

# On with the show

By Tony Hansen

This column I am going to try to delve into the world of show production. Many of you have likely just finished an Easter production or are looking at a summer show. It's certainly not too early to start thinking about your Christmas production. Some of the larger shows I work with will start production 11 months out. The company that I am fortunate enough to work for offers a design/consultation service and we often use it as an outreach program for houses of worship. Many facilities are not aware of the requirements and responsibilities to putting on even the simplest of shows. I have been called on many times to help with a production that could have saved a lot of money, time and tears if it would have been considered a few months or even weeks earlier. The size of the production has little bearing on the amount of time needed to pull it off. A larger production will usually have a larger team to help pull it together. I am going to lay out what a typical design would involve for me to give you some insight into your considerations at show time.

Well before any auditions or rehearsals are held, a production needs to have its support team in place. At a minimum a show should have a Director/Music director to handle the overall show and talent, a Technical director to handle the technical infrastructure and a Production Designer to handle the look and feel of the show. Obviously as the show increases, so will the team. Usually a Producer, Scenic designer, Costume/makeup designer, Lighting designer, Audio designer, Stage managers and even a House manager will be added to a team for technical alone. You will also need good Promotions, possibly an Acting coach, Choreographer, Musical director, etc. All of these folks make up your production team and should be involved from early on. They will shape the show and may likely have some ideas and input that could affect the overall direction the production takes. Most people aren't aware that a show is almost completely designed and well under construction before the first rehearsal. The other thing to keep in mind is that there is a progression to the design process. Just like building a house, you can't put up the drywall until the foundation is done. You also need to follow the proper build order of a show. For example, the lighting designer can't create a lighting design until the scenic designer has provided his plans. There wouldn't be anything to light or any colors to work with. This doesn't mean that the light designer shouldn't be involved from the beginning, any person can contribute to the design process and the lighting designer may have some scenic input.

It is also important that everyone have a common goal, if the scenic designer puts the show on a boat and the costume designer does a Shakespearian period piece while the lighting designer does a disco feel. Then each approach would give a great show setting but together you have confusing mush. The director and producer will lead the overall intent and feel of the show for the team, it is important that everyone do their job on their schedule in order for the show to stay organized. It is also important that the team "play well" together and accept input from each other while focusing on their duties. This is a team and should be treated as such. Most importantly, don't lose focus of the show itself.

Another warning, don't get involved with a production that you can't or don't want to handle. I will quickly assess a show and see if it can be safely created on budget, if I need to gracefully walk away early, it is far better than the pain later. Budget is not only money but can also be time or resources. It is certainly possible to do a production with limited money, but it will likely need more time. Likewise, you can make up for some lost time with increased funds. For

example, if you have a good team of carpenters in the church willing to give up their weekends, they can maybe build the scenery. If you don't have several weekends, you can hire a professional scenic shop. However, if you are being asked to build a show in one weekend that will take a shop a week, don't do it. It is not fair to you to try this impossible task and it is unfair to the rest of the team to trust this projects completion to you. I have seen many people go into a project with the intent to help only to come away angry, tired and disenchanting by the whole process. I have also seen people volunteer to help and then never show up or not want to do the tasks at hand. This is again unfair to all of the other folks that are trying to get this done.

Also remember that we are building a temporary show, not a house. Scenic construction practices are far less substantial than a regular construction project. The scenery needs to be solid enough to support whatever it is doing but it also needs to get on and off stage. I did a production that had a rolling staircase. The carpenters built a beautiful staircase but it was so heavy we couldn't move it. Before you handle scenic construction, grab one of the fine books on the subject. Remember also that certain materials can be highly flammable and need to be used accordingly. I have seen raw foam used many times on a set and this is a disaster waiting to happen if it isn't properly treated. Painting of the scenery needs to be handled in the same lighting conditions as what will be on the stage. I worked on a show that the set was painted in the facilities gym under fluorescent lights. When the set reached the stage, the color temperature of the lights had changed and it looked horrible. It is the job of the light designer to make the show look good, but this added an entire extra level of work and the set did not look like the colors picked by the set designer.

When I design an aspect to a production, I will start with reading the working script and getting a feel for this production at least twice. I will then sit down in the first production meeting and get to know the team and show. This is where we will get our first impressions and set up the schedule and budgets. I will then go away and start my initial design concepts, budget, schedule and equipment lists. The team will meet again and compare concepts and budgets and usually start the actual design and drawing process. The next meeting will usually have a scenic rendering, costume drawings and material samples and a stage layout. This is when the lighting designer can start to work on his plan and the script should be fairly locked down. Once the team agrees on the overall design, construction can start. Following meetings will track progress and budgets and possibly introduce that cast. While designing, remember that the technical is used to enhance the overall show, not replace it. Don't go overboard or use something simply because you have it.

Once the set and cast reach the stage, we will get the lights up and then look at the overall show with lights and costume about a week out. At this time all of the blocking should be fairly tight and the next week is tech week. This is the time to program all of the looks and rehearse the timing of the show. Any changes now to the show will only take away from the tech time and cause cascading delays. Lighting a large show can take 40 hours or more of programming time and the set needs to be fairly complete for this to happen. One rehearsal will usually be devoted to lighting and will be a long process of the cast stepping through from look to look so the designer can set up his show. The week will usually culminate in a preview show for invited guests and these folks will be asked for opinions. This is not a good time for family as it can still be pretty loose. This is all part of a complicated ballet that has been danced again and again for decades. The overall point is to get the show in front of your audience and have fun. Remember that there are professionals out there to help if you need it and don't grab more than you can handle.