

# STAGING CLEVELAND

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STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Let's Get Technical

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# Let's Get Technical

## **VISUAL STORYTELLING**

Although she received an acting scholarship to Carnegie-Mellon University, Inda Blatch-Geib realized pretty quickly that her heart and her future weren't in wearing greaspaint, but applying it to others. Her success in her makeup classes revealed an enjoyment of the technical end of theater and led to her exploring prosthetic makeup design, costuming and set design. She transferred to Akron University, where she completed her undergraduate degree in theatrical design and literature, and her graduate degree in design.

Even during graduate school she was working professionally almost full time focusing on costume and production design. Upon graduation, she smoothly transitioned into developing ongoing relationships as a designer with theaters, as well as working in television commercial, print and film projects.

"The visual storytelling a costumer provides impacts actors probably more than anything, because of the relationship of costumes to an actor's movements," she says. "It's so tactile and helps them truly become the character, and you're also dealing with psychologically manipulating the audience and giving them contextual, visual clues."

Cleveland has worked extremely well for her, she says, in terms of providing numerous employment opportunities for her. Blatch-Geib works regularly with Great Lakes Theater and Playhouse Square, along with a number of smaller theaters from Dobama to Playwrights Local. She has several theaters and clients with whom she's worked for 25 to 30 years. Having a mix of different clients, she informs, is especially important for technical contractors, and it can be difficult today for people to establish themselves.

"It can be a hard career overall for people to start out and believe they're going to work here entirely," she says. "You have to be willing to travel and to work in film or do commercial projects or start in the lower technical positions. You must have the desire to work your way up and be in learning positions for a while."

## **MASTERY OF SOUND ENGINEERING**

Similarly, Richard Ingraham had every intention of becoming an electrical engineer while attending Cleveland State University in the early '90s. Until that day when several heads of the Theater Department cornered him in the hall and disabused him of his belief. "Richard, you spend all of your time in this [the Factory Theater] building," he remembers them telling him. "You're not going to be an electrical engineer. Go change your major." He did.

One of the reasons they encouraged him to do so was he demonstrated a complete mastery of sound engineering skills. For example, they knew well of the time he took the theater practicum to learn some

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of the technical elements, and while running the sound board during a show read through all of the equipment manuals and, to his classmates' astonishment, figured out how to use all of the sound equipment.

"As a kid, I was always aurally oriented and loved playing with stereo equipment or my dad's open-reel tape recorder," Ingraham comments about his obvious destiny to be a sound designer. "I was always playing with a cheap cassette recorder, making weird recordings and pretending to do radio shows."

He left CSU to work at the Cleveland Play House (CPH) as a sound technician and then a sound designer, and then he went on to more than 20 years of working at a variety of theaters, from Great Lakes Theater to Dobama.

Ingraham claims the downside of working in Cleveland as a technician is it's difficult to find full-time jobs with the few theaters hiring those positions, which often are union jobs, so most contractors have to work at multiple theaters or find other employment. Over the years, he did a range of things from adjunct teaching at local universities to working on cruise ships. For the past several years, he's been working full-time at Westlake Reed Leskosky/DLR Group and doing contract projects at various theaters. (Recently, he accepted a similar position in the New York office of a UK-based theatre and acoustics consultant, Charcoalblue.) He believes this region does have one significant advantage that enables people to structure their employment in a variety of gigs.

"I can't think of anywhere comparable that has the same quality of living for the cost and also as many theater opportunities as Cleveland does," he says.

## **AN EXACT SCIENCE**

Growing up in Cleveland Heights, Tom Humes fell in love with technical theater while a member of the stage crew program and working on the "lovely, lovely huge stage" at Cleveland Heights High School. The program introduced him to the key technical components of theater such as hanging and focusing lights and how to participate on a run crew team, for example, as a spotlight or light board operator.

He went on to earn his bachelor's degree in theater with a mathematics major at Bowling Green State University in 2007, all while working at Cain Park in the summers. He jumped into theater jobs immediately after graduating, including serving as assistant stage manager for Opera Cleveland, his first experience managing stage hands. He worked at a variety of nonEquity theaters until he earned his Equity card at Cain Park in 2009. While working as a run crew member at CPH, he took a job as an electrician, so he had to also join the International Alliance of Theatrical Stagehand Employees (IATSE).

A few years later, when CPH needed an Equity Assistant Stage Manager, he jumped at the chance to elevate his career and now works as a Stage Manager for the Play House.

"The technical positions and how to work backstage are an exact science that make a lot more sense to me than the artistic side of theater," he says. "It's something that I enjoy immensely, and I can move very naturally through the different departments with no trouble."

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That ability to handle all of the technical capabilities required for a professional production is something he recommends people interested in being stage managers acquire. “I definitely suggest doing as much work in as many departments as possible, lighting, sound, costumes, projections, everything,” he says. “It’s very impressive when you go to a theater and can help them solve set construction problems.”

### **A STRONG NETWORK**

One of the best ways to find opportunities for stage management and tech positions is to network, according to Yesenia Real. Real works by day as an executive assistant at Ernest & Young, but by night as a stage manager in professional and community theaters.

“Finding friends or colleagues that know someone or work in theater that you are interested in is the key to finding tech jobs in Cleveland,” says Real, who found her current job at Dobama Theatre through a friend. “Resumes are great, but word of mouth is probably your best bet.”

Real’s recommendation is confirmed by a recent CPAC study, which states that the theater sector in Cleveland has a strong network, “allowing individuals to work across spaces and groups in an interconnected and welcoming environment.”

Moreover, the study found there are indications that more technical and design staff are needed in the Cleveland theater sector: According to the study, there are “opportunities for skilled trades labor beyond on-stage talent to transition their skills into much needed costume design, set design, lighting design, sound design, and stage management.”