



WHAT HAPPENS



(backstage)



VERONIQUEVIAL

IN VEGAS...

*Meet the stage managers behind
The Strip's high-stakes spectacles*



BY DAVID L. GRINDLE

“The Wheel of Death is set on the tatami deck, we are clear...”

“Places, please, for the orgy...”

“Thank you for volunteering to be the momma. Here’s your bottle, the nipple is clean... Have a good show.”

“Riggers to the cliff deck please, riggers to the cliff deck...”

“We’ve got all three jumpers tonight, repeat three...”

“I have the diver on screen... automation go.”

IT’S SEVEN P.M. in Las Vegas, the only place in America where you’ll hear commands like these flowing from headset to headset, filling the airwaves for two glittering miles of desert oasis. In this town where everyone comes to play, dozens of backstage magicians are getting to work.

Once known for strip joints, nightclubs, and mobsters, Vegas is now home to some of the most complex and exciting shows produced anywhere in the world. And the desert town that pushes everything to the limit does the same with its live entertainment. Faster motors, more dangerous falls, entire stages that descend and rise from pools of water—effects once unimaginable now happen every night in multimillion-dollar productions that draw tourists from all over the globe.

And just like the casinos, the shows have armies of sharp-eyed, quick-witted professionals, usually dressed in black and hidden out of sight, upon whom this high-stakes frivolity de-

pends. Overseeing them all are the stage managers. Here’s a look inside their world.

High-speed, high-pressure work

The spectacle of Las Vegas requires stage managers and technicians who are comfortable marshalling large numbers of people in unique performing situations. Multinational casts are the norm, and these casts bring with them language barriers and cultural differences that must be dealt with and respected. It’s not uncommon to hear five or six languages overlapping in the green room before a show. Along with that come the smells of native foods, celebrations of national traditions, and cross-cultural friendships (and romances).

Additionally, the nature of spectacle is such that each show tries to do something that has never been done: faster moves, larger scenery, higher jumps, larger theatres, water from nowhere, you name it. All of

the producers seek something to set their shows apart. So the crews have to be at ease with the unfamiliar and the unexpected, whether it’s a scene-changing gadget they’ve never encountered before or a way of running shows that’s nothing like what they learned in college.

“Every stage manager is calling cues,” marvels Claire LaNicca, a student in the stage management program at Indiana University, who recently went to Vegas and had the opportunity to shadow the team behind Cirque du Soleil’s *Mystère*. “The rover on *Mystère* had to be at specific areas to cue people or give clears [to the calling stage manager]... She was calling cues and moving around the stage catching things, not just sitting in a booth. We even went onstage for one cue, but I thought, ‘Why would anyone [in the audience] be looking at me when all of that was going on downstage?’”

Can LaNicca imagine herself doing that kind of high-speed, high-pressure work on a Cirque stage every night? “I would love that job,” she says. “It would be sweet.”

Ninety minutes of thrills

Spectacle is considered by some not to be “real” theatre—even though, if you know your theatre history, you know that scripted drama evolved from spectacle and not the other way around. Though there may not be a gripping story line to the typical Vegas spectacular, there are gripping visuals. Visitors to Las Vegas are looking for thrills, and lots of them—not three hours of Eugene O’Neill. Here, the shows are usually ninety minutes max, and filled with acrobatics, daring athletics, flashy costumes, and technology like you will see nowhere else.

The work of the athletes, aerialists, dancers, and technicians who make Las Vegas shows may be different from what an accomplished Shakespearean actor does, but it is no less artful or rigorous. They must keep themselves in peak physical condition and be capable of sustaining mental alertness during every second of a

show, as they may well be performing while hanging upside down, falling seventy feet into water, or dancing with flaming torches all around them.

Stage managers in Las Vegas come from a variety of backgrounds. Some have worked on national tours of Broadway shows, others in regional theatre, and still others in opera and ballet. Each résumé brings its own unique skill set to the table, and the result is a group of stage managers who balance each other's specialties to make a strong team.

