

# Rehearsals

The adventure truly begins at the start of the rehearsal period. Your work organizing initial details and establishing rapport with actors and production team members will now pay off as the show comes to life. The stage manager's overarching goal is to keep everyone on the same page—facilitating discoveries in the rehearsal hall and sharing those discoveries with personnel not in attendance at the time.

## ***REHEARSAL TASKS***

- Prepare and distribute daily and weekly schedules.
- Record blocking in the prompt book.
- Help the director and actors understand specifics of the designs.
- Schedule costume fittings, dialect sessions, interviews, and other activities outside the rehearsal hall.
- Generate daily rehearsal reports.
- Update pre-production paperwork.
- Participate in production meetings.
- Begin creating paperwork for the crew.

## FIRST REHEARSAL

The first day of work on a production will be part rehearsal and part business meeting. Reading through the play is combined with imparting information about the theatre, the specific rehearsal process, and the union, if you are working on an Equity production.

The day often begins with a meet-and-greet: an opportunity for cast members to get to know one another, members of the production team, and representatives of the theatre in an informal setting. This social time is typically followed by an introduction to the production. The director will share his or her thoughts about the script and vision for the show, and members of the design team present details of their work through renderings, models, or research images.

It is common to have guests at this first rehearsal. Personnel from the marketing department often wish to meet the actors to help personalize publicity requests later in the process. Senior staff such as a theatre's artistic director might attend to welcome the company to the theatre as a whole. Outside producers may even fly in from out of town, especially for a production with aspirations to travel beyond its home theatre after this run ends.

As part of the preparations for the first day, the stage manager should find out in advance who will be in attendance and what support they will need for presenting information. This can include a table for the model, display boards for drawings, or a surface onto which to project computer images. Designers who cannot attend this first rehearsal may send information to be shared on their behalf. The SM should also make sure there is adequate space for everyone, securing additional tables and chairs for the first day if necessary. Even though the guests may not be with you every day, it is important for them to feel welcome and included today.

The stage manager distributes many of the items created during prep week to the actors today. Cast members will need a copy of the contact sheet, the character/scene breakdown, and the preliminary rehearsal calendar. Depending on the policies of your theatre, the SM may also hand out biography and emergency medical forms, details on parking, ticket policies, or general rehearsal guidelines if working in an academic theatre.

The SM will need an opportunity to review this information, collected into an actor packet, with the cast. When working on an AEA production, the stage manager can also use the time for conducting union business, including the election of a deputy and taking any necessary votes about breaks, span of day, or other work details required by your specific contract.

## **WHAT IS A DEPUTY?**

The Equity deputy is a member of the cast elected by his or her fellow actors to ensure that the union rules are followed during the production. On a weekly basis, the deputy will report details regarding hours worked, safety conditions, filming activities, and any grievances filed by or about AEA members. Some of these details will simultaneously be reported by the stage manager. The purpose of a deputy is to provide the union cast members with an avenue for sharing potential violations of union rules. The deputy will report work hours and overtime to Equity simultaneous to the theatre's reports, ensuring accuracy. The deputy also works with the stage manager to resolve those problems with or between actors, and to make sure that any safety concerns that have been raised are addressed.

On an Equity production, only union members are permitted to be in the room while discussions and elections take place. And even on a nonunion show, this actor information may be of little interest to other attendees at your first rehearsal. A thoughtful stage manager will arrange the day so that those not involved with this cast business can easily excuse themselves.

A sample first-day schedule might look like this:

1. Meet-and-Greet
2. Introductions, Director, and Designer Presentations
3. Read through Play
4. Cast Meeting
  - General Schedule
  - Theatre Callboard/Schedule Updates
  - Character/Scene Breakdown
  - Theatre Policies
  - AEA Business (if applicable)

Such a schedule allows everyone to participate in the show-related orientation without having to come and go from the room multiple times or sit through details not pertaining to their work. Specific times would be identified for each activity, and breaks would be inserted according to the director's preference or the AEA requirements.

An alternative could be placing the cast meeting after the design presentations, so that those who wish to hear the play read will have an identified time to return—using the business meeting time as a break to check in with their shops or offices, read emails, or enjoy a second cup of coffee (a rationale for having any meet-and-greet snacks set up outside the room!).

### **WHAT DO YOU LEARN FROM A READ-THROUGH?**

The stage manager can collect several key pieces of information from the first trip through the script, including a preliminary running time and the pace of individual scenes. Pace is particularly important when considered in conjunction with your character/scene breakdown. You have already started identifying scenic and costume changes, with the available time quantified in pages. Pace will tell you how long you really have—which might be more or less than you anticipated.

## TABLE WORK

Before getting the show up on its feet, it is important for the cast to understand the text. The second phase in your rehearsal process will focus on analyzing the script. This is certainly a necessity when working on Shakespeare or one of the Greeks, but even contemporary scripts benefit from this exploration of the words. If your production has a dramaturg, he or she will be present for these days to help the director and actors. The dramaturg serves as a production researcher of sorts, collecting background and source information for the company and often creating materials for the audience to help them understand the context of the show. On a new play, expect the playwright to be present.

The amount of time spent on table work will vary from show to show, depending on the wishes of your director. Some productions may devote several days to this type of exploration, while others may only schedule a brief discussion following the first read-through. The stage manager should ask about table work during the initial meetings with the director to know if this will be a part of the rehearsal process.

The stage manager's communication work during this time is about gathering information. You should make note of tricky pronunciations to pass along to understudies and to use when prompting. And if you do not have a dramaturg, you can collect questions about script references that may be posed to the production team through the rehearsal reports.

To facilitate this process, the SM team should ask about acquiring reference aids—source materials, dictionaries, or lexicons. Depending on your production situation, this might be a question for the production manager, a faculty advisor, or a staff member in the literary or education department. It is also helpful for the SM to provide additional notepads, pencils, and highlighters for the actors, so they can successfully take notes during this time.

Table work may also be the start of cataloging script changes. An unedited performance of *Hamlet* can run up to four hours. Most modern productions do not include every word penned by Shakespeare. If the original script distributed to the cast and production team did not include the cuts for your show, the stage manager will need to document the changes as a starting point for further edits to come.

The sample page of line changes for this production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, reintroduced as Figure 5.1, shows how the stage manager can share both major and minor changes. We first saw this table in Chapter 2 when exploring color and white space. Now we can examine its content. The document provides very specific references to the act, scene, page, and line being altered. Line numbers are helpful for any show in verse. A contemporary text is unlikely to have this information, so the column can be eliminated. The affected text is identified and the change specifically called out. A notes column provides a place for narrative commentary on the edit.

When identifying a change, it is important to be both specific and consistent. You might opt to categorize text that has been removed with the term *cut*, *delete*, or even *omit*. Supplemental words might be an *add* or an *insert*. Your specific choice is less important than the use of the same term throughout the document.

The line-change document will be updated several times throughout the rehearsal process. As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of color can help identify new information in subsequent versions and allow you to record all notes in a single document organized in line order.

## Twelfth Night

### Line Changes

Updated 11/18/10

Act	Scene	Page	Line(s)	Character	Action	Words	Notes
II	5	43	117–118	Fabian	CUT	Sowter will cry upon't for al this, though it be as rank as a fox	Malvolio's lines continue from "Softly, M.O.A.I" to his next speech beginning "M- Malvolio..."
II	5	43	121	Toby	CUT	The cur is excellent at faults	Line now ends with "... work it out?"
III	1	45	2	Viola	CHANGE	TABOR to MUSIC	
III	1	46	9–10	Viola	CUT	or, the church stands by thy tabor, if thy tabor stand by the church	Line now ends with "... dwell near him"
III	1	46	11–13	Feste	CUT	To see this age! A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!	Line now ends after "You have said, sir."
III	2	52	29	Andrew	CUT	I had as lief be a Brownist as a politician	Line now ends after "...for policy I hate."
III	2	53	42–43	Toby	CUT	although the sheet were big enough for the Bed of Ware in England,	Line now skips from "... lie in thy sheet of paper" to "set 'em down."
III	2	53	48	Toby	CUT	at the cubiculo	Line now reads "We'll call thee. Go."

**Figure 5.1** A page of line changes for a production of *Twelfth Night*.

If you are working on a new play, line changes may lead to replacement pages in the script. This might be a task undertaken by the SM team, the assistant director, the dramaturg, or the playwright. Before rehearsals begin, the stage manager should inquire where the responsibility for new pages lies. This ensures that once rehearsals begin, there is a plan for who will keep track of the changes, who will type the updates, how new pages will be distributed, and on what timeline. When working on a new play or musical, expect to receive changes from the playwright or the composer/lyricist. Edits on an existing work may be generated by the director or dramaturg. In most instances the stage managers will be responsible for copying and distributing the new pages.

Don't forget that you will need to transform these new pages to match the rest of your prompt script. Try to arrange to receive updates so that you have time not only to send them through the copier as-is for the actors, but also to make the size and margin adjustments for your script. In the unlikely event that someone besides stage management is handling distribution of new pages, I recommend that you handle the prompt script's specialized formatting yourself.

## MUSIC AND DANCE REHEARSALS

When working on a musical, the table-work phase is replaced or reduced by dedicated time for learning music and choreography. The stage manager can take advantage of this time to take dance blocking in smaller chunks and to become familiar with the score.

Not every stage manager has a background as a musician, but the music rehearsals give you a chance to pick up key details that will help you throughout rehearsals and performances. The SM can follow along to improve his or her own ability to read music. The musical director will often point out useful clues to help the singers find their notes and rhythm. These same clues can help you as well. Figures 5.2A and 5.2B introduce you to the essential information contained on a page of the score.

The stage manager can also take this time to transfer details such as rehearsal numbers from the score into the libretto. If you are primarily working from the libretto, having rehearsal numbers will allow you to communicate more effectively with the music personnel by speaking in their vernacular. During a subsequent rehearsal, the director might want to review the staging for the end of a song. Rather than providing a lyric or trying to hum a musical phrase, the SM with rehearsal numbers can ask the pianist to “start at bar 47.”

## BLOCKING

Once the cast has an understanding of the words on the page, it is time to put the show up on its feet. Blocking is a crucially important phase of the process. Defining the physical shape of

the show will provide answers to many pre-rehearsal queries, and also generate new questions on a daily basis.

Blocking is defined as the movement of the actors on, off, and around the stage—interacting with one another and the elements of the set. The stage manager documents this movement in detail, noting both what happens and when it occurs.

## PREPARING THE REHEARSAL ROOM

In both professional and academic settings, the rehearsal period typically overlaps with scenic construction. The actors work either in a separate room or, in some cases, in the theatre during non-build hours. In order to make this time productive, the stage manager communicates the details of the set by reproducing the groundplan on the floor of the rehearsal hall with special cloth spike tape and acquiring rehearsal furniture pieces. In conjunction with the model or renderings of the set posted in the room, this will help the actors and directors to understand the end product.

(A cautionary note: Never opt for masking tape, painters tape, or something else simply because it is less expensive. Painters tape is meant to peel off surfaces easily, so it will not withstand actors walking back and forth across it for very long. Masking tape may pass the traffic test, but it will prove exceptionally difficult to remove later and almost always leaves a very unwelcome residue on the floor.)

The SM will need to consider the size and setup of the rehearsal room when determining the best spot for taping out the set. Within the context of the director's preferences (learned during that early meeting during pre-production week), consider the following:

- 1. Side-to-side location.** Ideally you will have enough room to tape out the entire set and still have room on both sides for actor entrances, prop tables, and furniture storage. If your room is not wide enough, think about how to position offstage items to lessen their visual presence while the director is watching the actors.
- 2. Front-to-back location.** Downstage of the groundplan, you will need to set up tables for the director and SM team as well as chairs for others. If possible, you also want some empty space between the downstage edge of the tape and those tables and chairs so it doesn't feel like you are sitting on the set. The SM also strives to place the groundplan so that there is room upstage of it for actors to cross from stage right to stage left.
- 3. Doors.** Doors are least distracting when located behind the director and SM so that actors entering the room aren't instantly "onstage."
- 4. Architecture.** Do you have columns, air vents, or other structural room elements? You cannot move these items, so think about how they can be the least impactful—even if that means placing the groundplan slightly off-center in the room.

No room is perfect! Focus on minimizing obstacles and maximizing the working space. If your room is not wide enough, can you utilize the front corners of the room for the prop tables? If the room is not deep enough, take a look at your set. Is there space between the back of the set

## NAVIGATING THE SCORE

Whether or not the stage manager knows how to play music, he or she can learn a great deal about how a song will sound by looking for clues in the score. On the opposite page is an excerpt from the Piano/Conductor score for the song “Look at the Sky” from the musical *Urinetown*. Follow the numbers to discover how much information is available.

