

# Local Performing Arts – How Do I Get Involved?

*By: Todd Huse, President of Elden Street Players.*

The Arts Council of Fairfax lists over 120 member organizations, including community theaters, orchestras, choirs, dance troupes and other arts related institutions. This number is probably less than half of the actual number of groups in the county, and a tenth of the opportunities available across the region. If you want to get involved in the performing arts, you could not live in a better area than Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Yet, one of the greatest challenges still seems to be making that first joining step.

Most of us are not looking for professional work in the performing arts. We have jobs, families and lives that leave limited time to fulfill our creative need to perform. However, our dreams and desires compel us to find opportunities to exercise our talents on stage. Finding auditions and backstage opportunities, around a busy schedule, represents a daunting hurdle that some can not climb over.

## ***Finding A Place To Fit In***

Let's face it, where you live will most likely have the greatest impact on where you choose to volunteer. While it is not unheard of for local performers to travel across town to work on a production, most people would rather not spend any additional time in D.C. traffic than absolutely necessary.

## **The Internet**

Several associations and information sources can help you locate performing arts organizations. The internet is an obvious answer. Web sites like the Herndon Council for the Arts ([www.herndonarts.org](http://www.herndonarts.org)) and the Arts Council of Fairfax ([www.fairfaxarts.org](http://www.fairfaxarts.org)) often provide links and contact information to local member groups. In addition, several local arts associations also maintain websites that a new volunteer could use to find nearby groups. For community theater, the NVTa Theatre Alliance website ([www.nvtaweb.org](http://www.nvtaweb.org)) provides information about all of their member community theatres.

The Washington Area Theatre Community Honors (The WATCH Awards) is an organization that adjudicates and presents awards for local community theatre excellence. The WATCH website ([www.washingtontheater.org](http://www.washingtontheater.org)) also provides links to local theater groups.

## **Newspaper Advertising**

Many local performing arts groups also publicize their performances, auditions and volunteer opportunities in the Washington Post (as well as local community papers). The heaviest concentration of local performing arts announcements is in the Washington Post Weekend Section, published on Fridays.

## **Calendars**

If you are a technical artist, interested in stagecraft, then in addition to information on the websites, you may want to pick up an NVTa Calendar or similar association calendar in August or September. The calendar allows local technicians to look ahead and decide which shows and companies have interesting productions ahead. The cost is usually around \$6.00 for the calendar. Others are free or available on the web.

## Membership Resources

If you are truly interested in pursuing professional opportunities, a few other resources (with associated membership fees) are available to you. The Actor's Center ([www.actorscenter.org](http://www.actorscenter.org)) has been around for many years as an audition hotline and performing arts information center. If the movie/TV industry is of interest, you will want to check out Central Casting ([www.centralcastingusa.com](http://www.centralcastingusa.com)).

## ***Okay, I Know Where and When... Now What?!?!***

For the most part, showing up is the only thing you have to do. Remember, most of the local performing arts groups are completely run by a team of volunteers which often changes with each production. So, showing up is key to becoming a part of the current team.

## On Stage Work

If you are interested in performing, all you need to do is show up for the audition. The advertisement should provide all the necessary information. In community theatre, you do not need to have a "headshot and resume", however if auditioning for a musical, be prepared to sing a song and dress appropriately to learn a dance. A piano accompanist is normally provided, but you must bring the sheet music (in the right key) for him/her to play.

Often, auditions are "cold readings from the script", where scenes are selected from the play and handed out to the auditioners. The auditioners are then given a few minutes to read it over before performing a scene on stage. Occasionally, the auditioner will be asked to bring a prepared monologue to perform. Again, the requirements (length, comedic, dramatic, etc.) should be provided in the ad.

