The Gospel of Mark Project: Stage Manager’s Guidebook

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The Gospel of Mark Project

Stage Manager’s Guidebook

*The script for this project was developed using the Common English Bible.*
Dear Reader,

Here I have taken the opportunity to compile as much information and documentation as I thought might be useful to any endeavoring to stage manage the continuing Gospel of Mark Play Project, or as might be helpful to prepare one for a similar touring production. The notes, ideas, and suggestions herein are informed by my personal experience stage managing the Gospel of Mark Play throughout the 2010-2011 school year, by my other stage management experience, by feedback received from those involved in the production as well as our audiences, and by research I have conducted regarding stage management of touring productions. My hope is that the work we have done to create this script, and the information I have recorded here, will allow this Project to continue within the Department with increasing ease and fluidity. Please consider reading through the information compiled here. For your convenience, there is a CD in the front pocket with a digital copy of our final script, and a few other potentially useful documents in digital format. The script is also documented on the Department’s N Drive. There is also a DVD recording of a dress rehearsal so you can see the final product – the blocking on its feet. May these things make your task significantly easier.

Blessings,

in CHRIST,

jessica joy nelson

P.S. Feel free to get in touch with me at any point in the future with questions or comments. As much as I am able, I am quite happy to be a resource, (or simply a friend 😊), to future stage managers.

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This Binder includes:

Front Pocket –
- CD with digital copy of final script and other documents
- DVD recording of a dress rehearsal

Yellow Tab –
- Description of our process creating the Gospel of Mark piece during the 2010-2011 academic year
- Notes and recommendations related to this process
- Advice for Stage Managers, including Auditions, the Rehearsal process, Organization, and Touring

Orange Tab –
- Feedback from ensemble members and Performance Venue contacts
- Helpful research from text sources
- Interviews with professional and amateur Stage Managers of various levels of touring and non-touring productions

White Tab-
- Paperwork from the Gospel of Mark production process

Green Tab –
- Blocking Script for the Gospel of Mark Play

Pink Tab –
- Sample Photocopy Script
- Sound Copy of Script
The Process:

Auditions:
- Actors were asked to deliver a parable, in any creative fashion.

Rehearsals:
- After our first rehearsal, the Director divided the text into lines before each rehearsal.
- New pages were handed out at each blocking rehearsal.
- Most weeks, we had two 1-hour rehearsals, and one 3-hour rehearsal.
- Cuts were made in the text to create a 45 minute piece.
- After the show was blocked, the Director left many rehearsals to the Stage Manager to continue running and polishing.

Performances & Brush-Ups:
- We had a performance booked in Chapel on November 30th – right after Thanksgiving break
  - Dress rehearsal for Chapel was 11:00 pm the night before, sound check was at 8:45 am (call at 8:15).
- Our 2nd performance was at Pascack Bible Church in NJ on Feb. 20th.
  - We had 2 brush-up rehearsals after J-term break
  - We traveled to NJ on Saturday afternoon, had a dress rehearsal in the space in the evening, and performed Sunday morning.
  - Minimal changes were made to blocking based on the new space.
- One more performance is scheduled for May 1st, at Slate Hill Mennonite Church.

Notes and Recommendations:
- For auditions, we had all of the Actors in to audition at the same time, except for a few who arranged separate appointments. The atmosphere was informal, which allowed theatre majors and non-majors alike to be comfortable with whatever they had prepared.
- Originally, the Director wanted to incorporate the music skills of the cast into our presentation of the Gospel. But because of the limited time and difficult schedule we had for creating the script and blocking, we were never able to experiment with this.
- We’ve created a script, and blocked the show. This was a difficult, especially putting the script together. So here is our recommendation: *Use this script.*
  - It is designed to run 45 minutes, to fit within a Chapel service, and we decided to keep the script we created to use for church performances as well. This allows churches to build their service around our performance.
Creating a new script, a new production, every year will only result in repeating the most difficult parts of the process. We have created this ensemble piece of theatre which can be re-created every year without much trouble, making it possible to explore and enjoy the text more, as well as, perhaps, book performances earlier.

