

Theatre with DCP: Risks and Rewards

Intro

When you come to a DCP audition with hopes of landing a role or finding a back stage function you will be asked to sign a waiver. Youths under 18 will also need their parent or guardian's signature to certify they understand what we will be asking from them and the processes and habits or traditions we have in place to ensure everyone learns and perform their role in a safe and enjoyable manner. This page explains what these activities are, some of their risks and our approach to make it a pleasant and safe experience for all involved.

You will find here the roles of supervisors of the production, the activities and the environment of actors, technical staff and front-of-house staff.

Supervision

These people are responsible for the success of their production. The producer, director and stage manager form a team appointed by the executive committee of DCP to create and manager all the details of their production. The producer oversees publicity, finance, ticket sale and front of the house activities. The director chooses the cast, play interpretation, look of the set, lighting, sounds and costumes. The stage manager documents the director's decisions and makes it happen on and off stage during rehearsal and runs the production once performances start.

actors

So you've been given a role, now what. First let's describe the facility. DCP has been using the second floor of the Old Town Hall since 1996 for storage of properties, meetings and early rehearsals. The rehearsals move to the theatre on the main floor about 3 weeks prior to opening night.

Rehearsal Hall

Stairs

The rehearsal hall (Old Town Hall's second floor) is used by DCP for many functions: storage of props, costumes, flats (generic surfaces used to build sets), furniture and lumber. It is also our executive meeting room and our main rehearsal hall.

Your first encounter with the hall is the long, steep and often dusty staircase. Use the railing for safety but mind the protruding radiator, half-way up this single flight of stair or you may bump a shoulder or your head on it's lower corner. It is all original old town hall and it's old fashion charm makes up for it's inconvenience.

Storage

As you get in, passed the double doors, you will be impressed by the massive, nearly 4 meter tall shelving holding furniture, suitcases, large boxes etc. Don't climb if you need something, ask for help. There is also a locked room for costumes. The walls are generally layered with furniture and boxes. DCP tries to secure all our properties but you should still look-out for sharp corners and tall or heavy object that may be just leaning against the wall.

Rehearsal mode

For rehearsals, a section of the floor is cleared, marked with tape or painted and furniture brought in to approximate the set-up of the final set. These objects are not always

standard home quality and rough edges or loose boards need to be handled carefully. The stage manager will try and advise the actors of what to watch for and how to deal with issues. Any problem or perceived risk should be reported to the stage manager as early as possible.

Lending a Hand

The cast and crew are a team working together to produce the best audience experience we can. You might be asked as an actor to help move set furniture, to handle props of any size, and that while wearing strange outfits. Walk don't run. Let the stage manager know if you are uncomfortable with any such off stage activity.

Theatre activities

The rehearsal activities move to the main floor and the theatre of the old town hall approximately 3 weeks before opening night and for the whole duration of the production, usually 2 consecutive week-ends, for 6 performances. You will find yourself milling about the lobby, green room, stage and theatre seating area. Generally keep it clean and tell the stage manager if something seems wrong.

Green Room Routine

A few hours before the start of a show and during the performance actors and stage hands will live mostly in the green room. For most of these 4 or 5 hours, and certainly once you are wearing costumes and make-up you will stay away from the lobby to avoid being seen by the audience. This small room must accommodate large cast, the back-stage crew, set change furniture, costumes, cast clothing, makeup tables and other technical equipment. To avoid chaos the stage manager marks areas for specific purpose and sets up sufficient chairs for everyone.

During the show, if you are not in an active role, sit down and stay relatively quiet. The green room has reasonable sound proofing but actors come and go on the stage and doors to the stage are not always closed. Some bring books, some just watch the play on the repeater TVs set up for actors and the support crew to follow the on-stage action.

Food and beverages are often brought in by actors or front of the house staff, specially at intermission. If you have food allergies, let the stage manager know. If you bring food with nuts or sea food, the usual allergy triggers, tell everyone and label your food accordingly.

Normal Entrances and Exit

An assistant stage manager normally sets up a prop table and a check-list near one of the green room doors leading to the stage. Prompted by the stage manager, this assistant stage manager will call out actors due to go on stage a few minutes ahead of time and use a check-list to ensure you go on stage with all the clothing and props the director intended. Pay attention to the assistant stage manager and remain aware of the progress of the play so you don't miss your entrance.

