

STAGE MANAGEMENT OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS AND CALLING TECHNIQUES SURVEY
Conducted: November 2009
Report Published: January 2010

In November 2009, the Stage Management Special Topics class at the University of Iowa conducted a national survey of stage managers to track occupational trends and calling techniques. This survey is a follow-up to a study conducted by David McGraw, PSM for the UI program, in November 2006. In the 2006 survey, 283 stage managers shared their views. For this second survey, 525 stage managers participated, far exceeding the project's goals. Actors' Equity Association estimates that over 2,100 of its active members are stage managers (<http://www.actorsequity.org/Members/stagemanager.asp>); this survey reached 318 AEA stage managers, or 15% of all union stage managers. While this study does not claim to report the full view of all American stage managers, we do believe this sizable sampling provides a glimpse into our unusual field.

Such high participation would not have been possible without the support of many groups and colleagues. The Stage Managers' Association (<http://www.stagemanagers.org>) has supported this project since the 2006 survey and strongly promoted the 2009 survey. This is evident as 196 of the survey participants identified themselves as members of the SMA. The SM Network (<http://smnetwork.org>), an online forum of both union and non-union stage managers also promoted the survey. The *Equity News*, a monthly publication for members of Actors' Equity Association, published a survey invitation in the Letters section of its November 2009 edition. Special thanks go to all of the stage managers who forwarded the survey to their colleagues, which helped create viral marketing for this project. Lastly, the survey was hosted by the University of Iowa on the WebSurveyor platform. This survey truly would not have been possible without all of this support.

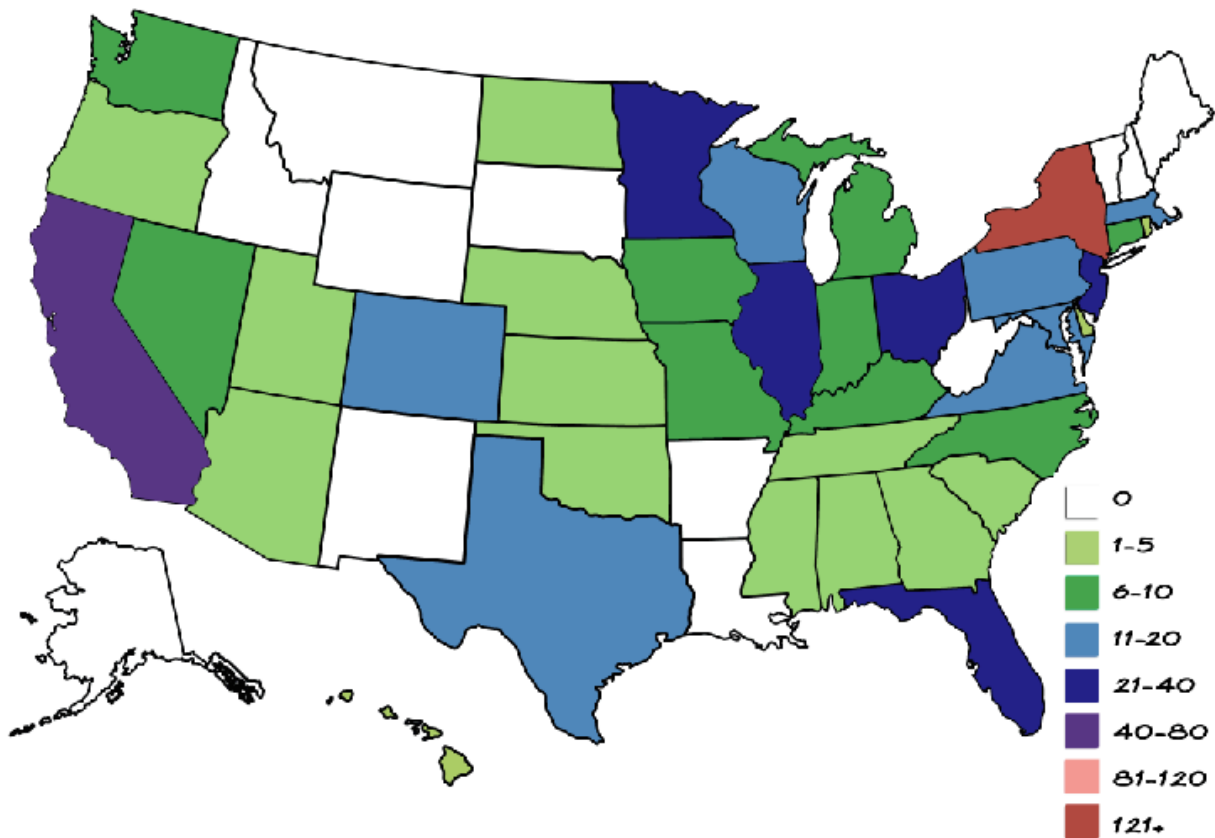
SECTION I: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

In order to elicit candid responses, complete anonymity was guaranteed for all participants. Survey participants were also not required to answer every question, so percentages are based on the number of responses, not the 525 participant total. But in order to compare responses within this particular sampling of stage managers and to contrast it with the 2006 and hopefully future surveys, the survey did ask several demographic questions.

The survey was open to anyone who has stage managed an American theatrical production. When asked to identify their current occupation, 328 (63.1%) indicated stage manager, 51 (9.8%) were students, 25 were teachers (4.8%), 21 (4.0%) were apprentices, 55 (11.1%) held other positions in the arts, and 40 listed "Other." But in terms of actual work in the past year, 73.1% of all participants had served as a stage manager, 58.7% had worked as a production stage manager, and 49% had been an assistant stage manager on at least one production.