- Communicating with the cast about rehearsals and other notifications is a little bit different than a regular department production in that the callboard is not a reliable means of passing on information, particularly when non-majors are involved. Email was my primary means of communication. I also made extensive use of text messaging for reminders and last minute notices.

- One of the challenges we faced during rehearsals was that the Director, Stage Manager, and two of the Actors in Gospel of Mark were also involved in daily rehearsals for the Department’s mainstage production, On The Verge. On an average week, Gospel of Mark had one 3-hour evening rehearsal, and two 1-hour rehearsals which overlapped with an hour of rehearsal for the mainstage. Our schedule was grueling. And when it came time for tech week, several more of the Actors in Gospel of Mark were involved backstage in On The Verge. So despite the fact that we had our Gospel of Mark performance in Chapel coming up shortly after On The Verge was scheduled to close, there was no way for Gospel of Mark to rehearse during that time.

- One of the difficulties of rehearsing without the Director is that we had only one pair of eyes and ears trying to stay on top every aspect of rehearsals. It is impossible to watch to make sure the show looks good, and pay attention to the details from an aesthetic perspective, while continuously paying attention to blocking and keeping line notes (line notes being already almost impossible with 8 Actors and 1 Stage Manager).

- Performing in Chapel right after Thanksgiving break was a wonderful experience, but also a challenge.

Because we had not rehearsed much during On The Verge, we needed to rehearse on Sunday evening at the end of Thanksgiving break, and our final, dress rehearsal in Brubaker Auditorium was on Monday night. The stage, chairs, etc, for Chapel are set up the night before, but they have to wait until after any sports are done with the room. In this case, we had to wait until basketball was finished before the work crew could set up the room. So we were not able to come in for our only rehearsal in the space until 11:00 the night before our Tuesday morning performance. We warmed up, had a sound check with the body mics, and ran the show once with the sound crew that night, and then came back at 8:15 Tuesday morning to warm up and do a sound check before our performance.

- After our Chapel performance at the end of November, we went two full months without rehearsing at all, before we were able to have brush-up rehearsals before we traveled to NJ. Two of the Actors were not available for most of J-term, and as soon as performances of the J-term musical ended, rehearsals for the Spring mainstage began. So it was nearly impossible to squeeze in any rehearsals, before our Feb. 20th performance. However, after persistently encouraging the cast to
review their lines and blocking, it was not too difficult to put the show back on its feet after two months. One run-through was enough to remember the flow of the action. Some of the actors remembered their lines better than others, but there was not enough trouble to be cause for concern. What was difficult was getting back into the flow of rehearsals, because there was no consistency of rehearsals throughout Spring semester.

We had 2 brush-up rehearsals before traveling to NJ. In the first, we had a run-through, which only stumbled a little bit as the actors remembered how one episode flowed into the next. In some cases, the actors knew their lines better than they ever had before. Then we did a speed-through mostly to focus on reviewing lines. In the second rehearsal, we had MORE problems with lines than in the first, but it allowed us the opportunity to realize that some of the actors needed to pick up their scripts and review a few more times, while other needed to put their scripts down so as not to over-rehearse.

When we got to NJ, we didn’t have any problems with lines or blocking. We were able to have a dress rehearsal (somewhat rushed) in the space on Saturday evening, which gave us the ability to adjust our blocking for the space. We didn’t even have time for a full run-through that evening, but we had enough time to run through more than half of the show, and then skip to important scenes and transitions to make sure the action would flow well in the space we had.

We made minimal blocking changes in different venues. During our brush-ups, I had an approximate measurement, and in order to prepare the cast for a much smaller space than we had in Chapel, we rehearsed in C29, and the space was quite a bit smaller than even the church stage would be. This forced the cast to adjust to a small space, and when we finally got into the space in NJ, it felt big. Which I think was helpful. Because the Cast was used to adjusting the blocking to fit within various rehearsal spaces, the changes when we took the show to NJ were mainly to incorporate the steps built into the stage there. For instance, scenes such as Herod’s banquet, Pilate before the crowd, and the crucifixion made use of a step above the stage.

We had a sound guy come for the first half of the rehearsal to figure out the best way to use the choir mics. He set up 2 good choir mics near the edge of the stage, which made a huge difference to audibility, even though we did not have enough body mics for all of the Actors. Another guy was there to work a little with the lighting.

