LIFE











Clockwise from top left: Bailey Wegner, stage manager; Kelley Arlt, box office manager; Shelby Kaishian, wardrobe supervisor; Terrell Pierce, vice president of orchestra operations; A.J. Magoon, marketing director. ANGELA PETERSON/ MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL, JONATHAN KIRN FOR MILWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, PROVIDED BY MARK FROHNA

The magic behind the curtain

Five unsung pros behind Milwaukee's performing arts

Jim Higgins Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

Look at a theater or concert playbill. It's full of names. Only a few of them are the actors or musicians you see on stage. • It takes an ecosystem of people to put on a show. Many of them work backstage or offstage. They sell you tickets. They make sure the lights and heat are on. They iron costumes, keep track of props and furniture. • They make sure you hear about the show in the first place. • If you read local playbills closely, you've seen the names of the five people I'm profiling here today. Now it's time to get to know these unsung heroes of Milwaukee's performing arts community.

Bailey Wegner, Renaissance stage manager and production manager

She entered college as a nursing student. But for nearly a decade now, Bailey Wegner has cared for the health and vitality of Renaissance Theaterworks and the productions it puts on stage.

While attending West Bend West High School, Wegner took part in theater – strictly backstage jobs – as an extracurricular activity. But thinking she needed a practical career focus, she went to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire as a nursing major. During her two years there, she loved the school and the city – but hated nursing.

Taking a year off, she went with her mom to Bonn, Germany, the birthplace of Beethoven. Her mom's husband was working as a musician there. Wegner got a short practicum with the local theater, then shadowed the stage manager. Inspired, she transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and earned her bachelor's degree in stage management.

During her senior year in 2017, she had an internship at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre. Chamber's professional stage manager Brandy Kline walked Wegner down the hall and suggested Renaissance Theaterworks use her as stage manager for "Br!nk," the company's annual new play festival. A career was born.

For Wegner, the magic of theater is what happens backstage.

Her job as stage manager for a production begins about a week before rehearsals start. Absorbing information from the director, actors and company, she finalizes rehearsal schedules. For some shows, she might also annotate the script indicating on each page which actors are in and out of that scene, which helps her create each day's schedule.

She tapes out the room, transferring the set designer's vision from a miniature model to points where the actors will move. She also assembles rehearsal furniture and props (the production's real props might still be under construction).

During rehearsal periods she is constantly messaging people, not only actors and the director but also understudies, designers, intimacy and combat specialists, etc.

Once rehearsals start, she attends each one, usually with an assistant, making copious notes.

Often, new stage managers assume the most important element of the job is calling the show – giving cues to light, sound and other operators during a performance. "But ultimately, the thing I spend the most mental energy on is people management," Wegner said.

A stage manager is in "an odd position of power" between upper management and cast and crew. She has to create trust in the room so people can do their best work. She listens closely to conversations between the director and actors so she can anticipate their needs. She also keeps an eye out for people who might need a break soon "because I can see them melting."

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ILLUSTRATION BY DANI CHERCHIO/USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY IMAGES

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Stage manager, Bailey Wegner oversees Renaissance Theaterworks' performance of "Great White Throne" on Oct. 28. PHOTOS BY ANGELA PETERSON/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL



Kelley Arlt, box office manager for the Skylight Music Theatre, sits in the box office of the Broadway Theatre Center on Oct. 15, just after celebrating 20 years in that position.

Pros

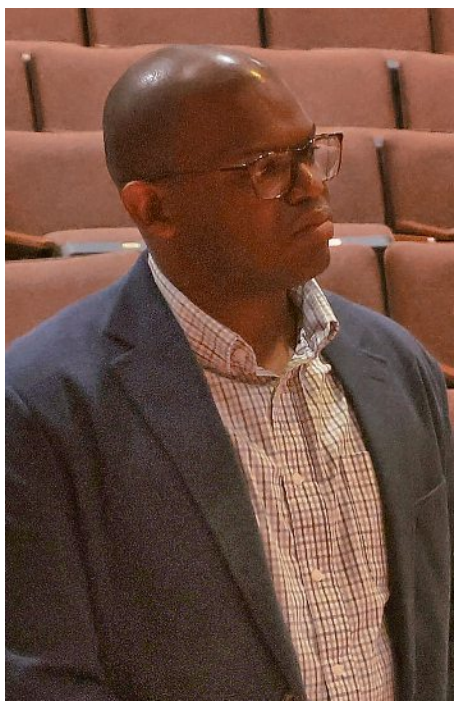
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For Wegner, who is responsible for a show's continuity through its run, there is an art to discerning when is the right time to give someone a note about an action or inflection or prop that needs correcting, and when it may be better to wait a bit.

