

This book is a great resource and foundation for anyone contemplating a professional theatre career. It also helps explain your chosen theatre life to family and non-theatre friends. A must for every Intro-to-Theatre reading list.

What We Do Working in the Theatre

By Bo Metzler

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What We Do Working in the Theatre

The background of the book cover is a dramatic illustration. In the foreground, the back of a person with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark suit, is visible. Their arms are slightly out to the sides. Behind them is a dense crowd of people, represented by dark silhouettes. In the upper half of the image, three bright stage spotlights shine down, creating a hazy, blue-tinted atmosphere. The overall composition suggests a theatrical performance or a director addressing an audience.

2nd Edition

Bo Metzler

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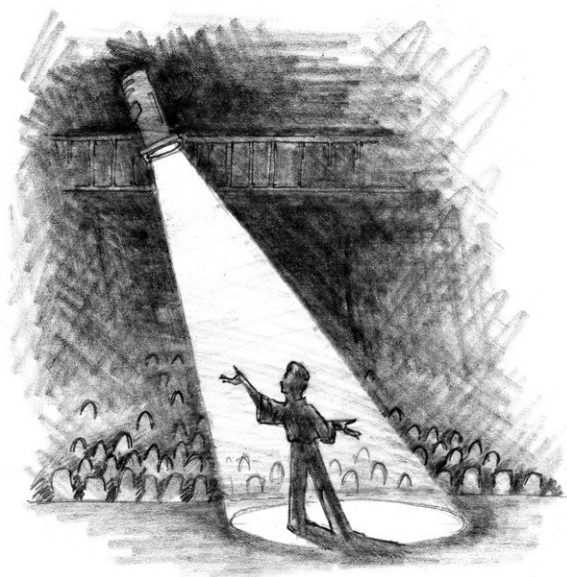
2nd Edition

For my mother who inspired me and let me be.

And for all my fellow theatre people
who do what we do
for the love, the dream and the applause.



The author, young and green,
attempting Shakespeare in
A Midsummer Night's Dream
(1968; age 17)



PRE-SHOW

(Preface)



In the theatre, the “Pre-show” is a show before the show.

**It is mainly a Dinner Theatre custom where
the waiters and waitresses become performers
and sing a few songs, tell a few jokes or put on a skit.**

**It occurs while the audience finishes their meal
while the dishes are cleared and everyone settles down
for the evening’s main event.**

**A “Pre-show” can happen on any special evening where,
for instance, there may be an author to launch,
a charity to fund, a dignitary to honor,
a grand opening or a world premiere.**

**Whether it’s entertainment or honor, it all happens
before the main show—as a warm-up to the main event.**

Here the “Pre-show” takes on a slightly different form.

**Instead of speeches or jokes or songs . . .
we will begin with a little "how it all began" story
which will explain the reason this book was written.**

**So . . . may I have the house lights dimmed to half,
and my follow spot, please?**

The idea for this book actually took root around 1980 when I was visiting my hometown in Ohio for the Christmas Holidays. This was my traditional week-long visit with

parents, siblings and friends, highlighted by the opportunity to partake in a juicy Yuletide turkey which I so looked forward to each year. The food, the family and the fun had become an annual affair ever since I left my hometown six years earlier to seek my fame and fortune. And, amid the revelry, there were the usual curious questions about what I was up to and how things were going in the “big city” of New York.

“What are you working on now?” asks one cousin.

“Well, nothing at the moment,” was my self conscious reply.

“Aren’t there any auditions? You were always such a good actor.”

“Yes, there are always auditions,” I explained.

“Unfortunately there is also, always, a lot of competition.”

“What do you do, just go around to each theater to see if they are auditioning?”

“Well,” I smile, “there are several trade papers which list audition notices and, in New York, you don’t generally audition in a theater.”

Seeing the question marks all over his face, I tried to explain. “You see, in New York, most theaters are just empty spaces for rent, like apartments or warehouses. When a show is going to be produced, it’s up to the producer of that show to rent a theater that will accommodate his needs. And generally, even though theaters are contracted months in advance, move-in dates aren’t scheduled until after the show has hired a cast and they are already in rehearsal.”

“So you need to see the producer, then? Where do they have the auditions?”

“Well, the producer doesn’t handle casting. Not directly. The director or a casting director does. And auditions can take place in the casting directors office or, very often, in a rented rehearsal studio.”

