



INTERVIEW WITH JODIE ROCHE

Stage Manager for *The White Divers of Broome*



Black Swan: This is your second time working with Black Swan, the first being in 2011 on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a co-production with Queensland Theatre Company. Co-productions are an excellent way for a company to work with other actors, creatives and production personnel outside of their own state. What are the advantages and disadvantages of travelling to the other side of the country for short term work?

Jodie Roche: Personally, one of the biggest advantages is getting paid to travel to places you normally wouldn't get a chance to see. In addition to Perth, I've been lucky enough to travel through regional Queensland, regional NSW, Sydney, Melbourne and even to China, although we usually spend the majority of the time in the darkness of a theatre rather than doing any sightseeing. Working for different companies and in a variety of different venues also gives me an opportunity to find out how other companies, stage managers and production managers work, which is a great chance to refine how you work and learn more efficient ways of getting the job done.

Other than being away from all the comforts of home, there really aren't too many disadvantages.

BS: Most people would be aware that an actor requires an agent to find them work. Tell us a little bit about stage management work, how it varies between contract and permanent work, how you find it, etc.

JR: Since graduating from university, I've been able to make a full time career out of stage management. Similar to actors, I try to fit in as many short-term contacts as I possibly can throughout the year – typically, a stage management contract for a theatre, opera or dance company runs for about two months. This allows for starting a few days prior to the cast to undertake “pre-production” duties, then about five weeks of rehearsal, a week of technical rehearsals and then about three or four weeks of the season. The beauty of these short-term contacts is that I never get bored – there is always a new challenge coming up. In addition, a stage manager can pick up work on gigs which may run over just one day – a one-off concert or graduation ceremony, for example.

Finding work as a stage manager is very much based on who you know and on word of mouth. Whilst studying at university, work experience placements and secondments play a huge role in establishing yourself, and as each stage manager works in a slightly different way, directors and designers often have a few stage managers which they prefer working with. It is very much a case of developing contacts, and particularly when starting out in the industry, taking as many different jobs as you can to begin making a name for yourself.

BS: How did you become interested in this area of the arts and what was your pathway that got you there? Did you study in Queensland?

JR: I studied AMEB speech and drama all through school and loved taking drama class during high school, but I soon discovered that I found the backstage elements far more interesting than actually

being onstage. I initially studied journalism but as many university students discover, wasn't sure if I wanted to make a career out of it. I then discovered that the Queensland University of Technology had a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Technical Production Management. Admission to this course (at the time I applied, in 2001) was by interview, so I applied more for the experience of doing so, rather than having any great expectations of being accepted. I was fortunate enough to be offered a place - the class sizes are incredibly small, only about thirty people are accepted each year – and I went from there. In my final year, I was offered a secondment with the Queensland Theatre Company and soon after was my first paid stage management job, as an assistant stage manager.

BS: What do you like most about your career?

JR: It's rarely dull. The problems we have to solve are not issues you would usually have to deal with in any other job, such as dealing with tricky stage effects and working on how a theatrical concept can be applied to give a truly amazing experience to audience members. I've been able to meet and work with some incredibly talented people and I still find it fascinating just how many people it takes to mount a fantastic performance - people with an incredibly wide range of skills. I've been able to work on some spectacular sets, seen some stunning lighting effects, listened to beautiful sound tracks and watched the process which artists go through in order to give the best performance possible. Because my contracts usually only run for a few months each, I always have a new project to look forward to.

BS: What sort of skills do you need to have as the stage manager of a production?

JR: Plenty of organisational skills. It's a balancing act, really – trying to coordinate cast, creatives and production staff in order to achieve the best show possible. Diplomacy plays a large part too – often the stage manager has to deal with sensitive issues. It sounds strange, but a love of scheduling helps – on a weekly basis, the stage manager needs to fit in the director's rehearsal wishes, wardrobe fittings, hair appointment, music calls, choreography calls and accent calls. I think that being approachable is important as well.

BS: As an experienced stage manager, what sort of qualities do you look for in an assistant stage manager?

JR: Many of the same qualities as a stage manager, in fact. It's really important that you can work well with your ASM, as they often will be the greatest source of support for you. Unless you have a deputy, the stage manager is required to stay at the stage manager's desk (SMD) during a show in order to call it. This means that you rely even more heavily on your ASM, as they are your eyes and ears backstage. A great ASM will prepare very thorough paperwork, so that they always know where every single prop is at any given time, what entrances and exits are coming up and be able to problem solve under pressure.