Participants identified their state of residence [Figure 1], though a number of stage managers noted they are on long-term tours. It was very encouraging to discover that stage managers from 37 states participated in the study. As to be expected with the NYC-centric nature of American theatre, the highest concentration of survey participants live in the state of New York (133 responses). But other states also posted significant stage manager populations: California (46), Illinois (30), Florida (28), New Jersey (26), Minnesota (24), Ohio (21).

Figure 1: State of Residence



Another key identifier was level of experience. The survey asked participants how many years they had been working as stage managers [Figure 2]. The largest grouping (30.2%) placed themselves in the 6-10 year range, but 13.2% listed at least 26 years of stage management experience. The survey also asked the number and kinds of productions that participants had stage managed [Figure 3]. Lastly, the survey asked the ages of participants [Figure 4]. The years of experience and ages do not necessarily align as to be expected, as outlined in Figure 5.

Figure 2: Years of Experience

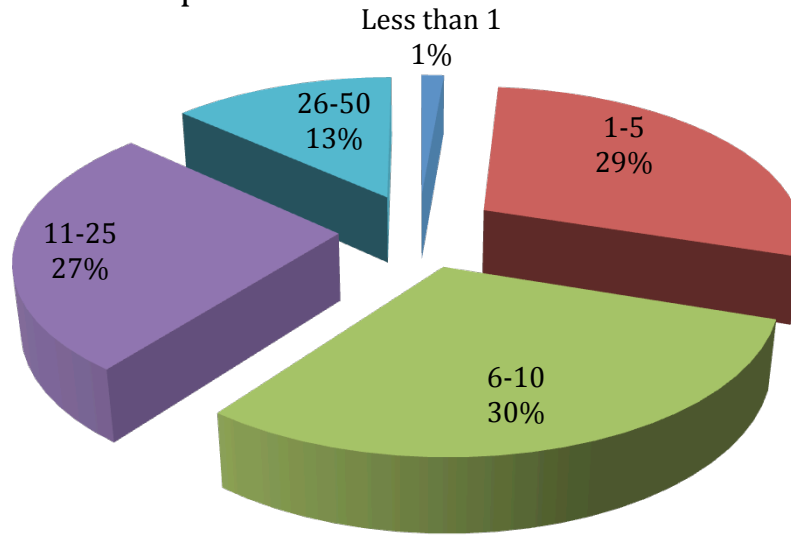


Figure 3: Number and Type of Productions as Stage Manager
(Percentage of Responses)

Number of Projects	0	1-5	6-10	11-25	26-50	51-75	76-100	101+
Musical Theatre	2.6	35.0	19.1	24.8	10.4	4.9	1.6	1.8
Non-Musical Theatre	1.0	18.5	17.9	27.4	19.5	8.6	3.5	3.7
Classical Dance	54.1	32.6	5.9	3.0	2.0	1.5	.2	.7
Modern Dance	43.2	38.6	7.2	6.8	.7	1.4	1.0	1.0
Classical Music	66.1	22.9	5.5	2.0	2.0	1.3	.3	0
Modern Music/Concert	52.3	32.0	8.8	3.3	1.3	1.3	.5	.8
Opera	47.3	29.9	9.0	5.7	5.2	1.4	.5	1.0
Special Events	12.9	46.0	16.8	11.8	6.7	3.2	1.1	1.5
Television/Video/Film	68.1	24.6	3.9	1.2	.7	1.0	0	.5

Figure 4: Age

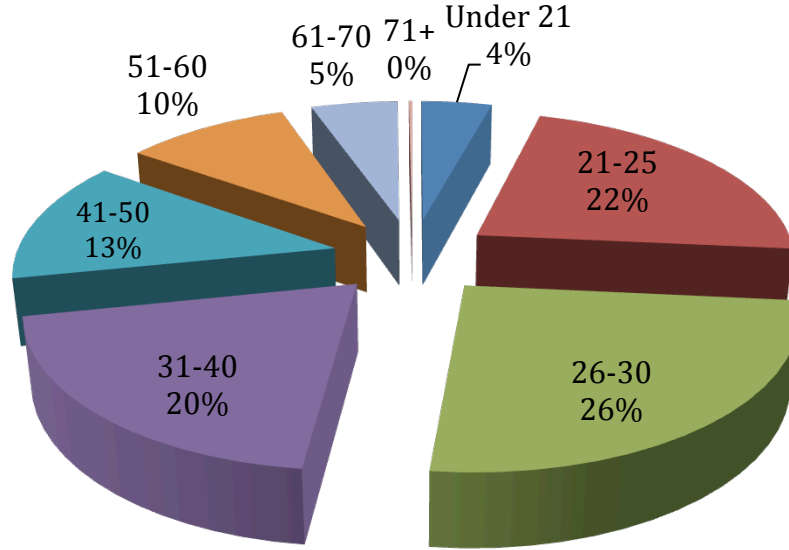
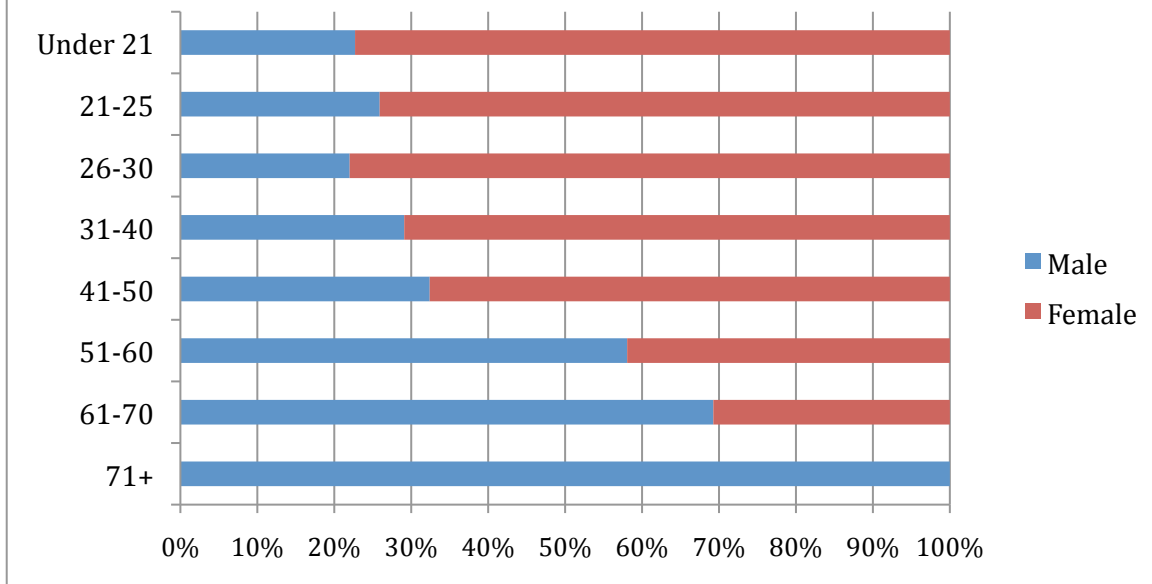


