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Stage Management

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In The Line of Fire

A stage manager must be a master liaison, an organizer, a problem solver, and a source of knowledge and inspiration; above all, a stage manager must always be able to be calm and collected *no matter what the circumstances*-- they are the eye of the storm. While Larry Fazio seems to be communicative, organized, helpful, and knowledgeable about his craft in his story In the Line of Fire, he was unable to keep calm and carry on during a production with absolutely ridiculous circumstances. Fazio seems to be a very capable stage manager, but not well suited to this production due to the large egos of the director and the star next to Fazio's seemingly short fuse.

Though he didn't know it at the time, Fazio's demise started the minute Vera Darling, the star of the show, got to the rehearsal hall. Vera was certainly not the only factor in Fazio's great downfall, but it seems to start and end with her. The moment she showed up, rehearsals became much more difficult to manage- the rest of the cast and crew were starstruck, whereas Gaylord, the director, seemed to have an almost personal feud with Vera. When Gaylord and Vera would get into a drawn out argument, it would derail the whole rehearsal, and Fazio was unable to get it back on track. Fazio became a pawn in their fight rather than the outside voice of reason that could stop them. The problems only grew from there.

During the long and demanding tech rehearsals, Gaylord was known to be rather verbally abusive when things were not exactly what he wanted when he wanted it-- which was often. With the PSM set up at the console backstage, Fazio faced much of the director's wrath and broke a cardinal rule of stage management: never lose your temper. After a particularly harmful tirade, Fazio publicly yelled back at the director and left the performance hall. This was not enough to get him fired, but it severely damaged his relationship with the director, which is never beneficial to a production. When he told Vera

about this altercation, they began a social friendship, which turned out to be an awful idea in hindsight.

The show ran smoothly for a few weeks in San Francisco until the reviews came out. The reviews for the show as a whole were positive, but they were rather harsh on Vera, who became a nightmare to work with thereafter. She cut herself off from all the friendships she made within the cast and crew-- Fazio included. She then demanded that lights be changed to be more pink, exclaiming: "Blue and green lights are murder on flesh tones!" When the PSM brought this up to the lighting designer, he shot the idea down-- the scene was supposed to take place at night. However, the producers were eager to keep their star pleased, and the cue was changed briefly. If the producers had backed up the stage management team, perhaps Vera's diva behaviour could have stopped there, but as the production continued, her attitude only became worse.

Fazio called the show 6 times a week, and whenever a cue went wrong; Vera made sure he knew that he made a mistake. During the opening sequence there was a light cue referred to as the "Ha! Cue" which had very tricky timing and Vera grew frustrated when the timing for the cue was off. When Fazio found the rhythm and got the cue right, Vera openly did a double take onstage to let the audience know she was shocked the stage manager could call a cue properly. One night Fazio missed a cue and proceeded with the show- the only reasonable thing to do when you've made a mistake, but Vera made sure to let him know how pissed off she was and that she thought he was incompetent.

To make matters worse, when a cue involving a chicken head went wrong due to electrical issues, Vera *publicly* blamed Fazio for the incident during a radio interview. In the show, the "chicken caper cue" called for a weathervane chicken's head to pop off after Vera shot it. During one performance, Vera shot her prop gun and Fazio called the cue, but there was an electrical issue and the chicken head didn't move. Vera was able to play it up and get the audience laughing, but she also dragged Fazio- still wearing his headset- onstage and rudely did the Italian gesture for "la bacca morte." She publicly shamed him both in front of that audience and later on the radio, which quickly became a recipe for disaster.

Fazio was understandably hurt and was displeased that people thought he was not capable of his job, but he allowed those feelings to fester.

Fazio was under constant criticism, and he had this idea that “the stage manager is expected to be perfected at all times.” While it’s true that there are high expectations for the stage manager, it is not helpful to fixate on the idea of perfection-- it is not attainable. A stage manager must do their best to not only be on top of their game (setting meetings, arranging rehearsal spaces, keeping to equity standards, ensuring efficiency at every step of the way), they must also anticipate the needs of others. This means that you are keeping open communication and are able to foresee both the best and the worst possible outcomes of every decision. It is crucial that the stage manager focuses on their work and keeps the production running no matter what, but it is simply unrealistic to expect perfection. Fazio’s fixation on perfection was his greatest misstep in this production, and is what caused many of the problems that led to him being fired.

A particularly unfortunate problem was that blue light began to flood a flat where Vera had a quickchange- exposing her to parts of the audience and ruining the illusion entirely. Fazio tried to fix this problem in the moment by having his light board operator check all the dimmers to make sure that no extras were up. The problem was not electrical however, and could not be fixed in the moment. At this point Vera was fed up with what she perceived as an incompetent stage manager, and Fazio was fed up with having the blame for situations that were out of his control constantly placed on him. For a few shows, this problem continued and Vera’s anger grew every single time. Fazio finally discovered the problem- a dancer had moved one of the poles on the lighting tree- but no one was impressed that the problem was solved, they were still displeased that it happened in the first place. Tensions between Vera, Fazio, and the producers were at an all time high after this incident.

The final nail in the coffin came when light cues during a trapeze sequence did not go due to electrical errors. Vera, not recognizing that there was a problem with electrics, chose to blame Fazio and ran offstage to the stage manager console to physically and verbally abuse him. Fazio, rather than remaining calm and collected, lost his temper and

started verbally assaulting Vera as well. The fight ended with people holding both of them back, and Fazio being dismissed for the night. The next morning he would be dismissed from the production entirely.

Fazio's reaction to Vera might seem reasonable to someone outside the realm of stage management, but we know better. While Fazio certainly seems capable of being a stage manager, there is absolutely no excuse to lose control at any member of the production like that *especially* in the middle of a show. The ego of the star of this show was too much for Fazio to contend with and when he was dismissed from the show, it was completely understandable. Fazio has been able to find work as a stage manager since, and it seems as though he learned many lessons working on this production. In the Line of Fire truly reads as a horror story to any stage manager, but also as a cautionary tale of how we must be in control of how we react to any situation that is thrown at us.

"I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not."