Wegner's other hat at Renaissance is production manager. She coordinates the design teams, budgets and schedules, including negotiating contracts. She reads scripts of announced shows early on to gauge what the needs and costs will be.

Wegner never did any of that business stuff before. She is always learning something new, or troubleshooting something unexpected. "One of the reasons that I adore Renaissance is I am allowed to make mistakes and not be punished for them," Wegner said.

"When mistakes happen, there's room to acknowledge it, talk about it, say sorry if the scenario requires that, and to correct the mistake. ... That's just been one of the gifts of getting this job pretty darn young."



Terrell Pierce checks arrangements before a Nicolet College chamber concert by Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra musicians in September.. PROVIDED BY JONATHAN KIRN FOR MILWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Kelley Arlt, Skylight box office manager

A year out of high school, Kelley Arlt began putting thousands and thousands of people in theater seats.

One ticket at a time.

After she graduated from Divine Savior Holy Angels in 1995, Arlt didn't know what she wanted to do next. Get a job with insurance and give yourself time to figure it out, her mother recommended.

So the position of night box office manager for the Marcus Performing Arts Center appealed to her first for its full-time hours and insurance benefits. But do note that Arlt and her mom had always enjoyed going to musicals. In particular, they were superfans of "Jesus Christ Superstar."

After two years, Arlt was promoted to assistant box office manager. At the Marcus Center she found a mentor in Jim Doyle, the director of ticketing services.

"I feel lucky that I learned everything I know from him," she said. Arlt still calls on his counsel. When she is mulling some problem aloud with her mother, Mom has been known to ask, "Have you talked with Jim about it?"

In 2006, when Skylight Music Theatre was looking for a box office manager, they called Doyle about Arlt. "I don't want you to take her, but she's ready," he told Skylight.

Earlier this year, Arlt celebrated 20 years as queen of Skylight's box office. Her career has spanned big technological changes. When she began, she wrote down orders and exclusively handed out paper tickets. Now she's on her third electronic ticketing system.

It may seem, especially post-pandemic, that all systems push people to go electronic. But Skylight customers are still about half paper tickets. Still, Arlt expects the paperless percentage to keep going up because people have become more familiar with tickets on their phones.

Electronic tickets on phones do not leave box office staff idly twiddling their thumbs. People still forget their tickets, or discover they accidentally deleted the email containing tickets, or arrive at the theater to find they can't open the tickets on their phones. But there's always a record of the ticket purchase, so staff can print out a new ticket, Arlt said.

Once Arlt might have said the most challenging part of her job was hiring and retaining box office staff, most of them part-time workers. But today she's proud of the staff she has developed, some of whom have worked there for five years or more. Many are students from the nearby Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. With new hires, Arlt can tell within a week if they are going to work out, she said. If they have trouble talking on the phone after five days of training, it might not be the job for them, she said.

Scheduling staff still can stress her out, though, because it can be hard to predict what walk-up sales for a show will be like, she explained.

While Arlt has dealt with some upset or even rude customers over the years, "I think that most people (are) pretty polite," she said.

Working in a theater box office has its perks. Sometimes during a quiet spell, when they're getting a mailing ready to send out, they listen to show tunes and sing along.

Terrell Pierce, MSO VP of operations

Growing up in the Detroit area, Terrell Pierce was immersed in music. His father was a producer and musician with a home studio. His mother sang in gospel choirs.

The young Pierce played multiple instruments before settling on tuba in high school. He saw the big brass instrument as his best path to earning college scholarship funds, an early sign of the practical intelligence he brings to his job as Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's vice president of orchestra operations. Even when he played in high school bands, Pierce was the guy who booked the gigs and showed up early to set up equipment. So thinking about the logistics of putting on performances comes naturally for him.

Pierce enrolled at Trinity International University in suburban Chicago, where the school worked with him to create an arts administration path, combining music performance with

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Wardrobe supervisor Shelby Kaishian works on a wig for Renaissance Theaterworks' production of "Great White Throne" on Oct. 28. ANGELA PETERSON/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL



Marketing Director A.J. Magoon photographs Next Act Theatre's leaders for a holiday card. PROVIDED BY NEXT ACT THEATRE

Pros

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business studies. During his senior year, a professor introduced him to Donna Milanovich, then executive director of the Chicago Philharmonic. She needed someone to help staff a concert box office on a Sunday. Pierce dashed from his senior tuba recital to that box office. That experience turned into a two-week internship post-graduation, then a summer job, and ultimately more than seven years with Chicago Philharmonic in artistic operations and personnel work.

From a pool of some 200 instrumentalists, Pierce hired musicians to play varied concerts across Chicagoland. He needed to know the music, the instrumentation and the venue, down to where each musician would sit. As operations director, he had to make sure necessary equipment and transportation were in place. He has shown up to empty rooms to set up every chair and stand for rehearsal. He has rolled pianos on and off stages.

