

formal training

Before formal schooling for theatre took off in the mid-twentieth century, property makers in all traditions and cultures either apprenticed to a master or followed in their parent's footsteps.

Today, learning to be a prop maker involves a mix of formal education, on-the-job training, and personal practice. Any of these can happen simultaneously: you can sometimes work professionally while attending college, and you can certainly work in summer theatres between semesters. If you are already working professionally, you can take night or weekend classes for various vocational and technical skills. Lastly, you may always develop your skills through personal projects you undertake in your spare time.

A props artisan is both an artist and a craftsman; an education through a liberal arts system, a vocational training program, or a conservatory school all have equal merit. The skills one needs can be learned by studying a myriad of other trades, but if one wishes to work in theatre, film, or television, the experience of working in any of those mediums can be just as important as the ability to build something. Each field has its own unique schedules, environments, and personalities; an experienced theatre technician who can also build props is often more desirable than a fine arts sculptor who has never worked backstage, particularly when deadlines approach.

You need three things to get work as a prop maker: hard skills, situational experience, and contacts. Hard skills are the actual tools and techniques you can use, such as welding, upholstery, carpentry, furniture building, painting, etc. These can be acquired on the job, through personal projects, in full-time colleges, in part-time vocational training, or in occasional seminars and workshops. Some universities will not expose you to any hands-on training, or they will leave you to your own devices, where you work with substandard equipment and materials and learn none of the typical ways to build things. While self-directed learning is useful, it can also lead to you developing bad habits, dangerous practices, and inefficient methods if you never get any feedback.

Situational experience means familiarity with your work environment, whether you want to work in film, theatre, or television. This includes experience working on a set; building

within the constraints of a theatre schedule; working with designers, directors, and actors; budgets; managing a props shop; and so on. Each of these areas has its own traditions, standard practices, and vocabulary. It is helpful to understand the hierarchy and organization of people working in your field and what is expected of you, depending on what you are hired for. You may be able to build beautiful furniture, but if it takes you 18 months to complete a piece and you do not collaborate with anyone in the process, your carpentry skills are essentially useless in the entertainment world.

The final necessity is contacts. Prop-building jobs are virtually unadvertised, and you need your own network to help find new opportunities. If you learn prop making from someone who works in the industry, you will also be making contacts to help you get your foot in the door. Likewise, if you study prop making with other people looking to get in the industry, you are developing a network of people who will one day send job possibilities your way. A good formal education can benefit you with an instant networking base.

High school is not too early to start your education in prop making if that is where your interests lie. A few schools still offer shop classes where you can learn carpentry, drafting, and other skills, or domestic arts classes, which teach sewing or even patterning. You can learn painting and sculpting in art classes. You can also find a variety of summer classes, camps, and programs in arts and crafts. Situational experience can be had from school theatre, and if you are lucky, from community and other local theatre in your area. Summer theatre camps also exist for high-school-aged people. Of course, working on your own personal props is good experience.

After high school, you have your choice of what to do. You can attend a university, a conservatory, a vocational school, or dive straight into the professional world.

Colleges and Universities

In a survey of the over 116 US universities and colleges with a theatre department, almost half offered at least one class in

stage properties for undergraduates. These are not offered every semester, and they may not necessarily be taught by a props person; check past class catalogs to see how often they are offered.

Some may have a class devoted to properties, in which you may learn not just prop making but also how to be a props master. Others may only spend a few days on properties in a class on general stagecraft. If the school has a theatre department, it will probably staff the different departments with students, so even if class selections are few, opportunities to work in props on actual productions will be great.

Some prop skills can be learned in stagecraft and costume craft classes; a well-rounded props curriculum might include courses on sewing, carpentry, dyeing and painting, drafting, metalworking, millinery, design, etc. Do not neglect to look at other departments as well. The Fine Arts department is a great place to take classes in sculpting, drawing, painting, and other crafts. Classes in the Interior Design department and classes on architectural history and model making will also help round you out. Many prop makers do not even come from a theatrical background; they spend their undergraduate years studying sculpting, industrial design, and three-dimensional art. If the program is very hands-on, you may have a lot more practical experience working with the same materials and methods that a prop maker would work with. Depending on the school, it may also be possible to take a few classes in the theatre department on set construction, props, or costume making to round out your education and gain production experience, which is important because prop making and sculpture do not have the same goals or ethos.

