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Play + safety

Training students on theatre safety

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THE HISTORY OF theatre shows us that safety, while maybe not the top priority of young theatre artists, has always been a consideration. Think of the ghost light, a common fixture in any dark theatre. Urban legends of haunted theatres aside, the ghost light stands as both a symbol of tradition and a means for avoiding accidents.

In contrast to this safety-first practice, we have long heard that “The show must go on.” Too often, directors use that phrase to push ahead when they should pause, to take risks where none are necessary. Audiences are made up of humans, humans who would rather see a show pause and restart than watch injuries occur where entertainment was intended.

When we think of teaching theatre arts, safety typically isn’t among the first lessons. It certainly is not foremost on the minds of students who dream of a life in the arts. Still, whether they aim for a role under the spotlights or a gig hanging them, theatrical safety is

integral to any successful production. You want your shows lauded for the talent on display, not reduced to a YouTube clip of an avoidable incident. But how do we make students care about safety? Where do we begin?

The first question to ask is, simply, “Where are we?” The steps required to build a safety culture depend on where you begin. Ask yourself if you understand the potential risks of every action on and backstage both before you start and as you move through rehearsals. Is risk assessment part of your planning at each stage? As you review scripts and make lists of prop, costume, and scenic needs, do you also note actions or moments that will require a greater eye on safety?

Evaluating your space

When people think safety, they often think of OSHA and NFPA codes. While compliance with these codes is essential, the idea of taking care of one another is a much more solid

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Key topics of a basic safety training program

1. People-first safety culture based on prevention
2. Risk assessment process
3. Proper training and supervision (including training documentation)
 - a. Electrical safety
 - b. Rigging
 - c. Set construction
 - d. General health and safety
 - e. Training review/refresh timelines
4. General "housekeeping"
5. "The show CAN go on" mentality
6. Incident investigation procedures
 - a. After action reports
 - b. Prevention strategies

foundation for building a true safety culture.

On day one of show rehearsals, do you familiarize your students with the space that will become a second home to them over their educational journey? How do you help them understand the hazards of the theatrical space in an engaging, memorable, and applicable way?

One solution is to develop a safety scavenger hunt or similar activity that allows students to explore the space and learn important safety details at the same time. The activity could be general: identifying theatre items like spotlights, platform legs, prop shelves, battens, etc., while working safety tips about these items into the clues. Ask students to find the place where any practical item in the show should be returned after its use or something one typically should not stand under while it is being raised or lowered. You can create a similar activity focused entirely on safety, for example, one that requires students to explore their theatre's fire safety features, from counting smoke vents to finding fire alarm pulls, sprinklers, fire doors, exit signs, and more.

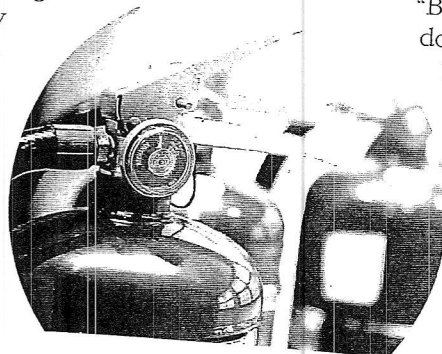
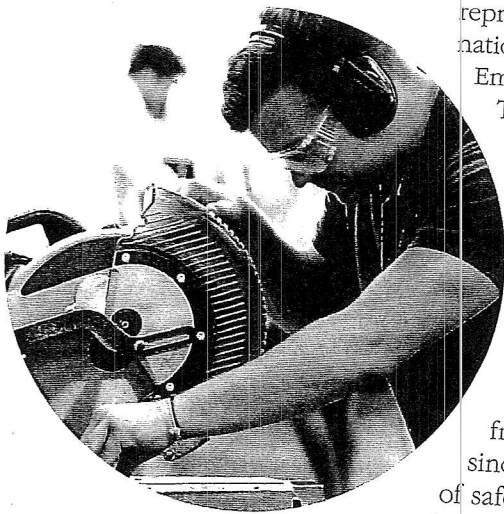
Another way to get students' attention is to invite a fire marshal or representative from your local International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) union to visit.

The authority having jurisdiction, or AHJ, is the individual or entity charged with evaluating site conditions and enforcing fire codes. Bringing in an AHJ can be extremely helpful, especially in early planning stages for a new theatre. Inviting a safety official to review your space may seem frightening, but if you sincerely aim for a culture of safety, that effort will be seen and appreciated.

Besides, sometimes it takes an outside expert for your students to hear the messages you've been repeating ad nauseam.

Safety isn't about codes; it's about caring. Starting from that place makes it much more engaging and fun. That's right, theatre safety can be fun, and according to Anna Glover, the Yale School of Drama's director of theatre safety and occupational health, it must be.

"Being fun doesn't mean being fluffy and nonsensical. We just have to get



away from the trainer being this guru figure," said Glover. She describes her training as active, engaged learning programs that include visuals, storytelling, and activities to help students with all learning styles connect with and retain safety information as they would any other lessons. Developing a safety-focused venue orientation activity (like a scavenger hunt) at the beginning of the term helps them become experts and take true ownership of and responsibility over the space.

