



The stage is set for a production at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago. What can you infer about the lives of the characters, based on the props and set design displayed here?

# THE RIGHT STUFF

**Y**ou're drawn to the theater department at your school. However, you aren't ready to be on stage. You aren't sure about your singing or acting skills. You are creative and want to get involved, but you aren't sure where you fit in. There are many jobs that need to be done to put on a successful show. One of the most critical is planning, designing, and building props and sets that help to bring the audience into the performance and engage the imagination. This book is here to help you figure out if this is the right path for you.

## Props and Sets

When you enter a theater before the performance of a play or musical, often you'll see that the curtains are open and you're able to see the stage. What do you see? A living room that looks an awful lot like yours? A worn couch? A laundry basket? Or maybe you see an outdoor picnic area with a table all set for dinner, and lawn chairs, and a place for a campfire. Or is it something less cut and dried? Maybe you see

an empty stage with only a few chairs in the middle. Or there could be several large wooden platforms in front of a red satin **backdrop**. No matter how simple or elaborate what you see onstage is, a lot of thought and care was put into what you see when you enter the theater and when the performance begins. How this changes (if it changes) over the course of the performance works hand-in-hand with the actors' performances, the lighting, the sound, the costumes, and more. Determining the set design and the part that props should play in the performance is the role of the **set designer, props master, head carpenter**, and crewmembers and assistants. They help design, build, paint, create, manage, and find all of the materials necessary to bring a performance to life.

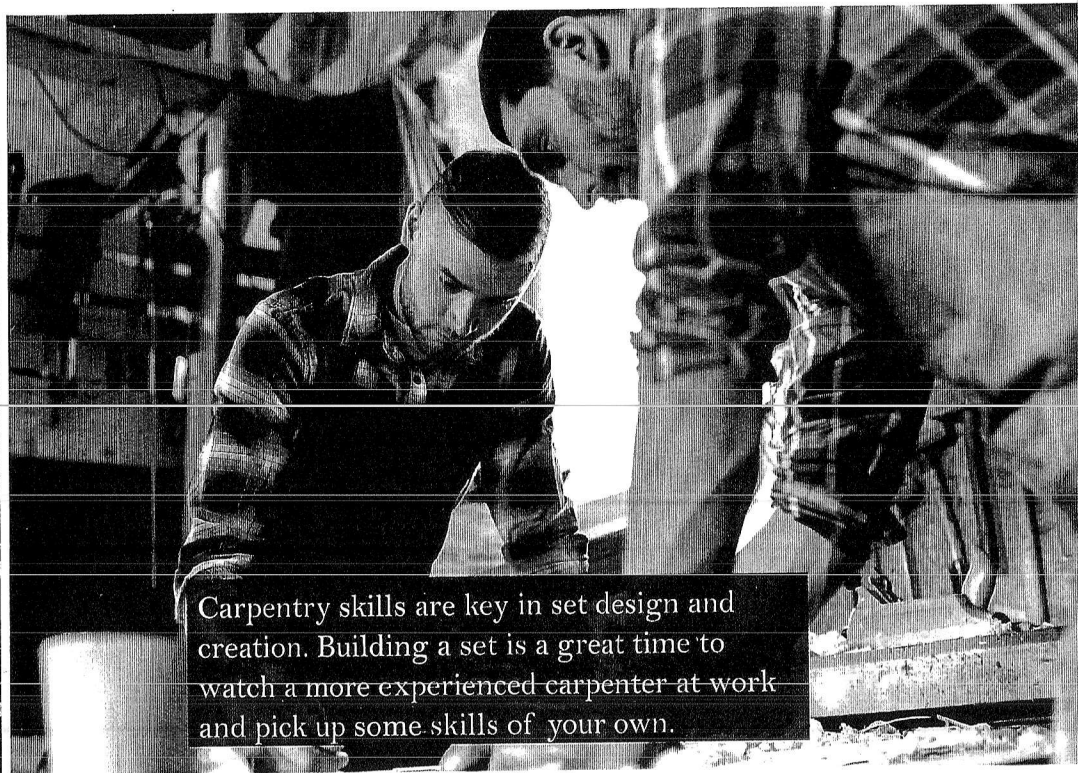
One of the most important aspects of staging a theater performance is setting the scene. Does the play or musical take place on a dusty ranch in 1870s America? Or in Victorian England? Or at the bottom of the ocean three thousand years into the future? The props and sets convey any of these possibilities to the audience.

