

Technical Theatre

Theatre is a collaborative art form; it depends upon people working together. For every actor that you see onstage, there may be a dozen people working behind the scenes to create the environment and effects that support and enhance the performance. These people work in the technical areas of theatre—usually called tech.

THE LANGUAGE OF THEATRE

batten a wood or metal pipe from which stage lights, drops, and scenery are hung

cue a signal for something to happen

drop or **backdrop** a large canvas or muslin curtain that hangs at the back of the stage setting

flat a set piece consisting of a light-weight frame covered with canvas, muslin, or wood

platform a set piece with a solid top and braced legs, made to support the weight of actors, furniture, and props

property or **prop** anything that an actor handles onstage as well as furniture and other items used to enhance the set

set the onstage physical space and its structures in which the actors perform

stage crew the group of people working on set construction, props, lighting, sound, costumes, and makeup

throw the distance light can be cast from a lighting instrument



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The Stage Crew

The tech crews are the groups of people working on set construction, props, lighting, sound, costumes, and makeup. Generally, a technical director or shop foreman supervises these people, collectively known as the **stage crew**.

The set construction crew creates the **set**, the onstage physical space and its structures in which the actors perform. The set is conceived by a **set designer**, then built and painted by the set construction crew, which may later become the **shifting crew**—those responsible for changing the set from scene to scene.

The properties, or prop, crew is in charge of gathering and organizing **props**—anything actors handle onstage as well as furniture and other items used to enhance the set. Props may be rented, borrowed, bought, or built. In the professional theatre, a **prop master** manages the prop crew.

Lighting is any illumination of the set and actors during a performance. It is needed to make them visible, but it can also establish a play's time, place, and mood. The **lighting designer** decides what kinds of lights are needed, where to focus them, and when to turn them on. The lighting crew places the lights and runs them during the show.

The **sound designer** decides what kinds of music and sound effects are needed and whether they should be live or recorded. The sound crew is responsible for collecting, preparing, and running the sound for a performance. The **sound**, or audio, component of a production may include amplification of actors' voices in addition to music and sound effects.

Any clothing an actor wears onstage for a performance is called a **costume**. Costumes are designed or chosen by the **costume designer**. They may be rented, bought, or borrowed. Or, they may be sewn by the costume crew, who is also responsible for keeping costumes repaired and clean from one performance to the next.

In the theatre **makeup** refers to cosmetics and hairstyling, including false hairpieces and false features. Actors use makeup to emphasize facial features so that they stand out onstage or to add age or special qualities called for by the characters. Actors usually put on their own makeup, but when there are many actors or the makeup is complicated or specialized, as in horror makeup, the job may be done by a makeup crew, or makeup artists, supervised by a **makeup designer**.

Although you may be interested in one area of tech work—or in acting directing, or producing—you should familiarize yourself with the work done by all members of the stage crew. The following pages will introduce you to the working spaces and tools of each



Technical Theatre

Everyone who participates in theatre expresses or illuminates the action onstage in some way. Designers and tech crews create the appropriate environment for the action, which may involve weeks of preparation to design and produce.

THE LANGUAGE OF THEATRE

brace to anchor scenery to the stage so it doesn't wobble

dress to add decorative props to a set

dutchman a strip of fabric covering the crack between two flats to enhance the illusion that a series of joined flats comprise a wall

front elevation a scale drawing showing the front view of the set as if it were flattened out onto a single plane

jack an anchoring option using triangular-frame units attached to the flat and weighted

pull to use an item from stock

rails the two shorter, horizontal top and bottom pieces of a flat frame

sight lines lines indicating visibility of onstage and backstage areas from various points in the house

stiles the long, vertical side pieces of a flat frame

toggles the horizontal center pieces of a flat frame



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Emergence of the Design Team

As a member of the design team (p. 54), you should have broad working knowledge of each technical theatre specialty. Some of these specialties have been present in essence from the beginnings of theatre, while others have developed relatively recently.

Set and Prop Design

Modern theatrical design originated in two movements of the late 1800s. The first aimed at realism in stage sets and props, such as those of producers André Antoine and David Belasco. (Antoine once hung beef carcasses onstage to make a butcher shop scene more realistic.) The second was a reaction against realism led by designers Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig who believed that a play's environment should convey a dramatic feeling, not merely present a historically or geographically accurate setting.

Lighting Design

Most early theatre was performed in daylight. Later, indoor theatres used candles or gaslights. When electric lighting came into use in the 1880s, it was seen simply as a way of enabling the audience to better see the performance. Eventually, lighting came to be viewed as a vital component in the total visual impact of the production.

Sound Design

Sound has always been an important component of theatre, and sound effects are often essential to convey certain action in a play. Sound design has become increasingly important with the development of new audiotechnologies, such as computerized electronic sound and miniaturized microphones and transmitters.

Costume Design

Historically accurate costume is a relatively recent phenomenon. In Shakespeare and Molière's theatre companies, most actors performed in the clothes of the time. Costume design today provides various information about the characters, such as historical period, social class, personality, and so on; but the costume designer also contributes to the total production concept.

Makeup

Makeup is one of the oldest theatrical arts, having origins in the body and face-painting of ancient ritual and dance. In the mid-1900s, typecasting in the American theatre de-emphasized the importance of theatrical makeup. In recent years, with an upsurge of theatre at all levels, offering a wider variety of parts to actors, the makeup artist has assumed new importance.



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Elements of Production Design

An effective production design should be informative, expressive, appropriate, and usable, although one element may dominate.

Informative Design

To be informative, a production design must communicate the time and place of the play. Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* is set on a temporary Illinois farm.



Expressive Design

For a design to be expressive, it must evoke the theme and mood of the play. This dramatic adaptation of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* expresses the theme that your heritage influences your life.

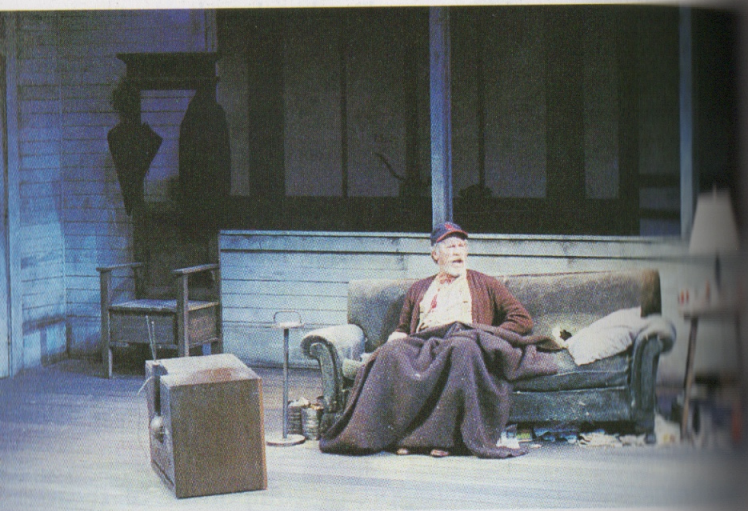


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Appropriate Design

To be appropriate, a design must be suitable for the play's action and the performance space. In this production of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the set is suitable for the action, which takes place in the confines of a well-ordered home, as well as for the performance space, which is a shallow proscenium stage, perfect for a play about a stifled wife.



Usable Design

Most importantly, an effective design must be a usable design. This set for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is at once flexible, workable, and dramatically dynamic.

