

4. Vandergrift: The Show Must Go On

00:01 Deborah Vandergrift: "The show must go on" is not just a romantic idea, it's a business imperative.

00:07 Kendall Lott: Hey project managers, how would you like to manage a project with poor scope, a set budget, and an unmovable deadline? Oh, and the quality of the project output is well, almost designed to be unpredictable. I'm talking project management in the fine arts, here at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC where the final output has...

00:28 DV: There's the court and the forest, and there are fairies, and there's magic, there's fighting.

00:33 KL: Hmm, on with the show.

[music]

00:37 Speaker 3: From the Washington DC Chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

00:46 KL: Today, we talk with Ms. Deborah Vandergrift, the Chief Production Manager of the Shakespeare Theatre Company. A premier and Tony Award winning regional theater company with the mission and vision to bring classical theater in a modern accessible style to theatergoers of our region.

01:02 DV: I am responsible for all of the physical production that you see on stage; the sets, the costumes, the props, the lights, the sound. I'm responsible for the stage managers who run the rehearsal process and run all of the performances. I'm responsible for sort of producing and putting together all the contracts and hiring the artistes, and hiring the staff and just getting the production that the audience eventually sees from the beginning to the performance.

01:38 KL: So how did you get here? So what is the background that makes you a chief production officer that has these project management roles?

01:45 DV: I was involved in theater in high school and college. I was a double major in Theater and English in college. I have a lot of good organizational skills and I enjoy organizing things, and solving problems, and putting pieces together, and removing obstacles. So I decided to go to graduate school for stage management, which is certainly a form of project management because they're given the responsibility of helping the director get the show rehearsed and communicating the things that director needs from scenery and costumes, etcetera. I was a stage manager for about 15 years and I became more and more interested in the broader picture, whereas stage management obviously gets very detailed of who's wearing what pair of gloves in each scene and if they come off stage right, do they have to be tracked by somebody stage left and that's all extremely important. But I became more interested in, well, how does one choose the season and how does one decide how many crew members we're going to have? And why would you make a decision to have four different settings in a play instead of three or five? And how do you put the pieces together on a

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larger scale to make this happen?

03:01 KL: Wait, did I just hear scoping and resourcing and integration? That sounds like project management.

03:08 DV: And I eventually moved into production management. Managing all of the shows for any given season and all of the people working on them.

03:18 KL: When you were studying as stage manager and also as production manager, those kind of two levels.

03:24 DV: Yeah.

03:24 KL: Was that taught to you as an idea of repeatable processes?

03:28 DV: Yes.

03:28 KL: Or is that taught to you as you're part of the artistic endeavor and it's always different and fascinating? [chuckle]

03:33 DV: The answer is yes to both.

03:35 KL: Both. Okay.

03:36 DV: But there are repeatable processes, there are standards as with I think anything you don't need to reinvent the wheel for every single process.

03:44 KL: What types of things tend to be standard?

03:47 DV: Scheduling. Certainly we work with unions and collective bargaining agreements, so the actors and stage managers are members of a union and there are limits to the amount of time you can work them and the breaks that they need etcetera, etcetera. So there's a way to approach managing that and scheduling. There's sort of an industry expectation about how a rehearsal will be supported. If a set is designed with many different kinds of combinations of walls, usually that design is complete and approved before the show goes into rehearsal, so the stage management staff in the rehearsal hall which is just a big empty room will tape out those walls on stage, so there are lots of things like that, that are more or less industry standard. That said, there are theater companies and directors and artists who work in different ways, who work beyond the bounds of that. So, flexibility is important.

04:49 KL: When you start up a specific production, do you have a case where you were going in one direction and then you're having to struggle with someone saying we need to change something that you would consider in the scope. Do they change the requirement you're responding to?

05:06 DV: Yes.

05:06 KL: Does that actually happen?

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05:06 DV: Sure. That actually happens. It often happens in rehearsal when there is a lot of discussion about like, how much is a "Reasonable amount of change."

05:16 KL: You're a project manager.

[laughter]

05:18 DV: And because you want to allow for that collaboration because that's what, I mean the collaboration and the ability to change and the ability to not stay within a certain amount of confines is part of the way we define creative thinking, right?

05:32 KL: Right.

05:33 DV: So you don't want to completely forbid that because then you end up with boring theater and what's the point.

05:39 KL: Right.

05:40 DV: On the other hand, if you do it too much, you end up with nothing because you've extended beyond your resources.

05:47 KL: Right. You're blowing the budget.

05:48 DV: Yeah.

05:48 KL: Yeah. We talked about the triple constraint. The scope, the amount of money you have, and the amount of time you have.

05:53 DV: Yeah.

05:54 KL: So, I'm aware that the schedule matters to you, right?

05:57 DV: Absolutely. I have a hard deadline. Which is the first paid public performance, and every performance thereafter. "The show must go on" is not just a romantic idea, it's a business imperative because if I don't have that performance ready for the people who've paid for it, then I either have to exchange their tickets, which lowers my inventory for later in the run, or I have to give them a refund which, I think we agree that's not a good business practice to aspire to.

