



## MODULE 6

# Part 2: Event production



## Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Staging.....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 Phases in stage design.....	5
2.2 Backdrops .....	6
2.3 Safety considerations .....	6
<b>3. Lighting.....</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 Functions of lighting .....	7
3.2 The event manager's role in lighting decisions .....	8
<b>4. Sound .....</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1 Factors to consider when deciding on sound systems.....	10
4.2 Setting up sound systems.....	11
<b>5. Audiovisual (AV) elements.....</b>	<b>13</b>
5.1 Special effects.....	13
<b>6. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>7. Bibliography.....</b>	<b>14</b>

**Disclaimer:**

These notes are adapted from the University of Cape Town and GetSmarter's course notes for Module 4 of the Events Management elective offered as part of the blended version of the UCT Postgraduate Diploma in Management and Marketing.

**Learning Outcomes:**

**LO3:** Illustrate the different stages of the design process.

**LO4:** Show how the production of an event ties in with the more creative elements of event planning.

**LO5:** Describe how the various design and décor elements work together to present the event experience

## 1. Introduction

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players..." - William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII

Just as Shakespeare's metaphor provides a glimpse into the nature of human activity and interaction with the world, it is also a useful way of thinking about events. In essence, an event can be seen as a stage or platform on which attendees, managers, presenters or performers, and crew members act to put together a performance; each individual has a part to play, and each performance is unique depending on the nature of interactions that take place. The act of putting together this show on the event "stage" is called event production or staging.

Event staging has its roots in theatre, and staging is traditionally understood to refer to the arrangement of all the elements of a theatrical production so that the show comes together on stage (Allen et al., 2005:417). Over the years, the event industry has picked up many elements and techniques from theatre, and events are frequently turned into elaborate shows complete with special effects, customised sound and lighting, production crews, specialised equipment, temporary structures, and renowned guest speakers or entertainers. Individuals and organisations alike desire to keep up with the latest trends in event design and production, which means that event managers constantly have to innovate, adapt, and put together increasingly-extravagant and technically-sophisticated events. It is the law of demand and supply, and in this highly-competitive industry it is the event manager's job to supply entertaining, unique, and memorable events akin to theatrical productions for an increasingly expectant client base.

**The changing nature of the event industry:**

In [his presentation](#) at the BizBash Elevate D.C. conference for event and meeting professionals, Colin Cowie, a renowned event designer and producer, discusses the changing nature of the event industry, the shift in client and attendee expectations, and how event producers need to adapt and navigate the changing landscape in order to continue engaging



audiences and creating successful events. Colin's elaborate design and décor choices make his events excellent examples of true event productions.

There are many aspects of staging an event, some of which relate to theme (or concept) selection, venue selection, event programming, production scheduling, design, catering, and staffing considerations (Allen et al., 2005:417). With the production and staging metaphor in mind, this set of notes explores the production-specific (or presentation- and entertainment-related) elements of event staging, including staging, lights and sound, and audiovisual and special effects.

#### **What do event managers need to consider when producing an event?**

In [this blogpost](#), event producer and lecturer Doug Matthews highlights nine key points that event managers need to keep in mind when producing an event. He discusses power and staging, technical, scheduling, stage management, and rehearsal considerations, and his advice serves as a useful checklist when planning the production aspects of an event.

## **2. Staging**

Advancements in technology, coupled with a public expectation of increasingly complex and sophisticated event productions, has resulted in the event industry adopting many theatrical stage building techniques, including backdrops, set builds, and stage construction teams. (Shone & Parry, 2013:177). In event management, the term “stage” refers to the general staging area (the space in which the event takes place) and not just a traditional theatrical or music concert stage used at cultural events (Allen et al., 2005:425). The stage sets the scene for the event and provides a space in which the main proceedings can take place.