As for degrees, most schools offer either a BA (Bachelor of Arts) in Theatre or a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) in Theatrical Production. Only a few universities offer props as a specific undergraduate program. Among the best known at this time are the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Besides classes in properties production, these programs also offer classes in soft goods, upholstery, molding and casting, carpentry and furniture



Figure 1-1: Inside a props classroom at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

restoration, and properties crafts. It is difficult to give advice one way or the other as to what path you should choose. On the one hand, you do not *need* to go to one of these programs to be a prop maker; prop makers do not need any certification, degrees, or licenses for basic prop building. On the other hand, I am always running across alumni of these and other programs working in the industry. Many internships and entry-level programs, in fact, *require* a bachelor degree of some kind, and most prefer theatre degrees. Without these first jobs, it can be difficult to advance in your career. Employers feel a degree proves that a potential hire has an understanding of the basics, has dedicated at least four years to his or her career, and is committed to pursuing it further.

Undergraduate school is one of the few formal education options that will allow you to build a portfolio and make connections; because of the lack of props-specific vocational programs in this country, your only other options are to study on your own and build props in your own shop with tools and materials you purchase, and try to get a job from that experience. The United Kingdom has vocational programs, such as the

4 formal training

Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, which grants certificates in prop making. For US students, it can be a difficult choice whether to commit to a full undergraduate education that costs the same as a student studying biology or engineering when one is really only interested in a few classes on prop making.

It is also important to point out that older and more established prop makers may advise that you do not need an undergraduate degree because that is what was true when they began their careers; undergraduate degrees were less common and certainly not as required as they are today. Take a look through the job postings for summer stock, paid internships, and paid apprenticeships, though, and you will see that most require an undergraduate degree as a minimum requirement. Additionally, vocational training in middle and high schools was far more prevalent in decades past. An older prop maker may have foregone a college degree, but he or she also had woodworking, drafting and metalworking training during high school. These programs have shrunk and even disappeared completely from many schools; many high school graduates have never even had to pick up a hammer in their schooling, let alone run a table saw. If a more established prop maker tells you that undergraduate school is unnecessary, ask yourself whether you have had the same vocational training they had in high school.

I do not mean to focus solely on theatre here, but the fact is there is not a single class in the United States on building props for film or television. Some schools, such as California Institute of the Arts, offer interdisciplinary courses in prop fabrication for both theatre and film, but these are still taught through the theatre department. Most film departments focus on documentary and short films rather than narrative films; when the rare project requires props or other production elements, they will typically partner with the theatre department. Prop makers outside of theatre, whether in film, television, retail display, theme park, or another field, often study fine art (particularly sculpting) or industrial design in undergraduate school. A few specialty schools do exist here and there offering certificates in various forms of effects and props design for

film. Strenuous research is recommended to find the right program that matches your goals and expectations.

However, if you are interested in film and television but are pursuing a theatre degree, you should still take some classes in the film and television departments. Though they may lack the need for props now, they may have an extensive alumni network filled with professionals who *do* need props. This is especially helpful for schools located near a lot of filming, because many of the local filmmakers may be graduates of that school, and the person you helped with a student film during school may be in a position to give you work just a few months or years after graduation.

A lot of this information assumes you wish to pursue a career as a prop maker, but that may not be the case. Perhaps you want a degree in something similar to prop making that will help you land a more dependable job while you make props as a hobby; industrial design and manufacturing engineering are such fields.

Whatever you choose, remember that you never stop learning. Even if you know exactly what courses you wish to pursue, you cannot possibly learn everything there is to know about prop making in four years. Plenty of people, myself included, do not even discover prop making until well after college.

If you are out of school, or do not wish to pursue that path in the first place, you can pick up skills on a class-by-class basis. Many makers in all sorts of fields also teach, whether formally or informally. So if you want to learn how to make knives, you take a class with a local knife maker. You learn upholstery from an upholstery maker. Stores, clubs, organizations, and other groups also give classes. You can learn faux finishing from local paint stores or wood carving from a carpentry shop. The types of educational opportunities available to you are highly localized and not always advertised well, so it takes a lot of digging to find what is available to you within your budget and schedule. The places where you buy your supplies (other than those big box stores) will often help you out with questions and suggestions, and may have community bulletin boards advertising what is available in your area.

Vocational training is a great way to pick up the more hands-on skills as well. It can be pursued in a program toward a certificate or degree, or taken one class at a time. Auto-body repair or boat-building classes can teach you all about fiberglass and working with composite materials. Machine shop programs can introduce you to milling machines, metal lathes, and all sorts of fun tools. Community colleges in your area may have classes and certification programs in a number of these areas as well.

