

# CUADC Guide to Props



The first thing you must do - and the earlier you do it the better - is to price a props list and a budget figure out of your director and producer. The list needn't be anything like complete (most prop requirements surface during the rehearsal period) and you must expect it to be continually added to and changed, but the earlier you can get an idea of how many things are wanted, how difficult they will be to find and how expensive they may be, the less hassle you will have during the last few days before the show opens.

Props budgets can be anything from £0 to £250, but for a Club Mainshow it will probably be in the range £25-£100. For a Lateshow, or a Playroom- or College-based show, the props budget will often be rather less, and for a two week musical, ADC-Footlights pantomime, or large touring show, rather more.

Keep in touch with your director, know when production meetings are happening and go to most of them if you can. There's often some overlap between props and set (especially set dressing, e.g. pictures for walls) or costume (e.g. jewellery) – make sure you keep talking to each other and know who's responsible for what, otherwise you might end up getting something twice or not at all! Don't be afraid to nag the director to keep you up to date on what is needed. To this end, attending the odd rehearsal is a good move, if only to reassure yourself, the actors and director.

**Do not believe the director who says they are going to "Go light on props". 95% of the time this just means they haven't bothered to think through just how many props they will require!**

As well as a Props list, the more specific details you have about each item the better. For some things this doesn't matter. "Wooden spoon" might be fairly self-explanatory, but on the other hand the director might want one 6ft long, or that can be dramatically snapped in half every night to reveal a collapsible white rabbit, or that can be used to hit people without causing them GBH. Check whether bottles need to be opened and poured from, whether food needs to be edible (see below), and whether cassette players need to be capable of playing cassettes. Talking to the actors is a good move; they have to use the stuff after all, and may have some good ideas, and often will have thought through their personal properties in more detail than the director. You can often find some of the things you need amongst the personal possessions of the company, so it's a good idea to attend production meetings and rehearsals and spend some time asking specifically if anyone already has any of the items on your list.

For each item, the first thing you have to decide is how important it is. This doesn't mean decide whether you can be bothered to get hold of it, since of course every prop is important, but it does mean: (a) how much of your budget (and possibly in some cases of someone else's budget) you are going to be prepared to spend on it and, just as important, (b) how much time and effort you are prepared to spend on it. There are likely to be one or two things that it is vital to get, and get right, (Dorian Gray's picture for example, or Yorick's Skull) but most props are less crucial than this.

The next thing you must decide is whether anything will have to be made rather than borrowed or hired. Making props can be very cheap, and sometimes necessary if you need something really unique; however, it's time consuming and sometimes disappointing. Don't be afraid to ask members of the carpentry, set-painting or technical team for help if you need their expertise to help create the perfect prop! If you don't know who to talk to, your producer should be able to advise. If you're stuck on how to create something, please feel free to get in touch with the Stage Managers' Rep at [props@cuadc.org](mailto:props@cuadc.org).

Papier-mâché is not a good prop- or mask-making material. Chicken wire or tightly squashed newspaper wrapped in brown paper, parcel tape or gaffer tape is much better.

Many shows require props that are bigger than life-size. This seems strange and usually doesn't matter at all, but bear it in mind. Stage coins and notes are a particularly good example as is make-up. You often need to go quite a bit over the top on things to get a "natural" effect.

If you decide to beg, borrow, steal, hire or even (God help you) buy things, the list below may be useful. Don't go over budget without checking with the producer - you may just conceivably need to, but the corresponding amount will have to be cut from somewhere else.

Make sure you get a receipt for everything you buy with your own money and keep the receipt safe so you can give it to the producer after the show for reimbursement.

### *CUADC Props Store*

Contains lots of useful props – especially plastic glassware, cutlery, and a variety of unexpected treasures! Please contact the CUADC Stage Managers' Rep, at [props@cuadc.org](mailto:props@cuadc.org) with any queries, or if you're interested in hiring CUADC props. Hire is free to CUADC Clubshows, and relatively cheap to other shows. Please note that the CUADC props store doesn't contain any furniture – all furniture (including tables and chairs) stored at the ADC Theatre is administered by the ADC Theatre Management, and is available for use by all shows at the ADC Theatre and Corpus Playroom. Contact [sam@adctheatre.com](mailto:sam@adctheatre.com) with any enquiries about furniture.

