Genres in the Life of a Musical Theatre Production at the Black Hills Playhouse

By John Warring

When people think about stage musicals, they think about only what they see, such as the actors, costumes, set, and flashing lights. We as a people tend to focus on the end product of entertainment because this is what we see as theatre goers. This is proven by the fact that critics only come to critique the final performances instead of seeing how the whole process operates. The critic writes about the decision that was made such as the color of a dress, but they don't know or understand why that decision was made (Wah & Rosvally 2019). It could be the set clashed with the original color or the actress did not look right in that color. There are decisions made throughout the process of a production that only those directly involved get to see. There is a great deal of creative energy, physical energy, and paperwork that goes into a show, and many people are necessary to make everything come together. There are many different design and technical components all thought up and executed by people with a long trail of paperwork in their wake, and all these creative people come together to make one product.

What if instead of focusing on the end product, we took the time to look at the production of a musical theatre play from beginning to end? Over this last summer, I worked at a theatre in South Dakota called the Black Hills Playhouse. In talking with a former administrative assistant for the playhouse, I discovered that before actors are even looked at, there is an extraordinary amount of paperwork, or genre systems, that go into the process long before where we might think it starts. As Marro stated in her paper "The Genres of Chi Omega: An Activity Analysis," comparing the sorority to a community, theatre acts as a community in the same way. All the individuals and genres interact to achieve the same goal (Marro, Victoria). Kristal Georgopoulos,

the aforementioned former administrative assistant, mentioned to me in an interview, "The process begins with us sending in the paperwork to get the rights to even perform the show. After that, we find directors and designers. The last thing we do personnel-wise is hire the actors."

There are several phases in the genres needed to complete a production. We start with contracts for picking the show and hiring the personnel, then move onto the pre-production where preliminary designs happen, rehearsal/build where the paperwork mounts with the stage manager documenting everything, moving to tech where paperwork is put into effect, performance where we use the paperwork to continue to run a cohesive show, and finally post production when the paperwork is stored away.

First we will look at the genre systems that facilitate the production process. Finding the correct show for the season is only the beginning. Once the season is selected, the theatre has to contact the agencies that represent the plays selected to ensure the rights for the show are available. Shows can only be produced in regions one at a time and typically not in succession to ensure that there is low competition for the theatres. Once the rights are secured, the contracts are written out and sent with information including length of performances, materials provided by the agencies to the theatre, including musical scores and scripts, and finally any restrictions that a script may have ("Obtaining Rights"). For example when doing Tennessee Williams materials, he wrote into his contacts before death his specifics on casting and set design. Some shows require specific music to be played. Once all the details are hashed out with the season shows it is time to hire directors.

My research comes from experience and an in depth interview with someone who has worked at the playhouse for almost 5 years and works as a stage manager who deals with the

majority of the paperwork from all individuals in the production. I have grown up in a theatre family and therefore have spent my entire life around the production process of theatre. My mother and step-father both work in the theatre industry and I have been in productions since I was a child. In my opinion, there is no better way to experience the process of theatre than being involved in a production. Every production process is different as you rely very heavily on an individual and creativity. Though each production is slightly different, the bones of the process and paperwork are the same.

The pre production process begins with hiring personnel. The playhouse hires approximately 70 people per season with approximately 14 of those being interns (Anderson). In my interview with Kristal, she went into detail about how directors and designers are hired at the Black Hills Playhouse. "The playhouse has been in operation for 75 years and has an excellent relationship with educators and professionals all over the country. The artistic director, Dan Workman, is the person who hires the majority of the company including the directors and designers. He has been attached to the playhouse since 1990 and therefore has a large pool of playhouse alumni to choose from. Dan would look at the shows and hire directors and designers he already knows, or he may hire someone recommended to him by a trusted source." This process takes place over an approximate two month period. Once the directors and designers are settled on or in discussion with contracts, the casting process starts.

The first thing the theatre does is announce the auditions. Once the auditions are announced, the resumes, headshots, and videos start to roll in. While the majority of casting is done in person and is preferred, there are some people who can not make the trip to audition. So online submissions are handled by the administrative assistant. Kristal talked about her

experience with casting. "As the administrative assistant, it was my responsibility to check our employment email every day and sort through all the paperwork emailed to us. This includes resumes, headshots, and video auditions when needed. I would then transfer them over the company's shared google drive and alert Dan, our Artistic Director, that more submissions had come in."

Outside of what is sent in online, the Black Hills Playhouse holds about five in-person auditions throughout the country all the way from Rapid City, South Dakota to New York City (Anderson, Linda). I have taken part in these auditions and received a contract, so I am well aware of the process. At these auditions actors are required to bring in headshots, resumes, and music for an accompanist to play while they sing. This paperwork is collected and marked up by Dan to look at and organize for casting. Dan will provide sides to the actors to read from. Sides are script selections from the play or musical in the season with specific characters highlighted so the actor can read for a specific role. The Playhouse holds auditions from late January until late February (Anderson, Linda). Dan will then look at all the people who auditioned and select his cast. Once the cast is selected and they accept the roles offered they will be sent their contracts.

While auditions are happening we move into the pre-production phase where the director and designers are having design meetings. The design meetings usually start with a director sending everyone their ideas about the production. This will include themes, tones, colors, time period, and any other direction they wish to give at this early time in the process (DGS : Drama Department). This will vary from director to director. The designers will take the information provided to them by the director and begin their designs. For a costume designer, they will begin

rendering costumes. The designer at this point would have read the script and begun to make a costume plot showing how many characters there are and how many costumes they will need to wear. The costume designer will typically take one costume for each character and begin a rendering with color swatches and material to show the director (Blood). This will be a rough draft to show to the director and get feedback to see if they are headed in the right direction. The process is the same for the set designer only they will begin a scenic breakdown showing how many locations they need. This process will happen over a couple weeks time going back and forth with the director until final drafts are due. The scenic final drafts will be handed to the technical director to begin drafting out how the sets will be built. The costume renderings will be sent to the costume shop manager to begin pulling clothes and organizing how this will be able to happen.

