

Immersive Theatre Guidance

These notes aim to support stage managers working or intending to work in the rapidly expanding and evolving field of Immersive Theatre.

Immersive Theatre covers a range of events, typically where the audience occupies the same physical space as performers and staff, mostly working to a fixed script. But there are events with no fixed script, no or few live performers (examples being escape room experiences or where a 'game' is supported by one or more 'animateurs'). Related theatre forms may also feature a good deal of audience participation. Venues can be a basement, an in-the-round theatre, a couple of floors of offices, a modified regular theatre, a warehouse, a purpose-built venue, in fact just about anywhere. The occupation of a common space by cast and audience is the defining element.



For clarity proprietors, promoters and employers are referred to as producers. Some producers are very capable. Some are not. Some start in the festival or fringe sector. Some come into the sector with no producing experience at all. The less established businesses tend to be simply resourced. When their shows become more complex a need for professional organisation becomes clear and they engage a stage manager. Bigger, fully experienced producers operate in much the same way as traditional theatre producers. However there are exceptions at all scales.

In regular theatre there is a common understanding of what stage managers do. Newly minted immersive theatre producers rarely have that knowledge and some see no reason to seek it. Even experienced producers may choose to extend the boundaries of the SM role to reduce payroll cost.

Life itself is full of risk. Working until late at night increases that. Horrors of all kinds are reported in the media every day. Going to work in a theatre should be fun, not scary. In standard venues SMs are protected from risk by good custom and practice, powerful legislation and, more often that, the separation of stage from auditorium. Some or all of those protections can be absent in Immersive Theatre.

These are matters you should consider. It's not a checklist to batter a potential employer with at the first interview. But it is wise to look into these things before you sign the contract.

In a 'regular' theatre job you can usually assume that these matters are in good order. But you might just check, anyway.

The Producer and the Job

Not every producer in theatre is fully aware of their responsibilities to the people working for them. Given that you should not be surprised that SMs in Immersive shows have reported the issues noted below.

Irrespective of who owns or operates the venue the producer is responsible for your health, safety and welfare.

- Has the producer engaged a stage manager before? If yes, what was expected of the SM? Will the same situation apply to you? SMs have reported being given job descriptions that were clearly lifted from irrelevant 'regular' theatre productions or are vague, such as 'support the production in all ways'.

- Is the producer a member of an organisation? ITC or maybe UKTheatre?
- If you are an Equity Member have you checked whether the producer is on the alert list?
- If a contract is an Equity Agreement it will say so clearly at the top. If not it is not.
- Is there a detailed job description? Does it make sense?
- What is the structure of the SM team and the Technical team, in rehearsal & performance? Who does what ?
- Is the SM team expected to undertake duties normally covered by front of house personnel? Shepherding the audience from space to space within a venue after 'curtain up' may well be acceptable but how would you feel about being tasked with unlocking and locking up at the end of the day? Or checking tickets?
- What are the working hours?

The Venue

- How good are the welfare facilities? Do you have a safe place to leave personal effects, to change, to take a break, find clean running water, make hot drinks and store food in a lockable fridge? Are the toilets shared with the audience? Are you obliged to share any facilities at all with audience, performers, front of house personnel, technicians?
- Are exit routes clearly marked, unobstructed and in good order?
- Are there easily accessible safe rooms.? (This is included to address the threat of attack by the public)?
- Is there a quiet room to house distressed or injured audience members, cast or SMs while waiting for medical care or receiving first aid treatment?
- Is the space adequate for the production's requirements?
- Is there good ventilation everywhere?
- Are the necessary notices in place e.g. evacuation routes, rendezvous points, certificate of employer's liability insurance?
- How many SIA trained security staff will there be, where will they be located and how can they be called to action?
- Is the audience checked on entry? Bag check? Metal detector arch/wand?
- What are the arrangements for communication with other SM team members, FOH staff, technicians?
- What is the policy regarding use and location of drinks? Is there a bar on site? Are there checks on audience bringing in booze?
- Is there a maintained lighting system (including exit signs) that is on all the time irrespective of show light state) and is there a non-maintained lighting system (emergency lighting that comes on automatically and immediately if the main supply fails)?

