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***The Importance of Seeming Earnest:  
Emotion Work and Leadership in Theater Worlds\****

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**ABSTRACT**

Although leaders can always use formal power to establish their authority, they do so at risk of alienating group members. By studying theater workers who must establish authority without having the opportunity to establish their expertise, I find a third way of establishing authority: through emotion work that shows commitment to the group and its goals. By employing in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and qualitative content analysis, I find that stage managers establish their concern for the show and key actors by acting as emotional buffers, creating a safe psychological space, and preparing actors for the transition to performance. All of this work comes out of an emotional ideology that puts the good of the show first. Other leaders may be able to employ a similar emotional ideology to influence group members.

**KEY WORDS** Emotion Work; Leadership; Authority; Theater; Stage Managers

Leaders draw upon a number of resources to get others to follow the decisions they make. As Lovaglia et al. (2008) describe, leaders can draw upon both power and influence to accomplish their goals. Sociologists have studied the many power bases that individuals may draw from in order to claim that they have power over other individuals. These bases may stem from their positions in organizations, such as formal bureaucratic power, or from their control over resources such as expertise. Using formal power, however, risks alienating group members and makes drawing on influence a better strategy for most leaders. Drawing on influence is particularly important for managers when they do not have access to traditional power bases and yet still need to manage other people (Lovaglia et al. 2008; Pescosolido 2002). What happens when individuals have less authority in some situations yet need to develop authority over time? The case of theatrical stage managers provides an opportunity to explore this question. Stage managers start with limited authority over the casts that they manage in the rehearsal process, because directors exercise primary authority over a cast. After opening night,

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however, the director has often left the show, leaving the stage manager with the sole responsibility for maintaining the show.

Stage managers are responsible for ensuring that actors keep their performances consistent over the run of the show. This task is made even more difficult because most directors and actors expect that the way an actor plays a role will change and develop over the course of a run. Consistent performances, therefore, are not identical performances, and the stage manager must balance the intentions of the director against the need for a production to change and grow within the limits set by the director. Without the ability to exert authority over the actors, the stage manager cannot hope to accomplish his or her job. Thus, stage managers must find ways to develop and maintain authority over the course of the production process. This paper describes the importance of emotion work even in formal work organizations. More specifically, stage managers take on the role of caretakers<sup>1</sup> for the show and the people in it. This allows them to demonstrate their commitment to the overall success of the show; this commitment in turn can stand in for artistic expertise as a base of power in art worlds.

Stage managers establish themselves as caretakers in a number of ways. They act as emotional buffers for members of the cast and the production team—the designers, workshop employees, and others charged with creating all of the aspects of the play beyond acting. For example, stage managers allow actors and other artists involved in the creation of theater to behave brusquely toward members of the stage-management team if it will allow the process of creating the play to run more smoothly. A stage manager might accept an actor swearing instead of calling for a line. Unlike members of the stage-management team, actors are not expected to consider the feelings of others in their interactions. Stage managers absorb emotional abuse and smooth over interpersonal conflicts between individuals. Stage managers also work to create a safe psychological space for the actors and director during the rehearsal process, shielding the actors and director from the realities of the outside world. They pride themselves on anticipating the needs of the director and cast, believing that the room should be free of anything that might distract the actors from their work. Finally, technical rehearsals entail a long and often grueling process for actors. Stage managers have work responsibilities that keep them from interacting closely with actors; they prepare actors for this process by making the actors feel as safe as possible and by reminding them of the long hours of technical rehearsals that they will face.

These caretaking actions are motivated by a specific emotional ideology of the stage manager: to work for “the good of the show.” Stage managers state that the best way to establish their authority is to demonstrate to the artistic staff that their loyalties are to the show as a whole rather than to a particular aspect of it. They argue that the most important factor in their ability to gain authority over a cast is earning the cast’s trust. Stage managers take this ideology to heart. They judge their success or failure by, and gain their greatest enjoyment from, the overall success of the show.

## **METHODS**

I employed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and qualitative documentary analysis. I obtained my interview sample by cold-calling or e-mailing production directors of theater companies and theater programs in two Midwestern cities and one Southern city and expanded my sample through snowball sampling. I interviewed thirty-seven theater world members, including twenty-three stage managers. In addition to interviewing stage managers, I interviewed actors, directors, and stagehands affiliated with the productions I observed. Interviews ranged anywhere from forty-five minutes to two hours, with interviews with stage managers typically being one and half to two times longer than those with other theater professionals.

