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What I’ve Learned As An Actor Who Also Does Crew

By TheatreNerds

Had you told twerpy middle-school me that today I would be able to confidently handle a table saw and wield a staple gun with ease, I’d think you were lying. I’ve always been the one on stage, but as the years have gone by, I’ve crossed over to the dark side (backstage) more than I ever thought I would, and guess what? It’s been pretty great.

My first crew experience was as a light board operator at a local theater. Lighting was not something I was really interested in at the time, but when the theater advertised their light board certification class, I figured I should give it a shot because, why not? I was wowed learning about gobos, filters and more, and I eventually even learned what all those intimidating spaceship-esque buttons on the light board did. After completing the class, I was asked to be the light board operator for the theater’s upcoming show, Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew. That’s where it all began.

My favorite part of being a light board operator was that I got to see the show from a new, unique perspective. I don’t just mean the view-from-above-the-audience type of perspective (even though that part’s pretty cool too!) Sitting through tech week and watching the performance about a billion times, I really got to know the show. I realized I was picking up on more and more of the jokes every night and hearing them so many times gave me a better understanding of Shakespeare’s language. The same went for more contemporary shows I light board op’ed. I absolutely loved seeing theatre in a new light! (no pun intended) It was also so interesting to me to see what lighting can do for a show. Now when I’m sitting in an audience, I try to really notice the effects that different types of lighting can give to a scene. Lighting design is a true art.

After my first backstage experience, I was hooked! Any time the theater was doing a show that I wasn’t auditioning for, I looked for a way to get involved backstage. I got this same type of joy working as an Assistant Stage Manager at this theater. Stage Management takes crazy amounts of concentration, organization skills, and confidence, because once the show is in production, the Stage Manager is the one calling the shots. But it’s definitely all worth it, and it was especially exciting for me as an actor for a few reasons. Taking line-notes was one of my responsibilities as an Assistant Stage Manager, and while doing this every night may seem like a mundane task, it soon became my favorite part of the job, must for the same reason I loved being a light board operator so much – after hearing the same lines so many times, I noticed more and more nuances within the words of the script. And it was also amazing to watch some really talented actors and directors at work; to watch a show develop and grow into something truly special. Watching other actors is a great way to improve your own craft and working backstage is the perfect way to do that.

Then, when I started college and was given a work-study as part of my financial aid, I decided to step way out of my comfort zone and get a job in the theatre department’s set shop. This little wimp – a carpenter? What? When I started I had absolutely no clue what I was doing. I really was a mess. But as weeks and months went on, I learned so much about all that goes into creating the scenery of a show. It’s a great way to challenge yourself. In set construction, I was taught how to do things I never imagined I’d be able to do, and by the end of freshman year, I was teaching newcomers to the shop how to do certain tasks and even leading teams of carpenters. I learned how to operate those scary tools, but problem-solving skills and leadership have definitely been the most important lessons I’ve gained in set construction. It’s also amazing to watch a set, slowly but surely, be transformed from mere pieces of wood into something enormous and spectacular. And it’s definitely a cool thing to go see a show and point out to your friends, “I painted that wall” or “I build that platform.”

Working backstage is also a great way to meet people and make connections. At my college and many other college theatre programs, all Theatre majors are required to complete some backstage hours, so through working on set construction, I got to know almost every person in the Theatre department. In all areas of theatre production, I’ve made so many great friends that I never would have met if our paths didn’t cross in an outlet of theatre that isn’t performing.

Through working backstage in many different positions, I gained a huge amount of respect for the other side of theatre. Getting your hands dirty and working hard backstage can be a way to prove that you’re a responsible and dedicated member of the theatre community or Company. Much like performing, the jobs backstage are certainly not easy at times, but also a ton of fun and so incredibly rewarding. My experiences as a crew member have given me a much greater appreciation for the art form that I love so much. A show is so much more than just its actors. Every individual moving part of a show is so incredibly valuable. My times backstage have been some of the most educational and rewarding parts of theatre for me, so in my opinion, it is so incredibly important for every performer to dip a toe in the backstage world.