Glover believes that "when we come to realizations ourselves, the learning sticks. 'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.' Training should involve stu-

dents thinking for themselves, being able to practice skills and even having a go at teaching others, which has been shown to be a very powerful way to anchor training."

You can use this principle in safety orientation activities by breaking students into groups that each learn different safety practices, perhaps for certain aspects of the theatre space. Then have each group teach what they've learned to the next group or the rest of the class.

Set construction

Basic safety protocols and training can be easily understood, but where we tend to get ourselves in trouble is during set construction. Directors typ-

ically take the time to train students in scene shop and stage safety, but do we do the same with family and friends who volunteer to assist? Again, ask students to teach the safety training they learned to outside volunteers to help them internalize the information. Always observe as students train outsiders to ensure the information is accurate and thorough, and to correct or supplement as needed.

Theatrical sets are built differently from other construction projects, as they often need to be light enough for the crew to move or flexible enough to fold into the available wing space during scene changes. Sets often visually suggest a space without replicating the heft and functionality of the structures they represent. This does not mean "good enough" is acceptable.

Sets must first be safe and stable so the actors can focus on their roles and not on balancing on a flimsy surface that "should" hold for the show's run. Build it well, build it right, build it once. Resources including the classic *Backstage Handbook* provide helpful techniques for set construction to ensure that, for example, that British farce with the slamming doors does not result in shaking set walls, or worse.

Train early, train often

You will always need to take time to train. If your training is for OSHA-reg-

ulated compliance purposes such as hearing conservation or respiratory programs, you should not continue the activity until people are trained.

But, to be honest, training can just be a conversation. You could also bring in a skilled guest to observe your work and give feedback. We need to get away from the idea that people need to be in a well-lit classroom with a workbook to be officially trained.

"On the set of *Wicked*, you can't come and go by [Glinda's] bubble unless you understand the safety protocols required," according to Greg Petruska, director of environmental health and safety for NBCUniversal Theatrical.

Petruska trains everyone to enforce safety regulations, not just the director or certain members of the technical or stage management team. "Every set of eyes on and offstage is important in ensuring the safety of the cast and crew, and *anyone* can pause the show in an emergency," Petruska said.

Emphasize to students that each of them is personally entrusted with the safety of their fellow cast and crew members. That message alone provides the most essential "why" behind safety training, and it makes the information seem more valuable.

Start by working out what students, volunteers, and anyone else working on your show needs to know. These individuals need information about the job they are doing, the tools they are using, and the space they occupy. Someone may know how to hang a shelf at home but not know how to safely use a tool in the theatre or build a flat. It helps to gather a group of people, including other adults who will assist on the show and student leaders from both cast and crew, to have an open conversation about

how best to assess the show's risks and train the people involved for safety. This way, training feels less like a chore and more like something everyone participated in creating. Revisit and refine these conversations as you design various elements of the show; build out these visions; and develop choreography, blocking, and more.

But we don't have any resources ...

Each time we discuss theatrical safety in conference workshops, we hear variations on the same theme: a shortage of resources. Whether money, time, access, or all the above, we always need more. So how do we approach these challenges? Glover recommends finding ways to show value outside the system.

"I was once told I couldn't conduct orientation training as it was too hard to set up," Glover said, "so I did it anyway. I put up a sign in a canteen for sessions every other Monday at 4 p.m. and sent out an email advertising the orientation. Whoever showed up got a walk around the building to first aid stations, evacuation points, etc. When 400 people had been through this, it became properly adopted and supported."

This is one example of inspiring ground-level interest to support a need and find new ways to influence thinking. Sometimes all it takes to engage volunteers or donors is to open our doors to these individuals and offer a look behind the curtain to give them a better understanding of the requirements of a theatrical space. Don't be afraid to invite school and district administrators or PTA leaders into your space to show them the value (and associated costs) of safety concerns you may have.

There are affordable resources through programs including the Rigging Safety Initiative of the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT). Through this program, educational theatre directors and technical directors in secondary schools can apply for free stage rigging inspections and safety training for themselves and their students. Finally, don't be shy about reaching out to local universities with strong theatrical programs. University theatre programs often work with a network of professionals and resources in your area, and they're usually happy to help a fellow theatre educator.

Sometimes large corporations also experience feelings of limitation. Even Disney producers worry about having the time and budget to deliver their team's creative vision. Nicole Queenan, producer for Disney Parks Live Entertainment, admits that sometimes they don't feel they have everything they need. She said, "We set priorities, we make choices, we decide what is most important and most impactful, but safety is always key in what we do."

Starting the safety journey may seem daunting, but it can be the most rewarding task we take on because it is rooted in care. My personal motto in this industry has become "People first, safety always." People are the purpose behind everything we do, and safety should pervade every step of the way. You know you have achieved success when conversations privilege wanting to do what is "right" instead of being obliged to do what is "safe." If you involve your students in this process and train these values in your theatre culture, they will develop the knowledge and desire to make the right decisions because they understand they have the power to make a difference.