

ALEXANDRIA SCOTTISH RITE DEGREE MASTER HANDBOOK

Thank you for taking on the role and responsibilities of an Alexandria Scottish Rite Valley Degree Master. While degree conferrals are only one segment of the many functions and contributions of our Valley members, your degrees conferred during our Spring and Fall Reunions are our newest members' first exposure to the several key tenets and lessons of the Scottish Rite. Your casts' conferral of the degrees will create the very first impression on the new members and may well be the determining factor in their future embrace of, and continuing participation in our Rite. The Degree Master is the primary contributor to the success of the conferral and, thus, to the overall Reunion experience and education of both the class and the general membership in attendance.

It is significant that you have been entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that the Brethren at each Reunion are presented with meaningful and faithfully reproduced Degrees. To help you achieve the best results of your efforts, this Handbook is provided to stimulate your own thoughts on how to achieve an impressive conferral of your degree. Your study of the following points should remind you of areas to be addressed and cause you to consider how the circumstances of your specific degree and the talents of your cast members might be optimized to achieve a continuing, high level of quality performance.

To the Degree Master is entrusted the dual role of producer and director, requiring that he accomplish many tasks to assure a successful degree conferral. Seven major task areas are discussed in the attached Degree Master Handbook:

1. Planning
2. Casting
3. Training
4. Staging
5. Coordinating
6. Directing
7. Assessing

Again, thank you and best wishes for great success in your efforts on behalf of our Valley and of the Scottish Rite.

/S/

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The following notes, reminders and general comments should serve to remind you of the many details to consider in preparing for the conferral of your degree.

1. **Planning.**

Planning begins with studying the last conferral to determine areas of weakness to be improved, and then preparing your plan to eliminate them. These areas may include cast performance, staging, costumes, stage props, sound, lighting, prompts and/or music. A shortfall in any of these areas can cause a distraction from the lessons of the degree.

The next part of planning is to ensure that you are knowledgeable of the thematic elements and lessons of the degree to ensure that they will be clearly represented to the class. Degree summaries and other notes on the degrees may be reviewed in several available books such those in the reference materials listed at the end of this Handbook.

Study the staging notes, properties, regalia and script to ensure that the stage environment and necessary materials are available and in good condition.

Evaluate the degree staging for presentation in our Valley Temple. Staging directions may need adjustment to accommodate our facility's characteristics.

Identify an Assistant Degree Master who thoroughly understands the structure and lessons of the degree and can take over on short notice should you be unavoidably absent.

Establish the schedule for the initial coordination meeting, meetings for script rehearsals or individual workshops, dress rehearsal, and conferral.

If your degree is not scheduled to be conferred at the coming Reunion, you should still prepare and practice with your cast in the spring and fall to maintain proficiency.

2. **Casting.**

Identify the appropriate cast members based on speaking and acting ability and, when possible, appropriateness to the role identity, i.e., regal bearing for a King, erect bearing for a soldier or burly stature for a ruffian.

Select the cast and provide the script early enough to provide the actor sufficient time to study his part.

Pursue new cast assignments to develop multiple actors for each role. This will provide for flexibility in future degree conferrals as well as enhanced resiliency to deal with last minute cast absences due to illness or work. While you cannot control these things, you can plan to minimize the disruption they cause.

In addition to having multiple trained actors for each role, you should try to have Brethren who, even if they have not memorized a part, are familiar with the floor work so they can fill in at a vacant seat and either read the part, or have it read by the prompters.

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If you have a very large part in your degree that is difficult to fill or find an understudy for, you should consider breaking the part into smaller pieces and have more than one Brother fill that role. If the role is costumed, the Valley will purchase additional costumes for that part so more than one Brother can be in costume and each can assume the stage and perform his part without any delay in the degree.

If possible, refrain from assigning yourself a role in the cast. It is difficult to conduct rehearsals effectively or to assess and correct performances while simultaneously participating in the conferral of the degree.

3. Training.

Provide the script to cast members early enough to ensure sufficient time for them to understand and memorize their parts.

