



# ROLE PLAY

Within theatre, what is our shared understanding of the difference between crew and technician?

BY PAUL WYSE



**W**e have an academic and historic understanding that the collective term of “the crew”—for example, the backstage crew, the stage crew, or the lighting crew—all have specific places to be used; these terms explain and explore the collection of people working within that discipline or in that particular physical area. But what is our linguistic understanding of the difference between the backstage titles of crew and technician?

The historical use of terms such as machinist, engineer, and crew, and the reasoning behind their continued use shed some light. An exploration of potential abuse due to the embedded stigma in the term crew and the role crews play in theatre bears exploration as well.

Interestingly, surveys of and discussions with professionals and students reveal continued use of these terms despite some stigma about singling out those working in on-stage disciplines, including scenery shifters, fly system operators, and the like. In a small sample survey, perceptions associated with “crew” do not extend to those working within the areas of lighting, sound, and audiovisual because they tend to be viewed as technicians. It’s time for a broader discussion about referring to a lower-skilled position, working under the technician, as “crew.”

## Nautical Roots

Historically, through crossover from the nautical world, we have used the term crew to depict those working on the deck, operationally carrying out the manual tasks to keep the theatre performing, and quite literally pulling the ropes. This has understandably carried forward through the different developments of theatre; it is no surprise, considering theatre in the United Kingdom “was highly traditional and resisted change” (Booth 1999, 79). These traditional terms and the notion that crews performed low-level operational tasks stuck, with added descriptors referring to the areas of the stage where the crews worked.

What also has unfortunately developed is a sense that those labeled as technicians sit above this tier of workers; technicians are often seen as better than crews with more expected of them. Thus, we have created situations where a specific group of laborers are the stage crew and, unfortunately, are less respected. Continued use of terms such as “wood butchers” and “box pushers” are testament to the lack of appreciation of and assumed lack of technical skill of stage teams around the country and indeed the world. A broader example of this lack of appreciation and acknowledgement of skill has been seen with the removal in 2014 of the Sound Design category in the Tony Awards. Though, arguably, that action brought a level of recognition to the value of sound design within the industry, and sound design was rightfully brought back as an award in 2018. It is interesting that this was a technical design role that brought about the backlash within the industry; would there have been a similar response to a stage crew category? Would such a category ever even exist?

Should we acknowledge the collective term of “crew” as seen in the armed forces, the fire service, hip hop, and in air travel? How do we level out the expectation that those working backstage, including the stage laborer or crew, are acknowledged as being highly experienced and trained in their craft?

Of course, within theatre and society, the meanings of particular terms fluctuate. For example, laborers working in one space may call the fly system’s counterweight exactly that, but in another theatre, in another town, in another

country, they may call this a “brick.” Once you are used to the idea of this change in terminology, moving around different theatres becomes easier because you can acknowledge and gauge the array of these differences, building a mental database of how they align to other theatres geographically.

The Digital Theatre Words team, through OISTAT, collects these terms. Their database of theatre terminology was produced in 2011 and later updated in 2013 and 2014 but arguably hasn’t had international take up, certainly within education. What is excellent about this project is the acknowledgement of and push to collect these terms from outside of the western theatre practices; the database currently has versions covering 25 languages.

Where these differences in terms become more difficult, regardless of the position in the world or language, is when they are people’s job roles or titles—when a natural change in the hierarchy develops and the conscious sense of place arises through the use of terms.

## Perceptions of the Roles

To explore how the industry views the differences in the roles, and to understand the need for data to springboard multiple discussions, data was collected through a survey. Seventeen individuals responded and, while the sample is small, the data points to a clear necessity for students, teaching staff, and industry professionals to expand the conversation to tackle the highlighted issue. Survey questions explored the use of terminology, job role differences, creativity, training, and pay, with the results showing that each title holds, on the one hand, common stigmas, and, on the other, a continued and traditional unconscious alignment to the term “crew.” (See page 37.)

The majority of respondents view a “technician” as those who work within lighting, sound, or audiovisual disciplines. Technician is also associated with seniority through independent work on individual shows or venue tasks, and as a result would be expected to have learned particular skills within their specialist field.

