

Case Study: Stage Manager (Concert Hall) - Richard

What do you do?

I work at De Montfort Hall in Leicester. There's a team of four of us, and we kind of work in all of the different departments: there's sound, lighting and stage, and we swap between all of those. But basically, I'm the stage manager, which means if we get a show that comes in with stage requirements, then it's my responsibility.

I also rig trussing, lighting, PAs; if there's anything going up above the audience or the stage, I make sure it's rigged safely and correctly, so we don't drop anything on people.



What is your background?

I used to be in a really dreadful band, and a friend of mine who was a roadie asked if I fancied doing some roadie work. So I ended up on a Michael Jackson tour, which was a pretty good way in, really.

From then on I worked 'humping and dumping', which is basically loading and unloading trucks, to start off with. Then I got to deal with the guitars and basses, and the amps: setting them up on stage, and making sure that the acts were happy.

Then, after doing some freelance work at De Montfort Hall, I took a permanent job here.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

To get a start in the industry, you need to be fairly fit so you can unload and load trucks. It's technique more than anything; you can learn how to lift correctly.

You need to be able to work late and long hours. Most of our work is at evening and weekends, so you need to say goodbye to your social life, to some extent; although there is a social life attached to working here.

Also, you are dealing with the public and, sometimes, very awkward visiting companies, so personal skills are needed as well.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

You tend to become a jack-of-all-trades, which from a qualification point of view doesn't really get you too far, but it does give you a good working knowledge of a lot of different areas.

They've sent me on a few a management courses. I've done a fire safety course. Also, there are carpentry skills: I end up making bits of scenery; building steps, that kind of thing.

I've also done a fork-lift course; that's a skill I could take into another industry. So there are a lot of skills that could transfer to other jobs.

What changes will there be in the future?

I think things will become more regulated; it has been a bit hit-and-miss on the training and health and safety front in the past.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

Dealing with people can be a challenge. Meeting with tour managers, who may be having problems with their tour, is sometimes an issue.

Getting the crew motivated can be challenging: you've got to get the most out of people without pushing them

completely over the edge.

Also, actually getting a show up on time can be a challenge. Sometimes the truck turns up late, and you've got to get the set up, because the show starts in a few hours.

Sometimes you get requests for the strangest things to be hung from the ceiling for a show. Finding ways of hanging things safely can be a challenge.

From the start of the day to the end of the day, it's a challenge. Every aspect of the job's a challenge really.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

It's one of those jobs that you tend to fall into. We do advertise in the local paper, as I think most theatres do. But what we often tend to do is pick people up through the crew we already have.

There is a trade magazine, The Stage, which you can get from some newsagents. Although the jobs advertised tend to be for people with experience, it's a great place to find addresses.

School work experience can even be a way in: we've picked up crew from people who have come in from schools.

If you've got an interest in music: find out how a guitar works and an amplifier works, just on a basic level; then you've got a skill you can take to a theatre or music venue.

What do you like about your job?

I like everything about my job, I really do, it's sad. I'm a sad bloke, I like my job; it's great. I get up in the morning and I might be tired but I won't go "I don't want to go in". Where else are you going to get paid for watching bands or theatre?

I'd never had an interest in classical music, but I now do, because I've seen some of the best classical musicians in the world. I never had an interest in ballet, but you can really appreciate it. It does make you more rounded.

You might see somebody you've always idolised, and you go "I'd really love to meet so-and-so". But in a work situation, you don't end up going "Hello, my name is...", you just do your job. And if you do your job well, they'll come up to you at the end of the night and say thank you very much, it's been great. And that's enough, to actually just be professional, and get them to thank you.

What do you dislike about your job?

In a normal job you can go "Okay, in April I think I'll be taking a week off, and in December I quite fancy going skiing." Or something like that. Until we actually know what the shows are, we don't really know who is going to be needed to do the job. Because the companies we get in might not have a flyman, or a stage manager or a rigger, in which case I'm working it. And that can change tomorrow.

It's only happened a couple of times where someone's said "You really are going to have to work a week that you thought you weren't working". But actually planning the social life side of things is difficult.

What are your ambitions?

I'd like to have my own venue, if the opportunity arose. There's a gap in the market in nearly every town you go to for a small venue, that serves good food, has bands on and has a late licence. There's not enough of it about.

Within this job, I suppose technical manager would be the next step. They are also talking about creating a head technician post. At the moment there are those of us who are heads of our own departments: stage, lighting, sound. When the technical manager isn't here, there's a bit of a gap, so a head technician would help to fill that gap. That position would be the next logical step; then technical manager maybe, after that.

I am realistic: I do realise that I won't be lifting boxes at 50. I won't be working till three in the morning at 55. You've got to look ahead.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

Write to your local theatre or music venue, you'll usually get a letter back. If they aren't taking anybody on at the

moment, they might keep your information on file and get back to you when they do. It's worth trying; we've done it here.

Go and do it for free, to get some experience. Find your local theatre group and tell them you'd like to learn. It's a start: get an interest and find out some basic skills, then go and talk to a company.

There are college courses as well: on the technical side of things, there's also performing arts, stage design.

You need to understand it is a physical job; we'll teach you to do it properly, but it is a physical job, especially when you are starting out.

A day in the life

A typical day varies, depending on what we've got on. Because the shifts can be so long, you can end up doing your whole 37-hour week's work in two and a half days. This is a typical music gig. The times vary.

When I do the job, I have to have the whole process in my head for the day. I have to know the order it's going to go in. There are a lot of people looking to me to know what's happening. And if I don't know how the day is going to go, then it can go wrong.

I always try to get here half an hour before I'm supposed to be here, so I can go through the paperwork for the day. To check what equipment is being brought in and what is required from us. I also check the seating arrangements.

The first point of contact with a visiting show is usually the truck driver. Then the crew unloads the equipment. I'll talk to their rigger or lighting guy, to find out their exact requirements.

Then I'll usually meet with the tour manager, and make sure he has everything he needs. Then I'll talk to the sound guy, to find out where he wants to put their speakers.

Once everyone's happy, I'll go back to unloading the truck with the crew. Then get the lighting and speakers in position. Following that, the sound and lighting desks are put into position. Any other sound equipment, such as amplifiers and an effects rack are put into place.

Then the instruments are set up. Once it's all in position, you can start focussing: pointing the lights to where the instruments are, and programming lighting requirements into the desk.

At the point where everything is set up, the majority of the crew will have worked for 2-4 hours. That crew then goes home until the show, later on. One or two of us stay on as the band rehearses, answering any queries, helping out with the equipment.

The show usually starts at 7.30, so by 6.30 I'll be making sure that everything on stage is ready and safe.

At around 7 o'clock I get a call from the front of house manager; I then get everybody finished off and away from the stage, ready for the audience to come in.

Once the band's on, I'm available at the stage manager's desk at the side of the stage, in case anything goes wrong.

When the show's over, the crew that was here earlier comes back and it all happens again, in reverse. It's all stripped down and loaded back on the truck.