

# *Experience Makers: Careers in Live Events*

## Sample Chapter

### Introduction

In theatre, there is a curtain separating the audience from the backstage—an area populated by stage managers, crewmembers and technicians of all stripes performing the essential but hidden work of live theatre. Another sort of curtain separates the event itself from the range of other makers involved in creating it during the months or years before it opened.

Moreover, a larger curtain separates the entire field of theatre-makers from other live events, each filled with makers of their own, engaged in the analogous work of creating live experiences. Pulling back this last curtain exposes a hidden truth: makers in all these fields are members of the same familial workforce. Despite the sprawling variety of industries and venues we populate, we all share a common task: making false worlds for real people.

Penetrating these barriers to see the work of makers in live events can be a challenging task. Some boundaries are intentionally drawn to hide the production apparatus from the public, preserving the delicate magic of the experience. Others may be the result of organizational pressures can lead to segregating the making process or siloing workers. More subtle obstructions include biases in favor of the more visible and celebrated work of performers, as well as the deeply rooted biases of white- and blue-collar labor. Even within our fields, structural hierarchies often value the “creative positions” of design or the supervisory work of management over roles in engineering or fabrication.

Yet when the curtain is lifted, it becomes clear how similar our fields are. Building a costume for a performer is a skill shared by makers for Broadway, Disneyland, Mardi Gras, Colonial Williamsburg, and Coachella. The same can be said of all the disciplines that live events share, including scenery, lighting, audio, media and the uniquely challenging disciplines of project and artistic management. Likewise, all live events share the essential processes of making: design, engineering and fabrication. However, they also include the unique tasks of hosting and interacting with live guests.

Keeping the work of makers behind these curtains can conceal their significance, even from their own companies, which can result in worker being undervalued or undercompensated. This selective blindness also creates obstacles between our industries and our future colleagues and co-workers. Makers who consider their skills a mere hobby are unable to recognize their value in the field. Students weighing possible careers are often oblivious to the varied roles in live events. Workers in the trades may consider their options limited to the jobsite without seeing how their skills are utilized elsewhere. Finally, our isolation prevents makers in our fields from seeing one another. Industry organizations are missing opportunities for collaboration and partnerships.

Education and training initiatives neglect the parallels in our disciplines to the detriment of our workforce. Techniques and best practices are limited by field instead of being enhanced by sharing and iteration.

The skills of a maker are universal and can be used to navigate into new professions and beyond the borders of a single field. After three Tony Award® nominations, Toni-Leslie James transferred her skills to the film industry when she designed costumes for the movie *Rustin*. Justin Townsend designed lights for an international tour of the Canadian rapper Drake just three years before his award-winning design of *Moulin Rouge!* on Broadway. This occupational agility is common across all disciplines of makers. The carpenters and welders in themed entertainment are often trained as cabinetmakers and ironworkers. Sound technicians for theatre become audio engineers for concert venues. Stage managers in the performing arts often make skilled project managers in the live event industry.

Makers in live events also possess an additional set of skills necessary to address the very liveness of the experiences they create. Live performance is a time-based art, demanding impeccable organization and flawless timing. Hosting visitors, whether as a single audience or a stream of guests, requires a hospitable environment from top to bottom. Live events also create a unique world of their own that embody a theme or tell a story. This narrative skill is essential for makers in this industry, although it is often overlooked in education and training.

Many of the careers in live events offer no clear training path to guide students or professionals toward jobs in their fields. For that reason, the current workforce presents a stunning diversity of backgrounds from graduate programs to informal and on-the-job training. Some formal programs of study address certain disciplines in great depth, such as industrial design, mechanical engineering, or welding. However, transitioning into live events requires that makers build additional skills, for instance, in audience management, automation cuing, or decorative structures. The world-building of live events involves unique goals and considerations that few educational programs provide.

One exception to this may be training in theatre. Even at the bachelor's level, a student maker generally gains significant exposure to design, engineering and fabrication along with the crucial skills of running a production with a live audience. All the major disciplines of live events are involved as well. For many makers, theatre served as their foundational training ground and first taste of world-building for an audience.

The goal of *Experience Makers* is to draw back the curtains of secrecy, siloing and bias to uncover the range of makers across these fields and the kinship they share. It reframes the practice of making in our industry as fundamental and universal. For readers, it

reveals a range of possible careers in making. It also illustrates diverse avenues of training, not as a how-to guide but as an examination of current professionals and their career paths. This study also reveals the transferrable skills that enable makers to navigate to and thrive in the many fields of live events. It informs both students and instructors who are interested in expanding their training to reach a broader range of fields.

Through examination and analysis of these industries, this study also reveals best practices that can be applied across the broader industry. It highlights successful collaborations between fields and identifies potential opportunities to build bridges, supporting our work and our workers. Finally, this study reveals the lives of makers—not just what they do but who they are. It paints richer image of what each career in the field is like and assembles these images to build a more complete picture of our entire industry.