

50 Years of the Stables
Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

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C O M P A N Y

Episode Eight: *Secret Life of Stage Managers*
With **Amylia Harris, Tanya Leach** and **Khym Scott**

They are the masters of problem-solving, schedule-writing, secret-keeping, energy-reading, and show-running... And at a quirky theatre like the Stables, they take on all manner of other unexpected roles! Go behind the scenes with three of Griffin's favourite stage managers in this episode of the 50 Years of the Stables podcast series.

Hosted by:

AC – Angela Catterns

Guests:

TL – Tanya Leach

AH – Amylia (Amy) Harris

KS – Khym Scott

Angela Catterns (AC): 2020 marks the 50th birthday of Griffin Theatre Company's home: the Stables Theatre. I'm Angela Catterns. Join us as we celebrate the anniversary in this special series of podcasts, where we'll hear about the theatre's history and talk to some of the country's most celebrated artists.

AC: In this episode of the Stables's 50th birthday podcast series, we take a look behind the scenes and meet the stage managers. Tanya Leach, Khym Scott and Amy Harris are well known and highly respected stage managers. Welcome to you all.

All: Thank you.

AC: What exactly is the role of the stage manager?

[pause]

Tanya Leach (TL): We all pause... [laughter] because it's different for different forms of theatre, from a one-man show to an opera with four hundred people that you are managing. So, the art of stage management can vary, but mostly, it's making a show go up on time and keeping everybody safe in performance. And in rehearsal, being there to support the creation of the performing piece.

AC: You mentioned it was an art, you agree Amy, you agree it's an art?

Amy Harris (AH): Absolutely, I think that stage management is definitely a creative role, I think that's overlooked often. But we are always the people who are the keepers of the vision, you know once the show has been made and created with the team, everyone else buggers off and we're left there to cradle that with the cast. And so I think you have to always keep your eyes open, you have to have a creative brain, you have to be able to articulate the process of how you got there and keep the ship pointing in the same direction and afloat.

Khym Scott (KS): And I think there is something about calling a show, or in the case of being at the Stables, operating a show, that it's kind of like you are performing as well and breathing with the show. And a split second decision can affect the mood or the temperature of a performance. So it is kind of a craft or an art as well, it's not as simple as pressing a button or saying some words.

AH: No, you have to have rhythm, especially if you are calling a musical, you have to be tuned in to the performers. So yeah, I would say....

AC: Well and in fact you would have to be able to read music, wouldn't you?

AH: Yes, you do. Yep, that's very important, and you have to be on the beat and if you miss something it can be dangerous. So, you know if you're calling a fly cue, it has to be on a particular note, it has to be on that note.

AC: Wow. Would you say it's more challenging being a stage manager in a tiny theatre like the Stables?

KS: I think it presents different challenges, absolutely. Um, some things are much easier, everything is a bit more in reach... (laughter)

AC: Well, you don't have to walk so far... (laughter)

KS: Exactly, yeah, yeah. You can climb on the back of a chair and re-focus a lamp or climb down a staircase and you have all the supplies that you need at your fingertips.

TL: One hose... (laughter)

KS: There are fewer people to ask the question I guess, but yeah it's a little tough in some instances being the only person there.

TL: I Admire Khym, I said to him this morning earlier, that I'm a bit frightened to another Griffin show because the technology requires me to be more digitally competent than perhaps I am, because I have been doing it for such a long time. I started with reel-to-reel and tapes and manual boards and now it's all computerised and there might be just one thing that I don't know, and we might not be able to start the show. I love the idea of having a technician nearby, which Khym hasn't got the luxury of having at Griffin because he is a one-man band.

AC: And so do you have to be multi-skilled as a stage manager?

AH: Yeah, absolutely. You are often head of wardrobe, you're a carpenter, you're an electrician, you're the sound guy....

KS: Head of props.

AH: Head of props...

KS: Head of wigs.

AH: Head of wigs... (laughter)

KS: Head mechanist.

