Stage managers acquire their skills through experience. Sometimes the best way to test one's own abilities is to put oneself in a foreign environment. I have worked in a different theatre company each summer since I started attending Indiana University (IU). After my freshmen year, I interned in the production department of a small local theatre in my home town of Arlington Heights, IL. Then, I was a stage management intern for Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival the summer after my sophomore year. Each succeeding theatre company was larger than the one prior to it. I decided that I wanted to do an internship for my final project because it would test my acquired abilities in a professional setting. I also wanted to include a life experience during this internship because it would be my last summer as a college student. Due to my demanding theatre schedules, the opportunity to study or travel abroad never arose. By combining a stage management internship with an abroad experience, I learned how stage management varies in another country and experienced another culture’s lifestyle.

During the fall of 2006, I talked with my sponsor, David Grindle, about possibilities for my Individualized Major Program (IMP) final project. At an Opera America conference, David had met the Technical Operations Director of Opera Australia (OA), Sue Olden. He e-mailed Sue and asked if Opera Australia would be interested in a stage management intern. After checking with the senior stage manager, Opera Australia decided that an intern would be most helpful on the Australian Premiere of André Previn’s opera, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (*Streetcar*). Opera Australia had never had an intern before; they asked me what I expected out of the internship. Sue said that they could provide housing but no stipend because the company had not budgeted for an intern. I was to report to Opera Australia on June 18 and remain with the production through closing night and strike of the show on August 30.
I was a little wary about the internship because I had never worked on an opera. In the Stage Management II course, we had studied various operas ranging from the early works to the more recent works, so I had some understanding of how opera rehearsals and tech operated. Luckily, I had the opportunity to work as a co-stage manager for Bloomington Early Playwrights Festival's production of *Orfeo* before I left the country. This allowed me to run rehearsals with opera singers and the assistant conductor, which gave me a better idea of what to expect in Sydney. However, it was still hard to imagine working at the Sydney Opera House because it is such an iconic landmark. I kept envisioning large-scale productions in a spacious stage; I would later find out that this was an incorrect assumption. Since I was the guinea pig in their intern program, I had no idea what the stage managers would let me do. They only had some vague information regarding my stage management experience, so it would be necessary for me to prove my worth.

On my first day, I met with Crissie, the Senior Stage Manager and also the stage manager for *Streetcar*. Crissie toured me around the facility and explained the hierarchy of the company personnel. During that first week, I sat in rehearsals and tech for *Barber of Seville* so that I could understand how Opera Australia stage management worked in those settings. Since *Streetcar* rehearsals took place off-site from the OA Opera Center, the stage management team had to pack up all supplies that they would need. I helped Crissie pack up the supply crate with office supplies, spike tape, coffee/tea and computer accessories. Crissie also had me surf their database to view samples of past shows and the paperwork that had been created. All of the stage managers send out their rehearsal reports in Word document form. I took a look at their template and suggested that they insert an Excel table into the Word document which would automatically calculate the time between each act. They all looked at me incredulously, and asked if I knew how to do that. Within 30 minutes, I had inserted and formatted an Excel table to automatically calculate the time between
the beginning and end of each act. Most of my paperwork is created in Excel because I find it easier to manipulate; the first Stage Management course introduced Excel as a good program for paperwork creation. Now, I just had to teach the other stage managers how the cells worked and how they had to input the data. It turned out that the stage managers were not very familiar with Excel because they mainly used Word for all of their paperwork. I talked extensively with the assistant stage managers (ASMs) about paperwork, formats, tips and layouts.

Before we began rehearsals, Crissie had me look at some of the promptbooks from previous shows to see how the stage managers took blocking (movement) notes and cues. I had expected to see numerous three inch binders stuffed with scripts and notes because that is how we typically create promptbooks in the USA. However, each promptbook was an actual book with binding and a hard cover. The company made these books especially for the stage managers, with the score interleaved with blank pages for notes. Since the sets from each production are kept, the shows are revived every “x” years. The promptbooks stay with the production; when a production is revived a few years later, the same promptbooks are used again. It was fascinating to see many stage managers’ handwritings in one book. The assistant stage manager on Il Trittico, a revival, did not want to erase the previous assistant stage manager’s handwriting because she felt it was erasing a piece of history. The old notes were helpful because they described when and how certain scene changes worked and actor entrances/exits. If the original director returns for the revival, these notes are helpful to the stage management team because they can reference the old production.

