

Chapter Nine

How Theatre Happens

by Debra Bruch

The theatre is a collaborative effort of giving. That means that a person cannot do theatre alone. Every member must be a part of a cohesive community. The better the community functions, the greater the potential to give and impact people's lives. An understanding of people's roles is necessary to understand how to build this rather unique community. Essentially, we need only the actors, the play, and the audience, but a survey of the expanded version of theatre production is necessary to understand the interrelationships among community members to produce theatre and potentially create a meaningful and spiritual experience.

The ideal theatrical enterprise includes the producer, the playwright, the director, the scene designer, the light designer, the costume designer, the sound designer, the properties designer, the makeup designer, the assistant director, the stage manager, the running crew, and the actors.

These positions can be divided into two categories. One category is pre-production. Long before the performance begins, people begin to actualize it. Another category is production. People who fall under this category actually work during the performance. The only group of people who fall under both categories are the actors.

PRE-PRODUCTION.

The Producer.

The producer finds or offers the means to produce theatre. He or she is primarily concerned with monies and as such seeks funds and usually finances anything that needs to be financed. The producer often carries the role of publicist and basic business

administrator. He or she hires or assigns the director.

A theatre production at a reunion is produced overall by the sponsoring organization. They give people the opportunity to perform by supplying the time, space, and sometimes the materials.

The Playwright

The playwright, more than any other person, works long before the production work begins. Except when producing an original script, the playwright's work is done before the process begins. When producing an original script, the playwright often works with the production staff to better the script. Otherwise, the playwright is rarely seen.

The Director

The director supervises all creative elements of a theatre production. A single person must unify the work of others, or the process will be in danger of being reduced to chaos. As such, the director offers a production a quality of unity by filtering all other creative work through his or her own vision. The director casts and rehearses the actors, approves all designs, and oversees the entire production.

Either the producer or the director chooses the drama to be performed. However, many veteran directors will choose their own plays. It depends on the circumstances.

The Designers

A designer is a creative person in his or her own right. An excellent designer has particular qualities and abilities. A designer must be able to visualize a production from reading the script. He or she must have a high sense of visual beauty and harmony and be able to translate these attributes into color, mass, form, line, and so on. And finally, a designer

must be able to subordinate his or her concept to the entire production. In other words, the designer must be able to combine his or her own concept with the director's concept.

In most situations, the scene designer goes through several stages to actualize a design. First, the designer must be able to analyze the drama in order to get a general, visual idea of the demands of the script. Second, the designer meets with the director and draws rough sketches. This way, he or she begins to put concepts into tangible form. Third, the designer converts his or her rough sketches into a finished floor plan and side elevations. A floorplan is a bird's eye view of the setting on the stage floor. A side elevation is a cross section of the setting, usually drawn to check masking (the hiding of something such as the back of the stage area). Fourth, the designer draws perspective drawings, and either makes a model of the set or paint a rendering of the set. This way, the director clearly sees what the set will look like. Fifth, the designer drafts working drawings from which the technical director and the shop foreman plan to build the set. Working drawings are highly detailed and in scale. And finally, the designer helps oversee the setup of the scenery.

The scene designer works with the technical director, the properties designer, the scenic artist, and sometimes the scene shop foreman. The technical director coordinates all design aspects of a production and assesses and purchases materials. The properties designer is the person who designs and supervises the building of props. Props are hand-held pieces by the actors during the performance. The scenic artist is a visual artist in his or her own right and paints the set. The scene shop foreman takes the designer's drawings and directly supervises the building and rigging of the set.

As implied, the lighting designer designs and supervises stage illumination. He or she takes a copy of the floorplan of the scene design and determines what kind of light will go where, what angle, and what color to create a particular affect. Some lights serve to make the actors visible on stage. Other lights attempt to create an atmosphere or mood. The combination of all elements is the design. Once plotted on paper, the light designer gives his or her design to the electrician who supervises light hanging, cabling, and channeling.

Like the scene and light designer, the costume designer must be able to subordinate his or her concept to that of the director's. The costume designer's main concern is to illuminate a character's traits by what that character wears. Once designed, the costume designer hands

over the drawings and renderings to the seamstress who supervises the building of the costumes.

The makeup designer attempts to illuminate a character's traits by using an actor's face, hair, hands, and any other visible body parts. Often, the makeup designer tries to change the specific look of an actor. Once designed, the makeup designer hands the task to the makeup artist during dress rehearsals and performances.

Sound is an often neglected element of design. Some playscripts call for particular sound effects such as a bell, a whistle, or night sounds. The sound designer's task is to find or create these sounds and record them for production. Sound design can be an integral part of the whole concept of the production, for sound helps create a mood or atmosphere. Sound designers also search for music to be played at a particular time during the performance to enhance the mood and help draw the audience into a particular experience.

Assistant Director

The assistant director serves as a main liaison between designers and the director. The assistant director also sets up for each rehearsal period before anyone else arrives. During the rehearsal process, the assistant director prompts the actors and gives any of his or her own input to the director. Also, the assistant director creates the main promptbook for the stage manager. Often, the assistant director and the stage manager are the same person.

Actors

The actors' main concern before the performance is to create a character. That takes physical and vocal discipline and exercise, an analysis of the playscript, memorizing lines, and a commitment to the director, his or her vision, and the rehearsal process. The actors are also aware of the efforts of other people who actualize theatre, and treat their products with respect.

PRODUCTION

All pre-production elements come together during the first technical rehearsal, about a week before performance. During this time, a whole new set of people emerge to actually run the show (except, of course, the actors!). While the director moves to bring all production elements together, he or she begins to fade from view during the week before performance. During technical and dress rehearsals, the director continues to have input with designers, but much is left to other people, for other people will be actualizing the performance. At this time, the director is largely concerned with the actors, and continues to give notes. By the first performance, however, the director's main role is to go around to everyone and wish them well before the performance begins, and then sit in back of the house to watch the performance, sweat, and have a heart attack.

Stage Manager

The person in charge of the technical rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performances is the stage manager. The stage manager supervises all aspects of the performance, including the actors. The stage manager sets the stage and makes everything ready before the performance begins. He or she calls cues to the light and sound board operators during performance, supervises set and prop changes during performance, makes sure that actors are ready, and solves any problems that might arise. Often, the stage manager has an assistant.

Light and Sound Board Operators

The light and sound board operators' main function is to run the equipment. They take their cues from the stage manager during performance. Before the house opens, they check all equipment to see if it works.

Makeup Artist

The makeup artist supervises all aspects of character makeup during dress rehearsals and performances.

Costume Runner

Some playscripts call for a character's change of clothing during the performance. The costume runner organizes and manages costume changes.

Property Master

With the help of the property designer, the property master assembles all props used during performance. He or she is responsible to organize the props, set them out before performance begins, see that the actors get them, and puts them away after the performance ends. The property master often has assistance from the running crew.

Running Crew

People assigned as a running crew are concerned with backstage activities. They help run props and shift the scenery if needed. They also help set the stage before the production begins, help light and sound board operators check equipment, and help put things away after the performance ends.

Conclusion

The ideal situation in theatre production is something for which to strive; such an organization lends the potential for quality. The goal is to give the audience member the best and most meaningful experience they can possibly have. Nevertheless, while such an

organization is possible in many instances, it is impossible at a reunion setting. But never fear! Go back to the basics! All we really need, besides the director, is a play, actors, and audience. That's it!

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