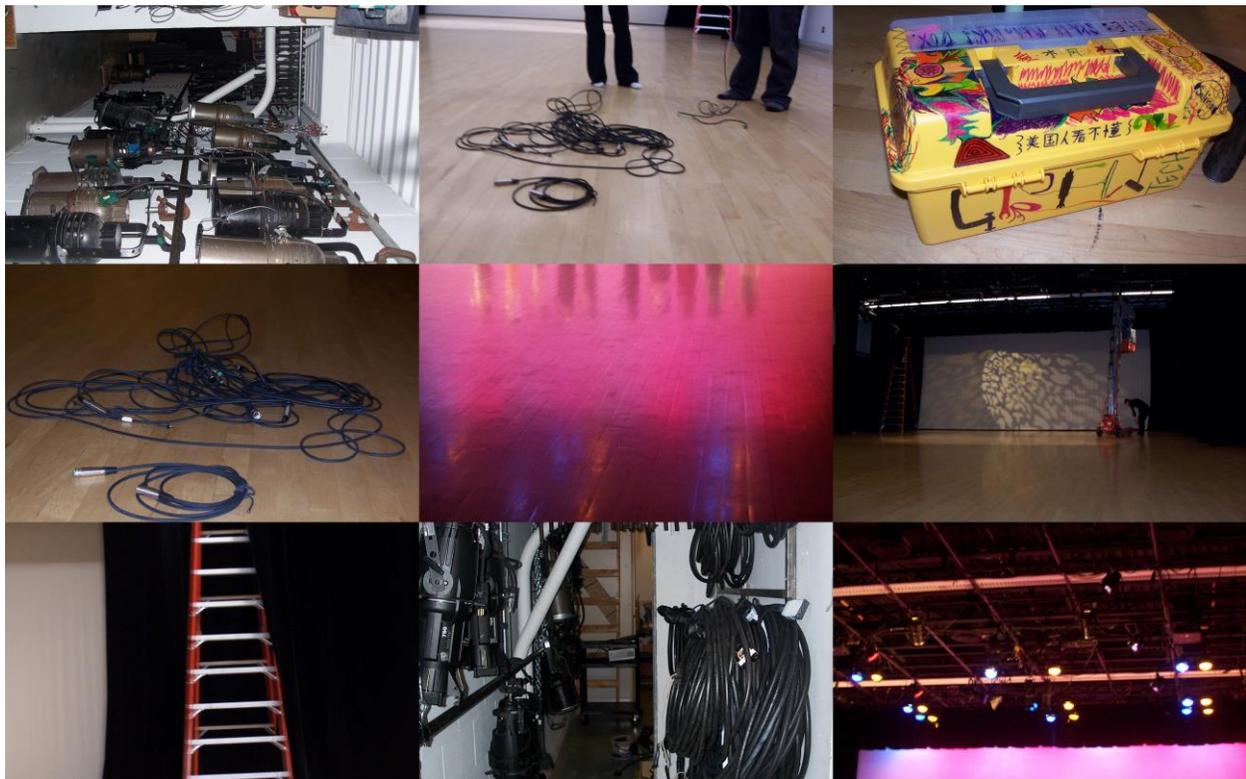


BACKSTAGE PASS: THE HIDDEN CULTURE OF DANCE TECHNICIANS  
An Ethnographic Study



Sociology/Anthropology 373A  
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## PROGRAM SYNOPSIS: ABSTRACT

Among the many and diverse subcultures at St. Olaf College, there is a hidden network of students whose goal is to remain unseen. However, these students play a vital role in all dance productions that take place on campus; they are the ones who make dance productions possible by allowing the audience to see and hear what is happening on stage. Despite well-attended dance concerts, many members of the St. Olaf community know little about what goes on backstage before, during, and after dance performances, or that there is an extensive unit of student workers in charge of performing any given show. Using an ethnographic model of research through participant observation, as well as individual and group interviews, I explore the unique sub-culture of the dance department student technical workers.

## SETTING AND COMMUNITY

The audience sits in the half-light, eyes focusing intently on the dancers as they float across the stage. Backstage, there is a frenzy of activity as stagehands move props and fix lights at the direction of the assistant stage managers. Overlooking their activities from the fly rail, the fly rail operator waits for the next cue to bring down the massive velvet curtain. The dresser waits in the wings for the dancers to run towards her for a quick costume change. Behind the audience, high above their heads in the technical booth, the stage manager carefully studies the movements of the performers, intermittently telling the light board operator to change the stage lighting, while directing the sound board operator to play or stop or turn up the volume of the music. Next door, the technical director paces back and forth to calm his nervous energy. The choreographer sits in the back row of audience seats, taking notes with a flashlight to later impart to the dancers and technical workers in order to improve future performances. As the dance ends,

the audience applauds with vigor; little do they know that this performance is the culmination of months of planning, rehearsing, and technical work. This technical work is almost entirely completed by student workers, all of whom are full time students at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

