Preserving the Stories of Those Who Protect Stories:

Writing Biographies of American Stage Managers for Wikipedia

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In a recent conversation between myself and Broadway production stage manager

Bonnie Panson, we discussed the art of teaching stage management. More accurately,

we discussed the nature of stage management – and how it is learned. It is a trade, and

much like any other trade, it is taught through experiences. These experiences can be

encountered primarily by the student as they work with a mentor in a rehearsal room or

backstage in a theatre. The lessons of stage management can also be taught through the

medium of storytelling itself, through the knowledge of mentors and the stories they

share.

There is a whole family of stage managers and mentors borne of experiences and

storytelling. These families pass stories and lessons down to each other through the

routine of their daily work schedule. This knowledge is privileged to them and

themselves only, along with others present, and whomever they tell the story to. There

is hesitance in current vernacular of using the word 'family' to describe coworkers. I

caution against this hesitancy, especially when not used toxically to explain away

wrongdoing. When one begins to draw connections between stage managers, their

assistants, mentees, and the others in the theatrical field, one can begin to assume a

strong family-like connection. After all, these are collaborators we spend most of our

time with.

Bonnie Panson proved this to me when she and I sat down at the Chipped Cup in Manhattan, and drew connections between various stage managers on the Internet Broadway Database. These lists of stage managers to the uninitiated could seem like plain lists of names and their resumes. Behind the resumes, especially paired with Ms. Panson's knowledge of Broadway history, were whole troves of stories and knowledge unavailable to the uninitiated. There were generations of stage managers who worked together, shared experiences and knowledge. They took over shows for others, built houses on Martha's Vineyard, dated each other. These were quite literally families who came together eight times a week to tell stories.

The theatrical industry is steeped in traditions, like the Legacy Robe (formerly the Gypsy Robe), Dollar Fridays, and Saturday Night on Broadway. The traditions include acceptable work practices and standard-operating-procedures, the ways in which stage managers help create the work. Stage managers protect these traditions, just like they protect the stories they ferry from first reading, through the long hours of technical rehearsals, the pressure of previews, and then, after opening, their work doubles down on itself. When a show opens, it is now a stage manager's job to protect its artistic integrity. And with its integrity, a stage manager's focus becomes protecting the workers of the theatre: the actors, stagehands, technicians, and ushers. Like a musical, a stage manager's job transcends the written words and ends with the people of the theatre in which they are entrusted to lead. The family of the stage manager is the colleagues they are privileged to call friends. These stories are intertwined,

intersectional, and constantly in flux. It is a singularly unique profession; one whose own story deserves to be told.

I began to wonder, as a young graduate student studying the art of stage management, how one could access information on these stage managers in an easy way. Besides the great innovation of IBDB, how does one learn about the lives of these stage managers? I thought perhaps stage managers should be included in biographical databases. This could bring awareness to the craft as whole, but more importantly, would effectively canonize their legacies for the industry itself. One biographical database that stood out was Wikipedia.

As a young person interested in theatre and film, I would often google actors and directors who interested me. These folks were the face of theatre and film – the people most relevant to my interests. I would search them on Google and their Wikipedia pages would be the first results in the search. On Wikipedia, I could learn about their childhood, early education, filmography, and theatrical performances, and through hyperlinks begin to infer collaborations, relationships, and legacies.

But why are their only directors, producers, and actors on Wikipedia? That is only three-fourths of the rehearsal room makeup. Stage managers open the rooms in the mornings, participate in collaboration, and ensure the artistic integrity of the production from start to finish, conception to closing. They complete the teams of theatrical creation, and their stories should be told alongside those of their more famous collaborators.

Therefore, I have chosen to write biographies of American stage managers for Wikipedia. Much like the duties of a stage manager, this paper endeavors to preserve and share stories. These biographies are the stories of stage managers who made it their life's career to tell and protect stories.

## History of Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a massive online encyclopedia founded on January 15, 2001. Its name is a compound word of the Hawaiian word 'Wiki' meaning 'quick' and 'pedia' meaning 'learning'. Wikipedia's name is effectively 'quick-learning'. The concept of 'wiki' is also used broadly on the internet, with its use in academic settings, amongst pop culture fans, and niche topics. Wikis are websites online where those with interests in specific topics share information and knowledge. There are other websites and online publications that use the 'wiki' format to share information relevant to any topic including the Star Wars Wiki, Game of Thrones Wiki, and Broadway Wiki. Even the Columbia University School of the Arts Theatre Program has a so-called 'wiki'. Wikipedia is essentially the largest and most famous wiki on the internet. A wiki is not a carefully crafted site created by experts and professional writers, but rather seeks to involve the typical user in an ongoing process of collaboration and creation.

Wikipedia is not just a website in which one visits and learns. It has a three-dimensional aspect to it that encourages interaction. Wikipedia is a hypertext publication, meaning it is made-of and references other published sources on the internet using hyperlinks. Each Wikipedia article must be cited through a hyperlink to another

relevant published article. These citations are peer reviewed by a large paid and volunteer corps of editors. More recently, there are bots that do simple editing and fact checking on Wikipedia.