### OVERALL PAGE STRUCTURE

A sheet of music contains one or more groups of five-line staves known as a **SYSTEM (1)**. The system contains the **vocal parts (1A)**, the **orchestra parts (1B)**, and the **piano parts (1C)** that are played or sung simultaneously. If more than one person is singing, there will be multiple vocal staves. A complex song might have so many individual staves to include that only one system fits on a page.

Each staff is divided into **MEASURES (1D)**. The construction of each measure is determined by the **TIME SIGNATURE (3)** printed at the beginning of the song. Our sample is page three of the song, but on page one we would find two numbers: 4/4. This tells us there are four beats in each measure and that a quarter note gets one beat. With this information we know how to count the music. The word “sky” will be held for 4 beats.

Measure numbers that appear in boxes are called **REHEARSAL NUMBERS (1E)**. These indicators represent parts of the song where the music changes-- speeding up or slowing down, adding instruments or singers, or changing from accompaniment to underscoring, for example.

We can even find messages from the composer. **V. S. (1F)** stands for *volti subito*-- turn the page quickly!

### WHO IS PLAYING

The score outlines which instruments play at which time. At the top of the page, the **clarinet and trombone (5A)** and the **bass (5B)** play with the piano. At measure 25, the **drums** join in (5C). The percussionist will play a *sustained roll on the cymbals* at measure 27 (5D). This helps the SM follow along by knowing what to listen for.

### PITCH

The **KEY SIGNATURE (2)** tells the musicians whether notes should be played higher or lower than their normal value. The key can change throughout a song. At the beginning of the page we are in the key of *B flat major*. After measure 30, the song changes (2A) to *B major*. The SM can look for key signatures and recognize when the quality of the song will change, even if you do not know how to read the specific notation.

### PACE

The speed of a piece of music is its **TEMPO**. Like the key, it can change throughout a song. As this page begins, the song returns to the original pace indicated by the notation *Tempo 1* (4).

### VOLUME

Clues about how loud or soft to play can be found in the **DYNAMIC MARKINGS**. (6A) *Mezzo piano (mp)* indicates this section is “medium soft.” (6C) *Forte (f)* is “loud.” Volume can gradually get louder with a *crescendo* (6B), or softer with a *decrescendo* (6D). Absent this kind of notation, the change would be instant.

### WORDS VERSUS NOTES

When dialogue occurs during a song, the **lines (7)** will be printed above the vocal staff. The fact that these words are spoken rather than sung is reinforced by the fact that instead of notes, the vocal line contains only (7A) **rests**. These particular rests are *whole rests*, which last an entire measure each.



3. LOOK AT THE SKY

1A → 19 P/C 2 Tempo I 3 4 22 ID

1B → Cl, Tbn p 5A

1C → mp 6A

1C → w/Bs 5B

23 24 25 26 6D 6C → f 6B → cresc. 5C → +Drs mp 3

7 → 27 1E → PENNY: Now, who's first? JOSEPHINE: I am! BOBBY: Ma! PENNY: We'll take your fee now, Mrs. Strong. 28 29 30 2A

7A

+Sus Cym roll 5D

V.S. → 1F

-113-

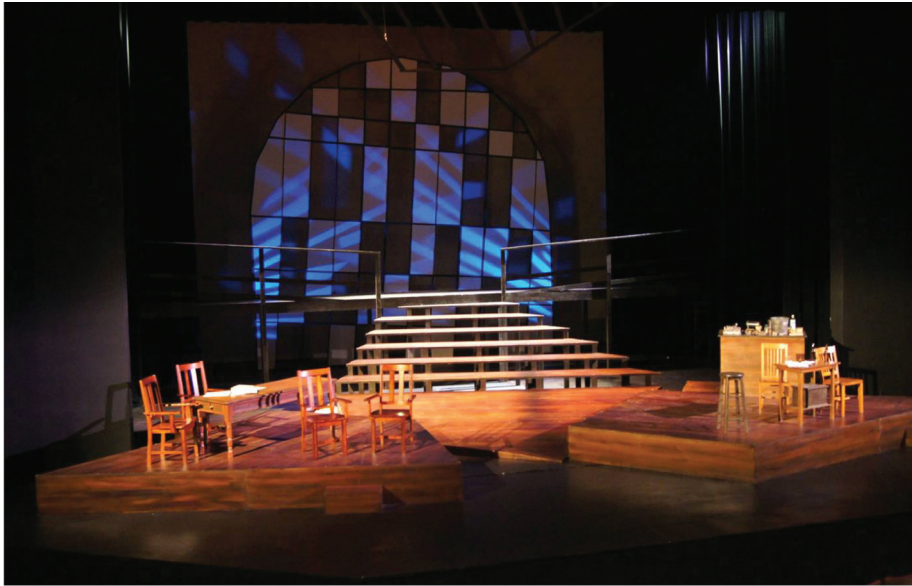
Figures 5.2B

and an upstage curtain or cyclorama? If it is not an acting area, consider reducing this space to get adequate real estate at the front of the room. If you have multiple obstacles and may need to eliminate part of the set when taping it out, talk with the director after looking at the room so you can agree on a compromise.

One way to facilitate this conversation is to provide visual support. Get a piece of acetate or clear plastic and draw the outline of the rehearsal room on it (in the same scale as the groundplan), marking doors, columns, and other structural elements. Then you can slide the clear outline over the groundplan to find the most functional layout for the room. If you work regularly for the same theatre, you can save the acetate for future productions. What works for one show may not work for the next.

### *Measuring the Groundplan*

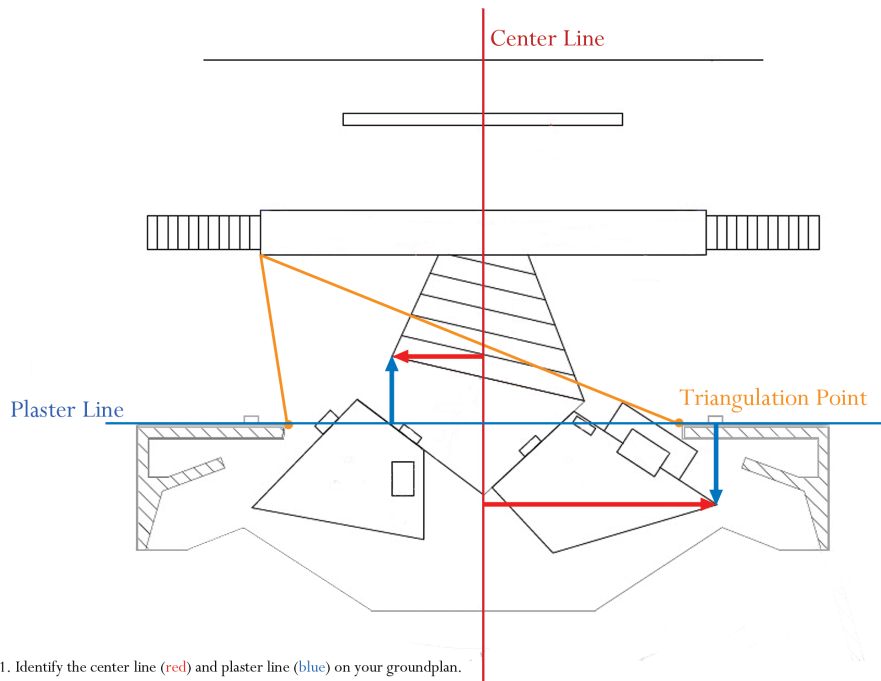
In order to tape the groundplan onto the rehearsal room floor, the SM team takes specific measurements of the size and location of scenic elements. The stage manager begins by locating the **center line**—the imaginary line running upstage to downstage in the center of the theatre—and the **plaster line**—the imaginary line running stage right to stage left on the upstage side of the proscenium arch. Using these two lines as X and Y coordinate axes, the team can find the distance from the axes to the corners of platforms or edges of walls. Once measured, the SM team can plot these points on the floor and connect the points with tape to mark out the location of both permanent and moving units.



**Figure 5.3** The set for *The Farnsworth Invention* at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. Scenic design by Mandy Kolbe.

Figure 5.3 is a full-stage image of a production of *The Farnsworth Invention* by Aaron Sorkin. The set consisted of a series of steps and platforms, which remained on stage for the entire show. Tables, chairs, and other furniture pieces moved throughout the play to indicate a variety of locations.

Translating this design onto a rehearsal room floor would focus on noting the size and location of the permanent pieces along with the front edge of the stage, which defines the downstage area. The director could block scenes on individual platforms by staying within the taped lines. It is not important to the process that ultimately the actors would be raised above the stage floor. Figure 5.4 shows you how to tape out those important scenic elements.



1. Identify the center line (red) and plaster line (blue) on your groundplan.
2. Measure the end points of each scenic unit in relation to those lines (ie: how far upstage or downstage of the plaster line, how far left or right of center).
3. Write down those coordinate measurements.
4. Lay down two tape measures at the center line-- with zero of each on the plaster line. This allows you to measure either upstage or downstage of the plaster line without extra math.
5. Locate the up/down coordinate measurement from the groundplan on your center line tape.
6. Use a third tape measure to locate the coordinate measurement left or right of the center tape.
7. Place a dot to represent that point.
8. Repeat for all necessary points, then connect the dots.

**Figure 5.4** Measuring the groundplan for *The Farnsworth Invention*.

For this production, the specific location of individual furniture pieces on the platforms was left up to the director, making it impossible to tape them out in advance. But that tape would not really be helpful. The actors need actual tables and chairs in order to rehearse. A rectangle the size of a desk would not encourage use of the desk or any props placed on it, or allow the director to stage the transitions to move it around the stage. As the director sets furniture placement, the ASMs can mark the locations on the rehearsal room floor with the same spike tape. Should the actual tables and desks become available later on, the spikes can be adjusted to the size of the new pieces. The SM team can then measure the location of those spikes by the same method used to recreate the groundplan and transfer them to the finished set, so the furniture ends up in the same spots.

The large set of stairs would present a challenge. Obviously no one will build you a set of temporary stairs in your rehearsal hall, so the tape will have to suffice. But the stage manager can facilitate some interaction. If the director asks an actor to sit on a step, the SM team can place a chair or cube in that location. This way, even though the actor may not be literally walking up stairs when crossing upstage, he or she can still find the physicality of a speech delivered while sitting down.

### *Triangulation*

When your set is placed in a proscenium theatre in an unconventional way, or when working in a thrust or arena theatre such as the one seen in Figure 5.5, you may be unable to utilize center and plaster lines for measurement references. An alternative method for measuring the groundplan is known as triangulation.

In triangulation, the stage manager takes measurements based on two fixed points. Rather than the X and Y lengths, points on the set can be located by the distance from those points. You still have two reference measurements. The orange dots in Figure 5.4 represent potential triangulation points. To find the downstage right corner of the back walkway, tape measures are affixed at each point and then extended to the spot on the set, as indicated by the orange lines. Each line is a distinct, measurable length, which can be translated to the rehearsal room floor. There will be only one point at which tape measures extended to those measured lengths cross—that is the location of that corner.

One important difference is that with the XY method, the tape measures (especially the ones running along your center line) stay fixed and can be taped to the rehearsal room floor. Because the triangulation tapes will rotate on their fixed points at different angles for each measurement, you are best served by placing a small tack in the floor so the tape measure can swivel, or having your ASMs hold them so you maintain the freedom of movement without having the ends pull loose.

### *The Multiple-Location Set*

By whichever method you use to recreate it on your rehearsal room floor, the groundplan for *The Farnsworth Invention* is relatively simple because it never changes. This is of course not

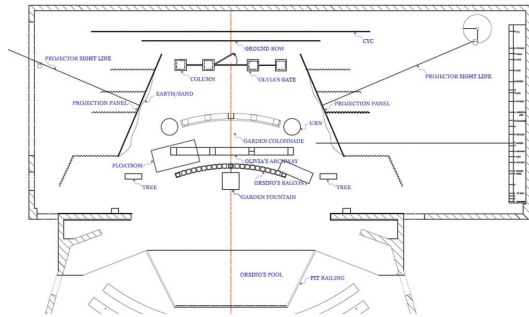


**Figure 5.5** An example of a production in a thrust space, with a stage floor most easily taped out using triangulation.

