

Backstage at the Ballet

When a ballet company comes to the theatre, the Technical Director is responsible for the loading of all the costumes, props, scenery and equipment (which are stored in large portable crates) into trucks and transporting them to the theater. These trucks pull into the loading dock arriving a day or so before rehearsals begin. The crates are labeled so that the crew knows what is in each crate by either stenciling the side of the crate with a word or number, or color-coding the crates.

Once everything is unloaded and unpacked, the Stage Manager and Technical Director work as a team and organize the crew and all aspects of the production.

The Technical Crew includes a Lighting Designer, Sound Technician, Lighting Crew and the Set/Prop Crew. The Lighting Designer designs a master blueprint of the lights, puts it all on paper, makes sure all the lights are in the right place, and sets the cues on a computer called a Light Board. The Lighting Crew then attaches the lights to a line set, a large beam to which lights are attached and then raised above the stage. A gel is a piece of colored plastic that inserts into a light to change the color. The lights are set before the scenery so that the lights can be focused, the gels added and then positioned correctly without working around scenery. Meanwhile, the Sound Technician is responsible for the placement of all audio equipment and adjusting sound levels.

Then the Set/Prop Crew rolls out the marley, a special floor used by dance companies so that the performers always have a good floor, free of imperfections, on which to dance. A marley floor also helps to prevent injury and to keep the dancers from slipping. Spike marks, pieces of colored tape, are used to show dancers where to stand, start and stop, and to show the crew where to place props and scenery. This is called spiking the stage.

Now the crew hangs the backdrops, set the props and makes certain everything is in the right place and in working order. A backdrop is a large cloth, hand-painted as scenery, and hung from the back of the stage. The men who raise or “fly” the backdrops and line sets are called Flymen.

The Stage Manager is responsible for coordinating and running the show. He or she must know where everything and everyone is supposed to go, and calls the cues for the show. Everyone practices this during the technical rehearsal, when the show is run so the crews can practice, and then the dress rehearsal, when the show is run with costumes. The Stage Manager also signals for the start of the performance. For example, once the audience starts arriving, he or she will announce to the performers and crew, “Half hour call. Act One will begin in thirty minutes.” During this time the entire theater is alive with energy. Performers put on finishing touches on hair and make-up, the costume and wardrobe mistresses double check costumes and accessories, and the crews do a final check before the house lights dim and the curtain goes up. Out in the lobby and the house, the ushers and House Manager are helping the audience find their seats. Once the House Manager tells the Stage Manager that everyone is seated, the stage manager calls, “Places!” and the performance begins.