TWENTY PLAYS IN TEN DAYS: An adventure in multi-venue festival production management

By Erik Viker

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20 plays in 10 days

an adventure in multi-venue festival production management

By Erik Viker

Theatre festivals are becoming increasingly popular with small professional companies and in academic settings, often giving production managers and technical staff the opportunity to work closely with many innovative theatre artists over a very short time period. With advance planning and careful decision-making, the intensity and controlled chaos of what might at first seem to be too many plays in too little time can be a rewarding experience.

One model for festival management was tested at the 2003 New Works Festival hosted by the University of Texas at Austin’s Department of Theatre and Dance, a ten-day event presenting multiple performances of over twenty productions. Those of us responsible for planning and running the New Works Festival enjoyed the challenges of providing management, performance space, technical staff and financial resources for productions expected to prepare and perform with minimal technical rehearsal time in festival venues. Each project had a separate artistic director, design team, stage manager and cast, with everyone converging on the UT theatre department for a brief rehearsal period, several days of technical rehearsals and ten days of performances. We learned many things that may be helpful for operating future festival events and other theatre management scenarios, such as summer stock theatre companies running several productions simultaneously or historical re-enactment festivals comprised of outdoor venues and multiple street theatre events.
We very quickly recognized that the line between too much organization and not enough organization is a precarious one. We worked to design a solid leadership structure with clearly defined responsibilities (figure 1), as nothing slows down a project like excessive bureaucracy and too many rules fostering “not my job” attitudes. Because crises will erupt in even well-planned events, a comprehensive but flexible organization provided a safe place to stand while the festival team addressed the many challenges of hosting simultaneous productions.

The New Works Festival was organized by a planning committee consisting of graduate and undergraduate students, faculty and university staff. One hard-working faculty member served as artistic director/producer, coordinating all aspects of finances, public relations and artistic content. A production manager was appointed to plan and supervise technical elements and the students serving as operation staff. A series of meetings very early in the process allowed us the opportunity to divide responsibilities between production management, the oversight committee and the faculty producer.

Regular communication with the oversight committee and the producer during the planning stage minimized later decision-making difficulties. During technical rehearsal and performance dates, the production manager was empowered to act quickly and independently for problem-solving and crisis resolution, and an advance plan for problem-solving authority on the fly provided confidence and peace of mind for all participants.

ASSESSING AVAILABLE RESOURCES

At first glance, the festival plan seemed manageable because everyone involved agreed to keep production values simple and focus on the texts rather than on scenery, lighting and costuming. Several veteran festival managers we consulted warned that a high number of uncomplicated events will still tax rehearsal space and staff. They suggested a careful resource assessment would be the best place to begin production management planning.

Facilities: We first identified the strengths and challenges of each venue to be used, including load-in access, rigging peculiarities, and temporary scenery storage space. An hour-by-hour labor estimate for each venue was helpful, including hall preparation needed, unusual seating configurations, special lighting positions to install, and masking requirements. Our festival used several types of venues, with simpler productions or workshop events in classroom or studio spaces, and full productions on proscenium stage and black box spaces.

In addition to traditional theatre, the New Works Festival featured unconventional performance art pieces requiring assessment of the unique challenges of outdoor performance areas such as sound issues, creating “backstage” spaces, and protecting equipment and scenery from the elements.

Rehearsal spaces and scheduling: Our organization provided rehearsal time and space for individual projects, most of which were created locally. We found it necessary to make a detailed rehearsal calendar for festival projects, carefully juggling dance needs, musical requirements and large-vs.-small cast issues to stretch our limited rehearsal space resources to fit the bill. We first determined the physical spaces and times available, and then estimated the needs of each project in allocating dance studio space, rehearsal rooms and other available locations. Theatre lobbies and conference rooms were pressed into service along with after-hours classrooms to ensure each group had a reasonable amount of rehearsal time.

Shop resources: Our festival technical director scheduled time for hall preparation, load-in and strike activities and technical oversight of each project transitioning into and out of our venues. Supervised scene shop time was also dedicated for limited show-specific

Figure 1. Sample organization chart.
...planning responsibilities falling to the technical director included coordinating festival-specific seating configurations, design and installation of rep masking plots for each venue, arranging in-production storage space and supervising the use of stock scenery items such as platforms, flats, rope and reusable hardware.

preparation work, with similar issues coming into play for prop shop and costume shop resources, with wardrobe needs such as laundry, preset, and quick change assistance carefully evaluated and scheduled.

Staff: Although each project had its own designers, director and production staff, our organization provided general festival oversight leadership and venue support staff. During our planning phase, we clarified where the organization responsibilities and the individual project responsibilities met so all necessary tasks would be completed without confusion.