Opera Australia’s productions run in repertory, along with the stage managers. Repertory indicates that during a certain period a different opera is performed each night; there could be three operas alternating performance nights during a week. At a given time, one of the stage management members could be working on two shows simultaneously. Since tech rehearsals and performances
for one show may conflict with the rehearsals of an up-coming show, a stage management member will often miss rehearsals for the up-coming show. This procedure made sense because the production that would be in performance soon should have the priority attention of the stage management member. For example, the ASM for Streetcar was also the ASM for Barber of Seville. Often she would miss Streetcar rehearsal due to a Barber matinee or performance. Generally, the other stage management members try to take notes for the person who is missing rehearsal, but the notes are not always beneficial, and the person missing rehearsal usually has to play catch-up. By joining the Streetcar stage management team, I provided an extra set of eyes and ears and was able to take detailed notes for the stage management member who was missing. When the ASM was absent, I took detailed prop notes regarding which actor moved the prop, when the prop entered, which side of the stage the prop came from, where the prop was placed onstage and any notes from the director. In the DSM's promptbook, I took notes about actor entrances and exits, and places in the music where the director indicated he wanted the light or set rotation change to take place.

Since Crissie was the SM for Streetcar and the senior stage manager for the company, she often was on the phone or internet communicating and scheduling with the people at the opera center. I often took notes for Crissie while she did her senior stage manager duties; the stage manager notes included blocking, set rotation, lights, and entrances and exits.

The stage management team of three at Opera Australia was different from anything else I had encountered. In the States, there is generally a stage manager and one to two ASMs; the stage manager calls the light and technical cues while the ASMs run the backstage deck. However, OA's stage management teams consist of a stage manager, a deputy stage manager and an assistant stage manager. The stage manager oversees the entire production and is in charge of cueing performers on stage left. The deputy stage manager calls all of the light cues, sound cues, curtain cues, technical
cues, reminders to the performers for their entrances and reminders to the wardrobe crew for quick changes. The ASM is in charge of making sure all the props are in place, handing off props to performers and cueing entrances of all performers on stage right. This division of power allows each SM team member to concentrate on a specific part of the production. During tech rehearsals, the SM is available to talk with the directors, performers and designers while the DSM fixes the cues in her score. After working on *Streetcar*, I prefer this type of tiered stage management over the system we use in the States. In the States, the stage manager is in charge of calling all of the cues and fixing problems before or after they occur. At OA, the stage manager is available to problem solve a situation while the DSM continues with the cues; the SM team works together to solve the problem, with each person focusing on a different aspect.

One of the most beneficial techniques that I learned at Opera Australia was the way that the stage managers write the cues in their promptbooks. The Stage Management I course instructs that all cues be written on colored tabs and inserted into the promptbook at the designated cue. When first starting out, I found this method helpful because the tabs could be easily moved and repositioned to a more desirable location. The color coding of the tabs also helped identify what type of cue was being called: yellow tabs indicated “standby,” green tabs indicated light cues “go,” blue tabs indicated sound cue “Go,” and orange indicated “warning” cues for crew or actors. However, after I had stage managed three shows at IU, the tabs became a costly convenience. Opera Australia provided an alternative solution, which I adopted and brought back with me to the States. For each page of music in the promptbook, there is a blank page directly opposite it. At OA, the stage managers divide this blank space into three columns: the column near the edge of the paper contains all notes of what happens on your side of the stage, the middle column contains all notes of what happens on the opposite side of the stage, and the column closest to the music
contains all cues that you execute. To help emphasize the cues, the stage managers draw a large box around the cue with a straight line attached to the box which leads directly to the beat on which the cue is executed. As soon as I returned to the States, I had the opportunity to practice this method on the fall show, *Measure for Measure*. Instead of post-it flags to mark my cues, I used their pencil box method in my prompt book. The method has worked successfully and I have recommended it to the stage managers in training.

One of the perks about being an intern was that I not only actively participated but also got to observe the company. The best time to observe was during lighting level set. To help me earn some pocket money, OA arranged for me to be a light walker on three of the shows during light level set. A light walker stands onstage in the places where actors would stand so that the lighting designer can see light intensity on a person. However, there are people besides the lighting crew onstage during level set; the mechs (stage crew) finish setting up the scenic elements while light crew focuses lighting instruments. Often the mechs get in the way of the light crew or vice versa. The production manager is supposed to be in charge and make sure notes from the designers are being executed; one of the production managers at OA was rather inadequate and created more confusion than clarity. The first stage management course taught me that communication is a key factor to being a productive and efficient stage/production manager; communication was definitely lacking at some of the productions at OA. It did not help that the head person of certain departments were opinionated and loud. This observation allowed me to assess the situation, survey people’s actions and figure out a better solution. These level sets reemphasized the importance of good communication between departments and the advantage of treating people with respect, to earn their respect. I brought these reemphasized values back with me to the States. Now, I am more
aware of my wording, treatment and communication with each department and people that I work with.