While vocational training can teach you about specific materials and process or particular crafts, and design classes can teach you about form, color, and proportion, these are mostly geared toward helping you build the best and prettiest things possible. Props, though, is rarely about building the nicest and most functional things. You may need to build a worn-down chaise lounge or a broken clock. You will have to build ugly and useless things just as often as you will build nice things. An understanding of period is also important; you must get into the mindset of a specific historical time to build things that actually existed then, rather than an idealized version which simply evokes the qualities of that period. You should understand the characters and the place of the production, which can only come from a solid grasp of the text. Most importantly, you should understand that a prop must fulfill all the needs of the production, including the backstage and off-screen needs, rather than simply being a well-made object that is nice to look at. In other words, if you wish to take formal education to become a props artisan, you should take classes that deal with making and using props in theatre, not just how to build things in general.

A number of theatres have become magnets for technical theatre training, particularly during the summer. Organizations such as the Santa Fe Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Utah Shakespeare Festival, and far too many more to mention here are places where burgeoning professionals “cut their teeth.” Many of these programs offer “apprenticeships” or “internships.” Unlike some internships, these will actually pay you for your work. Though the pay

is often small, the addition of free or low-cost housing, and in some cases transportation reimbursement, makes these ideal opportunities for prop makers just getting started. Unlike summer stock theatres that throw a bunch of kids in a barn with some tools and tell them to figure it out on their own, these places will actually teach you real skills as you work alongside professionals in the field. Some even have additional workshops and training opportunities, and may offer portfolio reviews toward the end of your contract.

Working professionally will lead you to make good connections and produce quality work, though it may not expose you to a great variety of skills. If you are a good carpenter, for instance, you will always be given carpentry jobs and may never get the chance to learn something different, such as molding and casting. Some places may let you assist or observe (often on your break) if you really want to. The surest way to learn and practice new techniques is to take the initiative and do it on your own with personal projects. While there are plenty of books and magazines dealing with how to work in various materials, the Internet has greatly expanded the resources available to us. Videos and how-to sites show any number of tips and tricks for building all sorts of things. This book too will arm you with the basic know-how to tackle any number of projects to expand your skills.

Graduate programs also exist that focus on props. A graduate-level degree is not required for any properties job in regional or commercial theatre. The one arena it is often (though not always) required is for teaching properties at a university level; even then, few colleges have a full-time props professor, and hire props masters and artisans at a staff or over-hire level, which does not require a master’s degree. Graduate programs can be expensive, and it is most likely the addition of a graduate degree will not raise your income enough to justify the cost.

On the other hand, educational theatres build far more props than professional theatres, so the development of your portfolio in the three years of a graduate program will most likely be more significant than three years of working. You will also have the chance to experiment with materials and

machines that you may not get the chance to work with in a professional setting. A graduate program may also help develop your administrative and leadership abilities, which is helpful if you ever wish to progress to a props artisan manager or shop supervisor. Graduate school is very different from undergraduate school; the classes you take are only geared toward your interests (no biology or statistics classes here), and are much more hands-on and in depth. The class sizes are smaller, and your peers are much more focused in their areas. You will not be in a class with a bunch of non-theatre people who think they can score an easy “A.” You basically take classes all morning, work in the shop all afternoon, and finish your homework all night. Sometimes you may even sleep. The contacts you develop, both with your professors and your peers, will last for a long time through your career. Many programs offer scholarships and assistantships, so it is possible to attend for minimal to no cost.

I am not going to recommend one way or the other whether you should attend graduate school for props. It is certainly a minority of professional prop makers who hold graduate degrees these days. If you wish to have the option of teaching at the university level some day, you should certainly look into it. If you can find a program you like that will offset all or most of the costs and leave you with a manageable amount of loans after graduation, then it may be worth it. I would certainly advise against paying full price for any graduate program; it does not make sense economically. If you have \$80,000-\$100,000 to pay for a degree, you may as well just rent a space and buy a whole bunch of tools to build your own props.

Jobs

Regional theatres, educational theatres, and other producing theatres frequently have their own “in-house” props shops to construct props for their shows. Broadway and many other commercial theatres do not. The Broadway theatres themselves are known as “four wall” theatres, meaning that other than the walls (and audience seating), everything has to be brought in by the producers. Lights, sound, scenery, and props

are all specific to every show. Thus, the props are all created by outside shops or individual prop makers contracted by the props master (usually it is a shop or combination of shops contracted to do the scenery and props, and individual prop makers or smaller props shops are subcontracted by these shops for some or all of the props). Film and television are similar. The art director or props master has independent shops, and/or individual prop makers construct any custom props needed. A small number of film and television studios still have their own in-house shops, but these actually operate more as independent businesses, and are free to construct props for other studios.