Ray Gin spent two years as the production stage manager for *Phantom: the Las Vegas Spectacular* at the Venetian Resort. Gin had been the stage manager for *The Phantom of the Opera* on national tours, as well as being the lead stage manager with other Broadway road companies. When the Venetian built a custom theatre for its new \$36-million production, they called Gin to stage manage the opening of the show.

"*Phantom* was one of my biggest challenges," Gin says. "Sorting out all the intricacies of running that show, from identifying a number of types of personnel [to hire], calibrating all the timings and order of the scene changes with all the automation, and then getting all the understudies up on their parts quickly."

While *Phantom of the Opera* has been thrilling theatregoers in the United States since 1988, the Las Vegas production had opportunities that weren't available to the Broadway or road company versions. First, a new theatre was built from the ground up for the Las Vegas show. The Venetian took a space that had formerly housed

Opening pages: A synchronized swimming sequence from Cirque du Soleil's O, a show at the Bellagio in Las Vegas, performed in and around a 1.5-million-gallon pool of water.

Inset, facing page: A character from O named Eugen explores the seas.

This page, from top: The custom-built house for Phantom at the Venetian, crowned by a \$2.6 million chandelier; and inside the automation room, from where much of the show's moving scenery is controlled.



a vintage car collection and gutted it to create a home specifically designed for *Phantom*, from the trap room to the grid. Additionally, the Las Vegas *Phantom* was able to take advantage of the corps of highly skilled technicians and mechanized scenery companies that now occupy the city to support its high-tech entertainment industry.

The show had to be shortened for casino attention spans. More efficient scene changes and purpose-built storage spaces allowed for several smaller scenes and numbers, once needed for cover, to be cut, and for other scenes to be reordered. Thus, the Las Vegas *Phantom* comes in at one act rather than two.

Even that famous chandelier got a Vegas makeover.

“The chandelier and dome of the theatre is a spectacular \$2.6-million effect,” Gin says. Rather than being in one piece, as in most *Phantom of the Opera* productions, this one is in four pieces—three of which hang over patrons as they enter the house. At the top of the overture, the four pieces come together over the audience and assemble themselves before rising to hang in the center of the house. Then comes the moment when the chandelier falls—straight down. Those sitting underneath can feel the rush of wind as the sparkling behemoth comes crashing to a point only eleven feet above their heads. While the audience composes itself, thirty-two motors whisk the chandelier up and out of sight during a three-second blackout.

It takes seventy crew members to run each performance of *Phantom*. Many of these people work on multiple effects each performance, but always within one area. One person mans the computers, which run the thirty-two servos that move the chandelier. Another controls all pyrotechnics, fog, and smoke. Two people in the trap room run the multiple motors that raise and lower everything from the façade of the Paris Opera House to the two-hundred-plus candles that form the lake and Phantom’s lair. Each of these technicians knows the operation of his or her effects and is

responsible for routine maintenance on them. And when technicians see a problem—or a potential problem—they each have the authority to stop the show to prevent injuries to people or damage to scenery. On a \$36-million production, nobody wants to risk a longer shut-down and a bank-breaking repair bill.

Cirque du mécanisme

Spectacle is what Cirque du Soleil is known for throughout the world, and in Las Vegas, Cirque is often the trendsetter. The first water show, *O*, opened at the Bellagio in 1998. Performed partly on a solid stage, partly in a 1.5 million-gallon pool of water, *O* pushed the boundaries of technology. All 150 technicians and 85 cast members are SCUBA certified. Fourteen of the technicians do all of their work during each performance entirely underwater.

O was followed in 2005 by one of Cirque’s most technically complex shows ever, *KÀ*. Performing at the MGM Grand, *KÀ*, like almost every spectacle in Las Vegas, happens in a theatre engineered specifically for it. The audience enters what appears to be an empty space that is lit by seemingly random bursts of fire from the pit. What they don’t see are the five stage lifts, the forty-ton cliff deck and gantry, or the nine-ton tatami deck that is often described as the world’s largest sliding drawer.