Sourcing and creating props for a performance can take you from a thrift store to a fabric store to a camping store and everywhere in between. Designing and building a set can involve everything from carpentry to papier-mâché. Whether you have the soul of a builder or the heart of an artist, you can play an active role in creating what the audience sees on stage.

## The Skills You Need

One popular misconception about theater is that you have to have an obvious talent in order to be involved. The primary trait you need to possess initially in order to take part in your school's theater program and beyond is a passion for theater. Maybe you saw a performance of *Les Misérables* that you haven't been able to forget. Perhaps you were specifically drawn to the towering sets that flawlessly recreated Paris in the early to mid-1800s. Maybe you were captivated by a performance of *Fun Home* and the vintage props that you felt brought you into a living room in the 1970s. New plays and musicals are being written and produced every day. Sets and **special effects** are becoming more elaborate as technology makes that possible. If that idea excites you, you have a passion for theater. So, congratulations! You have the desire that you need. However, if you want to be successful at it and help your fellow classmates put on the most amazing performance of their lives, there are a few more skills that come into play.

- **A willingness to learn.** At a high school level, the roles of set designer, props master, and head carpenter will likely be performed by teachers or parent volunteers. But this is your chance to watch, learn, and ask questions. If you have worked with tools and have experience painting, you can make a major contribution to the show while observing how to lead a crew. But when you're starting out, it's important to open your mind and just



Carpentry skills are key in set design and creation. Building a set is a great time to watch a more experienced carpenter at work and pick up some skills of your own.

display a good attitude toward learning. You might pick up some carpentry skills you didn't have before, or learn how to paint material to create the illusion that it is something else.

- **Research skills.** The ability to research architecture, furniture, and objects used in various times in history is very necessary for someone involved in creating sets and props. Part of making realistic props and authentic sets is to make them look as they did in the period in which the play is set. For example, if the play calls for a sword, you must find out if the blades used at that time were long, thin, curved, or double-edged. If you have good

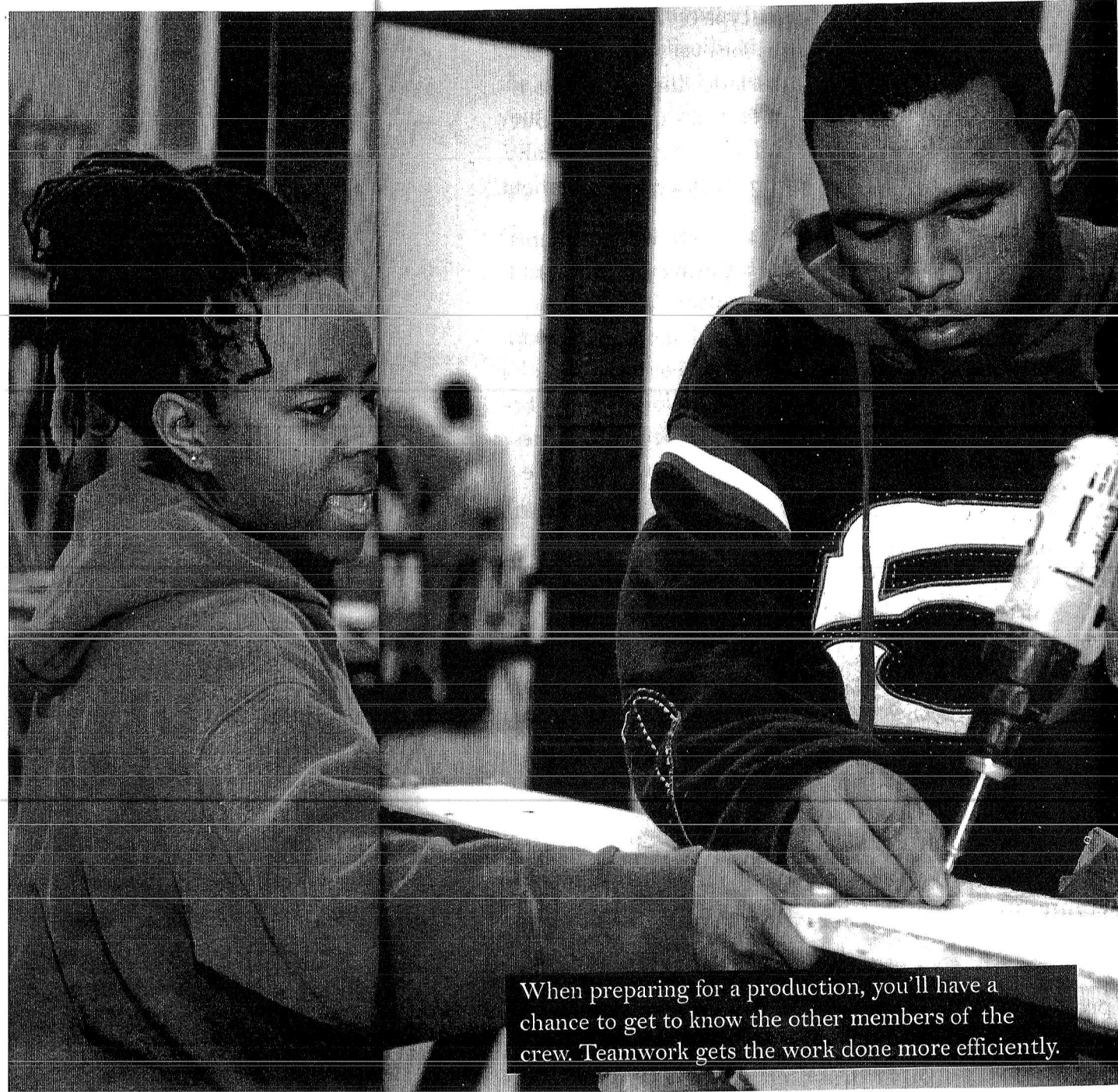
research skills, you can be a good resource for the team.