As a prop maker, then, you can work at a theatre with its own shop, at an independent props shop, or strike out on your own. I will describe the specifics of each of these first before diving into how you specifically search for work.

Theatre

Theatres, particularly the larger LORT theatres, will have props shops with either full-time artisans, seasonal positions, or freelance work on a show-by-show basis.

A **LORT Theatre** is one that belongs to the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), an organization that administers contracts and standards for nonprofit theatres across the United States. Currently, 75 theatres belong to LORT. There are also non-LORT regional and local theatres, which can range from highly professional theatres to amateur community theatres. Other classifications of theatres in the United States include Dinner Theatre, Summer Stock Theatre, and Light Opera Theatres, any of which may have in-house props shops or bring on over-hire prop makers. Opera companies are also places that employ many theatrical prop makers. Universities and even some high schools may have staff or over-hire positions in their props shops. Finally, many cities have numerous smaller companies that do not have a permanent performing space but that occasionally require custom props for their productions.

Most “full-time” props artisan jobs at regional or educational theatres are actually limited time contracts, with 32–45 weeks

being a typical time frame. You may be contracted for August through May, with an unpaid hiatus for the summer. Some are even further broken up, with a few weeks unpaid leave in December and January (some artisans call these “swiss cheese contracts” because of all the holes). This leaves these artisans having to “fill the gaps” for the other weeks of the years. Some locations and theatres make it possible for artisans to collect unemployment benefits for some or all of their time off. Most artisans, though, spend the time taking a job at a summer theatre or freelancing (either in another theatre or in another field, such as film or retail display). Many artisans actually prefer the creative freedom this brings, as they have the benefit of a stable paycheck for most of the year, but the variety and chance to try new things that freelance work brings.

Some theatres may also allow their staff to use the facilities in off-hours for outside work as long as it does not conflict with anything else. This is highly specific to the shop and personnel involved, but almost everyone in theatre is involved with projects on the side, and employers know that their staff often needs to supplement their income.

Smaller theatres and companies may only have one person in the props department. This props master will be in charge of procuring all props, which includes building the ones that need to be built. A slightly larger theatre may have two or three people in the department. In addition to the props master, the other person may be a props artisan or an assistant props master. Again, in a department this small, the props master may still have construction duties, though the more people who work in the props department, the less likely this is true. In a theatre where a props director is in charge of half a dozen or more artisans, assistants, and shoppers, it is highly unlikely he or she will have time to build props.

Props Shops

In the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, film and television studios all had their own prop departments with fabrication studios. Since the 1990s though, most of these have been

gutted, and the bulk of the work is done by independent prop fabrication studios. Los Angeles has several larger shops devoted to constructing props for film and television, while New York City’s large shops build mostly for Broadway and television. Shops in these cities and others are rarely devoted to one industry and often do a mix of theme park, retail, promotional, and other types of work. These shops tend to be a little more specialized in the materials and types of objects they build, and not specifically devoted to “props” as we understand them. For instance, a shop that constructs small scenic units will also build large set props and furniture pieces. A sculptural studio may work on sculpted set pieces and costume pieces just as often as it builds sculpted props.

A large shop may be contracted for the build of the entire show and then subcontract out the more specialized parts. For instance, the shop may build all the set pieces and large furniture props, but subcontract out the painting to a scenic art studio, the sculpting to a sculpting studio, and the hand props to a props shop. Further subcontracting may even occur, with more specialized pieces going to individual vendors.

In large cities such as New York, the high price of real estate has pushed many shops away from the city centers, so you often have to look in the outer boroughs or suburbs to find where the work is being done. For many of these studios, the number of artisans they need regularly changes depending on what work they have; they can go from a skeleton crew of just a few necessary employees to dozens of over-hire artisans in just a few days. Because of this, most of them are almost always seeking to interview new artisans. This does not mean you will be hired right away; they simply want to maintain a list of ready and willing people for when a sudden influx of jobs comes their way.

Films and television shows will contract out all or some of the props that need to be constructed to these shops. A film props master may also work with smaller vendors and **outside contractors**; these may simply be a single person working in a garage or home studio that the props master has worked with before, or whom someone has recommended.

When a film or television show is shot on location, temporary shops will be set up. Usually, the production offices will rent out space and equipment, and outfit another nearby space for a scenery shop, paint shop, and props shop. Working in the on-set props shop is like being in a nonstop tech week for theatre; the work is fast and constant, and you are dealing more with repairs and adaptations, as the hardcore construction would have been taken care of by the outside contractors. On union shoots, the props master is not allowed to handle any of the props, so this shop must handle every tiny repair and paint touch-up.

