

On the Subject of Global Shortage of Theatrical Stage Managers

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We had many months without work in theatre to rethink what we need to create a better work/life balance. A 5 day work week, no more 10 out of 12's, and securing living wages are just a few of the needs being called for as theatre companies look to fill open positions. Now, as Producers, Engagers, and Companies return to production and are eager to fill all their seats as COVID restrictions are lifted, we find ourselves in a mode of "Reset Better Later" rather than "Reset Better Now." Well-being and mental health are our priorities, but we find many productions continue to operate in pre-pandemic mode. Many theatrical Stage Managers (SMs) have decided to pivot to work opportunities such as corporate, film, or TV, or have changed careers to find the work/life balance we seek. This shift has led to a shortage of experienced Stage Managers and technicians in the live theatre industry. Numerous opportunities are coming to SMs who wouldn't normally see places reaching out to them, but they can't say yes as they are already engaged. Instead, early career SMs are taking these job opportunities: jobs they lack experience for or are not as qualified for as they could or should be. Various **Stage Manager Ambassadors of the International Cohort** met to discuss this shortage of veteran SMs and its ramifications as well as some positives that have come out of it.

United Kingdom: Andy Rowley (Executive Director of the **Stage Management Association**) reported that the Freelist they produce to send to employers of members available to work is usually populated with 20-30 Stage Managers. Now the list is down to a handful as many members are gainfully employed. Just as there's more work than qualified SMs to hire, the same can be said for COVID Safety personnel. SMs at smaller venues find that they are taking on the duties of COVID Safety, adding to their workload but not necessarily with more pay. And what was thought to become a standard of rehearsing 2 casts in separate rooms so that there is proper show coverage for call outs, that too is going away as the pandemic continues. This could be due to budget constraints for these contingencies, as well as fewer people available to work a show in this manner.

Australia: Kate Middleton-Olliver (Chair of **Stage Managers Association Australia LTD**) and Darren Kowacki noted that things are super busy for the SMs who are still in the profession. Producers are trying to avoid cancellations. There's not enough crew and virtually no subs or swings. Show stops are becoming commonplace. There are huge safety concerns as positions are being filled with those who have little experience. SMs find that there's not enough time for subs to learn the show and gain the capability to make snap decisions, so they must prioritize what to teach people coming into a new position/show track. The put ins are too quick and sometimes they are forced to cut tracks due to time/safety concerns. So the SM ends up maintaining the artistic vision at a bare minimum. They are trying to not lose rights that were

gained over the course of the pandemic, but at least there is hope in the new Arts Minister, which would mean an increase in arts funding.

Canada: Kat Chin's report echoed many of the same observations. With COVID guidelines relaxed and everyone wanting to get their show open, the sense of caution is lost. Canadian Actors Equity Association (CAEA) noted about 30% of the SM membership has left for film or other careers with stable and steady work. Even IATSE crew have been moving over to film work. Canada has been following through with establishing the 5-day work week though they do revert back to a 6-day work week when tech begins. Cutting 10 out of 12's is also on the rise. CAEA renegotiated contracts so that the pay scale has gone up and apprentices now make minimum wage (they used to not be protected). As in the UK, smaller companies are also trying to add the COVID Safety role to the SM position.

India: Keyur Shah (Founder of Stage Managers Association India) noted that they are back to work and seem to be thriving. Many events operate as a hybrid of virtual and in person. SMA India has helped with SMs getting respect and producers understanding about the jobs they do, and the pay scale has improved.

New Zealand (NZ): Lucie Everett-Brown's report continued in the same vein. Half of the NZ workforce has moved over to film, so the theatre industry is hurting and it still doesn't pay enough. Production cancellations were a contributing factor of people leaving due to the uncertainty of work. Those still in theatrical stage management contemplate moving overseas to seek out work. Young Stage Managers are being hired into experienced positions but not given guidance and support to succeed. COVID Safety is still needed but New Zealand never had a separate COVID Safety personnel attached to productions. There has also been a culture of no understudies/covers as they are usually not budgeted. But now, there's a movement to employ them and the next step is to get companies to include coverage for stage managers and crew. As with smaller companies in the UK, New Zealand often employs just one Stage Manager for a production. It's a liability when stage management is meant to keep an eye on safety. Those still working in the industry find this is an opportunity to push companies to hire more than one SM on a show.

