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## **Never work with children. If only that were possible!**

*SMA Member Martin Hope explains*

Never work with children or animals - if only that were possible. My guess is that at some point in every stage manager's career they are going to be working on a show with children, for children, touring to schools or as part of a youth theatre. And probably more than once! Let alone the hundreds of pantomimes with 'juves' (the great British tradition of juvenile performers), TIE tours, schools workshops, post show discussions, or you only need to look at the vast array of West End shows which have child performers, *Mary Poppins*, *Les Miserables* or *Billy Elliot* to name a few of the long runners.

Bearing this in mind I defy any stage manager to get through their working life without, at some point, working with children (and if you do you are very lucky, or not, depending on how much you enjoy working with the little dears!)

So, as far as working with children goes, as stage managers how much do we need to know, be aware of, or be qualified to do? What a huge question – and one with hundreds of possible answers and arguments. I am going to try and guide you through a few basics to give you a better idea of how to handle a difficult situation, whose responsibility things are or where to go for more information.

Firstly, let's start with a couple of sensitive situations I have encountered in the last year. The first example is an ASM who on a pantomime had to help the juves; all girls ranging from about seven to eleven, into shopping trolleys for a dance number. This is a lot of physical contact where trust could be abused in the wrong hands. Is the ASM OK to carry out this cue on their own or do they need supervision?

Another situation was a technician who was employed by a private school who was presenting a showcase and hired professional lx and sound. The radio mic runner was situated at a point in the wing with a list of changes, and the children would go to them for each change (as there were so many). This involved assisting the children with their packs – down trousers, under skirts etc, with no supervision from a teacher or chaperone whatsoever. This person had walked into the building for the first time that day and this is a big risk, even if this person is handling the situation acceptably, neither the radio mic runner nor the child performers should be put in this position. But whose responsibility is it to ensure there are correct safety procedures and supervision?

But let's take the most common form of working with children - child performers in a show where you are on the stage management team. Once a child performer has been cast, one of the first matters to deal with is their license.

The issue of licensing is extensive and utterly confusing. But as an overview, every child performer (someone who has not reached the minimum school

leaving age – usually 16) needs to have a license to perform if they perform for more than four days in any six month period. This has to be obtained from their Local Education Authority (LEA) by whoever is responsible for the production (possibly the producer or general manager) but often the stage manager. And whoever signs the license application is automatically the license holder who is then responsible for observing the restrictions of the license. So if you have been an organised and helpful stage manager and obtained this paperwork, you may then find yourself responsible for a lot more and longer term than you would have thought!

A lengthy series of regulations (set out in the Child Performance regulation 1968) must then be adhered to, far too many to list now but they include the number of performances allowed per week, working hours, breaks required etc.

The child must be in the care of a legal guardian or a registered chaperone at all times. Only parents are legal guardians (no uncles, grandparents or child minders allowed!). The maximum number of children a chaperone can look after is 12, however LEAs can insist on a lower number. The chaperone should keep a record of the times the child rehearses and performs; however, it might be an idea to do this as well.

The next piece of paperwork to complete is the CRB check. Criminal Record Bureau checks are common practise and it is likely that all members of the Stage Management team will require them. CRB checks are not actually a legal requirement, although the law is changing and they will be soon. There are three types of disclosure: Basic, Standard and Enhanced and the latter two must be applied for by your employer and they cost £34 each! (yes, for one piece of paper) – your employer ought to pay for this for you.

Now, if your licenses are set up and your chaperones are diligent you should be able to enjoy the show, but what about the potentially huge issue of child protection? What exactly is it and how much does a stage manager need to know?

Child protection is 'protecting children from abuse or neglect'. As a stage manager you should be aware of safeguarding, which is creating an environment where the welfare of children, young people and vulnerable adults is actively promoted. Whether or not you want to be active with this, the running of the building, dressing rooms and the entire staff base needs to be considered, and as stage manager this obviously affects you!

There are four types of abuse; sexual, neglect, physical and emotional and it's worth familiarising yourself with the definitions and spotting the signs of each type. I will tell you where to find all this information later and also point you to a very useful chart which shows you what you should do and who you should contact if you are concerned about anything.

There are also good practice guidelines in planning a project, physical contact, interpersonal dealings, health and safety and managing sensitive information – another useful set of guidelines to read just in case. There are many situations in theatre where these sensitive issues arise, for example getting children into harnesses, helping with quick costume changes or our

two examples from earlier. For the record, in these situations a chaperone should have been present to ensure that the events are being dealt with in a safe and appropriate way at all times. These good practice guidelines are excellent at setting out a basic guide (although a lot of this is common sense) which will cover your own backs as well as ensure the welfare of the child is properly adhered to.

This really is scraping the surface of what is an escalating subject, and for this reason it's important we all know as much as possible or have an idea of where to go to get the information we need in order to ensure safety and good practice. Sometimes this can be a minefield, but if your own child was at work or in a show would you want the stage manager or supervisor to be aware of child safety and protection? Almost certainly yes.

Useful sources to obtain further information:

Keeping Arts Safe - protection of children involved in arts activities:  
[www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

Criminal Records Bureau:  
[www.crb.gov.uk](http://www.crb.gov.uk)

The Protection of Children Act 1999 available from:  
[www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

Signs of abuse & what action to take:  
[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

Theatre in Prison and Probation:  
[www.tipp.org.uk](http://www.tipp.org.uk)

Working in Schools Pack  
Child Performers - help sheet setting out the rules (working hours, breaks etc)  
Child Protection Policy - to help you draft your own  
[www.itc-arts.org](http://www.itc-arts.org)

The ITC are running a child protection course in October. A one day event, packed with everything you should need to know and the chance to ask lots of questions! SMA members get a substantial discount! Contact the SMA or ITC, or check out the website for more information.