

1

SO YOU WANT TO WORK IN THEATRE BUT DON'T WANT TO ACT?

The purpose of this chapter is to help anyone with an interest in working behind the scenes to find out more about the types of jobs that are available and the skills that these require. Its aim is to introduce you to the range of jobs and associated skills that are involved in mounting a production. This should help you to decide on the type of job that may suit you before deciding on a career in technical theatre.

Please note: the only theatre job not covered is that of a performer.

Most of the jobs in a theatre are concerned with presenting a show to an audience. We will therefore describe the progress of a production from its original concept through to the first performance, as this is a sequence that is constantly repeated no matter what type of production is.

Getting the show under way . . .

The first stage in any production process is to choose the product that it is intended to present, whether it is a play, a musical or anything else. In theatres that produce their own productions this is usually the responsibility of the **Artistic Director**. However many companies are not based in a theatre of their own. These may intend to take their show on tour or to a theatre in the West End. In this case the **Producer** will be responsible for choosing the product and for booking a venue. Once the piece has been chosen then a **Director** is needed. This may be the **Artistic Director** or else a **Freelance Director**. The Director will help to choose the Set and **Costume Designers(s)**. The **Lighting Designer** and **Sound Designer** may also be appointed at this point. This group of people is known as the 'Creative Team'. Where music and/or dance are involved a **Musical Director** or **Conductor** and a **Choreographer** will be included. It is their job to decide on the artistic side of the production. They have to work within the budget that will have been set for the show by the **Production Manager**, in conjunction with the **Producer**, **Theatre Administrator** or **General Manager**.

Once the Creative Team have agreed on how they will interpret the show artistically, the **Set Designer** will then make a scale model of the set design

and the **Costume Designer** a set of drawings or references for the costume. These will be presented to the **Heads of Departments (HoDs)** at a series of Design Meetings presided over by the **Production Manager**. The HoDs represent each of the technical departments that go together to make up a theatre company. At these meetings they will check the designs to see if they are possible both in terms of practicality and safety as well as cost.

A series of negotiations may be required between the **Production Manager, Designers** and the HoDs to achieve the artistic vision within the resources available for the project.

Once a production has been confirmed then the **Marketing, or Publicity Department** can start to sell show. It may form part of a season's package to be sold by the **Box Office**. The **Marketing Manager** together with the **Press Officer** and **Box Office Manager** will plan a publicity campaign to attract an audience to see the show.

During this preparatory period the **Director** will cast the **Actors, Dancers**, etc, who are going to be in the production through a series of auditions. This may involve the use of a **Casting Director** and may also involve the **Producer, Choreographer** and **Musical Director** or **Conductor**.

Once all sides have agreed on the designs and the cast have been chosen, then creation of the set, costumes, props, etc can begin. At this stage other members of the 'Production Team' will be employed. This may include the **Company Manager, Stage Manager, Deputy Stage Manager, Assistant Stage Managers, Costume Supervisor, Props Buyer** and so on.

Rehearsals start . . .

Rehearsals begin between four weeks to six weeks before the first night and even longer for some big West End musical productions. In the rehearsal room the **Deputy Stage Manager (DSM)** will sit with the **Director** recording all the actors moves and adding any required sound, lighting or other Cues into the 'Prompt Book'. The DSM produces a daily report of what has happened in rehearsals, including requests for props, sound effects etc. The DSM will also work with the Director to produce a daily rehearsal schedule for the cast.

The **Stage Manager** with the **Assistant Stage Manager(s)** will respond to the Rehearsal Reports and provide as much as is possible for the cast in rehearsals. They may also be involved in finding properties and furniture for the production, working closely with the designer. On a large-scale production a **Props Buyer** may be used instead of the stage management.

Whilst rehearsals are taking place in a rehearsal room the other departments are working on the production. In the Scenic Workshop the **Master Carpenter** or **Workshop Manager** will supervise the construction of the scenery with his team of **Deputy and Assistant Carpenters**. This may require engineering and metal-working skills as well as traditional carpentry. On a large production a specialist in **Draughting** may need to be employed. Once a part of the set is completed it is passed to the **Scenic Artists** to paint accordingly after discussion with the **Set Designer**.

In the Wardrobe department, the **Costume Supervisor** will be working closely with the **Costume Designer** and a team of **Makers, Cutters, Tailors** and **Milliners** to either make the costumes, hire, borrow or buy them. A wardrobe department may consist solely of freelance makers who will all work from home or their own workshops. **Wigs** may also come under the wardrobe department or else a specialist company and **Wig Supervisor** may be engaged.

In **Props** such items that are too specialised or difficult for **Stage Management** to acquire are made using a variety of materials. The **Props Manager** oversees the work of **Prop Makers** or else freelance **Props Makers** or else freelance Props Makers or specialist companies will be employed. In smaller theatre companies there may not be a props making department in which case its functions will be undertaken by **Stage Management**.

Production Companies that are not based in a theatre will engage specialist Contractors. The Production Manager will put the job out to tender early on in the process. The contractors will deliver their commissions fully finished when they are required.

The **Lighting** or **Electrics department (LX)** has several functions during the lead up to first night. Firstly if a **Lighting Designer** has not been employed then the **Chief Electrician** will often design the show's lighting. Secondly the **Chief LX** will assess what extra equipment is required for the production as well as the colour filter and other consumables needed.

For companies that do not have their own theatre a **Production Electrician** may be employed to fulfil this role.