“In any given day, I am tasked with coordinating resources for eight technical departments,” says Erik Walstad, *KÀ*’s technical director, who supervises a technical staff that is larger than the entire staff of most regional theatres. “When literally more than a hundred people may need something on the stage at any given time, balancing the needs of the technical and artistic departments is always a challenge.”

Walstad came to the show after eleven years as the technical director at Portland Opera in Oregon. He had seen Cirque on tour and some of the earlier resident shows in Las Vegas, but seeing *KÀ* was what drew him to seek a position with the company.

Trevor Long likewise was attracted by the unique backstage challenges of Cirque-brand spectacle. Now the assistant production manager at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Long was a stage manager on two different Cirque shows, *Zumanity* and *KÀ*.

“The favorite thing for me when dealing with large, long-running shows,” he says, “is that you were never guaranteed on any level, technical or personnel or talent, to have the same show from night to night or even from early to late performance.” In the case of *KÀ*, some of its scenes are so physically demanding on the performers that there are two versions, each with different choreography. The scenes can alternate each night to avoid over-taxing or injuring the performers.

Unlike the other Cirque shows in Las Vegas, *KÀ* has a narrative plot. The show tells the story of twins who are separated in a storm and their battle over evil as they find their way home. It was conceived and directed by the French director Robert LePage. Technology created for this show, such as new harnesses for flying performers and interactive projections, is now being used by other companies, including the New York City Metropolitan Opera in their recent production of Berlioz’s *The Damnation of Faust*, which LePage directed.

Thinking on your feet

Of course, all of this technology is brilliant, but what happens when it doesn’t work?

Almost every show in town has backup systems permanently installed in the theatre. There isn’t one light board, there are two. There are two microphones on performers. There are redundant motors and costume spares, and people dream up problems and try to develop solutions long before they happen. Each stage manager keeps a book nearby as she calls the show with step-by-step instructions for every imaginable trouble scenario, and these books are constantly being reviewed and updated. It is not unlike NASA launch com-

mand. But as Trevor Long discovered, sometimes even the most pessimistic planner can't anticipate how much things can go wrong.

Long's first job with Cirque du Soleil was as a stage manager on *Zumanity*. This production at the New York, New York Resort and Casino relies heavily on automation, as do many Las Vegas shows. In one performance, the entire automation system below the stage stopped working because of a faulty safety switch. The over-stage automation was still working, but many acts required pieces to be lifted from below stage level. There were plans for how to deal with the failure of each individual piece, but no one imagined the entire system might stop. This is where Long's ability to remain calm and think clearly paid off.

He was able to speak via headset with the music director, who was on stage playing in the band. The music director started talking the band through music changes as they played. The technicians and the assistant stage manager backstage were able to work with the performers to decide which acts could be adapted to work without the automation pieces and which needed to be cut.

The Master of Ceremonies in the show had in reserve two songs he didn't normally perform that he could use to cover problems. On this night he sang them both while adjustments were being made by the cast and crew as the show was running. In the end they only cut two or three numbers and still came in almost on time.

During the break between performances that evening, the entire production team gathered and planned how to do the 10:30 show without the automated scenery. The performers were prepared and everyone was ready to take on the revised performance. At 10:20, the master electrician found the faulty wiring, and the automation package was restored. Long announced to the cast and crew that the show was going to proceed in its normal format. All of the work was filed away for the future, and the

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show went on as though there had been no trouble.

Vegas life

Working on Las Vegas shows is different from working in the rest of the American professional theatre in a number of ways, some good, some less so.

With the exception of *Phantom*, most of the stage management jobs are non-union; stagehands may or may not be members of IATSE, depending on the house. By contrast, stage managers on and off Broadway, and in most regional theatres and road companies, are represented by Actors' Equity, while virtually all stagehands are IATSE-affiliated. (Among other benefits, the unions offer certain protections when it comes to pay, hours, and working conditions.)

KÀ artist Eric Henderson gets his harness inspected before going on stage.