This performance was INCREDIBLY well-received.

SO many people expressed their enjoyment of the performance, and their gratitude for the message we were sharing.

One of the Elders of the church, who hosted 2 of the actors overnight, told me that he’s never been much interested in the arts, but that this performance was really refreshing, and a helpful perspective. We were all overwhelmed with thanks from the congregation.
Overall advice for a Stage Manager:

- Be more prepared than you think you need to be.
- Don’t leave something for later if you can/should do it right now. Prioritize.
- Be in constant communication with actors regarding rehearsals and call times, as well as updates about performances, costumes, and anything else they need to know. If you have new information, communicate it clearly, and as soon as possible to keep everyone up to date and on the same page.
- It helps to create a great atmosphere if you can stay on top of things in a professional manner and let people know that you’re still having fun.
- Keep a level head, stay positive, and keep smiling. Everything will be fine, and solutions are easier to find when you can stay calm. The stage manager has more control than anyone over the atmosphere during rehearsals.

Advertising auditions:

- Post flyers everywhere. Theatre majors know to pay attention to information about auditions. Mass emails help get the word out, but not everyone reads them. Aloysius, one of our Actors this year, who was cast in the role of Jesus, is a Bio major, who found out about auditions from a flyer posted on the bulletin board in the entrance to Murray Library. Use the public bulletin boards!
- Others have suggested putting flyers in bathroom stalls. (What else are people going to look at?)

Auditions:

Be an encouragement to everyone auditioning. Give them tips you’ve picked up on successful audition techniques. For instance:

- Be confident, believe in yourself.
- Make sure nothing is hanging from your clothes (especially lanyards); people tend to fiddle with these objects without realizing it.
- No gum
- No flip-flops
- Simple clothing is best – nothing distracting
Printing scripts to photocopy:

To print individual pages so they can copy into a book/script format:

2 pages per sheet:

34 – 1
2 – 33
32 – 3
4 – 31
30 – 5
6 – 29
28 – 7
8 – 27
26 – 9
10 – 25
24 – 11
12 – 23
22 – 13
14 – 21
20 – 15
16 – 19
18 – 17

This will print page 1 on the right side of a sheet of paper (landscape) so that when it is folded in half, page 1 is top. Then the pages alternate.

When feeding through the copier, turn the sheet with page 2 (and each alternating sheet) in the opposite direction. This will put page 2 on the back of page 1, and they will all be facing the same direction when folded into a book.

This layout will result in pages 17/18 on a sheet with no pages on the back. I simply folded and glued them together for convenience. An alternative would be to add a cover before page 1, or add blank pages at the end, which would shift the numbers in order.

*A hard copy of this script as a result of this process is included.*
Things to be thinking about FAR in advance:

- Churches plan their Sunday morning schedules a while in advance – often 3-4 months in advance. It’s not easy to find a church willing to invite a group for a last-minute Sunday morning performance. Work with the Production Coordinator to plan ahead!
- Get your 15-passenger van license with the College.
- If you’re going to use Messiah College Fleet vehicles, reserve them as soon as you have a performance booked. We had to use our own personal vehicles to drive to NJ for a performance, because by the time we tried to reserve vehicles, there were NO college vehicles available, let alone a 15-passenger van.
- Rehearsal spaces. This will be much easier once the new Worship Center is completed, but for the time being, if you want/need to rehearse in a space in Climenhaga, especially Poorman Recital Hall, or C134, talk to Cindy Streck (Assistant to the Dean) as soon as possible.
- If you’re performing in Chapel, be in touch with the Minister of Worship, Doug Curry, as well as the tech crew in charge of Chapel, as soon as possible. Work out all the details early, the same as you would with any other venue.
- Considering the potential for varied church venues with varied acoustic capacity, and the unlikelihood of having 8 good-quality body mics, it’s important to work some with the Actors on projection and sound quality, and to be aware of how the Actors’ volume levels compare to each other.

Working with the Production Coordinator:

Judy Mecum is our Production Coordinator, in charge of booking our performances.

Be as involved as you possibly can in the communication with churches. Check in with the Production Coordinator, see how things are going, offer to help.

