

Standing in the Dark: A Podcast of Ten Stage Managers and Their Stories

Rachel Anne Zucker

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Most professional shows succeed by the work of people who will almost never be acknowledged with a headshot or *New York Times* review; stage managers work in the dark to bring the people around them into the light. One would think these managers, who are a backbone of the theatre industry, would have a rich written and/or aural history devoted to their work but unfortunately very little documentation exists about theatrical stage managers. There is no centralized location to find out information about current and past stage managers. Sure, interviews and articles are sprinkled all over the web and in print, but there is no through-line history of those who identify their careers as “professional stage manager.” There is not enough stake in the theatrical ground when it comes to creating and maintaining stage management records. All of this and more inspired the podcast series: *Standing in the Dark*. By recording conversations with ten major players in stage management, this thesis is a way to begin to ameliorate the lack of information kept on stage managers during their lifetimes. Not only is *Standing in the Dark* a collection of living histories but also their stories, contributions, and legacies preserved in their own words.

What happens when an industry doesn’t have a centralized history of the people who worked in it the years before? The same mistakes are made, forward momentum cannot happen fast or easily, and people can get disheartened with their career. Stage management is a fast-paced, ever-changing vocation, but there is no dedicated history within the theatrical industry or even stage managers’ own representative union: Actors’ Equity Association (AEA). AEA doesn’t have a page for the history of stage management, or even an easy way to communicate and network with other stage managers in the union – it openly appears from the outside to only represent actors, which is truly not the case. Outside of Actors’ Equity Association, stage managers are also eligible to be a part of the Stage Managers’ Association (SMA). The SMA

was founded in 1982 in New York City. Much like this thesis topic, the SMA “exists to Recognize, Promote, Educate, and Advocate For – members working as stage managers in the United States” (www.stagemanagers.org). The SMA provides new stage managers with resources to shadow professionals, as well as job listings, networking events, events, committees, and mentoring programs across the US. The SMA is the leading organization in recognizing the legacies of theatrical stage managers around the Country, and every year, gives out the Del Hughes Award, “Considered the crowning achievement in a stage manager's career, the Del Hughes Award is awarded to those who represent the finest qualities of Stage Management: patience, diplomacy, organization, and a sense of humor.”

Other awards for stage management are few and far between and come in the form of lifetime achievement/excellence in the theater. Peter Lawrence is the only stage manager with a Tony Award (Tony Honor for Excellence in the Theatre) and Buzz Cohen the only stage manager with an Obie Award (unique Obie Award for Distinguished Stage Management.) Any stage manager will tell you they do not do their work to get recognized, but when it occurs, they are extremely grateful. Without a centralized place in the history of theatre, we often see an erasing of stage management as a legitimate job and neglect of those people who do decide to make this intense work their life. This kind of erasure means the diversity that needs to be incorporated – both in the sense of gender and racial diversity – cannot happen quickly if at all; incoming managers need a history to look back at so they can drive fearlessly forward without fear of failing their predecessors.

However, through creating *Standing in the Dark*, it is made known that failure in the line of duty is more important than success in most cases since stage managers learn by doing and work off the idea that when something does not go as planned/hoped for the first time, try it

again. As Bess Glorioso says, “Dream, believe, achieve, never let anyone tell you you can’t do it.” Not only is actual failure important, but failure of the system and knowing how to work with people with wildly different views comes in handy in this business as well. Sexism, and in some cases homophobia and other forms of discrimination, is still an issue in theatres around the country and in New York. Bonnie Panson asked if the idea of sexism/other discrimination was still a widely discussed topic and something that younger female stage managers wanted to know about – the answer being an emphatic “yes!” The female stage managers interviewed for *Standing in the Dark* are some of the most fiercely loyal, incredible women; most of the directors, stagehands, and actors they have worked with would definitely corroborate this if asked, because these are women who have taken on a patriarchal industry and assumed leadership roles among people who sometimes do not want that to be the case.

This project – albeit rewarding – posed many challenges to both the interviewer and the people who were interviewed, the biggest being time. Most of the stage managers who were interviewed are working professionals, which made meeting twice – once for note-taking and conversation, and then again to record the podcast episode off the transcript created during the first session – was difficult to schedule without impeding on their necessary down time. However, scheduling woes gave way to great meetings at coffee shops, academic buildings, and backstage offices in Broadway theatres. These non-traditional meeting locations made conversation flow more easily, and more was brought to light about the lives and personalities of people who have been professors and mentors than could have been hoped for.

As you will hear, discussions about childhood, early career dreams, how parents reacted to their child becoming a thespian, survival jobs, big breaks, advice for newbies to the industry, where they see the future of stage management in coming years, and other questions were

broached throughout these recordings. For example: Buzz Cohen, who is a dear friend as well as a mentor, was adamant that being true to who you are/what kind of art you like when accepting jobs is very important. This is a pretty specific “Buzz-ism”, since she is about as close as one can get to being the resident stage manager of the Public Theater. Most people (sans those who are residents) don’t have the luxury to pick and choose productions to work on because of the free-lance nature of our profession, but Buzz – as with many other stage managers – was very clear that we all have to love what we are doing or the job means nothing.

