

Occupational Profile: Stage Manager

Position paper exploring workforce development challenges faced by industry

Overview

Stage Managers are of critical importance to the organisation, management and execution of the technical, production and design aspects of live performance within a tight timeframe across the entire production process. Stage Managers are nurturing arbitrators who steer and manage the project, the people and conflicting interests. Responsive to change, they draw on highly developed communication, negotiation and interpersonal skills, as well as strong project management capability. They must apply critical thinking and problem solving, technical knowledge, research and development, and leadership skills to ensure a well-coordinated, seamless and meticulous production.

Stage Managers typically have a deep emotional connection to their work and thrive on the challenges and demands of their roles, as well as the collaborative nature of live performance making. As captured in a recent thesis, *Exit Stage Left: Mid-career transitions of female stage managers in Australia*, the fusion of identity and work is a strong career motivator (quoted in O'Neill 2017, 32)¹, despite the likelihood of eventual career transition. Paradoxically, it is the complexity of the role and its dynamic, challenging environment which, over time, shift the emotional reward obtained by the individual from one of gratification to one of dissatisfaction.

Western Australia currently faces challenges in retention, long term career sustainability and the availability of suitably qualified and experienced professionals to fill vacancies, particularly in the short-term live performance sector. This is despite the fact that there are an adequate number of suitably trained graduates entering the profession.

Challenges in Western Australia

The contraction of several performing arts companies in the State over the last 10 years limits the capacity and diversity of productions on offer. This in turn dictates the breadth of opportunity for career development and employment for Stage Managers. With few options for full time employment, the profession is predominantly freelance in nature, driven by irregular, contractual, short-term project-based work. Seeking better employment prospects, higher remuneration, longer term contracts and a greater range of work opportunities for career development, local freelance Stage Managers are drawn overseas and interstate to Melbourne and Sydney. Anecdotally, trained Stage Managers are also drawn to the events sector, enticed by more appealing wages, less stressful work and better employment conditions for a work/life balance.

Similarly, there are systemic issues which challenge the feasibility of sustaining a career in stage management. Precarious and insecure by nature, issues with long term retention of highly skilled, talented Stage Managers plague the industry nationally. Besides income instability, employment insecurity and career limitations, a combination of taxing working conditions, stress, perceived lack of recognition and value, scant organisational and professional support, and incumbent lifestyle factors all contribute to early workforce exits (O'Neill, 2017).

The sector is typically represented by a young, female workforce, many of whom seek more financially lucrative, stable and work-life balanced mid-career transitions beyond the sector. The traits and capabilities acquired as a Stage Manager build highly versatile, resilient, disciplined and resourceful people. Their leadership qualities and ability to manage projects and people translate into transferrable skills relevant across multiple industries. In this way, they are well suited to entrepreneurial ventures.

Skills Gaps

The development of technology and the increasing complexity of contemporary live performance production have led to greater requirements in terms of organising and managing the process (2017, 34). In line with this, local discussions indicate a need for greater specialist technical skills in theatrical lighting, vision and sound operations, as well as specialised software programs including Computer Aided Design (CAD) skills, knowledge in workplace health and safety legislation, risk assessment and management practices.

Although Stage Managers become highly skilled logistical experts over the course of their career, there is a need for a more structured development of soft skills as part of their vocational education and training, particularly around communication, problem solving, conflict resolution and leadership. Base knowledge in first aid, psychology and mental health intervention training are also critical to what is often a highly stressful role, exacerbated by the need to manage behaviours, conflict and misconduct in light of the current #MeToo discussions.

Education

In Western Australia, a 3-year Bachelor qualification underpins a combination of technical and operational skills. The first and second years are comprised of the vocational education and training qualifications: Diploma of Live Production and Technical Services and Advanced Diploma of Live Production and Management Services. The course, delivered at Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, incorporates many practical opportunities for stage management, including an industry secondment in the final year of study, providing students with both industry exposure and work potential. Independent productions through initiatives such as The Blue Room and festivals provide emerging stage managers subsequent opportunities for industry-centric skills development, exposure and networking.

The Diploma of Live Production and Technical Services and the Advanced Diploma of Live Production and Management Services are scheduled to be reviewed by the Cultural and Related Industries Industry Reference Committee in 2019/2020. This nationally driven review should include the revision of the specialised technical, software and soft skills critical to effective stage management.

Recommendations

Industry stakeholders have noted that a broader proliferation of companies in the performing arts sector, together with additional opportunities for more production performances in venues outside those managed by the Perth Theatre Trust could enable greater career development for local Stage Managers. A growth in the sector may also enable greater organisational capacity to increase professional development opportunities and support longer term contracts and residential ongoing positions, providing more financial stability and access to organisational benefits.

The inherent nature of the role and shifting personal priorities means stage management can only be sustainable for a short period (2017, 82). However, mentoring and greater organisational and peer support could shoulder some of the job-related stresses, enhance collegiality and provide the social, emotional and practical support to increase professional retention. Greater investment is needed in freelance Stage Managers to increase engagement and mitigate career exits in response to the intrinsic nature of demanding working conditions. Providing flexibility in employment arrangements, backing opportunities to take on multiple jobs and exploring strategies to enable work-life balance can address some of the issues causing early career exits. Improved retention of Stage Managers will have an impact on professional standards and support WA's capacity to deliver a world-class cultural offer.

Equally important are the establishment of professional pathways and support for career transitions. Although potentially problematic for organisations wishing to maintain their skilled Stage Managers, active organisational support in career development and planning also has the potential to elongate careers in stage management. The result may mean eventual redeployment into alternative roles within the sector, however, the benefit of retaining the skills along with the intellectual and organisational knowledge can benefit the organisation, the industry and the individual.

Similarly, tertiary training needs to move beyond skills acquisition for the initial occupational choice and incorporate career-management capabilities in curriculum design to equip students to adapt and evolve across their working life (2017, 94).

References

O'Neill, C (2017) *Exit Stage Left: Mid-career transitions of female stage managers in Australia*, Master's thesis, Queensland University of Technology