Nestled within the small hills and plains of South Central Minnesota, the city of Northfield is home to approximately 17, 147 people according to the 2000 US Census (U.S. Census, 2000). This relatively small town is home to two private colleges: Carleton College and St. Olaf College. According to the 2008 St. Olaf College profile, St. Olaf College is a liberal arts college with a student population of 3,073, of whom 45% are men and 55% are women (Profile, 2008). The average class size is 22 students, and the student-to-faculty ratio is 12.5:1 (Profile, 2008). St. Olaf College offers 44 academic majors, with a faculty and staff numbering 804 people (Profile, 2008). The comprehensive fee of attending St. Olaf College for the 2007-2008 academic year was \$42,000, and the average need-based financial aid package was \$22,743, with 63% of students receiving financial aid (Profile, 2008). A portion of this financial aid is granted in the form of student work wages, meaning students work for the college to earn tuition money. There is a huge variety of student work positions available on campus, such as library clerks, admissions and departmental office assistants, and everyone's least favorite occupation: the cafeteria worker.

Among all these student work opportunities, a small group of fifteen students work as the technical crew for productions of the dance department. The St. Olaf dance department produces approximately seven to thirteen shows every academic year, ranging from informal concerts, residencies, formal concerts, and massive dance company productions. The dance department is composed of six professors, each with specific areas of expertise, as well as four staff

members—a musician, academic administrative assistant, costume designer, and technical director. The student workers on the technical crew work directly under the technical director. The dancers and choreographers refer to these workers as “techies”, a term student workers use to refer to themselves as well.

## METHODOLOGY

After much careful thought and brainstorming, I decided to investigate the sub-culture of the student dance technicians; this came as a result of my personal experiences as a dance technician. During the entirety of the study, I maintained my occupation as a student dance technical worker, which allowed me to have extensive access to such things as closed rehearsals and work side by side with the other student workers. However, due to my position as a student technical worker, it was difficult to gain an outside perspective on this sub-culture.

In order to conduct research with St. Olaf student workers and dance staff, I first sent my project proposal in for Institutional Review Board approval. After gaining approval from the IRB, I began my study of the sub-culture of student dance technician. To conduct this study, I employed the research techniques of participant observation as well as individual interviews. Over seven weeks of study, I conducted seven interviews of student technicians, three with dance majors, and one with the technical director. These participants were recruited using personal invitation, and interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis in order to ensure anonymity. The project information sheet that preceded my interviews included a description of the purposes of the study, the benefits if the subjects completed the study, where the study would be disseminated, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Respondents could choose to complete or not complete an interview to ensure informed, voluntary consent. All interviews

were recorded on paper by the interviewer, and some of these were additionally transcribed into computer documents. These interviews were supplemented by over fifty hours of participant observation, and informal interaction with participants.

## THE PROBLEM

Performing arts technical workers, (also known as stagehands, crew, or techies) are often a marginalized sub-culture within the performance setting. “Although the actors get the applause, hundreds of people are behind every production. The stage crew hangs the lights, moves the scenery, and manages the props. The entire team works together to make sure that every audience enjoys a great show.” (Waleson, 2004) A prime example of this marginalization became visible on November 10, 2007—the beginning of the stagehand strike on Broadway (Robertson, 2007). This strike caused nearly all the shows on Broadway to shut down for a period of nineteen days as contracts were negotiated between the Stagehand Union (Local One) and The League of American Theatres and Producers, costing the city of New York over forty million dollars in revenue (Robertson, 2007). “While the crew greatly contributes to a production, because they work backstage and take orders from others they are at the bottom of the hierarchy which exists in the theater.” (Lyon, 1975:103) This marginalization is emphasized by the lack of recognition which technical crews receive; “A problem seen by members of stage crews is that they are rarely recognized publicly for their work, aside from program credit.” (Lyon, 1975:104)

Despite their hidden work on all types of production, technical workers are a vital force of performance arts. In her Ph.D. dissertation, Lyon terms those non-acting theater participants “support personnel”; this term is used as a way to characterize their relationship to the staged

performance, not to undermine their importance in a production. (Alves, 2007 and Lyon, 1975:68) These individuals work hard to ensure the audience enjoys any given performance; “The perspectives, skills, and experience of the support personnel influence the contributions they make as theatrical resources, and thus affect the emergent production esthetic,” (Lyon, 1975:69).