- **Creativity.** Creativity comes in many forms. One form is the ability to think of ways to use discarded materials so that props and sets can be built inexpensively. There are many examples in the blog *The Art of Faking It—Stage Design, Themed Rooms, Props, and More* ([bigpicturecreations.blogspot.com](http://bigpicturecreations.blogspot.com)). In one, the author demonstrates how to create the architectural details of a Brooklyn brownstone using pieces of 1-inch (2.5-centimeter) Styrofoam cut out using a template and then glued together. There are painting tips to create the illusion of stone. Large pieces of Styrofoam can be found at appliance stores; they are thrown out after stoves and refrigerators are unpacked. So whether your creativity comes in the form of painting, finding ways to turn scraps of material into usable props, or planning elaborate video game battles, be prepared to bring it to the table. It also helps to have an eye for detail.
- **Communication and listening skills.** No matter whether you're leading a crew as part of a multimillion-dollar theater production on Broadway or painting a backdrop for a junior high production of *The Sound of Music*, the listening and communication skills you bring to the table are invaluable. A theater production is driven by teamwork, and it's important to keep



everyone informed and to know when to ask questions. Treat rehearsals and meetings the same way you do a class that interests you. Take notes! You should keep a notebook on hand—or even an electronic tablet with a note-taking app. Use these tools to sketch ideas and write down pertinent questions to ask later.

- **Organization.** A theater production can take weeks or months to plan. And on opening night, the cast and crew rely on every prop being in place and every piece of the set being in working order. Otherwise, a performance can go off the rails pretty quickly! So it's important to be



When preparing for a production, you'll have a chance to get to know the other members of the crew. Teamwork gets the work done more efficiently.

organized. If you're the type of student who keeps color-coded notes for every class and a spreadsheet of homework deadlines, then you already know how to keep track of things. But even if organization skills don't come naturally to you, the theater is a great place to hone them.

- **Active involvement.** It's not enough to simply sign up to participate in a theater production. You have to actively be involved. This means showing up to every rehearsal and showing up on time. You must be able to meet deadlines while working under pressure. Volunteer to be a part of a particular crew, and be prepared to work hard until the final show is over and the set has been struck.

## It's Time to Participate!

So, you've decided you want to get involved in theater and have some skills to contribute to a production. What now? First, check out what's available at your school. Does your school have a **drama club**? Are they planning a production? Maybe the music department and theater program are combining to stage a musical. If work is already under way, that's okay! There are a lot of options out there if you're willing to look for them. Your town might have a **community theater**. Check online for community theater groups.

