



**Safety in the High School Theatre**  
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Does your high school theatre have a Safety Manual? Employers are required by law to provide safety manuals, so your school theatre already has one, right? Plus, your school district administration are legally required to enforce OSHA and other safety standards for its facilities, so you're safe, right? What about Entertainment Industry standards, those exist specifically for the entertainment world, so you're covered there too, right?

Well, sort of.... While a workplace safety manual covers a myriad of safety precautions, most work places don't have a fly system and a fog machine. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), as the name suggests, applies only to people in "occupations" - in other words "employees". OSHA does not necessarily apply to students, volunteers and outside users of school facilities (depending on what state you are in). So while the Drama teacher isn't allowed to stand within 6' of an open orchestra pit, your students, parent volunteers and little girls in tutus from the local ballet school might be? Nor are Entertainment Industry standards specifically applicable to education. But, although all of these don't always apply to the educational setting, you should act as if they all apply to everyone who is using your high school theatre in any capacity, and – you should also have high school theatre specific safety policies and procedures in place.

A theatre is like a construction site – in the dark. I'm sure you could list off many of the dangers in your high school theatre but here's a few universal ones:

- ✓ Students moving hundreds of pounds of weight over the heads of other students – without safety helmets on.
- ✓ Students in the catwalks and beams 30' in the air - without fall protection.
- ✓ Students working with electricity - without a license.
- ✓ Students using tools and power tools - without formal training and assessment.
- ✓ Students using hazardous chemicals such as foam and fog - without occupational-grade protection.
- ✓ Students at the edge of an open orchestra pit with a concrete floor 8' below - without a safety rail.
- ✓ Students being taught and supervised by parents and volunteers - without formal qualifications.

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The inescapable fact is that these dangers, and more, are inherent in any school theatre. Nowhere in the 'real world' are people - let alone minors - legally allowed to work in these conditions without stringent safety policies and procedures, and without liability protection for the institution. And often times students are working under these conditions without their parents' knowledge or explicit permission.

Sadly though, even if you are trying to do the right thing, you may not get much credit, or even cooperation, from your school district administration - especially if a safety policy or procedure you want to implement costs any money - because they believe that the district safety manual sufficiently covers all of their facilities. When I turned in a newly compiled Theatre Safety Manual to the supervising administrator at one high school theatre, the only comment I got back was that he didn't like having to read ALL CAPS, and so I should change those words to sentence case. I'm not convinced he did any more but give it a cursory glance.

So why do school administrations allow students to work under these conditions? It's because, most district administrators sitting at desks don't have the discernment to understand or assess the dangers inherent in theatres like they understand the dangers inherent while children are swimming or woodworking. This is because most people have had some real life experience with the dangers of swimming and power tools, but - through no fault of their own - they have no life experiences with theatres, simply because when they go to a production as an audience member, all they see is the magical outcome, not the dark backstage world of power tools, electricity, heights, heavy lifting, ladders, scissor lifts and the movement of overhead weights, to name but a few. Consequently they do not provide, or see the value in, safety manuals explicitly for the school theatre.

As well as not recognizing the physical hazards, another misconception of school district administration is that we don't need professionals to supervise students doing this sort of work, and that a school district doesn't need to spend money hiring highly qualified, professional theatre management and technicians. The misconception is that the Drama/Band/Choir teacher should be able to handle their own events in their own theatre. Nothing is further from the truth.

In the theater setting, even if a qualified teacher is teaching and supervising, what district administration doesn't understand is that during a rehearsal or a production there are students in the booth, students in the house, students on stage, students in the galleries, students in the catwalks, students back stage right, students back stage left, students in the scene shop, students in the storage areas, students in the costume shop, students in the dressing rooms, students in the classroom and students in the lobby. For a straight play the average amount of cast and crew can be 30 or so students, for a musical the average amount of cast and crew can be 60 or more students, for a choir or band performance there can be 30 to 60 students involved. Often times there is one teacher or guest director who is meant to somehow be overseeing all of these students in all of these areas all at the same time. One teacher is not legitimately allowed to

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have more than 30 or so students sitting in seats in a contained classroom, so how is it that one teacher is allowed to supervise 30 students in a subject with such a varied knowledge base and in such a physically demanding environment, who are spread out into several rooms and spaces? Plus, in the case of a school variety show, often times this can be a student's first and only time in your theatre, and those students are certainly not aware of the dangers and therefore the protocols.

As well as the teacher or director, students should be supervised by at least one lighting technician, one sound technician and one rigging/backstage technician. Safety is the most fundamental concern in the theatre, even before the education of students. Not only should the space not be overseen by one teacher, or by parent volunteers who don't always take theatre safety seriously, but no user (a district or outside event) should have free reign of the theatre without trained professionals present. If that were not the case, then once the students are properly trained how to use the equipment and tools in a wood shop or welding class, why have any adults watch over them? Once kids know how to swim, why not just have volunteers sitting in the lifeguard chairs? Once the high school football team has practiced enough, isn't any teacher ok to coach them? School districts would never take that approach to safety in those disciplines, so why do they regarding theatre safety?

