

INTRODUCTION TO THEATRE PRODUCTION

Stage Management · Lighting · Sound

A beginner's workshop handout for community theatre practitioners

Workshop	Introduction to Theatre Production
Facilitators	Hendrik Baird & Brandon
Hosted by	Franklin Players
Venue	Roosevelt Park Recreation Centre
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Duration	Approximately 2 hours

How to Use This Handout

This booklet follows the same journey as the workshop. It begins with the big picture — how a theatre production actually comes together — then moves through the three crafts in the order you'll meet them: stage management, lighting, and sound.

Each part opens with what you'll learn, ends with a recap and a practical exercise you can do after the workshop, and includes reference tables you can return to for years. Write in it. Fold the corners. Make it yours.

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Part 0	How a Production Comes Together — the process and the people
Part 1	Stage Management — the space, the role, and the prompt book
Part 2	Lighting — what light does, the tools, and how cues work
Part 3	Sound — the signal chain, the desk, and the soundcheck
Part 4	Where to From Here — pathways into technical theatre

PART 0 | HOW A PRODUCTION COMES TOGETHER

IN THIS SECTION YOU WILL LEARN

- The five phases every production moves through, from idea to closing night
- Who does what — the map of roles in a theatre production
- Where stage management, lighting, and sound fit into the whole

Why Start Here?

It's tempting to jump straight into the exciting stuff — the lights, the sound desk, the cue calls. But none of those make sense in isolation. Every technical role exists to serve a production, and every production follows broadly the same journey. Once you can see that journey, every individual skill you learn has a place to live.

The Five Phases of a Production

1. Pre-Production	The script is chosen, the team is assembled, the budget is set, and the designers begin their work. The stage manager builds the schedule and the prompt book. Most of a production's success or failure is decided here, before a single rehearsal.
2. Rehearsals	The director and cast build the performance, scene by scene. The SM records every decision. Designers refine their plans based on what emerges in the room. This phase typically runs four to eight weeks in community theatre.
3. Technical Rehearsals	The production moves into the venue. Set is built, lights are rigged and focused, sound is set up. Then the slow, painstaking process of working through the show cue by cue — the famous 'tech run'. This is where the three crafts in this workshop meet.
4. The Run	Opening night through closing night. The director's job is done; the stage manager now runs every performance. Consistency is the goal — the audience on the last night deserves the same show as the audience on the first.
5. Strike & Debrief	The set comes down, equipment is returned, the venue is restored. A good company also debriefs: what worked, what didn't, what we'll do differently next time.

The Team: Who Does What

Titles vary between companies, and in community theatre one person often wears several hats. But the functions below exist in every production, whether they're done by ten people or three.

Director	Owns the artistic vision. Decides what the production means and how it should feel. Works directly with the cast.
Producer	Owns the practical side: budget, venue, marketing, ticket sales, legal rights to the script.
Stage Manager	Coordinates everything and everyone. The communication hub of the entire production.
Set Designer	Designs the physical world of the play — scenery, furniture, spatial layout.
Lighting Designer	Designs what the audience sees in terms of light: mood, focus, time, place.
Sound Designer	Designs what the audience hears: effects, music, atmosphere, reinforcement.
Costume & Props	Dresses the performers and furnishes the world with objects the actors handle.

Crew / Operators

Run the show: lighting operator, sound operator, fly crew, stagehands, dressers.

How the Three Crafts Connect

Notice the pattern: designers make decisions in pre-production and rehearsals; operators execute those decisions during the run; and the stage manager coordinates between all of them at every phase. That triangle — design, execution, coordination — is the deep structure of technical theatre.

In this workshop: Part 1 teaches you coordination (stage management). Parts 2 and 3 teach you the foundations of two design-and-execution crafts (lighting and sound). Everything connects back to this map.

KEY IDEA

- Theatre is a collaboration between specialists. Nobody needs to know everything — but everyone needs to know how their craft connects to the others. That's what this workshop gives you.

PART 1 | STAGE MANAGEMENT

IN THIS SECTION YOU WILL LEARN

- The geography and language of the stage — how theatre people describe space
- What a stage manager actually does in each of the five production phases
- The prompt book: what goes in it and why it's called the bible of the production
- How cues are called — the exact words and rhythm used in a live show

What is Stage Management?

