

Guide to Props

The first thing you must do - and the earlier you do it the better - is to prise a props list and a budget figure out of your director and producer. The list needn't be anything like complete (most prop requirements surface during the rehearsal period) and you must expect it to be continually added to and changed, but the earlier you can get an idea of how many things are wanted, how difficult they will be to find and how expensive they may be, the less hassle you will have during the last few days before the show opens.

Props budgets can be anything from £0 to £200, but for a Club Mainshow it will probably be in the range £25-£100. For a Lateshow, or a Playroom- or College-based show, the props budget will often be rather less, and for a two week musical, ETG, or the ADC -Footlights pantomime, rather more.

Keep in touch with your director, know when production meetings are happening and go to most of them if you can. Be aware that Props is a slightly hazy area and some items may overlap with Costume or Set (jewellery for example or pictures for walls) and unless you keep talking to each other you may find you've got an item twice, or worse still each of you thought it was the other's job and no one has got it. You will probably have to **nag the director** to keep you up to date on what is needed. To this end, attending the odd rehearsal is a good move, if only to reassure both yourself and the actors and director.

Do not believe the director who says they are going to "Go light on props". 70% of the time this just means they don't want to have to bother thinking about them or budgeting for them.

As well as a Props list, the more specific details you have about each item the better. For some things this doesn't matter. "Wooden spoon" might be fairly self explanatory, but on the other hand the director might want one 6ft long, or that can be dramatically snapped in half every night to reveal a collapsible white rabbit, or that can be used to hit people without causing them GBH. Check whether bottles need to be opened and poured from, whether food needs to be edible (see below) and cassette players need to be capable of playing. **Talking to the actors is a good move;** they have to use the stuff after all, and may have some good ideas. You can often find some of the things you need amongst the personal possessions of the company, so it's a good idea to attend production meetings and rehearsals and spend some time asking specifically if anyone already has any of the items on your list.

For each item, the first thing you have to decide is how important it is. This doesn't mean decide whether you can be bothered to get hold of it, since of course every prop is important, but it does mean: (a) how much of your budget (and possibly in some cases of someone else's budget) you are going to be prepared to spend on it and, just as important, (b) how much time and effort you are prepared to spend on it. There are likely to be one or two things that it is vital to get, and get right, (Dorian Gray's picture for example, or Yorick's Skull) but most props are less crucial than this.

The next thing you must decide is whether anything will have to be made rather than borrowed or hired. This is not usually a good option: it's time consuming and sometimes disappointing. If you enjoy making, then go ahead, but if not, and a prop very definitely has to be made or altered because you can't get hold of it any other way, find a friendly set painter / techie / carpenter and use their expertise. A good time to do this is while the set is being built and there are things like glue and

paint around. At the ADC this is usually the week before the show goes up and intensively the weekend before - just wander into the workshop.

Papier mache is not a good prop- or mask-making material. Chicken wire or tightly squashed newspaper wrapped in brown paper, parcel tape or gaffer tape are much better. The ADC and the Mumford have some very good masks.

With the exception of totally naturalistic plays, most shows require props that are bigger than life size. This seems strange and usually doesn't matter at all, but bear it in mind. Stage coins and notes are a particularly good example as is make-up. You need to go quite a bit O.T.T. on things to get a "natural" effect.

If you decide to beg, borrow, steal, hire or even (God help you) buy things, the list below may be useful. **Don't go over budget without checking with the producer** - you may just conceivably need to, but the corresponding amount will have to be cut from somewhere else.

ADC Prop store

Contains lots of useful props including weaponry, and some costumes. Contact the Props Manager on the Club Committee [props@cuadc.org] if interested in hiring Club props, to check availability and arrange collection. Hire is free to ADC Club shows, and relatively cheap to other shows. Don't forget you'll need a deposit cheque.

Second hand shops

Best ones are near the Grafton centre and down Mill Road; there are also a couple of slightly posher more "antiquey" shops on Gwydir Road (off Mill Road).

The White Book

If you need something very special and specific (and expensive), then *the white book* can be a good place to look. It's online, and there is a paper copy in the ADC Theatre offices. It has lists of professional companies and suppliers for everything you could possibly want. Try under "Props Hire" or "Weaponry" or whatever else you're looking for, and it's always a good idea to phone around for the best deal; remember to include postage in your pricing.

Some shops will be prepared to lend goods or sell them cheaper or even donate them in return for a mention in the programme:- haggle!

Make sure that everyone who helps you in any way is mentioned in the "Thanks" section of the Programme - this is polite, and goes for everyone on a production team. Civility costs nothing, after all, and will make people more willing to help you in the future!

Props nightmares and hot tips

These are some of the problem items and a few possible solutions.

Food

If it's real it goes off, gets eaten or gets trodden on. It needs replacing nearly every night, needs cast and expensive quantities to look good on stage and is a hassle to prepare and clear up. Fake food (Non-biodegradable and usually about three times life size) is preferable for things like medieval banquets if you can get hold of it. If it doesn't have to be eaten and you want to prevent nibblers off stage, try things like dog biscuits instead of biscuits, dog chocolates instead of chocolates, stale cakes from a local bakery (they'll let you have their day's left overs every evening if you're lucky), cold black weak tea looks like whisky, cold black very weak tea looks like champagne and both have the advantage over apple-juice that no-one will drink them until they are on stage and absolutely have to, cakes with quantities of salt in the mixture are inedible and keep for ages.