For major studio pictures, the main production people still come from Hollywood even when the film is shot in another city or state. These production people have their own vendors and outside contractors whom they use whenever possible. Some areas may see enough activity for local props artisans and shops to pop up and “fill in the gaps” for projects and needs that arise while filming.

Besides the people hired for specific positions, film and television shoots will also have crew members brought in on a day-by-day basis depending on that day’s needs. These **day players** can work for as little as one day or for the majority of the shoot. With most union shoots, the crew is called in from the union hall’s list of names. However, if a lot of filming is occurring simultaneously, all the union members may be busy, and they have to call in nonunion people. Nonunion shoots will also require day players. These calls can be a way to make some money and to get your foot in the door. You may be called in to push some boxes around, but once the higher-ups discover you have actual skills, they may find other places to use you. It is also a chance to meet and network with many other people who will go on to other shoots. The trick is, of course, getting on the call in the first place. You can try your luck by calling the local union hall and getting your name on the list.

The art director for a television show often jobs out specialized props to be built, either because their in-house art department cannot handle it, or in the case of smaller-budgeted shows, because they do not have an art department.

A television prop crew consists of the property head and a crew of as many assistants as needed. They may acquire and rig special props for each production in addition to maintenance and crew duties. Often, this crew is known as the **inside crew**, while a separate **outside crew** will work with vendors, rental houses, and artisans outside of the television studio. **Outside packagers** basically have their own mini-production staffs, and their property chiefs will work with the inside, or studio, crew.

The theme park industries offer a lot of work for artisans. Some of the larger ones (such as Disney) have their own in-house fabrication shops, though many will contract work out to independent vendors and shops. Cities like Orlando, Anaheim, and Las Vegas have a lot of companies geared toward these industries, though these shops can be found all over. In addition to the year-round theme parks are more seasonal kinds of amusements. Halloween is a major industry in parts of the world, with haunted houses, dark rides, and other temporary installations that require many props and devices to be built. Annual parades are another flurry of creative activity. It can take a lot of detective work to track down the names and contact information of the shops that actually construct and fabricate the items used.

Working Independently

If you have the space and means to build props on your own, you can essentially be your own vendor. Some prop makers do all their work independently, while many others do independent projects either on the side or in between larger gigs.

Often, you will be asked to **bid** or **estimate** a job, which can consist of a single prop, a group of props, or all the props on a production. A production company or props master often solicits bids from a number of people and companies; they may not go with the cheapest bid; in fact, if one of the bids is far below the others, they take that as a sign that the person/company does not know what they are doing or does not understand what they are bidding on. In many cases, the price

When working independently, you are essentially running your own business, which makes you responsible for all your own taxes and other legal requirements. The scope and complexity of running a business is far too much to get into in this book, so I urge you to talk to a small business adviser or your accountant to make sure you are above the board on any paperwork you may need to file or records you may need to keep. Even just a few small projects a year can move you from “hobbyist” to “self-employed business owner,” even if you do not intend to start a business.

your name has to cover everything, so you need to factor in not only costs of materials, shipping, shop space, and any possible expenses you will incur, but also your own labor so you can continue to eat and have a place to sleep (or, if need be, pay someone else to help you). For practical reasons, many prop makers request a 50% deposit up front to cover the materials needed. For many bids, particularly with commercials and other extreme time deadlines, you have to start building before you receive that deposit check or you will not get done in time. When bidding on a project, you need to make sure you have the cash on hand or enough credit available to buy whatever materials you need to get started.

Places to Look for Work

For theatres, look at the websites for all the theatres in your area. They often have a section on their website that will list current job openings and whether they bring on over-hire workers. Even if they do not list such information, you can still contact the props master (or production manager if they do not have a props master) with a letter of inquiry or request for an informational interview. You can also look through the programs

of shows done in your area to see whether the outside shops and prop makers are listed.

People in technical theatre may attend one of two large conferences every year: USITT (United States Institute for Theatre Technology) and SETC (Southeastern Theatre Conference). These are great networking opportunities and a chance to meet employers for many companies. Many of these companies use the conferences specifically to hunt for employees for their upcoming seasons and projects. The websites for these organizations give the dates and locations of their next conferences (both are held in early spring) as well as job listings.