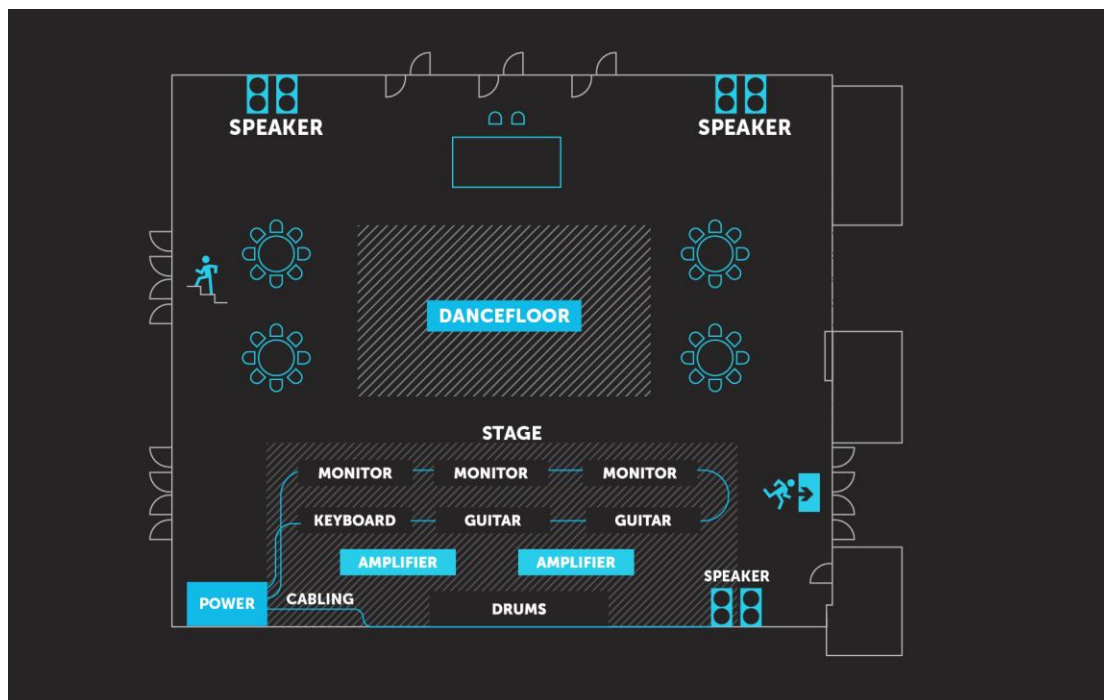
In order to set up the event stage effectively, it is important to draft a stage plan that details the performance area and illustrates infrastructure considerations such as entrances and exits, power outlets, lighting fixtures, dimensions, and equipment and prop locations. This plan is normally a bird's eye view of the stage area. For larger, more complex events, a master plan that details all the elements pertaining to the stage, as well as specific plans for different functions such as lighting technicians, performers, and sound crews, may be drafted (Allen et al., 2005:425). Stage plans ensure that the event build runs smoothly and that every person involved in staging the event knows exactly what to do and where to access what they need in the staging area.

#### **Festival stage set-ups:**

Stage set-ups can vary greatly depending on the nature of the event. Festival stage builds are particularly complex and labour intensive, as sometimes up to 12 bands may appear on one stage in a single day.

How much focus is given to the stage will depend on the nature of the event. When the event does not make use of a traditional staging area, such as when the main focus is dining or dancing, the stage plan is referred to as a floor plan or venue layout (Allen et al.,

2005:425-426). Refer to Module 5 for considerations regarding venue choice and layout considerations from a logistical and operational viewpoint.



**Figure 1:** An example of a stage plan for a dinner and dance function with live music. A clear, neatly laid out stage plan clearly depicts where key items such as stage and musical equipment, power points, seating, speakers, and entrances and exits are located.

## 2.1 Phases in stage design

According to Shone and Parry (2013:177), the stage design process can be broken down into different phases as follows:

1. **Planning:** In this phase the staging needs, level of expertise required for constructing the stage, the staging budget, and the equipment and technical specifications are mapped out.
2. **Modelling:** After determining the stage specifications, a virtual reality or physical model of the proposed stage can be set up. This will stimulate discussions regarding the venue and stage size, available space, accessibility, safety, backstage area, and load-in and load-out considerations. It is also very important to always keep the audience in mind when designing the stage, because aesthetic elements and practical or logistical considerations should not interfere with their line of sight (Van der Wagen, 2001:144). All attendees need to be able to see the stage area from where they are sitting (or standing).
3. **Production specification:** This plan will outline areas of responsibility so that each team working on the stage construction will know what needs to be done and who is responsible for each task. The technical and set-up crew will delegate



responsibility, for example, one person or team may be in charge of lighting and effects, another for set-up, and another for sound and stage.