I also conducted extensive participant observation of two full productions, following (in each case) a three-person stage-management team through their activities at work, arriving when they arrived, and leaving when they left. As a part of these observations, I accumulated a number of documents that I analyzed along with my interview and field-note transcripts. Stage managers, as a part of their jobs, generate an enormous amount of paperwork. For every day of rehearsal, production meeting, and day of performances, a stage manager generally writes and distributes, via e-mail, a rehearsal or performance report to all of the personnel involved in the production. I was able to obtain all of these reports for both productions that I observed.

Guided by the grounded theory methods suggested in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and Anselm Strauss's *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987) and developed by other theorists (Charmaz 2006), I coded my data thematically and looked for themes to emerge. I did this coding iteratively throughout the process, developing my focus in both interviews and observations based on the emergent themes. One of the questions from the interview guide asked, "What is your relationship with the company? The director? Other theatre staff? ... What should these relationships be?" Based on the answers to these questions, an emergent theme was that of issues around leadership and authority.

## **AUTHORITY, LEADERSHIP, AND BASES OF POWER**

Many sociologists have catalogued the bases of power upon which leaders draw to elicit compliance from others. In general, these bases can come from a number of sources based on organizational position or resource control. Resource control may include control over rewards (French and Raven 1959), punishments (French and Raven 1959), or expertise (Eulau 1962; French and Raven 1959; Mukerji 1976; Presthus 1960; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 1999).

Control of resources is one of the more effective bases of power, but wielding of that power is not equally available to all potential leaders. Not every leader has the ability to punish or reward individuals under their control, and even when they do, doing so risks alienating their followers (Lovaglia et al. 2008). Leaders may also have expertise that makes them invaluable to others, allowing them to demand respect for their power within the realm of their expertise. Within art worlds, would-be leaders often express this

expertise as having particular artistic skills or vision. Mukerji (1976), for example, argues that specialized knowledge as an artist is one power base that members of student film crews draw upon. The filmmakers express this by being particularly creative or expressive in their ideas. This artistic ability is a particularly important base of power in all art worlds. Although stage managers may or may not be able to claim artistic abilities (Kordsmeier 2011), they are not usually given opportunities to express such abilities in the rehearsal process.

## **EMOTION WORK AND LEADERSHIP**

When stage managers act as caretakers for the show, they focus both on the mundane tasks involved in running the show and on the social and emotional needs of the cast and artistic staff. Stage managers use positive socioemotional interaction to establish themselves as the socioemotional leaders of the group during the rehearsal process in order to legitimize their own instrumental leadership once performances begin. Stage managers use the caretaking role to show commitment to the cast and to the show, and in the process, they are able to gain authority over cast members. My ethnographic research provides new evidence that displaying positive socioemotional behavior is one way in which low-status members can improve their status in small group settings.

Managing the emotional outcomes of interaction is something that members of society do in every face-to-face interaction. As Goffman (1959) noted, we create performances that must both facilitate our instrumental goals and at the same time prevent either party from experiencing negative emotional reactions. Work groups are an important situational context in which socioemotional work is exhibited and experienced by members of the group.

Leaders are expected to perform emotion work as a key component of their jobs and may be called upon to enact a variety of emotions depending on the circumstance (Humphrey, Pollack, and Hawver 2008; Rogalin and Hirshfield 2013). Leaders who can understand and respond to group members' emotional states have happier and higher-performing groups (George 2000; Humphrey et al. 2008; Rogalin and Hirshfield 2013). Group members find leaders' emotion work most effective when the leaders seem to have a sincere investment in the success and well-being of the group (Dasborough and Ashkanasy 2002; Humphrey 2008). All of the evidence points to the idea that skilled leaders are also skilled emotion managers. Indeed, emotional skills can serve as a viable way of obtaining leadership positions. Côté et al. (2010) found that emotional intelligence was a key path to emergent leadership (that is, leadership in groups with no set organizational structure), and that this emotional intelligence was distinct from cognitive traits, personality, and gender.

