An Introduction to Technical Theatre

by Tal Sanders
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Among the arts, theatre is unique in that at its very core it is collaborative. Unlike authoring a book or painting a great masterpiece, a piece of theatre has not come from the mind of a single creator, but from a large group of people working toward a common goal. The theatre collaboration is similar to the function of a sports team, or even a military unit, in that many people are doing a variety of things that all contribute to the group success. This group of artists collaborates to conceive and construct a performance that endeavors to entertain its audiences. Each of the artists involved in this process contributes uniquely to the final product. Some of these contributions are obvious, some are more hidden but no less important to the creative whole.

There is an art, or at least a skill, to successful collaboration. Many of you have participated in group activities and team sports and can identify with both the power of group (team) work and the common struggles within groups to adopt a single vision. These factors exemplify both the challenge and the strength of theatre collaborations.

When working within a group, we must navigate differences of opinion, entertain varying perspectives, and rise to the challenge of maintaining clear communication. Learning to listen is an important skill in this scenario. Being clear in thought, exact in language, and deliberate in choice of illustrative examples can be key to success.

Theatre artists must learn the difference between giving up on our ideas when a strong voice is advocating for something different and defending our views to the point that we become an obstacle to consensus. I have found when artists listen closely and truly attempt to understand one another they are often able to find solutions that incorporate and even enhance seemingly disparate ideas.

In theatre we must channel our ideas in support of the direction in which the entire production is moving. Falling silent when you have a solution or shutting down when your ideas cannot be incorporated does a disservice to the entire production. A skilled collaborator will find an appropriate opportunity and use a productive tone to offer their opinions.
For many of us, our sense of how a theatrical production is put together stems from our experiences with theatre in our schools. For example, many students have participated in a drama program at their high school. These experiences may lead us to the conclusion that all productions are created under a system wherein the show’s director makes virtually every decision and everyone else involved is trying their best to carry out the director’s plan. It is easy to understand why we might have that impression when many of our schools have theatre programs in which the director is the only permanent staff and designers and other specialists are only brought in when required or when their talents can be afforded.

Many small community theatres and even college theatres, may, due to their limited staffing for productions, leave us with a similar impression that top-down management is the only style used in theatres. However, the way most professional theatre companies produce their shows constitutes more of a shared-responsibility model. In these companies, an entire team works together toward a cohesive solution that incorporates everyone’s expertise.

This is not to say the director’s influence on the production is diminished or that they do not carry an overarching responsibility for all elements of the production, but more that they are usually surrounded by other artists working on the production who bring their own experience and imagination to ensure it can be realized to its fullest extent. A director’s job includes unifying the artistic vision of the entire company. When looking at the reporting structure for most theatre organizations you see designers and other production staff do maintain a reporting relationship to the director.

An inclusive spirit is at the center of a productive and successful collaboration. When carried through all levels of production and performance—from the producers and director to the stage manager and technicians—these individuals work together, bringing their best so the end product will be a piece of art worthy of their collective investment.

Those who have participated in theatrical productions understand this environment fosters a special camaraderie among the cast and crew of a show and the experience of being part of a production often feels like having joined a new “family.”

Smaller theatre companies and educational theatre programs have a comparatively small staff doing multiple jobs. Much like the high school director mentioned earlier, in these situations a few individuals may wear multiple “hats” required to fulfil the roles in the production.

In a typical professional theatre organization, each individual would hold only one job listed on the company’s organizational chart. It is important to think of these models as upward trending lines of artistic responsibility rather than a downward trending workflow chart.
As you can imagine, in many smaller organizations the duties of all thirty job categories listed here must be fulfilled by just a few people. A scaled down organization such as a **community theatre** or educational theatre program might have an organizational chart that is simpler.

*Example of a professional theatre organization model*

*An educational or community theatre organization model*
Although all of the duties are still covered here, you can see a relatively small number of people make up the organization’s creative staff. Notice the show’s director is not at the top of the chart, but rather maintains a reporting relationship to those above. In educational theatre, the show’s director may report to the department chair, director of theatre, or even a school principal. In a community theatre, the director may report to and artistically satisfy an artistic director or a board of directors.

Job titles and duties are covered in Module 2, but it may be useful now to illustrate a typical scenario of how this theatrical collaboration functions:

A theatre company, school program, or community theatre has decided to produce a play or a season of plays. Each company will have its own reasons for producing the play(s) it chooses, as well as for its desire to produce play(s) at all.

**There’s More to Know**

How are plays selected for production? A school program might choose plays based on educational opportunities, topical stories, or strong roles that provide growth opportunities for acting students. A community theatre may produce plays that provide lots of opportunities for involvement and tend towards large cast shows. A professional theatre may consider a group of plays that fit together as a season, peaks public interest, and has good potential to sell tickets. Original theatre productions are often mounted based on the reputation of the playwright. Regardless of the criteria for choices, the people responsible for programming read many plays in order to choose appropriate material for production.

