Stage Management and Creativity: Exploring the opportunities in engaging stage management students in the creative process

By Gail Pallin and Pauline Miller Judd - 2007

This chapter is an extract from an article and its aim is to encourage the industry and students to recognise the value of understanding the application of the creative process within the role of stage management.

Abstract

The role of stage manager, both in training and the theatre industry used to be perceived as supportive and reactive to the creative demands of the production; the inherent creativity of the stage managers' input was not commonly acknowledged. The intention of this study is to discover and embrace a new climate of understanding which places communication, problem solving, creative and soft skills at the heart of the student experience.

This report examines current practice in stage management training, with a specific focus on the creative application of knowledge. The findings are supported by feedback from the British theatre industry, national and international drama schools, and a trial project. They suggest that by encouraging the creative potential of stage management students in training, we can provide the theatre industry with graduates who are better prepared to be flexible, proactive, multi skilled practitioners.

INTRODUCTION: Innovation in education and the industry

It is widely accepted (see Seltzer and Bentley; Bruner; Csiksentmihalyi; Newell, Shaw and Simon) that encouraging creativity and innovation in training and the workplace is crucial to the development of the individual and their ability to make a meaningful contribution to the industry. Creativity has always been a difficult term to define and it needs to be remembered that being creative means different things in different contexts. Many commentators see creativity as not just an innate talent, but rather a form of interaction between the individual and their environment that can be learned and nurtured. Creativity in its widest form could be seen as "the application of knowledge and skills in new ways to achieve a valued goal." (Seltzer & Bentley, 2001, p.10)

> Creativity involves first imagining and then working with the ideas to produce new things. It could be new knowledge, a new process, a product or performance or any combination of these things. We can encourage our imaginations to think many ideas or counteract the habits that limit us to working with a few ideas. We find it hard to articulate what we mean by being creative. (Jackson and Sinclair, 2005, p.2)

As educators and managers have come to recognise and understand innovation and creativity in the business world, so too have theatre practitioners begun to encourage a more creative approach to stage management. Whilst there has been much written about creativity and its general role in education and industry, there is little specific material about how creativity is taught within stage management training, or how it is applied to the role of stage management.

The role of stage management

Stage management are most likely to have trained at drama school. This

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> will have given them a background in all technical theatre departments, and practical experience in everything that goes into preparing and running theatrical productions. They will also have studied theatre history, literature and historical periods, and will have had training in all the practical and paperwork aspects of the job of stage management. They should also be up-to-date with legislation, particularly where it relates to health and safety. (Dean, 2002, p.39)

The stage manager in a theatre company has a wide range of responsibilities including co-ordinating information between departments, managing the stage area during performances, ensuring the health and well-being of the company and overseeing the stage management team (Pallin, 2003). Historically, the role was mainly perceived as reactive: responding to a predetermined set of tasks as requested by the director and designers. i.e. acquiring props and furniture, and running the show once into the performance space. The deputy stage manager (DSM) running rehearsals and cueing the show in performance was not expected to contribute to the rehearsal process other than taking notes, blocking the actors' moves, prompting and setting up for rehearsal each day. The opportunity for heuristic problem solving is limited in these situations.

> At one extreme is the autocratic figurehead director; they know exactly what they want and the whole team, design included, is there to carry out their vision. Compromise is reached grudgingly and the opportunity for creative input is limited, even non-existent. (Maccoy, P 2004 p.25)

The traditional perspective
In many of the conservatoire drama schools, there are two main elements which underpin the curriculum: taught theory of the specific skills and knowledge base required to participate in particular production roles and practical experience gained through working directly on a production in these roles.