AH: Yeah that's right, if anything goes wrong, I mean especially in Griffin, I used to get there with so much time, because you have to go through your checks. And I'm not massively technical either, so if there was something that I couldn't solve, you need the time to call a friend and get your production manager in to help you. Or solve it with your team in a different way: "Okay we are not going to get the projection tonight so this is what we are going to do." But yeah, head of wigs, I mean you do you have to be the jack of all trades really, and be able to get yourself around most issues as they present themselves.

TL: And that's why it's great, because we talked about it being an art and being involved in the creation of work. But then we are actually the people who are putting it all together very practically. So, it's that great mixture of being the worker and also being in this extraordinary creative space and being very sensitive to people and we are often also the ones, as well as doing all this practical stuff, who smooth over any tensions in the room and have got an antenna on about artists that need a bit of extra help with how they are feeling, and how that's going to be communicated to other people. So often you are sort of the ear to other people and you have to be very discreet but also very optimistic about how things are going to go.

AC: So, diplomacy is another skill of the stage manager?

AH: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I think you're... the stage manager is kind of always in the middle and everybody kind of revolves around you, you know. It's the communication role as well, you have to do all your scheduling. You need to get everybody's two cents in order to make sure you achieve the most efficient schedule. But definitely, you're also the person that's in a lot of people's ear and if anything is a problem and you are right [to Tanya] it is like an antenna, you have to pick it up almost before almost they do because that's the most effective way. So you can see when people are starting to crack and it's just popping in with a cup of tea, or "let's just take this off your plate," or "let me just call a friend for you," and then we can smooth that out and hopefully not take the bump.

TL: Yep. And often getting, getting someone out of the rehearsal room before they burst into tears with some sort of excuse you tell the director, you know they had to go to wardrobe or something, 'cause you can see that they are just about to have a little meltdown and you don't really want everybody to see.

AC: Khym, you look as though you identify with that?

KS: I was just going to say that I guess what we are saying is that we are problem solvers in every sense of the word. Like, um, if there is something technically that we are not necessarily across, and I don't think I necessarily am all the time, I think our problem-solving skill set helps us get through, not necessarily knowing exactly how, but we make it work. Identifying an issue with a person, or learning a skill that we don't necessarily have like, um, wig-making [laughter]. We just, you know, we problem-solve and we get through.

AH: Yes, creative problem solving. It's like okay just give me, just show me exactly what to do, with that and that and I will do it like that every time. Yep.

KS and TL: Yep, yep.

AC: Fantastic.

TL: And becoming absolutely obsessed about some weird prop that you can't find [laughter]-

KS: -oh you learn a new skill in every show.

TL: And then for two weeks you are looking in the street for some particular, you know, bit of rubbish [laughter] –

KS: Yep.

AH: Yep.

TL: -that the designer sort of wants or the actors are looking for this object.

KS: And there's such pleasure and pride in getting it as well! [Laughter]

AH: Yes!

[Laughter]

AC: Can you give me an example, of something like that?

AH: Ah, I did a show where we... It was *Thomas the Tank Engine* [laughter] and we had a dance break where they all got these clear umbrellas. And they were those cheap ones, so they broke constantly so I was constantly looking for clear umbrellas. And I tell you what, they are everywhere, except for when you are looking for them, and I just got to the point where I was trawling through dollar shops and I'd find one and be like, "It's the golden ticket!" –

[Laughter]

AH: -and text everyone and say "Okay I've got one, how many umbrellas do I-?" And *now* everywhere I go, bloody clear umbrellas [laughter], it's like they multiplied.

KS: We have a lot of prop blood in the current show that I'm working on, and it has to appear kind of suddenly and out of nowhere in a number of instances. So, we have a couple of different solves but there was one I just couldn't get for weeks and tried to work out how to make this blood just appear. And then I was in Woolworths during production week and I was in the medical aisle and there were these tubes of lube but they were sitting in this plastic, I guess, display piece of plastic. I saw the, I guess, rubbish and thought "I could use that!" [laughter] That's what they need! [laughter] I don't need the lube, I just need what they are standing in [laughter]. Um, so- so I took it [laughter], cut it up and it's still in the show.

AC: Ah fantastic!

[laughter]

KS: Yeah, it's those kind of successes.

AC: Yeah, Tanya, can you remember any?