And as early as possible during the Fall Semester, look at the season calendar yourself, and communicate with the Tech. Director, to make sure that the Production Coordinator has an accurate list of dates available that will not conflict with department productions (i.e. important work weekends, tech week or performances). Also make sure the dates do not fall on break weekends.
Scheduling:

- It is incredibly difficult to work around everyone’s schedules.
- Since the Gospel of Mark Project is not considered part of the Theatre Department’s season, it must give way to rehearsals for any department production, and other commitments the actors have made. The larger the ensemble, the harder it is to find free time in everyone’s schedules to work with.
- It is possible, but extremely inefficient, to work on blocking with an ensemble member missing. But once the show is blocked, it is essentially pointless to rehearse if not everyone in the cast is present.
- Get a good idea, when people come to audition, of how busy they expect their schedules to be. Make sure they’re willing to work around their schedules to rehearse, and to be available for rehearsals and performances throughout Spring semester (and J-term if possible). Consult the Master Calendar for the Department of Theatre Season to make sure you won’t be conflicting with various rehearsals and work days within the Department.
- Create a rehearsal schedule with the Director as soon as possible, so Actors can plan ahead. This can be more difficult when planning for Spring semester, when everyone’s schedules will change.
- If possible, find out before Christmas break what ensemble members anticipate their schedules to look like for Spring semester, once they know what classes they are planning to take and what activities they plan to continue, so you can create a schedule of potential rehearsals.

Know how much information you need to communicate with your performance venues:

- How much space do you need? Does the entire stage area need to be cleared?
- Are there enough mics for the entire cast (very unlikely with a cast of 8)?
- If not, are there choir mics that could help pick up sound?
- Is there any lighting that can be used to create a performance space instead of just a sanctuary?
- How much time will there be to rehearse in the space – to work out any changes? To warm up before the service(s) start on Sunday morning?
- Can you get the dimensions of the performance space ahead of time, so you can work on re-blocking before you get to the church?
- Since we took the show to NJ, we had to plan for hospitality and meals. If this is part of the planning, make sure all of the details are worked out and confirmed. Some of the details I thought I had worked out with my contact had apparently not been communicated fully to everyone involved. It all worked out fine, but only at the last minute. *Confirm the details ahead of time.*
- Let the church know what would be best for the ensemble, but also let them know that you’re flexible.
Touring:

- Take notes at every performance. I didn’t take notes during our Chapel performance, thinking that any problems would fix themselves or come up in rehearsal before our next performance. But we had limited rehearsal time to work with between performances, and you often will notice different issues in each run-through.
- It might be helpful to brief the cast about honoring the spaces we perform in and being respectful and open to interacting with church congregations and audience members, since this ensemble acts as a representative both for Messiah College, and for the Department of Theatre.

Supplies to travel with:

- Mic tape
- Script for sound
- Spike tape to mark center
- Props
- Pre-show and Travel checklists
- Itinerary (if needed)
- Paper – for notes
- Hair ties, clips, & bobby pins
Props:

- 2 metal buckets with water – sound effect for baptisms
- Tambourine – music for dance at Herod’s banquet
- 2 long strips of flowy fabric – simulates water, fishing nets, etc.

Costumes:

- Long-sleeved solid-colored shirts – These were purchased for the Project and will be stored by the Department. The character of Jesus wore a white collared shirt.
- Black pants
- Brown or black sandals
- Basic make-up
- Long hair tied back.

Sound:

- Because of the physical nature of the show, we need to have either body mics, or no mics at all. Hand-holds would be simply impossible to use. And while the Dept. of Theatre has plenty of body mics, they cannot travel. The wireless receivers are all built into one box attached to the sound system.
- The Chapel team DOES have 8 body mics (as of now), but some of them are older, and lower quality. But we would have been lost without those extra mics.
- The Chapel team told us, originally, that they only had 6. I didn’t realize until the last minute that it would be impossible to bring our own mics from the Dept, but I was able to arrive while the sound guys were setting up for our dress rehearsal, at which point I was told that they had some old ones that could be used.
- I also created a copy of the script to give to the sound crew, which highlighted the moments when the ensemble beats on the floor, and the actor who speaks directly afterwards, so that they could be prepared to adjust the sound levels. I also made note that when Jesus dies, the actor YELLS, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani.”
Stage Management Resources on Moving/Touring a show on a larger scale:

Stage Management
~Lawrence Stern

“Here are some of the steps you will want to take:

1. Prepare and distribute an itinerary.
2. Caution the cast/crew on travel deportment.
3. “Mother-hen” the cast on the road.
4. Supervise the load-in, setup, strike, and load-out.
5. Pave the way with letters to business agents, host theater owners, and so on. Request the host theater’s info packet.