However, little is known about backstage work and the technician sub-culture outside of the performing arts social circle. The purpose of this study is to shed some light on the hidden and marginalized work and culture of performance arts technical workers, focusing on the student technical workers of the St. Olaf dance department. This study investigates what dance technicians do, what their role is in production, and how they interact with others and themselves. In terms of analyzing student workers theoretically, there is evidence of social hierarchy in the group, as defined by structural functionalism theory, as well as evidence of exchange theory in interaction

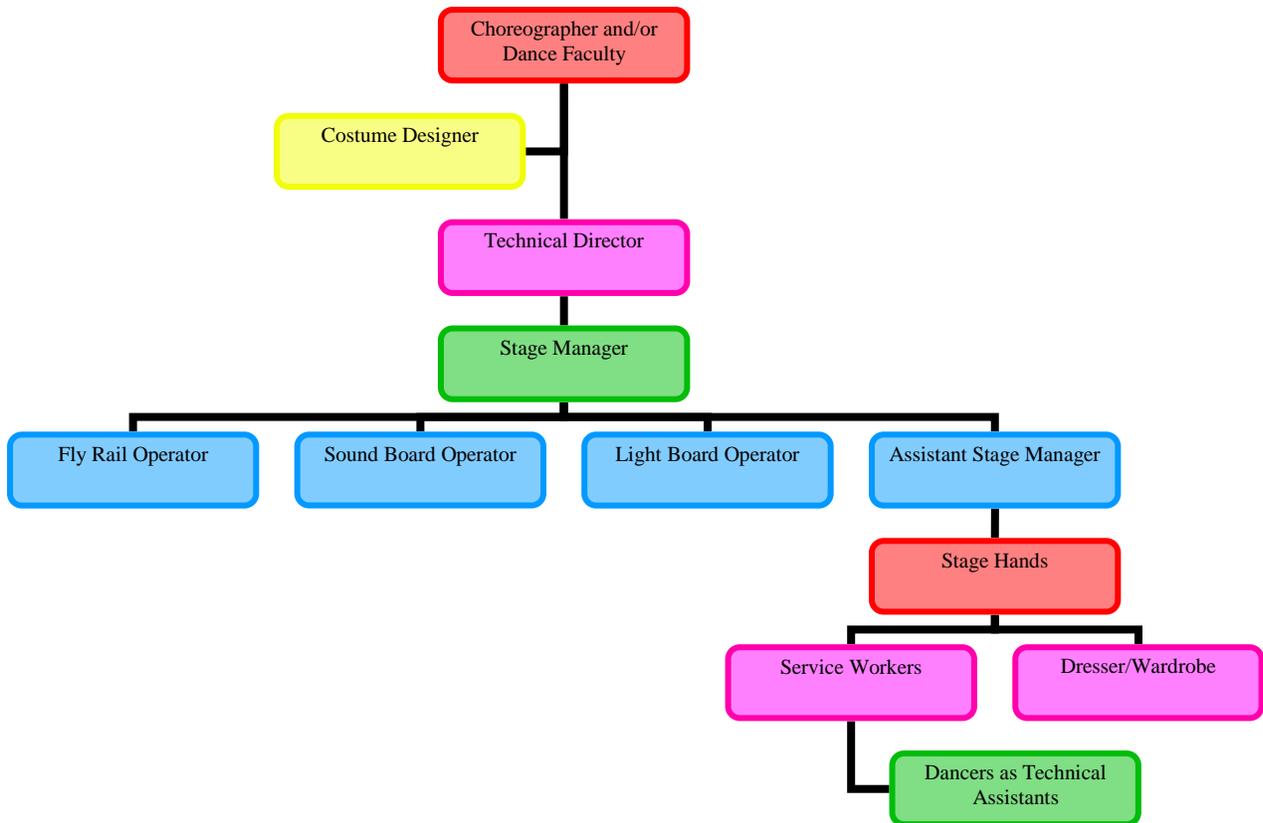
## FINDINGS

### Positions of Power

There are a variety of job positions available within the realm of technical production; each position is endowed with a certain degree of power over other positions in a hierarchical structure (see Figure 1). “Theaters are characteristically organized with a high division of labor and a well-defined hierarchy.” (Lyon, 1975:109) If one member of this hierarchy fails, the chain of command is no longer valid, resulting in mistakes during a performance or rehearsal. This is evidence of structural functionalism, in which stratification is a functional necessity (Ritzer, 2004:230). However, it is important to note that, for the student workers, this stratification

disappears outside of the work environment and is only applied from the cue-to-cue rehearsal through the strike. This hierarchy does not apply during the load in process. Student work positions include all of the following: Stage manager, fly rail operator, sound board operator, light board operator, assistant stage manager (ASM), stagehands, and dresser/wardrobe. The assignment of these positions is determined by the technical director, who considers skill, interest, experience, and physical limitations when deciding which student worker will have a given position. In this way, all technicians can be seen as versatile participants (Alves, 2007).

Figure 1: Hierarchy of technical production personnel.



### The Stage Manager:

The stage manager (SM) is the highest position a student worker can obtain; he or she acts as a go-between, making sure that the dancers, choreographer, and other members of the team always know what they need to do and where they need to be. (Waleson, 2004) This position carries the most prestige and power, but it also carries the most responsibilities and arguably the most work. Stage managers are in charge of everything during a performance. Lyon writes, "Stage managers are the people in command during performances, though theirs is the power of maintenance, not creation." (Lyon 1975:97)

During a performance the SM "calls the show"--announces all the light, sound, and stage cues backstage over a headset intercom system. He or she holds considerable organizational power and the power to maintain consistency in a show once it opens (Lyon, 1975: 99). Stage managers must work well with people, while maintaining the utmost professionalism and authority over other technical workers, and listening to the direction of choreographers and the technical director. (Waleson, 2004) The SM is positioned above the audience in the center of the technical booth in order to oversee the entire show.