Acting

Usually, you will go from the green room to a space on-stage behind a side curtain (a leg) and wait there until the exact moment in the play when the audience must see you.

Apparently, the expression 'break a leg' comes from this event. This part is done in relative darkness and you must learn to negotiate the darker parts of the stage during rehearsal, when there is plenty of light. Also remember not to leave props, chairs, lamps, tables etc in areas backstage where others might trip over them. Don't leave tall things leaning on the wall, from where they may get pushed and fall to great noise or injury.

Once on stage you have to move about according to the instructions of the director which once rehearsed are memorized and become part of your routine like your lines and costume changes. It is easy to be absorbed by the task of remembering your next line and not pay attention to steps, door frames. I have even seen fellow actors get so involved in their acting that one fell off the end of the stage during a performance. That's what rehearsals are for, look, learn and be disciplined enough to be where you are expected, performance after performance.

Stage Fight

Some roles are very dynamic. Either in dances, chases or fights, rapid movement carries risks. Add props, even weapons and you could easily spill blood or take out someone's eye. That is why fights are rehearsed extensively, usually starting very very slowly, with stop action so that the director or even a specialized fight manager can guide the actors through every single move of a fight or chase. It becomes eventually no more than a dance, with each antagonists, now partners in this choreography, know exactly what to expect from the other one and what is expected by them. Again, it is critical that you be exactly where you are supposed to be at every moment, performance after performance.

Technical Staff

A group of theatre people take great pride and pleasure in their contribution to the performance, even if the public never see them. People who design build and paint sets and furniture, design lighting and sound scape and produce them in synchronization with the action on stage.

Set Construction

Probably the most likely function to produce bleeding, handling sharp tools, rough wood and pointy screws and nails returns a very concrete reward after all the time and efforts. Using the drawings of the set designer, which were made after extensive discussions with the director, the construction crew order materials, gather their tools, clear the stage of obstacles and then tape a rough outline of the set walls on the floors to help align each panel, door frames, book cases, etc.

Sets vary hugely from one play to an other. Some will have you paint the walls and floor a fresh coat of black and add only a park bench or a single chair, others will have you back to the hardware store for more 2by 4s and plywood multiple times. We try not to work alone. The set building chief is generally present to direct other volunteers to the next best task to move the project along in an efficient fashion.

painting

Once the set is built, an often, even before, a painting crew sands, patches, primes, paints and otherwise decorate the elements of the set. You will certainly get acrylic paint over your clothes and your hands, but mostly on target. Luckily it washes easily from floors, hands and brushes.

light

Lighting is the result of design, under the artistic guidance of the director, light selection and positioning, using ladder and wrenched, and programming lights intensity from the control boots for each scene of the play. The riskier part of the job is hocking heavy lights, perched on a ladder with your hands full of lights, wires and wrenches. Proceed slowly, one item at a time and don't be afraid to ask for help.

sound

After getting a general impression of the sound scape the director intends for the play, a sound designer will collect or create sample sounds and bring them back to the director to confirm the plan and expand on details as needed. The sounds are saved on a CD, DVD or on a computer hard drive and sequenced to match the cues associated with each scenes. The stage manager will usually call cues for sound and light a few seconds prior to the required time.

props & Costumes

Unless you go to really wild parties you are unlikely to wear costumes as out of the ordinary as you will in theatre. Loose clothing, swords, chains, elaborate wigs and jewellery can be dangerous. Be kind to your costume, it has to last for rehearsals and many performances, and hopefully many more plays. The same goes for you, hat pins and sharp props can be nasty if you are not aware of them every time you are near them. Again, rehearsal will get you and you fellow thespians to become very aware of the pointy object in the play and you will learn to avoid them or to use them cautiously.

Front of House

Some of the most useful people don't even get to see the show. They prepare beverages, display food and clean-up in the lobby kitchen performance night after performance night. They work around sharp utensils and hot liquids, in a crowded kitchen, serving a large number of visitors in a hurry. Again, experienced staff guide others and early preparation makes the rush much easier and safe.

Conclusion

That covers just about everything you can expect to see during a production, from casting to curtain call. If you have any questions or suggestion for this page, please let us know.