Treasure

Including caskets of jewels, chests full of Spanish doubloons and assorted regal impedimenta. Silver paper, Christmas decorations and second hand tat are the order of the day here. Haberdashery departments (Sayle's) are good on shiny buttons. Gold/ silver spray paint and glitter are useful. If you have to make a bulging casket of shiny things, pad it full of newspaper or something, spray the newspaper gold, then stick the treasures you have onto the bulge. This is a good tip for any receptacle that needs to look very full or a commodity you are short of, be it a bowl of fruit, a sack of barley or a suitcase of books.

Blood weapons

At their worst these are unreliable, unimpressive, a costume cleaning nightmare and inclined to provoke audience amusement at the critical dramatic moment. On the other hand they can be fine. Consider getting the Costume Designer to alter a white shirt for example so that a piece can be ripped off on Velcro to reveal a red stain beneath (good for stab wounds). Of course an inconspicuous moment to do the ripping will have to be blocked into the fight. If you do decide to use one it will usually have to be properly hired (see White Book, above). The Blood is best made of 1 part Leichner stage blood or Grimas film blood, to 1 part green washing up liquid, to about 4 parts of water depending on the consistency you require. Glycerine (from chemists) will thicken it, coffee will darken it, but may stain. This mixture washes out like a dream if not left to dry into the clothes, but tends to coagulate a bit over time so it's a good idea to rinse the mechanism of the weapon out every so often with clean water. Blood capsules are fun for oral haemorrhages.

Guns

The ADC has a number of stage pistols, and these must be treated with respect and fired at a safe distance - ask the theatre management for details. Your production will need the appropriate licence to use a stage pistol - check with the producer that you have one.

Medical

See The St John's Ambulance web pages.

Smoking

Again, needs a licence, which can be arranged with the venue by the producer. You might have to fight with the actors over who pays for them. There must be sufficient ashtrays in the wings and on stage, and they must contain damp sand.

Candles

Need a licence, which can be arranged with the venue by the producer. Tend to be difficult for actors to light or inclined to blow out. Electric ones, especially with flicker bulbs can be quite an effective substitute, but check the batteries.

Breakable props

Lots of plays involve the symbolic destruction of something on stage every night. This may be a sheet of paper that gets crumpled up or torn, a piece of crockery that gets dropped and broken or a length of wood that is smashed over someone's head. You can get hold of props (e.g. statues of Buddha) that are designed to be broken and then put together again, but if you are actually destroying something every night make sure you make/buy enough to last the run: one for every performance, one for the dress, one for the tech and a couple more for luck. Balsa wood is good for making breakable things.

Health and Safety

There is often a need for bottles or glasses to be used on stage. Using real glass presents hazards whose severity will depend on the nature of the production: for instance, if actors with bare feet will be using the stage during or after a scene in which glass would be used, it may be considered too unsafe to allow glass to go on to the stage, unprotected. There are two popular solutions. The first is to cover the glass items with cling film: some of the glass items in the ADC props store are already covered in this way. Alternatively, plastic glasses could be used. The props store has a limited range of them, and they can be bought from shops such as Robert Sayle. Buying convincing plastic glasses is certainly more expensive than going for a box of factory-rejected real glasses, though.

All props used must be adequately flame-retardant. In cases where an object's flame-retardance is not obvious, the conventional test is to hold the flame of a cigarette lighter against the prop for 30 seconds: the prop must not burn. It is worth remembering that some plastic fabrics such as Nylon will simply melt in the flame and are unlikely to be acceptable. Most fabrics, and paper and card, can be made flame-resistant by spraying them with the liquid "Flamecheck", probably using several coats.

Get-in, Tech run, Dress run, first night

Prop managers often double as Assistant Stage Managers (ASMs), which means you are backstage with the Stage Manager while the performance is going on, helping to set up before and clear away afterwards, and carrying out scene changes. The Stage Manager may ask you to stay with him / her near the SM's desk on Prompt Side (which at the ADC Theatre means the stage-left wing) so you are available to find missing people / props.

If you are back-stage during the performance, remember to wear dark clothing. If you are not ASMing, you will probably need to be present at least for the beginning of the various runs and the first few performances, in order to finalise the setting of props etc. During the Tech and Dress, it's a good idea to note down what needs to be set both on and off stage, where, when and by whom. On the whole actors ought to take props from the prop table just before they go on, and replace them

as soon as they come off. The Presets (props set on stage at the beginning of an Act) can cause problems. Make sure you know whether it is you or the actor that is meant to set something; if it's the actor, it's a good idea to check it anyway, at least for the first few runs.

Afterwards

After the last performance and BEFORE the party, get all the props out of the stage area, and pack away as many as possible. Return borrowed or hired props religiously, since you will annoy everyone who has kindly lent you things if they're not returned. If you've spent your own money on things, keep the receipts and give them to the producer as soon as you can, for repayment.

You can combine Prop Managing with doing or learning to do various other jobs. Your help will be very much appreciated before the show opens with the Get-In and set painting, and you might be able to Stage Manage for a night or two if you can persuade the SM to teach you how. The same goes for operating the lights, Counterweighting (operating the big pulleys that fly bits of set in and out) and running sound. However, if you want to Prop Manage and do nothing else, then that's perfectly fine(!)

Good Luck, and have fun!

Further Reading

Chapter 6 of The Staging Handbook, Francis Reid, Second Edition, A&C Black, London, 1995

Stage Design and Properties, series editor David Mayer, Phaidon, London 1993