Stage management is the organisational backbone of any theatre production. The Stage Manager (SM) is responsible for coordinating every element of a show — people, space, time, and information — so that the director and performers can focus on the creative work.

Think of the SM as the production's air traffic controller: nothing takes off or lands without them knowing about it. They are rarely seen by the audience, but every smooth scene change, every perfectly timed blackout, and every performance that starts on time is their work.

A common misconception is that stage management is a junior or stepping-stone role. It isn't. Professional stage managers are among the most senior and trusted people in any company — and on performance nights, they outrank everyone, including the director.

1.1 THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE STAGE

Before you can manage a stage, you need to speak its language. Theatre has a precise vocabulary for describing space, and there's a good reason for it: in the dark, under pressure, with thirty seconds before curtain, 'move it a bit to the left' is useless. 'Take it two metres upstage right' is an instruction anyone on the team can execute instantly.

Stage Directions

All directions are given from the performer's point of view — standing on stage, facing the audience. This trips up every beginner: stage left is the audience's right.

Upstage (US)	The back of the stage, furthest from the audience. (Historically, stages sloped upward toward the back — hence 'up'.)
Downstage (DS)	The front of the stage, closest to the audience.
Stage Left (SL)	The performer's left when facing the audience.
Stage Right (SR)	The performer's right when facing the audience.
Centre Stage (CS)	The middle of the stage. Directions combine: 'upstage right' (USR), 'downstage centre' (DSC), and so on — giving you a nine-square grid that maps the whole stage.
Wings	The offstage areas to the left and right, hidden from the audience. Where performers wait for entrances and props tables live.
Flies / Fly Tower	The space above the stage where scenery, curtains, and lights are rigged and can be 'flown' in and out.
Apron	The part of the stage that extends in front of the main curtain line.
Front of House (FOH)	Everything on the audience's side: seating, foyer, box office.

Backstage	Any working area out of audience view: wings, dressing rooms, crossover corridors.
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Types of Stage Configuration

The relationship between stage and audience shapes everything — blocking, sightlines, set design, even where the SM can position the crew.

Proscenium	The traditional 'picture frame' stage. Audience faces the stage directly through an architectural opening. Easiest to manage: clear sightlines, hidden wings, full fly capability.
Thrust	The stage extends into the audience on three sides. More intimate, but entrances are limited and scenery must stay low or upstage.
In-the-round	Audience surrounds the stage completely. Powerful and immersive, but demands constant movement in blocking and rules out conventional scenery.
Black Box / Flexible	A plain, adaptable room where stage and seating are configured fresh for each production. Common in community and experimental theatre.
Traverse	A strip stage with audience on two long sides, like a fashion catwalk. Rare but striking.

TRY THIS

- Stand in any room and assign it a 'stage' orientation. Practise pointing to upstage right, downstage left, and centre stage until the directions are instant. Then ask a friend to call positions and move to them — in the theatre, this vocabulary must be reflex, not translation.

1.2 THE SM THROUGH THE FIVE PHASES

Remember the five phases from Part 0? Here is the stage manager's work in each. Notice how the role shifts from planner, to recorder, to coordinator, to commander.

Phase 1 — Pre-Production: The Planner

- Reads and analyses the script — not for character or theme, but for logistics: how many scenes, what locations, which characters appear together, what props and costume changes are needed, where the technical complexity lies
- Attends all production meetings, takes minutes, and distributes them — making the SM the keeper of every decision made
- Builds the rehearsal schedule in consultation with the director, balancing cast availability against what scenes need the most work
- Creates the prompt book (see section 1.3) and the contact sheet for the entire company
- Draws or sources a groundplan — a scale drawing of the stage showing the set — and tapes out the set's footprint on the rehearsal room floor, so actors rehearse in the real dimensions from day one

Phase 2 — Rehearsals: The Recorder

- Opens and closes every rehearsal: calls the room to order, keeps the session on schedule, manages breaks
- Records all blocking — every entrance, exit, cross, and piece of business — in the prompt book, in pencil, because it will change

