An Introduction to TECHNICAL THEATRE

by Tal Sanders
An Introduction to Technical Theatre
In order for a theatrical production to run smoothly and efficiently, there must be some sort of hierarchy or reporting structure. The stage crew’s organizing force is the stage manager. While crews may receive input on their jobs from designers, directors, and even cast members, they should remember the stage manager is the captain of their ship. The entire company comes together in order to produce an experience for an audience, and, as the stage manager is in charge of interfacing all of the elements of that experience, they must be the one to lead both the process and the people involved in it.

As a member of the stage crew, you may be asked to be on a variety of sub-crews for a production. Your crew may have a head technician who leads your group, such as a head electrician, lead dresser, or master flyperson. If so, you may do most of your reporting through them as they in turn report to the stage manager.

You may be asked to wear a headset for communication during the show. If so, know that many people need to use the same system to conduct the show properly and vocal traffic should always be minimal to keep the lines clear. If you are receiving cues via the headset, you should receive a series of calls for your cue. If you are running a manual or effects board on a production, and there are long stretches of time between cues, you may receive a warning call from the stage manager to tell you that you have a cue coming up soon. The response they require back from you may depend on their own personal needs or on the timing of the other cue traffic, but typically a response of “warned” will suffice to let them know you are ready. The next cue you hear from the stage manager is “stand-by,” and the typical response is “standing by.” Stand-by cues are given to all operators during a show. The final cue you should receive is a description of the cue or cue number followed by the word “go.” The word “go” is the actual directive to take your action at that time. Stage managers will often pause just before the word “go” to place it correctly within the stage action. Once you have finished your action, the stage manager may request that you add a response to let them know your action is “complete.”

If you are in a position that only works during scene changes or other specific moments in the show, you may spend quite a bit of time backstage in the dark,
waiting for your action. It is tempting sometimes to begin offstage conversations or to become involved with some distraction. However, this should be avoided, as all backstage sounds distract from the onstage action, and can cause you to miss a cue that requires your attention. It is best to remember what we are all there to do our part to support the action of the performance and the audience's experience.

You may be asked to wear all black clothing or “blacks” if you have a backstage job on a show. This allows you to better blend into the masking and to be less visible during blackouts if you need to cross the stage. Be sure your clothing is fully black to blend in well.

Technical rehearsals can be very long and can seem boring. Hours may be spent on short moments in the show. Though your attention is required, bring something to read and a way to keep hydrated. Since rehearsals run long, everyone needs breaks to visit bathrooms and drink water. Make sure the stage manager always knows where you are if you need to leave the room so the rehearsal does not come to a halt due to your absence.

During the run of a production be sure to arrive on time for your call, sign in if there is a sheet setup by the stage manager intended for tracking people, and start checking that everything you handle is in place and working for the show. Your stage manager will develop their own system to check-in with all departments to ensure everything is ready for the performance. Remember that standard production etiquette dictates a shift crew does not enter the stage post-performance to reset or clear the stage until the audience has emptied from the house. This, of course, might be altered if a particularly timely or long cleanup or reset is required.

Theatre is and should be fun. It is a great to become part of a team with a larger goal, but the fun comes from being dedicated to its purpose and to the work it involves. Presenting art is not easy, nor should it be. If it were easy, then there would not be anything special about being really good at it.

Have fun being good!