

# TEAMWORK AND THEATER



When watching a scene from *Hamlet*, you don't often think about the props department that found or made the skull to whom Hamlet delivers one of his most famous speeches.

In act 5, scene 1 of *Hamlet*, Hamlet delivers his famous speech while holding the skull of Yorick, a long-dead court jester who Hamlet once knew and fondly remembers. The scene is very sad and powerful (and more than a little disturbing). No matter which actor is playing the role of Hamlet, whether it be Jude Law, Kenneth Branagh, or your classmate, the scene just wouldn't work without a realistic skull. In the planning stages of the production, a member of the crew had to find or make a believable, lifelike skull, someone else had to place it within the actor's reach at exactly the right moment, and then another crew member had to keep track of the skull, put it in a safe place, and get it all ready for the next performance. To do all of those things requires organization, creativity, and teamwork. That's the theater in a nutshell. Every head of every department, every crewmember, every cast member, the director, the producer, even the person taking tickets at the box office, must work in unison to pull off a performance.

Here are some of the roles and responsibilities that go into creating the props and sets of a theater production.

## Set Design 101

According to the American Association of Community Theatre (AACT), a set designer is the individual who “designs the physical surroundings in which the action will take place.” This task helps to reflect the **mood** of the characters onstage, clues the audience in to the time period and location in which the story unfolds, and even just hides the action **backstage** (or the actors and crew) from the audience. A set designer might sketch out the layout of the stage, detailing the placement of props or set components, or even build miniatures to help lay out the plan effectively. A set designer works alongside the director and the show’s design team to talk about the director’s vision for the performance. A set designer will also meet with the lighting team and costume department to help create a sense of unity onstage.

## Set Design Styles

A set design can be brought to life in a number of different styles, and that style affects how audience members interpret the performance. According to an entry on the *Big Picture Creations* blog, “Stage design is not just creating a place for the actors, performers, characters, speakers to walk on, but to interact with, a place that is their home. It is important to keep this in mind while designing a set for a production—it has to represent them.”

Some set designers prefer to work in a realistic style. **Realism** allows the set designer to recreate the scene in its most authentic state. If you see a

performance of the musical *Annie*, it’s likely that you’ll see a realistic set design. You’ll see the ramshackle kitchen at the orphanage where the orphans perform “It’s a Hard-Knock Life,” with its dirty walls and worn furniture. You’ll also see the wealth and splendor of Oliver Warbucks’s mansion living room at Christmastime. A realistic set design for *Annie* allows audience members to see for themselves the contrast between the two worlds and feel a greater sense of triumph when the Warbucks mansion ultimately becomes Annie’s permanent home.

**Theatricalism** is another type of set design that is used often in staging performances. The “less is more” style of set design, theatric designs utilize minimal set materials to give more focus to the actors’ performances. One of the most famous examples of this type of design is used in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, a play-within-a-play in which we are introduced to the hamlet of Grover’s Corners through the performance of a stage manager who helps to set the scene. The stage is mostly bare in a production of *Our Town*. In one scene, two actors stand atop ladders to represent two characters talking from the bedroom windows of their homes. Audience members are meant to imagine the scene for themselves. A more modern example is the 2015 revival of *The Color Purple* on Broadway. In the production, actors sit in wooden chairs on a mostly empty stage before a tall, wooden wall affixed with more antique wooden chairs suspended high above. Audience members don’t assume that the main character Celie’s home has a long, decorative chair wall. They are meant to see and interpret the chairs as the symbol of an important