Other research offers insight into the mechanisms that allow socioemotional behavior to translate into power. First, research has shown that sentiments—that is, liking or disliking another—affect competency expectations. Group members who are liked are more likely to be assessed by other group members as the most capable to perform a given task (Shelly 2001). Second, perceived group orientation has a considerable effect

on the status of individuals within a group. Individuals who appear to be highly group-motivated are afforded higher status within the group, particularly when they start out as a low-status member (Ridgeway 1982). Positive socioemotional behavior includes exhibiting a strong commitment to the group and to the task at hand and thus affords low-status members a higher status. Thus, the experimental literature seems to suggest that positive socioemotional behavior may lead to greater status and leadership within small groups. This status can be used to influence group members to do what the leader wants them to do. One way in which this positive socioemotional behavior can be understood is as a successful display of emotion work.

### **EMOTION WORK AND STAGE MANAGERS**

The idea that stage managers are important emotion managers in the theater is not a new idea. In his study of actors as emotion managers, Orzechowicz (2008) notes that many individuals in the theater who are involved in the production of a play are also engaged in emotion work:

Actors, engaged in *primary* feeling management, focused on their own emotions, are responsible for only a few aspects of the show. They rely on ushers, house managers, stage managers, dressers, crew, and directors to oversee many other parts of the production. People in these roles, responsible for managing many offstage sources of emotion and distraction, are engaged in *secondary* feeling management, the management of others' emotions. These rarely acknowledged layers of *emotional buffers* structurally enable actors' feeling management. (146, emphasis in the original)

Although Orzechowicz astutely identifies the role that all members of a company have in managing the emotions of others, his focus on the emotional labor required of actors leaves the emotional labor of others largely undifferentiated. Stage managers engage in emotion management not only with actors but also with most of the other emotion managers mentioned above. Stage managers are the main emotion managers for directors and serve as both the socioemotional and instrumental leaders of the production staff, which includes house managers, crew, and dressers.

The caretaker role can be understood as a special case of feeling rules, as described by Hochschild (1979, 1983). Feeling rules help individuals know which emotions are appropriate to display or even feel within a given situation. Hochschild writes that feeling rules may become a part of a larger emotional ideology that serves as an interpretive framework to condition responses to events in interaction. These feeling rules can legitimize or delegitimize our emotional reactions, allowing us to evaluate how to feel about what we are feeling (Hochschild 1979). This is central to an understanding of which emotions are appropriate to be displayed and felt within certain environments. Yet, drawing

upon the work of researchers such as Bolton and Boyd (2003), this does not necessarily indicate that such emotional ideologies are in some sense inauthentic. Indeed, these emotional ideologies may be part of what attracts an individual to a particular career. In the case of stage managers, the emotional ideology that they take on is that of caretaker. This ideology shapes their emotional reactions such that they interpret success and gain their greatest satisfactions by adhering to this ideology.

## **THE PRODUCTION PROCESS AND THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF AUTHORITY**

In order to understand why stage managers draw upon emotion work and the caretaker identity to create authority, it is important to understand the changing context of authority inherent in the work that stage managers do. As stated in the introduction, stage managers are present for all of the acting rehearsals and are responsible for keeping things running smoothly and assisting the director and actors in their jobs. At this stage of the process, however, the director is clearly in charge of the rehearsal, setting the agenda, deciding when a particular scene has been rehearsed enough times, and acting as final arbiter of artistic disputes. The stage manager has some authority in this context; he or she is the one who calls actors if they are late for rehearsal and, in Equity companies, is the individual responsible for ensuring that breaks occur with enough frequency to meet union rules. Their authority, however, is limited to these nonartistic management tasks, and a stage manager is never asked to make artistic decisions. Indeed, stage managers are rarely asked to offer artistic input. In production meetings, the director and stage manager take on a dynamic similar to the one in the rehearsal room. In these meetings, the stage manager is second in command to the director, never making artistic decisions and rarely offering artistic input. Instead, the stage manager is often called upon to help the director report on anything that might have developed within rehearsals and that will have an impact on the larger production.

The second part of the process, technical rehearsals, is when the behind-the-scenes and acting elements of the play begin to merge. The stage manager now must keep track not only of actors but also of all of the members of the technical crew who are crucial to the production: light board operators, sound board operators, the running crew, and others. Here, stage managers begin to display more authority, although that authority is primarily over the technical crew rather than the actors. The director is still present throughout technical rehearsals and is the one who gives notes to the actors on their performances.

