RULES TO LIVE BY
By Robert Mokey, Stage Directions Magazine, May 2003

February's tragic fire at a Rhode Island nightclub, set off when stage pyrotechnics ignited foam insulation, serves as a reminder that serious accidents can and do occur in venues of all kinds. Please review the following safety tips and make sure common sense prevails.

Theatre has involved special hazards since the days of The Globe. In those days, firest, mechanical failures and falling accidents were beig concerns. Although the modern theatre has come a long way and is a much safer, more comfortable space than the theatre of the past, we still have fire and falling concerns today, along with electrical, woodworking and chemical hazards. Performers, backstage crew and sometimes even the audience can be at risk. There isn't enough room to cover all of the details regarding safety in each area of the theater from all perspectives here. There are several websites and books, however, which deal with the subject in depth. An excellent list can be found at http://www.iatse.lm.com/saflnk.html . This article will be more of a general overview of theater safety issues and hopefully, a reminder to be award of your theater's safety practices and equipment.

To start, please review this list of some common theatrical safety hazards as posted on the ESTA website at http://www.esta.org/tsp/hazards.htm . Consider what you can do in your theater to minimize these risks:

Falls
Toxic materials: solvents, paints, adhesives, and fumes
Burns from hot lighting instruments, glue guns, foam cutting, etc.
Falling tools and other objects
Electric shock
Fires
Poor facility and equipment maintenance
Improperly designed, installed or maintained electrical and rigging equipment and systems
Compressed gases, including air
Poorly designed, installed and maintained or improper scaffolds
Work locations with poor or nonexistent access
Equipment being used for a purpose for which it was not intended or designed. Many codes, standards and regulations prohibit use of some types of equipment for specific uses.
Improper use of tools and equipment
Lack of proper equipment to perform the task at hand, such as not having a ladder of sufficient height.
Pyrotechnics
Lasers
Weather: thunderstorms, lightning snow, rain, wind, wet conditions
Loud noise
Incomplete or no training on the task being performed or on the equipment being used: aerial lifts, forklifts, hand tools, rigging
Lack of proper safety equipment and related training

In addition, here are some important safety issues not regulated by law but very important to consider:

Lack of rest/sleep
Work schedule: irregular hours and shifts
Inadequate time to accomplish the task at hand
Lack of sufficient personnel to accomplish the task at hand (e.g., flyman supervising too many linesets)
Lack of appreciation of safety requirements and procedures
Lack of management commitment to safety
Co-workers working improperly
Facility security
Stress

Safety in the theater is everyone's responsibility. After all the lists are made, drills are carried out and safety equipment is purchased and checked, it still comes down to the individual's desire to work in a safe environment and willingness to take extra and occasionally time-consuming steps to perform a task the safest way. While researching this article, I spoke with many theater professionals about safety in all area of the theater: the wood shop, paint shop, backstage, lighting grid, stage, orchestra pit, rigging, even the restrooms. Although the safety concerns of the violinist or actor are somewhat different from those of the master electrician, they all have one thing in common: Thinking before acting increases safety for everyone concerned. Anticipate what could happen and prepare for potential problems. It sounds simple, but just using common sense can help avoid many unsafe situations. If you don't know how to use something or how to do something, stop and ask the person in charge. Keep your work are clean and uncluttered to minimize the risk of tripping. Keep all fire exits clear. Many theaters are very cramped backstage (especially older structures) and, with large scenic elements, lighting equipment, props and costumes, space can become a premium. Keep in mind that theaters are generally multilevel structures, from the orchestra pit to the stage to the catwalks, so there's plenty of potential for falls and falling objects. The following recommendations are geared especially for educators to help keep their theatre environment free of accidents and injuries:

Ensure that students receive instruction and are tested on the safe operation of theater equipment, the safe construction of set pieces and the safe use of hazardous materials.

Provide proper body protection for work in theater shops

Establish safety procedures and make sure that students understand and observe them

Use emergency procedures established by the school, such as evacuation plans for classrooms and other school environments, and make it clear to students what to do in case of an emergency.

Telephone access is important for production, rehearsals and performance activities, both during and outside of regularly scheduled school hours. Emergency numbers and procedures should be permanently posted, legible, and accurate.

Inspect facilities, tools, and equipment regularly; discontinue use of defective or unsafe equipment

Use posters and bulletin boards to emphasize potential dangers and safety procedures.

Supervise students using potentially hazardous equipment

Demonstrate and model safe behavior

While pressure is always present that “the show must go on,” never let that be the reason for unsafe choices or actions in any production situation. By making sure that everyone involved in your theatre is aware of and follows these guidelines, the show will go on, safely.