

Stage Manager Learns About Theater, Life Lessons

By Mitch Bathke
Contributing Writer

With five minutes until the opening of Cal State Hayward's summer production of "As You Like It," Gillian Robins sat in her chair, a huge binder laid out on a wooden table in front of her.

Around her people flipped switches and pressed buttons. The room was dark except for the soft glow emanating from a small desk lamp, a laptop and other computer monitors. It seemed very similar to the bridge of a naval vessel, with Robins the captain.

She looked out of the windows of the control booth over a sea of people in the audience, examining the deserted stage.

"We are five to places," Robins calmly announced to her crew via her headset radio. After five minutes of shuffling and going over check lists, Cal State Hayward's resident stage manager started the show.

"Cue lights," she ordered. "Okay, let's rock and roll".

Those words began a flurry of activity in the control booth at the back of the theater. A pattern emerged during the show: a rush of pushing buttons, flipping switches and radio commands at scene changes, usually followed by a quiet calm during the middle of a scene, and then a repeat of activity.

Activity began when the stage manager issued orders over the radio and ended when she stopped talking.

Robins, a senior planning to graduate in March of 2004, has only been doing this work for about a year and a half. Her relative inexperience doesn't show.

"You need to learn how to control a situation," she explained. "If you can manage something and take charge, it doesn't take long to learn. Anyone can do it; it just takes confidence".

As a stage manager for the major productions at Cal State Hayward, Robins has a laundry list of responsibilities. In the

weeks leading up to a performance, a stage manager must balance interaction with the director, taking walking notes for the show, supervising the actors and making sure everyone is where he should be at the right time.

Robins is the first person to arrive at a rehearsal and the last to leave, locking up the theater after everyone else has left. These rehearsals can go on for weeks, taking three to four hours a night, four to five nights a week.

With about two shows per quarter, not to mention volunteer jobs taken on the side for fun or extra experience, stage managing can be a full-time job. It's a lot to take on for a full-time student with a part-time job on campus, an active social life and membership in the Sigma Sigma Sigma sorority.

Robins put it simply: "It's a big time commitment".

When it comes time for the actual performance, Robins finds herself facing a whole new set of responsibilities and duties. While the actors utter their lines, a small group scurries back stage to provide all the lighting, set placement and sound the show needs to succeed. At the head of all that activity is the stage manager, organizing when and where the crew works.

In the case of "As You Like It," Robins must give 72 commands, all of which are time-sensitive. These signals must be given at an exact point in the performance or noticeable mistakes will be made on stage, possibly confusing the audience and diminishing the quality of the show.

In the first 90 seconds of "As You Like It" there are 12 different cues for the crew.

"People listen and they take in what I have to say," Robins said. "If something goes wrong, it's all my fault".

Requirements and timing cues differ from show to show, but their execution is always the responsibility of the stage manager. As of right now, at Cal State Hayward, that stage manager is Robins.

Anyone can step in and learn, as Robins found out in her first experience with stage management, when she was thrust into the control booth the opening night of a show because no one else was there to do it.

Experience, however, is always an important factor in the work of a stage manager. This leads to a practice of training one or two people to become resident stage managers, then using them as much as possible until they become unavailable.

When asked what might happen when she leaves in a few months, Robins replied, "They need to find someone. I'm sure another freshman or new person will step in and want to know how to do it. Somebody will have to learn."

Different theater departments focus on different disciplines, and Cal State Hayward focuses mainly on acting. This leaves few resources for technical training.

And Robins' crew, anywhere from two to more than 10 people, changes with every production.

The crew usually is made up of actors who do not have parts in the current show, or volunteers from beginning theater classes.

Staging often requires large amounts of physical work and many of these crew members learn the intricacies behind the operations of a show. They sometimes are rewarded with extra credit in classes or credit toward graduation, "so it's rewarding at the same time," Robins said.

"It's a position that is very, very well respected," she said. "You can't be the nice guy, or everyone will walk all over you."

"It gives a sense of what it's like to be in charge, to have people depend on you instead of you depending on other people. It has helped me to realize that managers in general are not big jerks; they're just trying to help you do your job. It opened my eyes to that."

"It's something I just enjoy doing," she concluded. "It gives a sense of being."

STYLE COMING UP SHORT?

show your student ID at the following stores and get a **college student discount:**

- target express
- charlotte russe
- american eagle
- victoria's secret
- limited
- forever 21
- macy's
- gap
- bath & body works

Keepsake Factory, Coldstone, Site for Sore Eyes, Perfumetics, Steve's Hallmark, Gingiss Formalwear, Baron's Jewelers and Subway.....

internship

at NewPark Mall, log onto www.generalgrowth.com for details.

Newark CA. HWY 880 exit Mowry www.NewParkMall.com 510 794 5523 **NEWPARK MALL**

Biology 101

Average new textbook price **\$73***

Biology 101

Average half.com textbook price **\$26***

Natural selection.

How smart is this: All the textbooks you need for up to 60% off retail prices. And all you have to do is go to half.com and type in the book titles, or ISBN numbers. Then let nature take its course.



Same textbooks. Smarter prices.

*Average retail price of a new college textbook: \$73 based on 2002 data from Feltz Corp., Associated Press, 1/27/03. Average half.com college textbook price: \$26 based on site statistics, January 2003. First time buyers only. Limited time offer; excludes shipping and handling; offer subject to change or termination without prior notice. Copyright 2003 half.com, Inc. All rights reserved. half.com and the half.com logo are trademarks of half.com, Inc. ebay and the ebay logo are registered trademarks of ebay, Inc.