyone could take your place without disruption. Ask your producer to get you a photocopy early in the production stage of the show and if possible spend time familiarising yourself with the script. The eventual size and complexity of the book will depend upon the show; if you are SMing a musical or an opera you will probably need to supplement the book/libretto with music and even a whole score, since lighting can and probably will follow instrumental cues. At the ADC, where the SM is responsible for cueing, this will obviously be a more complex document than it will be for Elsewhere shows.

You should always write cues into the book in pencil as things can change right up until the final performance, and try and keep things in it as precise and accurate as possible.

Take note of moments of likely complexity in the show during rehearsals and mark brief comments into the book if necessary. Lighting and sound cues can be marked in after discussion with the director and the relevant crew member, during the lighting plot, or at the paper tech.

## **The Paper Tech**

Lighting and sound cues may not be added until the get-in weekend, but on many shows a trial technical rehearsal or 'paper tech' takes place just before this, at which key crew members meet to run through the show. This is by no means a standard procedure and there are those who dislike the practice, so do not presume it will take place. However, it does provide possibly the only opportunity before the show for all the key crew members to sit down with the artistic team and make sure that everyone has the same conception of what happens and when at every point in the show. Previously unmentioned props and even bits of set have been known to appear in paper techs, so they can be very valuable! During the paper tech, lighting, sound, fly and set cues can all be written into the Book.

Before the paper tech can take place, you will need to have a clear idea of the set, the Director and Lighting Designer (LD) should have a clear idea of the lighting cues, and someone should be aware of points in the show at which fly cues may be necessary. For this reason it is often not worth calling a paper tech more than a week before the get-in weekend.

For simple shows the whole procedure may well be unnecessary, but the more complex the show, the more crucial a paper tech can be. If in doubt, consult with your TD and LD and make the decision between you.

## Marking the Book

There is a fairly standard way to mark up the Book to ensure that it can be universally understood. The following abbreviations are typical:

Q = cue

LX = lighting

S = sound (avoid FX – this sounds too much like ‘LX’ over cans)

CW = counterweights

H = Hemps (marked as ‘flys’ on desk)

PS = prompt side (stage left)

OP = opposite prompt side (stage right)

US = upstage

Lime = cues for followspot op

Pit = the band or orchestra

Most of these abbreviations correspond to the cue lights on the SM’s desk (more details on that below). US, PS and OP are most often used for cueing stage crew who may need instruction as to when to move bits of set or props on and off the stage.

When writing these into the Book, lighting cue 10 should appear (for example) as LXQ10 and counterweight cue 4 as CWQ4. Further information about calling these cues during the show is included below, but you may also wish to write your relevant ‘stand-bys’ (warning of imminent cues) into the book. You should also underline the exact word or end of phrase which triggers the cue to make it clear to yourself and others.

## Rehearsals

It is up to the individual SM how many rehearsals they attend, but as with any aspect of the job the more complicated the show the more time you should devote to it. For the average show starting to go to rehearsals two weeks before first night is probably appropriate.

Full runs are the most useful type of rehearsal to attend, as it is here you will be able to note potential issues moving from scene to scene and gain an overall idea of the show. The main aims when attending rehearsals as an SM are as follows:

- To write blocking notes (diagrams showing where the actors are standing and where they move to and from in particular scenes). These are useful for working out which side of the stage to place props, to check on inconsistencies and potential clashes with set movement, and any number of other things! As these are predominantly for your benefit, you may draw these up in whichever way agrees with you best, but it might be useful for others to be able to understand them.
- To take notes on props. Discuss with the director during the rehearsal what each character is carrying and what props are on stage at any given time. Not only is this likely to ensure you have a complete set of props before the get-in, but saves time in the tech if you already know where each prop or piece of furniture should be.
- To note scene changes and plan the movement of items on and off stage. If you have an ASM this will be done by them, if you are an ASM this will be your responsibility. However, the SM

should be aware of what is happening at all times and should thus keep a copy of eventual scene change/stage layout plans.

- To learn the show to the extent that you know the order of the scenes and the broad movement of each. It is a simple equation; the better you know the show the better you can run it.

During rehearsals, encourage the director if you can to block scene changes if the cast are going to be responsible for these at any stage. This may be no more complex than making sure an actor knows to carry off his chair at the end of the scene, but again, it saves valuable tech rehearsal time.