Other long-established websites that list technical theatre job postings include Artsearch (<http://www.tcg.org/artsearch>) and Backstage Jobs (<http://backstagejobs.com>). Artsearch requires a paid subscription to view the job postings, though many schools and companies buy a subscription for their students and staff to access. Backstage Jobs remains completely free, as it has since it was begun in 1997. Playbill (<http://www.playbill.com/jobs/find>) has a small job postings section as well. Other sites exist with job listings for technical theatre, but the postings are usually found on one of the sites I have already mentioned, or they are for unpaid or fly-by-night companies that you want to avoid. Other than Artsearch, you should be wary of any site that requires you to pay to view job listings; theatres want as many applicants as possible, so they will post job openings on the sites I have mentioned as well as on their own websites.

The Society for Properties Artisan Managers (SPAM), which represents many of the props masters of regional, educational, and nonprofit theatres and operas in the United States, maintains a list of internships at member theatres on their website (<http://propmasters.org>). They also provide contact information for those props masters willing to act as mentors to new props professionals, whether it is just answering a few questions or providing guidance for a career path.

Most states and some smaller locales have **film commissions**, which serve to promote and service major films and television shows that are worked on in that area. Find the film commission that services your locality. These will list prop

fabrication shops and related businesses in the area. Their individual websites will give an indication of how large they are and how often they take on new employees. If the companies you locate have a website, they may share whether they are looking for people to hire. Most, if not all, use a crew of “regular freelancers”; when they have work, they hire the people they have worked with in the past. Sometimes these people are unavailable, and sometimes they have taken on so many projects simultaneously that they need to bring in new people. These jobs are rarely advertised; there simply isn’t time. More often, they will ask the freelancers who work for them for recommendations for other prop makers, or ask other shops in the area if they know of any good freelancers.

The film commission websites may also have a list of what is currently filming in the area. You may be able to find out who is in charge of the props (either the props master or art director) for these shoots from the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>) or from the film’s own website.

For union shoots, they will hire the on-set prop makers and workers from the union first; they also try to fill the calls with locals, as they have to pay travel costs for anyone outside of a certain radius. Contact the union hall to inquire about whether you can have your name put on call lists, or what you need to do to be considered.

In some areas, it can be easier to get your start on nonunion shoots. The larger shoots may be listed on the film commission website, but there are far more that are not. You may find local organizations or networking groups in your area that serve as a way for filmmakers to list the projects they are working on and to put calls out for the cast and crew they need. For the prop maker, horror, science fiction, and period films remain the “bread and butter,” as these are the films that require the most custom props. You may find the occasional request for custom props on more general classified sites, such as Craigslist (<http://craigslist.org>). Be aware that while independent films can be just as professional and well budgeted as studio films, they also include shoots by amateurs unwilling or unable to pay and who may have no idea what a prop maker needs to be successful in terms of time and

money. Websites such as Mandy (<http://mandy.com>) and Production Hub (<http://www.productionhub.com>) occasionally have postings from people looking for prop makers.

Schools with filmmaking programs often seek crew and help for student films. They may have their own online bulletin boards seeking outside help, though larger cities (particularly New York and Los Angeles) will have many listings on Craigslist. While these kinds of jobs may rarely pay well, they can open the door to networking with the faculty of the program, who may still work in their field, as well as the school’s alumni network, which will be filled with various professionals in the industry.

Because film making is such a small community, particularly in areas outside of the major markets, getting on that first film shoot is the most difficult. Once you get on set once, people will see your work, and you will get to know those who will go on to do future projects.

Outside of theatre and film is the world of exhibition and retail. Think of all the window displays you see; somebody needs to build those. Trade shows are another big venue for prop makers. You may find that the same companies that do display and exhibition work also do trade shows. Corporate events, such as product launches, milestones, stockholder meetings, or office parties, occasionally require props and prop-like items to be constructed. You will find a whole world of people needing props built for weddings, bar mitzvahs, fundraising events, concerts, and so on.

If you are unfamiliar with the shops in your area, start with local searches on the Internet. Look for event design, party décor, exhibition fabrication, and all sorts of similar companies. You may find local guides or directories for your area that will point to a host of companies nearby. Bizbash (<http://www.bizbash.com>) lists vendors and venues in major American cities and Toronto. Contact the ones that do custom work; they may either have an in-house shop that builds custom props, or they use outside vendors and subcontractors to fulfill any custom work they need. Look at event venues as well. Many event locations and venues only work with pre-approved

vendors, including the companies that construct props and other décor; the venues will most likely list which companies they work with on their website or on request.

Contacting Places

Because very few places list actual job openings, a prop maker spends more time “cold calling” people and companies. You will be sending out a **letter of inquiry** or requesting an **informational interview**. Often, the letter of inquiry may be requesting an informational interview, though sometimes it is even more basic.