While the above learning and teaching modes are essential for understanding and performing effectively, the student is usually working under the guidance and artistic supervision of the director of a production. Traditionally, the stage management roles in theatre have been viewed as supportive, without the opportunity to make an obvious creative contribution to the output. This contribution was inherent, but not necessarily recognised or encouraged; If asked to source an antique vase, the director and designer may be very prescriptive about the shape, colour etc. If the stage manager has done sufficient research into the period, culture and setting and understood the concept of the design, they should be able to make an informed and creative choice about the appropriate vase. Likewise, the deputy stage manager (DSM) in rehearsals may have an excellent overview of the practicalities and parameters of the set design, and how it relates to the movement of the actors within that space. In this scenario, the DSM might be able to point up any impractical actions or moves that the director has not identified. The DSM requires encouragement to participate in the rehearsal process in this way.

There are conventional aspects of the job that have to be achieved and many students use this formulaic approach as a safety net within their role. Whilst there are opportunities within this process for students to engage and develop their creativity, the need for a professional standard to be achieved in the end product often negates these opportunities rather than enhancing them. In terms of training, performances can also be viewed as outcome based learning, which can be seen as antithetic to learning that emerges in unpredictable ways (Jackson, 2005, p3)

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Scene change

Stage management has always been inherently creative, in that a stage manager is constantly engaged in problem solving and seeking new ways to achieve the goals of the production team, designers, directors and performers constrained by time and monetary demands. The potential for creative thinking within the role however is becoming increasingly recognised as the industry comes to accept that communication, management skills and creativity are intrinsically linked.

This paradigm shift is still in its infancy and needs encouraging, both within the theatre industry and within organisations providing stage management training. Most drama schools tend to follow a conservatoire approach to training, which provides very practical, hands on experience through production work and placements, underpinned by classes in theory of techniques and methodologies, as opposed to a more academic study pattern. This study hopes to show that as educators and practitioners we can contribute to providing a deeper understanding of how a creative approach to stage management can benefit both the student and the profession.

The aims of this study are to:

1. Examine how the development of creativity and innovation may be reflected in the design and structure of stage management courses.
2. Identify whether the theatre industry believes that creative, innovative, problem solving and soft skills are as valuable as practical skills within Stage Management training.

CREATIVITY: The wider context

"The creative solution, the creative idea, is one which the individual achieves by freeing himself from his own conceptual system, and by which he sees a deeper or more comprehensive or clearer way the structure of the situation he is trying to understand." (Henle, 1962, p.39)

Diversity and opportunity

In the report 'All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education' published by The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) the need to develop human resources, particularly communication, flexibility and creativity was identified (2000). In order to encourage and develop these skills, drama educators first need to recognise the economic, technological, social and personal challenges which face the graduate entering an ever-changing workplace. Many graduates no longer enter into one role and remain within it for the rest of their career. In previous decades, stage managers more regularly worked within the same type of theatre context: repertory, touring, opera and ballet. Nowadays they may also be employed by companies running events, conferences, site specific performances, trade shows, film, television, the music industry, cruise ships etc. Thus success at moving horizontally into different areas is largely dependant on the ability to speak that industry's language, as the skills and knowledge base is similar. Acquiring the ability to think laterally and creatively will assist the transference of skills. Therefore portfolio careers are commonplace within the industry and students need to be prepared for the diverse challenges that this can bring. The creative industries are an expanding market, and to maintain and improve the professional standards of excellence it is necessary to provide a training environment which stimulates and rewards creative thinking. Czikszentmihalyi states that "it is easier to enhance creativity by changing conditions in the environment, than by trying to make people think

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more creatively." (1996, p.1)

Encouraging a creative environment

The first step is to provide a learning environment and curriculum where students feel it is safe to experiment. If the team dynamics within a group are supportive and non threatening there is a greater opportunity for innovation. When members feel safe, their energy can be directed towards creative activity rather than self protection.