## **Licenses**

Before certain things are allowed on the ADC stage a licence needs to be applied for from the Council. Such things include smoking on stage, naked flames on stage, pyros, guns, strobe lighting and various other things. Although your TD and Producer are likely to ensure that the relevant licences have been applied for well in advance, check what has been applied for and what will be in the show. DO NOT let your Director tick all the boxes on the off-chance they may decide to have everything. Only apply for what is actually needed, or a visit from the inspector is guaranteed, and he will ask lots of nasty questions. It is your responsibility to have read the licences for the effects used and to have taken the relevant safety precautions.

## **Health and Safety (ADC Theatre only)**

If you are SMing an Elsewhere show you should familiarise yourself with the health and safety regulations for the venue in question.

This is a key consideration for the SM at the ADC, who is responsible for health and safety in the backstage area during the show. There is a particular emphasis on fire regulations, and the SM must perform a fire check from a special checklist prior to every show. It is the SM who is in charge of evacuation in the event of fire or other incident; you are responsible for ensuring backstage compliance with all relevant regulations, as well as for general health and safety issues such as those arising from set movements or flying scenery. This is another good reason to attend and to be alert at rehearsals so that potential hazards can be identified before they arise! All new SMs must be trained by Theatre Management so that health and safety issues are properly explained.

### **Basic safety**

The basic idea of H and S is that no one should be likely to fall over on stage, fall off a piece of set, trip over something, set fire to anything or cause themselves or others harm. It is mainly just common sense, and individual shows will have risks of their own which you will have to identify and manage. However, the notes below set out the crucial ones, most of which involve things which need to be pointed out to the cast in advance of the tech rehearsal (see set walks).

### **Trip Hazards and head hazards**

All trip hazards on stage must be identified, marked out in white gaffer tape and pointed out to the cast on the walkround. These might be steps or changes of level on stage, sticking out bits of set or scaffolding at ankle height, or more usually cables. These last should be taped to the ground and marked in white. Likewise head hazards should be marked in white gaffer and in some cases padded to avoid injury.

### **Treads**

The edges of treads (steps or stairs on stage) should all be outlined in white unless flanked by a handrail. In dark scene changes the cast need to be able to descend safely.

## **Flying and moving set**

Make sure your cast are aware of the size and position as well as the timing of flying pieces of set. This is particularly important during the tech when they are unlikely to know what is going to come in when. You may like to spend time in rehearsals explaining what will be happening around the cast, but otherwise be careful when flying during the tech and demonstrate at every stage exactly where something is going to be and when it will be flying. If the stage is busy, agree an order of movement where either the cast wait for the set or it flies in once they are ready. This sort of arrangement is also a good idea with trucks and large bits of set, for reasons of practicality as well as safety.

## **Set walks**

Before the tech begins you or your TD or both should walk the cast around the set pointing out potential hazards such as overhanging bits of set, trip hazards and moving bits of set. Anything out of the ordinary that involves the cast and is potentially dangerous or needs to be used in a certain way can also be explained at this point.

You should also sit the cast down at this point and explain the fire procedures, asking them to take note of evacuation routes, passages across stage, and the red fire guidelines backstage. Explain to them what you will do in the event of fire and what instructions will be given.

## **Fire safety**

### **Smoking and naked flame licences**

Licences to have smoking or naked flames on stage during a performance need to be applied for in advance. When there is smoking on stage, there must be an appropriate number of ashtrays or other flameproof receptacles on set, as well as one in each wing. (Do not include the firebuckets and avoid encouraging the cast to use them as ashtrays.) All of these should be filled with damp sand. All cigarettes and cigars must be extinguished immediately upon leaving the stage and should only be lit immediately prior to entrances. It is strictly forbidden to smoke in the wings at any time.

In the case of naked flames on stage (candles etc) a member of the crew trained in the use of the fire extinguishers should be stationed by a fire point on either side of the stage whilst naked flames are alight.

These details and more are all on the relevant licences, which you must read before the show.

### **Fire passages**

For the purposes of evacuation there must be a metre wide passage at both sides of the stage at all times. This must be kept clear of all props and set. You will need to tell your cast of the importance of keeping it like that! Marking it out with white tape (so long as it cannot be seen from the auditorium, in which case black tape is much better!) acts as a reminder that certain areas must be kept clear, and can be seen as a safe passage in the event of a fire. You will need to demonstrate the fire passage to the cast during the walkround.