Itineraries

“The first thing you need is an itinerary, whether you are moving across the street or across the nation. What day are you making the move? What time? What is your destination? What’s the new address (with zip code)? What’s the new phone number (with area code)? What is the rehearsal and performance schedule during the period?”


The Backstage Guide to Stage Management
~Thomas A. Kelly

“On tour, it is vital that the stage manager know in advance what the next theater is like. Before you arrive in the next town or city, contact that theater’s house crew and go over all the needs and requirements of your show and try to iron out any potential problems with load-in.”

“Be sure you have a clear picture of the dressing room layout and the rooms available for wigs and wardrobe. Then once you arrive, go through the dressing rooms and make sure the assignments you’ve made in advance make sense.”

“On tour you are moving quickly, and so much changes for the performers from week to week that anything the stage manager can do to keep things similar the better.”

“During the load-in on tour, the stage manager is often responsible for focusing lights and must be totally familiar with the light plot and design concept. . . . The lighting designer should arm the stage manager with lots of paperwork, including all the information on the basic focus. . . . The stage manager should be with the lighting designer for the first time the lights are focused to learn all the intricacies of the plot, and then he or she must translate that from theater to theater.”

“Never take anything for granted.”
“Always try to have a sound check and some rehearsal with the cast onstage before the first show in a new theater.”

“A touring stage manager is always on his or her toes, adapting, dealing with a lot of different situations and personalities, but somehow making the show work every night. . . . It is vital to keep the cast active and together on tour.”

“Maintaining the artistic quality of a show on the road is quite a challenge, not only in terms of finding time for rehearsals and accomplishing all the technical tasks, but of dealing with the vast differences in audience reactions from one section of the country to another. “

“Travel days are far from days off for stage managers. Stage managers should help move the company by: assisting in baggage pickup and handling, organizing and scheduling bus pickups, signing people in, and, in general, shepherding the company.”

“A tour stage manager must use the same skills and attributes necessary for successfully stage managing a stationary production: a combination of the ability to handle a lot of detail and organizational work with hands-on care for and attention to the bell-being and spirit of the company and crew.”


Excerpts from interviews with professional Stage Managers:

“From the beginning it is important that you are confident in yourself and confident that you know your job. If you are working with a new director it is worth it to take the time to feel out how they want you to fit into rehearsals . . . Whatever you choose to do – do it with as much confidence and authority as you can muster. People will believe you and fall in line.” ~Joanna P. Brock

“This is a fun job. It should be a friendly and caring environment (not unprofessional, but for Pete’s sake, have fun! And let others know you are having fun!” ~Joanna P. Brock

“Clear and concise communication is really key in keeping things running smoothly. The clearer the schedule is, the better off EVERYONE is. Also, it ALWAYS helps to allot extra time to get somewhere.” ~Fran

“I think the most important thing about a stage manager in this kind of situation, because you never know what you’re going to run into, is to just be able to be quick on your feet and take things in stride.” ~Stephanie Leh
“When you find yourself working on a new play, you must prepare yourself to manage script changes.”

“Three functions must be addressed when working on a new play and expecting the play to evolve through the production process: revision, distribution, and file management. Revisions to the script may be made on a regular basis. This could be a daily occurrence or even more frequent. Stage management must, at the very least, be responsible for revisions being correctly executed in a timely manner. See that you have access to some type of word processing system. (And that you know how to use it before you need it.)

