

Downstage Center

Go behind the scenes with Kevin Selwyn



Who makes a musical happen?

First, there is the director, who presides over the whole look of the production and primarily deals

with the flow of the musical and the dramatic action. Next, there is the choreographer, who chiefly deals with movement and dance in the show.

Then, there is the music director, whose main concern is all musical aspects in the production.

But, ultimately all these individuals – director, choreographer and music director – sit back and watch their work unfold on stage after a production has been mounted and is enjoying a run in front of an audience. Save for one position.

The pit conductor.

Pit conductors are present and involved in the production as it is happening, and they can actively control and manage the musical flow throughout the show.

The pit conductor can be easily identified as the person in the hole in the ground in front of the stage waving a stick. Many times, the aforementioned music director serves as conductor, too.

In actuality, a pit conductor does so much more than wave a stick (called a baton).

“Conductors of pit orchestras have to not only handle the orchestra, but they have to handle the people on stage,” explained Dr. Thomas Albert, professor of composition and conductor for many school year productions and for Shenandoah Summer Music Theatre (SSMT) shows.

Albert’s experience in pit orchestras

is extensive. He started out playing string bass in pits when he was in high school. Conducting pit orchestras started when he began working at Shenandoah in 1974, from which time he has conducted one musical and one revue or Music Theatre Ensemble (MTE) show every school year.

Since he and Harold Herman started SSMT in 1984, Albert has conducted two shows every summer. With his school year shows and SSMT shows combined, Albert estimates he has conducted at least 110 musicals at SU.

But conducting a musical is no easy task.

“Usually, the pit takes a long time to get truly accustomed to the score,” said Shenandoah alumnus David Fiorello, who conducted while a student. “Also difficult is the simple fact actors tend to rush. Of course, it’s live theatre, and conductors need to be smart to fix such issues as they arise.”

Fiorello has conducted numerous MTE shows, main stage musicals and SSMT shows. He also pit conducted from the piano on the national tour of “Puttin’ on the Hitz: An Irving Berlin Revue,” and he served as music director for John Doyle’s revival of Sondheim’s “Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street,” in which all the cast members played orchestral instruments. Recently, he music directed the Off-Broadway hit “Danny and Sylvia: The Danny Kaye Musical.”

“The fact I almost never have a full score, so I don’t really know what the instruments have to play” adds to the long list of difficulties for pit conductors, Albert said.

“I know exactly what the singers have, because I spend more time with them. Typically there aren’t as many rehearsals with the instruments. We get, at best, a piano conductor’s score, which has the piano part with indications of instrumentation, and they’re not always correct indications,” said Albert.

“It’s very difficult, because you’re also dealing with a different acoustical



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ambience,” added orchestra conductor Jan Wagner. “The sound you hear from the pit and the stage is not necessarily the resulting sound in the house. It’s an adjustment to try to combine those two sonorities.”

Wagner is Shenandoah’s orchestra director, having studied conducting at the University of Music in Vienna, Austria, but he has conducted several opera productions in his time.

Albert, Fiorello and Wagner agree: pit conducting is difficult. Logically, one would expect performers on stage to watch the conductor for various cues and tempo changes.

“Mostly they do watch me as much as they should, but I don’t think it’s realistic for a conductor to expect people on stage to really watch. They can see, and when they need to get a cue, they watch. But mostly it’s a matter of peripheral vision,” said Albert.

“My career in musical theatre started as a performer, so I really encourage actors and actresses not to glue their eyes on the pit. The best

conductors, I find, are the ones who truly aid the show, not distract,” said Fiorello. “Too often, performers need the conductor for various things, and that’s why rehearsal planning is so important.”

Albert noted, “Despite all the ranting and raving I do in rehearsals about watching, I don’t really expect the same attention from the people on stage as I do from the people in the pit.”

“It’s theatre after all, so you can’t expect people to just stare at you. It’s an art form in itself,” Wagner said. “How do you pretend you’re looking out at the audience in character and at the same time coordinate with the rest of the ensemble? You have to trust the singer will go with the flow, so to speak.”

Wagner, who is used to being on stage conducting an orchestra, notices remarkable differences when conducting from a pit.

“One aspect of it is physical. You have singers in one place, on

one level, and you have the orchestra beneath you. When you don’t do it on a daily basis, it takes a little bit of an adjustment. It’s also different for the orchestra, because they don’t hear the singers. They really have to trust the conductor.”

“A conductor of a pit orchestra has to not only handle the orchestra, but they have to handle the people on stage,” Albert said.

“There’s a much higher unpredictability factor, because the people on stage are operating without a net. You have to remember the people on stage are always right – even when they’re not – because they’re the ones the audience can see.”

“As a conductor you need to know your material, you have to be prepared; you need to have a grasp of what you’re doing physically,” Albert continued.

“But, the process of bringing all that together is fairly complex. There are so many new variables, and each time it’s different. Every rehearsal is different, every performance is different. I wouldn’t say conducting is difficult, but it certainly is challenging.”

“It’s live theatre,” Fiorello said, “and conductors need to be smart to fix issues as they arise, and performers need to tune into that.”

“The most difficult thing about conducting has nothing to do with conducting. It has to do with managing a large group of people,” Wagner said. “It’s how to make a large group of people center their attention on one specific goal.”

“It’s about focusing on one specific sound. Yes, everyone has their individual part, but then how does that come together as a unit?”

While the director, choreographer and music director help build the foundation and structure of a production, it’s the pit conductor who acts as the glue to hold everything together during performance.

Scary to think things may fall apart if the man in the hole in the ground in front of the stage stopped waving his stick.