In a letter of inquiry, you are introducing yourself as a prop maker and asking if the company or person ever needs someone of your talents and skills for freelance or over-hire work. Your letter may include a scaled-down version of your portfolio or just some “teaser” images. It is especially helpful to have a website with your portfolio as you can include the address in your letter. A copy of your resume should definitely accompany this letter.

In an informational interview, you may have a full sit-down with a person at the company along with a tour of the facilities. Other times, it may be done in another location, such as a coffee shop, or even a hotel room if you are meeting during a conference. You may even do an informational interview over the phone. During an informational interview, you should find out what kind of work the company does, how often they take on over-hire prop makers, whether they ever hire anyone full-time, and the like.

Sending out letters of inquiry, particularly when you are just starting out in your career, can be frustrating. You will not hear back from many people; the company may no longer exist, the contact information you have may be out of date, the person you contact may be uninterested, or they may be too busy at the time and later misplace your letter. You may hear back from a small percentage of employers who like your work but cannot hire you (many of these “companies” are actually just one or two people), or do not have any current projects they need help

on. Some larger shops will ask you to come in for an interview because they like to maintain a large list of qualified prop makers in the area, but it can be months or even years before an opportunity comes up where they need you. You can send out dozens or even hundreds of letters for weeks and not get any new work out of it. This is especially heart-breaking when you have bills to pay and no payday on the horizon. It is better to start job hunting before you are desperate.

When I was freelancing, I sent my resume and samples of my work to many of these companies. Many wanted to meet me. Some had work right away. Others called me up a few weeks later. Some even went a few months before calling me in. Some turned me down, and a few never even replied to me. The point is, you never know when a studio will hit that perfect storm of having too much work and not enough artisans that requires them to start calling in new people, so you have to keep sending your resume out until it happens.

I have had shops contact me four months after my first letter of inquiry before they had enough work to take me on. Other shops have told me they had no work at the time, only to call me back in a few days saying they suddenly had a few projects they needed help on. Sending out letters of inquiry is not an instant process, but rather a slow accumulation of contacts who know that you are in the area and who may eventually either need your skills or recommend you to someone who does.

In an informational interview, you are trying to find out as much about the company as you can while they are trying to learn as much about you as they can. What kind of fields do they work in? Who are some of their clients? What kind of schedule do they maintain? What are the other employees like? When they ask you questions, they will first be interested in your skills and strong points; specifically, they will be interested in what kinds of tools and techniques you are proficient in, and what kind of materials you are most comfortable working with. This is not a time to give vague answers, such as “I am good at solving problems.” Whenever possible, bring your portfolio along.

Networking

Networking is not like on the TV shows, where you have to idly chat with fancy people at parties and hand your business cards to old men at restaurants while charming their wives. Networking simply means getting to know other people, letting them get to know your work, and keeping in touch with people you already know. The entertainment industry already has a lot of built-in networking just by virtue of the fact that every job and production is a new group of people to work with. After a few internships and entry-level jobs at theatres or on film shoots around the country, you already have a base of people who know you. In this world, six degrees of separation is an exaggeration; it is closer to three degrees of separation. After awhile, any new person you meet will know someone who knows someone you know.

In the technical side of the entertainment world, particularly in a field with specialized skills such as prop making, work is more often than not found through word of mouth and personal recommendations. The vast majority of props jobs are not advertised through conventional means. The old adage of “it’s who you know” is not quite true; it’s really “who knows you.” You may claim to know all sorts of people, but if they are unaware what kind of work you are capable of, or even that you are interested in such work, your name won’t cross their mind when a project comes up.

Production managers and props masters are typically the ones making the hiring decisions, though others on a production can influence the process with their recommendations. In film and television, the art director is often the one either choosing or recommending a prop maker to work with, while in theatre, it is the set designer who can push work your way.

Besides networking with potential clients, you also network with your coworkers. A production assistant I met during one show was working on another show when the technical director encountered a problem that required the construction of a custom prop. The production assistant remembered the work I had done on the first show, and I was called in to talk with them. Another props artisan I know found work when her

roommate, a costume designer’s assistant, recommended her to the costume designer of an opera who needed some masks and armor built. The designer liked her aesthetic and has been calling her for work ever since. Contacts lead to other contacts. One job can lead to more contacts, which lead to more jobs.

Your fellow props artisans are a fantastic source for jobs and work. They may either be working on a project that requires more artisans, or they may have to turn work down due to scheduling conflicts or because it is beyond their skill sets, and they can offer your contact information to the person in charge of hiring for the job. They will also be the ones most attuned to what kind of projects and materials are suited to your capabilities.