After the technical rehearsal period come the performances. In most professional theater, the director leaves after opening night. After the play has opened, the stage manager then becomes the sole authority for both cast and crew. It is the stage manager who decides whether the actors need a brush-up rehearsal and who schedules that rehearsal for the cast. The stage manager also calls shows during production, cueing the crew and occasionally the cast about when they are supposed to perform specific tasks. The stage manager is there to maintain the tempo of the show set by the director, much like a conductor maintains the tempo of an orchestra that is set by the composer. Stage managers' responsibility to direct both the technical activities of the crew and the acting

of the cast, as well as their responsibility for the entire show once it enters performances, requires them to have authority over both the cast and crew. This shift in stage managers' authority over the course of a production presents a problem for the stage managers.

### **STAGE MANAGERS AND AUTHORITY OVER THE CAST**

Although stage managers may be limited in their authority in the preproduction rehearsal process, there are several mundane aspects of the rehearsal process that fall under their authority from the very beginning, as discussed previously. Still, stage managers do not have control over any of the creative activity during rehearsals. When I spoke with one stage manager, Alex,<sup>2</sup> about the relationship between stage managers and the director in the rehearsal hall, and whether she would consider them equals, she said,

I wouldn't say equal; I'd say we work next to each other. The director has a different job in that room; they have a different kind of authority; their role is definitely an entirely different category. The stage manager gets to tell the director, "We need to stop now," and "We need to start now," but other than that, you know, two totally different things, and I mean, depending upon the director; some of them can get off topic or off goal, and the stage manager kind of needs to push them back and say, "We're not getting as far as we need to." I guess, you work side by side in two different categories; I mean, the director has the artistic ability and gets to say, "Let's try it this way, let's line this way." The stage manager really has no right to say that.

Stage managers do not have the opportunity to display any artistic ability in the rehearsal room—Alex goes so far as to suggest that directors are the ones who have the actual artistic ability—yet the stage manager is going to need to wield this type of authority once performances begin, telling actors how to deliver their lines (even if it is only to say that they need to deliver how they were delivering it before). Thus, stage managers must find another basis for their authority over the cast.

Stage managers argue that the only way to obtain this authority is to display a commitment to the overall show that inspires the other members of the production to trust in them. One stage manager, Wendy, relates,

When you're in a position where you have to go up to an actor and tell them that ... the director is gone and you can't do that on stage ... they have to be able to trust you to know that you're making a decision based on what happened in rehearsal and what's happening in the play as it's growing, and the only way to do any of those things ...



[is] if you say that you're going to do something, do it!  
(Laugh) ... I just feel that the only way to gain people's  
trust is to be trustworthy.

By showing dependability and respect from the very beginning, this stage manager shows herself to be not only a good stage manager but also someone the actors can trust to take care of them. From this perspective, it is important for a stage manager to show that he or she is an ally of the actors.

Stage managers must build this relationship through rapport because they have limited opportunities to display that they have an artistic sensibility. Rehearsals do not offer stage managers the opportunity to display creative expertise. Actors, directors, and stage managers alike frown upon a stage manager offering unsolicited opinions about creative aspects of the show to the director or actors. When I asked one stage manager, Ella, if she thought that an artistic sensibility was important, she replied, "Yes, but it's important, especially early on, that you remember to keep that in check, because you are not there to contribute, really, your artistic sensibility." Because they are not afforded the opportunity to display their artistic expertise, stage managers rely on emotion work to display care for the production and the cast, and in this way substitute one source of authority for another. Stage managers acting in the service of the show lets cast members know that the stage managers have the best intentions at heart for the show, and thus that the decisions they make reflect the best interests of the show.

This commitment to the show forms the core of the emotion work that stage managers do in establishing their power. One stage manager, Hal, when asked how he maintained authority, stated,

The stage managers who just are there because they want to feel authority and they want to feel power, and they want to feel that they're in control, are not there for the play. The thing about a stage manager, as far as I'm concerned, ... is that we are there to be of service, we are there to be of service to the play and to the production, first and foremost, and falling into all of that comes helping the director, comes being a resource for the actors, comes being someone that's the hub of communication for all the different areas, but it all comes from being of service to the play, it has to originate with that. Otherwise, if it's like a personal power play that you're doing, then you're just full of bullshit, you need to go somewhere else, work somewhere else.

