

Corbett Children's Theater

Guide to Backstage Etiquette

Imagine this: you have been working for 9 weeks on an incredible show. Everyone has their lines down, the blocking is perfect, the timing is impeccable, everything is wonderful...but there's one hitch:

You have no crew. Nobody's running lights, so you get to deliver your lines in the dark. There's no props mistress to make sure the cups and saucers are set, and nothing to pour into them even if there were. There's no one to help you backstage with that quick change between the first two scenes. There's no stage manager to make sure you make your entrance on time. No set, because no one designed and built it. There's no one to pull the curtain.

Actors (*particularly those who don't take their turn backstage*) often make the mistake of thinking that the show is all about them, and that the crew is somehow playing a lesser role and, by extension, deserve less respect for their effort. As the above scenario illustrates, nothing could be farther from the truth. Putting on a show is a team effort; while the actors have the glitzier part, the fact of the matter is that without a crew, they've got no show. Treating your crew members well, listening to what they need from you and doing as they ask can very well make the difference between a good show and a great show.

Do whatever the crew tells you without arguing, especially in performance.

Why it's important: Sometimes the reasons for the requests aren't obvious. If crew tells you they need to call you eight pages before your cue, it may be because they're all so busy with some other crucial backstage moment during the time leading up to your entrance that no one is free to call you any later than that. It's either come up 8 pages early or don't get cued. If they ask you to keep a prop with your costume and be responsible for it, it may be because they have no room for it or because they're busy when you make your entrance. One of my favorite personal stories (which we recounted in the early days of our web site) illustrating the "you just never know" principle occurred during a production of *Rumors*, when the stage manager told the actress playing Cookie, who had just donned an apron in preparation for an entrance, "Hold very still and don't look down." Being a well-trained actress, she did as she was told. The stage manager did something which the actress couldn't see and then told her to make her entrance. It wasn't until intermission that the actress discovered that her apron, which had been hanging on a hook on the wall, had become the roost of a small bat. It was clinging to the front of the apron when the actress put it on, and the stage manager had taken a towel, plucked the bat from the front of the apron, and then quickly run off and disposed of it outside. Never question what the crew tells you to do in performance; just trust that it's for your own good and all will be well. If you have a problem with what you're told to do, do it anyway and complain later.

Don't hang out in the wings watching the show.

Why it's important: Backstage space is cramped. Things can happen pretty quickly backstage, and you could find yourself causing a disaster by blocking someone's view when a visual cue is needed, or being in the way during a quick entrance or exit. Stay in the green room and out of the way.

Don't talk with *anyone* backstage unless it is essential to the show.

Why it's important: A whispered conversation going on in the wings can be very annoying to the actors on stage, and in some small theaters can even be heard in the house. Not only that, but a lot of what the crew is doing is waiting for a cue, just like you. If you distract them with conversation, they may miss a cue, just as you would if someone were trying to hold a conversation with you while you were trying to act on stage. If you have something that you must communicate to a crew member

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because it affects your performance or the show, then do so, but make sure you're not interrupting something else that may be going on. If your crew uses headsets, always make the assumption that they're listening to something when you approach them and you won't go wrong.

Stay put until you're called for your cue.

Why it's important: The crew can't call you if they can't find you. And while you may know perfectly well where you are, they don't. If the actors on stage skip ten pages, you're going to be needed on stage sooner than you thought, so don't count on going somewhere and making sure you're back "in time for your cue." If you need to be someplace away from others so you can run lines, make sure the crew knows that and be there when they come to get you. If you must use the restroom, tell someone else in the green room who will be there until you get back. This rule also applies to arriving in the wings before you're cued. I can't count the number of times I've seen crew frantically trying to track down a missing actor who is subsequently found nonchalantly waiting in the wings on the opposite side of the stage. This is one habit that can backfire on you, because the one time you decide to wait until you're cued, the crew figures you're already in place and doesn't bother to call you.

Don't play with or move the props.

Why it's important: Props should only be handled in the context of the performance - you'd be surprised how easy it can be to break or damage a prop that looked sturdy enough when you picked it up. Never move a prop. Stage managers and prop masters have specific spots for certain props, making it easier to find things in dim backstage lighting. It may not look like a big deal to just shove that coal scuttle under the props table so it won't be in anyone's way, but when the crew goes looking for it in the dark, it may not be so obvious that it's been pushed off to one side. If you inadvertently take a prop that should remain in the wings to the green room with you, try to get it back up into the wings as soon as possible, preferably by handing it off to a crew member who comes to the green room to call someone. Don't just lay it down somewhere, promising to put it back later; it's easy to forget both that you had it and where you put it, and there's bound to be a panicky search for it the next show.

Check your props before each performance, including any that are set for you to use onstage.

Why it's important: If something that you need to use on stage isn't set, you can lay all the blame you want on whoever fell down on the job, but ultimately you're the one who looks like a fool in front of the audience. This is a self-preservation measure, as well as back-up for the crew. If your props aren't there, blame yourself as well as the crew member who didn't set them, because you should have double-checked.

Don't peek through the curtains at the audience.

Why it's important: This goes along with not hanging out in the wings. If you're on stage, you're in the way of the crew. Actors should set foot on stage before the curtain opens only to make a quick check of their props, and then they need to vamoose. Needless to say, looking out through the curtains is strictly amateursville. Ever see Laurence Olivier stick his nose through the curtains to check out the house? Of course not. Do it, and you're branding your whole theater group as unprofessional.

Hold your temper until you get to the green room.

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Why it's important: First of all, you run the risk of being heard, because you're upset and probably not too cognizant of how loud you really are. In addition, an angry outburst is a distraction to the crew. You may compound the disaster by making them miss something else while they deal with you. Instead, use the time you take to get to the green room to cool down. If you must vent, do it there, but try not to get your fellow cast members too upset, especially the ones who have to go on after you.

Do not, ever, ever, ever run backstage. Even if you are late for an entrance.

Why its important: If you are late already you can assume that your fellow actors onstage are busy covering for you. Running backstage is sure to create a thunderous noise that immediately tells the audience that something is wrong, when in fact you fellow actors are working feverishly to make them think everything is just right. If you are running to get a prop, or to find a costume piece or other item before your entrance: first, you should have checked your props, second, its more important that you get onstage on cue, then figure out how, in character, to solve the issue of your missing prop or costume item.

Always express your appreciation to your backstage techs and runners.

Why its important: Runners, stage hands, lighting techs, stage managers, costumers, techs of all types, are supporting you at every step, with none, repeat none, of the glory. They get no curtain call. Nobody wants their autograph. Nobody comes to see the show because they are a techie. You, the actor, have only one person to worry about, and one thing to concentrate on...yourself. The techie has a multitude of people to worry about, a multitude of jobs to do, and has to respond to a multitude of minor emergencies every performance. They need to be greeted, and thanked, at every opportunity. Without them, you are just a guy/gal speaking gibberish, naked and in the dark.