Finances: The theatre department, the college of fine arts and other contributors provided limited funding for each project, and we expected project leaders to manage their budgets with minimal oversight. The production manager secured separate funds for hall preparation, venue operations and maintenance, and festival-related contingencies.

PRODUCTION STAFF JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Although it was impossible to anticipate the needs of every event in the festival, basic job descriptions allowed us to avoid confusion about responsibilities and focus our personnel resources realistically. We provided job description summaries to visiting production leaders to help them prepare for their time in our venues.

Festival Technical Director: The festival technical director consulted with the scenic designers and carpenters for each production to ensure their designs could be safely executed under budget in the time available. This requires each project submit a descriptive packet of technical planning material relatively early in the planning process.

Our hosting organization provided supervised scene shop resources for festival projects, and the festival technical director assessed production needs to develop a schedule allowing each production adequate time for scenery construction. Other planning responsibilities falling to the technical director included coordinating festival-specific seating configurations, design and installation of rep masking plots for each venue, arranging in-production storage space and supervising the use of stock scenery items such as platforms, flats, rope and reusable hardware. The technical director consulted with the production manager to create a load-in and strike schedule for the entire festival (figure 2). During the festival, the technical director and his assistant supervised scenery installation and transitions, paying special attention to rigging and load-bearing scenery.

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**Festival 2003**

**VENUE TECH SHEET**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Title:</th>
<th>Festival 2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date &amp; Time:</td>
<td>April 4 – 14, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue:</td>
<td>Theatre #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor:</td>
<td>Department of Theatre and Dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact:</td>
<td>Erik Viker, Production Manager</td>
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</table>

**PRODUCTION SCHEDULE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday, April 1</th>
<th>Hall prep: Exel transition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, April 2</td>
<td>Hall prep: Masking hang</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, April 3</td>
<td>Hall prep: Exel hang/focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, April 4</td>
<td>Hall prep: Risers and setting in (omt upstage chairs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday, April 5</td>
<td>Rio Grande load-in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday, April 6</td>
<td>Call for venue mgr, board ops, Rio Grande cast and staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, April 7</td>
<td>Call for venue mgr, board ops, Rio Grande cast and staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday, April 8</td>
<td>Call for venue mgr, board ops, Rio Grande cast and staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, April 9</td>
<td>Rio Grande performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, April 10</td>
<td>Install chairs on upstage risers</td>
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<td>Friday, April 11</td>
<td>Bedrooms tech rehearsal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday, April 12</td>
<td>Bedrooms strike</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, April 14</td>
<td>Bedrooms performance</td>
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</tbody>
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**Figure 1. Sample production schedule for theatre number 1.**
Festival Master Electrician and Festival Audio Supervisor: The festival master electrician helped visiting production staff become familiar with the rep plots, circuiting and control systems for all venues used during the festival. Well before the festival, the master electrician consulted with lighting designers for each production to ensure their design concepts could be realized with established venue rep plots.

The festival audio supervisor arranged playback and sound effect equipment for each venue and consulted with individual production directors and designers to ensure their audio needs and sound cue choices met festival guidelines. The audio supervisor trained sound board operators on venue equipment and helped production staff become accustomed to the acoustics and peculiarities of each space.

Both the master electrician and the audio supervisor were on site during the festival to trouble-shoot and provide technical guidance as necessary. The staged reading and workshop production venues were less technically complex and were supervised by the assistant audio supervisor and master electrician’s assistant.

Light and Sound Board Operators: Rather than expect every production in the festival to become familiar with the control equipment for the relevant venues, we assigned a light board operator and a sound board operator to each venue. Recruiting board operators who were already familiar with the equipment was a good idea, as the fast-paced festival schedule required them to think quickly and master the cues for several productions virtually simultaneously. Several projects arrived without lighting design plans, providing some impromptu cue design opportunities for the board operators during all-to-brief technical rehearsals.

Venue Managers: Projects participating in the New Works Festival were expected to provide stage managers familiar with their specific play. Because individual production staff arriving for each project had almost no time to become comfortable with the theatre before moving into action, we assigned a venue manager to each performance space used for the festival. Venue managers helped the various production teams rotating through their theatres make safe and efficient use of the space during tech rehearsals and performances. Venue managers were familiar with facility resources, including fire extinguisher and alarm locations, directions to rest rooms and telephones, dressing room configurations and assignments, and backstage traffic patterns. During performances, venue managers helped troubleshoot technical and personnel problems as they arose and acted as contacts for the roaming senior festival staff.

The New Works Festival included performance art, workshop productions, and installation art pieces. A small team of “flexible venue managers” was assigned to assist the diverse needs of projects with limited scope or short duration, with a senior venue manager delegated to dispatch the members of this team for various support tasks as needed.

COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

The oversight committee met regularly in the weeks leading up to the festival, twice monthly at first and weekly as the festival dates approached. The festival production manager was consulted during the project selection process to make sure proposals were not reaching too far beyond available technical resources and attended oversight committee meetings to provide guidance for decisions affecting smooth operations of the event.

With venue preparations and design issues being addressed simultaneously, consistent communication systems became absolutely essential. Several methods of festival-wide communication were used to keep all festival staff
and project participants informed and up-to-date during festival planning.

**Mandatory project-representation meetings:** A biweekly meeting attended by representatives from each project provided a consistent forum for announcements, organizational troubleshooting and disseminating answers to frequently asked questions about production issues, purchasing guidelines, scheduling adjustments, and publicity. The face-to-face meetings may have taxed some participants’ busy schedules, but allowed little room for confusion and misinterpretation of guidelines and announcements. Of course, this mass-communication method was effective only because the New Works Festival consisted mostly of locally generated projects.

**Web sites:** Much of the communication needed for festival planning was posted on our official festival Web site, including rehearsal and performance schedules, venue floor plans, staff contact information, technical production and design guidelines, and downloadable purchase, reimbursement, or stock loan forms. An electronic bulletin board where project teams might exchange advice and discuss sharing resources was suggested but did not materialize in the time available. In our technology-savvy society we often overlook the benefits of old-fashioned communication methods, but a large prominently displayed bulletin board for schedules and announcements was frequently consulted during festival days. In addition to a general festival bulletin board, we also installed a separate callboard centrally located in a backstage area near all venues with clearly defined space for each project.

**E-newslettering** was another easily implemented festival-wide communication method used in conjunction with our Web site to keep participants up-to-date and informed. Weekly e-mails from the production manager were used to disseminate those all-too-necessary multiple reminders about deadlines and procedures and provided a means of broadcasting schedule changes and critical announcements.

**RESOURCE TRACKING**

Although bill payment was handled by the theatre department business office, the festival production manager monitored production expenses and provided guidance as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Amount Earned</th>
<th>Recipient</th>
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**TOTAL** $

Notes:

Documentation to Follow: Ordered By:__________________________
- Invoice on delivery
- Vendor to bill
- Date: __________________________

Production Manager Approval:__________________________

After purchase is made, this form must be returned to Production Manager with receipts for reimbursement or invoice for payment.

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**STOCK ITEM LOAN REQUEST**

**Festival 2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Requested</th>
<th>Date Items to be Returned</th>
<th>Production Manager: ____________________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Date Signed:______________</td>
<td>Date Signed:______________</td>
</tr>
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**Guidelines:**

- **Costumes:** Make an appointment with the Costume Shop Manager at telephone 996-9999 to borrow costumes from costume storage. At this meeting the Costume Shop Manager will determine what items from your list are available for loan, and will plan picking times as needed and a pick-up time for your borrowed costume items.

- **Props:** Contact the Prop Shop Supervisor at telephone 996-9999 to plan a meeting to review your request list. The Prop Shop Supervisor will then determine what items on your list are available for loan and will schedule a pick-up time closest to your schedule. Each project will be limited to borrowing 10 items. 5 large items (such as furniture pieces) and 5 small items (such as weaponry or glassware). Multiple “shopping trips” to the prop shop cannot be accommodated, so plan your prop set design package carefully.

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**Figure 4. Sample form to keep track of purchases.**

**Figure 5. Sample form for organizing use of stock items.**
necessary to make sure individual project leaders stayed within budget. We used an automated spreadsheet system with separate pages for each project, production department and venue, along with a summary spreadsheet page for at-a-glance consulting. E-mail reminders ensured all participants submitted advance requests for purchase approval (figure 4), and a twice-weekly deadline for outstanding and expected expenses helped us keep the many purchasers from encumbering funds twice or otherwise overspending.

Because our organization allowed projects to use stock resources, we created a Stock Item Loan Request form (figure 5) and a sign-out system for tracking borrowed costuming and properties. The festival technical director used a similar system for reserving stock platforms, stair units and other scenic items available for project use.

**PRODUCTION PLANNING**

To simplify production planning for what could have turned into a collection of little tech riders, we offered a strict set of available resources and required projects to design around those limitations: lighting rep plots and standard house masking for each venue, specific storage areas and standardized load-in/strike times. Within these parameters, the needs of the various festival productions were taken into consideration during early resource planning by requesting detailed information about each event. Requiring project description packets also allowed the festival production manager time to identify and provide guidance for unrealistic plans or expectations made by individual project teams.

The standard “Project Information Packet,” which was requested from each participating production, included the following:

**Production Staff contact sheet.** This list included the names, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses for the visiting production’s director, stage manager, scenic designer, lighting designer, costume designer, and technical director. A primary contact person was designated for each project.