This stage manager suggests that even wanting to have that control over others indicates that a stage manager has overstepped his or her bounds. Instead, the stage manager should focus on making the show the best it can be. From this commitment to the production, he suggests, the stage manager will find much more success both professionally and personally. This includes having the proper amount of authority to complete his job.

Stage managers might employ other, more formal, power bases in order to obtain compliance from actors. Stage managers have formal rules that allow them to maintain power over the actors with whom they work. The Actors' Equity Association (AEA) Stage Manager Packet contains a page titled "Responsibilities of the Actor," which at the top has written in bold, "Please Post." Among the responsibilities that the actor has toward the production are these:

- Observe all reasonable rules of the management not in conflict with Equity rules.
- Cooperate with the Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Managers, Dance Captain and Fight Captain.
- Maintain your performance as directed.

...

Your Stage Manager is obligated to report violations to Equity and Equity will, when necessary, call before a Membership Relations Committee any member who violates these rules.

**Discipline is a sign of professionalism. Pleases maintain a professional attitude at all times.** (Actors' Equity Association 2006:4, emphasis in the original)

The stage managers I observed, however, did not make recourse to such rules in their dealings with actors. Notes were always couched in terms of what was best for the show; for instance, the actor notes in one performance report by Rebecca states, "Barry: P. 39 Dancing Men (Ent. UL/Ext. DL 'Excuse me, where is the bathroom?') Don't rush the exit, leaving Horatio alone." The stage manager offers a note that lets Barry know that if he is not careful with his exit, he risks making Horatio look foolish by leaving him alone on stage. Rebecca, through her phrasing of the note, shows both Barry and Horatio that the note is not an arbitrary decision on her part but rather has consequences for Horatio. In turn, this demonstrates that the notes that she offers come from her concern for the good of the show.

Three major ways that stage managers do emotion work let the actors know that the stage manager's first concern is the good of the show. Stage managers act as emotion buffers for the cast, create a safe psychological space, and prepare actors for any potential disruptions, particularly at the transition to technical rehearsals.

### *Emotional Buffers*

Stage managers serve as emotional buffers for actors over the course of a show, particularly during the rehearsal process. The stage manager has to be ready to serve as

an outlet for the emotions that actors may be feeling, sometimes going so far as to accept any abuse that comes his or her way. For instance, Wendy recounts,

You anticipate the way that [actors] like things, the way that they need to be spoken to, the way that ... certain situations have to be handled. Like, for instance, there's an actor that we work with; his name is Nathan Pittman. He is a sweet older man, and I think very, very highly of him. When he's frustrated, he tends to really bark at people, but it's not personal. And Andrew Rogers, when he is calling for a line, he tends to shout, "What?" or "Fuck!" ... And he tends to be looking right at you when he's shouting these things—it's not personal, and ... we know these things.

Stage managers anticipate that actors will use them as emotional buffers from time to time, and they even learn how to anticipate those occurrences as they work with the same actors more than once. Indeed, part of the job for Wendy, as she sees it, is to learn the quirks of the actors with whom she works, especially those with whom she works regularly. Thus, the emotion work is seen as part of a learning process. One way to discern whether there is a valid complaint behind the curses that flow from the actor's lips is to know whether that person's behavior is congruent with his or her past behavior. Stage managers are often called upon to act as the emotional buffers for actors in order to help actors stay in character during the rehearsal process. To ensure that an actor can concentrate all of his or her energy on creating a fully realized performance, the stage manager allows that actor to breach normal expectations of decorum. The actor is allowed to make emotional displays that violate those expectations.

The stage manager serves as an emotional buffer for members of the production staff as well. The stage manager needs to ensure that the rest of the members of the company are able to work with each other and avoid emotional conflict. Sometimes this means taking the brunt of someone's emotional outburst. Other times, it may require the stage manager to step in and head off conflict. One stage manager, Karen, relates,

The head of the costume shop is very sensitive about things being his fault—he will blame everyone else, yelling at actors for missing fittings. I have to make them understand what they need to do, that it's not their fault, and also to pacify Micah. A lot of times it comes down to being the mediator, taking the blame sometimes even when it's not your fault.

A good stage manager may choose an uncomfortable position. Making the emotional sacrifice of taking responsibility for someone else's mistake is not easy to do, especially when tempers are running high between the designer and the actor, but doing so allows

the show to function. The stage manager either must step in and act as the mediator or even go to the extreme of taking the blame upon himself or herself.