Because finding work is so dependent on the people you know and the people who are familiar with your work, your interpersonal skills can be just as important as your construction and crafting skills. This doesn’t mean you need to be the life of the party or be good at schmoozing and small talk. The world of props is one of the few refuges for the gifted rebel, combining art and science, or intelligence and manual labor, in a way that few fields do. It is not held against you if you dress strangely, are interested in nerdy subjects, or have a checkered past. What does matter is that you are easy to work with, take criticism well, work hard, understand deadlines, ask questions, and help your fellow technicians out when needed. Treat others in a reciprocal manner; if you ever need to turn down work, offer up recommendations of other artisans you know who can do the job. If you want to learn how another artisan achieved something, share one of your skills or tips with them. Finally, never take the frustrations inherent in our business out on a coworker, supervisor, or assistant.

Unions

Prop makers working in the entertainment industry may belong to a union. The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) covers most of these in the United States and Canada. IATSE is divided into “locals,” which cover either certain geographical areas, specific crafts, or a combination of both.

United Scenic Artists (USA) is another union that some prop makers join. It is actually a part of IATSE (IATSE Local 829), but it works differently from the other locals. Though it covers “scenic artists,” it defines these as workers who do surface decoration, sculpting, mold-making, casting, and painting of scenery and properties for all media, plus the execution of models and miniatures.

With IATSE union jobs, employers may do their own hiring, or may have the union help with the hiring in one of three ways. First, the employer may have IATSE send over day workers without specifying whom to send. Second, the employer can have IATSE contact and send specific people. Third, an employers may request people from a “skill lists” that is maintained by the union. These lists contain names of both union members and nonmembers and are organized by skill type (such as props assistant, set dresser, etc.).

Larger areas have multiple IATSE locals devoted to different types of skills, while smaller areas have a single local to which everyone belongs. Usually, an area will have a local dedicated to a smaller area for stagehands of all types, covering theatre, concerts, and other live events. A local covering a larger area will be devoted to film and television events. So, for instance, stagehands in New York City are organized under Local One. This covers Broadway backstage workers and many of the shops that build for Broadway and other large events (including shops that are located up to an hour north in the Hudson Valley, which is where many of them moved back in the 1980s–1990s). Film crews are organized under Local 52, which covers the entire state of New York, as well as Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania (minus Pittsburgh).

Some props people are members of more than one union. For example, a Philadelphia prop person can be a member of Local 8 for theatrical work and Local 52 for film

work. In smaller areas, one might be a member of several unions depending on how far one is willing to drive for work; in North Carolina, one could be a member of Local 635 for Winston-Salem and Local 574 for Greensboro since both cities are within an hour of each other, and neither may have enough work on its own to fully support a prop worker.

Some shops are union affiliated, particularly those that work with more than just props, such as scenery. Some large shops may not be union affiliated, though. While some union venues may pressure the producers to get most of the props constructed by a union shop, it has long been decided that they have to accept props built by nonunion shops.

Even when a shop is union affiliated, it may still hire non-union workers. These nonunion workers have a portion of their paycheck diverted to union dues. With many unions, you need to work a certain number of hours under a union contract for a period of time (often around three years) to qualify for union membership. Keep in mind, though, that even with enough hours to qualify, the more competitive unions may still not vote you in.

You may run across a job posting that specifies it is under a “union contract.” Even if you are not in the union, you can still apply for it if you are qualified. In some cases, they are posting the job simply to comply with legal requirements, and they plan on hiring whomever the union wants them to. Other times, the job may not specifically require the candidate to be in the union, just that a portion of their salary is withheld for union benefits (which you will not receive if you are not in the union). In rare cases, the employer may really want you for the job and will “buy” your way into the union so you can work there.

Choosing whether to be in the union or not is highly dependent on your situation, where you live, where you want to work, your experience, your skills, and whom you know. In many cases, you never even have the choice; you may find yourself working your entire career without ever needing to join a union, or you may find yourself being brought into a union because someone really wants to hire you for a union job. Prop making spans so many disciplines and so much work

14 formal training

exists outside of traditional structures that I cannot make any definitive statement about whether or not you will be helped by joining any specific union in your area. Talk with as many people in your area and your discipline as you can, union or not, to find out what is best for your career.

You can contact the local union halls in your area to request to be put on their skills lists for potential calls. As with

other over-hire work, they may call you when they simply need warm bodies, but once they find out you have skills, they will contact you for better jobs. In many cases, it is easier to get union work when you know someone in the union who can introduce you around.