If your school has a drama club or other theater program, then sign up. If you're shy and feel a lot of trepidation, talk a friend into signing up, too. Once you get to know the other drama club members, you might

even feel your shyness begin to melt away. If your interest is specifically in sets and props, be sure to let the club president or student advisor know. Ask how you can be involved, specifically, in those departments.

## What You'll Learn

One thing that almost every theater student or theater professional will tell you is that it's a learning experience. And you take those skills with you, whether it's to a career in theater or another type of job. Let's take a look at some of the skills you'll gain and how they'll affect your life as a student and into your career and beyond.

### Improvisation and Problem Solving

Whether you're onstage or behind the curtain during a performance, when something goes wrong, everyone has to do a lot of quick thinking to make it right. An actor might drop a prop off the edge of the stage, where it breaks. As a props master, it's your job to find a fast replacement and get it into the actor's hand without him leaving the stage. Do you have a backup ready to go? Can you find one within thirty seconds? Quick thinking is a skill that you learn to use during times like these and one you take with you for the rest of your life, or even just to the next time your teacher surprises you with a quiz.

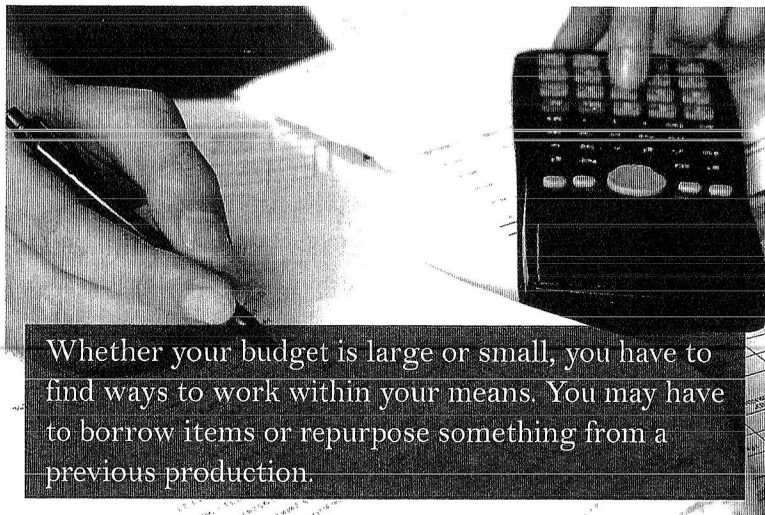
### Project Management and Leadership

Whether you're part of a Broadway production or a high school theater performance, in order to work as a

team, you'll need strong, effective leadership. You might eventually be given that role. Being able to manage a crew and prepare for a performance is something that helps prepare you for assuming leadership in your future roles as a parent or a manager in your career field.

## Working Within a Budget

No matter the size of your production, putting on a theater performance costs money. In a leadership role in the theater, part of your job is planning a show on a sometimes-impossible **budget**. Set your budget priorities and stick to them, then get creative in finding cheap solutions for your other needs. Budgeting for expenses is something you'll do in your personal life and likely your professional life.



Whether your budget is large or small, you have to find ways to work within your means. You may have to borrow items or repurpose something from a previous production.

## Dealing with Lots of Different People

In the theater, you'll be around a lot of different types of people. Some people are bossy. Some people

are shy. Some people are good at leading others, and some aren't. How you interact with all different types of people will prepare you for the future. You might one day have a difficult boss who has trouble communicating his or her needs to you, but because you experienced something similar with a director long ago, you'll know how to handle the situation effectively.

## Finding Your Niche

Some people crave the limelight, and other people like being behind the scenes. Others aren't sure just yet. You might feel shy in class, but once you step on the stage, you want to sing and dance and don't care who's watching. Friends might push you to try out for a lead role when what you really want to do is run the lights or take charge of the entire production in a leadership role. Perhaps you already feel a pull toward set design or props and are excited to get started drawing out your plans for your school's next theater production. And maybe after a few weeks on a crew building a set, you'll realize that you'd rather be in the limelight after all. And that's OK! It's exciting to try out some different jobs until you find your **niche**. Your niche, put simply, is something you're good at that makes you happy. It might take you a few days or a few years to find it, but being involved in theater will help you find it.

No matter your ultimate goal, the best thing to do is to just jump in and see where it takes you. Join the drama club. Check out your town's community theater. Get involved! You'll be glad you did.