



Educational Reform Tech Theatre is a CTE Subject

It is well documented that CTE (Career and Technical Education) provides high school students with an education where they are fully present. In fact many high schools now require that all students take at least one credit of CTE. The reasons for this have become evident. CTE courses, despite their inherent hazards - such as woodshop, culinary arts, welding, agriculture, business, biotechnology and so much more – employ students in the active engagement that enhances increases in memory, knowledge, communication and more. The benefits of this type of learning are so apparent that this methodology is now being integrated into more traditional classroom curriculums.

Paradoxically though, despite the fact that there are over 13,000 high schools in the US and the trend is for many school districts to build state-of-the-art performing arts centers on their high school campuses, Technical Theatre (tech theatre) has been the poor, if not ignored, relation of the CTE realm. As an example, a search of Washington State's "2002 Safety Guide for Career and Technical Education" for the words "counterweight" and "hoist" – both as major safety issues in a school theatre as the power saw in woodshop or a Bunsen burner in the bio-med lab are - nothing came up for "counterweight", and only non-theatre applications came up for "hoist". On top of these all too common omissions, not only do too many educators and administrators dismiss Drama as "playing" in the theatre, but there is a misconception that tech theatre is something the acting students do. While some acting students will run tech in plays in order to remain involved if they don't get cast, tech theatre is not a "performing" art, and most vocational tech theatre students would prefer not to perform.

Because of these misconstructions tech theatre is not a learning experience in the eyes of many, which is nothing further from reality. Not only is tech theatre a subject of its own, but it is a CTE – and STEM – subject, and as such tech theatre is inherently multi-dimensional learning. Tech theatre education is not only for experience's sake. Tech theatre is a vocation. And it's a vocation that is the backbone of our society. Students involved in tech theatre in our schools are our future grips for our movies, producers of our favorite TV shows, editors for our scientific documentaries, sound technicians at our radio stations, not to mention our Olympics organizers, and our football half time show designers and technicians. According to The CheatSheet's website, Americans spend more money per year on entertainment than they do on sports. In fact, the school gymnastics star and the school soccer star are much more likely to end up in a movie than in the Olympics. The skills students learn by participating aren't learned by sitting in a classroom, or by competing against each other. Tech theatre provides a meaningful educational experience, which doesn't rely on role-playing, simulations or fashioned workshops. These are tangible, real life results, which incorporate Whole Learning (see Whole Learning article). And concurrently, while not every high school tech theatre student will want to pursue tech theatre as a vocation, strengthening one part of the elephant will lead to a stronger elephant, to the benefit of all.

Tech theatre is a collaborative process within which personalized learning needs are met. What a lot of people don't realize is that within the specialty of tech theatre, there are many specialties. A costume designer, a sound technician and a lighting technician are different skills and mindsets. Tech theatre is a diverse learning environment where individual learning styles work together to create a common goal - or you can think of a play or musical as an 'object' - on which the students focus their attention. In addition, tech theatre is a creative process in which students are allowed to make mistakes. Not only that, it's a collaborative process with the teacher, in which the teacher is allowed to make mistakes. Students learn by seeing other people make mistakes and appropriately deal with them and recover from them. In

educational tech theatre students are also allowed to challenge a teacher, and this inherent collaboration 'disrupts', if you will, the process, which creates an expansive experience for the teacher and student alike. It's a collaborative learning environment that values questions, new ideas, tangents, and welcomes diversity.

But still there remains a disconnect between high school education and the real world. Tech theatre is a CTE subject, acting is not. If one were to critically evaluate the perspectives of tech theatre education in our society today, one would find that there is a nationwide flaw in the way most high school theatres provide tech theatre education. Contemporary high school theatres are too often staffed with 'one-person shows'; usually a Drama teacher, who has been well trained in acting, directing and literature, but who, despite having taken a few required classes in college, has no training in educational tech theatre. And school administrators, who have no knowledge of how educational tech theatre operates, believe that it is the Drama teacher's job to teach tech as well as acting.

The current actuality is that this is a flawed educational system. About 4,000 high school theatre teachers subscribe to *Teaching Theatre* magazine and over 3,000 high schools are listed as subscribers to *Stage Directions* magazine, and a common theme in articles and forums is how Drama teachers can teach tech theatre without having had any formal training themselves. In fact recently, a professional set designer colleague of mine posed the question on the EdTA (Educational Theatre Association) forum "how well do you feel you were trained in set design during your drama teacher program?" His findings – that while less than a third of the Drama teachers responding indicated they felt well trained, over two thirds indicated that they were currently charged with teaching set design. My own informal research concurs. In the online course that I myself teach in High School Theatre Management, I have found that 75% of my students – primarily high school Drama teachers – are running their whole Drama department on their own without much technical background and without any technical assistance.

This is why there is a fundamental need to reform how the nation's high schools are running their educational theatre programs today. We need to differentiate the benefits and needs of tech theatre as a CTE subject; independent from acting, directing and literature.

In order for change to come about, it is essential that two things happen:

1. High school administrators recognize that tech theatre is not acting, and if they have a theatre facility on their campus it must be appropriately staffed by a highly qualified CTE certified teacher, and professional theatre technicians for each technical specialty.
2. Universities reform their theatre degree programs and teacher training programs, and not represent a teacher as qualified to teach tech, who is an acting/directing/literature teacher without any technical qualifications beyond the requirement to take one introductory course.

A theatre is a theatre, whether in the educational setting or The Met in New York. The same theatrical process, hazards, collaboration, and creativity apply. Tech theatre is an inherently meaningful educational experience, which can lead to valid vocational occupations and related professions.