Serving as an emotional buffer continues into the performances. The actors may encounter all kinds of interpersonal conflicts over the course of a performance, and the stage manager must act as an emotional buffer and relieve the stresses that come up in the course of a show. Rebecca, for instance, offered this note in the performance notes one night:

I was surprised to be met after the show by a distressed Erica. She was in tears and presented me with a list of five notes she wanted me to give Elena regarding responses that have appeared during the course of the run. I hadn't found these as problematic as she did because, frankly, it was nice to see Elena open up and become more responsive. Erica and I discussed it and I'll find a happy medium with Elena.

Here, Rebecca finds that she must satisfy the emotional needs of one of her actors by stepping into the situation and having a conversation with another actor. This is a part of maintaining the show that requires any stage manager to balance his or her own ideas about what is for the good of the show and what needs to be done in order to ensure that the actors feel as though they are accordant with the other actors in the play. It is important to note here that Rebecca feels that her artistic judgment of the play is just as important as satisfying the emotional needs of the actor. The two must be balanced—"[she'll] find a happy medium"—because at this point in the production, the emotional needs of the actors cannot outweigh the attendant artistic needs of the show. The stage manager is now the ultimate authority when it comes to the artistic maintenance of the show, and the maintenance of the show must remain her primary responsibility.

By taking emotional abuse from actors or other members of the production staff, stage managers allow those other individuals to go about their work without pausing to consider how best to express their needs and desires. Stage managers may also take on emotional abuse to head off conflict between individuals, or may serve as sounding boards in order to accomplish the same goal. In all of these cases, stage managers, by acting as emotional buffers, help to lubricate the interpersonal machinery of theatrical productions, allowing the creative work to be done much more smoothly than would otherwise be possible, while also displaying to the actors that someone cares for them.

### *Creating a Safe Psychological Space*

Another way in which the stage manager embodies the caretaker role is working ensure that everyone involved in the production has what he or she needs in order to do the best job possible. Wendy, when asked about the importance of the role of stage managers, remarked,

I think it allows people like the director and actor to do their work without having to worry about extraneous

matters. ... Theater ... has expanded so much and involves so many different areas and different mediums that it requires someone who can help coordinate all of those different aspects and still maintain a sense of wholeness to it, and that directly comes under the auspices of the director, but I think that the stage manager can assist the director in that regard, as well as taking care of details and minutiae that the director doesn't need to be worried about—[for example,] communicating to the costume shop how long that quick change is going to be.

Stage managers are there to make sure that everyone else can do their jobs. Their commitment is to the entire production, and part of that means having a commitment to assisting all of the individuals who are involved with the production.

As stage managers described their duties, one phrase occurred repeatedly: “good environment.” Many stage managers saw the good environment as something that was crucial for them to create. Will, for example, describes his duties like this:

Well, even though it seems like coffee and a lot of things like that, there's a lot of preparation involved as far as pleasing actors and directors and making sure that ... I would call more of that creating a good environment. I mean, you want to make sure that everything's ready so they can come into the space and they're ready to go, they're ready to work. So I mean everything ... I mean, it's the idea of going to a hotel and everything's clean and it's furnished.

For Will, his job is to ensure that the physical space is prepared in such a way that the director and actors do not have to worry about the mundane concerns that might otherwise occupy them. It is interesting to notice that Will uses the metaphor of a hotel in describing how the room is set up for the director and actors. It brings to mind the idea of walking into a room where you do not have to think about the mundane chores that are necessary to maintain your own room at home: At home, you are the one ensuring that things are clean and furnished; at a hotel, the work of cleaning and furnishing your room is done when you are not present, which frees you from thinking about the work that is being done on your behalf.

Creating a psychological barrier between the mundane world and the activities of the theater and the theatrical process is something that is intimately tied to the creation of a physical space separated from the outside world. Wendy describes how taking care of physical needs also means taking care of psychological needs:

I feel responsible, very much so, for the rehearsal hall and the setting up of all of that and making the environment

there as accurate as possible and as comfortable as possible for any of the actors that are there as well as the director. So that they can create as best they can without having to worry about little details. ... So that they are free to do what they need to do and don't get bogged down.