### **The fire alarm isolate switch**

If there is smoking, a smoke machine or a naked flame on stage at any time during the show you need to isolate the auditorium and stage alarm from the panel in the Clubroom as part of the fire check.

### **In the event of a fire:**

If the red warning light (above the desk) flashes: If you can see the fire, evacuate. If you cannot see the fire and the cast or crew have not reported one, wait for Management to phone to confirm evacuation or false alarm. If after two minutes Management have not phoned, call the cast upstage of the iron, bring in the safety curtain and panic the houselights using the button next to the safety curtain handle. Evacuate the cast and crew backstage down the designated escape route,

remembering to evacuate the dressing rooms as well.

If you see the fire or it is reported to you by someone backstage: Operate the nearest break glass, bring in the safety curtain, panic the houselights and evacuate as above. Unless the fire is very small, do not attempt to tackle it yourself.

## **Accidents and reporting**

Any health and safety incident which occurs backstage during the show should be written into the SM's log. Serious incidents must be reported to Management, and they must also be informed of any accident which requires use of the first aid box or eyewash kit, as these need to be entered into the Theatre's accident book.

## **The risk assessment**

The SM is also one of the crew members who fills out the risk assessment. You should obtain it from your TD prior to the get-in and complete the relevant sections. It is not designed to catch you out (!) merely to ensure you have thought appropriately about potential issues.

The risk assessment varies from year to year but the basic requirements involve you filling in a section detailing the construction and material of any props used, whether they are likely to shatter, and whether they contain any water. You should also expect to answer questions about naked flames or smoking, flying set and the timely positioning of the cast, set movement and potential hazards, holes and trip hazards on stage, any moments at which the cast are bare-footed and other issues with the show that could pose a danger to cast or crew. The aim is to ensure that potential hazards have been identified and risks managed by such means as warning the cast, taping over and highlighting trip hazards, and establishing signal systems (for example) should an area of the stage become unsafe for a period of time.

## **Props**

There are several rules regarding props use on the ADC stage.

- Any props containing liquids (which should never be flammable) must be kept well away from any electrical equipment on stage. All spillages should be mopped up at the earliest opportunity to avoid injury.
- Glass or other materials which may shatter and become dangerous are not allowed on the forestage unless coated in clingfilm (to contain them if broken) to protect the audience.
- Such material is allowed on the main body of the stage without clingfilm only if every member of the cast wears shoes throughout the performance. No such items may be carried onto decking or up stairs or ladders. Items carried to a height or in shows with any member of the cast in bare feet must be clingfilmed.
- All paper and other flammable materials should be sprayed with Flamecheck (available from Management and charged as sundries). Items through which the spray will not penetrate should be soaked in the liquid. The only exceptions to this rule are items which come into extended contact with skin or those which contain items for consumption.
- All props which bear any weight must be well and structurally constructed and not liable to cause any injury.
- Sharp edges on items such as knives or scissors should be blunted or covered unless they need to be functional in which case actors should be reminded of safety precautions. Such items should be kept in the SM's desk when not in use.

## **The get-in weekend**

The 'get-in' is the name given to the period of time a show has to install the set and any other necessities and to rehearse prior to opening night. In the ADC that tends to be from very early Sunday morning (about 2am after the previous show has finished their get-out) until Tuesday evening

and the first performance. Typically the schedule includes an LX overnight rigging session, a Sunday of setbuilding, tech on Monday and dress on a Tuesday. If you are in another venue you will have considerably less time than this and should plan accordingly!

The SM has no specific role to fulfil during the set get-in; however you would usually be asked to help to put the set together with the rest of the crew. The get-in is also a useful time to ensure that the necessary props have been obtained and that these comply with safety regulations.

## **The ADC Prompt desk**

Stage left (or prompt side) is the prompt or SM's desk, from where the show is run. It comprises a set of buttons that control or warn about various things, a monitor, a phone, a headset with mic ('cans' set) and a storage drawer. It is switched on via a red switch on the wall behind it, near the LX rigger.

The most important features are the phone, for communication with the duty manager, cue lights and buttons (red and green lights with switches) which link to the boxes and points about the stage, and via which cues can be called; the bar bell, rung before the show and at the end of the interval (see preshow procedure below); the dressing room page system, a switch and mic for calling the cast to stage; the workers power switches, one green master on the desk and a panel behind the desk which controls the working lights; the clock; and the LX dimmer; houselight controls, which should be set to 'Off' before the show to allow the houselights to be dimmed. The desk also has several warning lights including 'floods' which tells you that the stage floodlights are on somewhere, and 'louvres open' which warns that the flaps in the roof need to be closed. Details about using the desk are given in training.