9

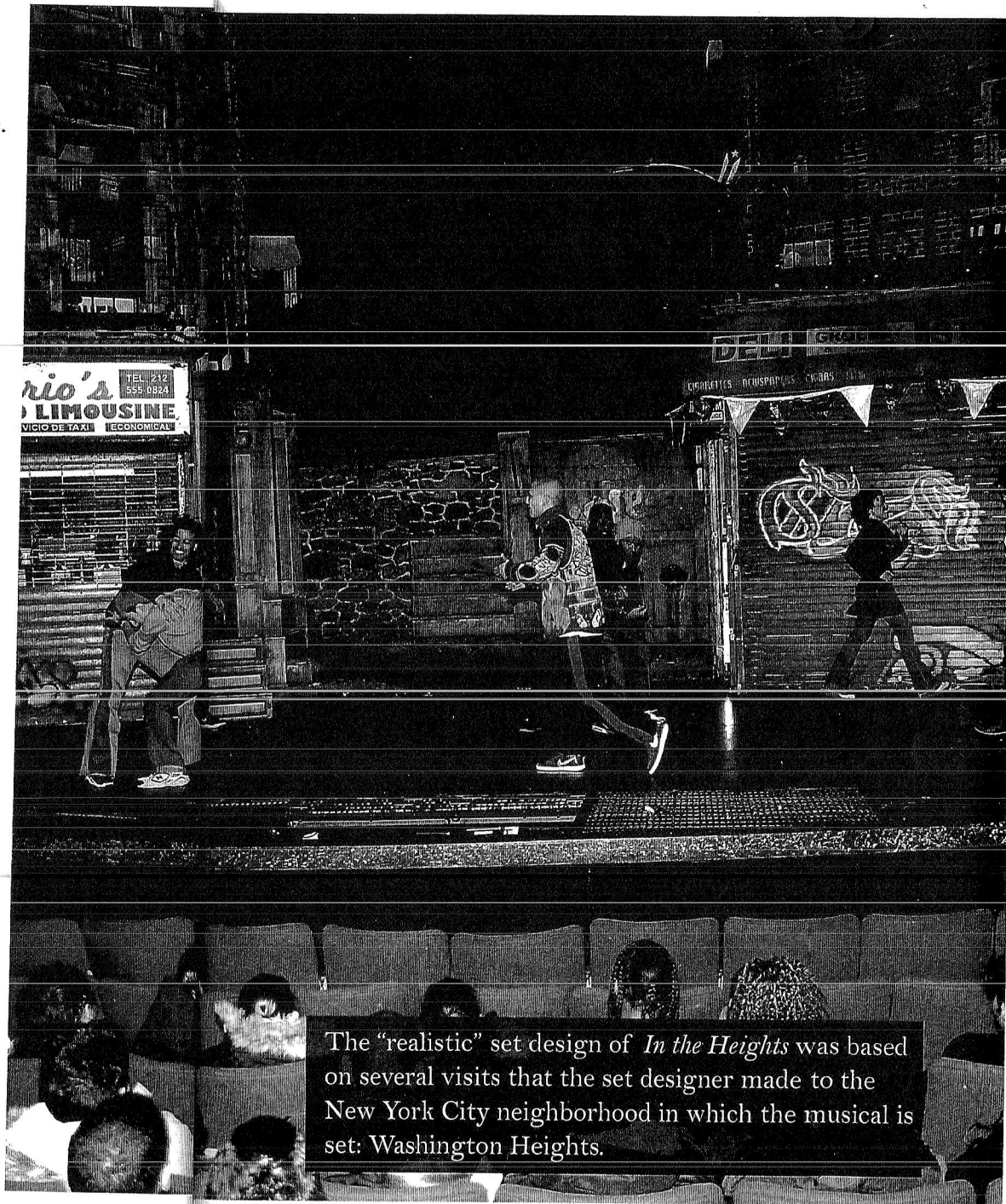
**theme** contained within the play: comfort, tradition, motherhood, struggle, or another theme that you as the audience member are meant to infer as you witness the performance.

Other set designers utilize the **expressionist** style of set design. Expressionism doesn't rely on set pieces to accurately set the scene. Instead, audience members are supposed to use what they see on the stage to build to an understanding of an underlying theme. One of the most famous examples of expressionism in the theater can be found in the work of German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht. Brecht famously rejected traditional, realistic theater in favor of dreamlike, nightmarish sets that utilized color and shapes to capture a theme.

Part of a set designer's job is finding which of these types of set design works best with the **source material**. As a set designer, you would work alongside the director and other members of the crew to determine how best to stage a performance.