By creating a space where the actors feel as if someone is taking care of them, meeting their needs so that the technical details will not distract them, the stage manager ensures that the actors are able to do what they need to do.

Actors often talk about this atmosphere as the creation of a safe space. Tom relates,

You can really feel when a stage manager is on top of a production, from the very beginning. And ... when rehearsing theater, when performing theater, how important it is to have a safe playground, a safe place to create, and the stability of the stage manager is a huge piece of that, to establish that place, that place of safety.

For Tom, this feeling of safety is the biggest part of the emotion work that a stage manager does over the course of the production. Here, he relates the need for a safe place from the very beginning of rehearsals. It is crucial for an actor to have a safe space to play and create, in order to do his or her job.

The importance of maintaining that workspace involves managing the emotions of the actors and directors, because the workspace is not just a physical place for the artists involved but is also a psychological one. For instance, stage managers like to anticipate any needs that directors or actors might have, and to meet the needs of those individuals before they can say something about the issue. Sometimes it is as simple as anticipating that it is too noisy outside the rehearsal hall for actors to concentrate. From my rehearsal notes:

Leslie [an assistant stage manager] jumps up and runs out as a din arises outside the rehearsal room. She says, "Ladies and gentlemen, we have started rehearsal, so please keep the noise down." As she walks back into the room, Bethany [an actor] says to her, "I love that. You did that before I had to ask."

Other times, it can be as simple as anticipating that actors or a director might want a certain prop with which to rehearse. One stage manager, Rebecca, told a story to the other members of the stage management team that, to her, exemplified the pride that people at this particular theater took in anticipating the needs of actors. When she was the stage manager for *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a play in which the first act takes place in a Chinese restaurant, she was so proud on the day in rehearsal that the director asked if stage management could maybe get some fortune cookies with which the actors could rehearse in the next rehearsal and she was able to tell the director that she already had fortune cookies in the room. Stage managers see anticipating the needs of directors and actors as

an important component of allowing the actors and directors to concentrate on working on the scene that they are rehearsing, rather than on logistical queries that take them out of the scene. By preparing the physical space of the rehearsal room, as well as themselves, to take care of tasks efficiently during rehearsal, stage managers help create safe psychological spaces in which actors can work, yet stage managers also work to prepare actors themselves for transitions in the production process.

### *Preparation for the Transition to Technical Rehearsals and Beyond*

Preparation takes many forms as the cast makes the transition to technical rehearsals. One aspect of technical rehearsals that stage managers must consider is that this is the first time that actors will spend time in the actual stage area. The stage has a different configuration from the rehearsal room, a problem that is often compounded by low lights and many new obstacles in the path of the actors. In the shows I followed, one of the first things that happened when actors finally arrived onstage was a safety walk-through. Led in part by stage management, these walk-throughs highlighted potential hazards for the actors. Stage managers emphasized repeatedly that actors should not hesitate to call, “Hold!” if they felt unsafe. Stage management was on hand to allay any actors’ fears about their safety. For instance, during the first technical rehearsal of one play, the actors were not used to coming on for a scene change in such low light. Because of this, Carrie, the main stage manager, had Abby, the assistant stage manager, place glow tape on the stairs. The fact that this was done in front of the actors but before any of them requested it only helped to illustrate to the actors that they were in safe hands with this group of stage managers.

This preparation allows stage managers to show actors that they care, while also preparing the actors for the production itself. Whereas once the stage manager prepared the rehearsal room so the wishes and needs of actors would be anticipated and fulfilled, now the stage manager prepares the actors for the performances beyond the technical rehearsal. The actors are now more responsible than ever for the maintenance of their performance, and the stage manager, in turn, is the one responsible for ensuring that the performance is in line with everything that came before.

### **EMOTIONAL IDEOLOGY: THE GOOD OF THE SHOW**

Stage managers base the elements of emotion work that they use in obtaining authority on an overarching emotional ideology: that they are there to work for the good of the show. This ideology informs everything they do, from taking emotional abuse to defining success. This means that the stage manager is the one who is ultimately responsible for the success of the show as a whole. When asked what she was responsible for in a production, one stage manager answered,

Everything. (Laughs) Pretty much everything ... you know, even if we’re not directly responsible for it, we are responsible for making sure it happens. You know ... I

can't fix all the little [problems, like] this hole in the wall, but I can make sure that the production manager knows that there is a hole in the wall that needs to be fixed and they make sure that the crew knows that it needs to be fixed and have a work call scheduled to make it be fixed and before our next tech [as well], or whatever.