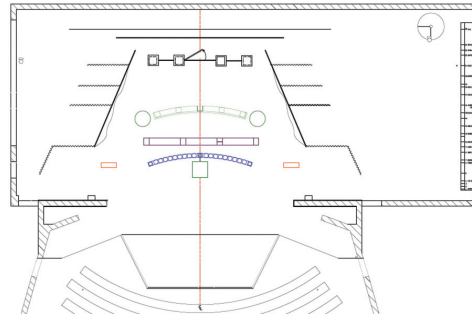
always true. When planning for a show with multiple scenic units—particularly if more than one piece plays in the same location—the stage manager should adapt the method for taping out the set. Accurate blocking and furniture placement will depend on a clear understanding of the scenery on stage at a given time.

Our second set of sample groundplans is for a production of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in the same theatre. In this instance, separate locations were defined by using specific scenic units. Some pieces, such as the main gate or trees, were used more than once, but other pieces were flown or carried in for only a single locale. Even without the labels in Figure 5.6, having all those lines on the floor at the same time has the potential to be confusing. Because the stage manager’s goal is to communicate the design clearly, the actors need a bit more help than for *The Farnsworth Invention*.

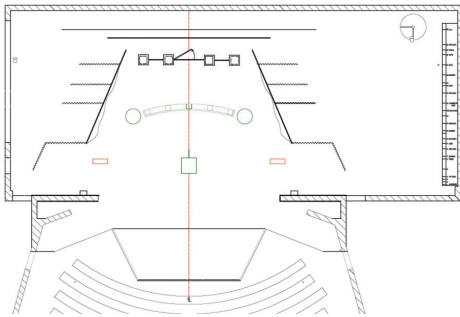
Color comes to the rescue in the same way it has done thus far in paperwork (Figure 5.7). By taping out each unit in a different color, the actors can more easily focus on only part of the detail on the floor at any given time. (If no units overlapped in use, each location, rather than each unit, could get a single color.) When working on a scene in Olivia’s garden, for example, the actors can be asked to focus on the gate and green colonnade, as seen in Figures 5.8 and 5.10. The urns and fountain could be represented with chairs or cubes, and spare music stands make excellent and easily portable trees. When moving to block a scene inside



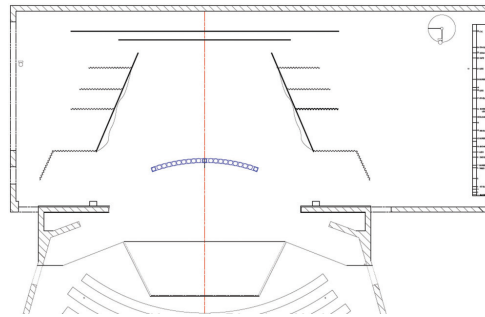
**Figure 5.6** A composite groundplan for *Twelfth Night* at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. Scenic design by Mandy Kolbe.



**Figure 5.7** The same composite without labels, but with the color used to mark out the rehearsal room floor.



**Figure 5.8** The units in use for Olivia's garden.



**Figure 5.9** The units in use on Orsino's balcony.



**Figure 5.10** A production shot of the garden.



**Figure 5.11** A production shot of the balcony.

Orsino's compound, only the blue railing found in Figures 5.9 and 5.11 is relevant. Just as was true for the tables in *The Farnsworth Invention*, the cast will need rehearsal furniture to complete the setup, further helping them to temporarily ignore the other colored lines on the floor. (Larger versions of these groundplans and other taping examples can be found on the book's companion website.)

## THE BLOCKING KEY

Because the stage manager's goal is to capture the actors' movement with as much specificity as possible, it is important to set yourself up for success before blocking rehearsals begin. To do this the SM needs to decide in advance what abbreviations to use.

These abbreviations will be collected in a blocking key—the Rosetta Stone to your prompt script. The key provides a reference for you, allowing you to be consistent with your use of symbols, but also aids others in understanding your notation. The blocking key contains several categories: areas of the stage and your specific set, actions, props, and character abbreviations. Later in this section, you will find the blocking key for *Twelfth Night* in Figures 5.18 and 5.19, detailing the collection of all of this information.

The blocking key should be kept in your prompt book at the beginning of the section containing the script. Because I like to have my key out and available while taking blocking, I keep it in a sheet protector so that repeated handling won't damage it. My key also takes two pages, and the sheet protector allows them to be kept together, back to back.

Early-career stage managers may try to write out all movement longhand, but over time you will discover that it is quicker to use a combination of words and symbols. The point of the symbols is to speed up your writing, so you want a system that actually does so.

Figure 5.12 contains the set of the blocking symbols I have developed over time. Many were originally introduced to me by mentors early in my career, and I have adapted them to suit my own style and the needs of shows I have stage managed.

The top three rows include symbols for common actions. Most are constructed on a very simple principle—the first letter of the action combined with an arrow indicating direction. Row four is a set of notations for location. These can be used to show where one actor or item is in relation to another. Again, the symbols are simple: arrows or a simple combination of dots and lines, making them easy to write and to understand.

The next few rows demonstrate an approach to noting props and furniture. These symbols are more pictorial than the actions or locations, but similarly simple in their design. You could, of course, draw a more complex lamp or stool, but the time spent on an intricate drawing would defeat the purpose of having it.

The bottom row in the chart shows how to combine symbols. The circle from the top of the lamp is joined with the table to indicate a table lamp. This allows you to distinguish between a table lamp, a standing lamp, or even a sconce (which might be that circle within a rectangle indicating a wall). Differentiating similar items is also easy. Look at the kitchen table and

ENTER En	EXIT Ex	CROSS x	STOP —	PICK UP ↑	PUT DOWN ↓
GIVE G→	TAKE ←T	LOOK L→	SIT S↓	RISE ↑R	KNEEL ↓K
JUMP ↑J	GO UPSTAIRS ↗	GO DOWNSTAIRS ↘	PUT ON P/O	TAKE OFF T/O	CORNER ⋈
UPSTAGE OF (above) ↶	DOWNSTAGE OF (below) ↷	TO (toward) →	ON TOP OF —•	UNDERNEATH —•	BETWEEN  •
TABLE π	CHAIR h	SOFA ⌊	STOOL ⊖	WINDOW 田	DOOR ⌈
LAMP ⊖	BED h	DRESSER ⌊	BOOKSHELF ⌊	TREE Y	CRADLE ⌈
ROCKER h	SUITCASE ⌈	BOOK ⌈	TENT A	TV ⌈	RADIO ⌈
KITCHEN TABLE Kπ	COFFEE TABLE Cπ	TABLE LAMP ⊖	BEDROOM CHAIR Bh	DESK ⌈	CLOCK ⌚

Figure 5.12 Blocking symbols.



coffee table. With the simple addition of a letter, the furniture pieces are distinct. Once you have found a set of symbols that work for you, it is easy to adapt them to the needs of a specific production. You might not always have a kitchen table and a coffee table, but this strategy will assist you in creating a key for any show.

The next set of decisions to make concerns abbreviations for character names. If every actor in your show plays only one role, then basing abbreviations on those names will work. Bob might be noted with a B and Arthur with an A. But if your two male characters are John and Joe, then you need more. Personally, I would abbreviate them as JN and JO, respectively. Why? Because JO will always read as Joe to me, even though *o* is also the second letter of John. And JN looks like John when I glance at it quickly.

If an actor plays two very distinct characters, it might be reasonable to use two separate character abbreviations. But for less-defined ensemble roles, you may find that abbreviations based on actor names are more successful. The blocking key for *Twelfth Night* contains all four strategies working together. Viola and Sebastian are easily identified with a single letter based on the character name. Orsino and Olivia have two character initials. The same actor played the Sea Captain and the Priest, but due to the differences between the roles and their place in the play, two separate abbreviations for the same actor worked fine. But what about the actors who play a combination of lords, sailors, and officers? When looking quickly in your script to answer a question, will you always remember that Luke plays Sailor 2? Or that Curio, Sailor 1, and Officer 2 are the same actor? For these cast members, abbreviations based on their actual names was faster—particularly since these characters spoke few lines. The director created the blocking by asking Brian or Luke to take an action, not Sailor 1 or 2, making this another example of working within the language of your production. If you find that you forget who is who when looking at the text, you can write in Luke's initials next to Curio's lines in your book.

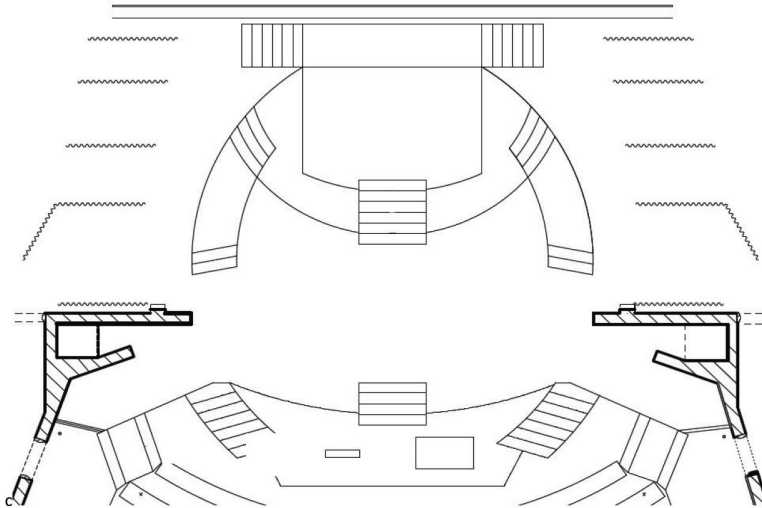
### *Naming the Set*

The final component of your blocking notation will be the elements of the set. In this instance, the terminology you use is not entirely your creation. Remember the design for *The Farnsworth Invention* with its three platforms. You might refer to them as stage right, center, and stage left; A, B, and C; or even 1, 2, and 3. During your prep work and initial meetings, the director and scenic designer inevitably discussed these items. What language did they use? That is your starting point. If the director refers to the units by their location on the stage, it will always be momentarily confusing if you answer an actor's question about where they were by referring to platform one instead of stage right.

For a more complex set, the stage manager will need additional information. Figures 5.13 and 5.14 present the groundplan for a production of *Spring Awakening*, with and without labels. Although a single, immobile unit, it contains multiple playing areas and accompanying sets of stairs. When preparing for this show, I found the prospect of numbers or letters less precise than I felt I would need when taking blocking. I looked to the use of each space for help. The platform located center stage was intended for the orchestra. Since no action would take place

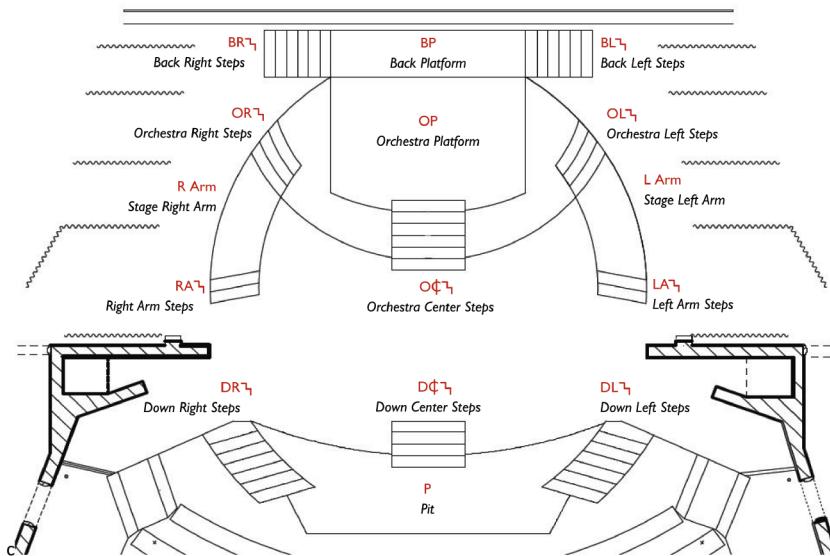
**SPRING AWAKENING**

Groundplan



**SPRING AWAKENING**

Groundplan with Scenic Nicknames



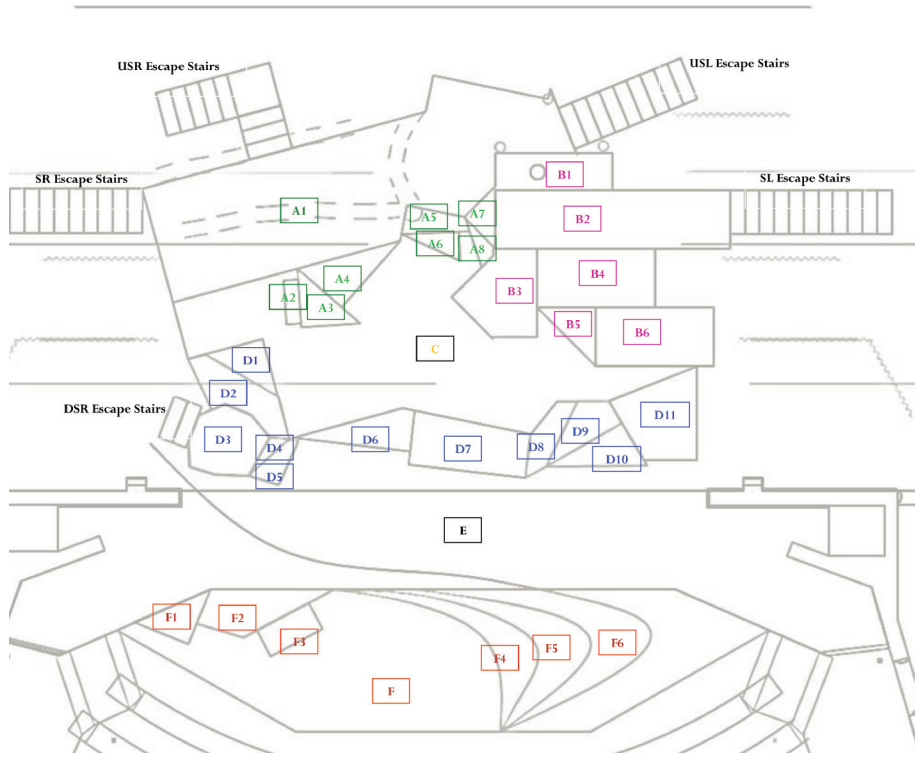
Figures 5.13 and 5.14 The groundplan for *Spring Awakening*, with and without scenic labels. Scenic Design by Mandy Kolbe.