Whenever a change is made, the new page or pages of the script must be distributed to all members of the cast and crew affected by the change. Do not overlook designers and the variety of artists and crafts people working on the production. Even a small cut or addition in the script could change the prop, costume, lighting, or sound requirements of a production. The turnaround time for revision and distribution should be kept to an absolute minimum. This means you must have twenty-four hour access to a copying machine or copying service. Some changes maybe so slight that they may be communicated to many people by way of the daily rehearsal notes you will publish. Keep a close eye on this and decide what is best for the production. Nothing is more frustrating than a lack of information.

“To keep an accurate record of the evolution of the script, it is important to maintain a file that includes every version of the script that you have come in contact with and a record of all revisions. This will become extremely useful when the director and playwright decide a recent change does not work and they wish to go back to the way the script was last Tuesday. Do not throw anything away.”

Feedback from those involved in the Gospel of Mark Project:

Is there a way to work music into the production without changing the script?

“I wasn’t really a fan of the one hour rehearsals because I thought it took a while for us to be focused and an hour wasn't long enough for that.”

“The only parts of the show I didn’t like were the parts where it was monologue after monologue. If I started to lose attention in the show I was performing in, how did the audience feel?”

“It was unique in that the performances were spread throughout the year, which allowed time for us to rejuvenate between shows. I do feel, however, that because of this, it is rather difficult to get back into the rhythm of rehearsing each time we begin again, which makes everyone low on energy.”

“Having hour-long rehearsals scattered throughout the week, but not 3 days in a row, gave the lines that we were memorizing time to incubate. Having perhaps one three-hour rehearsal and a few one-hour rehearsals a week was manageable, but . . . any more would have been overwhelming.”

“Dress rehearsals were infinitely helpful in cementing the blocking, lines, and overall comfort with the space.”

“Fixing our innumerable paraphrasing errors would have been more successful if we had received hard copies of line notes.”

“I felt that the movements/blocking were at times too mechanical to fully convey the intense emotions we were attempting to portray.”

“I definitely found it difficult to make it a priority, when I already had two shows and classes and work taking up my time.”

“I didn’t like . . . not having the director around very much. . . . I would encourage the dept to find someone who is not as involved in another show, if they want to keep it up and going. I didn’t really feel like I got very much coaching or feedback on my acting. I think it also would have been nice to have a directorial eye to see things from the other side, to constantly be tweaking things here and there, instead of just running running running the show.”

“I was not a huge fan of traveling. But it turned out okay.”

“Perhaps something to consider is not having a big chapel performance as the first performance because some people, especially non-theater people, may not be used to being in front of a large crowd like that as an opening performance. Perhaps a smaller venue would be better for opening performances.”

“Personally I found the rehearsal process to be very difficult. Trying to fit in rehearsals . . . I found to be very frustrating. I really enjoyed the beginning blocking rehearsals when we were implementing all the awesome ideas and just experimenting. However I found it very difficult to work without the director a lot of the time. It seemed like nobody was fully committed which in turn caused me to not feel as
committed. . . . In the future I would suggest having a director who has the time to fully commit to the show. Honestly I think that juggling everybody’s schedules was our biggest problem.”

“I can’t even describe how amazing the NJ tour was for me. The fellowship and hospitality refreshed me so much. It was very relaxing to have everything scheduled out so well and just get to go with the flow. . . . Performing at that church was the first time I felt our group was completely united.”

“I kind of wish we had a Chapel performance [Spring] semester too. A lot of people missed it [Fall] semester because it was so late in the semester.”

It might be interesting to see if there are moments when you can explore the text a bit more. For instance, connect a group warm-up activity to the text, to meaning, to scripture.

Feedback from performance audiences:

“At times it seemed the actors were really pushing hard to speed up their performance. . . . Perhaps it was actually a planned dramatic element of the production to highlight how much was being covered in so little time, but I am not sure that was your intent. It would have been fine to have the production be a few minutes longer, it was captivating.” ~Pastor Chet Klope, Pascack Bible Church

“It was a great production and I would absolutely consider the same or an equally well prepared team to be with us again in the future.” ~Pastor Chet Klope, Pascack Bible Church

“There was feedback long after the production. It was all about how clever the production was using very little props and using the space well. It was obvious that a lot of time went into preparing this project.” ~Nancy Illian, Pascack Bible Church