Even for this stage manager, the job is so all-encompassing and varied that it is hard to conceive of a part of the production that is beyond her purview. Thus, the good of the show is the most important goal for stage managers.

Ultimately, the best defense that a stage manager has against the emotional vagaries of the job is this commitment to the good of the show. A deep commitment to the show helps sustain one stage manager, Hal:

Well, as far as myself personally, I know that I have to take my own personal feelings out of it, which keeps me from having a lot of conflict, so I find that helps me deal with my own personal conflict with other people because it's not personal, I'm not here for me. Again, I can't speak from myself, my own feelings; I have to speak from the play, from the production, what the production needs, and if I do that, and if I sincerely do that, honestly speak in that way, then that's something that the other people will recognize, or that's my belief, at any rate. So if I have to give an actor a note, he may get frustrated with me for giving him a note, or they just [may] not like getting notes, you know I can't take that personally—I have to give them the note because that's what's best for the show.

A commitment to the show helps in two ways. First, it allows the stage manager another chance to display to the cast that he or she is there with a higher purpose in mind. Second, it allows the stage manager to ignore any anger directed at him or her, knowing that he or she was only doing what was best for the production. The successful completion of the production is key to the stage manager's emotional well-being.

The emotional rewards that stage managers receive from their jobs stem from their commitment to the show. While the emotional rewards are numerous, when they were asked, "What do you like best about being a stage manager?" or "What was your best experience as a stage manager?" a similar theme surfaced: Stage managers derive their greatest satisfaction from having the production as a whole succeed. Their emotional investment is in the seamlessness of a production, seamlessness that they themselves are responsible for orchestrating.

Even the smallest successes can bring about great joy for stage managers. As incredibly detail-oriented individuals, they take pride in things that might not even be



obvious to the audience. One stage manager, when talking about experiences that were the best, said,

I mean right now, I have happy moments every night, if I call light cue 46 just right, and the light cue just comes up and he just finishes that harmonica note and it's just like, "Ahh." And every night he does it a little differently, so you really need to play it out and see what's happening, and you know sometimes it's that small and I'm like, "Yeah!"

For this stage manager, emotional rewards come from small details done well. She remembers the exact number of the light cue. It also highlights that her greatest joy comes from one of the most technically challenging moments of calling the show. It suggests not only an extreme attention to detail but also a sense of perfectionism. Her happiest moments are when she is able to get the cue just at the right moment, something that demands her attention and skills in ways that are noticeable only, at best, to the other members of the cast and production team. The emotional rewards that this stage manager receives, then, are tied to the fact that she is at least partially responsible for the successful running of the show.

## **CONCLUSION**

The emotional ideology of stage managers offers us clues about how they establish their authority in the eyes of their casts. Stage managers adopt an emotional ideology that causes them to judge all of their actions through the prism of how well they serve as caretakers for the show. The emotional rewards that stage managers receive from their work come from taking care of the show as a whole. Caretaking, in turn, is manifested through emotion work.

Specifically, stage managers act as caretakers in three ways: They act as emotional buffers absorbing the negative emotions of those around them in order to maintain a well-functioning workplace, work to create a safe place that shelters the actors and director from forces both beyond and within the rehearsal room, and prepare actors for the transition from the rehearsal room into technical rehearsals and performances, when the stage manager will not be able to offer the same level of emotional support.

The emotion work of being a caregiver is something that stage managers can engage in to display their commitment to the show, and it serves as a substitute for another important power base that they cannot display in the presence of actors: artistic expertise. Stage managers use this emotion work to develop authority over actors during the production process. In turn, this suggests a way in which individuals, particularly those with lower status, who do not have access to other bases of power, may use emotion work to elevate their status and gain authority over others.

## ENDNOTES

1. In this case, I use “caretaker” to mean that stage managers value the play and value the skills of the director and actors. That said, the work that stage managers do in demonstrating this valuation comprises in part some of the same activities traditionally thought of as care work (England 2005), including care of both the physical and emotional needs of the director and actors.
2. All names used are pseudonyms, and other identifying information about the people and plays has been changed to preserve confidentiality.

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