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Influences on contemporary rehearsal practices in educational settings

ABSTRACT

The processes of rehearsal for a production are often shrouded in mystery and has been described as: “making a public display of what is most private and intimate about being human” (Perry 2001: 27). Rehearsals are an integral component of every production, be it large or small, be it destined for an open run on Broadway or a one off performance by a local school or community group. Professional stage managers often have the benefit of either tertiary training or years of mentorship, while in educational settings the role often falls upon an organised individual with an interest in the processes of theatre making. This article briefly touches upon several of the key the influences of the stage manager’s processes which are examined through two very different popular theatre productions within two different types of educational settings: a primary school (Bugsy Malone); and a tertiary training institution (A Midsummer Night’s Dream).

KEYWORDS

Stage management, rehearsal practices, education

INTRODUCTION

When an audience is watching a performance, with the actors delivering their lines and the technical crew running their cues, little thought is given to the praxis and influences on the processes that these creative artists have undertaken to present the work which is - at that moment - on stage. This collaboration does not take place in isolation from the commercial and political worlds in which we live. These real world influences are

external to the text yet do impact, to various degrees, the creative journey that has taken place prior to the realisation of a text as a piece of popular entertainment designed for an audience to enjoy.

The stage management team contribute much more to a production than just their organisational skills and management ability. Within the creative context of a rehearsal period, they contribute in many unseen ways that are rarely documented. When these rehearsals are examined, it is often from the viewpoint of a director or independent practitioner observing the action but nonetheless removed from the process. This article examines and analyses, albeit briefly, some of the external factors that may influence a rehearsal process focusing on the technical management elements that the stage managers experience. The author was involved in the popular children's production *Bugsy Malone* (performed at Sydney Grammar), which forms the basis for this investigation and reviewed the artefacts created as part of this production as well as the documentation created for the National Institute of Dramatic Art's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for consistency in findings across two different contemporary educational settings. The discussion and application of the influences discovered in the study is necessarily short to demonstrate the breadth of the stage manager's praxis within the two productions examined and the application of this knowledge to a broader audience, all the while considering the limited space available to express the complexities of the research within this article.

BACKGROUND

Rehearsals are an integral component of every production, be it large or small, be it destined for an open run on Broadway or a one-off performance by a local school or community group. Rehearsal processes generally relate to three groups of people: the acting company; the director; and the stage manager. It is the stage manager and director who collaboratively run the rehearsals and manage these processes and the factors that influence them with the goal of preparing the production for a public performance. Rehearsal practices are well documented by a number of directors such as Michael Bloom (1997) and Katie Mitchell (2009) or authors discussing the directors' processes

and practices such as David Selbourne (1983), Russell Fewster (2001), and Shomit Mitter (2002).¹

Rehearsing a production has been described as: ‘making a public display of what is most private and intimate about being human’ (Perry 2001: 27). Thus, it is not surprising that the literature documenting this very private practice that can involve the examination of sensitive and emotional issues such as ‘fitting in with a group’ in *Busy Malone* or new romance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in preparation for a production is limited. The stage manager’s rehearsal practices are often discussed in terms of a set of procedures and behaviours, wherein some texts examine the practices, few touch on the influences of this private and intimate activity. Stage management texts predominantly focus on the ‘how to’ of the rehearsal phase with an emphasis on the role in relation to preparation for rehearsal, the rehearsal period, transfer to the theatre, run of the production and close of the show.² The most recent texts add considerable information on health and safety in the theatre industry (Maccoy 2004). This process-driven approach is, consciously or not, often reinforced by the constant inclusion of template forms.³ This may be to encourage efficiency and organisation in the role and simultaneously reinforce the inference that the processes are the same, show to show. This approach might be useful in some circumstances, however it fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of each production and the different working methods each director brings to the process which brings us back to the question of what are the influences that can affect a rehearsal process from the stage manager’s perspective?