Meet with the cast at the earliest opportunity to discuss the synopsis of the degree as well as each actor's role and characteristics to be portrayed. Ongoing communications with individual actors will illuminate progress on learning the script and will also help to highlight and resolve individual questions.

Use understudy assignments and rotating roles to cross-train cast members in multiple roles and to introduce new members for future role assignments.

It is often appropriate to have both limited and full cast degree practices to familiarize the cast members with cues, timing and interactions with others. All cast members should be present at the final "dress rehearsal" at the Valley. *It may be necessary to replace cast members who prove unable to attend rehearsals, attend conferrals, or memorize their parts after a reasonable period of time.*

4. Staging.

Sight lines between the class and the actors and features on the stage must be optimized. Consider where the class will be seated and their spacial relationship to the actors and materials. To the greatest extent possible, the actors should be placed in a way to ensure that they are facing the class when speaking. For example, when the conductor is escorting the exemplar about the stage, and stopping to address another actor, the conductor should place the exemplar in the middle of an angled line so that the faces of all three can be seen by the class.

When props or artifacts are described by the actors, the class must be able to view them clearly. If the items are small, distant or perhaps lying flat on the altar, find some way to call attention to them. For example, an item on the altar such as a key, or an apron, may be picked up and shown to the class while discussing it. An immovable object such as a pillar or a gate in the East should be identified clearly by a gesture.

Similarly, each actor must be clearly visible, *and identifiable as the source of the voice*, when speaking. A seated actor who speaks his lines without rising, or in some way calling attention to himself, may amount to little more than a disembodied voice - a part that could be read by the prompter.

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Lighting is a major factor in helping the class to see the actor or item being discussed, and to track the on-stage activity. A speaking actor hidden in the dark and/or hidden behind a gauze drape, does not provide for good visual theater. An actor wearing a mask or other concealing costume must go to greater lengths to identify himself as the speaker by standing and using other physical activity such as movement or gestures. If the role requires him to remain seated, as perhaps for a presiding officer, king or judge, then spotlighting and hand gestures will help to call the class' attention to him.

5. **Coordinating.**

Communicate with the cast throughout the pre-conferral period to ensure that all are aware of your expectations and that they are reminded of upcoming meetings or practices. Ensure that all members of the cast have accurate contact information for you and each other to facilitate team communications, and emphasize that they are to notify you of any unforeseen conflicts with cast activities as soon as those issues become apparent.

Provide the cast list to the Valley Secretary in sufficient time for pre-Reunion publication. This will normally be 45 days or more before the first day of the reunion to allow time to coordinate, prepare, print, mail and deliver the Reunion booklet.

Coordinate with the wardrobe and stage crews to ensure that desired costumes and set props are available and in good repair, and that mid-conferral prop changes or curtain opening/closing timings are understood. The Valley is prepared to repair or purchase costumes, but you must first communicate your need. Use full support rehearsals for coordination with stage crew, sound, projection, lighting and wardrobe (as needed). Do not treat these as just another ritual and floor work practice. The support functions have issues to work out as well.

Ensure the Degree Prompter, stage crew, sound and lighting have the most current version of the script.

6. **Directing.**

At the dress rehearsal:

- Communicate with all to ensure that each cast member and each production support activity knows the desired effect to be achieved from the moment the Class enters the production area until the conferral is completed, the actors have left the stage and the Director of Work has resumed his duties in charge of the Reunion.
- Rehearse just as you are going to perform. This is the time to check the timing and interaction with sound, lighting, projection, curtains, prompts and any other activity that may not have been previously available. Remember that many of the supporting functions cannot hear the actors if they are not mic'ed for sound. Costumes should not be required at this rehearsal, but you should have determined any need for repair or replacement at a sufficiently earlier time to permit remedy.

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- Observe the fully supported performance from the area that the class will be seated, and coordinate any necessary adjustments with the appropriate functional area to improve the overall conferral.
- Review costume/uniform requirements with your cast and provide them with a time schedule for checking in with you at the Temple, reporting to the wardrobe room for costumes and/or microphones, reporting to the auditorium (off stage) for sound checks, and for being in place to begin the conferral.