## Contributing to Wikipedia

Biographies make up most Wikipedia articles by type as of 2021. There are many rules regarding the writing and publishing of biographies that make the task of writing for stage managers very difficult. First, everything must be cited to a published article. Without obituaries, very few stage managers have published articles regarding their lives. Secondly, there must be enough information regarding the subject that can fill an article. Many stage managers only have an IBDB page or obituary. Using this information, I had to become creative and infer connections with shows, other stage managers, and information I could find. I often resorted to Ancestry.com and other genealogical databases to glean more information about a stage manager's life, which I could cite in the references. Third, the article subject must be notable enough for it to warrant inclusion on Wikipedia (Various). I hit a snag with this third bit of criteria, and will discuss it later in the paper.

## Community Anecdotes

When I began writing I consulted with many current stage managers on whom I should write, and all gave me great anecdotes regarding stage managers they would like to see memorialized on Wikipedia. Due to the rule of only using published sources as citations, many of these anecdotes have gone unused in the writing of these biographies.

These anecdotes, however, provided helpful clues about shows, relationships, and trails to find more information regarding stage managers and their private lives.

I spoke with Broadway stage manager David Sugarman (Stage Manager of *Beetlejuice* at the time of my writing) about Bob Borod, a stage manager of many Broadway shows who mentored Mr. Sugarman. I was on the hunt for Mr. Borod's production files, which were not in possession of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. I visited the library often when trying to learn about stage managers as it stores many famous stage manager's production files, including Ruth Mitchell, Del Hughes, and even Hal Prince. Mr. Sugarman reminded me that even though Mr. Borod's files were not at the library, they did have much of Katharine Hepburn's correspondence, and she was a close personal friend of Bob Borod's.

I visited the library and found numerous letters, notes, and holiday cards from Bob Borod to Katharine Hepburn, including her notes to dictate back to the popular stage manager. Finding these treasures helped me form a more personal and fully realized version of Bob Borod in my mind as I wrote his Wikipedia article. It inspired me and reminded me that the work stage management performs is familial and creates strong bonds that help protect the stories told on Broadway and beyond, as well as the traditions we know.

Biographing Stage Managers

*Prioritizing Stories: Criteria for Writing Biographies*

There have been innumerable stage managers who have worked on Broadway, in New York, North America, and beyond. As of the submission of this thesis, I have written or edited Wikipedia pages for the following stage managers: Artie Gaffin, Biff Liff, Bob Borod, Cody Renard Richard, Craig Jacobs, Del Hughes, Peter Lawrence, Phil Friedman, and Ruth Mitchell. Deciding whom to write biographies for was a difficult endeavor as, initially, I felt that it was some sort of popularity contest. Many colleagues and peers whom I spoke with about who to include has strong opinions about stage managers who should be included and who should be omitted. I quickly realized this is an ongoing project, even after the submission of my thesis, and no stage manager would be taking precedence over another if their biography was written before another. Whom to write about was first decided based on my personal interest, then interest by colleagues or other stage managers, and then finally available published information and sources. There was a careful choice to create Ruth Mitchell's Wikipedia page first.

I first saw Ruth Mitchell's production documentation and papers at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in Fall of 2019. I had just moved to New York City and did not know of the importance of the special collections at the Billy Rose Theatre Division, nor did I know of the importance Ruth Mitchell had as a female stage manager on Broadway. Walking through the Hal Prince exhibit, her original prompt book pages were framed and hung next to the original boat used by the

Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera.* Seeing her pages framed and honored in this context next to real props from the original production astounded me. Sharing space with her production materials sparked an interest in her I did not expect. I went upstairs to the special collections and asked to see her prompt books. I was denied, for I had no appointment – but that I could come again with one.

I asked myself how I could learn more about her. I turned to Google, and then Wikipedia, as anyone would. There was no Wikipedia article, but a small biography for Ruth Mitchell regarding her production files was listed on the New York Public Library website. This is when the kernel of the idea for the Wikipedia page originated. I was frustrated with the lack of readily available information about a stage manager who clearly was influential in the cultural landscape of Broadway.

Ruth was a perfect candidate for a Wikipedia page: there is a published New York Times obituary, academic articles mentioning her work on *Phantom of the Opera*, her production files at the library, notable news articles that mentioned her, and resume listings on Playbill and the Internet Broadway Database. I wrote her page using Wikipedia's Article of Creation tool and waited four months for it to be reviewed. The article was approved and published October 29, 2020 with only the NYPL photo of her deleted – it wasn't unlicensed and therefore could not be included in her page. The feeling was triumphant. It was then did I realize I could pursue this as a very real project. One which could benefit the community at large.

***Compiling Resources for a Strong Article***

The next stage manager I decided to add to the millions of Wikipedia articles was Del Hughes. Immortalized by the Stage Managers' Association Del Hughes Award, he was a theatre-maker I felt would be a shoo-in for inclusion on the site. The SMA award in his honor is bestowed upon a stage manager for "Lifetime Achievement in the Art of Stage Management". Del Hughes stage managed over twenty Broadway productions and performed in half as many. Most impressively, he worked as the Production Stage Manager of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* while simultaneously performing the role of Reverend John Hale. His story was one which I feel must be told, and therefore I researched him for this thesis project.

