

On Becoming an Intern

by Jeffrey E. Salzberg

Congratulations on this new phase of your career! The next few months will be exciting, educational, and, I hope, productive and fun. You can expect to get a great deal of experience in professional theatre practice. You'll meet new friends and make professional contacts that may serve you well for the rest of your career. That being the case, though, you should understand that interns are often required to do an extraordinary amount of work in a very short period of time; this can, on occasion, be quite stressful. The manner in which you choose to handle such stress will have a definite impact on how enjoyable the experience is to you, your colleagues, and your supervisors. Please do not consider the following points to be critical specifically of you; rather, consider this your opportunity to learn from the experiences of past interns and, understanding what the job's about, give you an advantage that they didn't have.

1. You've undoubtedly learned a lot in 4-5 years of college, but please remember that after 4-5 years of college followed by 25 years of professional experience, your supervisors have probably learned more. You'll impress them most by demonstrating a desire to learn. No one expects you to know everything. If you don't know how to do a job you've been assigned, just ask; the staff will explain – and you'll have a new skill. Remember that "It's better to ask once than to do it twice."
2. The concept of an internship is that you provide labor in return for professional experience, contacts, and (whenever feasible) training. In the strictest sense of the term, it is not a "job"; what money you receive is intended to help defray your living expenses. While you may, indeed, be quite knowledgeable, you were not hired for your design skills; nor were you hired to teach the full-time professional staff the right way to do things; your job is to help execute the designs. This not a simple, menial job; the finest design in the world is lost if it's not properly executed -- and you are an essential part of that process. When there's time, we'd love to hear your suggestions, and might accept them, but often there will not be time. It may well be that you know a better way to do something, but, under a very tight production schedule, we need to rely on methods that we know -- from our own experience --will work. We will always, however, answer your questions, although we might ask you to wait a day or two before asking them. You certainly have the right to know why you've been asked to do something; you're not – nor should you be treated like – an automaton.
3. In college, you were taught one way to do things. In arts, there's rarely only one right way to do things. I don't claim to know everything, but I *am* the world's leading authority on the way I want things done. My reasons for wanting things done a specific way may not be immediately apparent but rest assured that there always *are* reasons and, as always, when there's time, I will explain them to you. If you are asked to do a task over in a different way, this should not be taken as a personal criticism, nor is it meant disrespectfully.
4. You won't impress us with your fearlessness by taking silly chances with your safety and that of others. Lack of time is not an excuse; if we tell the emergency room physician that we didn't have time to do it safely, she's not going to say, "OK, in that case, he's *not* dead." If we don't have time to do it safely, we don't have time to do it.
5. Know where the boundaries are. There was an electrician's intern once, a fairly typical one, who said, "Tell me what you're trying to achieve with this light so I can figure out where to hang it." Her job, of course, was to hang the light where it was drawn on the plot. It's the designer's job to figure out where the light should go; it's the electrician's job to hang it where it's drawn on the light plot. If you later want to ask why the designer drew it there, we'll happily explain. Of course, if a fixture's drawn so as to be shooting through a wall (sometimes designers don't have as much information about the building architecture as they need or might want), it is appropriate to call that to the designer's attention.

6. The call time is the time at which work is to start. It is not the time at which you are to walk in and begin eating your Egg McMuffin® (the Croissan'wich® tastes better, anyway), nor is it the appropriate time to begin (or continue) a personal conversation with your friends. A good motto to take to heart is, "If you're not ten minutes early, you're late." Promptness is, quite simply, a matter of respect for your colleagues and supervisors; and just as you want them to respect you, so must you respect them. There may be times when you are unavoidably detained (Note: oversleeping is *not* "unavoidable"). In such cases, you must notify your supervisor. It is not sufficient merely to leave a message; if you absolutely cannot reach your supervisor directly, you must leave messages in every conceivable location.

In the course of preparing this article, I consulted with various friends and colleagues in the "Backstage" forum of the web-based bulletin board *Critical Dance* (<http://www.criticaldance.com/forum> -- please feel free to join us there). Here, used by permission, are some of their comments and anecdotes:

CHRISTINA:

By the time I was 30 or so, I was a pretty seasoned newspaper and magazine journalist, with thousands of stories under my belt. I decided that I wanted to try my hand at freelancing. I also realized that I needed to find a balance between time to do this freelancing and having a little "bread and butter" money. About six blocks from my home was a small ad agency, which hired me on as a part-time afternoon receptionist. I didn't mention anything about my experience or awards. I answered the phone, greeted clients and talent and vendors, etc., and typed anything the writers, etc. asked me to do for them.

Every Tuesday evening, the president of the agency had an after hours meeting with several partners he had invested in another business with. It was my job to make sure a new pot of coffee was made every Tuesday for them before I went home. Being the sort of person who likes to do anything with a certain element of enthusiasm, I would not only make the coffee, but tidy up the kitchen, and set out the china, silver, napkins and condiments just so. For a time, I was not even introduced to the president of the agency, (who also had a reputation as something of an SOB with a temper).