Tom Kelly in The Art of Innovation states that "we all have a creative side, and it can flourish if you spawn a culture to encourage it, one that embraces risk and wild ideas, and tolerates the occasional failure." (2001, p.13)

A project undertaken by the Centre for Advances in Higher Education (CAHE) at The University of Northumbria at Newcastle identified the needs of a sample of businesses for innovation and creative skills in graduates. The final report made significant recommendations for the learning and teaching skills in higher education. Whilst not specific to the needs of theatre training, this report provided a wealth of ideas and challenges for HE institutions to take on board. "It is a clear finding from the project that establishment of a co-operative climate is likely to stimulate creative expression." (CAHE, 1999 p.5)

Having identified the need to encourage a creative environment within a training institution, how then do theatre educators go about achieving this?

Freedom for experimentation

 In the formal production roles it is often difficult for students to experiment. In order to encourage more creative involvement it is necessary to provide stage management students with the opportunities to experiment with their technical, practical and soft skills. This might be achieved, for example, by devised project work, without directorial constraints, in order to make space for creativity to happen. Such projects could be designed to encourage the students to specifically explore their individual creative contribution. If the brief is open, and the outcomes unpredictable, there is ample opportunity for freedom of expression.

The NACCCE report suggests that "creative processes require both the freedom to experiment, and the use of skills, knowledge and understanding." (2000 p.4)

Seltzer and Bentley also believe that by giving the student freedom of action "creative application of knowledge is (only) possible where people are able to make real choices over what they do and how they try to do it." (1999)

Risk + allow to fail = creativity

"In allowing the team to take creative risks, the team's overall problem solving abilities will improve." (Pallin 2003, p.106)

The stage management student working on a show, whether it is running the backstage activities, or cueing it, is under great pressure to 'get it right' every time. Indeed the professional integrity of the performance depends on this. There is, therefore the need again for a training context where the student is encouraged to both take risks and is allowed to make mistakes, and even fail. This requires an attitudinal shift in the student's concept relating to their studies, in an environment where most of their activities are assessed in some form or other. In order to allow the creative flow to flourish, risk taking is essential. Ceserani and Greatwood encourage us to "play, have fun, get it wrong, and try again." (1999 p.40)

Similarly in 'The Travelling Case' edited by Caroline Baillie, she too states that "the first rule of using a creative thinking technique is don't be afraid to play around with it." (2003 p.73)

In order to achieve a creative climate, educators should avoid being over-critical of new

ideas in order to nurture an environment of trust and openness, so the student is more likely to take psychological as well as conceptual risks.

Tudor Rickards believes we "do not reward bad ideas, but the habit of sharing new ideas, regardless of their apparent weakness. The skill lies in responding so as to send out two messages simultaneously:

1)   It is always good to come up with new ideas, and
2)   This particular idea needs working on, but don't give up." (1997, p.18)

A successful example of this type of problem based learning is explained by a student at Hyper Island School of New Media Design, Canada: "You are taught and encouraged to do things differently and experiment with odd designs…there are no right and wrong answers on how we solve problems and answer questions." (Seltzer & Bentley, 1999, p.55)

The report by the University of Northumbria strengthens this argument by stating that "students need to perceive their teachers as partners in the creative process, such that relationships foster free experimentation with ideas, with no risk of being regarded as foolish should individuals generate particularly wild notions or seemingly impractical proposals." (1999 p.4)

The difficulty for drama schools comes with the notion that the presentation of public production is part of the training, and that high production standards must continually be met. How can drama schools bring this need for productions as part of a students' training together with the need to provide a safe environment where creativity can flourish?

Students exposed to the subject

In order that the stage management student can begin to examine their working practises and experiment with creative thinking, educators must expose them to the basic underlying philosophies and knowledge base which currently exists around creativity. One of the first hurdles to overcome is that many students, on hearing the term 'creativity' think that it means design or drawing skills. By laying the foundations of creative, and indeed critical, thinking out for them, this notion can be overturned.