SETTING THE SCENE

This analysis of influences on contemporary rehearsal practices is based on a number of typical stage management artefacts⁴ contained within the production folder and prompt copy for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed in July of 2009 at the National Institute

¹ Gay McAuley more fully engages with other investigations into rehearsal practices in her 2006 paper *The emerging field of rehearsal studies*.

² Such as Kelly (1999) Schneider (1997) or (Copley & Killner (2001).

³ Barbara Dilker authored a whole book dedicated to forms, aptly titled “*Stage management forms and formats: a collection of over 100 forms ready to use*” (1982).

⁴ The artefacts generated during the rehearsal processes from these productions are typical of the industry: call sheets; properties lists; rehearsal reports; running plots; sourcing sheets; and the like, which briefly and concisely disseminate information around the company.

of Dramatic Art and Sydney Grammar School's lighting and technical management documentation folder for *Bugsy Malone* performed in September 2010.

Perhaps best known by its acronym NIDA, the National Institute of Dramatic Art has long been considered the 'the elite Australian educational institute for the dramatic arts' (The National Institute of Dramatic Art 2008: 2). Students at NIDA work as part of repertory company. Within the context of an educational setting, NIDA aims to replicate a professional state-subsidised theatre company as much as possible. Students are given considerable autonomy in their assigned roles and are supported and mentored by specialist staff.

Sydney Grammar School is an independent non-denominational school for boys founded in 1854. The annual production at the St Ives campus takes place in the school's hall. Acting roles are filled by audition, while technical roles are allocated to interested senior boys. In addition to the existing teaching staff, technical specialists from the wider entertainment industry are used to fill, or to supervise, the production roles.

THE INFLUENCES

A rehearsal process is 'a creative period when a director works with [their] company to establish the precise form the finished production will take' (Winslow 1991: 78). Rehearsals, as we now know them, are a relatively modern invention in the timeline of theatre from ancient times to the present day. John Perry observes it was the actor-manager David Garrick (1717-1779) who was the first to 'rehearse new productions in detail, holding sporadic rehearsals over a number of weeks. He would also take a production back into rehearsal to polish it while it was running' (2001: 16).

Analysing the artefacts created by the two different productions, a number of factors were identified as influencing the rehearsal process leaving aside grounds well covered within the existing literature, such as blocking notation or rehearsal planning. The remaining under-represented factors were then further analysed in respect of the impact upon, as well as the importance to, the stage manager's role in the rehearsal process for the two case studies under discussion.

ABSENCES

Workplace injuries leading to absences of both the technical and acting company members are an ever present risk because '[t]heatres are dangerous places. People are working both at height and in cramped conditions' (Gardyne 2009: 170). Additional risks include 'power tools, firearms, explosives, hazardous chemicals, lifting and climbing, and experimentation' (Schneider 1997: 181) often combined with long hours and the repetitive nature of delivering the same performance night after night while maintaining a sense of spontaneity.

During a rehearsal process, it may be possible to schedule around a short-term absence, however, educational settings rarely afford the luxury of an understudy, swing or cover who can fill the role. This was the case with the two productions examined though attention to absences varied between the performing and technical perspectives. Within the documentation there was no record of any consideration of how a performance absence would be addressed by the acting company, whereas there were detailed running plots from the technical crew that would allow for a cover to fill the role.

BUDGET

Budget is possibly the single most defining influence on a rehearsal process. 'In the professional theatre, financial considerations dictate that the rehearsal period should be as short and as intensive as possible' (Gardyne 2009: 96). The conventions for a rehearsal period outlined by John Gardyne (2009) and Thomas Kelly (1999) are generally followed in Australia: no more than three or four weeks for a play, and five weeks for a musical. William Hurt observed in the *Weekend Australian* that: 'Six weeks of rehearsal [...] is a luxury' (2010: 6) and in both of the case studies addressed here, the rehearsal processes were completed in less than 160 hours (the equivalent of four full working weeks).