And so it went, again—the explanations. I tried to be as simple and concise as possible. I tried very hard to use words that were easily understood—because I am well aware of the

fact that I can lapse into a familiar “theatre-ease” dialect which many non-theatre people still don't quite understand. Invariably, no matter how cautious I attempted to be; no matter where I started my explanations, there was always something missing. There was always some little tidbit of background information, not explained, that was crucial to a current explanation. Things would usually get confusing as I would go back and explain something else which would result in my losing track of what it was that I began to explain in the first place.

To complicate everything, each year I was coming home with new stories about new experiences in new areas of the theatre that I was getting involved in. Early in my career, when I wasn't finding much work as an actor, I was also taking work as a stage manager as well as backstage as a stagehand—hanging lights and building scenery. So each year, with every new experience, my explanations began to get slightly more confusing. This usually prompted the most frequent question—the one I've heard more times than I can count. It is my all-time favorite:

“What is it, exactly, that you do?”

“I am a stage manager,” I would answer, chest held high (when stage managing was my main area of concentration).

“Oh . . . I see . . .” a polite lie. “I thought you were an actor.”

“Well, I was . . . that is, I am . . . I mean . . . I started as an actor, when I first went to New York. And I still have an itch to be onstage. But while I'm not acting, I do other things to make ends meet. And because I sometimes work as a stagehand and even as a dresser, I found that the job of managing the stage was something I was well equipped to do.”

There were several years when my varied resume was a splendid source of total confusion.

“Why don't you do a TV commercial?”

I can't tell you how many times I've heard that one—especially during the period when I was modeling.

Or . . .

“Why don’t you get a part on one of those soap operas? You could make a lot of money doing that.”

“To tell you the truth, I wish I could. But it’s not that easy.”

“Oh . . .”

And so it went: questions, followed by explanations, followed by confusion, followed by more explanations. It became terribly frustrating and sometimes even a bit exhausting. There I was, year after year, trying to explain the crazy, mixed-up life that I had chosen for myself, and I usually got nowhere fast. Undaunted, I endured. The explanations were too brief, usually outdated (since I was always doing something different) and they happened only once a year. No wonder I got so many blank looks. My poor family . . . I don’t blame them.

I had to figure out a way to make the explanations better—more current, continuous and as complete as possible. I could make more frequent trips home with updates, but that would become prohibitively expensive. Frequent long distance phone calls would also add to my already overburdened budget. Not a good idea (this was before cell phones with free long distance). Maybe I could write letters (before email), constantly updating my career and life with lengthy explanations. The thought of words like “constantly” and “lengthy” made my hand hurt.

And then it hit me! Wait a minute!

What about *one* lengthy explanation? What about writing down everything I could think of that related to the business I was in, and all of the jobs I have had, and make copies of it for everyone who wanted them? I could share my experiences, with all the peculiarities and manifestations, and hopefully be finished with all the repetitive explaining—once and for all!

What a great idea! Simple enough, right?

As I thought about it, the solution became simple too. A book! I'd write a book about the theatre and then, on the next visit home for Christmas, I'd give a copy of the book to everyone who asked any questions.

The aim of the book would be to explain everything in theatre—what everyone did and how all the aspects of the theatre related to each other. A simple, concise, general explanation—a kind of reference book, so to speak, with terms defined, job descriptions explained and relationships and methodologies explored. The book would translate the language of theatre into the language of family and friends—so that everyone would understand.

The book would not be a “how to” book explaining *how* to do theatre, because many people have written these books already—covering all areas of the business. It *would*, however, be a *who, what and where* type book—an insider's view of the theatre, relating what I saw, what I did, and what I learned through my own experiences. It would be an explanation of the fundamentals of theatre so that any reader could begin to see, understand and appreciate the life that theatre people live as they pursue their careers.

There are probably thousands of people all over the country—my fellow theatre people and their families and friends—who are experiencing communication difficulties similar to mine when trying to understand the life and the business of theatre. Maybe my book would help explain things for them.

And as I thought further, I realized that there are tens of thousands of college students contemplating a career in the theatre—each semester of each year. A comprehensive and practical book outlining the scope of professional theatre would be a helpful, and maybe even necessary, addition to every intro-to-theatre, or theatre appreciation, course in the curriculum. I wish a book like this had existed when I went to college.

Was I biting off more than I could chew? Was I thinking too big? I thought not. After all, people with far less practical experience in the theatre than me have written shelves of theatre books. Why couldn't I? And if people could benefit from my sharing what I have experienced—why shouldn't I give it a try?