### Set Design in Action

The most important skill required for a set designer is a sense of determination. Set designer Anna Louizos is one of the most in-demand set designers working today. She has designed sets for Broadway's 2013 production of *Cinderella*, *Avenue Q*, *High Fidelity*, *Steel Magnolias*, *In the Heights*, *White Christmas*,



The "realistic" set design of *In the Heights* was based on several visits that the set designer made to the New York City neighborhood in which the musical is set: Washington Heights.

and others. For her work on *In the Heights*, Louizos wandered around New York's Washington Heights neighborhood with director Thomas Kail and the show's music composer, Lin-Manuel Miranda (who went on to create the Broadway smash *Hamilton*), to try to capture some of the neighborhood's details. She took lots of photographs and went back to the neighborhood multiple times afterward to study it some more. For Louizos, capturing the grittiness of Washington Heights was key. Said Louizos in an interview with *Playbill*, "When I walk down the street, I notice things. I'm always looking up, I'm always thinking, 'I'm gonna remember *that*.'" *In the Heights* went on to be nominated for a Tony in the set design category.

Set designers must also possess a vast creative sense and a willingness to "think big," often within a strict budget. For Lance Cardinal, who created the set design for a 2011 production of *Little Shop of Horrors* for Callingwood Private School in West Vancouver, British Columbia, a small budget and limited resources was a huge drawback. Cardinal, his partner Jeff, and another friend had to get creative to make the production happen. "We built it all in the school garage and with VERY LITTLE funds. We bought mistinted paint, and asked any friends to help who could," Cardinal said in a post on his blog. The result was a realistic, detailed set that contributed to an amazing performance.

To be a set designer, you also need to possess an ability to work under pressure and deadlines, impeccable people skills, and practical art skills, such as being able to draw or build **models**.

## Getting Creative with Set Design

A high school production will likely have a very low set design budget, allowing the opportunity for an amateur set designer to get creative. Talk to your drama instructor about ways you can save money while planning for your high school's next performance. You can often find plenty of student volunteers who want to be involved but tend to shy away from the spotlight and would prefer to help out behind the scenes. If there's a woodworking class at your school, talk to the instructor about recruiting some students from that class who might want to help build sets to help them gain experience. Art students might be willing to help paint sets or source props. Ask around. Talk to your parents or other adults about borrowing any set components or props you might need. Just be sure to keep track of where everything came from so it can be returned later!

## Props Mastery 101

The props master might also be referred to as a head of props or props director, but the most commonly used and accepted term is props master. In short, the props master for a theater company is in charge of creating, building, sourcing, organizing, and enacting the use of props for a stage production, in addition to some other duties. According to Chris Beck, head of props for the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, in an interview with *The Producer's Perspective*, it is his job to "load in, assemble, fabricate and handle all props necessary for



an attraction at the O'Neill; in addition to maintaining all seats, curtains and furniture owned by the theatre." It's a vast, multifaceted job that requires a lot of creativity, technical know-how, patience, and a positive attitude.

There are different types of props that a props master must be responsible for. The first of these—and what you probably think of when you imagine props in action—are hand props. Hand props are actively used or manipulated by an actor or actors during every performance. A book, a candleholder, or a bag of groceries are all good examples of hand props. Hand props can also fall within the category of **perishable props** that must be replaced every night, such as a piece of cake or fruit that an actor eats onstage, or a letter that gets torn up or destroyed during each performance. Part of a props master's job is determining who will replace the material each time, when it needs to be replaced, and how to budget for that.

The next type of prop for which a props master is responsible is a **set prop**. Set props represent the gray area between the sets department and the props department. If an actor sits down on a couch, that couch is a set prop. The couch is a part of the set, but the actor isn't interacting with it in the same way he might a hand prop. Set props aren't built into the set; nor do they leave stage with an actor at any time. A set designer must be aware of a set prop as he or she designs the rest of the set. Likewise, a props master must keep the set in mind as he or she prepares other props and considers how actors will interact with them. Some other examples

of set props include tables, tents, large rocks, and appliances.

**Set dressing** is another type of prop that also falls partway into the set design department's responsibilities. Set dressing is items that help set a scene, but actors do not actively interact with them. This might include pots and pans in a kitchen or knickknacks on a character's nightstand. Within the category of set dressing, we also have "trim props," which includes curtains and wall hangings, and "practicals," such as lamps, ceiling fans, or chandeliers.

A props master is also responsible for "**greens**," which covers any type of real or artificial flowers, leaves, bushes, trees, or any other type of foliage. A really large tree that requires some special construction will require some help from the set design department.