Figure 5: Experience Levels Divided by Age Brackets

Age	Less than 1 year	1-5 Years Experience	6-10 Years Experience	11-25 Years Experience	26-50 Years Experience
Under 21		11%	2%		
21-25	71%	54%	18%	1%	
26-30	14%	24%	50%	10%	
31-40		4%	19%	46%	1%
41-50		4%	5%	31%	15%
51-60	14%	1%	1%	5%	53%
61-70			1%	3%	27%

One goal of this survey was to track trends, such as the male/female ratio in the field. In the smaller 2006 survey, 66% of participants were female. In the 2009 survey, 68.4% are female. When divided by age brackets, the growing gender ratio becomes clearer [Figure 6].

Figure 6: Gender Ratios by Age Brackets



The last set of demographic questions were new to the 2009 survey: relationships and family status. A number of students in the University of Iowa program wanted to know how many stage managers are in long-term relationships and how many are raising children while stage managing. These questions were very difficult to phrase effectively, especially during the current political debate over marriage status. In addition, many people consider a family to include not just parent(s) and children but often older parents that require varying levels of care-giving. Nevertheless, only 24.2% of participants indicated that they are married, compared to 50.2% of the larger American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 data). Another 13% indicated that they have a long-term partner, a term that is open to interpretation and not easily correlated to the U.S. census data.

In addition, only 14.9% of participants responded that they have children, compared to 34.3% of households with one or more people under 18 years (2006-08 data). When segmented by gender, 22.6% of male stage managers reported having children, compared to 11.3% of female stage managers. When the survey was segmented to include only participants listing stage manager as their current occupation (removing interns, students, teachers, and other positions in the arts), 12.8% have one or more children. Many stage managers noted the challenges of raising a family while working long hours with limited flexibility in schedules. Actors' Equity Association has pushed for protection in several of its contracts for stage managers needing time off for childbirth; nevertheless, the industry continues to lag behind national initiatives such as the Family and Medical Leave Act.

SECTION II: TECHNIQUES ON CALLING A SHOW

The survey questioned participants on blocking and cue notations. The most popular format for blocking records is ground plans (43%), followed by writing the blocking directly over or next to the text (27%). Less popular techniques included columns (5.8%) and lists (4.1%), but a full 20% noted that they use another technique. When asked to elaborate, many of these stage managers reported using a combination of ground plans with lists or columns.

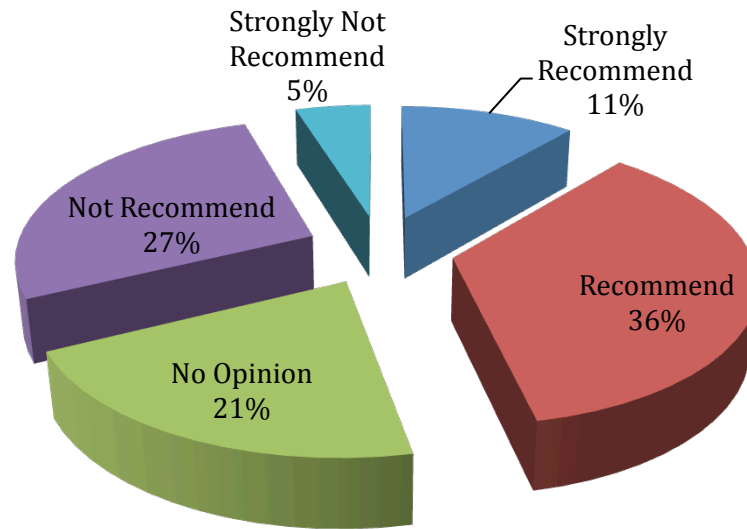
The survey group was evenly split over using separate calling and blocking scripts or a combined script: 53% use two separate books while 47% included both cues and blocking in one book. This represents a slight decline in using two books: in 2006, 55% used separate scripts. Several participants make their decision based on the length of the run and whether they anticipate actor replacements.

When asked about whether they create a back-up copy of the calling script, 32.9% take this safety precaution, 36.2% do not, and a full 30.8% admit that they do not but that they think they should. These results closely mirror the 2006 results. A stage management trivia fact: only 29.2% of single stage managers back up their calling script, but 74.2% of stage managers who are married or have long-term partners do so. And although the survey did not ask if the calling script remained in the booth, many stage managers reported this long-standing practice in their comments.