there, the name came naturally. The director and scenic designer both referred to the farthest upstage location as the “back platform,” and hence it was named as well. The curved platforms extending out on stage right and stage left got their names quite by accident, however. When looking at the groundplan in an early design meeting, one team member commented how the overall shape of the unit reminded him of a creature from an early video game, with the curved units looking like the creature’s arms. Everyone looked, agreed, and laughed—and the names stuck. With the platforms clearly identified, I could label the many stair units in relation to those platforms and take very specific blocking notes during rehearsal. And although not pictured in this preliminary groundplan, we ended up needing two additional sets of stairs to facilitate entrances when characters came from stage right and stage left, crossing over those arms. Because the actors making those entrances were carrying chairs, and the arms sat eighteen inches from the deck, a safety concern was raised about potentially tripping during that entrance. We needed two small step units located on the offstage side of the arms, at their midpoint. I still fondly remember writing the rehearsal note to request those step units—largely due to the fact that I could contextualize this placement as “in the elbow pad position.”

A third example of naming the parts of the set can be seen in the production of *The Tempest* pictured in Figure 5.15. This scenic design provides a director and cast everything you could want out of Prospero’s island—and includes thirty-three platforms at different levels. No quirky characters reveal themselves in the groundplan, and a simple numbering of the platforms is not particularly helpful either.



**Figure 5.15** The set for *The Tempest* at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. Scenic Design by Megan Morey.



**Figure 5.16** The groundplan for *The Tempest*, with labeling system implemented by stage manager Quinn Masterson.

For this production, the stage manager worked with the scenic designer and technical director to superimpose a naming system onto the set. Despite small variations, the platforms can be grouped into six general heights from the stage floor. By starting with this subdivision, the platforms in each group could be numbered for specificity. The groundplan in Figure 5.16 shows that labeling at work. The labeled groundplan was shared with the full production team, who could then speak with precision about an individual location on the set.

The next step was to translate that into a usable form for rehearsal. The labeling system would also allow the director to give blocking notes to the cast with specific detail, but it would be impractical to ask anyone to memorize the designations—actors, the director, or the stage manager. Instead, the names were placed on the platforms themselves. (This production rehearsed on the set in the evenings rather than in a separate rehearsal room.) Each platform received two labels: one on the top, oriented so it would appear right-side up to an actor standing on the platform looking out at the audience; and one on the face, visible to the director and SM. Figure 5.17 is a close-up view of these labels on a part of the set. Both the SM and the cast could take detailed notes during the blocking period, and by the time the scene shop was



**Figure 5.17** The platform labels at work.

ready to begin covering and painting the platforms, everyone felt comfortable enough with their movement patterns for the labels to disappear.

The completed version of the blocking key contains all of these details: a decoder for your general symbol language, the abbreviations for the characters in the play, a labeled ground-plan, and any specialized symbols you may develop for the scenic units or furniture in this particular production.

## PUTTING IT TO WORK

The blocking key and numbered lines on your backing sheet allow you to work precisely, as seen in Figure 5.20. The line number is written next to the individual word on which an action takes place, and your use of both words and symbols allows you to quickly describe this action in detail. The point of this specificity is twofold. The stage manager can clearly communicate the intricacies of movement set during a previous rehearsal to forgetful actors or to understudies and also be able to place cues based on specific actions into the prompt script with great accuracy.

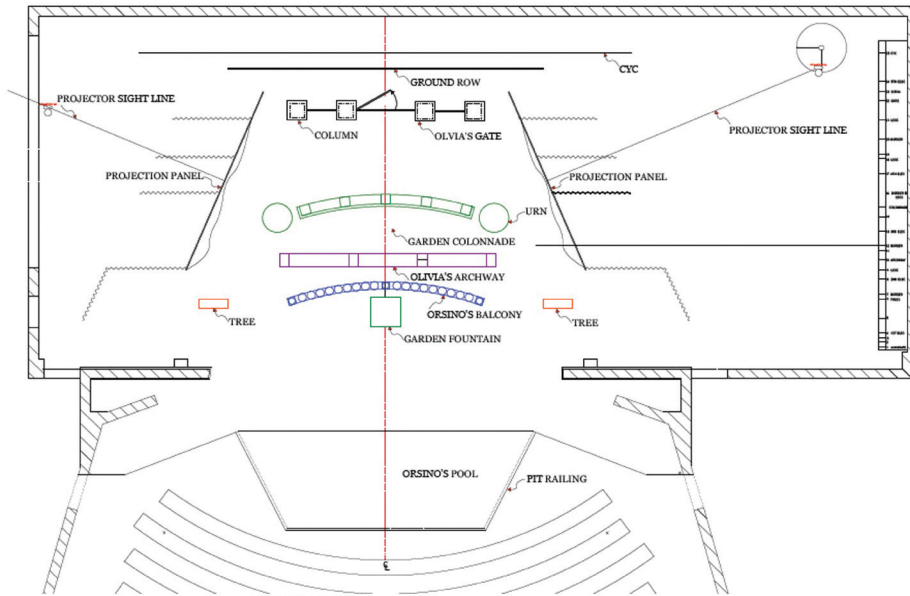
As you go through the show, you may find that some of the blocking symbols you originally planned out are unnecessary or not simple enough to draw quickly. Keep them updated on your key. Conversely, you may find yourself creating new abbreviations or symbols on the fly. Simply add them. The space on page two of the blocking key is designed to give you a place to document those additional symbols. You are unlikely to fill this section before rehearsals begin, and that is by design.

# Twelfth Night

## Blocking Key

en	Enter		OR	Orsino	
ex	Exit		S	Sebastian	
x	Cross		AN	Antonio	
→	To/Toward		V	Viola	
↪	Cross Below/In front of		OL	Olivia	
↩	Cross Above/behind		T	Sir Toby	
↑	Rise		M	Maria	
↓	Sit down		MO	Malvolio	
↕	Sit up		AA	Sir Andrew Aguecheek	
↵	Kneel		FE	Feste	
↗	Pick Up		FA	Fabian	
↘	Put Down		SC	Sea Captain (Jake Voss)	
↻	Turn		P	Priest (also Jake Voss)	
→	Give		M1	Musician 1 (Shelby)	
←	Take		M2	Musician 2 (Suzanne)	
↗	Lean		EW	Emily Ware	Attendant 1
—	Stop		LV	Lindsay Van Norman	Attendant 2
↪	Look		AH	Austin Hernandez	Valentine, Officer 1, Sailor 3
↕	Jump		LP	Luke Prescott	Curio, Sailor 1, Officer 2
↗	Go up stairs		BC	Brian Coffin	Lord1, Sailor 2, Officer 3
↘	Go down stairs		DH	Don Hart	Lord 2, Officer 4
·	On top of				
·	Underneath				
·	Between				
P/O	Put On				
T/O	Take Off				
ctr	Counter				
//	Pause in dialogue for dramatic effect (not forgetting lines!)				

Figure 5.18 The blocking key for *Twelfth Night*.







PH	Pool chairs			Orsino balcony railing
PT	Pool side table			Crate
LH	Living Room chairs			Ring
LT	Living room table			Letter
SI	Shrine			
KT	Kitchen table			
KH	Kitchen chair			
	Gate			
	Colonnade			
	Tree			
	Urn			
	Bench			
	Archway			

Figure 5.19 The blocking key for *Twelfth Night*.

111	weak pia mater. <sup>b</sup> <i>Enter Sir Toby.</i>	5	
	OLIVIA <sup>7</sup> By mine honor, half drunk. <sup>8,9</sup> What is he at the gate, cousin?	6	<u>T en DL, staggering</u>
	TOBY A gentleman.	7	<u>OL x 3 → DR</u>
	OLIVIA A gentleman? What gentleman?	8	<u>OL ↪ EW</u>
	TOBY 'Tis a gentleman here. A plague o' these pickle-herring! How now, sot?	9	<u>EW x T</u>
	CLOWN Good Sir Toby.	10	
	OLIVIA Cousin, cousin, how have you come so early by this lethargy?	11	<u>T pant off SL then x DR</u>
120	TOBY Lechery? I defy lechery. <sup>11</sup> There's one at the gate.	12	<u>T → at [S]</u>
	OLIVIA Ay, marry, what is he?	13	<u>T ex DR</u>
	TOBY Let him be the devil an he will, I care not. <i>Give me faith, say I.</i> <sup>13</sup> <i>Exit.</i>		

**Figure 5.20** A close-up view of blocking notation at work.

Each director with whom you work will have a slightly different approach to blocking. The stage manager can ask some questions about blocking methods in your initial meetings with the director, but no matter what information you have ahead of time, stay flexible and responsive in rehearsal. If your director narrates detailed movement to the actors and then asks them to run the scene, take advantage of that narration time. While the actors are writing it all down, you should do the same. You will then be able to focus your efforts on placing the numbers when the pages are run, rather than trying to do it all at once. If the director asks the actors to simply “walk through the scene and see what happens,” the stage manager should take notes here too. It will be a heartbreaking moment for you to hear a director say, “Great! Let’s keep that and move on!” to a cast if you have not written anything down.

Another point to keep in mind is that scenes will be run many times before opening. A successful stage manager will strategize. (1) During the initial blocking rehearsals, focus on entrances and exits, major moves, and specific placement onstage given the cast. If you miss a small gesture the first time through, you will have other opportunities to capture that detail. (2) If you take advantage of the backing page setup and write the movement on the line most directly opposite the relevant dialogue, you automatically give yourself at least a rough placement for the blocking even if you were unable to also place the numbers onto the script page. (3) And if your schedule has only a brief number of days for blocking, consider having one of the assistant stage managers help record everything. You might focus on principals and the ASM on ensemble and then merge the notes later. Utilize your team to the production’s best advantage.



## MULTITASKING DURING BLOCKING

Even a seasoned director may have difficulty predicting exactly how long it will take to block an individual scene. The daily schedule is an educated guess. The stage manager may find it challenging to schedule costume fittings or other activities that take actors away from the rehearsal room on these days—especially if your costume shop is any distance away. You don't want to arrive at a scene early and have a key actor missing, or be unable to respond to a director's request to add an ensemble member to a nonspeaking moment in a show.

In light of this unpredictability, it is helpful to provide the actors with a nearby area to wait. A second rehearsal space across the hall, or even a green room, will permit actors to work on line memorization or songs, or just relax and chat. They are available when needed, but much less frustrated than they would be if forced to sit in the rehearsal room just waiting for hours on end.

## BLOCKING FOR THE MUSICAL

In Chapter 4, we saw two different options for the backing page—one for the play and one for the musical. This is necessary because both the quantity and quality of movement will be different between the two types of productions. Figures 4.15 and 4.16 illustrated documentation of the musical in action, but how do you approach it?

The first consideration is whether the movement is musical staging or true choreography. **Musical staging** refers to blocking that is very fluid and specifically timed to music, but may largely be comprised of walking, posing, and gesturing. The stage manager can capture this movement in the same manner as blocking in a play—and may only need to utilize the lines on the backing sheet.