- Tracks every prop, costume element, and set piece the rehearsal reveals a need for, and communicates these to the relevant departments
- Issues the daily call: who is needed, at what time, for which scenes
- Sends rehearsal reports after each session — a short, factual summary of what was worked, what was decided, and what each department needs to know
- Stands in for absent actors, reads in stage directions, and prompts performers who call 'line'

Phase 3 — Technical Rehearsals: The Coordinator

- Compiles every lighting, sound, and fly cue into the prompt book with exact trigger points in the script
- Chairs the tech process: the room works at the SM's pace, cue by cue, stopping and repeating until each transition is right
- Establishes communication: in venues with headsets, the SM is on comms with every operator. In venues without (like ours), the SM agrees visual cues and runner systems instead
- Issues a production report after each session listing every fix needed before the next one

Phase 4 — The Run: The Commander

- Calls the half (35 minutes before curtain), then beginners (5 minutes) — the formal countdown that gets everyone in place
- Runs the show from the prompt book, calling every cue (see section 1.4)
- Manages everything unplanned: a missing prop, a late actor, a technical failure — the SM decides and the company follows
- Keeps the show consistent: timing each act, giving notes if performances drift from what was rehearsed

Phase 5 — Strike: The Closer

- Coordinates the strike — the safe, organised dismantling of the production
- Ensures borrowed and hired items are returned, the venue is restored, and the prompt book is archived

1.3 THE PROMPT BOOK

If the SM is the production's air traffic controller, the prompt book is the radar. It is the single, authoritative record of the entire production — which is why it's called 'the bible'. If the SM fell ill on opening night, a competent replacement should be able to run the show from the book alone.

What Goes In It

The script	Single-sided, in a ring binder, with a blank facing page for notes and cues opposite every page of text.
Blocking notation	Every movement, recorded in pencil with consistent shorthand (e.g. 'X DSL' = cross downstage left).
Cue sheets	Every lighting (LX), sound (SQ), and fly cue, numbered, with its exact trigger word or action in the script.
Contact sheet	Names, roles, and phone numbers for the entire company.
Schedules	The rehearsal schedule, the production week schedule, and performance dates.
Groundplan	The scale drawing of the set in the space.
Plots and lists	Props list, costume plot, scene-change plot, preset checklists for every performance.

In community theatre your prompt book might be a simple A4 ring binder. The format doesn't matter. The discipline does: one book, always current, always in the room.

1.4 CALLING THE SHOW

Calling cues is the SM's signature skill, and it has a precise verbal protocol. Every cue is called in two parts — a standby, then a go — so that the operator is never surprised:

The standby	'Standby LX 14.' Given roughly half a page before the cue. The operator readies the cue and responds: 'Standing by.'
The go	'LX 14 — GO.' The cue executes on the word GO — not before, not after. The word GO is always last, so nothing fires early.

Several cues can be grouped: 'Standby LX 14, Sound 8, and Flies 3... LX 14 GO... Sound 8 GO... Flies 3 GO.' A complex show might have hundreds of cues, and the SM calls every one of them, every night, with the same calm precision.

THE GOLDEN RULES OF CALLING

- The word GO comes last. Never say 'Go on LX 14' — half the rig will fire on 'Go'.
- Calm is contagious. If the SM sounds rattled, the whole crew rattles.
- Never apologise mid-show. Fix it, note it, move on. The audience must never know.

Recap: Part 1

- The stage has a precise spatial language — learn it until it's reflex
- The SM's role evolves through five phases: planner, recorder, coordinator, commander, closer
- The prompt book is the single authoritative record of the production
- Cues are called in two parts — standby, then go — and GO always comes last

PART 2 | LIGHTING

IN THIS SECTION YOU WILL LEARN

- The five jobs lighting does in any production
- The four controllable qualities of light — the designer's raw materials
- The main types of stage lights and what each is for
- How a lighting rig is controlled: channels, the desk, and cues
- How to think like a lighting designer, even with a tiny rig

Why Lighting Comes Before Sound in This Workshop

We teach lighting second and sound third for a simple reason: lighting concepts map directly onto the stage geography you learned in Part 1 (lights are focused on areas of the stage), and the cue structure is identical to what you learned about calling. Sound then reuses both ideas. Each part builds on the last.

