

Making Theatre Happen

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Take a look at the credits in any theatre programme – the production team is far larger than the cast and represents a hugely diverse range of skills. In order to stage any form of theatrical event, there needs to have contributions from designers, makers, technicians, and managers. The planning and construction of a production may begin many months, even years before the performance which itself may only have a very short life of just a few weeks or even days.

Any project can be divided into five stages; none of which can be started until the previous one is completed. I'm going to briefly talk through the five stages which must be completed in order to make theatre happen. They can be summarised as:

1. The Idea
2. The Design
3. The Build
4. The Rehearsal
5. The Performance

Stage #1 The Idea

Any production will start with an idea. Initially the idea is developed through the discussion between a director and a designer. Depending on the type of production, various different designers will be involved – typically starting with the physical structure and the scenery, and then building up the environment in which the performers will be seen by discussing the costume, lighting and sound. Each element is usually designed by a different member of the team. With the development and introduction of new technology, video is becoming more and more common; and as we have seen particularly in the last year, virtual reality is being considered a natural area for theatre to explore – another designer will take on this aspect.

Stage #2 The Design

This creative team of director and designers will develop the concept until it reaches a point where a reality check is needed. At this point, draft designs need to be committed to paper so that they can be costed and risk-assessed by the team responsible for realising those designs. This will involve scale drawings and models of the stage and scenery, illustrations of costumes, preferably with fabric samples, and 3D visualisations of lighting and projection ideas. Costume supervisors, Construction Managers, Chief Electricians, Technical Directors, Sound Engineers, Prop Makers and Scenic Artists will all be brought into the discussion to go over the designs in detail. Their work will be coordinated by the Production Manager who takes overall responsibility for budgeting and scheduling the production.

Before anyone has even walked into the theatre, every element of the performance will have been planned in detail. For example, every piece of costume will have been carefully considered – perhaps for historical accuracy, perhaps for practicality where particular movement is required, and certainly for its aesthetic balance with every other visual element on the stage. Each decision made about a costume impacts on a decision made about the lighting – and vice versa. Both lighting and costume have a huge influence on how the set is perceived. Similarly every piece of furniture and every prop must “fit” – it must be of the correct time period; its colour and proportion must complement the scenic environment; and most importantly it must practically achieve what is needed by the performer who is interacting with it. Once the Production Manager is satisfied that the designs are realistically achievable in terms of cost, time and safety, the final designs can be prepared.

Stage #3 The Build

Once the designs have been finalised, the performers will begin rehearsing in a rehearsal room and the work of construction can begin. Frequently, performer rehearsals and construction will happen simultaneously. Clearly it's essential that the various workshops are aware of how each element will be used; and it's the job of the Stage Management team to ensure that every development in the rehearsal room is communicated back to the appropriate workshop manager, designer or technician. As rehearsals continue and develop, there will be inevitable changes to the way costumes or props are going to be used and these changes must be checked for cost, time and safety.

For every element – be it costume, scenery or props – its journey from the wings to the stage and back again is planned in detail. Scale models and drawings must be examined closely to ensure that when the moment comes to put everything onto the stage, it will all interlock and function like a well-oiled machine. At the same time, costs need to be continually monitored to ensure that the production remains within budget. That coordination is the responsibility of the Production Manager who oversees the entire technical process.

The Production Manager must also coordinate the activity of each department so that their work is completed at precisely the right moment. For example, a piece of scenery, once designed and risk-assessed for safety, must be built in the workshops before moving onto the paint shop where scenic artists will get to work. If it arrives too soon, the paint shop will become overloaded – too late and the scenic artists are left idle.

Stage #4 The Rehearsals

When all the scenery has been built and painted, and lighting, sound and video equipment assembled, the production can begin to move onto the stage. Scenery will be transported to the theatre where it will be rigged by a team of technicians under the guidance of the Technical Director. Once again it must arrive on stage at exactly the right moment – every hour of stage-time is carefully planned as venue costs are always a consideration and the stage must never be left idle. The Production Manager will have prepared a schedule so that each element of preparation is perfectly coordinated – lights are rigged, scenery assembled, sound systems installed, and costumes prepared in the dressing rooms. Once every element has been put in place on the stage and the dancers and actors have developed their performance as far as it can go in the rehearsal room, it is time to begin rehearsals on stage.

At this point the Stage Manager takes charge of the stage and coordinates the performers and the technical elements. The first rehearsals are slow and painstaking as every technical detail is worked through. The performers and technicians must work through every scenic movement, every costume change, every lighting and sound cue, and assure themselves that everyone is confident of their roles, and that every risk has been carefully considered.

Once technical rehearsals have been completed, the dress rehearsals can begin. At this point, the production is finally run through without stopping and with full costume, scenery, lighting, props and sound effects. This is the moment when the director and designers can finally see their concept fully realised on stage and “fine tuning” can be undertaken. Typically there will be two or three dress rehearsals in the final days before the first performance.

Stage #5 The Performance

During the performances, the creative team and Production Manager generally step back and the production is left in the hands of the Stage Manager who will be responsible for coordinating the work of the performers, the stage crew, lighting operators, costume and makeup department and so on.

Few people understand how much is involved in making a piece of theatre. So many different skills are needed to make a production come to life and wherever a person’s talents may lie – whether they are interested in engineering and construction, art and design, music and maths, or planning and organising, there is always a place for them backstage.