

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

10 Principles to Help You Avoid Offstage Faux Pas



by Matthew Reynolds

"A part of the great tradition of the theatre is the code of ethics which belong to every worker in the theatre. This code is not a superstition, nor a dogma, nor a ritual which is enforced by tribunals; it is an attitude toward your vocation, your fellow workers, your audiences and yourself. It is a kind of self-discipline which does not rob you of your invaluable individualism."

- Kathleen Freeman's *A Code of Ethics for Theatre Workers*

Those words written by actress Kathleen Freeman date back more than 70 years, but the code of ethics she describes remains an integral part of modern-day etiquette in the performing arts. While knowing best practices is important (find your light, know your lines, do your research, and so on), it is etiquette – the approach to daily interaction with other people – that makes or breaks careers. Newcomers make mistakes because they don't know any better, but far too often experienced theatre artists also commit professional faux pas. For this reason, it is critical that we reinforce the importance of theatre etiquette at every level of experience. Drama clubs and community theatres often post rules of behavior in the green room or on the callboard. Some IATSE locals distribute pamphlets containing Do's and Don'ts to first-timers at load-ins. College practicum and performer contracts frequently contain professional conduct clauses. But the most effective way to teach theatre etiquette is by example. So, whether you're an old hand or a fresh face, check your own knowledge of the following 10 theatre etiquette principles in the areas of work ethic, attitude and communication.

WORK ETHIC

1 Show up prepared, and on time.

This means never miss a call or a cue. Sure, fender benders, illnesses and traffic jams happen, so call, text or email if you're running late. Remember the adage: 15 minutes before call is on time, at call is late, after call is fired. Everyone gets irritated at having their time wasted, so pay attention and wait patiently, prepared to make your contribution. Preparedness includes tools ready, appropriate attire, fed, slept and clean.



Sign in when you arrive. Do not leave the building after sign-in. Mike Wise, a professional stage director, actor, designer and Equity stage manager for over 20 years, shares a good reason for this rule:

"Years ago, I was working at a summer repertory theatre where we were doing two shows simultaneously in two theatres across the street from one another. One night I got a call from the stage manager for the other show, *The Hot'l Baltimore*, asking (pleading) me to come over and be "Suzie's John" for the night. I asked why the actor who was cast in the role wasn't doing it. We found out later: He had gotten to the theatre, signed in on the call board and thought he'd go down the street to the convenience store to get a cup of coffee. On the way back, instead of using the crosswalk, he jay-walked, got hit by a passing car, and suffered a concussion and a broken leg. An ambulance took him to the hospital. When the show started, "Suzie's John" was nowhere to be found in the theatre, although everyone swore they had seen him and his name was initialed on the sign in sheet. I always, ALWAYS remind actors and crew to stay in the building after they've signed in!"

Opposite Page:
Gary Wise (*Sir Anthony Absolute*) and Drew Baker (*Mrs. Malaprop*) appear in a production of *The Rivals* by the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance in Tuscaloosa, AL. Photo by Porfirio Solorzano.



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2 If you see something, say something.

Let the right person know immediately if something appears out of place. Even minor mistakes can ruin someone's day (a lighting instrument was knocked, a prop is missing, a set piece is blocking an entrance). So, do your colleagues the favor of letting them know. If you're not sure who to tell, ask the stage manager. In the worst-case scenario, the right person is already aware, and you've used only a few seconds of their time to give them a heads-up. In the best-case scenario, that awareness may save someone's life, which brings us to...

3 You are responsible for everyone's safety, including your own.

Do not wear a dangerous costume, walk on a dangerous set or work in a dangerous fashion. If you feel unsafe or see something unsafe, tell a stage manager or supervisor. Don't do anything you feel unsafe doing; ask for help. No show is worth your health or your life.



Do not work while impaired – whether from exhaustion, illness or intoxication (alcohol, illicit substances or prescriptions).