2.1 WHAT LIGHTING DOES

Theatre lighting is never just illumination. Every lighting choice does several jobs at once:

Visibility	The baseline job: the audience must see the performers' faces. Everything else is built on top of this.
Focus	Light directs the eye. The brightest point on stage is where the audience looks — which means the designer literally controls attention.
Mood	Warm and bright reads as comfort and comedy; cool and shadowed reads as tension and tragedy. The audience feels this before they think it.
Time & place	Dawn, noon, dusk, night; interior or exterior; summer or winter — all are built from colour, angle, and intensity.
Composition	Light sculpts the stage picture: it can shrink a vast stage to a single intimate pool, or carve one room into three locations.

A useful test of good lighting design: the audience shouldn't notice it. They should simply feel that the world of the play is real. The moment they think 'nice lighting', the spell is half-broken — unless spectacle is the point, as in a musical or concert.

2.2 THE FOUR QUALITIES OF LIGHT

Everything a lighting designer does is a manipulation of just four variables. Master these conceptually and the whole craft opens up:

1. Intensity	How bright. Controlled by the dimmer. Intensity is relative, not absolute — a 'dim' light in a dark scene can read brighter than a 'bright' light in a flooded one.
2. Colour	Created with gels (heat-resistant coloured sheets in front of the lantern) or built into LED fixtures. Warm colours (straw, amber, gold) read as natural, sunny, comfortable. Cool colours (steel blue, lavender) read as night, moonlight, unease. Designers often mix warm and cool from opposite sides to model the face.

3. Direction	Where light comes from changes what it means. Front light gives visibility but flattens. Side light sculpts the body — beloved in dance. Top light isolates and dramatizes. Back light separates performers from the background and creates the 'halo' that makes a stage picture read in depth. Footlight from below is unnatural — the classic horror effect.
4. Quality & focus	Hard-edged or soft-edged; a tight pool or a broad wash. A gobo (a metal stencil inserted in a profile lantern) projects texture: foliage, window frames, abstract pattern.

KEY IDEA — THE McCANDLESS PRINCIPLE

- The classic recipe for lighting a face: two lights at roughly 45 degrees to either side of the performer — one warm, one cool. The warm side suggests the light source (sun, lamp); the cool side fills the shadows. Almost every basic stage wash in the world is a variation on this hundred-year-old idea.

2.3 THE TOOLS: TYPES OF STAGE LIGHTS

Fresnel	Soft-edged wash light, named for its stepped lens. The workhorse of general coverage. Adjustable from spot to flood; shaped roughly with 'barn doors' (hinged flaps).
Profile / ERS	Hard-edged, precise beam that can be shaped exactly with internal shutters and can hold a gobo. Used for 'specials' — a light with one specific job, like isolating a single chair.
PAR Can	A simple, rugged can holding a sealed-beam lamp. Powerful, fixed-quality beam. The classic concert and back-light unit.
LED Wash / Parcan	Modern fixtures that mix colour electronically — no gels needed. Cool-running and energy-efficient, increasingly standard in community venues.
Flood / Cyc Light	Wide, even wash for lighting backdrops and cycloramas (the big sky-cloth at the back of the stage).
Follow Spot	Manually operated spotlight that tracks a performer. The operator is part of the show, riding intensity and size live.

2.4 CONTROL: CHANNELS, THE DESK, AND CUES

Every lantern in the rig is connected, directly or via a dimmer, to the lighting desk, where it is assigned a channel number. The operator works in channels: 'channel 12 at 80%' might mean 'the warm front wash on centre stage at 80% intensity'.

A lighting state is the complete picture at one moment: every channel at its set level. A cue (written LX 1, LX 2...) is a recorded state plus the time it takes to get there:

Fade	A gradual transition between states. 'LX 14, 8-second fade' means the new picture builds over 8 seconds. Slow fades are invisible; the audience just feels the world change.
Snap / Cut	An instant change. A snap to blackout at a climactic line is one of theatre's oldest and best tricks.
Blackout (BO)	All stage lights off. Marks the end of scenes and acts.