4. **Stage build (bump-in):** After all the above-mentioned planning phases are complete, the actual stage build commences and each team carries out their duties as specified in the production specification document.
5. **Stage breakdown (bump-out):** Once the event is over, all the equipment, props, and temporary infrastructure that was brought in for the build has to be packed up and loaded out of the event area. This will also be done according to the production specification schedule.

#### What actually goes into building an event stage?

The following videos illustrate the stage build process for a music concert, corporate event, and pop-up theatre for a conference:

- [Taylor Swift Sydney concert timelapse \(build, performance, and breakdown\)](#)
- [Timelapse for a corporate event build](#)
- [TED event pop up stage construction timelapse](#)

## 2.2 Backdrops

No matter how big or well constructed a stage is, without a good backdrop it will not be aesthetically appealing or add to the ambience of the event. Far from the simple hand drawn and painted fabric backdrops reminiscent of high school drama club productions, event backdrops have become elaborate, technologically-enhanced visual displays incorporating projector screens, video walls (banks of video monitors stacked on top of and alongside one another), stage flats, and special effects. These backdrops often incorporate marketing elements too, such as displaying sponsor brand logos or product advertisements on the projector screens and monitors (Shone & Parry, 2013:177). Stage backdrops always need to be designed with the overall event theme and objective in mind.

## 2.3 Safety considerations

Audience and set-up crew safety must always be a top priority when constructing an event stage, and Allen et al. (2005:427) highlight that the following safety precautions should be taken:

- **Enlist professional services:** The stage must always be well constructed and only professional staging companies should be considered for the job. These companies also need to have insurance coverage in case something goes wrong.



- **Provide clear markings:** Access points (stage entrances and exits), steps and protrusions, and equipment should be clearly marked. Equipment and boxes should also be placed out of the way.
- **Ensure adequate work lighting:** White lighting in the general stage area should be provided to ensure visibility for set-up before and after the event. Stage entrances and exits should also be well lit.
- **Secure and tag cabling:** Electric cabling must be secured and tagged to make sure that crew members don't trip over the cables or place equipment on top of them.
- **Make sure a first aid kit is available:** A basic first aid kit and any other relevant safety equipment should always be on hand. It is also advisable to draft a list of all relevant emergency contact numbers and people in charge in case of an emergency.

### 3. Lighting

A beautiful event stage or setting is of no use if the audience cannot see it. Adequate lighting, from both a practical and aesthetic viewpoint, is an essential part of event production. Lighting is integral to the design of any event, and must always align with and contribute to the overall event theme (Allen et al., 2005:428).

#### 3.1 Functions of lighting

Lighting has many purposes, including the following:

- Creating ambience
- Illuminating artists and speakers
- Contributing to event atmosphere
- Providing background illumination for public and support areas (such as foyers, reception areas, and toilets).
- Providing decorative illumination (such as lighting sculptures, paintings, or other centerpieces).
- Ensuring guest safety (adequate lighting in key areas, including public areas, and exit and traffic routes around the venue, helps guests to feel secure and capable of navigating the venue independently). The event manager must always keep in mind that lighting needs to create ambience and atmosphere, yet simultaneously be functional and ensure guest safety.

(Shone & Parry, 2013:179)



## 3.2 The event manager's role in lighting decisions

Depending on the size and nature of the event, the event manager may be in charge of all lighting decisions, or they will enlist the help of an experienced event producer or lighting technician to assist in making lighting decisions. Reid (1995 cited in Allen et al., 2005:428) explains that event managers need to keep the following in mind when designing a lighting plan:

- Light placement (the positioning of the lights around the venue).
- Types of lights to be used (including considerations around any special lighting such as floodlights, spotlights, or coloured lights).
- Light angle (where the lights need to be pointed).
- Light colours (whether lights should be warm, cool, coloured, neutral etc.).