Any special effects might also be the responsibility of the props department, depending on the size and scope of the effect. These are often done in collaboration with other departments and crews. A campfire bursting to life in a camping scene is the responsibility of the props department. Fog, snow, confetti, or bubbles are referred to as **atmospherics** and also require planning on the part of the props master and crew, with the help of the electrical crew. **Breakaway props** also fall into the special effects category. Breakaway props are props that are built to break and *will be* broken during a performance. This might include a glass or a bottle, or even a piece of furniture that falls or is thrown during a performance. Breakaway props are tricky because they must break safely without injuring cast, crew, or

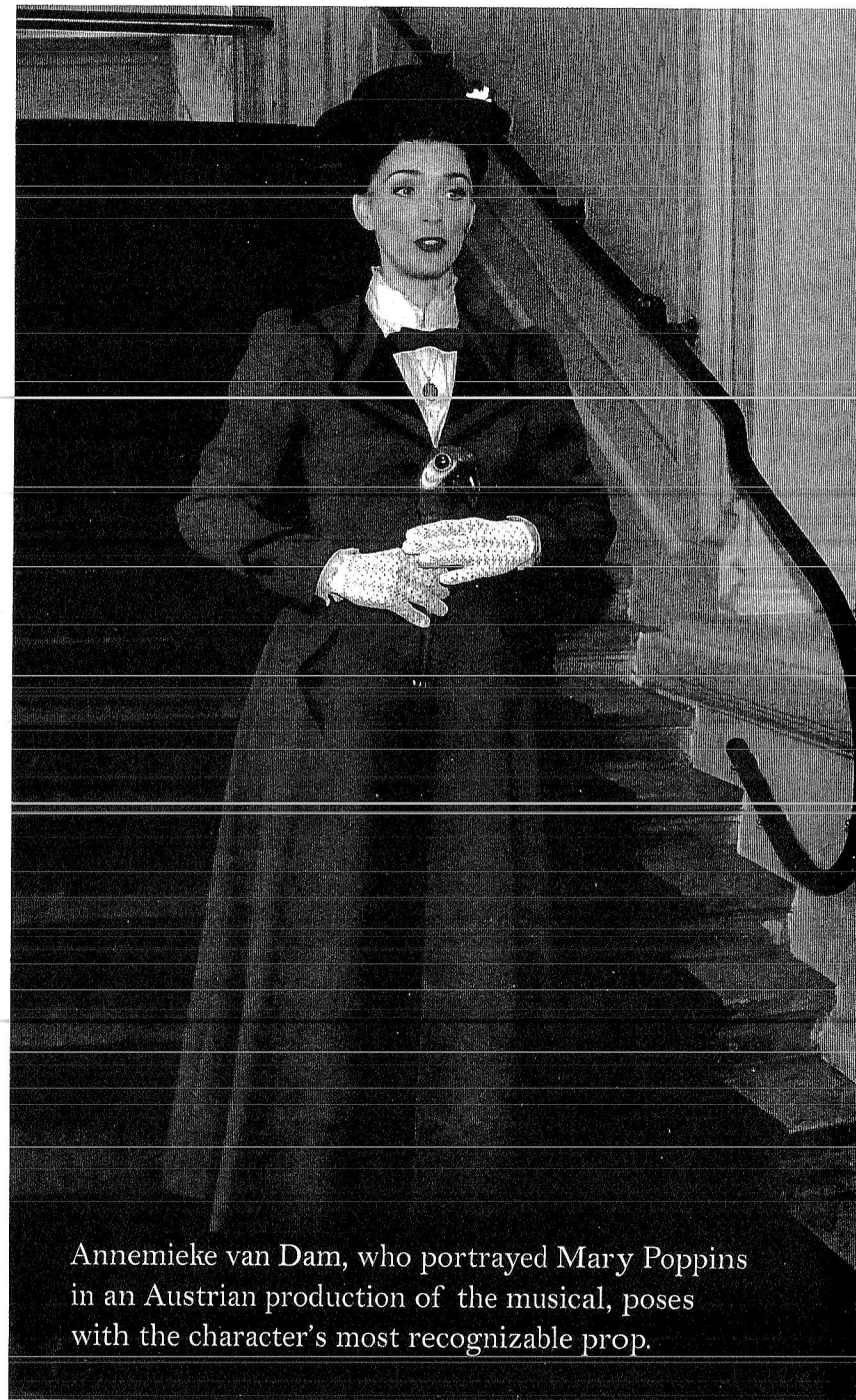
audience members. And they have to break every time without fail.