### Fly Rail Operator:

The fly rail operator is responsible for the raising and lowering of curtains and scenery which hang above the stage. This position is potentially the most hazardous and requires the most physical strength. The fly rail is a system of ropes and weights that work as a pulley/lever system which counteract the weight of the lights, cables, and scenery which are attached to metal pipes which hang horizontally across the length of the stage. The fly rail operator pulls on these ropes to raise and lower hanging items as directed by the stage manager. This person is stationed at the fly rail, which is on one side of the stage.

#### Sound Board Operator:

The sound board operator is responsible for manning the sound equipment; this entails the playing of music for dances, working a microphone for announcements, and making sure the dancers are able to hear their music on stage. All of these tasks are completed at the behest of the stage manager, who communicates via a headset intercom system. The sound board is usually situated in the technical booth alongside the stage manager and the light board.

#### Light Board Operator:

This position is very similar to the position of the sound board operator, except it relates to the running of the lights during a performance. This individual runs the computer system that controls the stage lighting, and requires the knowledge of how this system works. Lighting is especially important in dance productions due to the lack of other scenery and props.

#### Assistant Stage Manager (See Photo 1):

The ASM is the go-to person on the stage; he or she is the voice of the SM on the ground, and is responsible for activities that occur backstage. They answer to the SM and ensure that tasks are completed and that the dancers are in their places. Assistant stage managers are also responsible for directing the stagehands and service workers. He or she holds considerable organizational power and the power to maintain consistency in a show once it opens (Lyon, 1975: 99).



Photo 1: ASM Desk with gels, flashlight, spike tape, and notes.

#### Stagehands:

Though their position is often downplayed, stagehands are the eyes, ears, and hands of a production. Their responsibilities range from changing the color of a light at a given time, moving scenery, and directing dancers when to go on stage. They also assist the service workers and the dresser.

#### Dresser/Wardrobe:

The dresser and/or wardrobe person is responsible for “quick changes” that occur backstage; this entails assisting dancers into costumes quickly and maintaining the cleanliness and look of costumes, as well as repairing any damage that may occur to a costume during a performance.

#### Service Workers:

Service workers are a group of people that are unique to St. Olaf dance productions; these individuals are dance majors who as such are required to complete technical work. According to the dance curriculum requirements, every two years a dance major must complete the following:

“Help out with a large show production, or complete 12 hours of miscellaneous service hours. Dance majors must fulfill a large show requirement within their four years.” (St. Olaf Dance Department Curriculum requirements, 2008)

When interviewed, one dance major stated that due to this requirement and their experience as a service worker, “I was able to experience firsthand the fast-paced atmosphere backstage and mak[e] sure the show runs smoothly.” Another dance major reported that the experience of working backstage “made me feel important and helped me respect all of the communication that techies have to be involved in. That experience also showed me how it is not always a techie’s fault when something doesn’t work right.” These experiences as service workers foster a mutual respect between dancers and technicians, while at the same time allowing a dancer to gain further understanding of just what goes into the technical aspects of production. As reported by Shosh and Wescoe, “Having cast members involved in all facets of production helps them to care more about the success of a show as a whole and develop a sense of respect for that which they might otherwise take for granted,” (2007: 43).

### The Show Process or What Technicians Do

Negotiations:

Any given dance production at St. Olaf is comprised of multiple stages; technical production begins with meetings between dance department faculty, choreographers, the costume designer, and the technical director months in advance of a performance (student workers are often absent from these meetings). These meetings consist of people compromising between artistic imagination and reality—such as physical, monetary, and time restrictions. Eventually, realistic goals are set, and the physical production process begins. One technician reported, “I

would suggest that techies are more type A and detail oriented, while dancers are more type B. Stage designers try to walk the fine line between being analytical and artist.”

The Load-In (See photo 2):

A “load-in” is the beginning of work for the student employees; this process consists of multiple tasks and may last anywhere from a few hours up to two weeks. Primary tasks include hanging specific lights in specific places (hanging or rigging), plugging said lights in to appropriate outlets (known as dimmers) using innumerable feet of cable (circuiting), focusing all lights to illuminate their appointed portion of the stage (focusing), using translucent sheets of thin plastic called “gels” to manipulate the color of the light (coloring), and finally programming specified dimmers to distinct channels in a specialized computer system (patching), which is linked to a light board console (See photo 3).