One day, he walked by my desk and asked me if I was the one setting up the coffee every Tuesday night. He commented that until recently, no one had ever set up the coffee that way, and that it looked like Santa and the elves had been there. He continued to chat with me, opining that young people would do well to not enter a job situation with the notion that "well, this isn't what I really want to do anyway, so why should I care about this place" or "I'm better than this position because of my degree, pedigree, etc." As he continued to talk to me, he elicited information about my writing background and asked me if I would like to take a stab at a few projects for him on a freelance basis. Not long after that, I was wooed to join an ad agency as a publicity writer, but I kept in touch with this fellow. When the agency I was with went bankrupt, he invited me to come over to his agency and work full-time as a copywriter/producer. Although I had a background as a print and tv journalist, and a publicist, I did not know anything about writing commercials. I thought, "what the heck," and decided to try my hand at this new venue, with a baptism by fire. In a very short time, I was right in the thick of producing tv and radio (along with print) ads from conceiving the idea to writing the copy to hiring the talent to supervising the production of the final project. It was a great way to broaden my career as a writer -- and it all started out with caring enough to make a nice cup of coffee.

ALSO FROM CHRISTINA:

I think it actually goes back to the days when, as the oldest girl of 10 children, I needed a job in order to pitch in with the mounting cost of private tuition, uniforms, etc. How was a 15-year-old to find something other than babysitting (which didn't quite cut the mustard, financially). 16 was the beginning hiring age and, at that, it was highly competitive. I lived in a fairly large city, however, back in the days when department stores abounded. Each one chose its annual "Teen Board," comprised of one girl selected from each high school in the city. They were supposed to be "models" in every sense

of the word. Our high school guidance counselor wouldn't consider a girl unless she had a high grade point as well as a pert face. She sent 4 of us to try out, and I was shocked, after undergoing runway and interview, to be selected.

My lovely reign, alas, ended, as they must, after one year. My senior year in high school was spent (30 hours a week for \$1.30 per hour) in a college kitchen, bussing dishes, scrubbing floors, polishing a myriad of chrome coolers and appliances, and -- my favorite, up to my elbows, on many occasions, in a sink full of water and chicken parts.

All things must pass -- the good and the bad. Hopefully, it more or less evens out as we go along.

MEREDITH LIDSTONE, WHO STARTED OUT IN THEATRE AS AN INTERN MAKING \$30/WEEK:

An internship is hard work with low pay. As an intern, you're expected to work your heart out, keep your mouth shut and hopefully, you will gain some meaningful experience as well as future job contacts and good references. We don't all come out of the womb with Broadway producers on the phone waiting to hire us, after all...

ALSO FROM MEREDITH LIDSTONE:

Explain to your interns nicely but very firmly that the theater facilities and the items within, i.e., tools, costumes, props, etc., are to be treated with respect.

How many times have you found a tool or device that you bought for your department lying around outside in the rain or else covered in sawdust (or worse) on the shop floor? Another example: how many times have you discovered the stage door unlocked on the theater's dark days? (I say this last one for organizations that, for whatever reason, give keys to the building to their apprentices.)

I think it's important to impart to them the level of responsibility that comes with the job outside of the actual physical and mental labor of 'production.' This also applies to how they treat their housing, but that is something that would be best addressed by the Company Manager, I think.

BASHEVA:

Taking Meredith's point a step further, one must be taught not only to respect the tools of one's own trade (though the tools may be owned by another), but also to respect the tools of other crafts.

Like don't step on a pair of pointe shoes that seem to be just lying around - they might be there for a reason - like a very quick change in the wings.

I had that happen to me - I had the permission of the backstage powers that be to leave my pointe shoes there for a quick costume change - and came back to find that one of the stage hands had stepped all over them. They were not only smushed - but dirty, and I had no choice but to put them on and rush out back onto the stage.

A one time incident, I know, but respect for EVERYONE'S tools of the trade, is necessary.

BABSLIGHTS:

I think more likely, it's a statement of how our schools today are sending folks out into the world, coupled with a distancing from respect, amongst younger folk, for age, seniority, and experience. Personally, I cannot imagine speaking to Salzberg (ED. NOTE: REFERRING TO THE INTERN WHO ASKED WHAT I WAS TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH WITH THAT LIGHT) in such a manner if I was an intern. ..I can see asking "why" because I want to learn, and I can see asking "Why that choice?"

Eddie Raymond, of the San Francisco local of the IATSE (the "stagehands' union") has shared with me their list of "THINGS EVERY SAN FRANCISCO STAGEHAND SHOULD KNOW". I've filtered out the stuff that's only of interest to San Franciscans (such as, "Where's the nearest tofu bar?"); the rest, I think, applies to anyone in the arts, not just stagehands.

GENERAL:

- You are a part of a very large picture. The future success of the whole depends on the performance and behavior of each individual.
- The failure of one reflects on the dependability and character of the entire local.
- Twenty minutes early is fifteen minutes late.

SAFETY:

- It can kill you!
- If it can cut wood and metal, it can cut you. Keep your hands out of the way.
- Always unplug a power tool before changing blades, disks etc.
- Assume it's hot!
- Make sure the switch is off before plugging in any tool or device.
- Lift with your legs not your back (bend your knees).
- Grip flats from the same side as your partner.
- You only have one back; if you hurt it, you lose it.
- The body has many parts, none of them are spares.
- Look up! Look down! The entertainment environment is constantly changing - just 'cause the stairs were there a minute ago doesn't mean they're there now. Watch where you're going.
- If it hurts, it's bad. Stop doing it.

GENERAL STAGE INFORMATION:

- If you can see the audience, the audience can see you.
- Don't expect to know everything you need to know on the first day.
- Don't assume that the way you do things is THE way. There are many ways to do most of what we do. The person "responsible" for the project gets to pick as they typically have more information and do not always have the time to share.
- Listen and learn. You can't listen while you're talking.