**Project Budget.** As our festival infrastructure provided some funding for projects, the festival production manager was responsible for financial oversight of many small budgets within a larger overall budget, an even more fractured situation than usual theatre production finances. Most participants were unaccustomed to the host organization’s budgeting and purchasing rules, so we requested a detailed estimate of how and where the project team planned to spend money to ensure realistic resource allocation within each project.

**Basic ground plan.** A sketch of preliminary placement of scenery including furniture gave us a basic idea of intended use of space and helped the festival technical director plan off-stage storage and possible traffic patterns for the multiple projects. These preliminary ground plans also provided a sense of where standard soft goods masking would best serve the most projects.

**Preliminary light cue sheet and area lighting diagram.** To help our festival lighting designer consider project needs in designing rep plots, each project provided a preliminary light cue sheet describing anticipated lighting needs and a basic area lighting layout diagram. Although most of the productions were satisfied with our comprehensive lighting plots, some refocusing and changing color and specials during transitions was arranged in advance with the festival master electrician.

**Audio needs.** Project teams advised if they planned to use live music or any sound equipment other than the resources provided in each venue. Our festival audio coordinator reviewed each projects’ preliminary sound cue sheet and source material well before load-in, and advised about copyright rules that applied to the material.

**Project developments and changes.** Time, staff and money can only go so far. After initial planning, we asked that designers and directors consult with the production manager about substantial changes or additions proposed for costuming, scenery, or other technical elements before making final decisions. “Can we do this with our limited resources?” proved to be more proactive, realistic and ultimately more productive than “We must do this regardless of the impact it has on our limited resources.” Because the festival featured new plays or works-in-progress, we experienced some minor production slowdowns caused by drastic script rewrites, and the faculty producer helped negotiate with playwrights and directors as their revision needs interacted with our venue preparation and design deadlines.

**PERFORMANCE DAY ISSUES**

As venues were selected for productions in the planning stages, one of our experienced hands reminded us to consider how public areas will be shared when the festival gets underway. We tried to carefully stagger performances so pre-show and intermission crowds did not overwhelm the lobby areas and rest rooms in our facility. Our producer also orchestrated performance times to ensure adequate opportunities for at least some sequential attendance possibilities for our audiences.

Because the festival schedule was so tightly compressed, later presenters were still rehearsing in the facility when performances for the ten-day festival began. We anticipated sound problems arising due to rehearsal spaces near performance spaces and juggled locations to minimize volume problems during rehearsal-performance overlap.

We expected last-minute rehearsals, special meetings and other unexpected events to arise immediately before and during the festival. The theatre department gave the festival production manager authority for all room scheduling during technical rehearsal period and performance dates. At least one room was always retained for that unavoidable “must do” event needing space with no advance notice. Load-in activities and venue change-overs between projects occurred at odd times, almost as if three road houses were simultaneously loading in and striking scenery for ten days. Our technical director thought at least two change-overs ahead to make sure adequate staff and supervision were always available as outside practitioners transitioned through our venues. He also helped the production manager keep a close watch on our dedicated staff to make sure everyone took the breaks and meals they needed to stay focused and comfortable.

At the suggestion of one of our student assistants, we reserved a centrally-located room as our production office, equipping the space with posted schedules (enlarged for readability) a message board, and refreshments. Festi
Load-in activities and venue changeovers between projects occurred at odd times, almost as if three road houses were simultaneously loading in and striking scenery for ten days. Our technical director thought at least two changeovers ahead to make sure adequate staff and supervision were always available as outside practitioners transitioned through our venues.

Val department heads appreciated the “safe haven” where they could rest while remaining available for change-overs and other challenges. We used a two-way radio communication system for keeping department heads and house management in contact, and had a student assistant on radio in or near the production office serve as an unofficial dispatcher.

Auxiliary activities: As it was produced by an academic organization, the New Works Festival featured included various panel discussions, master classes and other non-performance events. We found it helpful to assign a team of “roving venue managers” to support these auxiliary events with room setup, “traffic control” and assisting presenters.

CONCLUSION
Whether it’s a dynamic collection of new works or a showcase for traditional classic material, nowhere is the extraordinary artistic energy and creative collaboration of the theatre more apparent than during a multi-venue festival. For the highly compressed and intense 2003 New Works Festival, the potentially daunting process of simultaneous productions in several venues became manageable with:

- Advance planning, including a careful assessment of how the material to be presented impacts on our resources
- Assembling an experienced staff with the authority and the ability to make good decisions on the spot
- Communication between key participants before and during the festival, especially about realistic expectations and how limits on time and personnel resources may affect artistic issues.

Erik Viker is assistant professor of theatre and technical director at Susquehanna University and a free-lance production manager.