I once played Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion* and the actress playing the maid had the stomach flu. For Eliza Doolittle's changing scene, the maid needed to walk up a flight of stairs and dress Eliza in silhouette behind a screen. The maid was so green and unsteady on her feet, it took her a solid minute to stagger up the stairs while Pickering and I improvised. The moment she got behind the screen and the silhouette light came on, she projectile vomited in perfect profile. That performance – forever known among us as the St. Patrick's Day Massacre – is not one that should be repeated.

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Peter and the Starcatcher - Directed by Murray McGibbon. Photo by Jeremy Hogan.

ATTITUDE

4 Behave with kindness.

Being kind in your dealings with others can be as simple as saying hi, please and thank you. Employment is most often offered to colleagues with a positive history and reputation. Do not burn bridges; everyone that you work with now, you will work with for the rest of your career. Theatre is a small world, and everyone knows everyone else.

5 Show respect for your costumers and your costume.

Arrive for fittings on time and clean. Dress properly, with underwear. Do not eat, drink (except water) or smoke in costume.



When actors arrive for a fitting without following etiquette, it can leave a lasting impression on the costumers – and the costume.

Pam Workman, costumer for the Gainesville Theatre Alliance, remembers: "I once had an actress that showed up with no undergarments at all. Another actor came straight from the gym. He was wet with the sweat, which with all the places we have to measure, was 000-ber gross. Plus, the sweat transfers to the costumes."

6 Take responsibility for the show as a whole, not just your slice.

Ignoring the other components is the antithesis of collaboration. Should a designer give an actor notes, or vice versa? No, of course not, but the right question conveyed in the right manner to the right person starts a conversation. "[Stage Manager/Director], I feel like the light is hitting over here, should I stand here instead?" "[Director], would it



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be possible for [Actor] to take a step downstage of the leg so I can catch her with the side light?" It's everyone's art, so appreciate everyone's contribution. Participation in putting together the show gives a more thorough ownership of the art and builds community.

7 Detach your art from your self.

Once an idea leaves your brain, it belongs to the collective, not you. Don't take the dismissal of your idea as a criticism of your person. Approach conflicts with the mindset, "I'm sorry; how can I help?" Everyone is the protagonist of their own story, so try to see the problem through the other's eyes. Your ego has no place in a collaborative art.

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9 Do not complain. Someone can always hear you.

Whether on headset, backstage, in the house or in the dressing room, there is almost always a microphone on and an ear listening, so be careful of the attitude and content of your conversations. Specifically, don’t attack artistic choices. Each choice is part of a grand scheme and is not necessarily intended to feel attractive, interesting or comfortable. And don’t attack the audience either. Without our audience, we have no theatre, so welcome them with open arms and treat them with respect – never annoyance or derision. They pay for our livelihoods.



Remember that the audience may hear what you say 30 seconds before your entrance and 30 seconds after your exit.

I was running followspot for a summer stock theatre one afternoon, and the audience was very unresponsive. As an actor exited the stage, he said, miked for the whole house to hear, “Man, this audience sucks!” Needless to say, they did not become more responsive.

10 Bury the myth of cast vs. crew.

There is a common, but false perception that actors and technicians are engaged in a mythic battle with one another. This conflict does not exist. However, there is often a communication gap between the two fields. Actors and design/tech professionals prepare for a show separate from one another for the most part: one in rehearsals, the other in meetings and shops. Because we look at the same project from two different sides, the performance and the design can unintentionally develop in different directions if practitioners do not go out of their way to collaborate. The best way to collaborate is to simply talk to one another. Set up a meeting or go to lunch. Ask what drives this or that artistic choice and find the common ground. We’re all in the same boat, working on the same show. We may disagree, but if we don’t communicate, we don’t get the chance to find our touchstone and grow together.

Embracing etiquette leads to success on multiple levels

Artists are passionate people, so there will always be conflicts, misunderstandings and hurt feelings. The most we can hope for is to minimize those conflicts by following our profession’s etiquette guidelines on work ethic, attitude and communication. These principles can help us make our process, our work and our art as joyful to make as it is for our audiences to experience. ■



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