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Join us in Charlotte, NC!

Tech Olympics Take Center Stage

By Ken Fraza, Indiana Tech Olympics coordinator

USITT Midwest Section again hosted the Tech Olympics at the Indiana State Thespian Conference on January 29, 2011. This was our 8th time the Section has run and hosted this event and it continues to grow! While the Indiana Thespian State Conference moves around a bit (like Illinois does) from year to year, our primary location is at Ransburg Auditorium on the campus of the University of Indianapolis. There, the theater department chairman is Jim Ream, a member of USITT! He and his undergraduate crew make it easy to do the events there.

From 2004 through 2009 we had about 28 students participate in the Tech Olympics (which the Educational Theatre Association/International Thespian Society calls the Tech Challenge) out of 450 overall delegates to the Thespian State Conference. Last year when it was at Vincennes University's new Red Skelton Theater the overall conference attendance jumped to 600 students and we experienced a 50% jump to 44 students in the Tech Olympics. This year the number jumped again to 66 Tech Olympics participants: more than DOUBLE any average year! This was due in part to a clarification I made that each high school could sponsor more than one four-person team, and three or four schools did! We ended up with 17 teams including two that were "blended teams" comprised of a couple of folks from one school, and extra students from another school.

Here in Indiana we do Knot Tying, Lighting a Geometric Shape, Sound System Set-Up and Props Quick-Change as individual events, and Folding A Curtain as a full team event. 1st Place was won by Carmel HS (again), which is a very large school, and the 2nd Place team was an all-girls team! Way to go girls!! That was the first time that had happened.



Michigan & Wisconsin Tech Olympics

By Ellen White, of ETC

The Midwest Section continues to host the very popular Tech Olympics at several of the High School Theatre Festivals in our region. The program has ongoing relationships with the Michigan Educational Theatre Association (December), the Wisconsin High School Theatre Festival (November), the Illinois High School Theatre Festival, and the Indiana State Thespians Conference (both in January), and also sponsored a Tech Olympics at the KC-ACTF Region III Festival.

These very important events serve as outreach for our Section and USITT in general.

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ETC and Indianapolis Stage Sales & Rentals were our primary vendors who supported us with a plethora of prizes to give the students as prizes in various categories, plus our 30 USITT Midwest Section t-shirts. Ellen White again brought a Source Four 26 degree as the 1st Place team prize and a Source Four PAR as the 2nd Place team prize straight from the ETC factory. She also judged the Props Quick-Change event. From Indianapolis Stage we had Jim Hermsdorfer, Randy Riggs, Barb Hoffmann and Marilyn Surma who assisted with set-up, registration, and calculating the scores & winners.

Next year we'll be up at Huntington University southwest of Fort Wayne. My thanks to the Midwest Section for all of their support. It has become an educational and fun activity to watch and gets our name **USITT Midwest Section** out there. Best of all, I enjoy seeing these high school students from all across the state connecting with each other and discovering new friends who love doing technical theater like we do! I let them know that this is what it is like at our National Conference & Stage Expo.



Top: First Place prize, a Source 4 from ETC!

Middle: Lighting Focus Challenge

At Left: Folding Soft Goods

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This year's Wisconsin High School Theatre Festival was held in the Albee Hall gym on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. . Over fifty Wisconsin high school students competed in six events throughout the day, culminating with an awards ceremony later that evening in the Pickard Auditorium at Neenah High School. The event was co-sponsored by USITT Midwest and ETC, with dealers from around Wisconsin sponsoring each individual event. Volunteer students from UW-Whitewater helped make the events run smoothly. The two morning sessions were for practice, where more often than not, the students were learning the event for the first time. What is always unique about this, and a pleasure to see, is that students who have participated the last few years are helping to instruct new team members sharing their knowledge and their tricks on how to win. The actual competition took place during the afternoon.