Lastly, event managers also need to consider the practical aspects of lighting, including:

- Available power sources within the venue;
- Whether a specialised team is needed to operate the lights;
- The skill level needed to operate the lights;
- Safety and security considerations;
- Provision of back-up lighting and alternative power sources; and
- Compatibility with other electronic systems.

(Allen et al., 2005:428)

### Lighting terminology:

When staging an event, the lighting technicians will often use the following terminology when referring to different types of lighting:

- **Mixing desk:** A desk, usually at the back of the auditorium or venue overlooking the stage area, from where the lighting engineer controls all the lighting and special effects, and adjusts light colours. The sound engineer also uses this desk to control all sound-related aspects such as volume, and transitions between music and microphone sound.
- **Rigging:** An overhead truss from which lights are suspended.
- **T-stand or tree:** An upright stand for propping up lights that are not suspended from the ceiling.



- **PAR cans:** An acronym for parabolic aluminised reflector – a sealed beam lamp (a fixed beam) with a soft edge, usually grouped together (in groups of two or four) and positioned above the front of a stage. Suitable for indoor and outdoor use.
- **LED cans:** Similar to PAR cans, but with the added benefit of low-power consumption compared to PAR cans, and increased versatility in terms of colour spectrum and luminosity.
- **Intelligent lighting:** Moveable lights controlled by the lighting engineer from the mixing desk. These lights can be programmed to display different colours and patterns, and move light beams across different areas of the stage or event area.
- **Floodlights:** A wide-beamed light that illuminates a very large area of the stage or event area. Commonly used for outdoor sporting events, or to illuminate an entire stage for a theatre production.
- **Spotlights:** Narrow-beamed lights designed to illuminate one specific area of the stage or event area. Frequently used to illuminate a focal point such as a main artist or centerpiece.
- **Follow spots:** Narrow-beamed light with the same function as a spotlight, but with the added functionality of being able to follow the object of its focus across the stage area. Frequently used for live solo performances such as singing, dancing, or comedy acts.
- **Hazers and foggers:** Special machines that create atmospheric effects and enhance light beams.
- **Lighting gels:** Changeable coloured slipover covers that can be applied to spotlights and PAR cans to change their colour.
- **House light:** The lighting provided by the venue.
- **Key light:** Light used to illuminate a specific object.
- **Back light:** Lighting effect to light the rear of the stage area. This type of lighting should be used for speakers (as it is not harsh and creates ambience while simultaneously allowing the speaker to be seen clearly).

(Van der Wagen, 2001:152; Festival and Event Production, 2016)

For visual examples and a more detailed explanation of what some of the above-mentioned lights look like, take some time to read through the lighting section of [this festival and event production guide](#).



## 4. Sound

If you have ever attended an event where the presenter or speaker was not audible (high school or university sporting events that make use of handheld loudspeakers or public intercom systems for announcements may come to mind), the sound was distorted, or feedback from the microphones interfering with the speakers was a frequent occurrence, then you will appreciate the importance of having good sound systems in place at any event.

The main purpose of sound equipment is to ensure that the audience can clearly hear all communication, music and audio effects, but it also has a secondary effect of creating ambience and atmosphere in line with the event theme (Shone & Parry, 2013:179). Sound requirements will depend on the nature, theme, and size of the event, as well as target audience preferences (for example, a younger audience may be able to tolerate louder music and more intense background sounds than an older audience), and the acoustic quality of the venue. At smaller events, a simple public address (PA) system may be adequate, whereas at larger events often require a host of equipment including microphones, cabling, speakers, amplifiers, monitors, mixing desks, and the assistance of sound engineers (Allen et al., 2005:430).

### 4.1 Factors to consider when deciding on sound systems

Using professional sound systems has become the norm at events, and event managers will often enlist the services of professional sound companies and hire specialised sound equipment for the occasion (Shone & Parry, 2013:179).