From his do-everything post at the Chicago Philharmonic, where he even was involved in educational programming, Pierce joined the Milwaukee Symphony as operations manager in 2019. While the MSO was still performing in Uihlein Hall then, it was deep into preparations for moving into its new concert hall, the Bradley Symphony Center.

As a vice president of a larger-scale organization with technical staff, Pierce doesn't have to set up every chair himself today. But he has to know where each one goes.

"The highest goal of orchestra operations, the best days," he said, are when arriving orchestra members find everything they need to succeed in place, from the temperature in the hall to the order of rehearsal.

Sometimes that means renting unusual instruments for specific concerts. For performances in 2022 of Richard Strauss' enormous Alpine Symphony, Pierce had to locate both a bass oboe and mutes for rarely played Wagner tubas. He also had to reorganize the stage to include extra musicians, two harps, two sets of timpani and a wind machine.

This is show business, so emergencies happen. Once, an outage on the block knocked out power in the hall during a preconcert lecture. While that led to the concert being canceled, Pierce and his team were able to set up piano soloist Aaron Diehl and his trio in an adjacent space for an impromptu jazz performance.

As a musician himself, Pierce appreciates the exacting requirements of artists and strives to meet them. When percussionist Christopher Lamb came here in 2023 as the guest soloist in Tan Dun's Water Concerto, Pierce made sure there was filtered water in the basins that Lamb was playing, because tap water can have a tinge of color that affects the special lighting for that unique work.

Pierce took an active role in the symphony's High School Career Day in the Arts April 8. He's brought his orchestral experience to career fairs elsewhere, too. "I think it's important that we show everyone that you can see yourself in this field, you can see yourself in these careers," he said.

Shelby Kaishian, wardrobe supervisor

Wauwatosa West grad Shelby Kaishian once thought she would learn French and work in New York as a fashion designer. But instead, she has combined her loves of fashion and theater into a career in wardrobe, wigs and costumes. An independent contractor, she works regularly with Next Act Theatre, Renaissance Theaterworks and other local performing arts groups.

Her dad, HP Kaishian, worked for decades as custodian and informal greeter at the Broadway Theatre Center, home of Skylight Music Theatre and Milwaukee Chamber Theatre. Around age 8, Shelby saw Skylight's "Hello Dolly" and "was completely freaking mesmerized," she said. "The costumes were beautiful." Over the next decade, she saw every production there, except for a couple her dad thought were too adult for a girl her age.

She studied theater costume design at UW-Milwaukee for more than a year, but left school for health reasons. Before withdrawing, she had arranged a short-term internship with In Tandem Theatre. When she told In Tandem about her status change, they still encouraged her to help with the show.

In Tandem was staging Richard Kalinoski's widely produced "Beast on the Moon," about a young Armenian immigrant and his mail-order bride. Armenian herself, Kaishian was deeply moved, "crying every night" in the production booth.

When Skylight would need an extra hand for a show, HP would volunteer his daughter. Her first paid theater assignment was helping with wigs for "Les Misérables." One gig at a time, she began stitching up a career.

For 11 seasons now, she's been wardrobe supervisor for Next Act Theatre productions. She's filled the same role for six seasons with Renaissance Theaterworks, which shares the Next Act performing space. Kaishian cleans, maintains and repairs costumes for each production. For example, during Next Act's recent "Trayf," a story about young Hasidic men, she made sure their black suits looked "pressed and nice because they're good Jewish boys."

She does laundry everyday during a production. A lot of steaming, a lot of ironing. If repairs are needed, she makes them, unless damage is so great a replacement costume is needed.

Some costumes require special maintenance, like a sequined-drenched cape worn in "The Taming." She got a kick out of the pro wrestling outfits actors wore in "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity."

She takes care of wigs, too – both human-hair wigs and artificial ones. "I know more about curling hair than I ever previously had, because I am not a person who curls my own hair," she said.

Kaishian was three when her mother Darnelle began teaching her to sew. In addition to repairing costumes, Kaishian has stitched for Florentine Opera, Milwaukee Ballet and other groups, altering or adding details or sometimes creating new garments. She does alterations and projects for friends and customers, too. Her home machine is a Singer. She is thrilled when she gets to use one of the Florentine Opera's heavy-duty industrial sewing machines.

Kaishian also does other work in theater. From backstage, she helped push the Mitzvah Tank forward during Next Act's "Trayf." She has spent four summers in stage management with Kohl's Wild Theater at the Milwaukee County Zoo.

"I am always ready for the next thing," she said.

A.J. Magoon, Next Act marketing director

Many performing artists have day jobs. Some have day jobs in the performing arts.