Preset	The state the audience walks in on — usually a gentle wash on the set before the show begins.
Cue stack	The full sequence of cues in order. During the show the operator simply presses GO on the SM's call — the desk does the rest.

Designer vs Operator

The lighting designer decides what each moment looks like and writes the cues during tech. The lighting operator executes those cues in performance, pressing GO on the SM's call. In community theatre these are often the same person — but the two ways of thinking are distinct: one is an artist making choices, the other a technician delivering consistency.

TRY THIS

- Watch any film scene with the sound off and ask only lighting questions: Where is the light coming from? Is it warm or cool? What is brightest in the frame — and is that where you look? You will never see lit images the same way again.

Recap: Part 2

- Lighting controls visibility, focus, mood, time, place, and composition — all at once
- Every design manipulates four qualities: intensity, colour, direction, and focus
- Different lanterns are tools for different jobs: Fresnels wash, profiles cut, PARs punch
- Cues are recorded states with transition times, fired on GO — the same protocol you learned in Part 1

PART 3 | SOUND

IN THIS SECTION YOU WILL LEARN

- The five jobs sound does in a production
- The signal chain — the single most useful troubleshooting idea in live sound
- Microphone and speaker types and when each is used
- How the sound desk works: gain, faders, and EQ
- How a soundcheck is run, step by step

Building on Parts 1 and 2

Sound reuses everything you've learned. Sound cues (SQ) follow exactly the same standby/GO protocol as lighting cues. And just as every lantern has a channel on the lighting desk, every microphone and playback source has a channel on the sound desk. New craft, familiar structure.

3.1 WHAT SOUND DOES

Reinforcement	Making live voices and instruments loud enough — and clear enough — to fill the space. The invisible art: done well, the audience believes they're hearing the performer naturally.
Atmosphere	Continuous ambient sound that places the scene: traffic, birdsong, rain, a distant party. Often played so low the audience registers it without noticing it.
Effects (spot effects)	Discrete sound events in the world of the play: a doorbell, a gunshot, breaking glass, thunder. Timing is everything — a late doorbell is a comedy nobody wanted.
Music	Pre-show and interval music, scene-change transitions, and underscoring — music beneath dialogue that shapes emotion the way lighting colour does.
Signal & practicals	Sounds that cue action: the phone the actor must answer, the kettle that must whistle. These demand split-second coordination between operator and performer.

3.2 THE SIGNAL CHAIN

This is the single most powerful concept in live sound. Every sound system, from a church hall PA to a stadium rig, is the same chain of five links. When something goes wrong — and it will — you find the fault by walking the chain:

1. Source	Where sound begins: a voice into a microphone, a playback file on a laptop, an instrument.
2. Input	The cable run into the desk. Microphones use XLR cables (the three-pin connector) which are 'balanced' — resistant to interference over long runs. Instruments and laptops use jack or RCA leads, often via a DI box that converts their signal to a balanced one.
3. Mixing desk	The control centre. Every input gets a channel strip: gain at the top, EQ in the middle, fader at the bottom. The desk combines (mixes) all channels into outputs.

4. Amplifier	Boosts the desk's small output signal to a power level that can drive loudspeakers. Many modern speakers are 'active' or 'powered' — the amp is built in.
5. Speakers	Convert the electrical signal back into moving air — sound.

THE TROUBLESHOOTER'S METHOD

- No sound? Don't panic — walk the chain. Is the source making sound? Is the cable plugged in (both ends)? Is the channel's gain up and the fader up? Is the desk's master fader up? Is the amp on? Work source-to-speaker and you will find the broken link. Ninety percent of 'emergencies' are a cable or a fader.

