

# The portfolio

The design student's show-and-tell

THOSE OF US WHO want to work in theatre design and production have our own kind of audition—the portfolio review, which is essentially a show and tell about the work we have done in the theatre. At the center of the conversation is the candidate's portfolio, a collection of photographs and other documents, in digital form or hardcopy, that establishes a framework for the interview.

A portfolio is a useful and necessary tool that stage managers, designers, and production artists use to show others what they have done and what they can do. For many of us, the first time we show a portfolio will be at a college interview. A portfolio gives your work (and therefore the interview) a visual context. You can point to specific examples that display your talents. You can talk about the fabric you used for a costume you designed or the techniques you employed painting the scenery. With your portfolio at hand, the person interviewing you will have a clear understanding of the scope and scale of the project. They can see it. They can ask questions about it. They can begin to gauge a context for your experiences, the level of your talent, the types of situations and theatre spaces you have worked in, and the tools, materials, and technologies with which you are familiar.

## What's in it

"Only show things you really like," was the advice on portfolio content from Peter Sargent, dean of fine arts at Webster University.

Sargent and other college representatives we talked to for this story said they are most interested in seeing materials that reveal the process of making theatre, rather than the finished product.

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"For me, what the student brings in the portfolio is an introduction to what they're thinking about and what they're doing," Sargent said. "So I'm more interested in a conversation around the portfolio than necessarily the slickness of the work. What's most important is to see how the student has thought through the process."

"We all like to see process," said Stirling Shilton, professor and technical director at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. "I don't want to see finished pieces that are matted and behind anti-glare glass. I want to see what you scribble in the corners of your notebook. I want to see what you give the carpenter on the shop floor. I want to

see that kind of process stuff."

"It's kind of like remember in fourth grade, they always made you show your work?" said John E.R. Friedenbergh, director of theatre at Wake Forest University. "I want to see your work. Show your arithmetic. Let me see the steps that you're doing so I understand what I'm looking at and how you're thinking about it."

Chuck Meacham, technical director and professor of theatre at the University of Evansville, recommends getting started on your portfolio by making a list of all the productions you have worked on. "Under each of these, write what you did specifically to help make the show happen," he wrote in this space last year. "What made each experience valuable to



you? What is unique about the experience that you could show in your portfolio? What materials should you include to support your experiences with each production?"

High-quality photographs can be used to illustrate production values, the specifics of a performance space in which you have worked, and the process you used to create ideas and develop a project.

In addition to photographs, your portfolio should include research images, sketches, swatches, samples, trim details, paperwork, drafting, renderings, rough drafts, and anything else you can find to illustrate how you think, work, create, and solve problems. You can show the development of an idea by including a research photo, the original "napkin sketch," the pencil rendering, the

color rendering, and a photo of the finished set or costume on stage under light. All these support materials help the interviewer get an idea of your creative process.

The kinds of materials you will include depend on the work you do. See "What's in your portfolio?" on page 44 for some notes on portfolio content.

It's important to keep the material you include current. Do not think of your portfolio as a scrapbook of what you have done or where you have worked. It has to be a constantly evolving document in order to continue to have value. Update your portfolio regularly and move dated material to the back (or move it out entirely) as you replace it with newer, better material. Include coursework and "paper projects" where applicable. Realized work is best, but sometimes

you can use a class project to show aspects of your talent and skills that you haven't had a chance to put to work on a real show yet. This can be especially important if your school's production season is short, or if your school only does big musicals. Choose project work that serves as a counterpoint to your realized work.

Also, include related work toward the back of your portfolio. This section might include writing samples, cost estimates, budget tracking, or other materials from your work. These kinds of items are not as appealing (or as much fun to talk about) as photos and drawings from productions, but they are an important part of the process for many specialities, including theatre management, stage management, and technical direction.

You should also consider including non-theatre work in your portfolio, especially if it shows some aspect of your artistic expression that is different from the rest of the material you include. Sketches, drawings, painting, photography, collage, etc. are all interesting to show and talk about.

## What's in your portfolio?

HERE ARE SOME NOTES and tips on portfolio content for design and production specialties.

**Stage management.** Show just one book, not three or four, if they are all essentially the same. Don't show a rewritten, clean copy. Use the actual book you called the show from.

**Scenic design.** Always include a scale human figure in sketches and models.

**Costume design.** Make sure you take pictures under stage light, not of the performers wearing the costumes in the back hallway.

**Lighting design.** Keep copies of your plots and paperwork handy, but don't feature them. Feature the production photos that show your designs at work.

**Sound design.** Edit down a playlist with short clips of sound effects and music. Ten minutes of crickets isn't any more useful than ten seconds. (You'll need to bring your own audio player for this, and an extension cord wouldn't hurt.) Don't show pictures of the sound

equipment, but do show a picture of the production. Have an equipment list handy in the back of your portfolio.