Some factors that an event manager needs to consider when considering sound include the following:

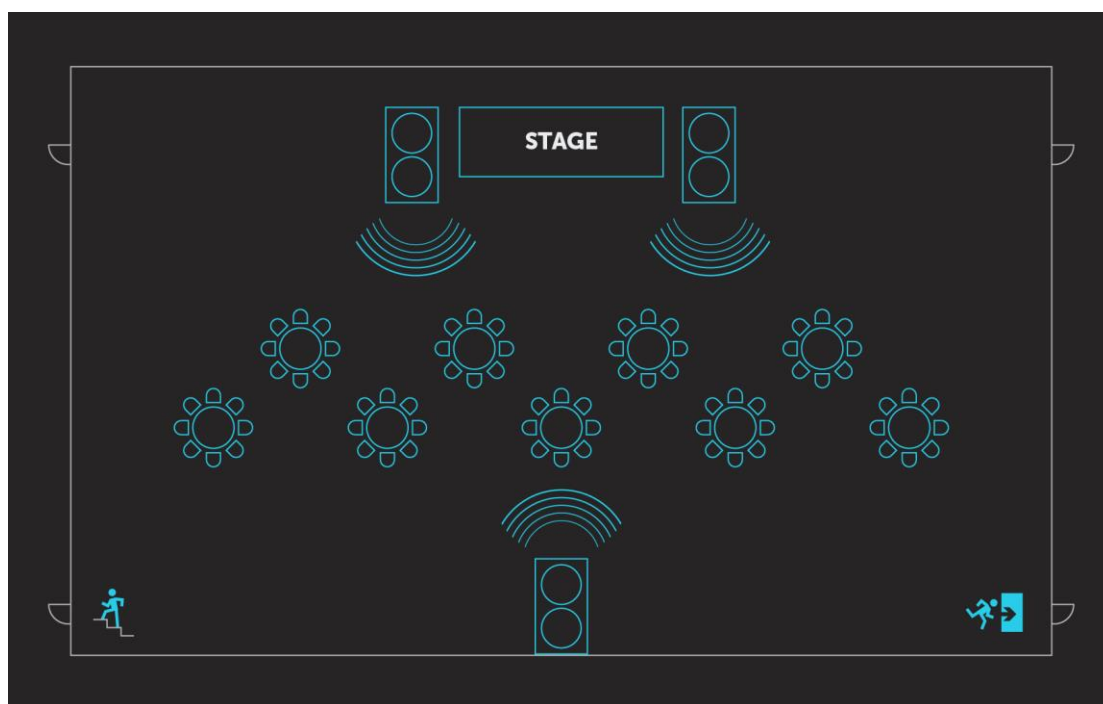
- **The venue:** The size and nature of the venue will determine how much equipment needs to be brought in. Some venues are well equipped and already have mixing desks, lights, and speakers installed, whereas other venues require everything to be brought in (such as in the case of temporary venue builds on open fields).
- **The event:** What type of event is it? Will it simply include key presenters making announcements and speeches, or will there be live musical or dramatic arts performances that require intricate sound equipment and cues?
- **The artist or speaker:** Each artist or speaker will have different sound requirements depending on the nature of their performance and what equipment they are used to working with. Some artists may want to use their own equipment or sound teams, whereas others will expect the venue or event organiser to supply everything.
- **The audience size:** How many people will attend the event? This is important to take into account, because large crowds tend to absorb sound, whereas large, relatively empty venues with only a few attendees will cause sound to echo.

- **The design and décor:** How does the sound equipment (such as speakers, monitors, and microphones) fit in with the other design and décor elements? It is good to attempt to conceal or blend the equipment in with the rest of the venue so as not to detract from the overall design.