As regards the “crew” title, those surveyed are split in their opinions, with many acknowledging they consider crew a base-level position primarily within the

stage department. In this view, the crew members bring a lower skill level, require explanations, and are overseen by production staff or venue technical management when completing tasks. Secondly, responses also reveal the more traditional idea that crew is a collective term for those who work backstage, a nod to the understood historical context of the term and its use as early as the Victorian era. The title of crew can of course be seen, as one survey member discusses, in other industries as a collective. The hip hop crew and the cabin crew are examples of a broad explanation of all those involved in collective work. In theatre production, partly due to the normalized use within education, the crew are considered as those who normally work within or for venues, and partake in the more manual tasks with a broader set of skills, similar, perhaps, to the nautical crew when looking after day-to-day operational and manual tasks on a boat. What is useful to remember, and this nautical analogy rightfully raises this idea, is that although the crew are often working on day-to-day tasks, they are essential to enable progression.

Of course, agency staff may actively advertise themselves as crew as well. Companies such as UK-based company Pirate Crew, as well as the Oxford company Crew Call, work to offer live music, theatre, and events, with the ability to add staff for specific performances. Interestingly, when reading client testimonials, common phrases reappear that indicate, for a crew, employees were well trained and prepared for the work. Further comments commend crews for coming up with ideas and solutions to challenges. It should be noted that within the events and live music sectors, crewing companies like these are employed to work more as an operation dealing with equipment movement and supplying additional hands for the touring staff when time is short. Even though this may be the case, the understanding is that crew companies, when working within theatre, possess a baseline level of skill and experience, and they should be publicly commended for work above this level. The praise for exceeding expectations further adds evidence to the preconceptions that although crew is a collective term for those who work backstage, the collective are seen to be less skilled, and

less independent than the role of the technician.

Given that customers who hire agency crewing companies have this preconceived idea of a crew's skill, how do we address the notion that stage staff, or stage crew as they are better known, are nationally and potentially internationally understood to have a lower level of skill and expertise when compared to those workers typically called technicians within the lighting, sound, and audiovisual disciplines? Much like the developed conversation around the need to change the use of gendered names for technical equipment (male and female connectors, for example), the social and cultural implications become clear when looking at the terms "crew" for stage workers and "technician" for lighting, sound, and audiovisual workers. Their use within a hierarchy of power creates a significant problem the industry must address.

### **Inherent Creativity and Practicality**

The survey also studied the perceived creativity inherent to each role, which itself brings debate about whether those who work backstage hold a creative role. While an unconscious, although troubled, generalized understanding of the two titles exists, it's important to gauge if the differences revealed in survey results were also visible within other areas of theatre practice.

Although Sternberg rightfully suggests that "theatre technicians produce innovative solutions to practical and aesthetic problems" and concludes that "behind all innovations, one finds creativity" (2012), note that the term "crew" is not used when discussing these and other ideas around creativity, outside of those seen as and employed as creatives within theatre and performance. Could it be that creativity is not seen amongst the larger crew and is only seen in the work of the technician? Or, in these modern times, is there a shift that "theatre technicians" is becoming the collective expression and that we are beginning to remove the term "crew" as a collective within theatre? Or, do we see this as the need to "hide the content of the job which would otherwise sound dull, unattractive and perhaps even off-putting to the younger generation" (Hajslerová, 2018),