While this is happening the props master, lighting designer, and sound designer will continue to check in and do some preliminary paperwork but their work usually doesn't begin until some set and costume ideas are made and they are onsite. Some of the paperwork a props master will do is a props list, showing all props used in a show, an inventory list if they know what is in stock, and build list if they know specifically they will need to build items if they are to large or if it is known it will be too expensive to buy (Hooker). A sound designer will look at the number of actors in a cast and note what type of mics they will need and how many are needed. They may also begin to put together some music if requested by the director. The lighting designer may put together a powerpoint on their ideas and how they would like things to look, but of all the designers light is typically the last to get done as they rely heavily on the set and costume designers to be completed before they can begin as they get to play with the space

and costumes once they are completed.

Directors, designers, actors, and crew have now all been hired and the rehearsal and build portion begin. It is time to head to the Playhouse to begin the season. Things will now be happening simultaneously. While actors are with the director and stage manager in the rehearsal hall, the scenic, costume, props, sound, and light designers are all in their respective shops working with crews to get things built and completed. One show will be worked on at a time. The build of a show happens at the same time as rehearsals.

In the rehearsal hall most of the paperwork is done by the stage manager. The stage manager is now the communication hub for all departments. Their responsibility is to keep the information flowing freely. If something is needed from the props department the stage manager will be the one to make contact to get what is required. They also manage the prompt book. The prompt book is arguably the most important paperwork in the production. Kristal as well as being the administrative assistant is also a stage manager for the playhouse in the summer for the last four years and has explained some items that go into the prompt book. "The prompt book holds all the necessary paperwork that would be needed to remount a production. The book will include blocking (movement) of the actors, props notes, scenic notes, costume notes, and entrance/exit plot, taken while in rehearsals. This includes the run sheet created by the SM that shows the movement of costumes, props, and set pieces happening on stage that is given to the crew who works on the show. Stage managers also create schedules for everyday rehearsals, upcoming tech rehearsals, and schedule meetings. All notes from every production meeting and rehearsal that include problem solving measures. The book also includes the cues provided by the lighting and sound designers that are to be called during the actual performance that are

decided during tech week." So basically the prompt book is a culmination of all the paperwork needed to make the show run outside of contracts. Additional materials that are created by the SM that actors rely on include line notes, shift plots, entrance/ exit plots, and script change reports (Kincman & Swank 2011).

The designers will work with the stage manager to ensure paperwork is turning out correctly and that everything is being recorded as needed. The designers will continue to create paperwork during the build of the show as things change day by day in the theatre. A huge part of theatre is problem-solving and implementing solutions to problems until we receive the best outcome. For actors, this may mean delivering a line ten different ways, and for a props master, this may mean buying an umbrella in ten different shades. This constant change needs to be documented in expense reports for materials purchased as well as on props documents noting that the umbrella is now blue instead of orange. The painters may have mixed a color that had too much yellow in it and need to remix, meaning it has to be notated for touches during production and cost that may have been affected in remixing.

Right before performances begin, we have a tech week. This week is all about putting all this paperwork from the drawings to the run sheet into actuality. The set is being put together and the paint is going on. The actors are able to perform in their costumes for the first time and use the props that have been made or purchased. This point of the process is when the lighting and sound designer will do their most work.The lighting designer is creating magic sheets and lighting plots that tell where lights are hung, what colors are in them, and what they are pointing at (Primrose 2019). Tech is a time for all the technical elements to be worked through. Light cues will be rewritten and timed

out. Colors of gels in the lights may need to be adjusted. Sound levels will be checked and notated in the board so they are consistent throughout the production. Problems with costume changes will be fixed as well as updated in the run sheet. Maybe character A has to change on the Stage Right instead of Stage Left. This will need to be notated in the run sheet to ensure that if an understudy needs to go in or a crew person gets sick the appropriate people are aware of exactly what needs to happen.

Once tech is over, it is opening night, performances begin, and the work of the director and designers are over. The actors take over bringing the script to life for the audience and the stage manager and crew continue to make the show happen as it was intended by the director and designers. The final product of nearly 6 months of work is now available for audience enjoyment. Kristal said of her prompt book, "by the time the show is open and running, I can have up to nearly 1000 pages of script and paperwork in one or two binders. It is important to record everything, as you never know what will break or who will get injured and we will need to have all the information available immediately to fix the issue. That is why the paperwork is so important in a theatre production.

Post-production for most is the easiest. We tear everything down. This is where paperwork comes full circle, as we use it to make sure everything is returned to the shops as intended and inventory is taken. Anything that was borrowed is returned and anything that is kept is logged into an inventory list and put in storage on a shelf. It is important to notate what we have, as we never want to overbuy or forget we have something because there is never enough money in theatre.

There is so much more to theatre than what is seen. Months of work go into

producing a single show. There is copious amounts of paperwork that need to happen in a

specific order for the best result. Theatre is a collaborative art, as those in the profession

rely so heavily on their colleagues to complete their work before others can begin. For

example, rehearsal cannot happen until a set is designed. These genres starting with

picking the show through tear down of the set require problem solving and collaboration.

In my experience the best way to learn the process of a production is to be a part of one.

There are so many jobs in the industry that do not require you to be on stage. There are

people who sew costumes, build sets, or rewire lights. There are plenty of books that have

been written on the process of a production but nothing beats the hands-on knowledge you

gain by working in the theatre.

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