An Introduction to TECHNICAL THEATRE

by Tal Sanders
An Introduction to Technical Theatre
Theatre production is a time-based art form. That is to say, once we set out to produce a play and have set a date for opening night, the race is on! So much must be researched, debated, decided, coordinated, and realized prior to that opening date. If you choose a life in the theatre, you may find the time commitment that ramps up to opening night and then ends sharply upon closing has a great influence on your life outside of the theatre as well. Artists must be very aware of any overlap of production schedules as the process, especially just before a show’s opening, can seem all-consuming.

Consider This

Technical directors have been known to view the considerations of production as a triangle whose three sides represent time, funding, and resources. All sides being equal, makes for a strong triangle, but if you cut any of these lengths down, your new shape no longer resembles a strong triangle. It will then be necessary to recoup what has been lost to bring the form back into shape.

Time is an important element in production, although it is not the only factor that must be considered. Your timeline must allow for not only all that must be ready for the production on opening night, but elements required for rehearsal and the juggling of schedules of various departments that might be involved together in specific elements, such as building, painting, and wiring. Lead time for specialty materials that need to be ordered may also be included in the timeline.

Funding seems an obvious element because you need to know what the budget is to know how much you can spend. But budget is also directly allied with time. For example, if there is less time than expected to construct elements or if a load-in to the theatre must be accomplished in a shorter period of time than was planned for or ideal, then clearly labor costs will need to increase to make up the difference. The allocation of funds is also dependent, at least in part, on the resources available for the production. If you are working in a community theatre where they maintain a
large inventory of props, costumes, and scenic elements, you may be able to pull items from stock rather than creating everything from scratch. Likewise, if you do not have a highly talented scenic artist on staff and your design requires intricate painting, then you might have to budget more money to pay a specialist. People and their skills are a very important resource to consider. Labor and materials consume the bulk of funding reserved for production, and labor costs often make up 50-60\% of those funds.

Resources also include things such as the theatre space in which you will be performing. Many small companies rent a theatre to perform their works. These companies must consider and minimize the amount of time they occupy the rental facility in order to maximize their budgets. Careful preplanning of the use of time in the space can help immensely in these situations.

When considering a rental space for a production, the presence or absence of all resources, like lighting and sound equipment, should be considered since they can be expensive to rent. Ideally, some of your production design team will be able to tour the space in person before working on their designs. You should always ask for copies of any scaled plans or other technical specifications that are available.

Your checklist might include:

- Does the space have a lighting control system? What type and capability?
- Does the space have a sound system? What type and capability?
- Does the space provide back stage communication via headsets?
- Is there a stage monitor in the dressing room areas?
- Is there a load-in door or loading dock?
- What is the size of the smallest opening (door etc.) that items must load-in through?
- How many patrons does the space seat (i.e. how many tickets can I sell)?
- Does it provide disability access/accommodations?
- How is the sound quality in the space? Is there echo, hollow sounding, or sound leaks from surrounding areas?
- What size is the stage (including playing area and wing space)?
- How many performers can the dressing rooms accommodate? How secure is this area?
- What style electrical connectors does the lighting system require? Will adaptor cables be required?
- What types of playback media or formats does the sound system support?

Remember, anything the venue does not provide will need to be brought in and set up for a performance, which will add to the budget in rentals, materials, labor, and time.

Time, funding, and resources are all considered in putting together a production schedule. Typically, a master production schedule for a season of productions is developed by a team of people, including the artistic director, managing director,
company manager, and technical director. The technical director further develops a **build schedule** for each individual production to ensure productions are realized on time and within budget.

Shops base their schedules on dates of completion for each item as well as on a concept of “lead time.” Lead time refers to the amount of time necessary for completion and can be broken down into phases to reach that end. A technical director may break down each individual piece required in a show design in order to consider all the phases the piece must go through and the scheduling requirements of each of those phases onto a large spreadsheet. The painters need to begin their work around the same time as the carpenters begin construction, so unless something from stock is available for painting, the first items to be built may need to include things that require the attention of the painters. Careful coordination of both deadlines and workflow are crucial to a successful build schedule.

When companies produce multiple shows, their production schedule must carefully consider use of space for each production. Overlapping productions can put a strain on limited rehearsal and shop spaces, as well as on personnel fulfilling multiple responsibilities. The production stage manager oversees the schedule and use of rehearsal spaces and support services for those spaces during the season.

**For Further Exploration**
