

A few years ago I got hyperconscious of safety in community theater. People who pursue a hobby for a few hours a week commonly don't regard it as posing any hazard to their health, and commonly they are right. But I've had things fall on my head (painful) and dropped things on other people (less painful); one time I nearly coldcocked a cast member with a big ladder, and on the same show a kid almost took himself out by running under a moving scenery piece. So I began reading and making notes, and in the end I wrote up a lot of what I learned.

This safety bulletin never became an official publication of Town & Gown Players, but I held onto it and now offer it to you in this form.

**I created this bulletin as a way of sharing experience. You must not take my statements for official rules, specifications or standards. What I say about strength and safety is based on observations, not on codes, regulations or standards. If you have not made observations of your own that enable you to evaluate the statements in this guide, you should consult other sources of information before going any further. You will understand that I cannot guarantee your results and that I cannot accept liability for any damage or injury that results from your work, whether you follow my suggestions to the letter or not. Follow the manufacturer's instructions when using any power or other tool, and observe all safety precautions found in those instructions.**

(Not an official Town & Gown Players publication)

## SAFETY BULLETIN

*To the director and staff:* You are responsible for maintaining safe conditions in the theater for your cast, crew and audience. Please note the following points. In case of conflicts, please discuss your needs with T&G's technical manager/facilities chairman.

- **Please make this safety circular available to all members of your staff, cast and crew.**

*To the cast and crew:* Town & Gown and your show staff will attempt to maintain safe conditions for your work in and around the theater. Your cooperation is essential. Preventable injuries and illnesses during a production are no fun for anyone. While this circular lists some key practices, it cannot address every aspect of safety in the theater—act like an intelligent, prudent grown-up!

- **Always put the first aid kit back in the right place so that the next victim can find it.**

### 1. THINGS THAT WILL CUT AND BRUISE YOU

#### **Power saws, drills, sanders and other electrical tools are dangerous even when used correctly.**

- Wear eye protection when using power tools.
- Check all around you before starting a cut or hole; many tools will ruin the fresh paint or throw splinters at your colleagues.
- Take the time to learn how safety features (blade guards and so forth) work. Let them work the way they are designed to.
- If you don't know whether you know how to use a tool, *you don't know how*.
- Don't booger up the grounding prongs on power cords.
- When setting down any tool, be sure it is OFF and STOPPED with guards in position, and not in someone else's way.

#### **Unpowered tools are dangerous too.**

- Chisels, drills, nails and screws will poke a hole in you or anyone nearby if you use them carelessly. So will braces, hardware, knives, clamps, framing squares, pencils, ....

#### **Ladders are the most dangerous tools we keep around.**

- Don't climb a ladder when you're in the theater by yourself. Someone should be in a safe position on the deck just in case you need help.
- The top step of a stepladder is there to hold the legs together, not as a work platform or storage shelf.
- Climb only the *front* of the ladder, the side with steps. Our ladders are rated for only one climber at a time.
- If you hate working on ladders, you aren't the person we want up there.
- When working more than 3 feet off the ground on any ladder—lower than that if you are uncomfortable or have a complicated task to perform—always ask a colleague to steady the bottom.
- If you are steadying a ladder for another person, stay alert. The climber may get in trouble and need your help, or may accidentally drop something in your direction.
- Rather than carry tools and materials when climbing the ladder, consider tying a piece of clothesline to them, climbing up, and then hoisting the tools to you.

#### **Any change of floor level or slope creates a hazard.**

- Whether you're building, acting, dancing, or just wandering around, stay aware of your surroundings! Spraining your knee or biting your tongue can spoil the whole day.

- If you must leave an obstacle for a moment, mark it with a light, sign, or other stopper.
- When possible, provide good light on steps, platform edges and so forth, or mark them

with glow tape or paint. A drape hanging directly against the edge of a platform is especially dangerous.

- A “ghost light” can help prevent injuries.

### **Heavy, clumsy moving objects can injure you and others.**

- Enlist a crew big enough to carry the flat, platform, step unit, ladder or other equipment without straining anyone’s back.
- At least one person should be able to see in front of the moving equipment.
- Call “*Heads!*” loudly and frequently when moving heavy equipment.
- Try not to position equipment by supporting it on your foot.

- When heavy objects have to be moved on stage, as during scene shifts, keep your fingers out of the cracks.
- In addition to watching out in front, you should look **up** when moving tall equipment that could knock lighting instruments down on your head. Fortunately, the *least* common cause of injuries at T&G is horseplay on stage. Keep it that way!