Annual favorites such as *Knot Tying* (sponsored by Mainstage Theatrical of Milwaukee, WI), *Hang & Focus a Fixture* (sponsored by Designlab Chicago) as well as *Prop Shift* and *Sewing a Button* (both sponsored by ETC) maintain a consistency in the event. New events add a challenge and a learning opportunity. Milwaukee based Acme Corp returned for the second year with their *Rigging a Truss* event. Students who participated last year were gung-ho to give it a try again this year. For those who were new to the equipment, time was taken to instruct and practice. Totally new to the Wisconsin Olympics this year was a simple variation of the *Leg a Platform* event. With only a single platform available, participants would attach two legs on one side, reverse the platform and remove two legs on the other side, leaving the platform half legged ready for the next two participants.

The best times of each of the six events from every squad were recorded and tabulated for the Team Competition. The 2010 Champion was Dominican

High School's "Black Team", with last year's Champion, Neenah High School, placing second. Third place went to Middleton High School.



Photos from the Michigan Educational Theatre Association (META) Festival prove once again the growing enthusiasm for the event. On Friday afternoon December 3rd, 2010, two workshop sessions were dedicated to the Tech Olympics. This year's events were: Hang and Focus a Light, Prop Shift, Costume Change and Knot Tying.

The Midwest Section also supports the Tech Olympics at the KCACTF Region 3 Festival each year. The event this year was well attended, now that the time slot was late afternoon and not middle of the night. Twenty-four teams of two competed in five events, with about 75 onlookers. As always, the judges for the events were most appreciated. Crystal Heckert from the University of Wisconsin oversaw the Costume Change event. One of the more interesting happenings was Crystal's decision to add a penalty to the wardrobe event titled "roughing the model." The model, Danielle Buckel, appreciated the fact that the penalty was used only once during the three hours. Michigan Tech's Christopher Plummer and Kalen Larson judged the Sound and Leg a Platform events respectively. Christina Robinson from the University of Indianapolis kept a sharp eye on the Hang and Focus a Light event.

Jim Ream, Theatre Department Chair at University of Indianapolis, besides judging the Knot Tying event, did a great job as always coordinating the event. In reverse order, third place went to Bryan Thorne and Nathan Hunter from Michigan Tech University and in second Place was the team of Natalie Cappuccino and Emery Becker from Indiana State University. This year's first place team was Lacie Tate and Corey Boughton from the University of Michigan Flint. Congratulations to all who participated in this year's Tech Olympics.



Wire Frame Hats and Headpieces Workshop at UW Whitewater

By: Kathleen Donnelly

At our most recent section program, Jeff Lieder from UW Milwaukee led a hands-on workshop on the construction of wire frame hats to an eager group of costume designers and craftspersons. The project for the day was to reconstruct the wire frame headpiece/tiara for the Sugar Plum Fairy. Jeff has worked on three productions of *The Nutcracker Ballet*, creating the tiaras and headpieces for the renowned designer Zach Brown.

The workshop started off with a talk about the styles of headpieces used in ballet with a wonderful display of actual headpieces to look at and try on. In addition to the actual headpieces, there was a collection of renderings and books that were the inspiration for the designs.

Then we set out to create the basic metallic covered frame of the headpiece used for the Sugar Plum Fairy. Patterns, paper or rayon covered wire, tie wire, ribbon, Tacky glue, scissors and pliers were all that we needed. In the course of two and half hours, we managed to make remarkable progress on our tiara. Using the paper pattern, wire and pliers we set out to create the basic framework of the crown. Once the flat pattern of the frame was finished, thin wire was used to create joints to hold the shape of the crown in place.

The tiara was then shaped into a curve to fit on the head, prior to adding the metallic ribbon. Using white glue to help adhere the ribbon, the ribbon was then wound around the frame to cover the wire and provide the basis for further embellishments.

Once the frame is covered, the finishing would occur: adding a horsehair braid edge to the entire base of the tiara, sewing combs to the headpiece to securely hold the tiara in place for the dancer, and of course adding rhinestone, crystal and glass beads and baubles to embellish the final product.

Once you learn the process, the estimated time to create the frame is two to three hours, however an additional 12 hours is needed to completely finish the tiara with all of its embellishments. This process can also be used to create other styles of hats and headpieces.