TL: Um, I remember going to a workshop for this um, play about Catherine McGregor that I did with STC, and we'd been looking for a certain sort of chair that the Catherine McGregor character sat on. None of them were right... anyway, just like half an hour before I got to this final rehearsal workshop, in the street someone had just left this chair. And I saw it and I thought "Ah that's exactly it". So, I sort of carried it for half an hour, you know, cause I always walk down to rehearsal. And um, it was perfect.

AC: And someone had been chucking it out.

TL: That's right.

AC: Fantastic. So you must have experienced a world of difference between stage managing a show at Opera Australia and a Griffin play?

TL: Yeah absolutely. No it's, it's very, it's totally different, because um, those big forces at the Opera, they're these specialist people that we've discussed what stage managers do well, in a big company, everybody has a job, you've got a props runner, you've got five fly men, you've got orchestral management, you've got five people in costume and makeup, you've got two ASMs (Assistant Stage-Managers), you've got a DSM (Deputy Stage Manager). So everybody is doing a very particular job, whereas at somewhere like Griffin, the stage manager takes on all those jobs. But the general thing about managing a performance is the way that we work and the formality that I might have at the Opera, I do carry on in other places.

AC: And Khym I think you worked with the Ballet, is that right?

KS: I did, I was ASM there for a number of years.

AC: And so there would also be a world of difference between working at Griffin and working with the Ballet I imagine?

KS: Yeah, I think similarly to what Tanya was saying, it's a bigger company so there are more people doing more jobs, but the scale is similar. Working at the Ballet I guess was different because we were thinking ahead a lot more... um, that's what I, I guess that's what I learnt to do. I was carrying half-a-dozen productions in my mind that might be on in a year or five years' time if that was the leeway. It's different at Griffin when you're just working on the one, or two *maybe*.

TL: Yeah working in a rep-company when you're doing, maybe rehearsing two shows during the day and then performing another one at night, it's relentless, but extraordinary, you know you're really in it, it has to be your life when you are doing that sort of work. Maybe not so much now, things are more regulated, but in the old days when you got in early in the morning and you didn't get home until midnight. You just kept going, I don't know how you did it, but yeah.

AC: And so I understand you're the first to arrive and the last to leave as a stage manager?

TL: In a venue like Griffin and Belvoir, yes. At the Opera House, of course, it's 24hours [laughter] and there's always security cameras looking at you.

KS: Yes.

AH: Yeah I feel like when you are doing the small to medium, like at Griffin your stage manager is in the trenches. They're in there with you doing the making of the show. And I think when you are

doing large scale shows, just because it's so departmentalised, everybody has their responsibility, and so the stage manager becomes more of a facilitator and a communicator. Um, so both have their appeals, you know, like large scale is great, and you know, but I also like to muck in and go "Let's find the lube container for the blood," you know?! [laughter] because that's... "Look what I did today!" It is funny because sometimes you just think, "What is this job that I'm doing, I'm inside an elephant patching the thing because the puppet leg's broken," you know. Trying to see with your head torch and um, you know you do do some really quite very bazaar things.

AC: Khym, I interviewed Sheridan Harbridge for another podcast in this Stables 50th series. Hers was about doing a solo show and in it she talked about not really being alone despite not having a scene partner, because she had you, [laughter] her stage manager, to talk to after the show about what worked and what didn't in that night's performance. Is that also part of your role as you see it?

KS: Yeah, I think it is, um, I mean we are the people that see the show every night and we are watching it. We're not, we're not asleep. Um, and we have been with it since day one, so we've been listening to what the director and actor, single in this case, are hoping to achieve through the rehearsal process and um, providing some sort of guidance um, and some feedback. Not acting notes obviously, or criticism but just feedback, yeah, depending on what they need each night. Yeah.

AC: Have you performed that role Tanya?

TL: Yeah, some actors like to talk about the show afterwards, and one I did recently, I felt it was part of my job to go and have a drink with one of the actors that, everyone else ran off, and he really just needed someone to talk to after the show. So even though I really didn't want to have another drink, I ended up at the bar having a drink. And it was quite, you know, I mean not that it is a duty, but I felt that he needed that. It was fine, but I did take it on.