Caroline Baillie describes the creative process very clearly in four basic steps:

1.   Explore the question
2.   Generate ideas
3.   Develop ideas
4.   Plan for action (2003 p.8)

Ceserani and Greatwood expand on these steps offering a cycle of innovation to highlight a different way of working, encouraging the reader to "cross over into the innovation world." The cyclical headings they suggest are "speculative exploration, idea development, possible solutions, refine/modify/gain commitment, decision, experimental action, and constructive review" then to return again to speculative exploration. (1995, p.28)

This model differs from the logical, procedural and linear reasoning common in our routine activities, stimulating an open minded lateral way of thinking. If the student is educated in the advantages of innovative problem solving, they may be able to apply their new skills across the disciplines and work in multi-functional roles within the theatre production team.

Time is a necessary factor

It is crucial that we recognise that an essential part of the creative process is a period of incubation. Stein believes that "during such a lull, the individual is not consciously pre-occupied with his problem, but work on it still continues on non conscious levels." (1974, p.21) If we problem solve on a conscious level, the process tends to be linear and logical.

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But as Csikzentmihalyi suggests "when ideas call to each other on their own, without our leading them down a straight and narrow path, unexpected combinations may come into being." (1997, p.79)

It is therefore important that, when designing student projects and other curricula activities, time for this incubation period is built into the process. Again this is often a problem for drama schools which have to work to tight production schedules. Planning the student experience on productions becomes more complex and challenging when this need for incubation time is taken into account.

The research methodology

Detailed exploration of creativity in the field of stage management is as yet unpublished, although it is widely discussed within both drama schools and the industry. This was the starting point for the field research.

A series of semi-structured interviews with three leading British drama schools offering specialist courses in stage management and eight leading professionals within the industry were carried out to investigate current thinking and practise. This was supported by email answers to questions from three European drama schools which offer a more general training in theatre production. These interviews provided qualitative results, which attempted to illuminate, explain and supplement the data collected from the literature review. The overall goal of the interviews was to explore the topic of training stage managers, gaining feedback from drama schools and the industry.

Interviewees were selected through a process of random sampling. Within the industry it was important to choose a relevant but diverse cross section of theatre disciplines to ensure a balanced and inclusive response. Professionals within large scale repertory theatre, receiving houses, dance, opera, events, touring and circus production companies were interviewed to achieve this. The interviews with drama schools and the industry provided a valuable and diverse set of responses on which to base the following discussion.

Results and discussion

The following discussion is a summary of the results from the original article:

Facilitation of exploration

The drama school staff believed they provided life long learning skills, the higher priority on soft skills and creative application of knowledge. The responses clearly indicated that although the acquisition of practical skills were believed to be important in developing technical ability, the development of soft skills were essential in terms of self development. Indeed as the industry response indicated, not only do they desire graduates to be able to apply creativity and problem solving skills effectively, some believe that more emphasis should be placed on developing these abilities as opposed to practical, technical skills. As one industry respondent points out "practical skills are quickly absorbed if the intuitive, problem solving skills are well developed."

100% of the industry respondents believed that the teaching and development of creativity and other soft skills was, at minimum, of equal importance to the development of practical skills. Most held the view that in order for the student to develop, the training required a greater emphasis on learning soft skills than on training in practical skills.

Progression through projects

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The main element within a course design and structure which the schools believed developed creative application of knowledge was the inclusion of project work, both group based and individual. In particular, projects were deemed especially useful if the content encouraged the student to study disciplines outwith their subject and knowledge base. It was seen as important that the projects did not necessarily have a defined outcome nor were they for public viewing. This takes away the pressure on the student to achieve specific product-based outcomes for assessment.

It was deemed important that projects and workshops did not limit students to finding single solutions to problems, but allowed them to develop their capacities to think conceptually. In the field of stage management, industry respondents articulated the need for schools to give students ownership of projects, allowing time and space for creativity to occur. It was also generally felt that the role of stage management demanded greater emphasis on soft skills, and the ability to transfer knowledge across disciplines, leading to greater employment opportunities as the need for multi-skilling increases.