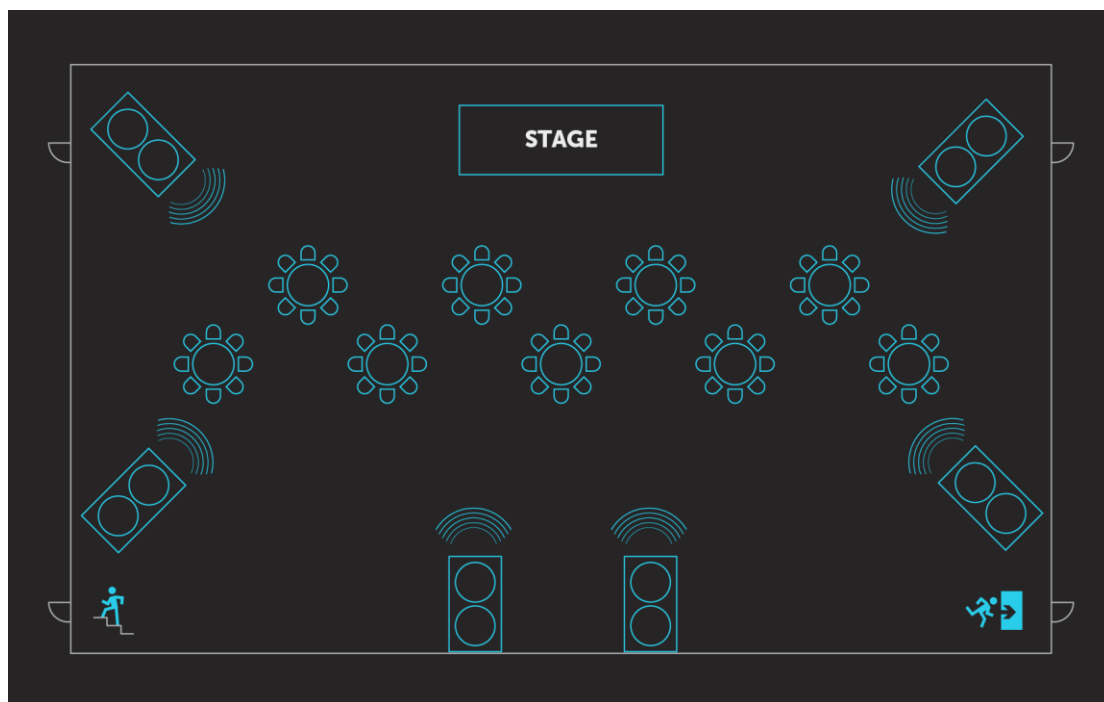
## 4.2 Setting up sound systems

After determining what type of sound system will work best for an event, the event manager (in consultation with the sound engineer and operations team), will plan how to set up the sound system within the event venue. This layout will be incorporated into the stage plan, and technical run through needs to be conducted a few days before the actual event to ensure that there are no technical glitches, that all equipment is in working order and positioned correctly, (to avoid any audio feedback problems), and that, if applicable to the event, the venue is compatible with high-tech or power-intensive presentations (Shone & Parry, 2013:176).

Deciding on the size and type of speakers, as well as where to position them within the event venue, will depend on the nature of the event. For example, at a music concert, the main speakers may be placed at the front of the stage facing the audience, whereas at a corporate dinner function smaller speakers may be placed in different locations throughout the room, or be suspended from the ceiling (Allen et al., 2005:429). Figure 2 and 3 depict two different examples of speaker and audio layouts.



**Figure 2:** Large speakers can be placed at the front and back of a venue to allow the sound to travel across the whole room.



**Figure 3:** In bigger venues, or venues where the attendees are spread out across the venue, speakers should be positioned at different angles and placed throughout the room to ensure that the sound reaches all the attendees.

### Sound terminology:

When staging an event, the sound crew will often use the following terminology when referring to the different components of a sound system:

- **Amplifiers:** An amplifier is used to project sound to the audience. A microphone will be plugged in to an amplifier, which will then send the sound to the speakers.
- **Decibels:** A decibel is the standard unit for measuring how loud a sound is to the human ear. Sound technicians will therefore prescribe microphone, speaker, or music volume in decibel units.
- **Out-front speakers:** Speakers that face toward the audience.
- **Microphones:** Microphones pick up sound waves and transmit them to the listener through an amplifier and speaker system. There are many different types of microphones.
- **Monitors (fold-back speakers):** Monitors are separate audio systems that cater to the needs of performers on stage. The monitors face toward the performer (away from the audience) and allow them to hear themselves and the other performers on stage (such as in the case of a large band with multiple musicians). The console that controls the monitor system will usually be set up on the side of the stage.