**Technical direction.** Make sure you include budgets, calendars, and technical drawings in addition to construction shots.

**Theatre management.** Be sure to include all the promotional material you generate, including press releases, posters, and especially the production program. Get a good shot of the show.

**Carpentry.** Get good process shots against a neutral background, so we don't see the messy shop behind your beautiful woodwork.

**Stitching.** Same as for carpentry. Get good process shots, preferably with a person wearing the clothes.

**Props.** Shoot your props work on neutral backgrounds, and include the research on props you built or found.

**Scenic painting.** Make sure you have pictures under stage light, not work lights, and include a copy of the scenic designer's paint elevations.

### Packaging and formatting

Once you know what the materials will be, you can start thinking about the physical dimensions of the portfolio.

You may be tempted to buy a fancy leather presentation case for your portfolio, but when you're starting out this is probably not the best choice. For one thing, they're very expensive. A portfolio case also limits how you can present your materials and puts your work "under glass" behind those acetate sheets. We advise mounting photos, drawings, documents, and other flat materials on matte board. The size can range from 11x14" to 20x24" (or even larger, up to 24x36"), depending on the content and the formatting choices you make. The boards can be organized into an inexpensive paperboard art portfolio wallet, available at any art supply store.

For smaller materials, such as a stage manager's promptbook pages, a black three-ring binder with matte sheet protectors will work fine.



If you have some large life drawings that you want to include, you will need a case big enough to fit them in, or another way to display them. You may find you need an additional box for three-dimensional objects, or a tube for large rolled drawings and drafting. Let the size and quantity of the work you are including dictate the style and type of portfolio you use.

Create a format or layout scheme for each page and stay consistent with that format throughout the portfolio. Be sure to orient your work all in the same page layout direction (portrait or landscape). That way you and the interviewer won't have to keep rotating the boards to look at them.

The final major element in formatting is labeling. This is a critical part of the process of creating and presenting a portfolio. Everything in your portfolio should be labeled. The label should include the title of the show (and the playwright's name), your position or responsibilities on

the production or project, when and where it was produced, and when appropriate, the techniques or materials you used in the work that is shown. You should avoid letting the label get too big and wordy, however. Be concise and brief. For example, the date can be just the month and year. If it's a class project, note that, and use the name of the class, not the number.

The easiest way to make a label is to typeset the text in a word processing program, print it, and trim it out to size. (Handwriting or lettering is also an option but only if your hand is very neat.) Labels should be consistent in font and size throughout the portfolio. They should be in a clear font big enough to be read from three feet away. This is the approximate distance from the interviewer's eye (when standing) to the table on which the portfolio rests.

## **The digital portfolio**

You may be creating a digital version of your portfolio for submission

with online applications, and it is tempting to do away with all of the photographs, drawings, paperwork, and bulky presentation cases and take your portfolio to the interview on a laptop. Computer presentations like PowerPoint can be great. Remember, though, that software crashes, battery failures, and other technological calamities tend to happen at the most inopportune times. If you decide to go digital, our advice is to take along a paper version as a backup.

The other major pitfall of digital presentations is that the technology itself can often distract you and the interviewer from the work you are showing. It is difficult to pay attention to what you have to say and at the same time keep up with a scrolling display of images and text.

Digital portfolios find their best application for some things that don't show well on paper. If you are a sound designer or in theatre man-

agement, you might find interesting ways of using a computer for audio playback or to illustrate your familiarity with specific software. The real trick of any sort of digital portfolio is to practice interviewing with it and to find ways to integrate it seamlessly into your interview. It's too easy for a presentation on a laptop to end up like giving someone a TV to watch: mesmerizing but, ultimately, a solitary activity. The presentation is supposed to be about you, not your computer.

If you are considering both paper and electronic versions of your portfolio, invest some time in thinking about how you might tie them together. Pay attention to the similarities between the two versions in layout, font choice, and other aspects of the graphic presentation. You should identify ways for digital versions of your portfolio materials (whether website, PowerPoint presentation, or some other application) to be easily recognizable as

yours by creating visual and navigation ties between the two formats.

### **The interview**

When Shelton interviews prospective students, "I'm looking for that *je ne sais quoi*," he says, "in what you show me and how you show it. If you are animated and excited about this thing you built, that says something. We're looking for a kind of passion, and that can come across in a many different ways."

Shelton's advice to students headed into an interview: "It's the advice that no seventeen-year-old will listen to. Just relax and be yourself. Because that's who I'm hiring, that's who I'm admitting into this program. I need to know who you are, and if you're wound up and tight and you're not being who you are then I can't see if you're the right guy for us and more importantly, if we're the right guys for you." ▼