Technical Theatre Curriculum, Training for High School Participants

By Dana W. Taylor

The National Core Arts Theatre Standards of 2014 represent the most comprehensive work in theatre education in the United States. In remarkable detail, these standards look at theatre through specific lenses of creating, performing, responding and connecting and how those focal points inform our learning and teaching.
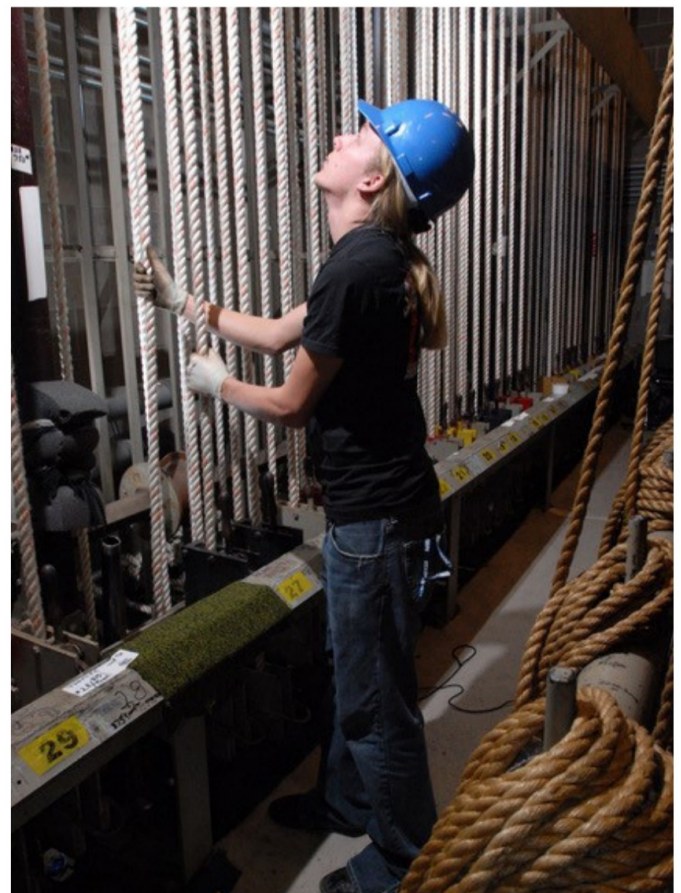
All of the standards are well-intentioned and well done, except for what it doesn't tell us when we read, "Create a complete design for a drama/theatre work that incorporates all elements of technology." The implication is that these elements should be taught, but what are they and how do we teach them? How do we ensure that theatre participants behind the scenes know how to perform their various technical tasks efficiently and safely?

HS Advanced TH: Cr1.1.111
a. Synthesize knowledge from a variety of dramatic forms, theatrical conventions, and technologies to create the visual composition of a drama/theatre work.
b. Create a complete design for a drama/theatre work that incorporates all elements of technology.
c. Integrate cultural and historical contexts with personal experiences to create a character that is believable and authentic, in a drama/theatre work.

There is a perception that if you teach theatre, you know about all things theatrical – and not just plays and playwrights but lighting, scenic construction, counterweight rigging, costuming, audio, and how to do it safely, economically and well. And, if you are a first-year teacher, you probably don't wish to disabuse your princi-

pal's confidence in your abilities. The issue is not inadequate training of theatre teachers; rather, there is so much to know, and it is not reasonable to believe anyone knows how to do everything.

If it is just a teacher and a small student crew working on a show's technical needs, they will likely figure things out. The more significant issues emerge when a teacher is tasked with instructing students in the multi-disciplinary field of theatre technology, for a variety of performances throughout the year.

In Indiana, for instance, anyone with a theatre endorsement on their license can teach technical theatre. That doesn't mean you know much about it, so what do you teach? There are virtually no guidelines for what that curriculum should look like, and not much about appropriate pedagogy or an established sequence for teaching the materials. And as seen earlier, the National Core Arts Theatre Standards don't provide specific guidance.