### **Audition Hints:**

1. Have at least a basic understanding of the play/musical. If unable to read the script ahead, make an effort to find out the plot, the characters and listen to the music.
2. Be realistic about roles for which you want to be considered. If over 40, you will not be cast as Romeo or Juliet. The reverse is also true, if you are in high school, don't expect to be playing an 80-year-old unless the group is dedicated to school age performers.
3. First time auditioners should not expect to get cast in a lead role. Be prepared to take a smaller role with a new group.
4. Read all of the information provided at auditions. Make sure you understand the rehearsal calendar commitments and have been honest about your conflicts.
5. Rejection is part of the process. Not everyone can be cast in every show. Use the audition process to hone your performing talents. Take someone along who will honestly help you to evaluate/improve your audition for next time. Request and accept feedback from the director if available.
6. If you've never auditioned before and the auditions are spread out over two days, on the first day just watch to understand the process.
7. Be a team player. Respect the time and work of others. Remember everyone is a volunteer and deserves appreciation. Be aware, it doesn't take long to acquire a reputation in community theater for being "difficult".

Being in a play or musical normally requires six to ten weeks of rehearsal in the evenings and on weekends. For large roles in complicated shows, this may mean that you are committed to rehearsing Monday through Thursday (7:30pm-10:30pm) and Saturday and/or Sunday (10am – 3pm). Performances are usually 2 to 5 consecutive weekends on Friday and Saturday evenings with Sunday matinees. This level of time commitment is not unheard of, and should be considered carefully before auditioning.

## Backstage Work

If you are an experienced director, producer or technical designer (sets, lights, sound, props, costumes, makeup, etc), submit your name to theaters 6 to 18 months in advance of opening night. If you want to help build the sets, hang the lights or operate the boards (whether experienced or not), submit your name 30 days to 3 months in advance of opening night.

Unfortunately, giving a theater your name and number does not mean it will get to the director and/or producer responsible for staffing a production. Focus your request. Don't just e-mail a group and say I want to help on sets and lights. Instead, look at the theater calendar (and your schedule) and ask them "who do I call to work on a specific show?" If you want to "design" an element of the production, make that phone call as soon as you see the season announced. If you want to "work" on the production, you can usually wait until 3-6 months prior to the opening date. Timing is everything. The worst time to volunteer is just after seeing a performance, because one show is closing and the next is already staffed.

The key is communicating directly with the producer and/or director. They start from a list of people they know first, before they turn to new volunteers. Simply contacting the theater means your name goes on the "possible volunteers" list. Contacting a director/producer means your name goes on the potential team list.

### **Backstage Volunteer Hints:**

1. Show up. Reliability and responsibility are the keys to becoming a trusted member of the production team. If unsure when to show up, call someone. Don't assume they will call you.
2. Don't say "maybe." If you are not certain you can show up, be up front about it. As a new volunteer, you need to establish a reputation for being there. When you decide to work on a production, make sure you can commit to the evening and weekend time required.
3. Ask questions if you don't know how to do something. Safety is vital and resources are sparse in community theater. Avoid mistakes that would jeopardize your safety or the safety of others.
4. Be a team player. Respect the time and work of others. Remember everyone is a volunteer and deserves appreciation. Be aware it doesn't take long to acquire a reputation in community theater for being "difficult".

## Administration Support

Local performing arts organizations are more than just the on stage and backstage artists. It takes a whole bunch of people to sustain the "business" of a non-profit organization.

If you are interested in helping out in the box office, or as an usher, go beyond just adding your name to a list. Find out who in the organization "coordinates" those volunteers.

If you are interested in helping with publicity, graphic arts, and/or the websites, again, try to find out who is currently managing those duties and if there is a way you can help out.

Whether you want to be on the Board of Directors, run the treasury, or help coordinate new volunteers, rest assured the organization wants your help; but, it may require a little dedication on your part to make sure the right person knows you are available and up to the task.

When all else fails, contact the organization's president. If nothing else, the president should be able to direct you to the right person or explain why you may not be getting a response.

## ***The All-Volunteer Organization***

In the end, it all boils down to a couple of points. There is an organization out there that needs your energy in the cast, crew, orchestra, choir or dance troupe. You can find them on the web and through several other information sources.

However, the all-volunteer organization may not be as organized as you would like. You need to focus your initial contacts toward your real goal. Don't just send an e-mail or fill out a form and expect them to call you. Make the extra effort to actually "show up" and meet the right people in the organization that need your help. Some organizations may require membership (usually an annual fee to cover insurance and administrative needs), but very few of them require an invitation to join. Your desire and love for the performing arts is your invitation, come join in the fun.

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