One of the goals of the survey is to track the impact of computers in rehearsals and performances. Only 4% of surveyed stage managers always type their cues and 70.8% have never typed cues into a calling script prior to opening, but use of typed cues grew after opening: 9.7% type their cues after performances begin. Equity members were more likely than non-Equity stage managers to always type their cues after opening (34 AEA, 16 non-AEA); budgets and the length of the run may impact this decision. Of those who type some/all of their cues, Microsoft Word is the clear choice; only a fraction have recorded their cues in Microsoft Excel (2.9%) or programs like Adobe InDesign (1%). Proponents of written cues noted a reduction in paper use and increased legibility of cues. Other stage managers indicated a very strong preference for pencils or tabs/stickers for faster cue placement and adjustments. One participant responded, "It has to be in pencil. The show is a living thing and changes. I need to be able to adapt to the growth of my show."

One of the more contentious questions was whether stage managers had called shows directly from a computer rather than a paper copy of the calling script. Sixty-three stage managers (12.1%) have tried this technique and are split on whether they would recommend the practice [Figure 7].

Figure 7: Recommend Calling a Show from a Computer



It is interesting to note that while the percentage of stage managers who have tried calling from a computer remains steady at 12% in both 2009 and 2006, those who have used this technique are recommending it more: in 2006, only 3% strongly recommended it. Those in favor of calling from a computer found it less stressful on the neck and recommended a monitor arranged vertically. Others noted monitor glare, difficulty in finding sections within a scrolling document versus a printed page, and the need to have a back-up paper copy as reasons why it was not worth the effort. Among those who have never called from a computer, the primary concern continues to be the risk of a mid-show computer crash. And while the assumption would be that only younger stage managers would try this technology, 14.4% of 31-40 year olds, 5.9% of 41-50 year olds, 7.8% of 51-60 year olds, and 3.7% of 61-70 year olds have called shows off of computers. Yet there does seem to be a gender divide: 7.9% of female stage managers have tried this technique compared to 21.3% of the male stage managers surveyed.

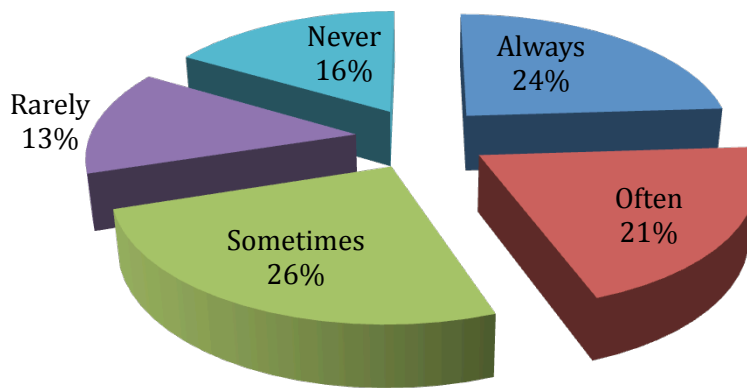
If given a choice, 65% of the survey participants preferred to call a show from the booth, rather than the wings (26.2%) or other locations (8.8%), but several participants noted that they often do not have options when it comes to their calling locations. Commenters noted that video monitors have solved many of the sightline issues from the wings, but often productions require larger offstage footprints for scenery and electrics. There was a strong age correlation: 80.2% of 21-25 year olds preferred a booth compared to just 22.2% of 61-70 year olds.

The majority of stage managers (68.6%) list their cues in the right margin of the text, compared to the left margin (23.1%) or other locations (8.3%) such as directly above the text, which is popular among some opera stage managers. Also noteworthy is that 23.1% of the survey participants reported being left-handed, which is significantly higher than the

approximate 10% of Americans (“Left-handedness,” Hardyck & Petrinovich, *Psychological Bulletin*, 1977).

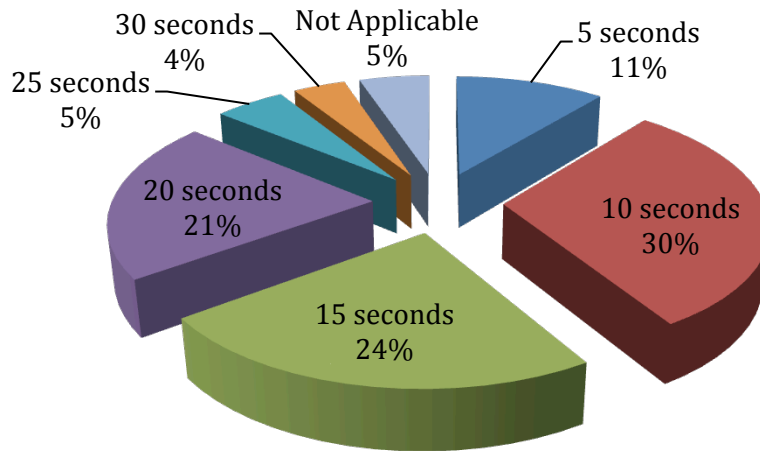
Only 15.1% generally write in cue counts, the length of time needed to complete a cue. But a full 60% have written in some cue counts and another 4.8% mark when cues are a ‘zero count.’ Others regularly request an additional light board monitor so that they can track cues. Participants also tended to place a mark in their scripts indicating when to begin speaking cues, but they varied in how often they chose to use this technique.

