The RSVP Production Manager

A Senior Project
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to provide a guideline and documented description of the operational structure and responsibilities of the production manager in the 2016 RSVP. This production is a Cal Poly tradition currently in its 21st installment. While RSVP is a fluid construct, constantly in flux as it advances through the years, this document will serve to boil down the recurring production manager position to its fundamental responsibilities, and function as a guide for prospective student production managers to come.

II. PRE-PRODUCTION

A. What Needed To Be Done

Once the initial business of job assignment was finalized, RSVP “staff” launched into their responsibilities over the course of the ten-week class: producing the music for the show. To be sure, the timing was tight, so it was important that compositional work began immediately after the Creative Director introduced the scenes. The introduction to the initial manuscript defined the mood and style of the commissioned pieces, and thus the Compositional Director and his core team of Musical Composers assumed responsibility for the composition.

Meanwhile, class periods largely functioned as business meetings to discuss items related to ticket sales, advertisement, and the preparations for load-in. These meetings included the assignment of show-specific duties that needed to be carried out, such as the creation of vital props or the acquisition of equipment and operation skills.
B. Synopsis of Story

The 2016 storyline of RSVP was a complex tale of love that endures despite separation across continents and time. The original narrative, focusing on Evangeline and Gabriel, was drawn from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1847 epic poem, *Evangeline*. On another level, the drama captures the struggle of a Middle-Eastern couple, Bashira (Arabic for Evangeline) and her Beloved Gavri’el (Hebrew for Gabriel), separated by world events, to return to each other’s sides.

The tale begins in the Forest Primeval where we find Evangeline, a product of her environment, who is washed ashore and begins to frolic among the beauty of the natural world. She encounters the angel Jibril and he guides her to Gabriel. They fall joyfully in love, but are torn apart by the storm of political tension—represented in the ballet by the “Imperial Suits.” Evangeline searches worldwide for her Beloved. Her restless quest seems fruitless, and she suffers in a refugee camp while Good and Evil engage in warfare.

After an epic battle, Evangeline is helping to tend the wounded when she discovers her Beloved at last. Overwhelmed by emotion, she screams—the first audible sound that any dancer has made. Although her Beloved is dying, she still gives thanks for being reunited with him. The ballet concludes with Jibril; the dancers drape various objects across his outstretched arms, including scarves, chains, and even a baby. Jibreel forces the audience to confront themselves in the hand-mirror he holds to their view.
This presentation of the mirror was a direct parallel to the mirror that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (played by Antonio Barata) presented to the audience in the prologue of the production. The meaning of the mirror changes following the lesson of the performance. Longfellow insisted that the audience “Look at yourself, and think of me.” Initially, Longfellow’s gift is given in a spirit of admiration. I believe that, symbolically, it is a gift to God. An omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent creator has no use for frivolous worldly tokens, which only satisfy the greed of mankind. Only our praise, admiration, and imitation of His goodness could please. By the end of the performance, the mirror is turned back to the audience so that we are challenged to take a long hard look at ourselves; we must, in the end, consider our own private thoughts and actions.

C. Schedule (Calendar)

- **Week 1**
  - Introductory Session
  - Position Assignment

- **Week 2-8**
  - Composition
  - Scenario Review
  - Ticket Sales

- **Late Week 8**
  - **May 20**
    - Load in 8am-9pm
  - **May 21**
    - Load in cont. 8am-5pm

- **Week 9**
  - **May 22**
    - Load in 8am-5pm
  - **May 24**
    - Cue-to-Cue 8am-12am
○ May 27
  ■ Technical rehearsal 4pm-12am
○ May 28
  ■ Rehearsal Cont. 8am-12pm
● Week 10
○ May 29
  ■ Rehearsal 8am-12pm, 1pm-3:30pm
○ May 30
  ■ Dress Rehearsal 8am-12pm
○ May 31
  ■ Class
  ■ Performance
    ● Call time: 6pm
    ● Show time: 8pm
○ June 1
  ■ Performance
    ● Call time: 6pm
    ● Show time: 8pm
○ June 2
  ■ Class
○ June 3
  ■ Strike 8am- Completion

D. Schedule Adjustments

While the aforementioned schedule was decided in the earliest days of the class, it was important that we be able to adapt to whatever the situation called for as it was happening. Thankfully, this flexibility was not exclusively reserved for unfavorable events. This year’s RSVP went unusually smoothly. The Load-In process was completed smoothly and efficiently, our Compositional Director was talented and stepped up to every challenge without hesitation, and the exceptional performance of the Assistant Director meant that Load-In and Rehearsal times could often be reduced. By the premiere
performance nerves were considerably relaxed. In the end, we were fully ready for that show.