[laughter]

06:27 DV: So we know that there's that hard deadline, but there's a lot of moving pieces that build up to that, and I think we are constantly reexamining if the subset of time we've set aside for each goal is appropriate.

06:46 KL: The schedule is imperative. It cannot be lost. Cost management, you're given a budget, I assume. That sounds familiar?

06:52 DV: I create budget.

06:53 KL: You create it?

06:53 DV: Yeah. If someone tells me we want to do 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', I can look at the number of settings. So there's the court and the forest, and there are fairies, and there is magic, and there is a certain number of characters. And I imagine those characters will need different costumes. There may be special effects. I'm gonna need a certain number of actors and, by the way, I'll probably need to bring some of those actors from out of town, so I'll need to house them and travel them. So there are all these moving parts that, if you give me just a title of a play and let me read the script, I can make certain assumptions about what that might reasonably cost, what might be a realistic budget.

[laughter]

07:39 DV: And then, on top of that, if you give me a director, which is sort of the chief artist in any of these projects, I might say, "Oh, that director likes really lavish sets." Or I might say, "Oh, that director likes things very minimalist and spare, so maybe we could do a set with a little less money."

07:57 KL: So how do you, from where you're sitting, address risk, or expect others to address risk?

08:00 DV: For me, and for my theater, when I see a design, I have to evaluate whether, with the support of my project managers, we have to evaluate whether we can complete this design within the resources given: Time, staff, money, etcetera, etcetera. The question is, how much do you reach? It is relatively easy to define, in any given situation, what is easily achievable. Right?

08:31 KL: Right.

08:32 DV: It's easy to say, "Yeah, we can get that done, that's a no-brainer," but why leave some resources on the table at the end of the day?

08:39 KL: Right.

[laughter]

08:41 DV: If you have a bucket of resources, the goal is to use them to their fullest extent without overreaching.

08:52 KL: Right. Do you document the key things you're looking for or things that could go wrong? Or do you guys not process...

08:57 DV: Yes, I think there's a standard that we know that the performance proceeds, that all of the elements are there, that there's not, for example, not only are all the costumes are there, but all the trim and all the detail is in the paint. And the actors know all their lines and know all their blocking, and beyond that they're engaged, they're emotional, they're creating a reality on stage for the audience. So those are all the standards, but what if the initial set design has a lot of automation in it? My technical director may look at that and say, "Well, I feel like maybe we can get this done. We might still be working on it through previews, and I don't know if the first couple of previews might

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be a little bumpy." And I know, here at this theater, that's not going to be acceptable. So I don't want him to cut from say, 20 to five, but I wanna find that sweet spot which is, are we doing as much as we can but not overreaching?

10:00 KL: And that's going into the planning stage, so you're mitigating risk on the front end. You're highlighting that as a potential problem and getting ahead of it.

10:05 DV: Absolutely. The question that's actually fascinating to me is that, at one time, all managers came up through the ranks. Managers, project managers, executives, etcetera. You would meet an executive director who started as an assistant box office manager someplace and grew, and grew, and grew, and grew. And because of their interests and predilections and particular talents, were given chances to step up, and step up, and step up. And that's a very valuable journey to have had as a manager, obviously. On the other hand, a lot of these managers and executives got their training ad hoc, in terms of the higher functioning stuff. For example, my Masters in Stage Management had very basic... I had one class in contract law, business law actually, it wasn't even contract law, and I had one class in basic accounting. And now I manage a budget that represents half of this organization's expenses.

11:17 KL: Wow.

11:18 DV: That's the extent of my formal training. So somewhere along the way, I had to pick all that up. Now, there are programs where you can go and get an MFA in Production Management. You can get an MFA in Artistic Management and Administration. And so those people come out with basic accounting and business skills and all of the things you would expect an MBA to have.

11:43 KL: So what would you like going forward?

11:44 DV: I don't want people who have no idea of the jobs below them, of what they do. I also don't want people to become managers without some basic business training. I think the best of both worlds that I see are the people who start to work their way up, and then go, "You know what? I need some more formal education", and they go back to school and then they come out.

12:07 KL: Right. Go back and forth.

12:08 DV: Yeah.

12:08 KL: Well, that may be what the certification might be helpful for some. That's what we found for some practitioners, the ability to say, "I've met a standard of how I practice this craft or this art." Right? In the case of project management.

12:21 DV: For me, the idea of project management as a skill set, it's something I've only heard of in the past five to 10 years. It's kind of fun to realize that something that you've just learned to do actually fits into a skill set that extends beyond your own industry.

12:39 KL: Special thanks to today's guest, Deborah Vandergrift. Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Post production performed at M Powered Strategies, and technical and web support provided by Potomac Management Resources. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time, keep it in scope and get it done.