Inside the desk is the SM's logbook which is a crucial part of health and safety procedure. It is the SM's responsibility to fill it in every performance from the Tech to the final night, including the time at which the fire check was completed, the show start time, the times the safety curtain was raised and lowered, the down time of the performance, and any health and safety issues that may have occurred.

## **The Tech**

The Technical Rehearsal or 'tech' is the point at which the director hands over the show to the crew, and more specifically the stage manager. The SM is in charge of the tech, and the aim is to ready the show technically for performance by practising (if necessary ad nauseam!) the cues and/or scene changes until every member of the crew and cast knows what they are doing and the SM is confident of being able to call that section of the show.

It is unlikely that Elsewhere SMs will have to deal with cues. However it is likely that you will play a part in the Tech with organising and practising the movement of set and props.

## **Calling cues**

During the show the SM 'calls' the show by giving cues to the lighting operator (LX op) and sound op as well as any other crew as to when to 'go'. Standard cue calling runs as follows:

A short while before the cue (a couple of lines, for example) you should 'stand by' the crew by saying

"Stand by LXQ10" (for example) and flicking the relevant cue light to flashing red. You can stand by more than one person at a time (eg. "stand by LXQ10 and SoundQ2") and also blocks of cues if there are several close together (eg. "stand by LXQs10-15")

This will be acknowledged by the op who will press his cue light to turn off the flash on the desk. A steady red light therefore means that the stand by has been acknowledged. They may also add verbally, "Standing by".

To give a cue, you should repeat the title of the crew and instruct them to 'go' by saying "LXQ10 – GO" whilst depressing the cue light to green (in time with the word GO to avoid confusion).

Notice that for stand bys the word 'stand by' precedes the cue and for gos the 'go' comes after the cue. This is to ensure that there can be no confusion when the actual cue (as opposed to the stand by) is going!

## **Running the Tech**

By rights this should be the longest section in this guide, as it is the hardest part of the SM's job. However, the way in which you run a tech will depend upon your individual style as an SM, and it would be wrong to be too prescriptive. The following is intended as a helpful guide to eliminate some potential mistakes.

You run the tech from the desk with the crew at their places apart from the LD, who is likely to watch from the auditorium with the director and be in contact via cans. You start and stop as you feel appropriate, rehearsing things until you are comfortable with all cueing, set and safety issues. Those who wish to stop or repeat something for any reason should inform you – only you, not the cast or the director (who will frequently try to) have the right to stop the show. The whole process usually involves a lot of shouting and negotiation, and repeating the same thing time and time again, but although it can be a tedious and lengthy process it is the point at which the whole show comes together and thus vital it is done well.

Most people prefer a full run of the show as a tech, to allow the cast to get used to the stage and to calculate real-time breaks between cues. However, time pressure may mean reducing this to a 'cue to cue' procedure. This means that all script between groups of cues is cut and once one cue is rehearsed you proceed straight to the next. Do not presume that this will be easier! It requires good SMing and cast control in order to be of benefit.

Before the tech, as well as doing the walkround, explain to the cast the aims of the tech (some of them may be inexperienced) and that they need to be patient and understanding whilst the crew work around them, listening to your instructions and obeying swiftly. Talk to the director as well and remind them that the technical is not a time for rearranging blocking or stopping for artistic reasons. All comments from them during the tech should be routed through the SM.

## **Scene changes**

If you can have encouraged your director to have (however vaguely) blocked some scene changes then this will help as the cast will have some idea of what to take off or bring on at any stage, or at least what they are responsible for, even if they do not know what to do with it! However, as most Directors are very bad at this sort of thing it usually falls to the SM or ASM to deal with during the tech.

Once again there are no rules – you just have to rehearse the change until it is right! The cast are usually harder to direct in this matter than crew, so you may need to be patient. As scene changes are usually carried out in blackout, it can make it easier to run changes through at walking pace and at speed in the light, before doing it in the dark.

## **The Dress**

A proper dress rehearsal is always treated as a complete and uninterrupted performance of the show. Once again the SM is in charge, and if you are running over schedule it may be your job to hurry people up to begin. Remember to take note of the running time of the show during the dress and inform Management or the front of house staff before the first performance. Otherwise, just treat it as a practice for the real thing! Some problems will not appear until the dress (particularly if your tech was cue to cue) so keep a pen and paper handy to note down mistakes, queries and issues to discuss with the crew, director or cast.