Figure 8: Marking When to Start Speaking a Cue



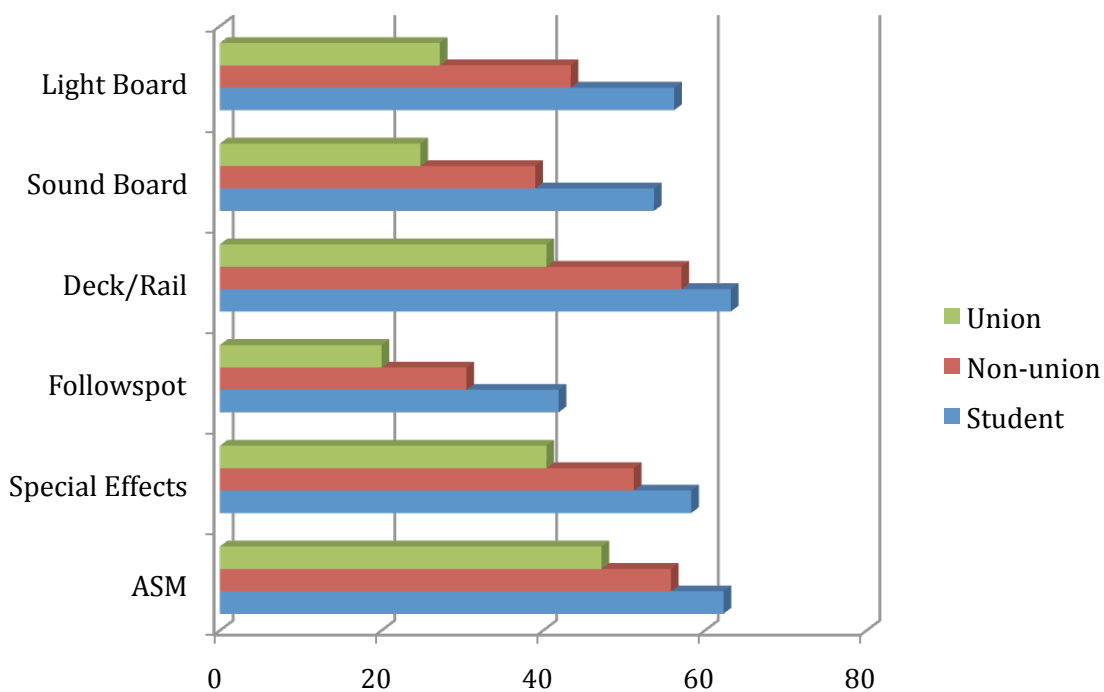
There appears to be minor shift in cue terminology: 81.7% call the announcement of the cue immediately prior to the call the “standby” while 13.1% call it the “warning.” In 2006, only 76% used the term “standby” while 19% called it a warning. There continues to be a small group that used the term “ready” (1.5%) and another group that uses no cue announcement at all (3.5%). There does not appear to be a consensus as to how far in advance to use this cue announcement [Figure 9]. But there is also no identifiable trend relating age or experience with the pause between the announcement and the actual cue.

Figure 9: Time between Cue Announcement and Cue



Another topic that has arisen in stage manager discussions is whether to require crew members to give verbal feedback to our cue announcements. Since the experience level of the crew member could have an impact on the stage manager's trust, we divided this question based on union, non-union, and student crews [Figure 10]. When stage managers expect verbal responses, the most common response (53.8%) is the department name (Lights, Sound, etc.), followed by a standing "standing by/warned/ready" (36.9%).

Figure 10: Expectations of Responses from Crew (%)



While commonplace prior to computer light boards and sound consoles, the advance warning, in addition to the cue announcement, is now primarily use for deck/scene shifts (50.5%), rail/fly cues (45.3%) and special effects (37.3%). Only 20% still use both a warning and a standby for manual light board operators and a mere 11% use both announcements for crew on a computerized light board. Several stage managers commented that they only use warnings after long periods of inactivity.

The majority of stage managers arrange their cue announcements by department (60.5%) rather than strict chronological order (35%). The most commonly reported order is Lights, Sound, Rail/Fly, Deck/Scene, Spotlights, Projections, Automation, and Special Effects. "Lights" continues to be the most popular name for a cue from the lighting designer at 74.6%, followed by "Electrics" (11%), "Elex" (2.8%), or no name but just the cue number (1.8%). The term "Electrics" is more popular among older stage managers (23.5% for 61-70 year olds), but "Lights" is the most popular in all age categories.

For the followspot operator, the majority of stage managers used the following sequence of information when describing cues: cue number, pick-up point, frame color, hard/soft focus, and size of iris opening.

While 87.4% of surveyed stage managers have used cue lights, the majority of them (63.1%) use "home-made" systems. At the University of Iowa, we are experimenting with a DMX-based system for easy "plug-and-play" positioning, but there is certainly an open niche market for this device. Very few stage managers (18.1%) expect a verbal response to the standby of a cue light. Other favorite non-verbal techniques for delivering cues include hand signals (57.9% of stage managers have used this technique), tapping crew members (29.9%), headset call buttons (22.3%), flashlights (22.9%) and sign language (4.4%). Lastly, 67.4% have allowed some crew members who are on headset to take cues on their own.