Spain: Margarita Sanchez Gonzalez and María Dávila (both members of [Asociación de Regiduría de Espectáculos](#)) noted similarities to other countries and that it's an exciting time to be working in the industry in Spain right now. It's a great chance to choose between many job offers and to ask for better conditions. For those who took the time to work and learn from the audiovisual industry, it has been advantageous. Events employers and private theatres are looking for SM profiles with this skilled knowledge. There is a great opportunity for many students to jump into professional jobs – and they are coming in with fresh ideas and enthusiasm.

Mexico: Paz Zavaleta noted the plethora of opportunities and the ability to negotiate for a better work/life balance. Budgets still remain low though, so pay is still not as good as it could be for the workload it compensates. Stage Managers with skills to work in a hybrid setting are highly sought after.

Germany: Daniela Tatto observed there's the feeling in Germany that if you decided to go into this profession, you knew what you were getting into. In Germany, there is no official way to train as a Stage Manager.

South Africa: Dian Harcovecchio said they are going strong as they adjust, push and work with what they have. Productions are starting up again but they too have lost some amazing and skilled people to different industries, and a lot of them are determined to stay there. It feels like those who are left are hanging on by a thread. For opera, they have less than a handful of opera-specific stage managers remaining.

Asia & the Middle East: Anna Robb reported they have the money and the ambition in these areas. She expects to see large entertainment growth in these regions over the coming 10 years. It was already happening but it's getting bigger now that COVID is "out of the way." Those looking to work overseas may find some lucrative and exciting opportunities in places like Dubai, Shanghai, and Macau.

The concern from several countries about recent grads and early career Stage Managers getting hired into positions that normally require more experienced and seasoned Stage Managers is huge. It's exciting that these opportunities exist for them, but, when they do get hired, the employer is often not offering mentoring or training to help them succeed and support the show. This is especially affecting BIPOC SMs who are starting their careers. Companies that hire early career BIPOC SMs often do so to check off the diversity box on their agendas, as well as to fill a job, but are not following through to support them. Opportunity is not the same as, nor equal to, training.

There is a clear indication that many companies and producers have yet to budget for people. SMs are being negotiated down on their salary around the world. SMs are also making discoveries on the job that perhaps the salary isn't compensating what they are required to do. Producers and companies in the USA still think they can get away with paying low wages while AEA continues to be behind on salary rates compared to IATSE. The UK is at a standstill on raising wages. Producers continue to bank on the idea that passion for the work is part of the salary. Shows continue to be built on the bones of mental and physical health being compromised. And with the rate of inflation – if there's a per diem, it's not enough. Ada Zhang noted that the cost of lodging and other expenses in cities visited by tours continues to rise, and producers can't seem to grasp that when there are special events in a certain location, the costs of everything is generally higher.

Despite the nuggets of positives from this discussion, ultimately, Stage Managers continue to be burdened – directly and indirectly. The excitement of being back to work shouldn't outshine what we intended to gain. Producers need to implement higher standards now (not later) so that Stage Managers can support their productions to the best of our ability. The "show must go on" mentality does not serve anymore. Stage Managers can help with redefining and setting a healthy workplace environment and practices. Trade organizations and unions can help forward this advocacy and support the individual so that working conditions in the theatre industry around the world can be changed sooner and for the better.

The International Cohort will be utilizing International Stage Management Day on October 10th to vocalize and advocate on all this. We will showcase the areas and companies that continue to fall short on improving work/life situations for those they hire. We will call them out to "**Reset Better Now, Not Later**". Join us as we make noise on October 10th and beyond. If you have an idea or wish to assist with this campaign, [**contact the International Cohort**](#).