Figure 5.21 is an excerpt from my prompt book for the musical *Chicago*—part of one backing page for the song “When You’re Good to Mama.” Although the reader does not have the

8 M x ♣ □  
 9 MG ↑R, help M ↘  
 10 M shove MG aside  
 11 LY + M, take arm  
 12 LY, M x DR

**Figure 5.21** An excerpt from the blocking script for the song “When You’re Good to Mama” from *Chicago*.

benefit of my key to follow character abbreviations, the notation about the specific movement is straightforward: the character of Mama (M) crosses to the center of a platform and is helped down the stairs by an ensemble member (MG) who rises to do so. That ensemble member is then “shoved aside”—for which there is no cute picture in my symbol library. (*Sometimes words really are best!*) Another ensemble member (LY) crosses to Mama and takes her arm. The two then cross downstage right. Nothing about this notation is “musical specific,” but in this instance there is nothing that warrants that approach.

When your task is to document choreography, the stage manager will find the boxes on the backing sheet to be more useful. They facilitate detailing general configuration and movement patterns. In choreography, you do not always need to note each individual performer by his or her initials in each box. Consider the second example from *Chicago* seen in Figure 5.22, this time from the song “All I Care About.” Box A notes the position of six ensemble women in a circle around Billy Flynn (B). When the entire group moves stage right but does not change their relative positions, an arrow communicates that information specifically enough. After

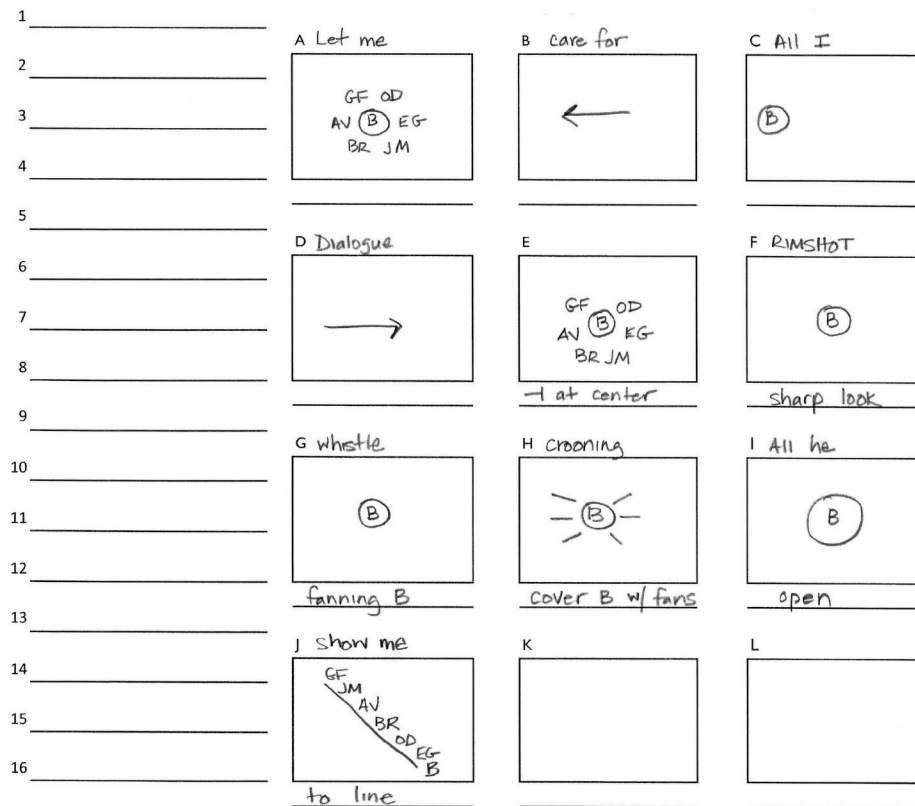


Figure 5.22 A blocking excerpt for “All I Care About” from the musical *Chicago*.

spending additional time encircling Billy on stage right and then crossing back, it is reasonable to reaffirm everyone's specific placement with initials again as seen in box E. But because the relative positions remain until the movement captured in box J, the initials again disappear. Instead the focus is on a musically timed look to Billy and movement of the large fans with which the girls danced.

The line below the dance box allows the stage manager to make simple blocking notes like that "sharp look." Even if the choreography is more complex, it is not necessary to be fully versed in dance terminology. Should you need to reference a specific moment, describing it as "the series of fast turns" will serve you as well as knowing the specific term *soutenu*. And if you resort to something unconventional but visually descriptive for yourself, trust that performers in the number will figure out what you mean by the "shimmy walks" or even the "chicken arms" pretty quickly should you ever need to reference that point in the dance!

The space above each box left room in this song for a very brief lyric reference. Just as you focused first on movement detail and then timing specificity within the scene when taking blocking for a play, you are best served by this same approach when capturing choreography. But since the boxes are not designed to individually line up with a specific line of text on the script page, small lyric notations will help you to place the letters corresponding with each box in the correct place in your libretto or score when you can.

## **WORKING WITH A DANCE CAPTAIN**

The primary reason that the stage manager is not concerned about precise choreographic terminology is that you have a partner in learning and documenting the movement. Each production will have a **Dance Captain**. This is a member of the cast chosen by the choreographer to assist with documentation and review. He or she will be the first point of contact for an actor wanting to ask whether the sharp look was on count 4 or 5 of that measure, or whether the performers are standing in parallel or turned out at a specific moment. (If any of those terms are unfamiliar to you, you have just discovered exactly why the dance captain exists!) During rehearsals the dance captain will often hold review sessions for songs as part of the rehearsal day, and he or she will assist you in maintaining the show after opening by giving notes and running numbers as needed.

The dance captain's role on the show is similar to that of a **Fight Captain**, chosen by a fight choreographer to help document and review stage combat sequences during rehearsals and performances. On an AEA production, these actors will receive additional compensation for these additional duties.

## THE DAILY CALL

Now that the rehearsal period has begun, the stage manager will disseminate much more detailed information about daily rehearsal activities than available on the overall calendar. General days and times were the appropriate starting point, but now everyone will need more. The stage manager creates and distributes a specific work schedule on a daily and weekly basis. Actors need to know where to place their focus to prepare for the next day's work; the production team will be concerned with what units might be in use in order to be ready for a specific rehearsal prop or costume request—or to determine what *not* to make unavailable for that day. Communicating these plans requires both written and verbal strategies.

At the end of one day's rehearsal, you hope to announce to the cast the plan for the next day, emphasizing anything that has changed from previous information. That schedule may include actors not present at the time, so you need a way to reach them as well. Many theatres maintain a rehearsal hotline—a telephone number on which the next day's schedule is recorded as the outgoing voicemail message each night. Written communication of the schedule might take the form of a document posted on your electronic callboard or emailed out to your cast.

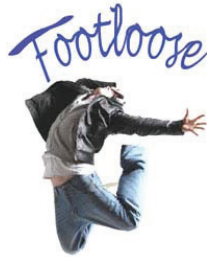
The sample daily call from *Footloose* found in Figure 5.23 is a good example of the potential intricacies of a single day of work. This would never fit onto a general calendar. It also did not exist at that time. Wednesday's schedule was the product of several days of notes from the director, musical director, and choreographer.

In written form, the call makes use of columns, allowing the actors to visualize how the activities overlap. The music sessions fit within the same time blocks set up for the director and choreographer. By merging cells to line up the time blocks, making use of sufficient white space, and placing commentary in italics, the actors have a way to navigate the plan.

I was the stage manager for this production, and can honestly say I am glad that my indirect way to reach my cast was a website and not a telephone hotline. It would be tricky to make this much information clear over the phone! My schedule was posted directly on the actor information page, with a hyperlink to a PDF file of the schedule in case someone wanted to print it out or was having problems viewing the columns (for example, on a mobile device).

But had the phone been my only option, I would have taken the following approach:

1. Begin by announcing any fittings on Wednesday before getting into the schedule, so that information wouldn't get lost.
2. Read the details for one location and then the other rather than going in time order and addressing both rooms at once.
3. Start with the scene work and choreography column, because it is less complex.
4. Concentrate on articulation and keeping my pace even.
5. Make sure I preceded the schedule with an introduction similar to this: "The following is the *Footloose* schedule for Wednesday, June 13. Please listen carefully, as we have lots of



## REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

Wednesday June 13

Scene Work and Choreography (in Toland Theatre)			Music (in the Choir Room)		
6:30–7:30 pm	Willard, Ren	Assorted Scene Work	6:30 pm	Wendy Jo, Urleen, Rusty	#1, 4, 6, 7B, 11, 18
			7:00 pm	Posse (Beyer, Cornwell, Lake)	#10
			7:10 pm	Wendy Jo, Urleen, Rusty, Beyer, Bush, Cook, Cornwell, Escher, Lake, Schneider, K. Wolf	#1, 4, 9, 16A
7:30–8:00 pm	Chuck, Lyle, Travis, Ariel	Assorted Scene Work	7:30 pm	Willard, Garvin, Jeter, Bickle	#13, 13A
			7:45 pm	Ren	#3, 9, 12C
8:00–9:30 pm	Rusty, Wendy Jo, Urleen, Ariel, Willard, Ren, Garvin, Jeter, Cowboy Bob, Beyer, Cornwell, Lake, Black, Fanshaw, Holloway, Schneider  <i>(in other words, everyone at the Bar-B-Que except Erica and David)</i>  Holloway to arrive at 8:40 pm	Let's Hear It For the Boy	8:00 pm	Black, Willard, Garvin, Jeter, Bickle, Chuck, Lyle, Travis,	#1, 4, 9, 16A
			8:25 pm	Chuck, Lyle, Travis	#2, 7B
			8:40 pm	Travis	Go to Toland!

Figure 5.23 A daily rehearsal call.

small overlapping work sessions planned. Grab your pencil now! If you have any questions, please call Laurie at 333-555-1212 for clarification.”

This would prepare the actors to hear a lot of detail and allow them to have my phone number jotted down right with their notes about the schedule. I had, of course, provided it several other times, but why not save a confused actor an extra step?

At the beginning of the rehearsal period, you are likely to have simple schedules—full company calls for introductory sessions, and days divided into large segments for table work. Blocking and scene work days will be more complex. The director may wish to work with select groups of actors for more specifically defined periods of time. As you approach technical rehearsals, the schedule will simplify again as the work turns to repeated runs of the show followed by notes, requiring the full cast.

## CONFLICTS

One of the trickiest aspects to developing a rehearsal schedule can be finding a balance between the director's wishes and the actors' availability. Absences may occur less frequently in a professional setting, but you can still have a cast member with a previously scheduled appointment or last-minute emergency. Academic stage managers find themselves handling many more conflicts. The ideal actor for a role might also play in the orchestra, which rehearses on Monday nights. Another might have a class on Tuesdays until 8:00 p.m. Both actors will clear their conflicts for tech week and performances, but may not be able to do so for the first four weeks of work on the show. The director agreed to this unavailability during casting, but will still be frustrated by rehearsals that become unproductive due to absences. Two-way communication helps to ameliorate the problem. Be sure you have a complete list of the actor conflicts noted on your audition forms. Make a follow-up request for conflicts once you have a cast. And consult that list carefully while helping to create the schedule. When working in an academic setting where conflicts are more prevalent, I will typically create a “conflict calendar,” which looks nearly identical to my general rehearsal calendar but with the boxes for individual dates containing detail on when someone is unavailable or will arrive late rather than general rehearsal times and locations.

Sometimes the solution can be found in suggesting a new order for a given night so that everyone can be present. At other times you may need one of your ASMs to walk the role and write down any notes or blocking to give to an actor before the scene is next run. Keeping the director informed and getting missing actors caught up quickly allows work to be successful every night.

# FITTINGS

The stage manager will be asked to schedule actors for costume fittings—times to visit the costume shop to try on costume pieces as they are built or altered. In a professional setting, the shop hours may be simultaneous to the rehearsal hours, requiring the stage manager to weave these appointments into the rehearsal schedule. In an academic setting, it is more common for fittings to happen during the day and rehearsals to take place at night. The stage manager will still schedule the appointments, helping the actors to find the best blocks of time within their class or work obligations.