While evaluating the transcripts of each podcast episode of *Standing in the Dark*, a main point that stuck out was that there is no one way to stage-manage. Some managers are more artistic, some are more logical; depending on who the director is or producers are, a stage manager might have a smaller or bigger role in the overall creative process. Everyone’s paperwork and style is like their personal fingerprint: each is unique to the person creating it – a stage management “brand,” so to speak. In addition to paperwork, a stage manager’s personality is part of their brand since this profession is extremely personality based. Mentors, who are a huge part of stage management training, are apt to pick and choose mentees based on the first minute of an interview or conversation solely based on personality. Mentors are the single most important resources we have – everyone learned most of what they know from someone else down the line. After all, stage management is a collaborative art form and profession. Have a listen for yourself:

Standing in the Dark: A Weekly Podcast Series Interviewing Stage Managers On Broadway, Off Broadway, and in Regional Theaters

1. **Bonnie Panson**: current Production Stage Manager of *Anastasia* on Broadway

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/17ahzqyo7584unr/1%20-%20Bonnie%20Panson.mp3?dl=0>

2. **James Latus**: current Production Stage Manager of *Indecent* on Broadway

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/h3p6w37i83xp0zx/2%20-%20James%20Latus.mp3?dl=0>

3. **Joseph Drummond**: past Resident Production Stage Manager of the Goodman Theater in Chicago for 42 Seasons

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/f3vppuyyuusgx0b/3%20-%20Joseph%20Drummond.mp3?dl=0>

4. **Bess Marie Glorioso**: current Production Stage Manager of *The Price* on Broadway

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ysrtuhd0by1h7ae/4%20-%20Bess%20Marie%20Glorioso.mp3?dl=0>

5. **Ira Mont**: current Production Stage Manager of *Cats* on Broadway

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/8kbosnwmtxf6olc/5%20-%20Ira%20Mont.mp3?dl=0>

6. **Peter Lawrence**: (the only) Tony Award Winning Stage Manager

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/u0hhez2m09vykm4/6%20-%20Peter%20Lawrence.mp3?dl=0>

7. **Jerry Adler**: Past Production Stage Manager, circa 1950's – 1980's

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/hjlmevzqjsp9w16/7%20-%20Jerry%20Adler.mp3?dl=0>

8. **Marybeth Abel**: current Production Stage Manager of *Wicked* on Broadway

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/cyn5sxgjnde23tg/8%20-%20Marybeth%20Abel.mp3?dl=0>

9. **Michael J. Passaro**: current Production Stage Manager of *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* on Broadway

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/fj8tmbm0cayf5u/9%20-%20Michael%20J.%20Passaro.mp3?dl=0>

10. **Buzz Cohen**: current Production Stage Manager of *Julius Caesar* for Shakespeare in the Park @ the Delacorte Theater in NYC

Link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/pq95s9chs9jusbe/10%20-%20Buzz%20Cohen.mp3?dl=0>

Link to all Ten Recordings:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/mhs3swuzxzbmq6/AAAPt9sbSoJMMoVmt7NBRLb1a?dl=0>

All recordings edited by: John Salutz (<https://www.johnsalutzdesigns.com/>)

These ten humans were chosen to be a part of this project because they have had a significant impact on the current world of theatrical stage management. The voices of past generations and those who have been working as theatrical stage managers for decades are vital to the development of younger stage managers who might not know what they are doing beyond creating schedules and reading lines for actors. Stage management is complex and in certain ways as limitless and indefinable as acting, while being just as vital and important as what the people onstage are doing.

In just the past few decades, stage management has changed on a micro level due to the advancements in technology. How one person may have stage managed back in the 1980s is not how one would stage manage in 2017 and not necessarily how one will stage manage twenty years from now. It is essential to know and track these changes in methodology to better educate the next generation. The work in obtaining generational voices and opinions starts here and now. If “Inside the Actors Studio” can exist and a lifetime legacy project for actors and dancers funded by both AEA and The Actor’s Fund, a legacy project for stage managers in which we hear about their lives, careers, and contributions to the theatrical world can and should exist; *Standing in the Dark* is just the beginning.

The Stage Management Association has a part of their mission that is dedicated to the keeping of documentation and history of stage managers – so much so that they have sponsored *Standing in the Dark* and are partnering with this series to incorporate it into their ongoing legacy archives. They are creating a page on their website that will feature these recordings so that they can be listened to by the public both in and out of the industry. Michael J. Passaro, the head of the stage management program at Columbia University, also wants to link the recordings to Columbia’s SM Facebook page. The hope and dream would be to turn this series into a podcast series on iTunes and have episodes be sponsored by other theatrical institutions, including but not limited to theaters, schools, and potentially AEA.

Even with this project, there were many people who were not interviewed because of time restraints but who were recommended by their colleagues as stage managers who need to be recorded in the future. Some names that were given as industry leaders included Steve Zweigbaum, Diane Di Vita, Lisa Dawn Cave, Roy Harris, Annie Keefe, Peter von Mayrhauser, Mary Klinger, among many other worthy managers. *Standing in the Dark* should be an ongoing

series in collecting the legacies and stories of stage managers all over the country and should encompass all generations while continuing through the decades so there is a streamlined history of stage management. *Standing in the Dark* is just a small link in the ongoing chain of what needs to be done when it comes to the documentation of stage management – these ten recordings are by no means the sum total representation of all the voices of this generation, but this podcast series is laying the groundwork to start filling the information void in theatrical history where stage management proudly thrives.