My Internship at Beef and Boards Dinner Theatre

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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INTRODUCTION

In order to fulfill the requirements of ID 499 I did an internship at Beef and Boards Dinner Theatre. This paper is a summary of what I did and what I learned while I was there. It was a different atmosphere than any I had ever experienced before. I learned a lot about theatre but more importantly about myself. Unfortunately most of my lessons were learned from negative experiences and reactions. However, I did meet many exciting people. We had a lot of fun together and I still think about them often.

This paper is divided into three sections. PRESHOW describes what I did during the ten days of rehearsals. THE PERFORMANCE tells of my responsibilities during the run of the show. IN REVIEW reveals what I learned from this whole experience.
The first day I arrived at Beef and Boards, I got an indication of the organization (or should I say lack of organization) I would be working with for the next ten weeks. I had been told to arrive between 3:00 and 5:00 on Sunday. So, I appeared on their doorstep at 4:30 only to find out that the people who would assign me my room were not there. The box office attendant told me to "hang out" for two hours. I had to tell my parents whose car was filled with my belongings that we had to wait for two hours before they could unload the car and begin their two and one half hour trip back to Fort Wayne.

That night I met Ed the stage manager. I was looking forward to working with him because I was most interested in stage management and I hoped I could learn from Ed. He showed me my room above the theatre and the kitchen in the green room that the seven residents would share. I settled into my room and planned to get some rest before our 9:00 a.m. call. I soon gave up on that idea as Mickey Gilley began his performance just below my room.

The next morning I went down to the theatre and met the rest of the cast and crew. Surprisingly several of the people were Ball State graduates. I found out that this was the first time Beef and Boards had offered a program for purely technical theatre interns. (Most of the interns were actors trying to get their equity cards who were also expected to do back stage work.)
This fact was obvious as no one knew what to have me do. As the actors practiced their singing I was told to wait for Brian who was the costume designer that I would be assisting. After forty-five minutes of waiting I was finally put to work constructing a park bench.

Later, after lunch, I went up to the costume loft which was the tiniest, most unorganized costume shop I'd ever seen. During my time there we were constantly searching for buttons, hats, or "that pink piece of fabric I just saw an hour ago." However, they did have a serger sewing machine and once I learned how to use it I sewed everything I possibly could on it.

As it turned out there were three acting interns working in the costume shop none of which knew how to sew. So, my experience in costuming turned out to be quite valuable. However, I was surprised at just how much responsibility and freedom I would be given in the construction and design process. Brian was also one of the lead characters in the show and was often busy with rehearsals. So, Tara (who was the full time seamstress for the costume shop) and I were put in charge of most things.

For the next week I had the most enjoyable time of my whole internship. Everyday Brian would give me one to two hundred dollars and send me out with a shopping list. It was a challenge to try to find the best buys and it was fun to spend someone else's money. Of course, it was an even bigger challenge to find my way around as I was a complete stranger to Indianapolis.
However, with the help of my trusty map I had soon beaten a path to the Salvation Army, the fabric store, and Castleton Square.

What time I didn't spend shopping, I spent altering pants and shirts, constructing dresses, and gluing on feathers and sequins. In addition, I did some quasi-reupholstering. The scene designer asked if any of us knew how to reupholster. Since I had watched my parents recover several chairs and I was pretty handy with a staple gun, I thought maybe I could help out. So, I volunteered to recover a sofa. Believe me, I did not know what I was getting myself into. We decided for theatrical purposes we would not take off the original fabric but rather put the corduroy on top of it. It sounded easy to me but I ended up needing two people to help me and using a lot of safety pins where staples would not work. Every night during the performance I feared that the actors would accidentally tear off a piece of the corduroy.
THE PERFORMANCE

The first night was press night. Reviewers and reporters from many area newspapers attended. After only ten days of rehearsals the show was really rough. What surprised me was that the producers were not concerned because they knew it would quickly improve and that the reviewers would take the roughness into consideration. This seemed unusual to me because in college theatre the main idea was to be in top shape for opening night.