Top: Jess Gersz, University of Illinois, modeling Snow King headpiece. Middle: A Display of Tiaras and headpieces
Bottom: 3 students from University of Illinois



Tech Olympics at the Illinois High School Theatre Festival

By: Steven Jacobs, of Chicago Spotlight, Inc.

The Tech Olympics at the Illinois High School Theatre Festival had the largest number of participants since it began nine years ago. A record 91 students from 17 high schools competed in these events: Wiring a plug, focusing a fixture, tying a knot, prop quick change, costume quick change, nicopress crimping, sound set-up and building a flat. Several new schools fielded teams this year which helped account for the larger turn out. Addison Trail High School from Addison Illinois, was the winning team with a total team time of 15 minutes, 37 seconds for the 8 events.

A follow-up letter with certificates for each participant were sent to each of the teams teacher sponsors to prompt them and/or their students to join the Section and to encourage them to nominate a student for the Founder's Award.

The Section would like to thank the MANY vendors, dealers, and the National for all of the swag they provided, but especially to ETC for once again providing fixtures to the first and second place teams.



Top: Wiring a plug

Middle: Build a flat!

At Left: The winning team from DePaul.

**2011
USITT Annual
Conference
& Stage Expo
March 9 to 12**



White Models & Stage Management sessions at UW-Whitewater

By: Mick Alderson, UW Oshkosh



Eric Appleton, Scenic Designer at the University of Wisconsin-

One of the afternoon sessions at the Midwest Section mid-winter event was a hands-on workshop on creating white models in a short amount of time. The session was presented by Eric Appleton, scenic designer at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, which hosted the event.

Appleton began with a display of some of his own white models produced for shows at UWW. These ranged from simple to complex depending on the needs of the show. He discussed the use of white models as a communication tool to explore the three-dimensional relationships of scenic elements, and to convey concepts and intentions to director and the scene shop.

The goal of a white model is to provide for those needs without greatly adding to cost and work load, as can happen with more elaborate detailed colored models. To that end, Appleton explained his own process. He touched on some of the materials commonly employed in creating models, such as foam core, bristol board, photocopied elevations and ground plans, rubber cement, and tacky glue.

The bulk of the session was spent with participants each working on a sample white modeling materials and drawings supplied by Appleton. While Eric typically prefers 1/2" scale models, participants

worked in 1/4" scale to keep the project manageable. Participants were guided through the process of creating the theatre space firm foam core and matt board, laminating ground plans to foamcore and elevations to bristol board, then cutting out and assembling the scenic pieces onto 3 dimensional parts.

As work progressed, Eric suggested several alternatives to each step, depending on the complexity of each piece and the detail desired. He suggested working in an orderly manner, e.g. front to back, to avoid having an installed piece interfere with placing another, and dividing the model into sub assemblies that can be created outside the model space, then inserted into place. He also suggested working on several parts at a time, building one piece while the glue on another sets, to make efficient use of time.

There were a variety of skill levels present, as participants ranged from freshmen to grad student to working designer. There is always value in seeing how another person tackles a familiar task. As each progressed, Appleton commented on and made suggestions about



process and technique. Participants also contributed their own ideas and experiences. All in all, each came away with added insight into the oversell process of creating this important design and communication tool.

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Stage Management session continued from previous page

One of the morning sessions at UW-Whitewater was a round-table discussion on Best Practices for Stage Management. The session was lead by Stephen Chene, Technical Director for UWW, and Laura Wendt, an AEA Stage Manager at Milwaukee Repertory Theatre and an alumna of the BFA program in Stage Management at UW-Whitewater.

Stephen Chene opened by discussing some of the procedures taught to student stage managers. For example, Chene strongly suggested each theatre create a "Stage Manager Handbook" containing guideline, procedures, checklists, and forms specific to that theatre's process. We discussed how each producing organization develops its own culture and systems that works for it, and a new Stage Manager must adapt their own working methods to match very quickly to be efficient. A theatre handbook can be extremely useful for the newcomer. At UWW, stage management students are tasked with creating and updating the Handbook. This makes the Handbook a teaching tool and a work in progress, and helps each student to develop their own personal methods.

