

Setting the standard

Jodi Myers recalls the invaluable technical training she received under former Central School of Speech and Drama teacher, the late Peter Streuli, and fears that courses today lack the same hands-on experience she herself acquired

Reading an obituary for Peter Streuli, who died on January 2, aged 91, I was reminded of how wide his personal experience was – as an actor, director, lighting designer, production manager and producer – and how fortunate those of us on the Stage Management and Technical Theatre course at Central School of Speech and Drama under his direction were.

Streuli – I can still hardly bring myself to refer to him as Peter – led this course from 1960-82 and, from my perspective as a student in the middle of this period, it was a wonderful privilege. Not only did we acquire a thorough grounding in all things technical, but Streuli instilled in us an extraordinary work ethic and sense of responsibility. I suspect many of us never worked quite as hard as we had at Central once we had graduated, but it was no bad thing to be prepared to face the worst the industry could throw at us.

Having worked the length and breadth of the country, including stints at Birmingham Rep under Barry Jackson, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre with Glen Byam Shaw, and Pitlochry Festival Theatre with Kenneth Ireland, as well as many smaller and experimental companies, Streuli had a deep understanding of the business for which he was training us.

“One of the most distinctive things about Streuli’s technical course was the inclusion of movement and voice classes – he recognised that stage managers needed to understand a little of what the actors we were working alongside were going through”

He also taught us to note the word ‘management’ in stage management. After opening night, we were to be in loco director and prepared to deal with any inappropriate behaviour the acting company might indulge in.

We were also to be part of the management of the theatre and had to be prepared to go onstage to make an announcement if the need arose. Consequently, at least someone on the SM team had to be appropriately dressed at all times, except during the fit-up and get-out. I took this advice rather too literally, and during my first job in Edinburgh, I was the cause of occasional amusement by being rather more smartly dressed than most ASMs.

One of the most distinctive things about Streuli’s technical course was the inclusion of movement and voice classes. This wasn’t because stage managers were thought to be frustrated performers – by the time I trained, this attitude had disappeared – but rather because he recognised that stage managers needed to understand a little of what the actors we were working alongside were going through. They were invaluable lessons.

Of course, in those days our training was blissfully free of concern for academic qualifications, but it did include detailed play studies, sophisticated design exercises and afternoons scheduled for visits to galleries and museums, to bone up on period style – what a wonderful excuse to spend time in the V&A. We even staged complete shows to give us the experience of seeing something through from start to finish and of working as a team – and possibly to convince us that we definitely didn’t want to act. And I owe my continuing devotion to the Filofax, in preference to the Blackberry, to Streuli – it was standard issue for recording all sorts of information.

When I went to Central I had little idea of what I wanted to do in theatre, other than it didn’t involve acting, but I couldn’t have wished for better training. While I only worked in stage management for a couple of years after I graduated, the



Peter Streuli, photographed in the fifties

skills gained and the experience of watching work being made have been of huge value throughout my career, which has involved working in marketing, for Arts Council England, venue management and consultancy.

I am not alone in acknowledging the transferable skills of stage management. There are numerous examples of former stage managers going on to run major organisations, and many more in less high profile, but nevertheless key roles.

Over the last 35 years, I have been an employer of many graduates of all sorts of courses, for many different jobs, and I sometimes wonder whether the current emphases on academic qualification and on leadership will mean our emerging managers will fully understand the business they are to manage. I have no doubt they understand the business in terms of pounds and pence, but the business of putting on a show? Well, I am not always so sure.

How many of our future arts managers will have spent any significant time in a rehearsal room? I don’t mean the executive director popping in to watch the final run-through, or the marketing manager who sits in on the read-through, valuable though those experiences may be. But I mean being part of the team which makes the work, such as those who work in stage management.

Consequently, I was delighted to read of the Stage Managers for Managers initiative recently launched by the Stage Management Association, with the support of the Cultural Leadership Programme. With a bit of luck, over the next few years there might be more organisations run by people who have spent some time at the sharp end.

Jodi Myers is an arts consultant who was, until last year, director of performing arts at the South Bank Centre. Previously she was director of the Warwick Arts Centre