AH: I feel a lot of actors do need to decompress. There is a real cost to the artist when they are inhabiting these worlds and humans, and it's difficult. And I think a lot of people don't understand actually how much an actor takes on, and some really go there more than others. I mean Sheridan in that play [*Prima Facie*], that's a really big role to carry and so you, if you don't have a lifeline or someone, a friendly face that you can look at the end, come back to yourself, and talk about something, maybe you talk about the dog. Maybe you talk about the weather. You know sometimes the role of the SM is to *not* talk about the show, but to bring you out of the show. And some people like to keep to themselves. But I've definitely had a lot of people who just want to have a touchstone of, "How did that go?" "Yes, it was good, you were great, well done."

TL: Mm. And the other thing as a stage manager is just all the different processes that actors go through in the rehearsal room. Some come very prepared, others find their performance in the last week of rehearsal, and you have to be patient or you have to press them. Or depending on what their process is, and similarly in performance, some people come in very early and just like to sort of sit there and chat, do the crossword together, have a cup of tea, talk about their dog, whatever. And other people you know you're always thinking, "Ooh, the half hour call, they better get here in two minutes or I'll get cranky." [laughter] Everybody is different and that's what's so great, and as Amy said, what actors go through and singers, bearing their souls on stage, and we're sort of also the protectors of their souls because they're naked and they have to, yeah, have someone to help.

AC: You sound like wonderful people, wonderful people to have as partners actually.

TL: Well partners often don't see us very much!

[Laughter]

KS: No, we would be bad...

AH: Rolling into bed at midnight!

TL: My husband... I don't know how... I mean it's just such a weird life. And, and most stage managers finish doing this job much earlier than I have, I just keep going. But it's weird because often you have to be in the rehearsal room first thing in the morning and then, you know, you get home at seven o'clock or something, and then when you are in performance you've got a whole different timetable in your life. So you're sometimes a morning person, sometimes a night person.

AC: Mm. What would you say was the most difficult show you have worked on Tanya?

TL: Ah, I always try to forget these shows! [Laughter] So bad. I did a show that I don't really want to remember, it was called *The White Devil*, it was during the Olympic Art Festival. Just from the start of rehearsals it seemed to have some sort of strange curse, it was a Jacobean revenge tragedy. [laughter] And just everybody got sick and we had such a turnover of cast and then we went into the theatre and dreadful things happened. Like the follow spots blew up, and the headsets never worked, and I was calling it, and there wasn't an assistant director, and it was just awful. And, and everyone, it was - the women in the piece were treated very badly, you know in the writing, and so they were all weeping and it was just awful. And then it was so good that we took it to New York and did it all over again-

AH: No!

TL: -and I just thought, "Please let this thing end!" [laughter]

AH: It's like "I'm sorry, I'm going to Bali, I'm not doing that again, no way!"

TL: And everybody had meltdowns all the time and, and management just didn't help. I don't know it was just an awful experience. But, you know, I did go to New York and had a quite good time in Brooklyn, you know, and, several people in the company, I mean, I *loved* to bits because you - it was like you were in a... I mean, not that I should downplay war but every day there was some problem and ah, you just hung on. And um, and prayed for it to keep going. Oh, oh when I just - oh every time I just don't want to think it about it!

[Laughter, and the following dialogue a little overlapping]

AC: I'm sorry, I'm sorry to ask about it!

AH: She's been triggered, she's been triggered!

TL: All these memories pop into my head, what happened with that person, ohhh!

[Laughter]

AC: Khym what has been the most difficult production have worked on?

KS: Nothing as terrible as Tanya's.

AH: I can't top that.

KS: No, I think I have been quite lucky. I mean every, every production I have worked on has had difficulties, and there have been some that have been more difficult. But none stand out, it's normally the ones that -

AC: Any incidents were things haven't gone according to plan?

KS: Uhh...

AH: Show stops!

TL: Show stops!

KS: Oh, show stops are, show stops are fun!

AC: Is that where you stop the show?

KS: Yeah.

AC: Why, in what circumstances?

TL: That's a whole stage management thing, how to do a show stop.

AC: And why do you, and when do you?