Photo 2: Loading In. Kelsey Theatre, St. Olaf College

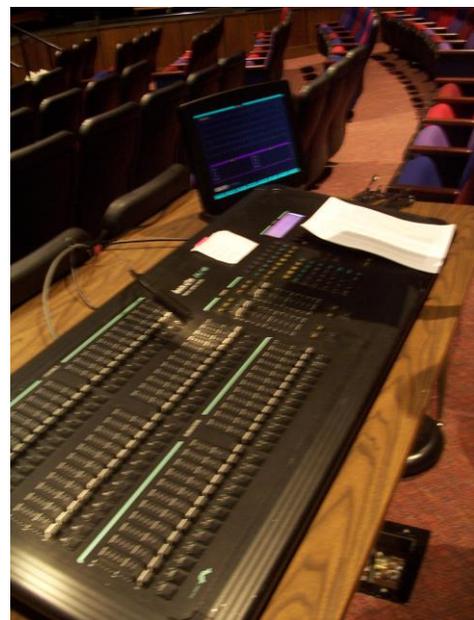


Photo 3: Light Board Console

During this time, these tasks are divided up by interest and skill. For example, those who feel more comfortable perched high on the top of a ladder are better at circuiting, versus those who wish to stay on the ground. Others have the specialized knowledge needed to program the lighting computer system, and are more suited to that task. After all of these necessary tasks have been completed and are in proper working order, the next phase of production begins—the cue-to-cue rehearsals.

#### Cue-to-Cue Rehearsals:

These are the longest and least exciting tasks of all the work performed by the technical crew; it is a process of compromising between the artistic desires of a choreographer and the restrictions of stage production. Such restrictions include the characteristics of light, props, scenery, time, space, and costuming. For a formal show, cue-to-cue rehearsals take anywhere from four hours to twenty hours, broken up into ten-hour shifts over two days. This is the most vital time for a stage manager because it is the time when he or she learns exactly which specific technical actions are to occur at which times during a dance. For example, if a choreographer desires a change in the lighting at a specific moment in a dance, this is the time that the stage manager records and remembers exactly where a lighting change is supposed to occur, usually based on a dancer's movement or music cue. The rest of the technical crew sits back and can be seen doing homework, but spring into action at a moment's notice when the technical director calls for a specific task to be done.

## Technical Rehearsal:

Technical rehearsal is always an adventure (See photos 4 and 5); this is the very first time all the production aspects come together and merge into a performance. Lyon writes, “tech rehearsal provides the first occasion for the coordination of all the technical and human elements of production,” (Lyon, 1975:231) For the first tech rehearsal, all the choreographers, dance faculty members, dancers, the technical director, costumer, and stage technicians hold a short meeting and go over the schedule for the rehearsals, safety instructions, and costume care, and also get acquainted with one another. Then the real work begins; it is not unusual for technical rehearsals to run anywhere from four to over seven hours every evening during the final days before a show. For example, this author has recalled working almost a forty-hour week during these rehearsals, in addition to school work and attending classes.

Essentially, the stage manager is in charge of technical rehearsals, and decides when to continue, stop, or repeat a dance piece. Throughout rehearsal, everyone is performing their required tasks according to their positions, gaining practice for the actual performances. There are usually around four nights of technical rehearsal, in which everyone perfects their actions. Following each rehearsal, the choreographer, dance faculty, technical director, and costumer go over notes which they collected during the rehearsal. These notes are for dancers and technicians; the primary goal for these notes is to improve the look, quality, and artistic presentation of a dance piece.

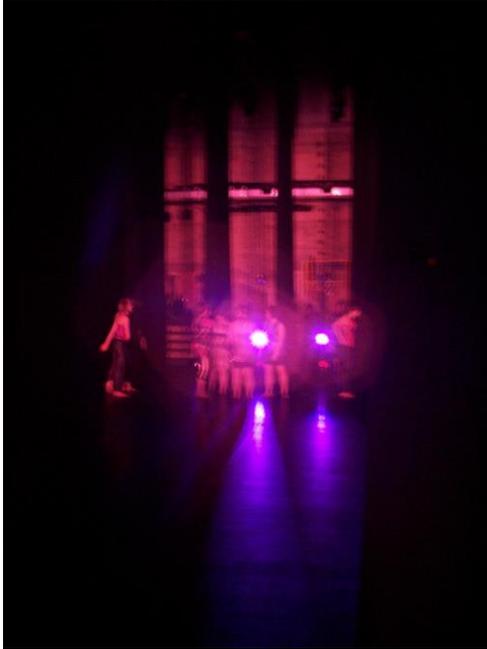


Photo 4: Technical rehearsal with dancers and lights. Photo 5: Pattern lights and dancers.

### The Big Show: Performances

Performances are the pinnacle of a dance production; this is the chance for everyone to showcase their work for an audience. Technicians are at the theatre one to two hours before show time; this gives them time to sweep and mop the stage, double check lights and ensure everything is in proper working order. Then, waiting begins (Lyon, 1975:263). Everyone waits for the audience to be seated, waits for the show to start, and waits for their cues. However, once a cue is given, there is a flurry of activity behind the scenes. During this time, technical workers are required to wear black from head to toe in order to remain unseen by audience members. As someone once said to me, “Anything can happen during a live performance.” Things go wrong during performances, and it is often the responsibility of the technical crew to fix them; machinery does not operate the way it should, zippers break on costumes, someone forgets their

cue to go on stage, etcetera. Technicians must think on their toes, so to speak, in order to create the best performance for every audience.

