

The stagehand's

pocket

Essential tools for the running crew

By Steve Nelson

DURING A PERFORMANCE, the backstage shift crew works swiftly and silently, moving scenery and changing props.

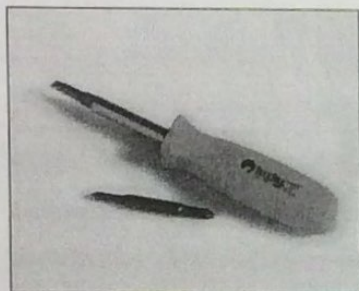
It is demanding work: the stage is usually dark and timing is critical. And sometimes things go wrong. A caster gets jammed. A hinge pin that came out easily during all the rehearsals gets stuck. A doorknob falls off. Something always needs an immediate fix or quick preventive maintenance.

Stagehands working backstage during a show always carry a basic kit of tools in their pockets and on their belts. Tools sitting in the toolbox in the green room are worthless when you're trying to fix a just-noticed problem on a scenery piece that is going on stage in thirty seconds. Professional stagehands keep their basic tools on their belts and in their pockets.

Here are the elements of a back pocket tool kit.



Miniature flashlight. It's always pitch dark in the corner where you need to fix something. The industry standard flashlight is the Mini Maglite, a small aluminum job with a focusable beam powered by two AA batteries. Look for it in a package with the free belt holster.

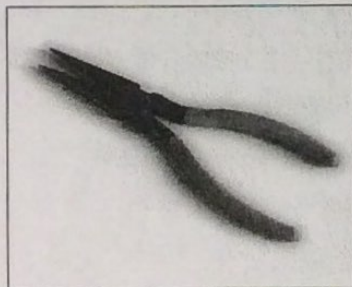


Four-in-one screwdriver. This screwdriver has a nifty shaft that pops out of the handle and allows you to choose from small (#1) and medium (#2) Phillips and straight driver tips. Good for tightening and loosening screws as well as the occasional prying job.



Eight-inch adjustable open-end wrench (a.k.a. "crescent wrench"). Besides tightening and loosening the obvious nuts, bolts, and lag screws, a crescent wrench is the ideal tool to provide the extra leverage to break free an overtight wing nut or

stage screw. Lighting techs like to attach these wrenches to a belt loop with an umbilical. As a member of the running crew, you should avoid this: the cord will inevitably catch on something during your dimly lit backstage travels.



Six-inch or eight-inch needle-nose pliers with a wire cutter notch at the base of the jaws. Great for gripping an ornery hinge pin, extracting a piece of string jammed in a caster, or cutting away a piece of wire or cotton sash cord.



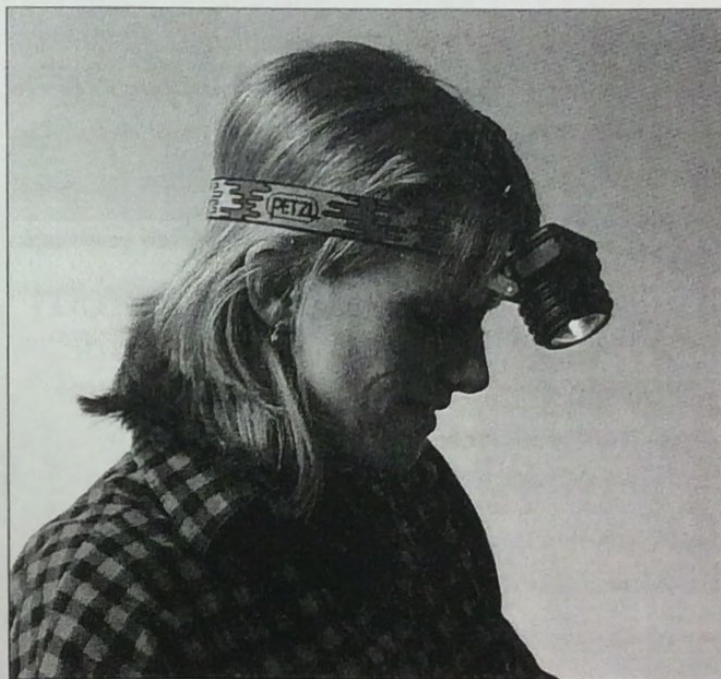
Something to cut with. In the professional theatre, that would be a pocket knife or a mat knife with a retractable blade, for cutting through fabric, tape, cords, and rope. Most schools do not permit students to carry pocket knives on campus,

and you can get by without one. The cutters on the pliers will handle most of the cutting jobs you'll encounter, and they won't get you into trouble.

That's the basic complement of tools. Keep the flashlight on your belt and the other tools in your back pockets.

Here are some other ideas for your personal toolkit.

Free up your hands. Holding a flashlight in one hand and the top rung of a ladder in the other makes it difficult to find the hands to fix most problems. You can get a rubber "bite end" for the Mini Maglite that allows you to comfortably direct the light while holding it with your teeth. Or you can get a special headband that has a slot on the side for inserting the flashlight. Or my favorite, a climber's headlamp that straps around your head to put a focusable beam lamp right at the center of your forehead. Cool.



Consolidate the tools. Many stagehands only carry a flashlight and a multi-tool backstage in a holster on their belt. The multi-tool (such as a Leatherman) is an updated version of the Swiss Army knife that puts lots of tools into one fold-up package. It's a costly item, \$40 to \$90, but most versions have a knife blade, Phillips and straight screwdriver tips, wire cutters, needle nose pliers, and much, much more. Sorry, no crescent wrenches on any of them. (Make sure a multi-tool with a blade is legal in your school.)

Put all your tools on your belt. There are pouches available specifically for stagehand tools. Keeps them out of your pockets, secure, and close to your body.

All of the basic tools are available at your local hardware store. A great place to find the specialty items for your backstage tool package is www.toolsforstagecraft.com. The site features pictures of these items and other unique stagehand tools. Headlamps, Maglite accessories, and multi-tools can also usually be found at local sporting goods or climbing and hiking stores.