SECTION III: CAREER, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION

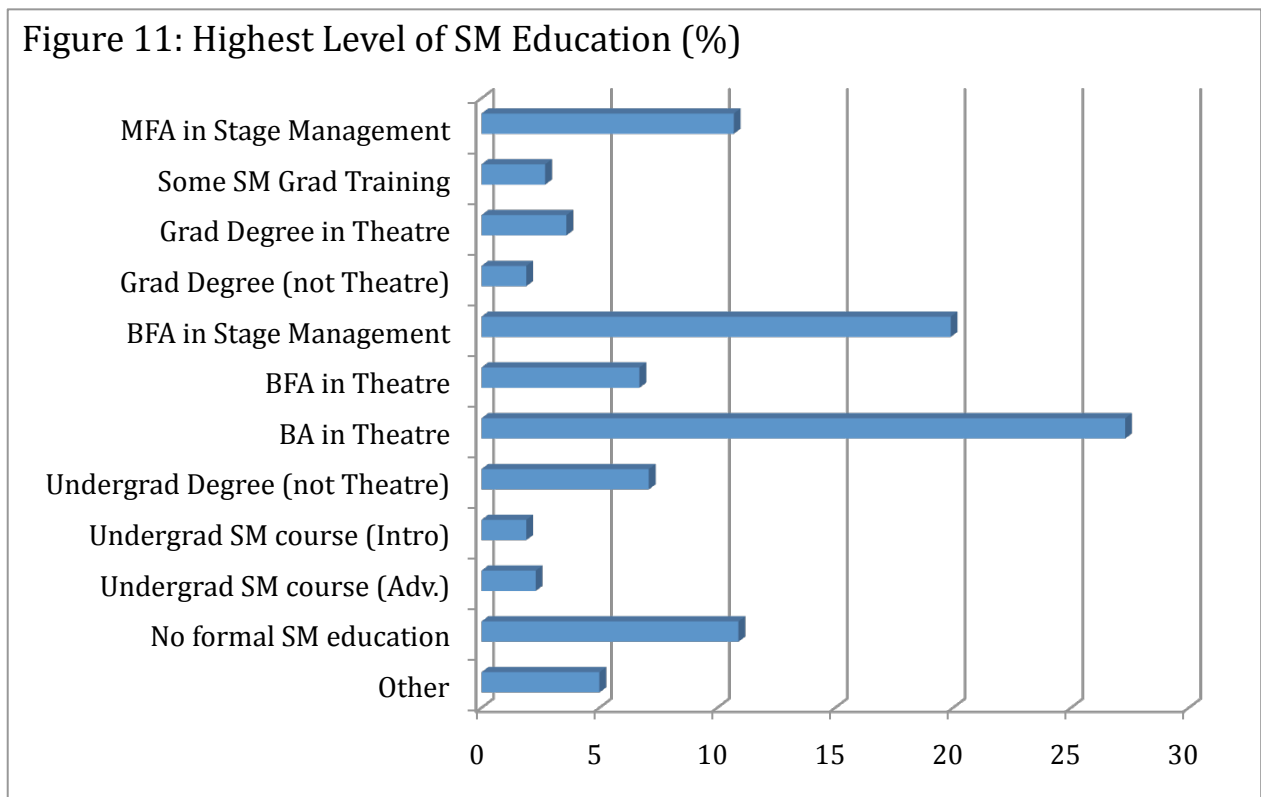
We asked participants about how they learn to call existing shows. 195 stage managers (40.3%) reported that they only watch a show once before they start to call it, 28.3% see it twice, 13.2% see it three times, and 14% have the luxury of watching it four or more times. Another 4.1% reported that they do not watch a show at all before moving to the booth. There was no correlation between experience level and the number of times observing a show. After watching the show, most participants shadowed the original stage manager once (25.1%) or twice (43.5%) before turning on their own headset mic. In addition, most stage managers called the show once (39%) or twice (37.7%) with the previous stage manager present. The vast majority (89.9%) felt that they received a sufficient amount of training to take on the new show.

Despite restrictions from Actors' Equity Association and a number of royalty companies on the recording of theatrical productions, 51.9% of survey participants have used audio

recordings and 53.4% have used video recordings to practice calling cues. Several participants recommended that, for safety concerns, Equity should allow a stage manager's training video recording, much like the sign language interpreter recording allowed under many contracts. As one participant noted, "I find the use of recordings to be incredibly helpful. You can go over a tricky transition 5 or 6 times in a row to really drill the cue sequence into your body. You can't do that by only watching someone else do it, and then only getting one shot in 24 hours."

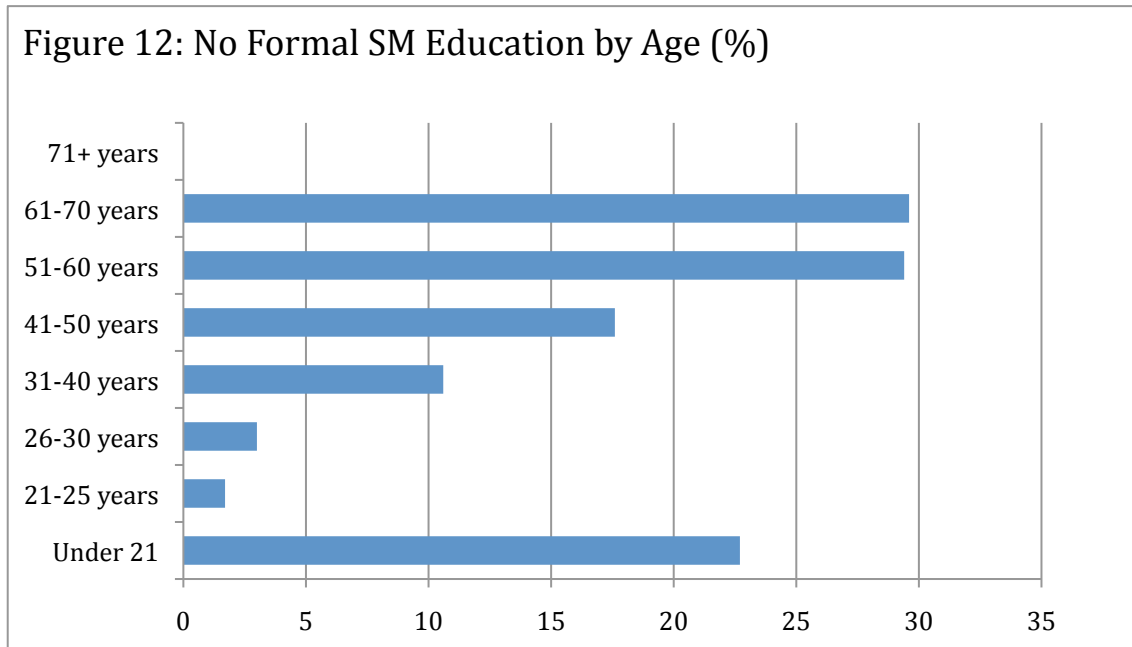
The most heated debate in the 2006 survey was formal education in stage management and the 2009 survey proved no different. Participants were asked to indicate their highest level of stage management education [Figure 11]. Twenty-six participants listed "Other" – most of these responses were stage management studies combined with other theatre disciplines, degrees such as the MA, or partial studies.