A funny thing happened to A.J. Magoon on his way to the fame and success he imagined having as an actor in New York: He became marketing director of Milwaukee's Next Act Theatre.

"LIfe was conspiring to keep me in Milwaukee," said Magoon, a graduate of Hamilton High School in Sussex.

A theater kid since he was little, Magoon studied theater arts at Marquette University. Needing a second area of concentration at Marquette, he choose public relations – in part, to allay the concerns of his supportive parents about his future career prospects.

He assisted the theater department's artistic director with communications and social media. A summer internship with Bottom Line Marketing led to paid part-time work during his senior year. He thought he would earn some money there after graduation, then head to New York. But a deepening romance with classmate Caroline Norton (they recently married each other) and his administrative work with the Marquette-spawned Summit Players Theatre, a summer Shakespeare program, made him value what he had in Milwaukee.

He began working at Next Act Theatre in Feburary 2020 – yes, right before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. He handles all marketing and PR duties, writes newsletter articles, takes rehearsal photos and videos, and offers event support. If Next Act has a table or booth at a festival or night market, Magoon is usually sitting at it.

He has not stopped acting. He's been asked to take part in many developmental play readings of new scripts around Milwaukee, and has performed in productions by Acacia Theatre, Theatre Gigante and Milwaukee Irish Arts. He keeps adding new skills, too, including puppet making, which he has done now for Summit and other groups.

Earlier this season Magoon played a leading role in Next Act's comedy "Trayf," the first time he's performed in a full-scale production for his employer. (Like any other actor, he auditioned for the role.) To keep up with his day job while performing, he worked as far in advance as he could, starting days early and staying later during the rehearsal period.

Magoon said his bosses – artistic director Cody Estle and managing director Libby Amato – recognize that "basically their whole staff is working artists." (Amato herself just performed in Renaissance Theaterworks' comedy "Great White Throne.") They've been welcoming, within reason, to his and his colleagues' desires to branch out and do artistic things, Magoon said.

"I still kind of don't fully know what I want to be when I grow up," Magoon said.

"I love acting. I love being able to apply my craft on stage, but at the same time, I don't really even think that I have that much of a need to do it full time," he said.

Drummer

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like an athlete, working on her core strength, lifting 45-pound dumbbells to fortify her shoulders and using cable machines for her triceps. She usually works out every other day, sometimes on show days if she was too exhausted on a welcome day off. But, she says with another smile and a nose wrinkled in distaste, "I don't do cardio."

The moment Nilles steps off stage, she is greeted by her physiotherapist, who works on her arms.

"There are shows when my arms are fine. And then there are shows when they are tired and tight. It doesn't matter how it feels, we work on it a little bit and the next day feels so much smoother," Nilles says.

Along with reveling in the return of Rush in general – grown men openly weep while witnessing their heroes onstage – fans have keyed in on the lighthearted vibe that permeates the show.

Lifeson and Lee grin at each other, and toss approving nods at Nilles after she nails yet another complex Peart pattern.

Much of that atmosphere can be attributed to Nilles and what she brings to the band.

"I just joined in their goofiness," she says. "I mean, they're fun. They're such cool guys and are so nice. I really love them."

A highlight of the shows comes at the close of the finale, "Working Man," when Nilles engages in what has been dubbed "Anika's Antics."

She can't remember when it started, but recalls during the last tour rehearsal in Toronto in 2025 that Lee and Lifeson told her, "We goof around on the 'Working Man' ending, so just do a weird face or whatever."

Nilles took that permission to be silly at MVP levels, sometimes improvising at the last moment – like eating chips out of a bag in Detroit, using baguettes as drumsticks in Montreal or strumming a guitar in DC to mess with Lifeson.

Just because she is spotlighted on a major rock tour doesn't mean Nilles has been absolved of her other responsibilities. For years, in addition to writing her own music and touring, Nilles has headed the drum department at Germany's Popakademie Baden-Württemberg, a university of popular music and business.

While she doesn't necessarily miss teaching drums – something she has done since she was 12 – she still has to produce the curriculum for her classes while she's on tour, including finding substitutes.

"I want to keep in touch with my students, so we have Zoom meetings just to see how they feel in the semester and they ask how the tour is going," Nilles says, oblivious to how unusual it sounds that a celebrated drummer on a worldwide tour is also preparing lessons for students in her downtime. "They ask me if we can do a little online session and I'm like, guys, I'm not into teaching right now."

Still, that doesn't interfere with Nilles' focus, as she continues to meticulously prepare for every show, practice daily on a kit in her hotel room and concoct clever "antics" to keep Lee and Lifeson laughing.

So now does Nilles look at the audience from behind her drum kingdom?

"I do," she says with a smile. "I just have to ignore the air drummers."