

ONE FOR ALL

On the stage and behind the scenes, theater workers blend their many and various talents. Through their love of theater and their “creative gene,” theater people share many similar characteristics. Yet they each have individual skills and duties that are quite diverse. The skills learned in your high school or community theater can be applied to professions outside the theater.

New Directions

Costume designers and other members of the theater world who may want to look for a different way to make a living have plenty of valuable skills to take with them into other careers. There are numerous options in business, where theater-trained skills including scheduling, managing, budgeting, and communicating are highly desired. Persons may find employment as event planners, management trainers, marketing executives, or as educators in public speaking or communication techniques. Many companies have corporate retreats, and their executives have hired actors and other theater people to provide



CAD software makes costume design changes fast and easy.

guidance and inspiration to their employees in subject areas such as teamwork, effective human relations and communication skills, grace under pressure, and strategies for meeting deadlines. Many theater people have also been successful as entrepreneurs, taking their specialized talents, such as creativity and commitment, into the marketplace themselves. Many costume designers, for example, have started a clothing line and/or opened a fashion boutique.

Training in theater gives people an advantage in other professions as well. Particularly in their experience in public speaking and with their dedication, self-discipline, willingness to work long hours, willingness to listen and interact with empathy, and attention to detail, theater-trained people can also be successful as lawyers, educators, and politicians. There is a relatively new field of law called fashion law whose lawyers represent clients in many aspects of the business of fashion, including intellectual property, business negotiations, finance, international trade, and government regulation.

Art and Tech

Although many costume designers prefer doing sketches and renderings by hand, a growing number are also using, to some degree, computers. "It is especially helpful when we need to check to see how a garment was worn in a given scene, rather than tracking down [notes], we can just look online. Also, when characters are added to a scene, a location changes, a character is deleted, or a new scene is added, with a few simple keystrokes, the information

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can be updated. I like the fact that there is new technology aspiring to help me and other designers, while at the same time creating new opportunities for costume designers," says costume designer Jeremy Eagan. Computer-aided design is becoming the future in the fashion industry and in costume design. A costume designer's knowledge of CAD software can translate into many other career paths.

Many members of the various technical departments of the theater—sound and lighting designers and engineers, electricians, and technical directors—are sought-after employees in tech-related jobs. The technicians not only have technology skills, but they have experience in working under pressure and being analytical, flexible, and capable of meeting deadlines.

Costume Designers Forge New Careers

Some costume designers move on to other careers, most of them related to their artistic backgrounds. Some of the most common new careers are in fashion design and retail clothing sales. Another important and often well-paid field is event planning. Costume designers can be well suited to this work. An event planner coordinates meetings, conventions, and special events, such as weddings and fundraisers. The job requires imagination, an eye for detail, good customer relations, budget consciousness, the ability to meet deadlines, and the willingness to work long hours on an irregular schedule.

Other jobs include working on displays for department stores and museums, managing

department stores and boutiques, and being a clothing or jewelry buyer for a retail store. Costume designers are ideal employees for managing a retail clothing or jewelry store. They create appealing displays, produce effective promotions and advertisements, and interact effectively with wholesalers, associates, and customers.

But while there are numerous other professions costume designers are prepared to do, many would not give up their career in theater for anything in the world. Costume designers are essential in bringing theater art to life. As actor Tom Wilkinson said, "I once did a role which I couldn't rehearse in my street clothes. I had to have the character's costume on before I could rehearse it. I just couldn't think as the character unless I looked like him."

Shared Traits

A background in theater is excellent preparation for countless other careers. While those who work in theater love their work, many also acknowledge that it is a very competitive field, has very irregular work schedules, and does not necessarily pay well. Many choose to work in theater part time and maintain other careers that give their lives more balance and earn them a greater income. Fortunately, theater skills can take people far in other career directions. People with a background in theater learn valuable skills that can put them in good stead to also become lawyers, politicians, business executives, educators, computer technicians, electricians, and more.

People in theater, no matter what their roles in the production may be—literary, musical, managerial,

artistic, or technical—all can provide substantial benefits to future employers. To begin with, theater people know how to start a major project and follow through to a successful finish. They know how to interact in close, day-to-day situations with a wide variety of personality types—outgoing, intense, serious, practical, idealist, introverted, egotistic, energetic, and more. Theater people coordinate with each other's departments, such as lighting engineers with choreographers, or costume designers with set designers. They coordinate their production responsibilities and manage their schedules under deadline pressures and the commotion of everyone working in the same physical space.

Each individual in a theater production has a certain assignment, and each must take responsibility for his or her own work and be ultimately accountable for it. A malfunction in a costume, for example, can have its root in the design, in the construction, in the fitting, or even because the actor mishandled the costume. However,



Training in costume design can lend itself to careers in other fields such as fashion design, advertising, and event planning.

no matter what, how, or who damaged the costume, it is the responsibility of the costume designer to repair, replace, or redesign to make everything right. The costume designer and everyone else in the theater company are accountable for their work within the production. They waste no time on blame or excuses because the "show must go on."

Theater people are also aware that there is a code of ethics and a set of rules to follow. Nothing would be accomplished in the short time it takes for so many disparate parts to come together without some form of order. Everyone in each department communicates and takes direction from the head of each department, and every department head takes direction from the director. A respect for authority is paramount.

For many theater people, especially actors, directors, and designers, envisioning the big picture comes naturally. In many businesses or organizations, there are certain people who are tasked with envisioning an idea or inventing a product, while others in the organization are assigned to produce it. In the theater, the creative, visionary, and inventive people are also the same people who physically, technically, and intellectually turn the vision into a finished piece of work.

All in all, the qualities of people who work in theater are desirable to employers. The qualities can also help people with a theater background become successful entrepreneurs. Theater people share common traits, such as energy, fortitude, enthusiasm, and an ability to work under pressure. They also have good organization and communication skills and know how to work as a team. Some of the most important qualities are self-confidence, self-discipline,

and determination. Every play starts from zero and goes forward, collecting and combining people, ideas, and resources along the way until one day, without fail, a completed production is the result. All the people involved in the production have the confidence to know they will get to the end, the self-discipline to learn their role or accomplish their tasks, and the determination to do so despite conflicts, crashes, and challenges. In a nutshell, theater people have developed these natural and learned traits, qualities, and abilities:

- Communication skills
- Problem-solving abilities
- Ability to work independently
- Ability to work as a team
- Time-budgeting skills
- Promptness
- Respect for deadlines
- Accepting authority
- Flexibility
- Self-discipline
- Accountability
- Self-confidence
- Determination
- Commitment

All of these can carry someone a long way.