Not only is it imperative to staff a high school theatre with qualified professionals, but also to create a safety program, enforce safety rules and provide a Safety Manual on site. That way if something does happen, you can provide documentation that you have been doing everything possible to mitigate dangerous situations. This applies to senior high school theatres, junior high school theatres, middle school theatres, and even some elementary schools that have theatres. Even if your performance space is an "auditorium" or "multi-purpose room" school theatre safety applies to you too! Regardless of the size or type of your theatre and the age of your students, it's essential to create and provide a School Theatre Safety Manual and to enforce school theatre safety rules to everyone who uses your school theatre.

There is no doubt that it is time consuming to create a Theatre Safety program and then to document it all in a Safety Manual, amid the shows, events, production meetings, repairs, maintenance, scheduling and the myriad of other administrative tasks involved in running a high school theatre. But, I urge you to get started and work on it when you can, because your next accident can happen tomorrow. Don't let the show go on without a Safety Manual!

Your Safety Manual should be a comprehensive policies and procedures document of safety standards intended to control and minimize the hazards typically found in your school theatre. It should address proper training, equipment maintenance, the dissemination of appropriate information, and enforcement of policies and procedures in order to maintain a safe and healthy environment for everyone in your school theatre. Every high school theatre has its own unique operations, but here are a few fairly universal topics that should be in your Safety Manual.

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## **POLICIES**

- General Safety Policies
- Theatre Safety for Performers
- Safety Policies for Theatre Technicians and Student Crew
- Responsibilities of the Outside Event User
- Site Supervision Policies for School-day Events
- Safety Rules for Workshops (scene shop and costume shop)
- Noise Level Policy
- Work Lights Policy
- Pit Cover Removal and Replacement Policies
- Fog Machine Policy

## **PROCEDURES**

- Theatre Safety Announcements for Classes, Auditions, Rehearsals and other Non-performance use of the Theatre by district staff during the school day.
- Counterweight System Operation Guidelines
- Counterweighting Guidelines
- Procedures and Safety for House Management
- Announcements to Audience
- Strike Check List
- Liability Waiver for Students, Volunteers, and Outside Users

## **DOCUMENTATION**

- Copies of Signed Waiver Forms
- Lists of Students Who Have Been Trained To Use Theatre Equipment
- Equipment Incident and Repair Records
- Completed 'Work Party' Maintenance Lists
- Maintenance Schedule
- MSDS Sheets

Some of this content may seem a bit repetitive, but your Safety Manual is essentially a compilation of rules for a wide variety of uses of your space. Although everyone needs to know not to jump off the edge of the stage and not to eat food in the house, house managers don't need to know the rules for using power tools and set builders don't have to worry about crowd management. So while each section of your Safety Manual will repeat common safety rules, it will also stipulate safety rules specific to each area's function, which allows people to specifically learn the safety rules and requirements of their own tasks, without having to read a whole tome in order to weed out what's important to them. Yet at the same time the Safety Manual acts as a "reference manual" just in case the set building student has to go and help out in the lobby on opening night.

In addition, having a variety of handouts and signs that communicate each section of your Safety Manual is essential. You should post safety signs and notices everywhere around your theatre – backstage, in the booth, in the house, in the lobby - wherever people will be. Some of the notices you should have posted in your theatre include:

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- Food and drinks policy
- General safety rules
- Workshop rules
- Counterweight system policies
- Authorized entrance notifications (who can come into specific areas, such as the catwalks)
- Open pit notification and procedures
- Departure checklist (for the last person who leaves the theatre)

Even then it's not enough to have a Safety Manual and handouts and signs. You have to train all users of your high school theatre, whether they be performers, student crew, parent volunteers or outside users. Following are some suggestions for trainings in the high school theatre.

### Theatre Safety Talk for all Performing Arts Students

Once a year hold a basic Theatre Safety talk that all Performing Arts students must attend, whether they are in drama, band, choir, a performance club or tech. This training should be held near the start of the school year, before any performances have begun. This is a general safety overview that includes rules such as no jumping off the stage, don't touch the cyc, no visiting friends and family members may come back stage, if the doors to the catwalks is open it doesn't mean you can go up there, and so on. I tell the students that they, as the Performing Arts students, need to be safe, but also that they are stewards of their theatre, so that when a non-Performing Arts student uses the space - say for a variety show or school pageant - that they must act as role models and peer-mentors.

### Student Crew Trainings

Students who are going to be using the theatre at a deeper level – the tech crew for school productions – need to have specific training. All students should be taught not to wipe their hands on the flame retardant covered drapes as they walk by and not to enter a door just because it is unlocked, but those who are actually operating your fly system, or going up into your catwalks or beams to operate the followspots, or push sets around in the dark need specific training and practice. These trainings should be held shortly before your tech week for each show begins. Not too far out so that they forget what you've taught them when it comes time to use the equipment, but not too close to the first day of tech that the training is rushed. You will need full use of the stage, so on the day(s) of your training the actors will have to rehearse elsewhere.