As part of the roundtable discussion, participants were invited to describe their own experience with stage management at the various institutions, from the intense multi-production professional environment at Milwaukee Rep, to small staff academic programs. Emphasized throughout was the need for stage managers to be organized, prepared, and good at "people-skills". The Stage Manager must keep track of everything and facilitate communications in all directions. They are also the one person who must always keep their cool. Things are going to happen, and the Stage Manager must never "loose it" if they are to keep a show on track.

Laura Wendt particularly emphasized how important a calm demeanor and people skills are to the stage manager. An SM needs to "guide" people rather than "drive" them, strongly suggest rather than commanding. Laura often prefers to state things as pointed questions; it's all a matter of semantics. Above all, the Stage Manager must be professional and think ahead, with plans and contingen-



cies in place to deal with the inevitable issues that arise.

Discussion then turned to technology. We discussed traditional methods like the common call board and sign-in sheet, but we also discussed electronic tools, such as email, which has become the standard means of transmitting information. For instance, and SM must provide nightly rehearsal reports to all concerned, and email makes this much easier. Yet they must be timely to be useful. We discussed whether to put the rehearsal report in the body of the email or add as attachment. A strong consensus was that the report should be in the body of the message. This makes instant access much easier and an immediate reply more practical. Many SMs like to use a word processor document as a template, but a simple copy-paste can insert the contents



into the email. In addition, Chene suggests that the report document can still be attached if desired. That way the recipients are not required to have a suitable program to open a proprietary file, which they might well not have available. The goal is communication, and the fewer steps required to achieve that, the easier it will be to achieve.



The discussion concluded with how electronic technology can be further incorporated into the Stage Management process to make it more efficient. In many ways, Stage Management still relies on older methods of work to accomplish core tasks. For instance, a typical prompt script uses pencil on hard-copy to notate cues and blocking. While this approach is familiar and natural, Chene is interested in how incorporating electronic methods might improve the process. Steve is exploring creating an electronic prompt script that can be created, edited, and used in production on the computer screen.

We discussed pros and cons. For instance, and electronic script must first be prepared. Currently scripts are provided in printed form only, and so an electronic script must be prepared using a scanner and OCR (optical character recognition) software. Laura was concerned that the actors in a rehearsal might be distracted by the sound of a keyboard from the house as cues and blocking was entered. The "more experienced" participants (i.e. us "old fogies") expressed concern about a stage manager with eyes on the keyboard and monitor rather than the stage. This concern was not shared by the youngest members, who apparently use a keyboard

with the facility we dinosaurs apply to pencil and paper. Technology may soon provide an answer as tablet computers like the iPad provide virtual keyboards and alternate means of entry.

On the pro side, an electronic prompt script can be easily distributed, saved, and backed up to media or networked servers. This would facilitate recovery from the "hit by a bus" scenario, and simplify altering a "finished" prompt script when required. It will also be more "natural" to a generation who have grown up on computers in every other part of their lives.

Steve in particular is interested in developing software solutions for creating electronic prompt scripts. He is especially interested in adapting readily available and familiar software to the task rather than requiring exotic and expensive solutions, which would only inhibit experimentation and adoption. For instance, specialized software exists for creating and marking up a television screenplay, but it is expensive. But every computer has a word processor, and so Steve is experimenting with using MS Word to create and work with a prompt script. He has investigated using the Note function to insert cues. Here again the younger generation provided insights, suggesting he look at Onenote to insert notation as needed. The project is still very much in the early stages, but definitely holds promise.

All in all, the session was lively, informative, and intriguing, and was useful to participants and presenters alike.

Midwest Regional Section Annual Meeting

Join your fellow USITT-Midwest members for light breakfast at 8:00am, Thursday at the USITT National Convention. Learn about upcoming events and programs, or get more involved!

SEE YOU THERE!