It took me over 30 years to write this book because first I had to live it and experience it. And as I publish this book I am passing my 34th year in New York and in the professional theatre. I have worked in almost every theatrical arena in and out of New York (Off-Off-Broadway to Tours to Children's Theatre); I have held nearly every job on stage or backstage (acting, stage managing, carpentry, props, electrics and wardrobe); I have written for the stage as well as produced for the stage; I have driven scenery trucks as well as coordinated limousine transportation; I have worked in TV and on Broadway (including on 4 of the longest running Broadway hits). So who better to write about all of the different jobs in the theatre, and how they relate to each other, than someone who has actually done pretty much everything in the theatre at one time or another? Proudly and yet humbly I answer: "I'm your guy!"

So here it is. A first-hand comprehensive compilation of what I have observed, learned, experienced and accomplished while working in the theatre business. It's organized into chapters and sections that will help anyone who reads it understand the ins and outs of the theatre. It explores the language, the jobs, the venues, the training, the relationships, the activities, the sweat, the toil, the stress, the fun, the people, the camaraderie, the good times and the not so good times—all about what we do working in the theatre.

I'm sure I have forgotten or missed a few things—or been occasionally redundant. And, since the business is always changing, there may be things I did and ways I did them that may seem antiquated to future readers. But it is my intention

that this one, long, detailed explanation is basic yet universal enough so that everyone who reads it will get something out of it—whether they are coming from no knowledge or from an already established career. And hopefully it is concise and informative enough so that anyone either in the theatre, planning to go into the theatre, or anyone who knows someone who is in the theatre, can begin to communicate with knowledge, understanding and appreciation.

It is in this regard that I have set about this curious task. It may at times be personal—with anecdotes from my life and my experiences—but it is every theatre person's life and every theatre person's experiences. We all want our family, friends, and future theatre people to know what we do. In fact, we need you to know—so that we can share our experiences and enjoy them together.

So relax and get comfortable. I hope that you enjoy what you are about to read as much as I've enjoyed living it for you.

Does everyone have a program? (If not, turn the page.)

**Follow spot fades to black.
Hopefully, there is polite applause.**

**The house lights fade to black.
A hush of excitement and anticipation
wafts over the crowd.
A few people take one more glance at The Program.**

The main show is about to begin!



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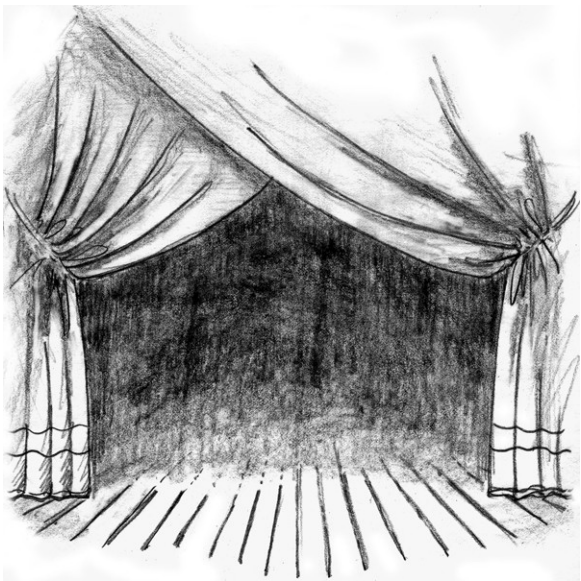
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About the Author *



Bo Metzler has been involved in some form of theatre activity since 1967. He spent 10 years doing theatre as a pastime in high school, college, community and regional theatre in Ohio. Six of those 10 years were spent at Kent State University as an actor, scenery builder, lighting tech, propman, stage manager, publicity director, writer and director—on over 40 shows—first as an undergraduate math major (of all things!), and then as a graduate teaching assistant working on a Master's degree in Theatre and teaching theatre labs.

In 1974 he began a 32-year career in New York where, all in all, he plied his trade on over 2 dozen Off-Off-Broadway and Off-Broadway shows and in over 20 different Broadway theaters on over 30 Broadway shows throughout the years. His work on Broadway has spanned the jurisdiction of 3 labor Unions anywhere from a few days (on load-ins & load-outs) to months and even years on such shows as *La Cage aux Folles*, *42nd Street*, *Jekyll & Hyde*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, and four of the longest running Broadway shows: *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Miserables* and *The Lion King*. Working on Broadway as a union actor, stage manager, dresser, electrician, carpenter and propman may very well be a uniquely singular professional achievement.

Mr. Metzler also worked on various TV shows such as 5 years on *Sesame Street* (3 times earning Emmy Certificates for his contribution to Outstanding Lighting Direction), and various sporadic days on *Donahue*, *Letterman*, *Today*, *Later*, *Jane Whitney*, *Howard Stern*, *Jane Pratt*, *Dudley*, *Inside Moves* and *Family Edition*.