## NAME OF SHOW

### FITTINGS

ACTOR  
REQUESTED  
AND FITTING  
LENGTH

*By listing out costume shop requests here, you can easily give this sheet to an ASM to schedule, and cross off names once he or she has been successful.*

Day:	Day:
1:00 pm _____	1:00 pm _____
1:15 pm _____	1:15 pm _____
1:30 pm _____	1:30 pm _____
1:45 pm _____	1:45 pm _____
2:00 pm _____	2:00 pm _____
2:15 pm _____	2:15 pm _____
2:30 pm _____	2:30 pm _____
2:45pm _____	2:45pm _____
3:00pm _____	3:00pm _____
3:15 pm _____	3:15 pm _____
3:30 pm _____	3:30 pm _____
3:45 pm _____	3:45 pm _____
<p><i>Note: adjust the times listed next to lines above for the appropriate availability in your costume shop!</i></p>	

*Note: This form is based on one originally developed at the University of Arizona*

**Figure 5.24** A sample fitting request form.

Once scheduled, fitting reminders should be available to the actors. This might take written form on a callboard, website, or individual appointment slip filled out at scheduling time (much like the reminder card you get when scheduling a doctor's visit). You can also provide verbal reminders on the rehearsal hotline.

If your costume shop is responsible for building more than one show at a time, the stage manager may need to coordinate fittings across several shows so that only one person arrives at a time to see the same designer or staff member. The costume shop will request fittings a day or so in advance, allowing each stage manager time to consult their rehearsal schedule for potential slots, check with other stage managers, confirm times with their actors, and then communicate the combined fitting details to the costume personnel.

Your department or theatre may have a form for scheduling fittings. If not, you might choose to develop something to simplify the process for yourself. The form I use in rehearsal can be found in Figure 5.24. But it may be just as easy to type up a list of costume fittings similar to a rehearsal schedule. As long as the information is clearly presented for all users, the choice is yours.

## THE FIRST RUN-THROUGH

The stage manager should help to develop a schedule during blocking days that allows both for new work and for the occasional review prior to the first attempt to stumble through the show on its feet. Your director might prefer spending the final portion of each day reviewing work or waiting to run several scenes at the end of the week. Review is ideal for two reasons: (1) actors will memorize blocking more effectively if given the chance to walk through it multiple times, and (2) understudies can take their notes in more manageable chunks. On professional productions, understudies are not always called for rehearsal if they do not also have a role in the show. Understudies who are members of the primary cast may not always be free to attend blocking sessions if called for other work at the same time. In both instances, this allows them to get information in concentrated doses.

But whether or not you've done any review, the first full run of the show is a major event. The SM team can confirm blocking and prop/costume tracking notes and obtain an updated running time for the show.

It is important to set up the room so that rehearsal props and furniture pieces can be moved efficiently, whether done by actors or the ASMs standing in as the crew. The stage manager should also anticipate the return of some of the first-day guests—particularly in-town designers. If you have moved the extra tables and chairs out of the room, now is the time for their return. You are striving for an efficient, functional work space for everyone.



## ORGANIZING YOURSELF

With so many important tasks to accomplish, it is important for the stage manager to have a way to organize him or herself. If a show is particularly large, you may find your normal reliance on breakdowns and groundplans to be less effective than you would like. Be sure you take the time to determine how you can best keep the entire show moving forward, especially during rehearsals.

For the previously mentioned production of *A Christmas Carol*, I found myself in need of something special. I had created a detailed character/scene breakdown, but the cast of fifty-four took two pages to list out, even with the form set up in portrait orientation. Some actors were cast in single roles and could be identified by character names, while others were multi-scene unnamed ensemble members. And then of course there were the ten children, both with and without specific character names. The script contained only informal scene divisions noted by a change in set pieces, but the director had added traditional numbering for the production team. And each location had particular furniture pieces much like the *Twelfth Night* we have looked at in this chapter.

I began rehearsals relying on my standard paperwork, but quickly found myself wanting something to pull multiple kinds of information together at once, and to make it easier to double check that I had called the correct subset of cast member for an individual scene. A cheat sheet came to the rescue, shown in Figure 5.25. Originally just created for scheduling, my ASMs were also quickly drawn to the consolidation, and we revised the document to provide quick access to even more. The addition of a column to note which spike tape color pertained to which scene's furniture setup proved very helpful.

I have not found the need to create this type of document for many other shows, but the notion of cheat sheets can take many forms. The stage manager always has a groundplan, and for multiple-location plays will have several individual drawings. You might find it useful to shrink them down so that many mini-groundplans fit on a single sheet. This will not provide you something to measure easily, but it may facilitate answering placement questions during a run-through and provide a consolidated place for documenting spike tape colors.

## SCENE WORK

The first run-through of the show will be followed by further exploration of the play. The work shifts from “what” rehearsals concerning logistics to “why” rehearsals concerning intention and motivation. Actors have a thorough grounding in the physical shape of the play and can now begin exploring details of their character.

Character work on a scene often requires a larger segment of the rehearsal day than was allocated for blocking it. Scene work may also be done out of order, so that an actor can explore the arc of a character through the play more concisely. In contrast to the blocking rehearsals,



# A Christmas Carol

## CHEAT SHEET



Act/Scene	Pages	Location	Spike Tape for Furniture	Cast
<b>ACT TWO</b>				
II-1	21-22	Scrooge's Home (Present)	<b>PINK</b>	Present, Scrooge
II-2	22	Street	<i>none</i>	Dickens, Scrooge, Present, Chestnut, Flower, Baker, Martha, Sopol, Cratchit, Fred, Mrs. Fred, Beggar <b>Kids: Izzy, Elizabeth, Tiny Tim</b>
II-3	23-28	Cratchit Home	<b>BRIGHT BLUE</b>	Dickens, Scrooge, Present, Cratchit, Mrs. Cratchit, Peter, Belinda, Martha <b>Kids: Tiny Tim</b>
II-4	28-29	Street (Bygone Christmas)	<i>none</i>	Dickens, Scrooge, Present, Belle, Young Ebenezer, Cratchit, Beggar <b>Kids: Fan, Boy Ebenezer, Tiny Tim</b>
II-5	29-33	Fred's House	<b>GREY</b>	Fred, Mrs. Fred, Topper, Cecil, Hazel, Florella, Scrooge, Present
II-6	34	Street (Ignorance & Want)	<i>none</i>	Dickens, Scrooge, Present <b>Kids: Annie, Elizabeth</b>
II-7	35	Scrooge's House (Future)	<b>PINK</b>	Dickens, Scrooge, Future (Coffin)
II-8	35-36	Street (Funeral)	<i>none</i>	Scrooge, Future (Coffin), Snuff Box, Pound Notes, Newspaper, Undertaker, Topper, Cecil, Fred, Cratchit
II-9	36-37	Cratchit Home	<b>YELLOW</b>	Scrooge, Mrs. Cratchit, Cratchit, Belinda, Peter, Martha
II-10	37-39	Outside Graveyard	<i>none</i>	Scrooge, Future (Dickens), Char, Laundress, Joe the Beetler, Undertaker, Beggar, Fred, Cecil, Topper
II-10 A	39	Graveyard	<i>none</i>	Scrooge, Future (Dickens)

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**Figure 5.25** A cheat sheet for *A Christmas Carol*.

the stage manager may more easily identify opportunities to schedule costume fittings, dialect sessions, and other events that make actors temporarily unavailable to the director.

Scene work usually coincides with the line-memorization deadline because these rehearsals are more successful once actors are no longer carrying scripts. In addition to the added scheduling, the SM team will now take on responsibility for prompting (feeding lines to actors if they forget them) and taking line notes during this phase.

## ***DONE TAKING NOTES?***

The blocking may not be changing, so should the stage manager take notes in the prompt script during character rehearsals? Yes! Particularly if you will be maintaining the show or rehearsing understudies, document the discoveries taking place. The ability to refer to the director or the actor's own words will help legitimize your feedback later on.

## **LINE NOTES**

Line notes are a tool to help actors memorize the script accurately. Although technically a form of written communication, they are a bit less formal. The goal is to achieve specificity, even though you are writing quickly. Using preprinted slips with a series of categories facilitates noting the type of error, and indicating the beginning of the relevant line along with the problematic section is sufficient identification. Figure 5.26 provides a sample of a single-note form.

When beginning the line note process, the SM team should concentrate on major problems: dropped lines, significant paraphrasing, or jumped cues. As the rehearsals progress and the actors become more proficient, the stage managers can correct more minute details. When

CHARACTER _____			PAGE _____
Dropped Line	Paraphrased	Jumped/Missed Cue	Called for Line
Dropped Words	Sequence of Lines	Pronunciation	
Added: _____			
LINE: _____			
_____			

**Figure 5.26** A line note. These notes are formatted four per page, and are copied and cut into the individual slips prior to use in rehearsals.

the stage manager notices a line that is repeatedly misdelivered, it can be useful not only to identify the problematic part of the script but also to indicate what the actor is actually saying. Often the error has already been memorized, and the actor may not be aware of the inaccuracy. Be sure to make use of your whole team for this work. The person “on book” should not also try to write out line notes so that he or she can keep eyes constantly on the script. The moment you look away is always the exact moment an actor will call “line?” If the SM is still taking or refining blocking notation and you only have one ASM, consider a “special guest star” to be on book. This might be a fellow stage manager or friend, or as a last resort a rotating set of willing cast members who may be offstage for several scenes each and available to help.

## THE REHEARSAL REPORT

At the conclusion of each rehearsal day, the stage manager will prepare a report to be distributed to the production team and other staff members as required by your theatre or department.

### Recipients

- Director and SM Team
- Designers and Assistants
- Production Manager
- Shop Heads (as appropriate)
- Production Stage Manager (if theatre has one)
- Faculty Advisors (academic productions)

### What It Contains

- Details of the day’s work, including breaks
- Overview of the next day’s schedule
- Absences, latecomers, and visitors
- Questions for individual production areas from the director or SM
- Discoveries about scenery, costumes, props, or any other physical element of the show
- Notations of any accidents or injuries
- General information for the full team

### Why Do It

- To provide an accounting of what is happening in the rehearsal room
- To alert production team members to needs or requirements for individual items
- To share the director or stage manager’s questions

The rehearsal report is the most important communication tool for the stage manager. It is a direct line from the rehearsal room to the rest of the production team, and the most effective method for distributing a large amount of information to a diverse audience. It can be sent as easily to guest designers in another state as it can be to staff members across the hall. The rehearsal report is considered an official document of the production, particularly for Actors' Equity or insurance issues.

As such, the stage manager should treat the report as formal communication, employing the three key rules first introduced in Chapter 1: to be tactful, timely, and specific.

The rehearsal report should thoroughly address each category of information. If you have no questions or information for the sound department on a certain day, it is better to write that you have “no notes today” rather than to leave that section blank. This reassures the sound designer that nothing came up in rehearsal—and not that you have forgotten to include it.

One characteristic of the blocking period is its distinction as the time when the most props are added to a show. It is also true that some of these props will be cut once you reach scene work and the actors are no longer carrying scripts. So should you wait to make requests for additions to the prop list in case they go away? *No*. The props department will be unable to accurately plan their time or budget if you request a long list of items late in the process. The scenic designer will be unable to share concerns with the director or to discuss compromises about a specific prop if he or she doesn't know about it. And if a request cannot be fulfilled, then everyone's time is wasted in rehearsal by miming an item that will never come.

Notes should also be written as specifically as possible. If your director requests a baseball cap for an actor, then you are omitting details by writing a note asking just for a hat. Conversely, it is not up to you to make artistic decisions. If only a hat was requested, it is not your job to determine a baseball cap is the best choice.

It can be awkward to write a note you feel will be unpopular or that delivers bad news. But that does not mean the stage manager should not write it. Pre-production time spent learning about the elements of the design will provide you some context to know if requesting a change or asking a question could prompt an emotion-filled response, but the stage manager's job is to communicate nonetheless. You might opt to combine written and face-to-face communication by conveying general details in the report and following up in person the next morning. You need to provide the information so that a conversation can happen—even if that conversation is an argument.

## **“THE DIPLOMATIC HAND GRENADE”**

In their book *Difficult Conversations*, authors Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen describe delivering a difficult message as the equivalent of tossing a hand grenade. No matter how hard you try, tact may not truly soften the blow. They stress dealing “creatively with problems while treating people with decency and integrity.” Transforming your message-delivery role into the opportunity for a conversation is much more constructive.<sup>1</sup>

### **ANALYZING THE REPORT**

The sample rehearsal report from *Twelfth Night* in Figure 5.27 allows us to examine the document both for format and content. General details requested by the theatre appear at the top, including personnel, date, and attendance information. The next section outlines the schedule in summary form. Because this is not a document for the actors, you can present the facts simply—and in this case in a slightly smaller font size to minimize the amount of space it takes up. The most important sections of the report are those for individual production areas, so they should be the most prominent components of the page.