Often plays are chosen with a specific director in mind. The director may have a particular style or resume of experience that makes them a good match for both the script and audience. They may have a great track record of working with a particular theatre group. Whatever the criteria for selection of the director may be, once selected, they are often asked to help form the rest of the creative team for the production. This team includes the producer, director, designers, choreographers, and musical directors. Some companies utilize resident designers who, as employees of the company, are assigned to a particular production based on their talents and experience. In other productions the director may be asked if they prefer to work with a particular designer or other creative team member and, possibly, if they have preference for a particular stage manager. Once assembled, this team develops an artistic approach to the production known as a production concept. This concept expresses the unifying vision that each individual strives to support in creating the production elements.

The production concept is arrived at through careful consideration of the script, the reason to produce a specific story for a specific audience, the production resources, and the inspiration and insights of the particular creative team.
Consider This

If you are asked to play a part in a production either on stage or behind the scenes, consider the commitment you are making. It will consume more than just your time. You are agreeing to be part of the collaboration and will have to do your very best at your task to uphold the commitment to the entire production.

Once the creative team has agreed on a production concept, each designer develops their portion of the staging design through a series of meetings and discussions. Meeting both as a group and individually, but always in conversation with the director (who is tasked with carrying the concept forward through rehearsals), the creative team then begins to interact with an entire production team. Designs are delivered according to scheduled deadlines, and a process of budgeting funds and other resources commences. Actors are auditioned, and cast and rehearsals begin: Sets and costumes are constructed; music, projections, and lighting are created; and the entire production team is engaged in the movement toward opening night.

At this point, the creative team is busy supervising and revising their creative work to ensure a cohesive production. Usually, the designers on this team are working an opposite schedule from those directly involved in rehearsals. Designers work closely with the technical director, costume shop manager, or master electrician as their designs are being realized, attending acting rehearsals only occasionally.

There’s More to Know

Three types of technical rehearsals are common to most theatres.

A dry tech might be the first of these rehearsals. At a dry tech no performers are present, and time is allowed for crews to become familiar with the show elements and rehearse cues and shifts.

The second rehearsal is often a wet tech. It includes performers and allows everyone to learn the traffic patterns imperative to the timing of cues and shifts.

A director may also call for a cue-to-cue technical rehearsal, where both crew and cast work together on shifts and cues but dialogue in between these actions is not performed in order to allow for more technical rehearsal in a shorter amount of time.

All show elements must be adequately rehearsed and finessed. During these rehearsals, remember to be present, attentive, quiet, and prepared to both jump forward and go back to repeat actions in order to perfect cue timing.

Still, good theatre professionals realize the most important element of collaboration is how the creative work relates to what happens in the rehearsal room. This col-
laboration is where the production comes alive—where the rubber meets the road, where concept meets reality, and inspiration is tempered by practicality. It is where new ideas born from the rehearsal process can inspire opportunities.

The collaborative process continues, now including performers, choreographers, musicians, stage management, and the director—all bringing their own creative energy to the production—throughout the rehearsal process, into the technical rehearsals, and all the way to opening night. During this time, the stage manager maintains daily communication to the entire production team, reporting what happens in the rehearsal room. The director continues to meet with the creative team both as a group for production meetings and individually with designers and production personnel in order to keep all efforts moving in support of the developing production.

Once construction of the elements is completed, whether built off-site and loaded in or built onstage, the next step in the rehearsal process can begin: technical rehearsals. Technical rehearsals occur when all of the various elements of the final production are brought together and can be integrated into a single piece of art ready for an audience. It is during these rehearsals that the elements of sets, lights, projections, costumes, props, music, sound effects, and atmospheric effects are added. This is also when a whole new group of collaborators join the production: the stage crew.

During technical rehearsals the creative team is busy refining the production elements into a whole. They work with the director to shape an experience for the audience. Meanwhile, the stage crew works under the direction of the stage manager, rehearsing scene shifts and cues so that timing of these is both precise and repeatable. These rehearsals can be difficult and taxing as so many elements and people need to be coordinated. Many theatres conduct the bulk of the technical rehearsals over a weekend or two-day period. Often these days are run as ten-out-of-twelve days, meaning that ten hours of the required twelve-hour day are worked in rehearsal. I have heard people describe the technical rehearsal process as similar to “watching paint dry.” It is true these rehearsals can seem long and boring if the sequence or cue being worked on doesn’t involve you. If the cue does involve you, you may be asked to repeat the same movement or cue multiple times as the coordination is developed. All the efforts of these rehearsals are rewarded when the technical elements and the actions of the actors are seamlessly married into an effective presentation.

After the initial technical rehearsals, dress rehearsals incorporating wardrobe and costume changes begin, followed by preview performances, and, finally, opening night followed by the performance run. Up to opening night, the director and the creative team continue to work toward the best production possible within the given circumstances and time available. Most creative team members move on to their next production once a play opens and their services have been rendered. Even the director’s work is now complete, and the stage manager takes on the responsibility
of delivering a consistent show that preserves the director’s vision throughout the production’s run.

For many productions, this entire process takes about 8-12 weeks, though it may be longer for a new or complex production. Generally the rehearsal process takes about 4-6 weeks of that time, and performance runs take approximately 1-3 weeks. The rest of the time is typically spent in preproduction.

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