

## **What is an Understudy?**

### **Background**

The Fall 2021 Northwestern University Advanced Stage Management class, consisting of five Theatre students: Morgan Frost, Heidi Hill, Sam Kim, Daniel Maton, and Molly McDermott, and taught by Barbara Butts, conducted a research project to determine student and faculty perspectives on the role of understudies in Northwestern productions. This group conducted a survey of the NU theatre community to gauge perspectives on understudies at NU.

The Wirtz Center has adapted these recommendations into a comprehensive understudy policy.

### **What is an understudy?**

An understudy is a member of the ensemble or a principal performer who memorizes the lines, vocals, blocking, and choreography for another principal role or a leading actor's role. In the event of an unexpected injury, illness, or if a principal is taking a vacation, understudies are essential in ensuring that the show is always ready for performance.

\*Credit for this definition goes to Careers.Broadway and The Broadway League.

### **What is a swing?**

Definition: an off-stage performer responsible for learning multiple featured/ensemble tracks and being prepared to go on to replace an ensemble member if they are unable to perform

### **What are your responsibilities as an understudy?**

Understudies are a crucial component of the show. Accepting an understudy role is a tremendous responsibility and one that should not be taken lightly. Time spent should focus on perfecting your knowledge of the role prior to opening. Be kind to yourself and work a little bit each day. You will be expected to be off-book and know all blocking at the time of opening and may have to go on for a performance with 30 minutes' notice.

### **What are the goals of including understudies in a theatrical process?**

Understudies ensure that a process can continue without its usual performers. At a learning institution like Northwestern, including understudies provides actors with a chance to learn the skills necessary to understudy in the professional world. Understudying a role can be an incredibly lucrative position and one that, for recent college graduates, is extremely beneficial as they begin to navigate the professional world.

### **What are the responsibilities of a stage manager using understudies?**

Stage managers should act as a support to understudies. Understudies should be made to feel that they are vital to the success of a show's run and that they are not an inconvenience for asking for help.

### **What support is offered to understudies?**

Understudies will be rehearsed by stage management and assistant directors and/or choreographers both during rehearsals and at additional understudy rehearsals. The priority in understudy rehearsals will be to understand blocking, movement, and answering any questions. Put-in rehearsals may be required if a leading actor is unable to perform. Put-in rehearsals give an understudy an opportunity to rehearse the show with the main cast in preparation for a tech rehearsal or public performance.