At the conferral:

- Coordinate with the Director of Work to identify the desired Class Exemplar for your degree. He will have the class list and will attempt to ensure that all will have an opportunity to participate. He will also ensure that the selected Brother will be seated at the front of the class.
- Focus on time! The scheduled time in the reunion booklet is the time for the degree to begin. Ensure that your cast has checked in with you sufficiently early to permit you to determine missing or delayed cast members and to make any necessary adjustments. Have cast cell phone numbers with you to permit ascertaining delays or need for substitutions. You should also have printed scripts available if last minute substitutions require them. See paragraphs 2.c and 2.d above which address planning for this contingency.
- Every speaking part requires a microphone. The projection booth, sound booth, prompting, and lighting often cannot hear an actor absent a microphone. Even those who can effectively project their voices for the audience cannot penetrate some of these spaces. It takes 10 to 20 minutes to don microphones and complete sound checks prior to the performance.
- Keep the cast off the stage until the Director of Support releases the area to the Degree Master.
- There is no time for last minute instruction while on the stage and waiting to begin the conferral. Have all the preliminaries completed so that the degree will commence when scheduled.
- The degree teams put much effort into their degree and it is gratifying to have a large number of Brethren present to enjoy the results of those efforts. Accordingly, it is highly recommended that if your degree is in the morning, your team arrives when the Reunion begins, stays through lunch, and, then, if they cannot remain for the afternoon program, they may leave after lunch. Similarly, if your degree is in the afternoon, and your team did not arrive earlier, they should come for the lunch and remain until the last degree of the afternoon. In addition to the benefit of seeing the degrees, supporting the casts, and enjoying the fellowship with the class and other Brethren, there is an additional benefit to having the casts present - if a degree cannot be conferred, it may then be possible to move up another degree to fill the empty space. This is particularly useful in the afternoon, as we may then conclude the Reunion earlier.

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- As the Degree Master, you will be called upon by the Director of Work to introduce your degree. Practice your introduction so you are able to present it in an impressive manner. It does not add to the degree experience if the introduction is poorly delivered, for example, if you are speaking too fast or too softly to be heard and understood.
- During the degree, critically note every aspect of the production and note any changes to consider for the next conferral. Your written notes will be required for the next, last step in the process.

7. Assessing.

Finally, there is a seventh point, which, like the Ouroborosⁱ, connects back to the first and continues the ongoing process to encompass all that comes after the degree conferral in preparation for the next. Each performance is an opportunity to prepare for the next presentation.

Perhaps your most important activity as the Degree Master following the Degree, is your positive reinforcement of your cast's performance. While there might have been small areas to work on for the next conferral, each cast member contributed time and effort, beginning with learning the assigned part and showing up for practices and the conferral. This cannot be overemphasized. Each cast member will experience his own version of self-assessment and it may well be quite more negative than yours. Whatever the concern, your support and encouragement will likely be the most productive initial post-conferral message you want to communicate.

You will also have noted areas to be improved. These "lessons learned" might include a need for additional rehearsals for the cast, or consideration of ways to change staging or placement of actors or props for a more impactful presentation. Whatever they are, they are yours to address at the appropriate time, and to be resolved prior to the next conferral.

Conclusion. We hope this Handbook will help you think ahead and plan for a successful degree conferral. While the intensity of your efforts will rise and fall between Reunions, you should be thinking about how to improve the degree for the next performance.

Suggested Reference Materials

- Rex R. Hutchins, *A Bridge to Light* (Washington, D.C.: The Supreme Council, 33°, 1988, 1995, 2006)
- John W. Boettjer, 33°, G. C. & Arturo de Hoyos, 33°, G. C., ed., *Forms and Traditions of the Scottish Rite* (Washington, D.C.: The Supreme Council, 33°, for the Scottish Rite Research Society, 2000)
- Arturo de Hoyos, 33°, G. C., *The Scottish Rite Ritual: Monitor and Guide* (Washington, D.C.: The Supreme Council, 33°, 2007, 2008)

ⁱ a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.