Figure 11: Highest Level of SM Education (%)



The most dramatic change since 2006 was the change in participants reporting a BFA in Stage Management. In 2006, 10.1% reported this degree while 19.9% selected this status in the 2009 study. As to be expected, formal stage management education was more prevalent among younger stage managers as many university programs started in the 1990s. For instance, of the 56 stage managers who earned a MFA in Stage Management, 44 are under the age of 40. If we divide the "No formal stage management education" group by age, it produces the following breakdown:

Figure 12: No Formal SM Education by Age (%)



There was also a relationship between stage management education and gender: 19.5% of the men surveyed had no formal SM education while only 6.5% of the women reported this status. Moreover, women had 46 of the 56 reported MFA degrees. But since women comprise the majority of the younger age brackets, it is difficult to determine the impact of gender compared to the more dominant trend of age on educational choices.

While this survey was conducted in an academic setting, the following are a sample of comments on this issue. A majority of comments came from those opposed to formal education in the field.

I learned more in the real work environment than I did in my college. That was 35 years ago and times have changed. You can find stage management being taught now.

MFAs are diploma [sic] mills so schools don't have to hire AEA SMs. Waste of time! Education gives you the nuts & bolts – but to really manage a stage takes a good mentor and the opportunity to practice the craft.

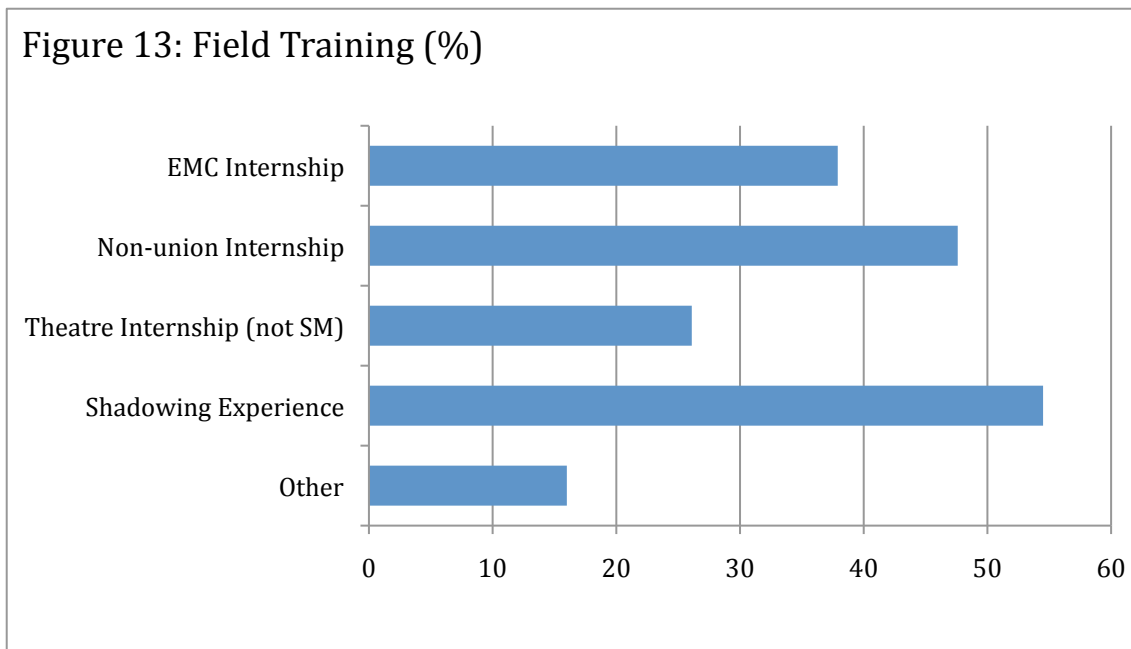
An MFA in Stage Management stands for “Moving Furniture Around”

The best SM education is doing it! I find school to be a waste except for paperwork. You never stop learning. There is always more to learn to be the best you can for the show you are on right now. We “steal” from other SMs all the time.

Another interesting statistic from the survey data was the relationship of career satisfaction and educational experience. The majority of responders (61%) were very satisfied with their career choice and another 27% were somewhat satisfied. In fact, only 3 participants (0.6%) were very dissatisfied. These high percentages are not surprising given that people who are not satisfied with their career are less likely to participate in a

voluntary survey. But if you divide the data by education level, 96% of stage managers with MFA are very or somewhat satisfied. In contrast, only 80% of stage managers with no formal stage management education ranked themselves in these two categories.

A much less contentious issue has been the prevalence of internships and the importance of training in the field.

