

Career Series Articles

Tech Theater: A career behind the scenes

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Scene one: Wilson Center Studio Theater

On the catwalk about 25 feet above the floor, FCCJ Theatre Technology students Keith Baranowski and Sam Parker along with recent FCCJ graduate Billy Parker are checking the lights hung earlier for an upcoming production of "Unspoken for Time." The play's main character has flashbacks to past events that were lost in her memory. The effect of time-past will be achieved with the use of lighting (hung by students) and scrimms (a fabric with special qualities, cut and hung by students) behind which the action is played.

"Tech theatre is a unique business many people don't understand," said Professor Johnny Pettegrew, a veteran with more than thirty years in the business, designing, building and teaching. "It's skill and craft but it's art as well."

Real-world experience at the Wilson Center prepares students for real-world careers. Skills, craft and art learned in courses in stagecraft, lighting, properties, sound, scene design, stage management and scene painting are put into practice in tech theatre labs. Pettegrew claims a high success rate for the program. "We have 100 percent placement" in employment or acceptance into an advanced program for every person who has graduated from the program. Among his graduates are the property master for twisted tricksters Penn and Teller, the lighting designer for University of Alabama (Birmingham) and technical director for the Olney Theatre, a suburban D.C. professional theatre. Additionally, students or graduates are employed in every theatre in Jacksonville. Recent grad Billy Parker is a production specialist for the University of North Florida Student Union.

Scene two: Wilson Center scene shop

Six students are constructing elements of the set, which will be moved the next day into the Studio Theatre. The floor is covered with wooden frames for flats under construction. Brent and Misty are reinforcing the corners with a nail gun. Jessica is operating a circular saw. Bob Rupp, the scene shop supervisor, has 30 years of experience, ran the scene shop at Alhambra Dinner Theatre and now imparts his experience and practical wisdom on students. "Students have opportunity for leadership roles here," Rupp said, pointing out that what they learn in their two years in the program they wouldn't be able to touch until their last years at a four-year school.

As the official apprentice program for the local backstage union, IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees), the FCCJ program allows second-year students to intern on professional productions at the Times-Union Center, the Florida Theatre, Veterans Memorial Arena and other local venues.

Scene three: Olney Theatre Center, Olney MD (suburban D.C.)

Dan Parker recently stepped up as technical director at Olney Theatre Center, after starting as master carpenter in 2006 and a short time as assistant technical director. He is a graduate of FCCJ's A.S. degree program and holds a BFA from Jacksonville University. A professional theatre in the D.C. circuit, Olney puts on eight shows a year, currently running "Of Mice and Men" and "Late Night Catechism." It's home to National Players, the nation's oldest touring company. "I got a lot of well-rounded experience at FCCJ in sound, lights and construction," Parker said. "Now I supervise all of those departments and act as the liaison between theatre staff and the designers who come in." And he recently hired Karen Scutter, another FCCJ graduate, as an electrician at Olney.

Scene four: the career and how to get there

Professional stage hands, carpenters, electricians, audio technicians, lighting designers, costumers, property masters and technical directors. You can work in theatres, churches, on cruise ships, or at conventions, trade shows, circuses, concerts, sporting events, movie sets. Entry-level is nearly \$13 hourly and increases with experience. The Theatre and Entertainment Technology Associate in Science degree program costs about \$4,250 and takes two years to complete. For more information call 904.646.2421.

*Tuition and fees are subject to change by action of the College's District Board of Trustees. Current tuition and fees will be posted at the time of registration.

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