

The Show Must Go On . . . Safely



No other school department poses a higher risk to student safety than the theater department. Because theater classes and programs are not held in regular classrooms, school district safety coordinators and administrators may overlook them during their inspections. When was the last time your district's safety representative took a walk backstage, through the storage areas, or up on the catwalk?

Unlike other areas of the school, theater settings offer many potential hazards: falls, fire, power tools and equipment, storage constraints, poor housekeeping, egress concerns, chemical exposures, and rigging. Students can be seriously injured in these areas of the school. I have visited districts where students have amputated fingers on electric saws; where a construction set collapsed, sending eight stu-

dents to the emergency room; and where a fall through an open trapdoor left a student a quadriplegic.

The theatrical productions themselves can also be risky. District personnel have allowed students to participate in extremely dangerous activities without realizing the potential outcome. Special-effect activities—such as pyrotechnics and “flying” students across the stage in plays such as *Peter Pan* without the expertise to ensure everyone's safety—pose unnecessary hazards for the students, as well as the audience.

Every school district should have a safety manual with written policies and procedures for every department. Local community organizations that may use your theater should also receive the safety policies and procedures for the theatrical department. Short safety reviews and meetings increase

By Jodi L. Traas

the safety awareness of the students and volunteers. Risk management inspections and documentation should be maintained.

Certain points should be considered to ensure a safe environment and a safe production.

Supervision

The theater and auditorium are not frequented daily by those outside of the theater department. Therefore, they are quite attractive to students who want to “hang out” during lunch or unscheduled classroom time. Students who are involved in theatrical programs also spend a lot of time before and after school working on their productions—sometimes without supervision.

I have witnessed students operating saws, climbing ladders, and working up on catwalks without supervision. Allowing students to conduct such activities unsupervised is not only unsafe, it is an invitation for liability claims should an unfortunate incident occur.

Student safety remains our first priority and proper supervision is a key component. Theater instructors should have professional training in theatrical operations. They should also be aware of their supervisory responsibilities whenever students are in the area.

Falls and Falling Objects

The potential for slipping, tripping, and falling exists in almost any area of the theater. Students can fall from ladders, scaffolding, high-reach lifts, and catwalks with missing guardrails; through open trapdoors; and into orchestra pits.

All ladders should be examined to ensure stability and general safe condition. Students need to be trained in the proper setup and use of ladders, scaffolding, and high-reach lifts. Sets should be designed with structural integrity and stability. Cover all floor openings and follow Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards and state laws.

Student falls are not the only hazard. Loose items can tumble from overhead storage areas, catwalks, or lighting fixtures. Ensure that lighting is secured to the guardrail with a safety cable. Remove all loose materials from the walkway of the catwalk grid so that they cannot be knocked off accidentally. Only a qualified person should operate rigging weights. Weights, cables, and ropes should be inspected regularly as part of the safety policies and procedures. Lock the rigging when not in use to limit horseplay and access by inexperienced users.

Chemical Hazards

In any science class, the overall risk of using a particular chemical should be the first part of the lesson plan. This is also true in the theater department. Chemicals are often used in creating props and special effects. If necessary, students and staff should use personal protective equipment with particular products and chemicals. They should also

learn the hazards of and safety precautions for the materials being used.

A safety data sheet should be maintained for every hazardous material and kept in a location that is readily accessible to staff and students. All chemicals and products should be labeled properly to allow quick identification of health, fire, reactivity, or other hazards. Depending on the materials used during the production preparation, an eye-wash station and shower may be necessary. Provide metal storage cabinets to store all flammables properly.

Woodworking Equipment

The wide use of table saws, radial arm saws, band saws, and other machinery for set construction is obviously a great concern for safety professionals. In Wisconsin, students in technical education classes must pass a written exam for each piece of equipment they intend to operate. Generally, this practice *does not* carry over to our theater departments.

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High-powered saws should be inspected to ensure that proper guards are in place according to OSHA standards or state laws. Do not allow parents or community members to donate their personal machinery for the production; it may not be in good working condition or have the proper safety controls and guards. Ensure that the students who will be operating the machinery know how to use it properly. Don't forget the safety goggles.

Storage and Housekeeping

Access to catwalks, lighting, and other hazardous areas should be controlled to prevent students from reaching them unnecessarily. These areas are often student “hideaways.”

Often, theater directors want to keep more items for a future production than the storage room can safely house. Store costumes, lights, and props on racks suitably designed for their weight and size. Eliminate makeshift pulley systems for raising props and furniture to elevated storage areas. Hoists and other lifts should be properly designed to accommodate the weight of props and other items to be stored. Your local fire department may also want to view these storage areas for fire hazards and emergency evacuation.

Maintain cleanliness throughout the entire theater area, storage rooms, and catwalks, not just the auditorium. Clearly designate permanent aisles by painting yellow lines to frame the walkway. Keep aisles clear of obstructions to allow safe access and egress.

Fire Prevention

Stage curtains must be made from flame-resistant materials and tested and inspected annually by a professional company. Theater instructors and directors should know how to properly use a fire extinguisher in case of an emergency.

Given ample notice, your local fire department will likely conduct an inspection before the event. This inspection will help ensure compliance with safety codes and federal and state laws.

Students should be trained in the emergency evacuation procedures before each production. Evacuation procedures should always be posted for the attendees of any event in the theater or auditorium.

Electrical Issues

Power and extension cord inspections should be included in the safety policies and procedures. Only a qualified electrician following the National Electrical Code can make the necessary repairs or changes to equipment and lighting.

Resources

Theater and auditorium safety for the students, staff, and community members requires commitment from the administration, the theatrical staff, and the students. The show can go on safely if the proper safety policies and procedures are in place and adhered to before the start of the production and throughout the event.

If an incident occurs, it should be properly investigated and reported, and corrective action should be taken to prevent a similar future incident.

Many resources are available to help ensure that your show goes on safely. For example, the International Secondary Education Theater Safety Association is dedicated to the health and safety of the students, administrators, and instructors who work in secondary private and public schools in the performing arts programs, productions, and activities. A wealth of information is available on their Web site, <http://www.isetsa.org>. ■

Jodi L. Traas is senior risk management consultant for the Aegis Corporation in Brookfield, Wisconsin. Aegis Corporation specializes in the development and implementation of association and alternative risk-financing programs, as well as providing a full-line of business insurance coverage.

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11401 North Shore Drive, Reston, VA 20190-4200
Phone: 703/478-0405
Fax: 703/478-0205
Home Page: www.asbointl.org
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