He has traveled as a company manager, road manager, stage manager, actor and scenery van driver on three tours throughout the U.S. (once even assisting with hair & make-up); supervised the wardrobe and dressed Harry Belafonte in Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain, Zimbabwe as well as in Vegas, Atlantic City and other U.S. cities; designed for a Modern Dance Company which performed in Israel, South Korea, Japan and New York; worked as a stagehand on 15 rock concerts in Omaha; stage managed or crewed Tributes & Benefits at: Lincoln Center (MET & Avery Fisher), The Waldorf Astoria and Giants and Yankee Stadiums; worked at the CBS carpentry shop, E.L.T., La Mama ETC, the Orpheum, Theatre of the Open Eye, Lion Theatre, Harold Clurman Theatre, The Public Theatre,

Manhattan Theatre Club, The New Victory Theater, The Actor's Studio, The Kennedy Center, The Spoleto Festival and Lincoln Center State Theatre and was a staff stage manager at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts on more than a dozen full productions.

Over the years, Mr. Metzler has also worked in Dinner Theatre and Children's Theatre and even helped build houses for Habitat for Humanity. He is the author of a play about the Lincolns entitled "*Abraham and Mary*," which he appeared in as well as directed, and has a new book, as yet unpublished, based on a journal chronicling his last two years on *The Lion King*, tentatively entitled *Behind the Lion's Roar!*

Mr. Metzler's career came to a crashing halt - literally - in 2006 when he fell on a stairway while moving a sofa from a dressing room on *The Lion King*. He suffered a serious neck injury and had to retire on disability.

He moved to the Philippines with his wife in 2010 where their son Dominick was born.

* This section was written in the actual style of a Broadway Playbill, where the performer writes their own Bio in the third person.



On the prop crew
of my last Broadway show
(2006)

If you enjoyed this book - spread the word!

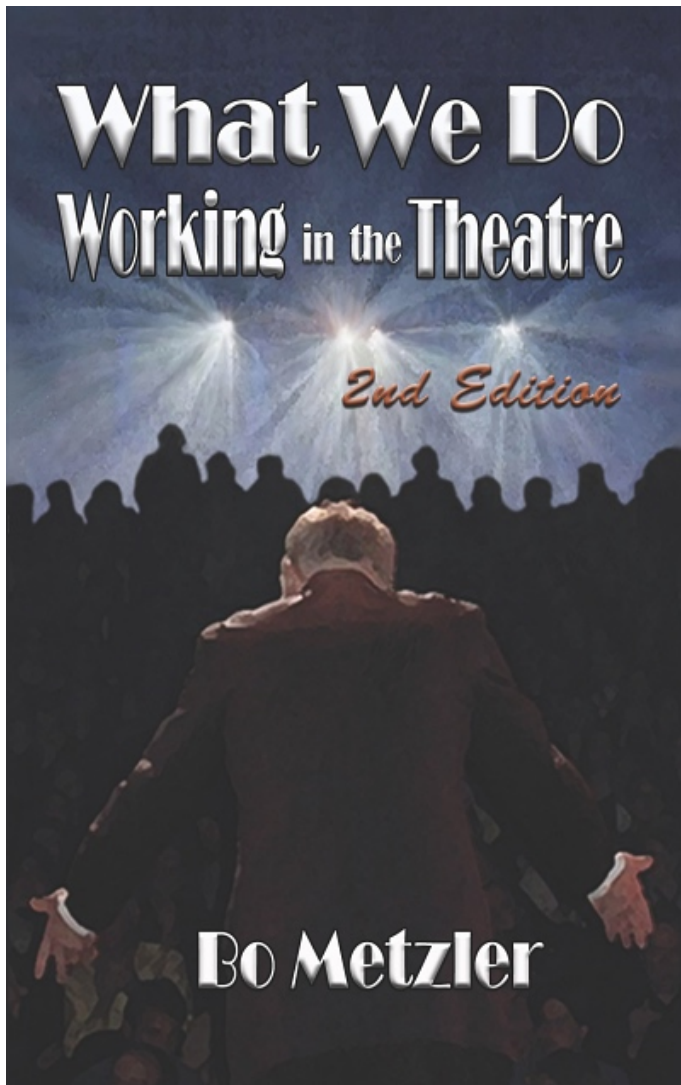
It is perfect for college theatre studies because
it covers ALL of theatre – not just acting.

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