### Strike: Much More Work Than You Would Think

Following all performances, the theatre must be set back to the way it was before load-in began. The process of vacating and cleaning up a performance space is known as “strike.” The technical director, technicians, and dancers are all required to assist during strike. The primary role of technicians during strike is to direct their assistants (often dancers) in order to safely and efficiently remove every trace that the performance has happened. Organization and specific knowledge about equipment is required for technicians to direct others in the clean-up efforts. It is interesting to note that the load-in, which took technicians weeks to accomplish, is effectively destroyed in a matter of hours. Scenery is dismantled, lights are taken down, cables are coiled up and the performance space is ready for the next show to grace its stage.

### What Technicians Think About Themselves and Their Work

#### Goals and Actions:

According to a technical staff member of the dance department, the main objective of dance technicians is “to present the [dance] pieces in a more professional and polished manner than if they were to dance outside in the broad daylight, or under fluorescent lights.” Generally, this broad goal is maintained by all technicians as is evidenced by their responses to the questions of what the role of technical production is in dance. Responses included “making the dancers look good,” and “ensuring the dance is seen and heard to the highest quality.”

When specifically asked what they did as a dance technician, responses were very similar and revolved around the process of the show. As one techie said, “We maintain and operate equipment, lights, sound, some props, and special effects for the different dance shows each year.” Another techie described it this way: “The dance tech job is two fold: load-in/preparation, and show tech. Dance techies need to be well-versed in stage construction, lighting, and sound, and troubleshooting all these areas.” When the same question was posed to dancers, responses were close to what the technicians had said, but had a more outside perspective on technical work: “They are in charge of running the entire theater; they let the dancers know what is going on and what to do. They set up the stage and lights; they basically make everything happen besides the actual dance movement itself.”

### Marginalization and Recognition

Dance technicians are a marginalized sub-culture on the St. Olaf campus. This is partially due to the lack of recognition of all technicians in the performing arts. However, dance technicians generally do not mind that their work lacks recognition. When asked about audience recognition, one technician replied, “I don’t think they know we exist. Which is good. Like the music score of movies, and the lighting in a production, if we are noticed, we are doing something wrong.” Another stated, “I don’t think they know about us, except for our close friends, and at least, in the case of my friends, they think we’re another fun but slightly weird group.”

The consensus on recognition is that most dance technicians interviewed believed that marginalization just comes along with the technical worker position. Technicians feel that they

do not always receive appropriate recognition for all their work. When asked, one technician stated that receiving little recognition is “the nature of our profession. Not only do we shy away from recognition, our job is to enhance the perception of the dancer. We have accomplished the job adequately when we have not been noticed and we have propped the dancer up [o]nto a higher pedestal.” Many technicians even enjoy the lack of recognition; multiple interviewees replied that they like to remain mysterious and unseen. Satisfaction for a job well done comes from hearing the audience applaud, and “seeing the smiles on their faces, even when they do not know we are looking.”

The dance majors interviewed had a slightly different perspective on the recognition and marginalization of technical workers; they believed the techies should receive more credit and recognition than they usually do. However, efforts are being made to counteract the lack of respect and credit given to the dance technicians. One dancer reported, “It would be helpful for the dancers/others to be aware of the work that goes into training/setting up for a concert.”

Another dancer stated,

“I think that the dance department tries to bridge the gap by requiring all of the dance majors to tech a “big” show. This along with strike gave me a perspective on dance “teching” from the inside. As a senior dance major, working with all the techies to put together the show was a huge eye-opener for all of the work techies do before and after a performance. I think that being friends with the tech staff outside of “hell week” [technical rehearsals] really gives the best perspective. Increasing awareness for the first-year and sophomore dancers would be good.”

### Interaction

#### Co-Workers:

The interaction between co-workers is most often one of friendship and fun. There is a sense of community among the technicians, as evidenced of their enjoyment of one another and

their work towards a common goal. One technician reported, “At work, we have fun. We make fun of each other and we’re a good group of friends.” During work time, conversations can range from playful banter to ethical and political discussions. Music is another part of this conversation; during load-in, everyone is welcome to bring their own music and it is played over the sound system during work. There is little complaining over who’s music is played, and everyone takes turns sharing their favorite tunes. Most technicians feel comfortable singing along, and one reported that the music during load-in was one of their favorite parts of being a dance technician.

Amid this fun and musical environment, helping and teaching one another is also an important portion of the interaction between student workers. Upper class, more experienced workers teach the underclassmen the responsibilities and skills necessary for the job, as well as offer advice on everything from dorm living to academics. Academic majors of the student technicians range greatly from studio art, art history, political science, theater, dance, music, computer science and the CIS individual major.