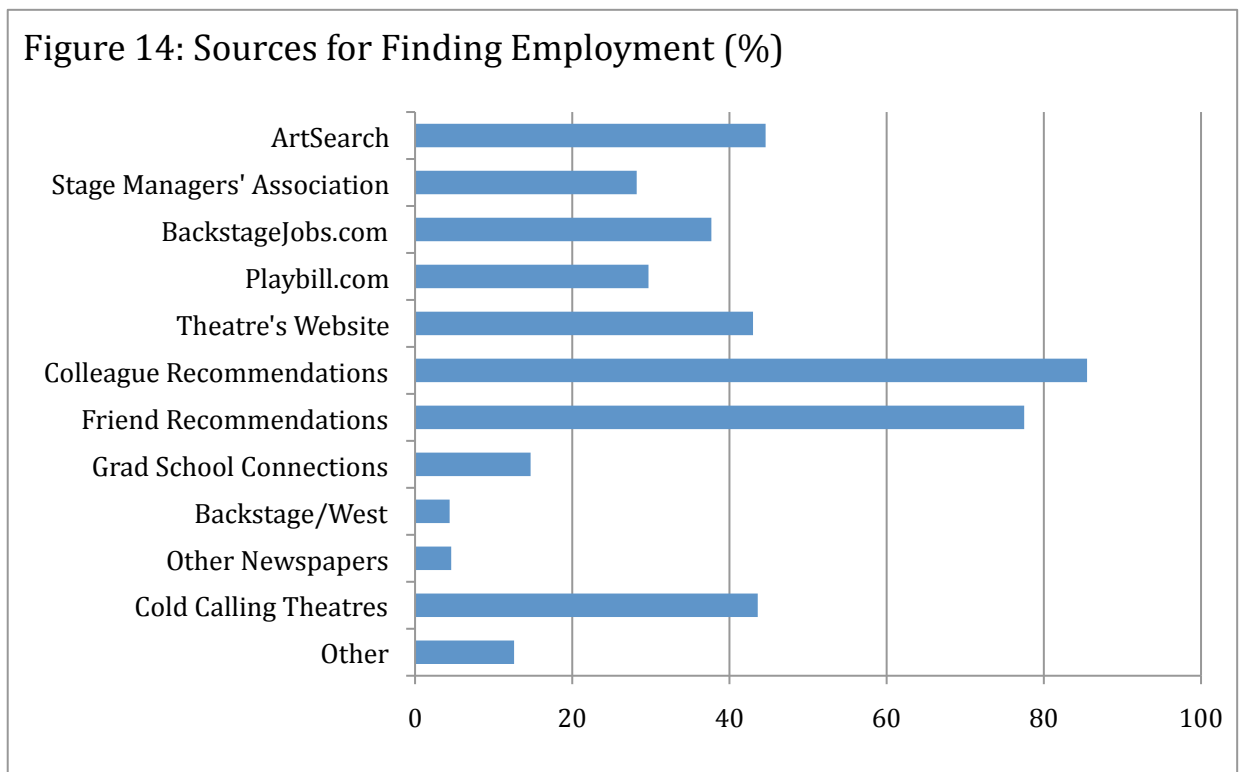


The question that took most participants by surprise was about stage management software. In fact, there were more comments about not being aware of stage management software than there were actual responses to the software listed. Of the seven titles listed, LineNotes by Thank You 5 had been tried by 20 surveyed stage managers (3.8%), followed by Production Assistant by Theatre Management Tools (12 users), and Virtual Stage Management by MTI (10 users). Attendance Management System, Play Rehearsal Scheduler, and StoryBoard had been tried by fewer than 10 survey participants and no one had tried CoCoAct Suite. Stage managers were encouraged to write in other software titles, which included MegaWatch (an AEA break timer), Icarus, and the Aurora program created by Cirque du Soleil for its projects. Given the low response rate, there is no data on stage managers' satisfaction with the listed programs. But in the age of smartphone apps and low-cost standalone programs, why are there not more programs for our field? The AEA Central Region Stage Manager's Committee conducted a round-table discussion in Spring 2009 about technology issues ranging from cell phones backstage to laptops in rehearsal. Future editions of this survey will include questions on these trends.

This survey also tracked potential turnover in the field. When asked the likelihood of leaving stage management within the next five years, 40 participants (7.8%) believed it very likely and another 46 (9.0%) thought it likely that they would stop stage managing in this timeframe. But of these 86 responses, only 17 came from stage managers over the age of 50. In fact, only 26 responses were from stage managers over the age of 40, so it appears that the cause of turnover will be more career changes rather than retirement. The major reasons for a departure from stage management included the long hours, the challenges of having a family, comparatively low wages for the number of hours worked, moves into production management or theatre administration, finding careers with more stability, and general burn-out from extended work schedules and high job stress.

For those remaining in the field, there are a number of popular resources that have proved successful in finding work.

Figure 14: Sources for Finding Employment (%)



CONCLUSION

The original plan for this survey was to conduct it every three years to see how stage manager experiences and attitudes change over time. Given the extremely high participation rate, a large number of suggestions for new questions, and the relative stability of many answers, we will change the format for future surveys. We will conduct the survey every two years, but we will split the questions into two groups that will only appear every four years. We chose to omit a number of intriguing questions in the 2009 survey to keep the length manageable. By alternating between two shorter surveys, we will be able to ask more questions with hopefully very little participant fatigue.

If you would like to recommend a question for a future survey or have your address on a mailing list for survey announcements, please e-mail davidjmcgraw@mac.com with "Survey" in the subject line. We will announce future surveys through the Equity News, the Stage Manager's Association, and the SM Network.

The Stage Manager's Association has been investigating opportunities to create a conference or convention for stage managers. The main challenge, of course, is that we are all extremely busy and critical to the success of our productions. Until such a gathering can occur, we hope that efforts such as this survey will help unite our field. We would like to thank again all of the survey participants for sharing their time and thoughts. See you in 2011!

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