Props masters and crews might also be responsible for certain types of sound effects, but this is becoming less common. Before there were sound systems and computers with extensive sound effect libraries, prop crews were responsible for creating any and all sound effects. A roll of thunder could often be attributed to crews shaking a large piece of sheet metal or high impact styrene plastic (called a thunder sheet) backstage. A hand crank-operated wind machine was often used to make the sounds of rushing wind. Props crews were also responsible for any doorbell sounds or phones ringing onstage. In smaller productions on a strict budget, the props department might still be responsible for manually producing sound effects.

The final type of prop is a **personal prop**. Personal props are used by an actor to help develop his or her character. This might include a fan, a pair of glasses, an umbrella, or a cane. Sometimes the inclusion of a personal prop is written into the script. Sometimes an actor will pick it out on his or her own and work it into the performance. Every type of prop mentioned above is important and must be kept organized and performance ready by the props master and crew.

### Scope of Responsibilities

In an interview with Eric Hart's *Prop Agenda* website, Tina Stevenson describes one production



Annemieke van Dam, who portrayed Mary Poppins in an Austrian production of the musical, poses with the character's most recognizable prop.

that required a lot of extra effort to get a prop right. The theater was putting on a production of the play *Dinner with Friends*, which involves couples at a table having dinner. So Stevenson needed to make several cakes to be consumed onstage. For this particular production, two of the actresses had food allergies, one to chocolate and the other to oil, which was a huge challenge since the cake needed to at least look like a chocolate cake to the audience, and oil is an important ingredient in cake. Stevenson set to work experimenting with recipes that would keep the actresses safe. She finally made a spice and gingerbread cake made with applesauce and yogurt instead of oil. "The safety of the actress was important to me," said Stevenson. After opening night, one of the actresses confessed that she wasn't actually allergic to oil. She just didn't like eating it.

Other props masters might have to whip up a batch of convincing stage blood, or track down the blueprints of buildings you might see in the early twentieth century in New York, or treat a piece of wood furniture to make it look like an antique. The needs are endless, and a good props master knows that you must be tireless when in pursuit of the perfect prop. "An 'impossibility' goes against my grain," said Tina Stevenson in the same interview with *Prop Agenda*. "I've learned over the years to know when to say 'no, it's not possible.' However, before I say this I exhaust all possibilities. Sometimes 'impossible' doesn't mean there's no way to fabricate or procure an item, but [that] it isn't in the budget, or you don't have the manpower to produce the item."