The budget influences the time allocated for rehearsals, as well as what properties are available and which scenic elements will be brought into the rehearsal space and when. Access to specialists such as vocal and movement coaches or firearms and special effects experts can also be impacted by the budget. Sydney Grammar, for instance, minimised the budget impact by utilising short and more intensive rehearsal sessions over a long period with the full crew only attending one full run prior to the technical rehearsal

and NIDA utilised existing staff to provide the specialist voice and movement coaches for the company

COMPANY SIZE

The size of the company may impact upon a rehearsal process in a number of ways. For example, if the rehearsal venue is small and cannot fit the full stage proportions on a floor plan, the company may never rehearse together within actual spatial parameters until they move into the theatre. Similarly, a larger company will require more time for the director to provide feedback and block moves. According to Doris Schneider in *The art and craft of stage management*, '[t]he stage manager's role in musical productions grows with the size of the staff' (1997: 166). Schneider further observes that with larger companies, there will be more people vying for not only creative input but also attention (1997: 166-167).

Additionally, the rehearsal process may become more complex when one actor plays many roles. This is often found in modern productions of Shakespeare's plays or in educational settings to balance stage time and roles for the company. In both case studies, several actors played multiple roles. Due to the size of the cast, *Bugsy Malone* was predominantly rehearsed on stage with minimal settings until the production week.

COMPANY SKILL

The skill of a company has an impact on the rehearsal process in a number of ways. Gardyne suggests two key points be considered: if the actor is taking on a difficult or challenging part, the director may require more time one on one to develop the skills or characterisation they desire for the production (2009: 31-33). Secondly, characters with specific requirements such as choreography, dialects, weapon handling, or similar specialist skills may require additional detailed rehearsals and technical calls. This can be particularly relevant in a musical or opera where 'some dancers will learn quickly, while others will require extra time' (Schneider 1997: 174).

This influence on the rehearsal process is best demonstrated in the NIDA call sheets, with the acting company attending numerous specialist calls for voice and musical

tutorials early in the rehearsal period and then hair and make-up calls were overlaid upon these as the move into the theatre began. The rehearsals for *Bugsy Malone* were scheduled in smaller blocks over a longer period to allow greater time for students to learn their roles.

COSTUMES

Productions that are utilising period costumes from before the twentieth century may require additional rehearsal time to allow for the company to change in and out of rehearsal costumes, as it can often take up to a quarter of an hour to dress. For some actors it is important to be in costume as different attire will alter both their movement and breathing in different ways, and in turn the way they play their role.

The use of rehearsal costumes can also impact other factors such as fight choreography and movement over the set. Neither of the case studies had particularly challenging costumes, however the actors still had the opportunity to utilise their performance costumes in rehearsals.

DIFFICULTY OF THE SET

Sets with elements such as bridges, steep rakes, ladders and the like require extra time for the acting company to become comfortable undertaking the business of the production. These complexities also make it harder for the stage management team to document these moves. Difficult sets are often constructed and delivered to the rehearsal-room to allow the company to become more familiar with them and lessen the shock of moving into the theatre.

With more emphasis being placed on health and safety, it is becoming increasingly important to ensure that the company are fully inducted into all the intricacies of the scenery. Time for not only this induction but also to undertake and review the risk assessment must be factored into the rehearsal schedule. The *Bugsy Malone* cast had the benefit of several full rehearsals with all the major set elements before the technical rehearsal to allow the company to adjust to the additional infrastructure.

OPENING NIGHT

The opening night is often set before the engagement of stage management by the producer whose ‘first scheduling decision [...] is the opening performance date. All other dates work forward or backwards from there’ (Marshall 1994: 2). The opening night represents a point of no return for which all the elements must be in place. Usually by opening night there have been one or more previews preceded by a transitional production period, although Arabella Powell notes a 2003 production of *Bobbi Boland* that closed after some previews before its opening night (2007: 10).