3.3 MICROPHONES AND SPEAKERS

Microphone Types

Handheld	The classic vocal mic. Robust, reliable, visible. Right for concerts, cabaret, and announcements; wrong for naturalistic drama.
Lapel / Lavalier	Miniature mic clipped to clothing or hidden in the hairline. Invisible to the audience — the standard for musical theatre. Vulnerable to costume rustle and sweat.
Headset	Worn over the ear with the capsule at the cheek. Consistent distance from the mouth means consistent level — the choice for big musicals and high-movement shows.
Boundary / Float mic	A flat mic laid on the stage floor or set. Picks up a zone rather than a person. The budget-friendly way to lift an entire ensemble a few decibels.
Shotgun / Boom	Highly directional. Aimed at a specific area from a stand or overhead rig.

Speaker Types

FOH (Front of House)	The main speakers facing the audience — usually a left/right pair beside the stage. Deliver the primary mix.
Foldback / Monitors	Speakers facing the performers, so they can hear the band, the playback, or themselves. What the audience hears and what the stage hears are different mixes.
Subwoofer	Handles only low frequencies — the weight and rumble. Essential for music-driven shows.
Delay speakers	In long venues, extra speakers halfway back, time-aligned so the sound arrives in sync with the stage.

3.4 THE DESK: GAIN, FADER, EQ

Three controls do most of the work on any channel:

Gain (or trim)	Sets the input level — how strongly the desk 'listens' to that source. Set once, during soundcheck, and then left alone. Gain too low: hiss when you turn it up. Gain too high: distortion. Get gain right and everything downstream is easy.
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Fader	The sliding volume control — the operator's moment-to-moment tool. Faders ride up and down throughout a show; gain does not.
EQ (equalisation)	Tone control: boosting or cutting bass, midrange, and treble per channel. Used to make voices clearer ('cut the mud, lift the presence') and to fight feedback.

Feedback: What It Is and How to Stop It

Feedback — the howl or screech every audience dreads — happens when a microphone picks up its own sound from a speaker, which gets re-amplified in a loop. Three defences, in order: keep microphones behind the speakers, never in front of them; keep gain and faders no higher than needed; and use EQ to cut the specific frequency that is ringing.

Running a Soundcheck

A soundcheck is not 'making noise until it sounds okay'. It is a procedure:

1. Line check — confirm every source reaches the desk: speak into each mic, play each playback source, watch the channel meters.
2. Set gain on each channel, one at a time, at performance level ('give me your loudest line, please').
3. Set EQ per channel for clarity, fighting any feedback now, not during the show.
4. Build the mix — balance all sources with the faders.
5. Walk the room — a mix that's perfect at the desk may be boomy at the back. Listen from the seats.

TRY THIS

- Next time you watch live music or theatre, find the sound desk and watch the operator for five minutes. Watch the faders move during the show. You'll see the invisible performance happening alongside the visible one.

Recap: Part 3

- Sound reinforces, creates atmosphere, delivers effects, carries music, and cues action
- Every system is the same five-link chain: source → input → desk → amp → speakers — and faults are found by walking it
- Gain is set once at soundcheck; faders move all show; EQ shapes tone and kills feedback
- Sound cues use the identical standby/GO protocol as lighting

PART 4 | WHERE TO FROM HERE

Technical Theatre Is Learned by Doing

This handout has given you the map: the production process, the SM's craft, and the foundations of lighting and sound. But the territory is only learned on your feet — at the desk, in the wings, with the book in your hands. Every production teaches what no workshop can.

Your Pathway In

1. Volunteer for the next Franklin Players production — in any technical capacity. Say yes to whatever is offered; everything backstage teaches you something.
2. Shadow before you drive. Ask to sit beside the SM, the lighting operator, or the sound operator for one full performance. Watching a show run from the inside is worth ten rehearsals.
3. Take the book. Once you've shadowed, ask to be assistant stage manager (ASM) on a production — running the deck, managing props, learning the rhythm of a show from inside it.
4. Learn one desk. Don't try to learn 'lighting' or 'sound' in the abstract — learn the specific desk your company uses, button by button, on a quiet afternoon.
5. Keep notes. Start your own production notebook now. Every show, write down what went wrong, what you'd do differently, and one thing you learned. In five productions you'll have your own textbook.

A Final Word

Audiences applaud actors. They rarely think about the person calling the cues, the operator riding the faders, or the crew moving in the dark. But everyone in this room now knows the truth: the show belongs to all of you. Welcome to the other side of the curtain.