**E. Administrative Organization Chart (as originally planned)**

![Diagram of administrative organization chart]

**Artistic Director**

The Artistic Director served as the final authority on all creative decisions. The instructor of the course, Dr. Barata, filled the role as he will for the foreseeable future. Before the official class even began, the artistic director spent months working on the initial draft of the script, scenes, and stage instructions. During the class, he instigated agenda topics and supervised the progress of all music that the students produced. Behind the scenes, he managed the financials and the appointment of staff.
**Assistant Director**

The Assistant Director functioned as the right hand of the Artistic Director. The responsibilities of the Assistant Director were numerous and logistic in nature. She also documented class member attendance and led the production discussion topics during class. She also coordinated the ticket sales, dividing responsibility among students in the class and collecting the revenue earned. During the production, the Assistant Director worked closely with the Artistic Director, as well as the light/sound operating battery, to form the cue sheet for the performance.

**Production Manager**

The Production Manager coordinated the process of load-in among peers to optimize the speed at which the set could be constructed. His role is important because having professional technicians on site to supervise the venue is costly and completing the job a day early can mean the difference of hundreds of dollars to the bottom line. It was also valuable to have that extra time for rehearsal of which one can never have enough in RSVP’s limited timeframe.

**Compositional Director and Composers**

It was the Compositional Director’s duty to oversee the creation of the entire show’s music. He delegated the tasks among the composers and ensured that the
individual compositions served the production seamlessly. In the case of RSVP XXI, in addition to the Creative Director, the Compositional Director also had to work closely with the Dance Choreographer to ensure that the music was still dance-able. Not only this, he also was careful to insert aural cues for dancers throughout the work to ensure that the progression of events in the performance was always well defined, and that the durations of pieces fulfilled choreographic needs.

**Story Consultant**

This is a position that was not fully actualized during 2016’s RSVP. However, this role could have greater importance in a production that is more text-driven.

**Lighting/Sound Board Operators**

These Operators controlled and engaged the theatrical lighting instruments and sound playback during the show in real time. Before the performance, they worked closely with a professional technician to learn how to operate their respective stations. They needed to become fluent quickly with the systems so they were able to make quick alterations on the fly during technical rehearsals.

**F. Load-In Description**

The caveat of the RSVP XXI Load-In process was the production's lighting requirements. Vibrant color manifested itself as the lifeblood of the performance similar to the way in which it drove, if not defined, the beauty of the modern choreography. Just
as a cake cannot be decorated until it is baked, the largest portion of the Load-In work involved a team of cherry-pickers to hoist the boldest of students to the ceiling of the Cohan Center Pavilion, where they painstakingly secured heavy lamps to the sprawling framework overhead. Until all the overhead work was completed, it was necessary that all other groundwork be postponed and the floor kept clear until the hanging units were placed and digitally designated.

Following the lighting work, other responsibilities of the Load-In process were executed with relative ease. These included laying down the Marley, dance flooring that helps dancers maintain their foot grip, constructing risers for elevated seating, deploying the sound and lighting station (consisting of a fold-out table, a handful of operating boards, and considerable wiring), dressing the exits, and arranging the physical seating. A diagram of the 2016 seating plan appears below.
III. PRODUCTION

When the days of load-in arrived, a bit less than two weeks from the performance, everyone was expected to have their weekends and as much of the week as possible cleared for setting the stage. As always, specific events of the 2016 timeframe were show-specific; however, the timeline customarily involves setting up the lighting, the floorplan, the seating, and the sound and light control stations.

When the days of dress rehearsal and the performance finally arrived, the majority of the crew of RSVP fell into their secondary positions. Aside from the Sound and
Lighting Operators, a team of runners haunted the stage’s periphery in their solid black attire. Several of these runners wore headsets to relay status and cues to and from the Assistant Director, who functioned as the central nervous system of the performance. Other jobs include assistant ushers, who seated patrons, and stagehands, who moved pertinent items around behind the scenes to get them where they needed to be for an upcoming scene.

IV. POST-PRODUCTION

Following our rousing success, we returned to the venue two days later to strike the stage. This process was essentially the same as load-in but in reverse. We packed away any particularly useful or extravagant props to save them for RSVPs to come. We took special care not to throw away anything of value.

Also during this phase, the Artistic Director collected the student evaluations. These were a collection of comments and rankings that the students used to evaluate each other, anonymously, basing the critiques on their performance.

V. Evaluation

Based on my own experience this year and the stories that I have heard of RSVPs in the past, I believe that the 2016 production of Evangeline was one for the books. The lighting and choreography were gorgeous and creative, the music formed an atonal suite
in which not a single piece felt out of place. The team was talented and ultimately worked well together in any situation.

As far as critique goes, no show is perfect, but this was a very fine effort. Nevertheless, this work was highly symbolic and contained no spoken dialogue for the duration of the entire plot. It might be advisable to include a short synopsis in the program in future productions of RSVP.