PROPERTIES

Productions with a lot of properties or difficult scene changes may also require extra rehearsal time. For instance, a play that requires a full three course meal to be consumed as part of the action will require more rehearsal for the timings and amount of food to be consumed leaving the table bare at the end of the scene, compared to the ease of rehearsing a scene in which an actor can take one bite from an apple and then leave the remains.

Properties not only require rehearsal for the actors, but also for stage management in terms of plotting their movements, the amount consumed or used in each performance and preparing cue sheets for the crew who may assist the assistant stage managers in the management of the properties (Pallin 2000: 45-46). Schneider also warns: ‘[p]rops used in musical production should be available early in rehearsal as their use must be carefully timed and coordinated with the music and movement’ (1997: 169).

SPECIALIST CALLS

This factor may be more relevant in educational settings where actors have an ongoing training requirement such as vocal, dialect or accent, movement, fight choreography or firearms handling to learn for their role, or as part of the wider training aims of the institution. Schneider suggests a need to: ‘[s]chedule plenty of time for fight rehearsals. It takes time to bring fight choreography up to tempo and then to integrate characterisation, dialogue and bystanders’ (1997: 22).

Towards the end of a rehearsal process, before moving into the theatre, a dedicated call may be held to rehearse scenic elements or special effects that have specific health and safety implications such as: flying a person; being in enclosed small spaces; lifts; or travelators. These rehearsals are not just limited to the acting company. Other calls, including publicity and wig or wardrobe fittings, need to be accommodated within the rehearsal schedule. Fittings may take place away from the rehearsal-room, while publicity calls often take place during a rehearsal (Maccoy 2004: 134-136), and 'inevitably come at the most intensive part of the rehearsal period and need sensitive handling' (Maccoy 2004: 134).

Sydney Grammar approaches specialist calls such as voice and choreography as part of a broad rehearsal enactment, emphasising the inclusive nature of the production process, while NIDA deals with these elements separately. This is not only a reflection of the development of skill level between that of young children compared with young adults, but also of the two slightly different rehearsal methodologies employed. *Bugsy Malone* was rehearsed sequentially alternating between detailed work followed by running a section, whereas the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* company intensively worked on several small sections involving the same actors, until eventually, enough sections were rehearsed for an act to be run.

TIME / SCHEDULE

The effect of time on a rehearsal process can be considered from both the practical view that time is limited and philosophical view that there never is enough time. Rehearsal time is often influenced by the type of production. A one-person monologue is unlikely to rehearse for five weeks, while a period piece by Henrik Ibsen might. Similarly, rehearsing a production based on a well-known text will take less time than working on a devised piece that is being created from a blank canvas.

The flexibility of the schedule is usually dictated by the director. Some directors will lock in the whole rehearsal period before the first read, while others will only schedule a week at a time. One of the primary goals of stage management in a rehearsal process is managing the schedule. This is recorded in the call sheets and production schedules of the productions examined for this article. The schedule for *Bugsy Malone*

was less rigid with more whole of cast calls than *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where the schedule was complicated by a large number of specialist calls. There is an interaction between the impact of time and schedule on the other influences, which have been touched on elsewhere in this article.

CONCLUSION

The influences on rehearsals come in many interrelated forms. For instance the opening night has an impact on almost everything else. It can determine how complex the set can be or how many costumes can be made. Similarly, a low budget production may only rehearse for two weeks, while a better-funded Broadway production may rehearse for much longer.