The **LX department** will also have some responsibility for maintaining the fabric of the building as well as directly show related work.

Another member of the department may be responsible for the **Sound Design** of the show. In larger theatres this will be a separate department with responsibility for sound effects, music and communications during a production. During the run of the show a **Sound Operator** is required to

set the sound levels and to playback the **Sound Cues** for each performance. A large musical may require several **Sound Operators** and **Crew** members responsible for **Radio Microphones** on stage.

Throughout this period the **Production Manager** will maintain an overview of the progress of the show in terms of deadlines and schedules, the budget and any issues of Health & Safety. They may call regular Production Meetings in order to discuss progress and any issues that have arisen.

Moving into the Theatre

When the production finally moves, or ‘gets in’, to the theatre the lighting will need to be set up or rigged before anything else. Under the supervision of the **Chief LX** or **Production LX**, the **Deputy** and **Assistant Electricians** together with **Casual** staff will rig the individual lanterns and other equipment according to a plan drawn up by the **Lighting Designer**. Once this is complete the scenery or other equipment that needs to be flown above the stage can be installed. A team of **Stage Technicians** under the supervision of the **Technical Manager**, **Resident Stage Manager** or **Master Carpenter** will be responsible for this. This may include a dedicated **Fly Crew**. Once they have finished then the set itself can be built onstage by the **Scenic Construction** crew. Specialist **Riggers** may also be employed and, where the movement of scenery is automated, an **Automation Programmer**.

The next step is for the lighting to be focused according to the **Lighting Designer’s** plan and then for the **Director**, **Designer** and **Lighting Designer** to plot the various lighting changes into the lighting board, aided by the **Lighting Board Operator** and **Deputy Stage Manager**. The **Stage Management** team will be present during this and will use the time to mark or ‘spike’ the positions of furniture on stage and to set the props backstage. **Stage Crew** will also be required to move any scenery.

The next stage is the **Technical Rehearsal** which is run by the **Stage Manager**. During the **Tech** the entire show will be run through slowly in order to make sure that all the ‘technical’ elements of the production are working and happen at the right time. This will include lighting, sound and scenic cues and also any quick costume changes which the cast may require the help of **Dressers**, and followspot cues, operated by **LX Crew** or **Followspot Operators**. Individual cues will be called by the **Deputy Stage Manager** who should be in contact with departments throughout and who has overall control of when each cue happens.

The Tech can be a long process during which some complicated sequences will need to be rehearsed many times before they are right. This is the first point at which all elements of the production come together in the theatre. Although it is a critical time for the technical departments it is also important for the cast to become familiar with the set, their costumes and props and for the Creative Team to find out what works artistically and what doesn't. In the case of some West End musicals several weeks may be allocated for the Tech. Throughout this technical period the **Production Manager** will be present, taking notes and arranging for any problems that become evident to be solved. Representatives of the **Costume, Props, Scenic Art & Scenic Construction** departments will be on stand-by, or even present, in case their services are needed. It is usual for periods of time to be scheduled so that any technical work that is identified as necessary can be undertaken.

Once the Technical Rehearsal has been completed then **Dress Rehearsals** take place. These should be run just like a show as far as is possible; sometimes an invited audience will watch one of them and a photographer may also be present to take photographs for publicity.

After a final Dress Rehearsal the show opens and starts its run. Once the first night is over, cast, crew and everyone in the theatre retire to the bar for a well-deserved drink!

Keeping the show running

Once a production has opened it may run for weeks or even years or it may be taken on tour. On a daily basis a theatre may have a permanent staff of **Daymen** and **Chargehands** overseen by the **Technical Manager, Resident Stage Manager** or **Master Carpenter**. They are responsible for keeping the stage area maintained and clean and for setting up the scenery for the production itself on a daily basis. Their responsibilities may extend to other areas of the theatre including the auditorium and dressing rooms. Some theatres will have a dedicated **Props Crew** responsible for setting and maintaining the props. The **Lighting Department** is responsible for maintaining the stage lighting and may be made up of a **Chief, Deputy Chief** and **Assistant Electricians**. Where a theatre doesn't have a dedicated Sound Department the **Deputy Chief LX** may be responsible for this. The LX Department may also be responsible for maintaining the general lighting in the theatre building. The Costumes used in a production will be maintained by the **Wardrobe Department** overseen by a **Wardrobe Manager**. Most

costumes will need to be washed and ironed daily or dry-cleaned regularly and the wear and tear that they undergo during a performance means that they may need to be repaired regularly. The **Stage Management Team** will be responsible for setting props and furniture for every show and for checking that all elements of the production are ready and in the right place. At the end of every show the **DSM** will produce a report detailing anything that happened during the performance that may need to be acted on the next day. This will include any breaches of Health & Safety that need to be investigated.

For the performances themselves **Casual Show Staff or Crew, Dressers** and **Followspot Operators** may be needed in addition to the theatres permanent staff.

If the show is touring the **Company Manager, Production Manager, Technical Manager** and **Production Electrician** will liaise with each venue in advance. They make sure that the staff in each venue knows what to expect and make advance preparations where possible. This may include hiring in equipment, arranging transport and so on. The **Technical Manager** may travel to each venue in advance of the main Company, leaving the **Company Manager** to organise the ‘get out’ from the previous venue. The **Company Manager** will be responsible for making arrangements for travel and accommodation.

After the final performance any hired or borrowed equipment needs to be returned to its source.