- Is there a way that is to hand in all the performance spaces to switch on 'working lights' in case of an emergency?
- Is there a landline phone (in case the mobile signal is no good and you need the emergency services)? Make sure everyone knows where it is.
- Is your exit point at end of show or day (your 'stage Door') also the audience exit route?
- Have you thought about a P.E.E.P.? That's a personal emergency evacuation plan, how to leave the venue or take shelter from risks within it.
- Are there adequate provisions to support disabled SMs?

The Show

- What is the performance schedule? Does it allow time for breaks that meet minimum standards? Will you finish work late at night?
- Are there high risk elements, e.g. pyro, high sound levels, smoke and haze, open flame, strobe and/or flashing lights, firearms, stage fights, visibility?
- Is the scenery robust enough to cope with audience contact, both routine and in an incident?
- What is the procedure for show stops? Who has authority to initiate them? Are you authorised to act independently? Have show stops (and restarts) been rehearsed?
- What is the procedure for evacuation and invacuation (moving to a safe space in the venue)? Has it been practiced? What is the chain of command here ?
- Have you been shown the assembly point for evacuation and how to secure invacuation safe rooms?
- Who is responsible for checking the venue is empty in the case of an evacuation?
- Is there a sign-in book? Who is responsible for collecting it in the case of an evacuation?
- Who is responsible for liaison with emergency services in the case of evacuation?
- Who are the fire marshalls?
- Have you been given a copy of the production's risk assessment? Is it adequate.? Is it written for this show or just a template carried forward from another show?
- Have you been given the opportunity to comment on or be consulted on the risk assessment?
- Have you been give a copy of any method statements or protocols resulting from the risk assessment?
- Have you been shown round the venue?
- Is the space all flat-floor and if not do steps/stairs have maintained lighting and white nosings?
- Do doors between spaces where the show takes place have locks and if so, why?
- Will you be issued with a panic button and shown what will happen when it is activated?

- Who are the first aiders?
- Where is the first aid kit and the automatic defibrillator?
- Have you been issued with a rechargeable torch? A proper one, not a mobile phone light.
- Have you been given a copy of standard operating procedures? These might cover what to do should audience behaviour be a worry. It might be that producers use messages, flyers or signage to tell audience members that a behaviour standard exists. Some 'regular' theatre shows address potential disruption by sending out audience behaviour codes with tickets. Will a similar approach be used for this show?
- Unfortunately those are often ignored or just forgotten after a few drinks. It is wise to know what is expected of the audience.
- Have you been given information on the producer's policy on unwanted physical contact, verbal abuse, related risks? Is the policy good enough? What is the procedure if those things happen?

After

- Audience members may think they have developed a personal relationship with performers or SM staff and feel entitled to accost people from the show. Typically that happens on exit from the venue. So, are the security staff kept on duty at the exit point and nearby to support you when leaving?
- SM staff are often the last group to leave the building and are obliged to travel late at night. What are the arrangements for booking and paying for safe means of transport?

Summary

An awful lot of the concerns noted above are covered by legislation. Building regulations, local authority licensing and ABTT Technical Standards take care of the physical elements of the venues. Health and Safety at Work law covers producer's responsibilities - and yours. Common sense creeps in here and there too.

The legislation is no longer brand new. Immersive Theatre is an evolving form. The 'rules' will need to be reviewed to reflect changes in how theatre is made. This is a live document that will be reviewed from time to time.

Meanwhile at SMA we aim for the gold standard: respect in the workplace and going home safe at the end of the day.

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Terry Lee Dickson

The ABTT publishes a guide to the safe use of non conventional venues:
<https://www.abtt.org.uk/product/non-conventional-theatre-spaces/>

ABTT also publishes RUSafe, a valuable guide for small venues
<https://www.abtt.org.uk/product/ru-safe-2014-guide-to-running-small-venues/>

The Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974:
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/legislation/hswa.htm>

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, 1999:
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/1999/3242/contents>

The Stage Management Association Guide to employing a stage manager:
<https://www.stagemanagementassociation.co.uk/what-is-stage-management/employing-a-stage-manager>