*Gel-less yet?*



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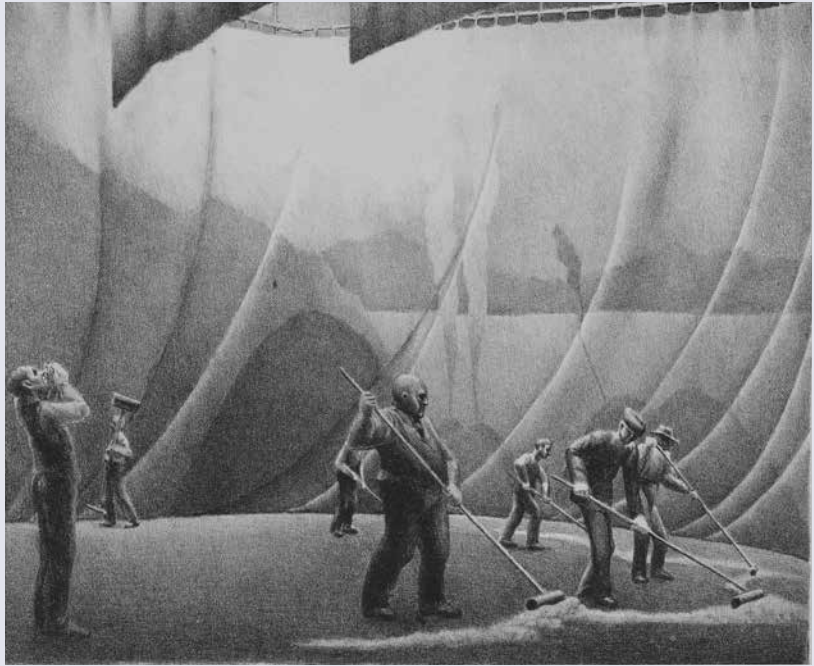


## Of Sailors and Groundskeepers

Professor Peter McKinnon of York University in Canada, author of *Sailors and Stagehands* (2022), suggests that, historically, people working backstage were called crew, and the term reflects the idea that theatre staff, technology, and techniques came from sailing more than 170 years ago. Research, of course, shows that theatres had equipment, designers, and backstage staff well before sailors were involved (e.g., Boychuk 2015; Booth 1999; Kubalcik 2004; Wilmore 1989); the systems to operate were different then and those working backstage or indeed under stage with the various winches and rope systems were called machinists. These workers used the lower-stage machinery to operate advanced systems such as the “chariot and pole,” as seen at the Drottningholm Palace Theatre in Sweden. These various traps, scenery changes, and stunning visual effects were operated from an under-stage position, and later laborers would control any of the upper-stage machinery, such as border changes and flying performers, from the same basement position.

Interestingly, these early baroque performance spaces were staffed by some of those working in the grounds, using “gardeners, horse trainers, coach drivers, and so on” due to their time spent working outside and sensitivity for working with “instruments that create natural sounds” (Slavko 2002). What is pivotal to this research, and something to be reminded of throughout, is that based on extant materials, even since the start of theatre technology, all those working backstage were seen as technologically skilled. Backstage workers, machinists, and let’s be honest, gardeners, coach drivers, and general laborers were operating and maintaining intricate systems that were the height of advances at the time. These early practitioners passed on this knowledge, generationally, resulting in later descriptions of theatre workers such as “stage carpenters holding to long established practices” (Booth 1999, 80).

Through the explosion of central and regional theatre in Victorian times, theatres struggled to maintain a balance between numbers of venue staff to run productions and to maintain the buildings themselves. This new era of performance and standards saw the introduction of the manual and later counterweight rigging systems. Developments in lighting technology occurred as well, with changes brought about by new theatrical advances from



“Sweeping the Snows of Petrouchka,” a 1936 lithograph by Kyra Markham, shows a stage crew removing snow from the stage floor. This lithograph was published by the Federal Arts Project/ Works Project Administration. | Courtesy of the New York Public Library. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/011f0040-fce1-0132-4740-58d385a7bbdo>.

candles to gas, and then eventually to the electric light.

Alongside these developments, the terminology for laborers also changed. Those working within the newer backstage systems, the former machinists, soon became known in Europe as engineers. In the UK, these machinists later became known as crew—a generic term for all those working backstage, which was also linked to sailors joining the staffs. Seeing an opportunity after the modern steam engine removed the requirement for the large numbers of sailors, shipping lines made many sailors redundant. This opportunity was helped by the theatre industry struggling to modernize at the speed that the rest of the industries were accelerating toward. Like moths to a flame, sailors found work surrounded by familiar technology, and a new era backstage was born.

Interestingly, across the waters, Americans were using title “stagehand,” which is still used to this day and closely linked to the nautical role of the deckhand, who are members of a ship’s junior crew. What is worth mentioning, and certainly discussing, is the link that developed between the nautical and theatrical application of crew. Within both Europe and the United States, the use of crew came to mean people

who carry out the majority of the manual tasks, or jobs often seen to be everyday, operational, and potentially mundane. In the theatre industry, the term itself came to include a predetermined judgment and hierarchy when talking about those involved in the crew.