TL: If there is a technical difficulty, someone gets hurt, someone in the audience has a heart attack. Any reason that you - and *you* have to make the choice that we cannot proceed. Often you just keep going and there is just something very drastic that's not right, but you just keep going. But there are some things that you can't um, you can't keep going.

AC: And that's your call?

TL: It's *totally* the Stage Manager's call. And you can't ask anybody.

AC: So you have had to do that?

TL: Oh, millions of times.

AC: Really? Tell me -

TL: Yeah yeah. Well not millions of times, but a lot.

AC: So just give one example?

TL: [Announcer voice] "Ladies and gentlemen..."

[Laughter]

AH: "Due to unforeseen circumstances- "

TL: Yeah, yeah, oh well like when a revolve won't revolve, and the whole production like *Romeo and Juliet* I did at the *Opera House* -

KS: [Gasp] I was there that day!

AH: Ohh!

TL: Ohh there you go, so you heard my show stop.

KS: I heard your show stop!

[Laughter]

AH: I had a, I had a great show stop when I was doing a show in New York, actually it was called *How the Grinch Stole Christmas - The Musical*. And we lost power halfway through the show, like the whole theatre, not just us. The whole theatre went dark, and I was like okay bring the show curtain in, so, and everyone was dressed like 'Whos'. It was pitch black so: "Alright, everyone on crew who's got a torch, go find a Who and just keep them, and bring them, um, to stage. So everyone sort of scattered to find a Who, and kind of Who-ing people back into centre. [Laughter] Um, and we were waiting for the venue to give us an update. And then we came - it comes back, and we've also got a house of like two and half thousand people, so they're all dealing with that. And then we're like "Oh okay the whole *block's* gone." So we have to evacuate. We let the audience go, then all the Whos wanted to go get changed, "No you're not allowed to go get changed." So everybody went out in their giant costumes onto the street, and then I did headcount and there were like twenty Whos and we were missing one. [Gasp] So had to go back in *pitch black* with these weird kind of emergency lights going. And then I found one of my Whos having a bloody shower! [laughter] I was like "What are you doing?! I'm risking my tail coming in crawling around trying to find you!" And he's like "Oh I just thought I would be a bit sweaty in my costume." Like "Nup, out!" [Laughter] Um, yep.

AC: So, tell me, what's like when you work in the bio box at Griffin and what that actually is?

AH: So the bio box is the space usually at the back of the auditorium, which the stage manager can see the show from and that's where you operate the show. So you're operating in the case of Griffin as you are a one-man band, you're doing lights, projection, sound, any type - if they want to rig something up, I've done a can drop, which is on a rope so you had to kind of lean and pull a string at a certain time -

KS: I've got one of those at the moment.

AH: There you go. It's always interesting kind of things they'll run to the bio box. Um so it's kind of the brain of the theatre perhaps, then we're the little ones in there operating it. So yes, Griffin's bio box is special, [soft laughter from Khym] erm, it is tiny. Erm, I feel like the first person - the first time you go in there you, you kind of go: "Okay, but where is the rest of it?"

KS: Mmm.

AH: 'Cos you can't - [laughs] it can't just be - It's literally like one metre deep by like two and half metres. And the amount of tech, I mean I don't know, if you've seen a Griffin show, but sometimes there are six projectors, and the lighting console, the sound mixing desk and everything else, and plus you've got to try to find a tiny square metre - square inch for your prompt copy, so- and a little tiny lamp that you are allowed and you have to fight for that space and if all the technicians keep

trying to put more in you are like: "I must have space for my script". Yeah, that's kind of, that's where we call from and then because the space in Griffin is so tiny, the audience's head, you know, you could lean out and touch them on the head if you needed to. Um so...

KS: Because at Griffin the bio box actually it's not its own room, realistically...

AH: No...

KS: It's the last row of the auditorium –

AH: Yes! [Laughter]

KS: - with a false wall put between the last two rows. So we are kind of there.

AH: Yes, exactly! You are right there, and you can hear them breathing and you have to turn your page [whispers] so quietly because especially if it's in a quiet moment. I would have to add extra cues because I knew there was going to be a pause, and you can't turn your page in a pause because you'll hear it. Um and, ah, also the air conditioning is on the other side to the bio box, so that's always fun in summer because the bio box gets seriously warm.