# Running the performance

You must ensure that the show is ready to begin on time, call crew and actors backstage at the appropriate moment and generally make sure that everyone is in the right place at the right time for the duration of the show. It is your responsibility together with Front of House staff to get the show open, if not up, on time. There is a procedure for starting the show which is included below, together with the preshow schedule.

## Preshow procedure

You should arrive at the venue about an hour but at least 40 minutes before the start of the show to make sure you have time to do everything and be ready to open the house on time, at 7:30 for an ADC MainShow and 11:45 for a LateShow. Elsewhere shows will have different start times.

The first thing you should do when you arrive is to turn on the show relay system. This makes sure the cans system works. You also need to turn on the SM's desk from the red button behind it. You must sweep the stage (this is a safety procedure) and you or your ASM should check all your props and bits of set are in the appropriate places to begin the show.

Inside the desk is the fire check board, which lists the steps on the fire check you need to complete. This needs to be completed before you open the house. The rest of the show schedule is as follows:

**35 minutes before start** 30 minute call for cast

**20 minutes before start** 15 minute call for cast

**15 minutes before start** HOUSE OPENS

**10 minutes before start** 5 minute call for cast

**5 minutes before start** Ring 3 bar bells Call beginners to stage **3 minutes before start** Ring 2 bar bells

**1 minute before start** Ring 1 bar bell

**When everyone is ready to begin**, press red foyer warn button. When foyer warn light goes out, you may start the show.

**5 minutes before interval** Ring 1 bar bell (to warn bar staff to do interval orders)

**DURING INTERVAL** Bring up Safety Curtain at end of first half.

Set anything necessary for second half of show.

Bring down the safety curtain toward the end of the interval

**When Management call** Ring 3 bar bells Call beginners to stage **2 minutes later** Ring 2 bar bells

**2 minutes later** Ring 1 bar bell

**1 minute later** Put on Foyer Warn

Begin second half as for first.

## Troubleshooting

Before the house opens check that:

- The louvres are closed (red light should not be on)
- The floods are off (red light should not be on)
- The dimmer on the desk is turned down (black dial)
- The house lights are not panicked. (Check the switch by the safety curtain handle).

The SM should not move from the desk during a performance as in case of an emergency the cast, crew and Management all need to know where you are. If something goes wrong that effects cueing, there is no answer other than to use your common sense and compensate. If there is an accident, phone Management immediately for assistance. In the event of a technical crisis, ring five bar bells and all technicians in the building will rush to your aid!

## Assistant Stage Managing and props

On larger shows an Assistant Stage Manager and/or Props Manager may be appointed, although on smaller shows the SM typically covers all backstage roles (by use of the cast for changes etc). The division of duties between members of the backstage team is up to the individual SM, but in most cases the ASM acts as the SM's chief crew member, co-ordinating the stage crew and running scene changes. There may be one or more ASMs depending upon the requirements of the show (for example you may need one ASM per wing). The Props Manager is always responsible for buying and/or making props, and may or may not be present on performance nights to supervise prop movement on or off stage. In the absence of a Props Manager, both jobs tend to be performed by the ASM. If you are an ASM or a Props Manager then the most useful parts of this guide for you are the scene changing and props sections, as these will fall under your remit. Like the SM, you are partly responsible for ensuring that everything is ready for the show to go up on time. Your SM will probably leave it to you to ensure that props and set are suitably placed – don't let yourself become the cause of a hold-up unless absolutely necessary! Both jobs make you understandably more mobile than the SM, who is attached to the desk, so they involve a lot of troubleshooting and 'gophering'.

## General points

- Remember you are in control from the moment the show goes up. Stay calm and collected.
- Always ask questions of everyone. The more you can find out and anticipate before the show, the more smoothly things will run.
- The better you know the show, the better it will run. Go to rehearsals, and read the script thoroughly.
- Be as organised as possible, it reduces panic in everyone around you including yourself!
- Be diplomatic; the SM (almost alone in the team) deals with everyone in the cast and crew, but be prepared to settle some disputes whilst refraining from getting involved in things that are not of concern to you.
- Expect the unexpected and be prepared to deal with it.
- Above all, enjoy it! This is one of the most satisfying jobs in theatre. A well-run show makes everyone very very happy.