Learning through ownership

When asked what techniques were used to encourage creativity, initiative, team membership and proactive work, the responses backed up the previous statements and stressed empowerment of the students, including giving them responsibility for teams and for their own learning. Many schools believed that if a learning contract was negotiated between the tutor and student, with transparent and concrete criteria to encourage creativity, the student then felt they had ownership of their work and the freedom to express themselves. The use of learning contracts requires the student to be involved in the negotiation of both the project and the assessment. This requires them to address the issue of, and to provide their own definition of, their creativity. This empowerment also ran into the system of productions by giving the students the responsibility and authority to carry out a job role, knowing there is a support system.

Supportive environment

In order to discover how the courses facilitate the student development, each respondent was asked how the teaching environment supported this education. One respondent stresses about their institution:

> 'We've made it support it. We fought for a long time for an absolute
> realisation that stage management students are not just there to put
> shows on for the acting course, and some of the projects they work
> on don't involve actors, but do involve performance, and that is
> completely accepted. Project work allows personal freedom.'

Creativity was also encouraged by "re-producing professional contexts. By third term they are confident enough to put their own spin on ideas within the group." We see in the results again the emphasis placed on the freedom which project work and non public performance offers to the development of innovative skills of the student. The space and time these projects allow are crucial to the teaching and learning opportunities inherent in this type of work.

Assessment of creativity

In both historical and current literature and also responses from the drama schools there appears to be opposing and controversial opinions as to whether creativity *can* be assessed objectively. Indeed, some teachers might feel that assessing creativity is not desirable as it may constrain the student's creativity to be bound by assessment criteria. Assessment of the student, and their creative input is tackled primarily within drama schools by setting appropriate and relevant learning outcomes and criteria, some schools focusing on process, others product and many believing it is inherent within the role or

project content. Amabile (1996) suggests that a conceptual definition of creativity and its assessment might contain two elements: "A product or response will be judged as creative to the extent that a) it is both novel and appropriate, useful, correct or valuable response to the task at hand and b) the task is heuristic, rather than algorithmic."

The delegates at a seminar on 'Best Practice' at Rose Bruford (2003) believed that the more open the briefing on projects, the more creative freedom the students would have. 'When assessing creativity, look for the student defining the problem, then identifying the lateral thinking involved in solving the problem.'

Conclusion

Csikzentmihalyi argues that "if the next generation is to face the future with zest and self confidence, we must educate them to be original as well as competent." (1996, p.12)

The first aim of this study is to examine current learning and teaching practise in developing creativity within drama schools, and how as trainers, facilitators and educators, the staff reflects this in the design of the course curriculum. The responses indicated that if we as educators create an environment which provides ample time, and projects involving heuristic tasks which actively encourages creativity, students will succeed in acquiring the range of skills necessary to make a meaningful contribution to the theatre industry. Giving them freedom to take risks within the domain will inevitably enhance students' creativity. In achieving this we will provide the industry with stage management graduates who remain flexible and proactive within theatre's ever changing skills and knowledge base.

The second aim is to identify whether the theatre industry believes that problem solving, creative and soft skills are as valuable as practical skills within stage management training. All the industry respondents agreed that the role of stage management required a good grounding in practical skills, but greater emphasis in developing soft skills, knowledge transfer and the ability to multi-skill would lead to improved success in employment opportunities.

If we can enable the stage management student to understand their own potential through creative contribution it will benefit not only their own development of life long learning but also the industry into which they bring their skills and abilities.

However, as Csikzentmihalyi points out "even if the rules are learned, creativity cannot be manifested in the absence of a field that recognises and legitimises the novel contributions." (1997, p.29)

As schools and the industry recognise and encourage the potential for stage management to develop creative skills, a role not usually attributed with this particular ability, a cultural shift will occur.

Gail Pallin and Pauline Miller Judd

(The full transcript can be viewed at www.stagemanagement.co.uk)

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