Gaining a working knowledge of state-of-the-art tools is a definite bonus for students when applying for college technical theatre programs.

Some students are happiest when they are working on a theatre production backstage or behind a control board, but may not realize they can turn their favorite hobby into a career. Professionals in theatre production include technical directors, master electricians, costume shop supervisors, union stagehands, production managers and scenic, lighting and costume designers. It is never too late to embark on a theatre career path, but students who begin career planning as early as high school may be more likely to succeed in the areas of theatre technology, operations and design.

A quality undergraduate education in theatre is the best way to make sure you are attractive to graduate schools and eventually to employers. You can improve your chances of being accepted into top-rated university theatre programs by considering two factors: your potential, including the experience and skills you offer, and your presentation, or how you prepare your documentation and application materials for consideration.

The best undergraduate theatre programs are highly selective, due to small class sizes and the value placed on individual attention for students. If your resume includes a range of practical experiences, both in school and off campus, you may present yourself as a promising student with a serious interest in theatre.

Early Career Experience

High school students can approach their resume development by augmenting school production experience with non-school theatre participation. College professors who review applications are often impressed by work experience requiring professional-quality responsibility; high school is the time to accept a few short-term positions where you can enhance your portfolio-in-the-making. Contact local civic theatres or small professional theatres for volunteer opportunities, because even simple stagehand or costume shop assistant positions can help you demonstrate commitment to the theatre. Actively pursue opportunities to be in charge of specific projects. For example, you might become the stock scenery inventory manager for your local theatre group or serve as assistant technical director for a season, if you have modest stage carpentry skills.

Volunteer theatre positions provide valuable experiences with diverse people and can lead to excellent references and letters of recommendation. The Gainesville Community Playhouse in Florida, for example, welcomes high school student participants in all areas of theatre production. Technical director David Twombley says the Playhouse staff assigns entry-level activities for new volunteers and monitors their progress. “Based on acquired skills, demonstrated maturity and dependability,” he points out, “we then allow them to take on progressively more responsibility.”

Twombley’s theatre group, the oldest community theatre in Florida, plans to develop a structured technical theatre education program aimed at local high schools. “Many of the area drama teachers have been supportive of this concept since they often do not have extensive experience or resources for teaching technical theatre,” he explains. He frequently writes college application recommendations, often commenting on the applicant’s reliability, teamwork and problem-solving skills, as well as the student’s technical theatre expertise.

Quality documentation can make a difference in the college application process, but unfortunately many high school student designers and technicians do not document their work. Begin collecting photos and drawings demonstrating your contributions to theatre productions as you participate in them. Recreating paperwork and diagrams for older productions is usually acceptable, provided you do not alter or enhance your original design or contribution. Volunteer to create a scenic design from researched images related to the script and draw up a set of diagrams to build from. If you enjoy lighting, sketch out the positions of each instrument and how it affects the stage. If you are involved with costuming decisions, make watercolor paintings or drawings of each character in costume. You can use these designs as the basis for costume creation and later display them during college application visits. Student costumers might create image...
collages from magazines and other media to demonstrate design ideas. Student designers may want to compile samples of their work in a portfolio for easy display during interviews and campus visits. Student stage managers should collect any cue lists, property plots or staging diagrams they create during their production work and use them as proof of their experience when applying to universities.

Even without extensive production experience, a student portfolio can still convey a sense of the student’s potential and readiness for undergraduate study. “The undergraduate applicant’s portfolio we hope will tell us about the student’s ‘whole life’ experience,” says Assistant Dean Dennis Booth of North Carolina School of the Arts. “What are their artistic background, training and experiences? What books do they enjoy reading? What does the applicant enjoy doing for personal recreation? Has the applicant held positions of responsibility and to what level? Has the applicant been involved with home renovation, decoration or construction projects?”

Make Personal Contacts

Students who are serious about applying to a particular school might contact the theatre faculty there and initiate conversations about the program. Most college admission departments will consider the professors’ opinions and insights about specific applicants, so you should pursue opportunities to share your resume and experience with the faculty members who might become your mentors. Although some undergraduate theatre technology and design programs do not require work samples during the application process, it is understandable that students who demonstrate ability and potential will impress the professors.

Like other fine institutions, the North Carolina School of the Arts also places importance on less-tangible aspects of an applicant’s experiences. Dennis Booth states their undergraduate programs “endeavor to train a student who will get work, continue to get work, survive the profession of live performing arts production and further that profession by making their mark with creativity, integrity, excellence and quality of craft.”

Essays, Cover Letters and Résumés

Even the most dedicated theatre students will not be taken seriously if their application materials are riddled with errors or sloppy presentation. To demonstrate your potential as a conscientious and detail-oriented student, you should prepare your application materials and resume with great care.

You can find resume format examples through your guidance counselor or online resources. There is no one right way to organize a resume, but you should keep the following common-sense guidelines in mind. Your contact information should be accurate and attractively presented. Also, you might create a separate e-mail address for college applications: “Susanjones@provider.com” makes a much better first impression than “backstagebabe@hotmail.com.”

Don’t let text-messaging habits and pop culture trends influence how you write your cover letters and application essays. Use well-crafted sentences describing your interest in the university and why you are an excellent candidate. Use accurate and respectful forms of address for all recipients, and research the correct academic titles for those who will receive your material. Any letter to somebody you do not know well should be treated as business correspondence, so avoid slang, fragmented words or sentences and overly familiar terms (“Hey, Professor Viker”) in all your application correspondence including e-mail.

Getting experience is critical when beginning a backstage technical career.
He indicates that "sheer volume" of productions will not necessarily impress the faculty, but a demonstrated passion for the theatre and a creative spirit will often capture their attention.

Professional associations are invaluable for making career networking connections; they also look good on a résumé. Student organizations such as the International Thespian Society are excellent resources for the young practitioner, but are featured on many undergraduate applications and may not stand out as anything special. You might consider a student membership in the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT, www.usitt.org), which may demonstrate a mature professional interest in the industry. As veteran theatre technician Richard Stephens indicates in his 2006 address at the USITT conference, such affiliations allow you to "learn from established experts, help build the future of the profession and begin relationships with peers that may last through your career." It is never too early to begin making contacts in the profession through organization membership and hands-on experience.

The theatre production industry is becoming more complex and sophisticated every day, and now is an exciting time to enter the profession. Richard Stephens notes that previous generations "took us from canvas and glue into the digital age, but your generation will take us forward toward innovations we can hardly dream about."

Long-term success depends on a number of factors including dedication, skill level and good fortune. An early start on a career foundation will serve you well if you hope to embark on a career in theatre design or technology.

Erik Viker is an assistant professor of theatre at Susquehanna University in Penn., where he serves as technical director for the Department of Theatre and currently sits on the faculty admissions committee. He teaches courses in theatre production, stage management and dramatic literature.

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