

Honor the Work



Respect the Workers

Stage manager likes to stay out of spotlight

By Pamela Monk

Meet Maggie Maietta. Clipboard, headset, flashlight, watch. These are her tools. "Warning," "Stand by," "Go." These are her words of power.

She's a stage manager: indispensable, reliable and rock solid.

People go to a show to be entertained by performers whose roles are clear. Even the most casual theatergoer has an archetypical image of the director at work—shouting orders through a megaphone, wearing a beret and discussing motivations. And there are many others: someone designs and builds a set, someone makes the costumes, someone runs the lights, someone changes the scenery between acts.

The contributions of this loose confederation of artists must be precisely coordinated so that when the curtain goes up, the performance appears as one beautiful, inevitable, seamless whole. The stage manager provides the necessary adhesive.

A stage manager's work begins well before the first rehearsal and continues until the curtain comes down on the last performance, the actors clear out, the set is struck and the keys are turned in. An incompetent stage manager can damage a show; performers need, above all, to feel secure. A competent stage manager helps provide the sense of safety and trust that allows the artists to do their best work. A fabulous stage manager gets performers as close to a guarantee of peace of mind as they can get in live performance. That's Maggie Maietta.

"I originally intended to study acting, but I found that although I was good at audi-

tions, I was too terrified on stage to let go enough to really become a character," explained Maietta, who arrived in State College to study theatre at Penn State after a stint at Point Park College in Pittsburgh. "I was involved back stage, often working lights, and I saw what a stage manager does. 'Cool,' I thought. 'I can do that.'"

Maietta graduated from Penn State and has stage-managed shows in the region since the late 1970s. She has worked for Contemporary Dance Company, Pennsylvania Music Theatre, The State College Community Theatre, Next Stage, The State Theatre and the Pennsylvania Dance Theatre, among others.

"For some companies, like Next Stage, they want me there at auditions, since I know the community," she said in an interview between meetings about yet another production. "After that, I get to the rehearsal space early, and I set it up. I am a schedule maker, a liaison between the cast, the crew and the director."

Maietta puts together the contact information, communicates with the cast, and serves as both a buffer and an open channel representing the best interests of the cast while carrying out the requests of the director. "I also keep a written record of the blocking (the movements of the cast), a detailed record of how the show is put together." This includes every production element: what lights go on when, which piece of scenery moves, who moves it and when any special effects are to take place. These are known as cues.

"There can be 50 to 75 cue calls in a show," Maietta said. "A dance may have a

cue change every 30 seconds." Dance is the best of all, she said. "It's all movement and sound; there are very few language cues. You almost become part of the dance as you call the show."

Calling the show is the main responsibility of the stage manager once the rehearsal period is over. That's when, traditionally, the director's work is finished. The stage manager is responsible for making sure the show plays as rehearsed. This means that the stage manager signals every cue to the crew member in charge of handling it.

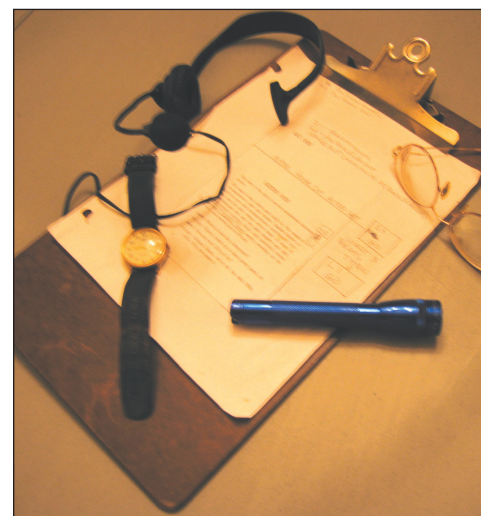
"Nothing happens until I say GO," explained Maietta. For example, a light may need to go on when an actor hits a switch. "I give a warning and then say STAND BY, but until I say GO, no light."

In a live show, any number of things can (and will) happen to make the timing different from night to night. The stage manager ensures that the desired effect happens properly, without interrupting the flow of the action.

What is most satisfying about her work?

"When everything falls into place," she said, "and the timing is perfect." It takes organization, diplomacy, attention to detail, patience and being able to think quickly on your feet. "Sometimes I come across as negative, but it's just that I have to anticipate everything that might go wrong and have a backup plan."

Case in point: "Back when the Pennsylvania Musical Theatre was still in operation, they were staging *Pirates of Penzance* in Gatsby's. The set designer had painted the scenery on the stage, and so had repainted the stage black to clean it up. The



Stage manager Maggie Maietta wouldn't permit Voices to take her photo, but she did allow us to photograph some of her tools of the trade.

trouble was, he used an oil-based glossy paint that wasn't going to dry in time. To make matters worse, just before showtime, he had the crew walking all over the stage trying to dry it. The director considered canceling. I remembered there was carpet stored under the stage. We pulled it out and laid it over as much as we could. I ran to Kmart to buy enough carpet to cover the rest. We had to scrape it off the stage after the show, but it worked."

"It's only been recently that I've been able to say I'm good at this," Maietta said. Fans of local productions have benefited from her talent, but probably didn't know it. Other than her name on the program, there is no obvious manifestation of the enormous influence she has on the show. And that's exactly how she wants it.

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