So as theatre and its use of technology improved due to demand from the audience who “began to complain about matters that did not disturb the Georgians,” such as the “stiff geometry of the wings” (Booth 1999, 74), productions became larger and inevitably heavier. So theatres expanded to include fly floors and a grid space to house the larger sets. Theatres also began to move to the separation of the disciplines. Though arguably “many organizations exhibit a division of labor in excess of what is technically required” (Baron and Bielby 1986), specialist staffing across the disciplines of lighting, sound, and later audiovisual was needed. These workers were considered separate from the stage laborers, including carpentry and flying, which continued to use the term “crew,” but with a collective meaning of a team, whether it be the backstage crew or the technical crew, or more specifically the generic use of the stage crew.

and so do we begin to adjust titles and attract graduates into roles that arguably would be seen as lower skilled, and thus possibly seen as unattractive?

The survey produced a common response that although all roles share a lack of direct creative input within a performance, venue-based technicians are potentially more able to be creative; rightfully or wrongfully, survey respondents viewed technicians as only being found within the disciplines of lighting, sound, and audiovisual. This creativity is seen when technicians provide a lighting design for a community group or operate a comedian's sound, for example. It was also commonly understood that both the technicians and crews working on touring productions for a venue have, at times, no creativity in conducting more operational tasks, much like the agency crew companies discussed earlier. Yet, when pursuing the discussion of what creativity is and how it is used (e.g., Day 2021; Farthing 2012; Newman 2013), elements of creativity do occur when on-stage workers fly a show cue in time to music, for example, or complete a choreographed scene change in view of an audience.

The survey also points to a general sense of frustration that, quite often, neither role is seen as creative nor are the workers able to be as creative as they would hope. Whether it's working in a venue that receives productions, on a long-running tour, or on resident production, creativity gives way to repeatability and consistency. What is seen as fairly rare, certainly within the UK, is the regional production houses that create theatre and utilize the backstage staff and their skills to work outside of the normal and perceived remit.

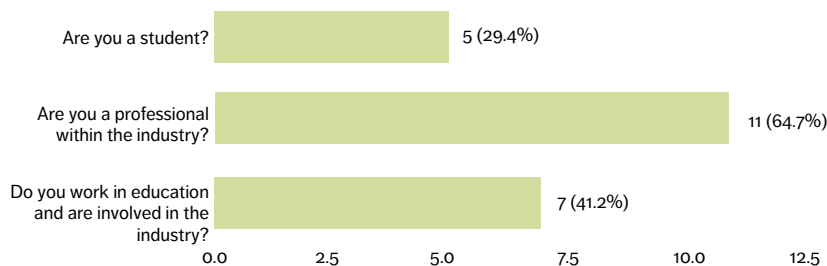
Despite the perceived differences between the terms "crew" and "technician," we can be confident proclaiming that all backstage staff are creative people who work with designers, directors, and other creatives on productions. Failing to acknowledge their creativity amounts to gaslighting, and to reinforce this collapse of the term onto the individual workers is not helpful for the retention and enthusiasm of those coming into the industry. It is easy to forget that all backstage workers do and "should develop a diverse palette of methodological approaches, and be able to utilize creative practice to synthesize unique outcomes from

## Survey Questions

The survey included eight questions that invited a conversation and reflection through participants' own experiences and knowledge.

1. What is your understanding of the term "technician?"
2. What is your understanding of the term "crew?"
3. What, in your experience, is the difference between a technician and a member of crew within your specific area of industry?
4. Do you believe there is one job role that is more creative than the other?
5. Do you believe there is one job role that is more practical in its approach than the other?
6. Do you think there is a training difference in the job roles?
7. Do you think there is a pay difference in the job roles?
8. Is there anything else you would like to say around the subject?

About you...  
17 responses



it" (Amabile, et al. 2002). We cannot, of course, problem solve or realize designs without the implementation of creative solutions; all workers have those creative abilities.

Regardless of the debate over the title, what's clear is that crew and technician positions, by virtue of the very industry they work in, are both practical jobs. Technicians are perceived more as problem solvers and leaders, while crew are considered more hands-on with heavy lifting and operational tasks, according to the survey data. This perception is largely unchanged whether survey responses are considered for venue-based workers or individual production-based workers.