And the desert is not an easy place to live. Summer daytime temperatures can reach 115 degrees Fahrenheit. While salaries are generally higher in Las Vegas than in regional theatres, the high cost of housing, food, and other items can almost cancel that difference.

The Las Vegas schedule turns the entertainment workforce into even more extreme night owls than most theatre people. John Gruber, a stage manager on Cirque's *Zumanity*, says one of the greatest challenges he faced was a work schedule out of synch with every member of his family living in other parts of the country. He would come into work at 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon, work until 2:00 in the morning, socialize with friends after work, and go to bed around 5:00

or 6:00 in the morning. Being a night person, as many Strip professionals are, means the other people in your life must be night people, too—or you won't get to talk much.

Others have commented on the city's resemblance to a stage set, which some people like and some find depressing. "Different parts of town have no unique identity or personality," Walstad says of the physical environment. "It is a stark contrast to the Pacific Northwest and many other parts of the country... It's not easy for many people to make the transition to life in Las Vegas, and that's something to consider when looking at a career in Las Vegas entertainment."

Las Vegas stage managers also have to adjust to dealing with performers from a broader range of backgrounds than they're likely to encounter in most theatre settings. Technicians and stage managers are generally used to working with actors and singers. Certainly there are actors and singers in Las Vegas, but there are many other kinds of performers, too, some with unique needs. *O* has cast members with Olympic gold medals in diving; *KÀ* has professional martial artists. Other shows have professional in-line skaters and magicians. It once took Gruber a week to calm down two Brazilian artists who were convinced that their juggling props had been sabotaged.

Nevertheless, he said, "The true pleasure of being a Cirque stage manager is dealing with artists from so many different countries and so many different backgrounds. Since most of them come from circus backgrounds, they are very protective of those they consider 'family,' so that's fairly interesting when the chips are down."

Moreover, Gruber says, "The size, scope, and expense of automated scenery I got to manage each day was fantastic and not something you would see in most [regional theatres] in the United States."

Gruber started working for Cirque when he was twenty-seven years old. He has a B.A. in theatre from the University of Nebraska at Omaha

and an M.F.A. in stage management from the University of Delaware Professional Theatre Training Program. During his school years he had been an intern in companies like the Utah Shakespearean Festival and the Santa Fe Opera.

He went to Las Vegas because he wanted a job that "put me in a position to be challenged and make a decent salary." Like Trevor Long, he found an opportunity at Cirque through a friend from a past job who was working with the company. "I wanted to work with big budgets putting miracles onstage every day. I got exactly that," he says.

Getting there

Big scenery, expensive productions, and a city that never stops sound exciting. So how do you get there?

Each of the stage managers we talked to recommended internships.

Ray Gin, the former *Phantom* production stage manager, noted that he has hired several interns and production assistants who have proven themselves on big projects. Gin is now production stage manager on the road company of *A Chorus Line*; he hired and trained John David, the current production stage manager for the Las Vegas *Phantom*. He also made the point that being an intern gets you connected quickly, especially if it is on a new show where the entire creative team is there.

David noted that one stage manager and the assistant stage manager currently on the show had started with him as production assistants when he stage managed *The Lion King* in Los Angeles.

"The idea is to get in first, at any level," says Lynda Lavin, a Las Vegas-based stage manager who has also worked on many major Broadway tours. "Many of the large production shows in Vegas offer long-term employment, and they like to hire and promote from within."

That's evident in the path that Trevor Long took from one Cirque show to another. "Get out and work no matter where," he says, "and do it

well. You never know when that ASM you worked with twelve years ago will one day be in a position to hire you or recommend you."

Gruber adds this about working for Cirque: contrary to rumor, it's okay if you don't speak French.

Las Vegas is dazzling, and the technical productions there are unmatched. For some people, working backstage on The Strip is like hitting the jackpot; for others, it's a step along the way to some other career goal.

The professionals interviewed for this article all started as young people wanting to work in theatre. What happened in Vegas? Experience. Unpredictable, unforgettable, and unheard of anywhere else but here. ▼