Starting at the New York Public Library for Performing Arts, I spent over ten hours documenting his production files and taking notes on the context of his work. I then began collecting published resources online about Del Hughes, including many of the ones I have already mentioned: Internet Broadway Database, New York Times, Playbill, Ancestry.com, and obituaries. After collecting these resources, I began writing his article.

I published Del Hughes' biographical article and others began contributing to it. Some suggested notes for improvement regarding its "orphan status" (not linked to from other articles), or tagging it under categories like "Biographies", "Theatre", and "Broadway". These contributions helped me hone my craft as a Wikipedia editor, and even contribute to others' articles. I was able to see the work others were creating while

improving upon my own work by providing better sources, adding my own tags, and

even using more objective language when writing. Akin to the stage managers working

to protect the art of storytelling, there is a large community of editors on Wikipedia

working to protect the massive online encyclopedia.

### *Joining a Community: The Ephemeral Nature of Wikipedia Articles*

When publishing an article on Wikipedia, one's work is no longer their own. The

hunt for research, the creation of a story, and the rote act of writing the article are all

done in the service of improving and adding to the entries on Wikipedia. Once the

article is published, it is at the will and discretion of other editors on the platform. I

wrote an article detailing the biography of Broadway stage manager Porter Van Zandt.

After about two weeks of its publication, an editor nominated it for deletion (Various),

asserting the article did not meet the notability requirements of Wikipedia as listed on

their website. Initially devastating, and angering, I decided to listen to this new

community at Wikipedia and rewrite the Porter Van Zandt article to meet the General

Notability Guidelines. It was deleted soon after before I could complete the updated

page. The Wikipedia article detailing the life and times of Broadway stage manager and

producer Porter Van Zandt will be written again, but with further reverence to the

requirements set forth by the community at Wikipedia.

### Passing the Baton: Sharing this Project for Posterity

This project was created with the influence and help of the theatre community.

When researching Del Hughes at the library, I shared photos of his prompt books,

blocking notes, and rehearsal documents in a Facebook group called "The Year of the Stage Manager", a group made by and for stage managers around the world to connect and champion others in our craft. The feedback on the photos was ecstatic. Many group members did not know who Del Hughes was. If they did, they did not know his production files were available at the Library for Performing Arts. When I began to share the Wikipedia articles I was writing, others began suggesting stage managers to research and write about. During this process is how I began writing articles for Craig Jacobs, Biff Liff, and Artie Gaffin.

Much of my research focused on stage managers of the last half of the twentieth century. All stage managers whom I have written about are stage managers who worked after 1950. There are many reasons for this, including that information on stage managers prior to 1950 is scant, with the occupation of stage manager before 1950 being much different than the occupation of stage manager through the last half of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first century. As I continue working on these articles, I hope to focus my research on stage managers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I believe this expanded history would embolden the tradition and pride of the stage management profession and create a deeper sense of ancestry for working stage managers. It is normal for families to have lost the histories of their ancestors, especially in the United States, but if we are to protect the stories of others – we must discover and protect the history of our own.

Stage managers complete the makeup of proper theatrical collaboration. Alongside producers, directors, and actors, they are the final creative requirement for a safe and efficient rehearsal process. Their three aforementioned colleagues receive accolades, press, and recognition for their difficult and dedicated work in the theatre. Stage managers, albeit by nature, are hidden from public view. All the more reason they deserve public recognition for their work. The histories, careers, contributions, and legacies must be preserved for future generations. Having stage managers' biographies listed amongst their peers in the most prominent free encyclopedia in the world, Wikipedia, further serves to validate the tireless effort and sacrifice stage managers give to the theatre.

Finally, in the spirit of academia, Wikipedia, and storytelling: this project is not owned by me, the author, or by Columbia University, who requires I write this thesis for graduation in partial fulfillment of my Master of Fine Arts degree. In fact, it is a shared endeavor by whomever takes up the mantle or receives the baton. I hope the history of stage managers, the protectors of theatre, will be told and preserved themselves by a diverse group of people. The artists I have written about in this project are not a definitive list of those who deserve to be canonized in Wikipedia, or similar source. It is my hope that I can inspire respect and engender a new appreciation for the work of stage managers and theatre-makers as a whole.

## Alphabetical List of Published Wikipedia Articles About Stage Managers

- Artie Gaffin†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artie_Gaffin

- Biff Liff*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biff_Liff

- Bob Borod†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Borod

- Cody Renard Richard†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cody_Renard_Richard

- Craig Jacobs†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig_Jacobs

- Del Hughes†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Del_Hughes

- Peter Lawrence†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Lawrence_(stage_manager)

- Phil Friedman†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phil_Friedman

- Ruth Mitchell†*

    o https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_Mitchell_(stage_manager)

†Created by H. Corthell-Wood under Wikipedia name Xaviershorts
*Edited or contributed to by H. Corthell-Wood under Wikipedia name Xaviershorts

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