KS: With all that equipment in there and not having air conditioning it's very hot.

AH: Very hot. I used to get just sweat dripping down my back and I was allowed one tiny fan but I'd have to turn the fan off for certain moments because the fan was too loud! [Laughter] "Ahh God here we go I've got the cue coming up, turn off fan, dammit!" Turn off my fan, sweat dripping down, "Oh great, fan on moment! Okay here we go." Just like put it on to your head. She is special!

AC: You're not the only person in there?

KS: Ah, we are during performances, but during production week it's sometimes very, very squishy. Especially when it gets to preview performances I think, uh and equipment comes out of the box and into the auditorium so the designers can work during the day. When it goes back in, it's normally just before you are ready to open the house and let patrons in. And all you want to do is have a little bit of space and just look over your book and check that the screens are right, but you've got two or three or four designers all also trying to work on their own equipment at the same time. And you're like -

AH: "Get out... half hour call!"

KS: Yep.

AC: Given that your role is so vital in the production of a play, do you ever feel overlooked?

TL: Yeah -

AC: Do you wish the spotlight shone on you sometimes?

TL: No!

ALL: No, no!

TL: No we wouldn't be doing this if we wanted to be performers. It's for someone who likes to observe, this job.

AC: And run things by the sound of it.

TL: Well, observe, and run things, but it's a really interesting mixture of stepping back depending on the team, deciding how much you say, in public. Of course, you have to have order in the room and all that sort of announcements and things, that's your, you're the mouthpiece. It's a really interesting thing...

KS: It's not about us, and I think -

TL: It's not about us.

KS: -that's the main thing, it's not about us.

TL: That's right.

AH: If you want to freak out a stage manager tell them that you want them to go out on stage.

TL: Oh my god, no thanks!

AH: That's one way to get them to run.

[Laughter]

TL: Oh no.

AH: Put a costume on? I don't think so.

TL: I don't think so. And some companies put you in the program with a photo, but I have avoided that for many, many years. Um and I don't like being the program with a photo and my bio. I just like my name. People in the business know who we are, you know, and that's all I need, I don't need anyone else to know who I am.

AC: What are the challenges of stage managing I guess in places like that and what are the highlights?

AH: Oh, I love Griffin. I think Griffin is somewhat the beating heart of Sydney theatre, I think, um, what it gives our community is enormous. The new work that is birthed there and the amazing careers of artists that have started there is just incredible. So it's um, what it gives the community is amazing. In terms of, I mean, I guess as I said um, stage managing there, yes it's a challenge because you have to have, you're the captain of a lot of ships. But you're in there making and you are part of it and you end up with a script at the end that is only there largely because of the contribution that you made. You stick it on the shelf and you are forever proud of those moments. So yes, I have a deep love for Griffin.

AC: Khyam?

KS: I think what's great about working at Griffin is that everyone *wants you to*. You feel really, really supported and really welcomed there. We had a new staff member um, in the box office start just

recently, and they've come from a hospitality background rather than a theatre background. And they said what was surprising to them, being in a customer service role was that everyone was really happy, and everyone wanted to be there, and I mean going to the theatre, it's not, it's not a passive activity, it's not something that you have on in the background, everyone is there for a purpose and everyone wants to be there. Being part of that is kind of really great and really special. And it makes putting in the effort really worth it, I guess.

AC: That's lovely. Tanya?

TL: I just remember seeing such wonderful plays at the Griffin as an audience member, being there for you know, Michael Gow's *Away*, and so many plays that have become classics. And the series of Artistic Directors that Griffin have - has had have all been such passionate people and it is a really, really important theatre.

AC: Beautiful, thank you so much. It's been a delight to talk to you all. Amy, Tanya, Khym – thank you so much.

All: Thank you.

TL: We don't get to talk about stage management much! [Laughter]

AC: Thanks for listening to Griffin's special podcast series, where we're celebrating 50 Years of The Stables. For more anniversary activities head to Griffin's website: griffintheatre.com.au

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*The 50 Years of the Stables podcast series was produced by **Margaret Murphy**, hosted by **Angela Catterns** and recorded & edited by **Diamantina Media Group**.*

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