Other general document design principles from Chapter 2 in action include the following:

- A layout that presents the information legibly in the least number of pages
- Just enough white space to keep the text accessible
- A commonly available font, consistent with the one used for other show paperwork
- Minimal use of color and shading

## **REHEARSAL REPORT TEMPLATES**

If your theatre does not have a format for rehearsal reports, the one provided here is a good start. If you have been asked to present the information in a specific way, however, you should do so. When beginning work for a new company, ask the production manager or a fellow stage manager about existing forms you should use. Often they exist in a common folder on a computer available to the stage managers, so that you can easily acquire the necessary templates to fill in for your production.

Looking at the report for content, a stage manager can find several useful strategies at work. The necessary formal tone is in place, set by the use of full sentences with correct grammar and punctuation. Questions and comments are concise, including all information from that

## REHEARSAL REPORT

Production: Twelfth Night  
 Date: Friday October 29  
 Stage Manager: Laurie Kinckman  
 Assistant Stage Managers: Melissa Heller, Quinn Masterson  
 Guests: Colleen Schulz  
 Call Began: 7:00pm Breaks: 7:45 (5), 9:00 (5) Ended: 9:30 pm  
 Late: none Absent: Austin Hernandez (excused)



Rehearsal Breakdown		
Time	What	Who
7:00 pm	Block II-1	Sebastian, Antonio
7:50 pm	Block III-2	Sebastian, Antonio
8:05 pm	Block II-2	Viola, Malvolio
8:40 pm	Block II-4 to p. 37	Orsino, Viola, Feste, Coffin, Hart, Prescott

Next Rehearsal Monday November 1		
Time	What	Who
6:30 pm	Block I-3	Toby, Maria, Andrew
7:30 pm	Block II-3	Toby, Maria, Andrew, Malvolio, Feste
8:30 pm	Block II-5	Toby, Maria, Andrew, Malvolio, Fabian

<p>Scenery/Technical Direction (Mandy and Ron):</p> <p>25. Will the gate be pinned to the deck after it flies in? (We are not asking for this—just wondering if we should allow time/personnel for it).</p>
<p>Props (Mandy and Laura):</p> <p>26. Please ADD a rucksack for Sebastian in II-1.</p> <p>27. Please ADD a change of clothes for Sebastian to pack into the rucksack. It will be preset on the bench when brought on.</p> <p>28. Several people are now blocked to sit on Orsino's poolside table (only one at a time, though).</p> <p>29. Please ADD money (bills) for Valentine to pay Feste in II-4.</p>
<p>Costumes (Michelle):</p> <p>Please see prop note #27 regarding clothing for Sebastian to pack.</p> <p>30. Sebastian and Antonio's overcoats for II-1 will be preset on the coat rack when it is brought onstage.</p> <p>31. Antonio's overcoat should have an inside breast pocket for his wallet.</p> <p>32. Walter would like Antonio's disguise for III-3 to include dark sunglasses.</p>
<p>Lights (Nick):</p> <p>33. III-3 is currently blocked to occur far downstage right on the apron in front of the proscenium arch.</p>
<p>Sound (Brent):</p> <p>No notes tonight, thank you.</p>
<p>Miscellaneous:</p> <p>34. Suzanne Clum and Shelby Krarup will be the Musicians in the production. There will be no third musician.</p>

Thanks everyone,  
Laurie Kinckman SM

Figure 5.27 A rehearsal report from *Twelfth Night*.

night's rehearsal, without embellishments. Additions are requested with a *please*. And every area of the report is filled in, even if there are no notes.

### CLARITY AND COMPLETENESS

The props notes from this particular evening include both additions and clarifications. The additions are obviously important, but so is the detail provided about the poolside table (note #28). As the scenic designer and props master search for the most aesthetically pleasing furniture piece, it will be important to know it needs to bear weight. If the first-choice piece might not do this on its own, the team can now plan to reinforce it, look for another option, or initiate a conversation with the director about the necessity of that blocking. Similarly, the costume section includes specifics about where a coat pocket is best located for the blocking and an addition to a disguise for later in the show.

### NUMBERING NOTES

Throughout this report, you will notice that most notes have a number. Numbering facilitates directing attention to a specific detail—either sending the same production area back to a previous report or directing a different area to a note with shared implications. A good example of this can be found at the beginning of the costume section. It is reasonable for the costume designer to want input into this prop clothing. Even though an actor will not wear it, it belongs to a specific character and should fall within the design concept for his look. If the rucksack had been added as a filled item (meaning the contents would never be seen on stage), then props could handle this alone. But because the clothing is seen, both areas should know about the note.

The stage manager should expect that production personnel will read notes in their individual sections thoroughly, general notes quickly, and other area notes not at all. Without a reference to the prop note, the costume designer could easily overlook the information. And by directing the designer's attention to a specific prop note, time is better used than if he or she was asked to search through the props section for the relevant item (not difficult on a night with only four prop notes, but what if there were more?).

The “please see” note does not need its own number, because it is not new information. It is the equivalent of the italicized commentary a stage manager might include on a chart or in a schedule. Personally, I also omit numbers when the note is a thank you. I do this to keep some control over the number of numbers. Thoroughness in reporting is essential, but there is something a bit overwhelming about opening a report to find it begins with note number forty on day five!

### PRESENTING THE PROBLEM, NOT OFFERING THE SOLUTION

One of the toughest things to master as a stage manager is learning when to step in. If a prop or scenic piece should malfunction during a performance, of course the SM's problem-solving



skills take over, and your job is to find a way to temporarily repair or replace the item so the show can go on. But during rehearsals, when you have the full staff working on the show, that is not your responsibility.

The stage manager can communicate if a piece of music is shorter than the transition for which it was written, if a table is too heavy to be carried by the actor tasked to do so, or if an actress in a long skirt has been blocked to run up a flight of stairs. That information is exactly the type of detail you should include in a rehearsal report. However, it is not your job to inform the costume designer that the skirt should be shortened, or to pull a lighter table for the show yourself. By presenting the problem, the stage manager allows the correct area to work on the solution—whether that is an easy substitution or a compromise reached after discussion in a production meeting.

Particularly in a rehearsal report, which is written and widely distributed, the SM should be careful not to imply that a colleague has made a poor choice or done an inadequate job. If your solution is requested, you will be asked for it. This might happen in follow-up conversation in person, where you can utilize your skills at reading body language to gauge how much “help” to provide if asked.

The exception to the unsolicited-suggestion rule might be during a production meeting if the personnel involved have reached an impasse. The SM can read the room and offer the “I know this might be a crazy idea, but could we . . .” comment. Your idea might work. Or it might restart the conversation and lead to a different outcome. The change in setting makes all the difference!

## FINDING BALANCE

As the SM is writing the nightly rehearsal report, it is just as important to know when to include a note as how to write it. A production of David Auburn’s *Proof* I stage managed offers an example of just that.

The tradition at my university is that rehearsals take place in the theatre, on the set, at night. Typically the first two nights of rehearsal take place off-site, allowing the scene shop to get a jump start on construction without having to stop early or clean up for rehearsals on those initial days. Day three marks the first evening the cast will work onstage.

*Proof* takes place on the back porch of a house in Chicago. The set consists of the house and that porch. In our production, the director and scenic designer opted to place the house at an angle rather than facing straight downstage. Because I hold a dual post as production manager, I was aware it took several conversations to arrive at the current orientation of the house, and that a lingering question regarding sightlines was never completely resolved. In preparation for our first night with the set, I visited the theatre in the afternoon and quickly realized that the sightline question would indeed be back. But as I was neither the director nor the scenic designer, it was not my question to pose. I did, however, chat briefly with the technical director—asking about the feasibility of adjusting the angle of the house. She told

me it could happen, especially if requested within the next two days before the installation of the walls. I filed that information away and went to rehearsal. Midway through the evening the director did raise the subject of sightlines. Knowing that a change was possible technically, I encouraged him to pose that question to the designer. I had not spoken with him during the day, so the artistic response to an angle adjustment was unknown. Nonetheless, it needed to be addressed in the report.

My report that night included three scenic notes: the answer to a question from the scenic designer, a request to fly in a piece of masking for rehearsals, and that pesky angle-of-the-house note. I presented them in that order, and I did so on purpose. The section read:

1. We are happy to swap the two tables and to keep the larger one on the porch.
2. Would it be possible for us to fly in the black traveler during rehearsals?
3. (The Director) has a general layout question for you. He will come find you in the morning.

By first reporting success with a request from the designer, I started off positively. The use of the traveler would not be difficult for the shop to facilitate. It simply meant leaving construction projects slightly closer to the back wall at the end of the afternoon. And I did not specifically ask the design question in the report. Because I could not control the context in which the designer would read the note, I did not want him to be upset—or to feel there was no room for discussion on the subject. He was simply alerted to a time-sensitive question headed his way. This allowed a true conversation to take place the next morning, when an agreement was reached. And because the technical director read additional meaning into the note, she was able to make a mental adjustment to the day's work plan while reading the report in the morning in case an actual adjustment would be required for the afternoon. Everyone's wishes and feelings were respected, and they were all happy with the end result.

This situation might seem easier for me to handle because the director and scenic designer were faculty colleagues. But I would have had the same responsibility, and nearly the same approach, were I a student stage manager. As a student I might have been reluctant to hint to the TD in advance that a change might be forthcoming even if I felt confident in my assessment of sightline challenges. But I certainly could have sought out my advisor for their advice and possible assistance. And my report at the end of rehearsal would have been written exactly the same.

## **DISTRIBUTING THE REPORT**

We have seen tact, timeliness, and specificity at work within the report itself, but the issue of time applies equally to distribution of the report. Daily reports obviously need to be sent out every day, and the stage manager should do his or her best to keep to a schedule. Complete the report at the end of the rehearsal, send it on its way, and then go home. Production team members will get used to receiving information at a certain time, and may not always keep checking for their notes.

This is particularly true in an academic setting when you are communicating with both students and faculty. A student stage manager may be concerned about a test the next morning and want to study for a few hours before typing the report, or want to go have some fun before tackling more work. If you fall asleep, get home later than intended, or simply forget, appropriate areas may not get your report before working on a project directly affected by your notes from the night before. Their class or work schedules might permit reading email only at the beginning and end of the day. If that beginning is 8:00 a.m., and your report arrives at 1:00 p.m., the information may be missed.

This author also strongly recommends finding the review method that works best for you. As part of the formal presentation of information, the report should be free of easy-to-find spelling errors or missing words. Notes need to be coherent. Your first effort to get the words on the page may not be as successful as you think.

I know myself well enough to realize that I proofread hard copies more successfully than written words on a computer screen. So once the report is done, I print a single copy. And I often read complex sentences and potentially unpopular notes out loud. If there are no changes to be made, then I already have a report for my prompt book. I can print any additional copies, distribute the report electronically, and call the task complete. But if I find errors, I have an opportunity to catch them before sending the information out into the world. I would rather waste a sheet of paper than appear sloppy or uncaring.

In today's electronic age, the rehearsal report is typically emailed out to production team members. By choosing common fonts and relatively simple formats, you can ensure that the report will look the same when opened on any computer. If you find that your reports are accessed over a wide variety of electronic devices and jumbled formatting is compromising legibility, you might consider distributing a PDF copy, as first discussed in Chapter 2.

The stage manager may also be asked to post one or more copies in specific locations around the theatre. Follow these policies, but keep them in mind while preparing the report. Personally, I do not like posting reports—not because they are secret, but because the potential exists for others to read the information out of context. Consider the following hypothetical situation: The stage manager needs to inform the costume shop that the director has considered the options shown to her earlier in the day and has decided she would prefer for Actress X to wear the sundress rather than the shorts and t-shirt. A seemingly harmless note. But what happens if the report is posted in a common area where that actress can read it? Perhaps she won't think much of it. But she could just as easily infer that the director thinks she looks fat in shorts and her body problems are better hidden by the dress. Of course your note said nothing of the kind, nor did any portion of the conversation between the director and designer concern that issue. This is a scenario existing solely in the actress's head—but one you cannot predict or control. Loss of context opens the door for outside interpretations. If I were posting a report with that note in a public place, I would alter it slightly to say that the director had decided the dress will work well with no reference to the other option. The decision has been communicated just as successfully, but with less opportunity for misunderstanding.

## PRODUCTION MEETINGS

During the rehearsal period, your production team will gather regularly for meetings, allowing everyone a chance to discuss multi-area issues, schedules or budgetary concerns, and to get clarifications on information from your reports. The meeting might be run by the stage manager, the production manager, or even the director, depending on the tradition of your theatre. You will also find differences in formality regarding an agenda. Some meetings will work from a previously distributed list of topics, and others will unfold more organically.

