



# Working backstage: introducing the School Theatre Technician



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Theatres have long been part of many independent schools around the country, recognising the importance of performing arts for developing confidence, communication and team-work, as well as performing and backstage skills.

School theatres range from intimate studio venues to large 600-seat professional auditoria. There are schools with traditional historic theatres, to those with state-of-the-art new buildings. There are theatres held together on the smallest budget, to schools operating commercially, hosting visiting professional shows open to the local public. All lie at the heart of the whole school, bringing together students, teachers, parents and external visitors as a meeting place and shared amenity, showcasing the school to the wider community, and providing the best possible facilities for the presentation and teaching of drama and performing arts.

Productions require more than just performers. There is a whole team of backstage helpers involved with scenery construction, lighting, sound, stage management, rigging, props, costume and make-up. Gone are the days when keen sixth-formers would scramble up the rickety ladder and balance precariously on the scaffolding to reach those lights. It seems a shame, really, as many older technicians will tell you this is precisely how they started their love of theatre – at school, being left to run the show and learn for themselves.

However, these days this falls to the School Theatre Technician – a rare breed of theatre professional who

is asked to manage and maintain a working theatre within the demanding environment of a school – often single-handedly designing, co-ordinating and running several productions a year, plus supporting the drama teaching department, managing external lettings, organising meetings, fixing broken equipment and ensuring everything is safe. All with endless enthusiasm and energy, whilst encouraging the next generation of budding technicians, designers and performers to climb up that still rickety ladder (but now with method statement, risk assessment and safety harness, of course).

## WHAT DOES THE SCHOOL THEATRE TECHNICIAN DO?

In brief, school technicians usually manage, provide and supervise all aspects of theatre productions – lighting, sound, video, props, scenery, costumes, design, rigging, stage management – as well as supervising and training students who are interested in backstage work, supporting drama lessons and practical exams, and managing the theatre and drama facilities. Often, school theatres also host visiting professional shows, or are let out during school holidays.

As well as managing the school's theatre space(s) and running the extra-curricular school productions, school technicians often support the drama department with workshops, resources and guiding students through the technical options of GCSE and A-level, plus technical support for examined performance work. There is regular maintenance and testing to be done in the theatre, as well as the plethora of other school events which often

take place in the theatre – such as exams, discos, concerts, assemblies, parents’ receptions, exhibitions and external lettings.

Quite often, the technician also has other responsibilities around the school as well, such as IT or AV support. A typical day can be filled with department meetings, setting up a portable PA and projector for a small lecture, helping with a drama lesson, fixing a broken toilet door, rigging lights for a forthcoming show, taking ticket bookings, organising the student ‘backstage club’, setting up front-of-house, and then running the evening’s performance!

There are many schools who recognise this important role and will have their own dedicated theatre manager and sometimes one or more technicians in the largest of cases. Unfortunately, there are still plenty of schools who tend to only employ department technicians, or caretakers, and don’t always recognise that a theatre or performing arts technician perhaps requires greater skills (and working hours) than a typical classroom technician.

Working in a school theatre is a very rewarding job, but hours and expectations can be demanding – if you’re lucky, this is offset by school holidays or a higher salary, but not always – often relying on goodwill and dedication alone (which is a prerequisite for any school technician).

### SCHOOLS’ THEATRE SUPPORT GROUP

The Schools’ Theatre Support Group was founded in 2005 by three technicians from three schools with very different facilities. I was at Rugby School at the time, which has an attractive 1885 building which had been surprisingly well converted in 1975 to form a theatre with the seating cleverly switched from ‘end on’ to ‘side on’, giving an intimate ‘thrust’ stage which proved ideal for drama (but less so for musicals or larger shows). My co-founders were Gavin Short at The Leys in Cambridge, which is where I am now, and Hannah Grace, Theatre Manager at Felsted School in Essex. The Leys currently has a typical 1970s school hall with high stage and terrible sight-lines, but we’re on the verge of having a new theatre built, of which the school will be justifiably proud – as are a host of other schools with recently completed new buildings – Alleyns in London and Cheltenham Ladies College are two of the most well-known recently. Felsted’s theatre is a converted gymnasium, which makes an ideal studio-theatre, and is also typical of many school theatres.

School theatre technicians occupy an unique and often isolated situation, outside of regular theatre but with the same products, rules and problems. For this reason, the Schools’ Theatre Support Group (STSG) was founded to provide a mutually beneficial network

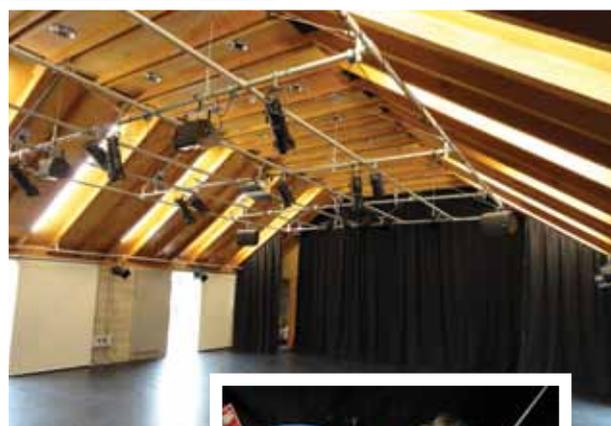
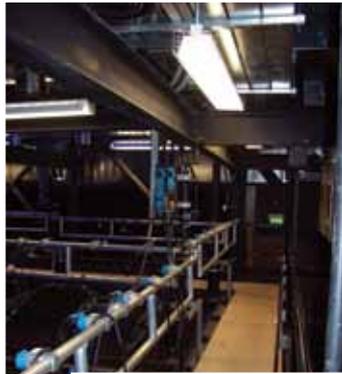
of school-based theatre professionals. Since then, the Group has grown to a steady membership of around 100 from a wide range of independent schools, state schools, colleges and universities around the country. The network allows members to share ideas and problems specific to school theatres, as well as keeping in contact with those working in a similar environment. The STSG has also proved to be a useful information resource for those teaching drama and theatre, or working with young people in other areas of theatre.

Regular activities include a popular biennial conference with workshops, seminars and social evening; meetings at major trade shows; visits to members’ schools; training courses and product demonstrations; and participating at the annual conference of the National Independent Schools’ Drama Association (NISDA) – which takes place over a long weekend in early June, bringing technicians together with our drama teaching colleagues. The Group also produces a newsletter and has its own internet forum.

Current projects include encouraging more students to consider a career in the backstage industry. There is still a lack of understanding and even a prejudice against theatre work in most careers departments. However, statistics claim that we will soon be short of skilled and qualified theatre technicians and designers, industry-wide. The Stage newspaper has already published a set of ‘e-books’ aimed at students, careers advisors and school libraries, whilst the National Skills Academy for Creative and Cultural (NSA-CC) runs regular ‘Offstage Choices’ events and publishes the ‘Get Into Theatre’ website. We are also investigating options for a skills-based reward scheme to acknowledge students’

technical skills at an extra-curricular level. Many school technicians already run ‘home made’ schemes of their own, but we are considering developing a standard set of criteria that will allow universities or employers to formally recognise the valuable experience and skills gained from often un-credited backstage work.

In conclusion, school theatres are an active and vibrant part of any school, but require the correct expertise and management to enable them to be run effectively and successfully. A theatre technician is an investment in providing a better experience to the students, supporting over-stretched colleagues, and safe-guarding the theatre building asset. The STSG can provide help and advice to its members, and is more than happy to help elsewhere if possible.



**For further information:**

W: [www.stsg.org.uk](http://www.stsg.org.uk)