Interestingly, the language used within multiple answers to question 5 include "feel" and "think" much more than in answers to other questions. Phrases such as "I feel," "crew feels," and "I think," are all used in the discussion of whether one job title is more practical than the other, and these semantic choices convey a sense of being unsure. Certainly, one might expect students to use this type of wording when discussing these within a seminar, or hobbyists over a tea break, but to see it

used by professionals suggests that there may be a wider feeling in the industry that we are unsure about how these titles sit with us now, and whether we should go about using them when employing or addressing teams within the backstage area.

The survey also reveals a commonality of thought that, often, the term crew is used when a group is working as a collective on a visiting production, which is a more inclusive use of the title. This conveys, too, an understanding that the role of a crew on a visiting performance will be led by those touring the show; that leadership enables the crew to carry out directed show cues during the performance, leaving the more in-depth tasks such as maintenance to the touring staff.

### Appropriate Training and Pay

Pay and training were also addressed in the survey. Responses suggest that training must be explored. Good training is imperative to gaining enthusiastic and confident new theatre staff, and of course training should be followed by transparent and aligned pay scales.

Survey respondents understand that



A demonstration of the art and craft of using a spade bit to drill holes during a 2013 USITT Conference & Stage Expo practical session. | USITT/ Daryl Pauley.

those working in all backstage areas require an in-depth level of training that is transferable to any industry, and it doesn't matter whether that training occurs through in-house courses or something more formal. Overall, respondents perceive the role of crew as requiring significantly less training, aligning it with tasks such as manual handling or laboring that arguably can be taught on the job early on without the requirement for extensive professional development. Certainly, disciplines seen within the collective definition of crew such as carpentry, flying, and

stage management—all of which require extensive training—are not acknowledged as areas worth highlighting. What is disappointing is that this expertise is not often acknowledged within educational settings. Discussions at the university level would allow better transparency between disciplines and level out any perceived hierarchy. These roles within the technical disciplines of lighting, sound, and audiovisual require further training due to them being, as one survey member suggested, “a more complex job.”

Perceptions about training and pay

reflect the expectation that a technician will be better trained and experienced to complete the job roles and tasks, and crew are general workers who require a simpler training scheme to conduct their work.

Finally, in terms of pay, respondents admit to and even develop feelings of embarrassment that they have to mention that there shouldn't be a difference in pay—certainly when coming back to the traditional and historical understanding of the collective term crew. The responses do, however, show an expectation that the technician, due to more formal training and a more developed set of theatrical skills, would earn a higher wage than those working as crew.

The issue is that the term crew is too ambiguous, and those surveyed think, and perhaps most within the industry would agree, that crew should therefore be used as a collective term rather than to specifically refer to one discipline. With this should come a leveling out of the training and pay gaps seen between them.

### **All Technicians, One Crew**

Whether you're building a decking system, flying a large opera performance, programming a complex lighting plot, or problem-solving a speaker issue, we all work within a community of talent that is no different to those early baroque performances, where all staff are technologically and creatively skilled in delivering performances night after night. Rather than splitting the disciplines, we must all recognize that we cannot operate without each other, and so our current understanding, but more importantly our use of the terms, needs to be both functional and inclusive to all. The use of crew should continue to be used to acknowledge those working backstage, no matter which discipline they are a part of. Within education at all levels, this clarity of terms must be combined with an understanding that, within the hierarchy, there is no difference in skill or pay, no matter the discipline you work in. Technical disciplines should not attract a different wage than those seen as the manual hands-on disciplines of the stage department. Wages are the foundation upon which the idea of crew, as a collective, should be developed and instilled, rather than using crew as a distinct term meaning the stage department.

Certainly, within formal education

at school, drama clubs play down the role of the technician with the term we have all heard: “techies.” Even at this age, students should be developing their disciplinary literacy to include correct terminology for people’s roles as well as equipment, and to properly use titles for the roles they are fulfilling. When working within a digital society and a fast-developing digital performance space, we are all technically trained and all technically creative. We are all technicians, but we work as one crew.



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