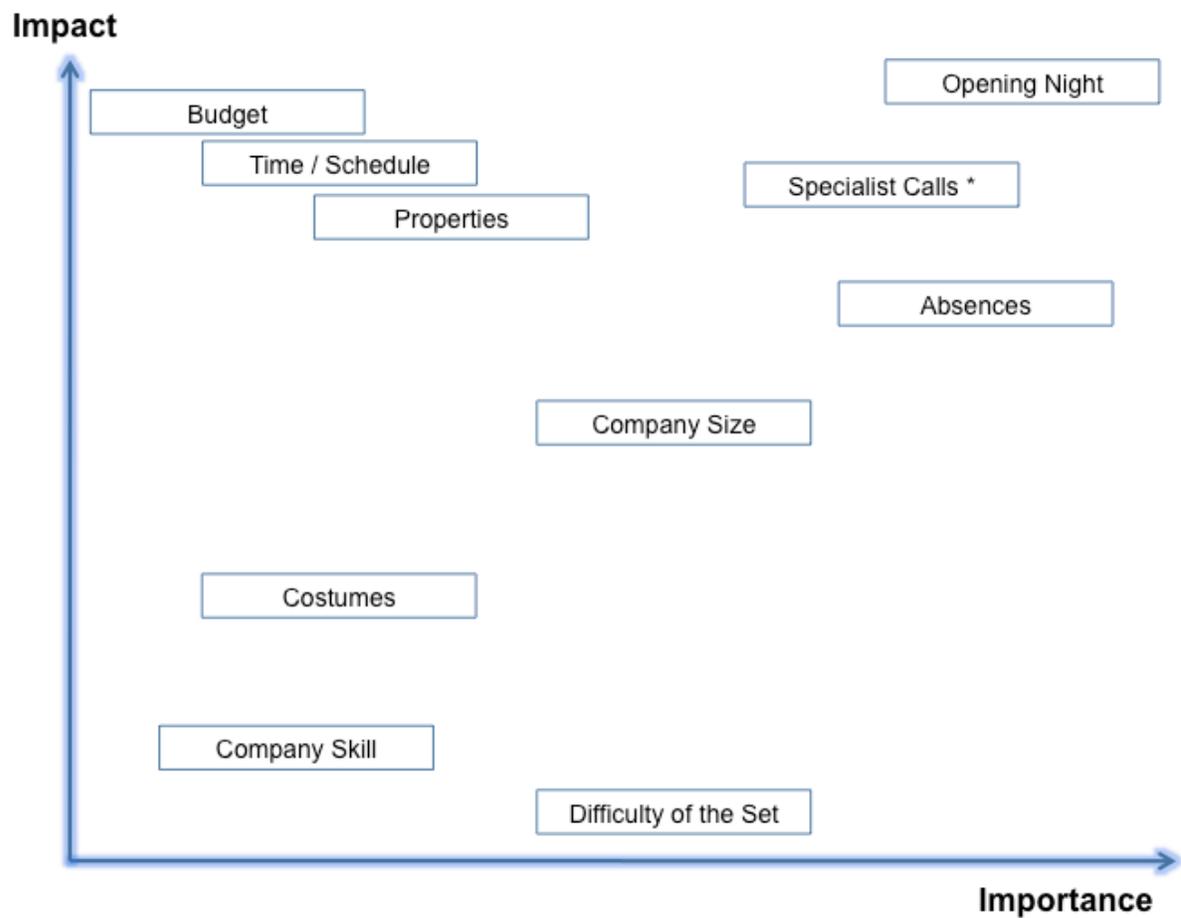


Figure 1: Influences on a rehearsal process.

It is these relationships that make the factors interesting for a researcher, both in observing them in isolation and in play with each other within contemporary practice. It is, perhaps, this challenge to be observant within an artistic context and attempt to isolate these factors that contribute to an understanding of these processes from the lesser acknowledged repertoire of the stage manager and his/her perspective. The factors discussed in this article are not a complete list, they represent a number of influences that were under-represented within the existing body of knowledge, yet played a significant part in the role of stage management for the two case studies that were analysed.

This paper has attempted to identify a list of under-represented factors that influence a rehearsal process. These were then tested against two case studies ensuring their validity within an educational setting. This article brings attention to the need for all production personnel to holistically consider the impact that seemingly minor and unrelated influences can have on a rehearsal process, especially when decisions involves one of the ten factors identified in this research.

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