The camaraderie of student technical workers can also be seen outside of work; during a show process, technicians eat dinner together on a daily basis, as well as congregate and enjoy snacks and conversation during and after rehearsals. Often this conversation during rehearsals takes place over the headset intercom system; this use of this system is governed by specific etiquette which all crew members are expected to follow. Rules include: no talking during a stand-by, in which the stage manager is will soon call a cue during a performance, and no one but the stage manager is allowed to say the word “go” at any time as that word indicates a cue to occur. These etiquette rules are necessary for the smooth running of a show, but in between stand-bys and cues, free conversation is normal and enjoyed.

The aforementioned power hierarchy is observed during co-worker interaction; however, this imbalance of power does not often negatively affect co-worker relationships. It is expected that everyone respect the functional stratification of power; when someone does not uphold the hierarchy, mistakes can result. When this occurs, it is the stage manager's responsibility to verbally remind the usurper that such action is not appropriate, and if the situation escalates, the technical director will address the problem. Generally, everyone is appreciative of the power structure as it lessens the stress and responsibility of their role.

The integrated interaction of co-workers is somewhat unique to dance technicians; during the interview process, a pattern emerged that indicated a difference between the interaction of dance technicians with one another and the interaction of theatre technicians with one another. One of the primary differences between the dance and theater technicians is the division of labor. Interviewees reported that "Theater techies are more specialized – one or two people will work on sound while another one or two work on lights, whereas the dance techies do everything." Apparently, this is a common phenomenon in theatre technician structure. Most theaters have strong divisions of labor, which can cause problems. Lyon reported that "In some theaters the division of labor has become so strict and so complex that effective collaboration is hindered." (Lyon, 1975:110) This division is virtually non-existent in the dance tech culture. "Dance techies all work together in all forms of the art. The theater department has structured the student workers into [specialized compartments]. The sound techies do not work with the lighting techies. This creates less of a community."

## Student Technicians and the Technical Director:

The interaction between technical director and tech workers was also an interesting undercurrent of group relationships. This interaction is shaped by mutual respect as well as a power hierarchy between the boss and the workers. At first, it is difficult to pick out the staff leader of this student group; the technical director works along side with the student workers throughout the show process. Conversation and joking is the norm between the students and director. The technical director often delegates jobs to student workers, or teaches others how to best perform a task. The majority of student technicians strive to complete their tasks to the satisfaction of the tech director. One interviewee stated, “The tech crew should report to the director and follow all guidelines set by the director.”

There is an unspoken trust between the student workers and the tech director; he trusts the student workers to complete their tasks properly and to ask questions when they arise. If mistakes happen, the technical director explains what went wrong and how best to fix the mistake. On the other hand, when safety issues crop up, a necessary strictness and authority can describe the interactions between workers and boss. A student worker described the tech director as “a cross between a really good boss and another co-worker. If the techies are a family-like community, he’s the Dad – but a really goofy one who is strict when he has to be.” As the St. Olaf staff member in charge of this group of student workers, the technical director is responsible for taking disciplinary action when there is dissention among the student workers. Such disciplinary actions include the assignment of lower positions of power during a show, as well as not allowing a student to work, or even dismiss the worker entirely.

Most often, the relationship between the students and the tech director is casual and fun. The technical director has met up with dance technicians outside of work to have smoothies or

host a party at his home for both student workers and dancers. Student technicians have friendly interaction with the tech director, but know that he has the final word in all technical matters. One student reported, “The techies respect his decision and know that anything he has to say is important in order to make the concert run more smoothly.”

#### Dancers and Technicians:

Dancers and technicians are dependent on one another. The shows would not happen without either group; without the dancers, the technicians would just be a sound and light show, and without technicians, the dancers would be left without lights, sound, and leadership. The interaction between dancers and technicians are mostly characterized by mutual respect for the work that both groups do, however, during interviews it became apparent that this is not always true. One technician reported that “sometimes they [dancers] just don’t talk with us [technicians], but mostly it’s like the relationship between co-workers. We like to joke around.” The reasons why dancers sometimes do not interact with technicians is unclear, but this is the exception to the norm. Relationships are often very friendly, and collaborative efforts are enjoyed.

Despite relatively positive interaction, there is still evidence of marginalization. For example, a member of the technical workers stated, “My experience...is that many dancers believe that techies are unskilled or incompetent. Techies are put into a position where they can easily become the scapegoat. If this occurs enough, there become dancers who think it is appropriate to berate those who are involved in dance, but not dancing.” This sometimes occurs at St. Olaf, especially when mistakes happen—regardless if they were caused by techie or machinery/technology.

Some choreographers and dancers struggle with understanding what is feasible in technical work; when something does not occur in the rehearsals the way they envisioned, they may become angry and blame the techies. This also occurs when choreographers and dancers misunderstand the technology being used in a production. I recall a time when a dance faculty member stated, “Is the light on the cyc [backdrop] bluer than yesterday? I think it looks bluer.” A technical worker had to explain to the faculty member that the color intensity of the lights was programmed into the lighting computer system, and that the color intensity was exactly the same as the day before because it was saved on the computer’s hard-drive. These types of misunderstandings can lead to unfavorable interaction between the technicians and dancers.