## **2. THINGS THAT WILL BURN AND SHOCK YOU**

- Avoid having open flames on stage. There are a hundred substitutes—use one of them.
- There is a reason we call it a *hot* glue gun.
- Step outside to smoke, especially during set calls when carpentry (sawdust) and painting (solvents) are going on.
- Wear rubber-soled shoes when working with power tools and other electrical equipment.
- We use three-wire cords for electric power, except for low-wattage running lights and

certain set and prop items. Use two-wire zip cords only with the approval of your construction chief.

- If you see an electric cord with no apparent function, point it out to your construction chief. Unused cords should be removed, coiled and put in the tool storage area, but what looks “unused” may be there for a good reason. What’s more, in some cases removing the cord may present more of a safety hazard than the cord itself does.

## **3. THINGS THAT WILL BURN DOWN THE PLAYHOUSE**

- Avoid having open flames on stage or in the house.
- Unplug all heat-producing tools—hot glue gun, curling irons, etc.—before leaving the theater.
- Unplug any cord by grasping the plug, not the cord.
- Ordinarily we leave all lights turned off except the ghost light. Except as instructed by your technical director or stage manager, turn off lights by *switching* them, not unplugging them. Don’t flip the breakers to turn off work and house lights; that makes them nearly impossible to turn on in the dark, to say nothing of the safety problem.
- Learn where the fire extinguishers are and how to operate them.

- Turn low-wattage lights off at the switch or, better, at the breaker before changing bulbs. If a breaker blows, tell your construction chief—don’t simply try to pop it back on.
- Be careful not to hang draperies or locate scenery next to lighting instruments. Our draperies are treated with flame retardant, but that does not mean they will not eventually burn.
- If you find a damaged electrical cord, don’t use it! If it is already in service, notify your construction chief at once.
- Before you hang anything from the ceiling joists, get the approval of your construction chief. In general, don’t do it then either.
- When running drop cords or zip cords, keep them out of traffic ways. A cord can be

damaged and become a hazard if someone steps on it or puts a piece of scenery on it.

- Neatness counts when running wires for any purpose. If a wire is too long, coil the excess,

secure with electrical tape, and hang or stow in a secure place—your construction chief will say where. If the wire is too short, get a longer one; don't try to stretch or splice it.

#### **4. THINGS THAT WILL MAKE YOU REAL, REAL SICK**

**Town & Gown uses latex wall paint for scenery. When applied with brush or roller in a well-ventilated space, this paint does not present a serious health hazard. We also use white glue (Elmer's) or carpenter's glue. Follow the accepted practice.**

- Solvent vehicles in most other paints, including spray paints, can be a health hazard, and not just to the person applying them. Do not use non-latex paints without the approval of your construction chief.
- Go outdoors to apply spray paints. We do not have a proper spray booth or fume extraction system. Both overspray and evaporating solvent are objectionable inside the theater.
- Do not smoke near where spray paint is being applied.
- When painting indoors, open at least two doors to provide ample ventilation. In bad weather, open two doors anyway. Maintain ventilation until paint is dry.
- Don't eat paint, glue, dye or other substances used on set. If it's on your hand when you pick up your taco, you just ate it. Remember most lumber—and therefore most sawdust—

has preservatives, glues and other chemicals in it. Most pigments and dyes and many glues are **toxic**. Wash up frequently when using any of these substances, and be aware of when you can get exposed to them (sawdust settling in your coffee cup).

- Dyes other than Rit brand and similar household fabric dyes can be an *extremely grave health hazard*. Don't use them.
- Do not use bug killers or other chemicals in the theater until you have cleared this with T&G's technical manager/facilities chairman.
- If you have difficulty in breathing, become dizzy or nauseated, or have a nosebleed, **get out of the theater**. You may be having a bad reaction to some substance being used either properly or improperly. Tell your construction chief what the problem is. This is not something to be stoical about—your bravery could endanger someone else.

#### **5. THINGS THAT WILL HURT PEOPLE AROUND YOU**

**More than anything else, a bad attitude will hurt people. If you enjoy risks, go climb a rock. If you're invulnerable, sign up for the "Niagara Dreams" rafting vacation. This may be amateur theater, but your colleagues don't love it enough to suffer through your action or your failure to take proper precautions.**

- Set construction combines badly with beer, wine and other agents that affect judgment and coordination.

- Always put the first aid kit back in the right place so that the next victim can find it.

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