- **PA system:** The public address (PA) system refers to any standard live audio reinforcement system that allows sound to be projected to an audience. The simplest PA system consists of a microphone, mixer, speaker, and cables.

(Van der Wagen, 2001:152; Festival and Event Production, 2016)

## 5. Audiovisual (AV) elements

It is common for event managers to subcontract audiovisual companies to provide a fully-integrated audiovisual (AV) service including lighting, sound, and multimedia elements (film, video, slides, projector images, video conferencing, and special effects) for the given event (Allen et al., 2005:431; Shone & Parry, 2013:174). If the event requires extensive use of special effects and AV elements, the event manager will need to appoint a designated AV coordinator with experience in the field to ensure integration of all these elements. Fortunately, complex AV and technical elements for large events are usually preprogrammed, which means that less technicians have to be assigned to control each aspect on the event day (Allen et al., 2005:432).

### Testing, testing, 1,2,3...

Incorporating AV elements into an event means that adequate planning, preparation, and collaboration with the AV team is essential. The last thing an event manager wants on event day is to find out that the presentation software is not compatible with the venue's computer, or that there isn't sufficient power at the venue to accommodate all the lighting, sound, and special effects planned. They also want to ensure that they establish a good relationship with the AV company from the start and that there are no misunderstandings as to what is expected from each party.

The chosen multimedia and special effects must always be in line with the event theme and contribute to the objectives of the event. For example, if the objective of a conference on global warming and climate change is to convey an urgent and important message about the future of the planet to the audience, then bright and colourful special effects, comedic video clips, and over-the-top presentations may end up distracting attendees and detracting from the message instead of supporting the intended event outcome. On the other hand, if the main objective of an event is to entertain and excite, such as at a music festival, then coloured flashing lights, fireworks, glow-in-the-dark sticks and confetti will certainly assist in achieving this objective.

### 5.1 Special effects

According to Roger Foley (cited in Allen et al., 2005:431) of Fog Production, a special effect is "anything that is not anticipated or expected. It must heighten the awareness of viewers and increase their anticipation, sensitivity, and receptiveness. The result is to make it easy to get across the message of the event."



Special effects fulfill the following functions:

- Attract attention
- Generate excitement
- Sustain interest

(Goldblatt, 1997 cited in Allen et al., 2005:432)

Elaborate special effects are normally outsourced to specialists in the field instead of being managed by the AV company, and effects can range from pyrotechnics and cryogenics to ice canons, confetti, and fireworks (Allen et al., 2005:431; Festival and Event Production, 2016). The correct use of special events can add a new dimension of excitement and memorability to an event, and the type of special effects used will depend on the event theme, objective, and budget. A good example of using special effects to create spectacle is Beyonce's 2013 half time SuperBowl performance. Her performance incorporated pyrotechnics, lighting effects, and smoke machines to produce a spectacular visual display.

## 6. Conclusion

Staging an event is no small feat, and as rewarding as it can be from a creative and design perspective, there are many technical and practical considerations to take into account. From planning to stage breakdown, each aspect of the production process must be carefully mapped out and implemented, always making sure to take safety considerations into account. Lighting, sound systems, and audiovisual elements, including special effects, are also a wonderful way to create ambience, excitement, and sensation, and can assist in creating memorable event experiences for the attendees. Lastly, the event manager must always ensure that there is a golden thread woven through each aspect of the production process; every production decision must be in line with the event theme and support the event objectives, so that by the time the final curtain is drawn on the event, the audience will applaud and leave with the main message of the event fresh in their minds.

## 7. Bibliography

Allen, J., O'Toole, W., McDonnell, I. & Harris, R. 2005. *Festival and Special Event Management*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Queensland: John Wiley & Sons.

Festival and Event Production. 2016. *Production Guide*. Available:  
<http://festivalandeventproduction.com/event-guides/production-guide/> [2016, February 25].

Shone, A. & Parry, B. 2013. *Successful Event Management: A Practical Handbook*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. United States: Cengage Learning.

Van der Wagen, L. 2001. *Event Management for Tourism, Cultural, Business and Sporting Events*. NSW: Pearson.