The stage manager should come to production meetings with an agenda, even if one is not distributed or required. Preparing an agenda gives you the chance to look back through the previous week's reports—identifying unanswered questions or group topics—and to think ahead to upcoming events that might impact the production team. The agenda can function as a checklist for you to ensure all those items get discussed. If a conversation turns into a very specific discussion of small details that do not affect everyone, the list provides the SM with some backup to suggest finishing that discussion in a “meeting after the meeting” with only the necessary participants, as there are still multi-area questions needing attention during the actual meeting time.

The sample agenda in Figure 5.28 was prepared for a production meeting two weeks prior to the beginning of tech rehearsals. The stage manager itemized the pressing issues for the show along with important events in need of confirmation.

### MEETING MINUTES

Often the stage manager is asked to record minutes from production meetings. Taking these minutes is not about stenography. The important considerations are to summarize important updates, to present decisions made during the meeting for those who were not in attendance, and to remind everyone about upcoming action items. You don't have to capture every word uttered in the room.

When organizing meeting minutes, it is helpful to place discussion notes under the relevant production area, no matter who initiated the conversation. For example, during the meeting for which our sample agenda was prepared, the director was the first to ask about the status of the problem with the stage elevator. But, as this was ultimately a technical direction issue, the information was summarized in that section of the minutes.

Minutes should be distributed within forty-eight hours of a meeting—sooner if possible. Because most production meetings take place on a weekly basis, the action items and schedule reminders are typically short term. If too much time transpires between the meeting and the distribution of the minutes, the details may no longer be relevant.

# Twelfth Night

AGENDA: November 10

---

Director: Walter

Top of show – designers thoughts on using shrine without gate?  
Intermission after III-3

---

Scenery and Props: Mandy

Time to set a height for the pit with Orsino and Malvolio  
Live flame concerns for candles on the shrine  
Ripping up the challenge letter

---

TD: Ron

Status of pit repair

---

Costumes: Michelle

Confirm PR photo on Thursday at 6:00  
Confirm Toby coat test right after photo  
Scheduling a quick-change rehearsal

---

Lights: Nick

*No current questions*

---

Sound: Brent

OK on headsets?

---

Music: Alden

*No current questions*

---

SM: Laurie

Paper Tech next week at 11 – lovely to get cues Friday or Monday!  
Replaced lost crew member  
Discuss use of dry tech time on Sunday

---

**Figure 5.28** The agenda for a production meeting during the rehearsal period.

## **THE ASM POINT OF VIEW**

Three young stage managers offer their perspective on the role of the assistant stage manager in rehearsals.

Cara Cook: “The most important task of the ASM is to understand your role. Not just the ‘standard’ responsibilities of an ASM, but knowing what the SM, director, and even crew expect of you from different productions or companies. Working with different personalities is always a challenge, but with the different personalities come different ideas of what your job entails. It is absolutely incredible how fast the rehearsal process goes, and being as organized as possible can be the difference between a smooth or disastrous rehearsal.”<sup>2</sup>

Nicole Smith: “I believe the goal of the ASM is to prepare in rehearsals the transitions of the props, costumes, and scenery to the best of your ability, so the actors, SM team, and director are comfortable with how those elements will work on stage, which will allow their focus to be on the new elements added in tech.”<sup>3</sup>

Quinn Masterson: “As an ASM, the rehearsal period is my favorite part of the process. It’s almost like a scavenger hunt for me. If I’m focusing on props or furniture, it is fun to find the track of where things will come on and off stage or where they’re going to be preset onstage for the actors. On the other hand, if I’m the costume ASM, being able to see if an actor is going to have enough time for a costume change or where costume pieces are going to be needed to be is something that makes each night of rehearsal fresh.”<sup>4</sup>

## **ADDING THE ELEMENTS**

As your production approaches technical rehearsals, the shops may be able to provide the cast with actual furniture or access to movable scenic units now built—both to enhance the rehearsal hall experience and to prepare them for the process of pulling the show together in tech. Other useful additions might include rehearsal costume pieces or sound cues.

In some theatres the SM team will pull rehearsal props or costumes from their stock. If you are responsible for collecting rehearsal items on your own, be sure that you familiarize yourself with the drawings and renderings so you can pull accurately. There is a big difference between working in a chair with and without arms. You also would not want to provide an elastic-waist prairie skirt to an actress who will wear a straight, above-the-knee skirt in the show. In an academic situation where actors may provide their own rehearsal items, use these same criteria to recommend what they should bring from home. Ask for help if the SM team (or a cast member) does not have something appropriate at your disposal.

During this phase of rehearsal, the stage manager works to successfully integrate these new elements into the room and increases specificity in the rehearsal notes. Switching from one

rehearsal chair to another is of less concern to the props shop than making an adjustment to a show item recently purchased or built.

It is important to make sure the director is aware whenever a “real” item comes into rehearsal. He or she will inevitably give it more serious consideration than the stand-in version. Walk the director through all the new items prior to the start of a rehearsal day. The stage manager should also specifically ask the director for notes about these pieces at the end of the day, so they can be immediately put into the rehearsal report.

If you are working on an Equity production, specific rules regarding shoes come into play. Under most contracts, dancers must be provided with shoes at least one week prior to dress rehearsals. If your show includes any traditional ballet, the shoes must be provided for any rehearsal in which the performers are dancing *on pointe*. The SM will be responsible for reminding costume personnel about this deadline, and then facilitating the pickup, use, and storage of the shoes once they arrive.<sup>5</sup>

Some production elements will never be replicated in the rehearsal room. Just as you will never get a second floor, you are extremely unlikely to execute light cues. The stage manager’s method for communicating important lighting changes is through narration. Announcing “blackout” and “lights up” appropriately will help the actors to become aware of how light will interact with their work—even if they do so unconsciously. Similarly, the stage manager can narrate sound cues prior to playing anything in rehearsal. This is particularly important for effects that impact the action: a door knock that prompts a line, an offstage crash or gunshot, or the fading out of music that signals the start of the next scene.

## **PLANNING FOR EXTRAS**

As the SM team prepares to incorporate new elements into rehearsal, take time to think proactively about what you will need to make the process a success.

- Do you need more time to set up? Does this mean overtime that needs approval?
- Do you need dollies to help cart things around?
- Do you need better speakers in the room than those in your laptop?
- Do you need to borrow the production assistant from the other show to be on book because both of your ASMs will be moving scenic pieces?
- Do you need to return items to the shops at the end of the night? Do you have keys to do so?
- Can you leave things in the room? Is there a secure place for valuable items or electronics?

## UPDATING PAPERWORK

As rehearsals progress, the SM team will add and delete props, make changes to the calendar, and gain new information about actor entrances and exits. Part of successful communication is keeping the relevant documents up to date and distributing those revisions to the production team.

Updated paperwork should reflect the new version number and date. Archival documents such as the character/scene breakdown might not need to highlight the updated information, but interactive documents will benefit from some additional formatting to make the new facts stand out.

The prop list in Figure 5.29 is a look at that information after three weeks of rehearsal. (The preliminary list was first introduced in Figure 3.11.) New items, first appearing in the rehearsal report, have been inserted. They are presented in blue text to make the additions visually distinct. This makes it easy for the stage manager or props master to look at the list, remember what is new, and make sure there is a representative item for rehearsals. If the list is distributed in hard copy, and your team does not have easy access to color printing, consider another option to achieve this same heightened focus (use of bold, large asterisk outside the left margin, etc.).

Props that have been cut remain on the list, but the text has been struck through. The stage manager could remove the entries, but by choosing this formatting option instead, it is clear that the item is indeed cut and was not accidentally deleted during the updating process.

The SM team should have a consistent schedule for updating paperwork. It is rare that items will need to be redistributed more than once a week. It is also ideal to send out updated documents the day prior to your next production meeting, so that everyone can operate from the same version of the information.

If this prop list needed a version 3, the updating procedure would be as follows:

1. Turn all existing text back to black. In the next issue, it will not be new.
2. Insert all props added since the last version, and add notes to reflect any new information about existing props.
3. Update cut props to appear in strikethrough text.
4. Change the font color for all above items to blue.
5. Update the revision number and issue date.
6. Redistribute and update the copies posted on any callboards or show websites.

## REHEARSALS FOR DANCE

A stage manager working full time for a dance company will experience a process that is similar in many ways to that of a play or a musical. You regularly attend rehearsals, distribute notes to the production team, organize or simply attend production meetings, schedule fittings,



# LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

## REVISED PROP LIST



Page	Prop	C	Character	Notes	R	A	Source
FURNITURE/SCENIC ITEMS							
	Trash cans/garbage barrel			Multiple, possibly danced on			
	Outdoor bench						
	Refrigerator						
	Antique dentist's chair						
	(3) Stools			2 work table, 1 counter			
	Counter						
	Work table			Old			
	Coat rack						
	Shiny new work table						
	Sign		On door	"open" "closed"			
18	Dust pan		Audrey				
18	Broken flowerpots		Audrey	In pan- "terracotta" pieces			
19	Cleaning rag		Seymour				
21	Leftover sandwich		Wino #1	Lettuce and white bread			
21	Roses		Audrey	Limp, lifeless			
22	Pod #1		Seymour	Large, but sickly; expandable			
24	Cobweb		Set-Dressing	On-register			
24	Roses		Audrey	Dead			
24	Monster movie magazine		Crystal	Oversized			
26	Plant food		Seymour				
26	Spray/spritzer bottle		Seymour	For watering plants			
27	Blood	*	Seymour	Pricks finger, and feeds Audrey II			

Figure 5.29 One page from a revised props list.

and take blocking—those pictorial notes in boxes on the dance-specific backing sheets. The SM often has an additional primary task of running sound each day.

If the stage manager is hired part time, only some of these tasks may be yours. You might only be expected to attend occasional rehearsals until production time nears, in which case the choice of days may be largely up to you. Consider selecting rehearsals in close proximity to meetings so that you are as knowledgeable as possible. You might also be hired full time, but not until week three—after the choreographer has completed creating a new work and is now clarifying and refining it. Both are relatively common scenarios.

In my professional career I have also experienced a third contractual structure: hired to start only a few days before tech rehearsals. In such an instance, the scheduling of costume fittings falls to a different full-time staff member, and an assistant choreographer might handle sound needs in rehearsal. You may or may not have the opportunity to attend meetings. This is common for small ballet companies who are resetting work. This year's production of *Sleeping Beauty* will be identical to the one performed two years ago except for the actual dancers. But you will still need a script! Fortunately when working in these types of short-term situations, the stage manager usually receives some invaluable material at the time of hire: paperwork about scenic pieces and light cues, and a video recording of that previous performance. The creation of a script becomes an offsite project, with the SM noting movement while watching that video. That completed script comes with you to rehearsal, where you can add other relevant detail when finally seeing the dance live. The cue lists will allow you to have your own personal paper tech (discussed in the next chapter), and scenic lists may facilitate a shift plot if one will be required.

This may sound like extreme circumstances, but remember that the dance company will want the show to succeed—and therefore you to succeed as well. I have never been told *no* when asking to attend more rehearsals than required, and I've never had a lighting designer refuse to answer questions about a cue list. If I do not have enough initial information for crew paperwork, a clarification about what was in use last time either leads me to a source for more details or the person who actually prepared it. (In some instances the technical director or lighting designer is a full-time staff member and takes on those responsibilities due to that status.)

## CONCLUDING TIME IN THE HALL

The final days in the rehearsal hall are for refining the work. The stage manager should anticipate running the show multiple times, with each run to be followed by a notes session. Continue to take important character-based notes during this time, and hold on to them for additional assistance during the run of the show.

The SM team is now eagerly anticipating the arrival of crew! We will meet the paperwork distributed to the crew in the next chapter, but it is during these final days when preliminary versions are created and checked to be as thorough as possible.

The stage manager should also make time to visit the theatre as load-in progresses. Adjustments are occasionally necessary as pieces are assembled, and the SM gains the opportunity to alter the rehearsal room spike tape, so the director can address the blocking before arriving on the set if a big change is necessary. If it is feasible, you also might want to arrange a field trip for the cast. Standing onstage for even a few minutes will enable them to more successfully make their own transitions from tape to platforms, and to start incorporating a sense of the theatre into their final rehearsals in the hall.

If you are lucky, your schedule will permit a day or more to rehearse on the set before tech rehearsals begin. This allows sightline adjustments and other small changes to happen in advance and could give the lighting designer a chance to see the actors in place as he or she finishes focusing lights and begins to create cues. The assistant stage managers get a preview of life backstage and may find additional duties that need to be incorporated into the crew paperwork. If such a day does not exist on your original production schedule, the stage manager should inquire about the possibility. You may face time or budgetary restrictions that preclude transition days, but you will never know if you don't ask!



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