The Responsibility to Train

The first issue is that technical theatre is not just about knowledge but also skills – skills that demonstrate you know how to sew, how to build, how to paint and how to light. Secondary-level textbooks cover these subjects, but from a generalist's perspective, not from a practitioner's point of view. Consequently, other sources, such as user guides for equipment and systems, instruction manuals and other industry sources should be explored.

The second issue is the availability of technology. It is tough to teach rigging when you have none, or how to use a miter saw if your school doesn't allow students to use power tools. However, there is still much that you can teach, even in the absence of technology, tools and hardware.

It is not just having new equipment, but also understanding how to use it effectively, how it is maintained, and safely used in our theatrical productions, concerts and assemblies. In short, if you have the technology, you have added not just an opportunity for learning but the responsibility to train.

Finding Curricular Guidance

Lacking available curricular materials, we can turn to an unlikely source for guidance – job readiness certificate exams. Designed for technical theatre programs and often used in CTE-based study, we can reverse-engineer our courses to meet the rigor of the tests. No, we are not talking about teaching to the test, but using it to guide teachers to what they should include in their instruction.

Currently, two criterion-referenced technical theatre assessments are available for secondary schools. These comprehensive exams cover multiple disciplines in technical theatre; each has curricular guides and study materials, providing a good idea of what teachers should include in their technical theatre classes. The exams, written by technical theatre professionals and high school educators, are recommended for students in their junior or senior years.

The first is the NOCTI Exam for Technical Theatre. Created in 2007 for the New York City public schools, the exam covers eight technical theatre disciplines and has 229 questions. Administered in a three-hour block divided into one, two or three sections, there is also a practical exam (skills test) for specific disciplines. All participants take the same written test and select their appropriate practical exam. The cost, either online or written, is $15 for the knowledge exam and $23 for the practical exam.

The second is the BACKstage Exam. Created in 2022 by the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) and the Educational Theatre Association (EdTA), the 100-randomized question digital exam covers eight technical theatre disciplines drawn from a bank of more than 400 questions. The curricular support materials include terminology guides, procedural documents, video instruction, recommended reading and industry resource documentation.

The BACKstage Exam costs $30 for USITT or EdTA members and $35 for non-members; the test fee is determined by the instructor's membership in either organization. A discount is available for larger school districts. A practical exam is in the works. BACKstage allows students to take the exam twice each academic year, allowing teachers to use it as a pre- and post-test.

Of the two exams, BACKstage references newer technologies, industry technical standards and is based on USITT's Essential Skills for Entertainment Technicians Program (eSET). The exam will be expanded by offering questions representing additional disciplines. NOCTI offers a practical component, sometimes required for CTE-based programs. Some support materials may not be available to schools outside of New York and the exam has not been updated since it was created.

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) scored both exams, and the current cut score for each exam is 58 percent. (You don't have to know everything to pass the test.) Regardless of your choice, utilizing the materials included can provide much-needed guidance for your technical theatre curriculum and the skills your performing arts students need to master. We readily applaud talented students on the stage, while failing to recognize those working behind the scenes. Their art, craft and contributions, when done well, may go happily unnoticed, but we hope not unrecognized. **HST**

Contact:

NOCTI at *www.nocti.org/credentials/state-programs/new-york*
USITT at *www.usitt.org/education-training/backstage-exam*

Access current/archive articles online at *www.nfhs.org/resources/high-school-today.*

Dana W. Taylor spent more than 25 years teaching technical theatre at Mt. Vernon (Indiana) Senior High School Fine Arts Academy. He is a writer in the area of technical theatre and for 10 years served as technical editor for "Dramatics Magazine" and "Teaching Theatre Journal."He received the Founders Award from the Educational Theatre Association in 2011, and in 2014, was the first high school educator to receive the United States Institute for Theatre Technology's Distinguished Achievement Award for Education.