## Organizing Your Props Budget

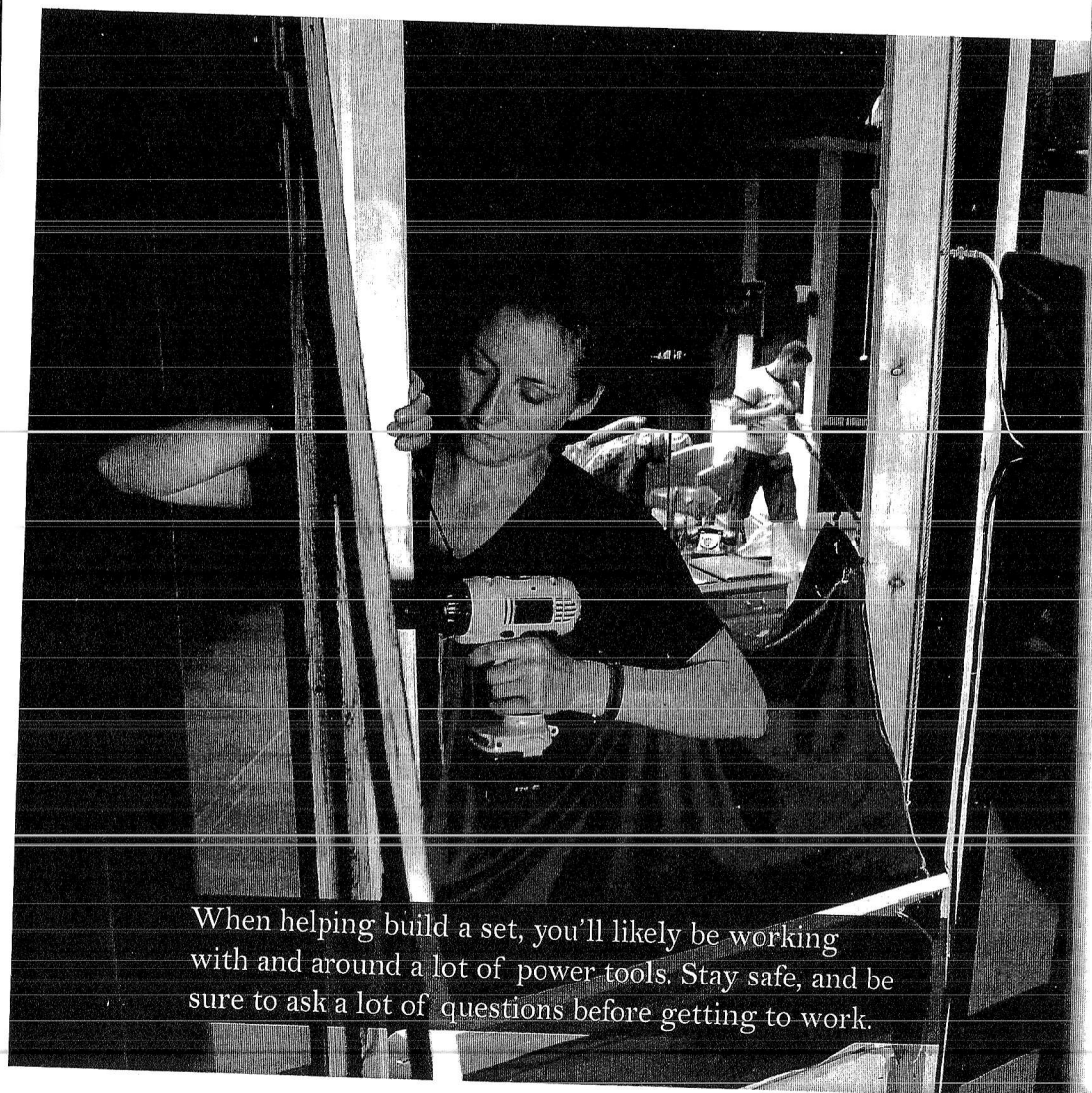
You're organized and creative, have the tireless spirit of a props master, and are ready to get involved with your high school's next theater production. What can you do to help out, or even take charge? One of the most important things to keep in mind is your budget. Create a spreadsheet listing all of the props you're going to need and how much money you have to spend. Then slowly work your way through the list, almost like a scavenger hunt. Borrow props where you can. Recruit trusted adults to help you build or create other props. Your theater teacher or drama club head can help you get started.

## House Carpenter

In 2011, Charlie Rasmussen was the oldest active member of the Local One of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. At the age of eighty-five, he was still driving twenty-five minutes a day, six days per week (every day a performance takes place) to New York City's Times Square, the city's theater district, to manage his six-man crew of set workers as head carpenter at the Broadway Theatre. In an interview with *Playbill* he shared his experiences in getting hired early in his career: "An old-timer told me years ago that if I was going to work with my hands, I should go where I'm going to make the most money." Sixty-five years later, he was still going strong with no plans to retire.

If you're the type of person who likes building and creating and working with materials, then





When helping build a set, you'll likely be working with and around a lot of power tools. Stay safe, and be sure to ask a lot of questions before getting to work.

working as the house carpenter of a theater might be for you. Of course, at a high school level, the heavier carpentry and use of power tools will probably be handled by an adult. However, working alongside a more experienced carpenter gives you the perfect opportunity to learn and ask questions, and to build your skills.

A theater's house carpenter must work with the set designer, props master, and crew to build sometimes simple, sometimes more elaborate pieces to be used onstage.

A strong background in carpentry is the most important skill required for a set builder. One flaw can cause a set to come crashing down, so it's important to hone your skills. In 2005, opera singer David Rendall shattered his hip and knee and injured his shoulders when a set collapsed on him during a performance of *Aida* at the Royal Danish Theater in Copenhagen. Safety is a top priority for a carpenter, so it's important to learn and ask questions and communicate well with the rest of your crew.

Everyone who works in props and sets as part of a theater production has a large list of responsibilities. Performing those responsibilities in an organized and careful manner is the result of a great deal of planning, leadership, and, most importantly, teamwork.