However, these types of issues are not one-sided; dancers also stated some dissatisfaction in their interaction with technicians. One dancer explained, “Some of the techies are extremely rude. They treat the dancers with little to no respect. Disclaimer: not all techies are like this, in fact very few of them are. Those that are [disrespectful] can really ruin a performance experience for the dancers.” As this dancer has stated, when one technician is disrespectful to dancers, it can negatively reflect on techies as a group. Another dancer stated,

“Usually it [interaction] is very cordial and we [dancers and techies] are friends. I think the stressful and demanding schedules we have when we work together during [technical rehearsals] causes a lot of tension. I also feel like dancers often feel like techies talk down to them and boss them around, which is probably just a combination of stress and doing their job. The other stressor is that dancers know what they want but don’t always communicate [effectively] with the techies. Also when techies [make mistakes] that we do not fully understand, but think should be simple...we get very frustrated and can be disrespectful.”

These situations described by dancers deal with the interaction between dancers as performers and technicians versus dancers as technical assistants during strike. During strike, most of the student technicians are placed in positions of power over dancers. Dancers are

divided up into groups, and each group has a student technician as its leader; each group is assigned different tasks for strike. Technicians must be leaders because they have the knowledge and skills necessary in order to ensure that the equipment is deconstructed, organized, and cared for properly. Again, there is evidence of structural functionalism, in which power stratification is necessary for function.

Interaction between dancers as assistants and technicians are mixed; some dancers resent being forced to work after the physical labor of performing, while others say that strike is their favorite part of a production. Technicians also have varied feelings about this system; some like to be in charge of dancers, while others struggle with having to explain and teach dancers how to perform the work necessary for strike. Technicians also may feel relieved that the production is over, but also feel sad that two weeks of their hard work is undone within a couple of hours.

Interaction during strike, when dancers are in positions as assistants, varies greatly depending on their own perspective, and the perspective of the technical leaders. Generally, interaction is positive, and the collaboration of efforts during strike is the capstone to the collaboration which has taken place throughout the production process.

There is a necessary goal of mutual respect between dancers and technicians. When one side fails to respect the other, animosity can result. In my observation and experience, this does not happen often; for the majority of cases, dancers and technicians get along well and have positive interaction with one another.

#### **SUMMARY and CONCLUSION**

Throughout this study, I have examined the intricate nature of the work and interactions of dance technicians at St. Olaf College. The sub-culture of dance technicians is a marginalized population; however, their work is vital in the production of a dance performance. This

marginalization and lack of recognition is common throughout all theatrical and dance companies, as illustrated by Alves (2007) and Lyon (1975).

While studying dance technicians, I discovered that there is a strong power hierarchy among positions occupied by dance technicians, and that this power stratification is necessary for function. This evidence supports the sociological theory of Structural Functionalism, wherein social stratification is seen as essential to proper function. Arguably, power stratification is necessary in all occupations; there is always an employer supervising an employee. The student work positions for dance tech at St. Olaf include: Stage manager, fly rail operator, sound board operator, light board operator, assistant stage manager (ASM), stagehands, and dresser/wardrobe. Each of these positions is endowed with specific powers and responsibilities.

Production time is carefully laid out; time is divided into necessary segments in order to obtain the goals of ensuring that each dance piece is seen and heard to the highest possible quality, with appropriate lighting, sound, and theatrical effects. Technicians are in charge of all the technical aspects of production, as well as running performances.

Despite these achievements by technicians, they are rarely recognized for their contributions to dance productions. This lack of recognition is not considered a problem for techies; most believe it is just part of the nature of their work. Dancers, on the other hand, believed technicians should have more recognition for all of the work that they do.

Technicians interact with one another positively, and acknowledge the achievements of each other. Techies often eat together, joke with one another, and consider each other friends. The technical director also interacts positively with student technicians, often joking, teaching, and conversing casually with the student workers. However, he also maintains a position of authority over those workers, as well as all technical aspects of a production. Dancers and

technicians have a relationship with an emphasis of mutual respect. When this respect is not observed by every member of both groups, animosity can result. This is relatively uncommon in the St. Olaf dance department; however, it does transpire on occasion.

This research provides an inside look at the culture that is created behind the scenes of dance productions. This information can be used to create awareness of those who do backstage work, and all the effort that goes into a production. It will give readers something to think about the next time they see a dance or theater production, and provide them with insight into the intricate network of power hierarchy that happens backstage. It can also be used as a resource for further research in this area.

Further research is needed to extensively examine the differences between dance and theater technicians, as well as the differences between dance techies and other technicians on campus, such as Pause and music/chapel technicians. Future research may also include a closer look at the culture of dance, as well as historical research of the dance department at St. Olaf.

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