One of the most fascinating events to watch is the change-over; the set onstage is struck and the next show’s set is setup in its place. It takes the mechs (stage crew) only a couple of hours to completely change-over for the next show. All of the sets and props are kept on ground level at the loading dock. The only way to get the sets from the loading dock to the stage is on a large platform elevator located upstage (away from the audience). The offstage spaces on the sides of the stage are called the wings; OA’s wing space is very tiny. It is amazing to watch all the mechs move the scenic pieces around this small area. Many opera houses have enough wing space on either side of the stage to hold the entire set; OA only has space on the upstage elevator to house set pieces.

Teamwork, cooperation and communication are crucial elements to making change-over as efficient and quick as possible. Depending on the length of the matinee performance, there may only be a couple hours until the next show begins. For one evening performance of Streetcar, the stage management team and props team were checking and setting props and set dressing until the start of the show because the morning show had taken longer to strike. Everyone worked together to get the show ready for performance. As soon as the curtain closed after final bows and the actors had cleared the stage, the mechs started striking the set so that they could have a clean stage for the next day’s setup.

My overall stage management experience at OA was fantastic. I proved to myself that I could work in a foreign environment and a foreign country. Even though Australians speak English, it took me a little while to adjust to their slang and vocabulary. During the first few weeks, I often had to ask the SM team to describe the object they wanted me to get because they called the object a different term. For example, a slider is a crescent wrench, a texta is the equivalent to a Sharpie
marker, a tech gun is a screw gun and a bulldog clip is a binder clip. The performers and the staff often asked me about America while I asked about Australia. Since some of the performers had worked abroad in the United States, we were able to swap stories about experiences in good ole America. OA had warmly invited me into their family, and I felt like one of the team almost instantly. After spending time with all of the stage managers and watching numerous performances, I discovered that I enjoyed operas and I enjoyed working on opera productions. The OA stage managers taught me new ways to record blocking and cueing notes, which turned out to be a better system for me; a simple, effective and cost-saving cue writing technique. The best reward was realizing that my training at IU has prepared me to work in a professional company.

With this experience in opera, my options for employment have expanded. I have applied to numerous opera companies in addition to numerous theatre companies across the United States in search for stage management work. Even though I have only worked on one opera, the opera companies in America are quite impressed with my Opera Australia experience. Already, I have interviewed with four opera companies, and I only sent out my resume a few weeks ago. Each company has called or contacted my references, one of which is Crissie Higgins, the Senior Stage Manager at OA. The opera companies that I have interviewed with have said that my resume is not as competitive as others due to my lack of opera productions, but that my OA experience and recommendation from OA show that I have a lot potential and talent. Most of the OA stage managers that I met have always lived in Australia; however one of them lives in England. Many of the opera singers I met have lived in Australia or New Zealand most of their lives, but some of them perform internationally. Since they are respected as international opera singers, their opinion often carries some weight.
My experience in Australia not only affected my stage management skills, it was a life changing experience. This experience was the first time that I have ever been outside the United States. Since I had never been to Australia before, I arrived two weeks prior to my start date at OA. My mom and I traveled to Cairns, Melbourne, Adelaide, Kangaroo Island and Sydney; I saw the vast variety of climate including rainforest, mountains and beach – no desert because I did not have time to travel to the outback. As soon as I started my internship, I was on my own in Sydney. I lived with a family who worked at the Opera Company, but I only saw them in the evenings. When I was not at work, I explored Sydney to find out as much about the culture as I could. From this experience, I proved to myself that I could relocate to another country and function fine. It took a little getting used to the Australian language, but I adjusted quickly. The way of life in Australia is much more laid back than America; “No worries” is a common saying that sums up their view on life. I adopted this attitude towards life when I returned to IU, after missing the first week of classes. Life with classes and rehearsal was still hectic, but I chose not to stress over the little bumps along the way. I felt less stressed and more focused regarding the show I worked on in the fall. However, class deadlines, tests and projects will stress out even the most serene person – this is hard to avoid during undergraduate studies.

Generally, seniors enter their last year of college worrying about graduation and lining up a job for after graduation. I entered my senior year with more confidence in myself and my abilities because of my Opera Australia internship; I had successfully lived and worked in a foreign country and foreign environment. My training and courses at IU had prepared me to efficiently work in a professional theatrical environment. I had full confidence in myself that I will be able to make a career in stage management, in some form of theatrical performance. This experience was not just a
capstone to my IMP degree; it was a capstone to my college career, affecting my stage management skills and life style.