

Showtime

BY FRANK DERRICK

Playing a show can be one of the most rewarding gigs in music and one of the most challenging, requiring consistency, discipline, and alertness. Being the drummer of a show, or having the “hot seat,” involves more than playing with the band. On many occasions you will find that what feels good with the band has to be altered to fit what’s happening on the stage.

IN THE BEGINNING

When a show is being put together, dance arrangements are worked out with the music arranger and the choreographer. In most cases, movement on stage is synchronized with the music to counts of eight. (A dancer’s eight-count translates to two measures of 4/4 time.) Accents are then added to catch highlights of the choreography. The count-off, “5-6-7-8,” gives you the tempo.

When the choreographer or music director (M.D.) asks for a “hit” here or a “catch that there,” it’s the drummer’s job to remember when it happens and to make it work musically within the arrangement. In the early stages of a production, the instrumentation is usually just keyboard and drums. You will have to anticipate the direction of the arrangement and construct the drum part accordingly. Usually there is no written part at this time, so take notes. The people on stage are dancing to specific steps and they will expect to hear the same thing every time they do a particular movement.

THE RUN-THRU

After several days of rehearsing, several “run-thrus” are performed. These are mini or raw performances for continuity and for showcasing to producers and the creative staff. Only a particular segment may be run, or it might be the entire show. You will be expected to make all segues, transitions, and tempo changes. You don’t want a producer asking, “What’s wrong with that drummer?” Be sure to have all of your music, notes, and cues in order. This may sound basic, but I have seen run-thrus break down

because someone didn’t have the music in order.

MUSIC REHEARSAL

After all of the fixes and re-writes, the music is orchestrated and a music rehearsal is called. Remember when I mentioned altering what feels good with the band to fit what’s happening on the stage? Those accents and licks that worked in the dance studio will have to be incorporated into the full arrangement. You must reach a happy medium between the choreography and music. In the process, you may discover some interesting fills and licks. Once you find something that works, stay with it. As you become more comfortable with the music, your creativity will allow freedom within the structure.

PERFORMANCES

The performers on stage will expect (and need) to hear virtually the same thing at each show. This is where consistency and discipline apply. You have to confine your creativity and freedom to within the structure. I cannot over-emphasize this point. You also must be alert. There are times when the unexpected happens, and the drummer has to be on top of it. I have experienced new endings and the count “1” being in a different place, just to name a few. If the drummer is not quick to catch what’s happening, the entire number can break down and you will have what is commonly called a “train wreck.”

SUBBING

If you think creating the drum arrangement for a show involves a lot of work, pressure, and responsibility, try being a sub. You will be expected to sound like the regular drummer without the benefit of run-thrus, music rehearsals, or a series of performances under your belt.

Surprisingly that task is not a difficult one, using a proven technique. On your first visit to the show, make a tape. Don’t worry about reading the music; instead, observe the drummer and conductor, and

try to learn the feel of the music. Ask for a copy of the music to take home. There, you can study the music with your tape.

At your next visit, pay particular attention to anything that seemed tricky, and ask questions if necessary. Watch how the conductor gives cues while you read the music. This is what you will see when you do the show. By all means, ask if you can do some rehearsals. This will make you more comfortable with the music without the pressure of a performance.

On many occasions, when the drums are an integral part of the show, a “put-in” rehearsal is called. This will give you the opportunity to do the show under the same conditions as a performance, but without the audience. Keep in mind that you are striving to sound like the regular drummer. Stay within the structure or you might not get that “return engagement.”

As I said, playing a show is a rewarding experience. With the vast array of show themes, there is no better way to get acquainted with various styles. You can listen (by all means *listen*) to all kinds of music, but the only way to develop a feel for a different style is to put yourself in the middle of it.

The theater is also a window of networking. Shows have singers and other musicians. Singers and other musicians use drummers. Catch my drift?

Frank Derrick has performed on Broadway in *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, *The Wiz*, *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, *Big River*, and *Catskills*. He was Cab Calloway’s drummer for ten years and the drummer for the original *David Letterman Show* on NBC. He currently appears with Maureen McGovern, the Louis Armstrong Legacy Band, and is the assistant conductor and drummer for the Palm Beach Pops. He is the author of *Focus on Technique for Drummers* and a member of the PAS Drumset Committee.

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