### Scene Shop Trainings

Most likely your state has a Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, but that doesn't mean all school districts enforce those requirements – this is especially true for theatre, because there is little understanding about the dangers. It is likely that your CTE program stipulates that students may use the hand tools and power tools only if there is a CTE teacher present and if the students have been trained and tested. Otherwise, an adult has to do most of the work. Regardless of whether you have a CTE program,

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students should be trained and tested at the CTE requirement level - there should be a specific training for any student who will use hand and power tools in the shop. Although I understand the practicalities, I do not advocate students doing anything in a scene shop without a CTE teacher present.

### Set Building Workshop for Volunteers

Another group it is imperative to teach theatre safety and protocols to is your parent volunteers, especially the set builders. Mothers and fathers who want to volunteer in a high school scene shop usually have some sort of background and interest in construction. When I started working at one theatre there were a group of dads who were already building a house set for "The Sound of Music". And that's just what they did – they built a house on stage. That thing was never going to budge. Throughout the year they were able to repaint it and use it as a factory in "The Pajama Game" and later a community variety show used it as a brothel!

This isn't standard practice in set building though, we were just lucky with the choices of shows that year. There are techniques to building sets so that they can be modular, portable and also safe to stand on. If you have parents who want to build sets, it is best to instigate an annual set building and rigging workshop, which is mandatory for anyone (teachers, parents and students) who will be building sets to attend. Teach about modular set pieces, general theatre construction techniques for flats, platforms, stairs, etc, and how to safely hang drops and flats using the correct rigging hardware with the correct techniques (although a rigging technician must be present to supervise any hanging of scenery). If you don't have anyone on your theatre staff who can teach this, hire a professional from the community. Spending the money on training set builders will be less than spending the money on lawsuits down the road. Consider the cost of hiring a professional as a form of insurance.

### Outside Users

It's likely that your school's Drama department and other school groups are not the only users of your theatre. Many high school theatres operate as "road houses" and have a variety of transient users that need constant monitoring and supervision. Therefore, you should have written safety policies that you provide to them before they arrive for their event, and you should do a short safety training when they arrive. In reality it may not be practical to get everyone in one place at one time – for instance most dance schools tech their little ones' dances first so that they can go home, and dancers are coming and going all throughout the tech rehearsal period – so in that case require that the Outside User make each participant aware of the safety rules. Have them sign a document that says they agree to this and other requirements of using your theatre, that way if an accident or incident occurs you have proof you did the best you could to provide them with the safety information.

You may have noticed that people don't always read notices, or sit down with a cup of coffee to spend a pleasurable afternoon pouring over a Safety Manual. For liability purposes, you should also have students and other users who are using dangerous equipment sign a safety waiver. No matter what safety precaution trainings you have

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and what notices you post, and how many liability waivers are signed, there is always that litigious parent. A parent's signature on a liability waiver is not necessarily going to stop them from suing the school district if their child is hurt, but it shows that you have done your best to inform the parent of what activities the student will be involved in and the precautions they must take, and the trainings you have provided. One such incident happened while my daughter was in tech theatre at her high school (where there was no Safety Manual or liability waiver). A student was walking backstage in the dark and broke her ankle. Of course the parents sued the school district. I believe this was settled out of court, but, like some court rulings about people falling into orchestra pits, students and their parents have to accept the dangers of working in a theatre. I am a parent myself, so I get where parents are coming from, but the theatre is not a safe place, and if you want your child to live in a bubble, you should not allow them to work in their high school theatre.

And finally, it is important to document every accident, incident, and equipment maintenance performed in your theatre. Your school district probably has report forms, however you should keep additional specialized documentation in your Safety Manual (or at least indicate in your Safety Manual where this documentation can be found). This record can be in any format that you create, however at least the following information should be included:

- Date of Incident/Accident/Maintenance.
- Time of Incident/Accident/Maintenance.
- Location of the Incident/Accident/Maintenance.
- Person injured/equipment broken.
- How the injury or incident happened.
- Witnesses.
- Actions taken at the time.
- Further steps taken to resolve the issue.

And remember – no detail is too detailed. That said, regardless of detailed details, you can't possibly anticipate every accident and incident. And, as said before, even if a student's parent has signed a waiver allowing their student to use that power tool or fly that cyc, it doesn't mean they won't sue the school district if their child gets hurt. But remember, it's called Risk "Management" not "Risk Elimination". There is no way to completely eliminate risks in a theatre - however you must attempt to at all times. The National Safety Council defines safety as "the control of recognized hazards to attain an acceptable level of risk".

In order to do so it is imperative that you provide appropriate supervision, have operational policies and procedures that safeguard personal safety, protect property, and mitigate liability in your high school theatre, and these should pertain to all users. It's also imperative that you train your students to appropriately and safely use inherently dangerous equipment and how to behave in inherently dangerous situations. If you can show that you have provided the safest possible environment, complete with policies, procedures, trainings, notices, supervision and documentation of acceptance of risk, then you can mitigate liability, and more importantly perhaps prevent what could have been a more serious accident from happening. Why standby, when your next accident could happen tomorrow. Go!

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