During the run of the show I was assigned the job of spot light operator. Running a spot light was about the only thing I had not done at Ball State but I figured it could not be that hard. I was only given one day to practice before the opening performance and I soon found out that running a spot light is much harder than it looks. The hardest part was lining the spot light up so that when it was turned on it would be aimed at the proper area of the stage. It was also difficult to follow the dancers with a tight circle while making sure their head and feet were still in the light. I finally became a competent spotlight operator and for the next eight weeks (every day except Monday and twice on Sunday) I followed the characters around the stage with a circle of light.

Besides running the spotlight, I also had other responsibilities. Before the show started, I made sure that certain props were in place. At the end of the first act of Singing in the Rain it rains on stage. So, I helped dry the stage
during intermission. This was fine until the director decided that he wanted it to rain at the end of the show also, simply to impress the audience. This meant that we had to crawl around the stage with towels twice instead of once. Needless to say, his decision did not go over very well with the technicians.

The run of the show was rather monotonous as the show was the same every day with a few exceptions. Once the star of the show received an electrical shock from a lamppost as he was dancing in the rain. Another time one of the orchestra members had a minor heart attack. The funniest event was when one of the characters lost her wig! Technical difficulties also caused occasional problems. A set of stage lights continuously dimmed throughout one performance only to "pop" back on during a tender moment. Twice the curtain got stuck and the show had to be stopped until it could be repaired. The first time this happened I went into shock. As a stage manager, I had learned to always work around or overcome any problems in order to keep the show going which often required some quick thinking. When Ed called an intermission to fix the curtain I was amazed.

Of course I was also amazed at the primitiveness of their pulley system. I did not expect Beef and Boards to be as nice technically as Ball State's theatre but it was even worse than I had figured. They didn't have a weighted fly system and they didn't even use heavy duty rope and pulleys. They used twine like rope with household pulleys screwed into boards. So it wasn't surprising that the curtain was continually sticking.
Another disappointment besides the physical aspect of the theatre was Ed the stage manager. He was the first professional stage manager I had worked with and I had hoped to learn from him. I knew he was a Ball State alumnus so during one of the performances I asked him about his college theatre career. I was very disappointed to find out that he was never involved with Ball State theatre. He graduated with a degree in criminal justice and his only theatrical experience was as a technician for University Singers. He had obtained the position of stage manager because he was a friend of the owners.

Actually, I found Beef and Boards whole system of job authority and responsibility a bit confusing. Their technical director only built the set. While Ed the stage manager seemed more like a technical director because he set and repaired the lighting and sound systems. Also, the assistant stage manager was nothing more than a props person. The whole time I was there I never knew who to talk to about any problems that came up because their title didn't fit the job descriptions I was familiar with.

During the run of the show I also came to understand what "equity" was all about. I had heard the word mentioned before but I didn't realize what was required to become an equity member or what it was like to be one. For instance, equity members must have brand new shoes. With each person wearing two to three pairs of shoes in one show this can become very expensive. Also, every theatre is supposed to have two cots set up in separate
quiet rooms for actors' and actress' resting rooms. Well there was absolutely no room for something like this at Beef and Boards but they did keep a cot in the closet in case someone complained.

After the show all of the interns spent time sitting in the green room talking. It was interesting to meet such a variety of people from all across the country. It was also beneficial to learn from their experiences at other theatres. I learned what theatres were good places to work and what were not. I made a lot of contacts through all of the people in the show.
IN REVIEW

I learned many things from my dinner theatre experience. I learned how to run a spot light and I learned how differently professional theatres operate. I've had some people tell me that dinner theatre is a breed of its own and is different from true professional theatre. However, many of the elements are the same. I found out what it was like to work on a long running show. I found out that professional costumers buy more costume pieces than they construct or retrieve from storage.

Basically, I discovered that if I ever work in theatre I want to work in educational theatre. I find it much more exciting. I like the variety offered by short run shows and I like the challenge of working on two or three shows at one time.

I'm not sure I would recommend this program for other theatre students because it was a rather negative experience for me. Although, if a student is serious about working in professional theatre perhaps they should try working on a long running show to see if they can handle the monotony. I think doing an internship at Beef and Boards would be more beneficial to acting student because of the opportunity it offers to make contacts and learn about equity.