### *Second hand shops*

Burleigh St, near the Grafton Centre, has a whole host of charity shops; the Salvation Army Store ("Sally Ann's") on Mill Rd is large and often fruitful. These second hand shops sell all kinds of household items, clothing and accessories. You'll be amazed what you can find! These shops often have a quick throughput of stock, so if you can't find what you need, it's worthwhile going back the next week to look again.

### *Online shops*

Amazon, eBay and other online shops are fantastic resources for obscure bargains, make good use of them, but be aware of the delivery time and cost – budget for postage, and make sure you plan far enough in advance for everything to have arrived well before you need it.

### *Professional Props Suppliers*

If you need something very special and specific (and expensive), then it's worth trying professional props hire companies such as the National Theatre Props Store (<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/costume-and-props-hire>, 020 7820 1358), Keeley Hire ([www.keeleyhire.co.uk](http://www.keeleyhire.co.uk), 01992 464040), or, for weaponry, Cutting Edge Combat (<http://www.cuttingedgecombat.co.uk>, 01223 750265). Companies like these have a fantastic stock, and you can almost always find what you need if you're willing to pay enough! It's easy to blow too much of your budget on hire (remember to factor in the cost of delivery and return when you're budgeting), but it can sometimes be the only way to find a particularly special items. There are lots of

similar props suppliers for stage, film and TV, and it's always worth ringing around for the best deal, and don't be afraid to haggle for the best price! Try The White Book (<http://www.whitebook.co.uk>), a large event production directory, for more ideas on companies that might be useful.

Some shops will be prepared to lend goods or sell them cheaper or even donate them in return for a mention in the programme: haggle!

Make sure that everyone who helps you in any way is mentioned in the "Thanks" section of the Programme - this is polite, and goes for everyone on a production team. Civility costs nothing, after all, and will make people more willing to help you in the future!

## Props nightmares and hot tips

These are some of the problem items and a few possible solutions.

### *Food*

If it's real it goes off and gets very smelly, gets eaten or gets trodden on. It needs replacing nearly every night, needs vast and expensive quantities to look good on stage and is a hassle to prepare and clear up. Fake food (non-biodegradable and usually about three times life size) is preferable for things like medieval banquets if you can get hold of it. If it doesn't have to be eaten and you want to prevent nibblers off stage, try things like dog biscuits instead of biscuits, dog chocolates instead of chocolates, stale cakes from a local bakery (they'll let you have their day's left overs every evening if you're lucky), cold black weak tea looks like whisky, cold black very weak tea looks like champagne and both have the advantage over apple-juice that no-one will drink them until they are on stage and absolutely have to, cakes with quantities of salt in the mixture are inedible and keep for ages.

### *Treasure*

Caskets of jewels, chests full of Spanish doubloons and assorted regal impedimenta? Silver paper, Christmas decorations and second hand tat are the order of the day here. Haberdashery departments are good on shiny buttons. Gold/ silver spray paint and glitter are useful. If you have to make a bulging casket of shiny things, pad it full of newspaper or something, spray the newspaper gold, then stick the treasures you have onto the bulge. This is a good tip for any receptacle that needs to look very full or a commodity you are short of, be it a bowl of fruit, a sack of barley or a suitcase of books.

### *Blood*

Blood capsules can, at their worst, be unreliable, unimpressive, a costume cleaning nightmare and inclined to provoke audience amusement at the critical dramatic moment. On the other hand they can be fine. Consider getting the Costume Designer to alter a white shirt for example so that a piece can be ripped off on Velcro to reveal a red stain beneath (good for stab wounds), or have something like a dark waistcoat which can be opened to reveal a blood-stained shirt beneath. Of course an inconspicuous moment for the reveal will have to be blocked into the fight. You can buy stage blood, but this is expensive, and if you need large quantities, consider making your own – everyone has their own favourite recipe, mine is about 15 parts golden syrup, 1 part washing up liquid, 1 part red food colouring (and, if you like, a tiny bit of blue to fill out the colour), 1 part water. (If the blood needs to be ingested or come into contact with water then remove the washing up liquid, otherwise it will taste horrible and start foaming!) This mixture washes out like a dream if not left to dry into the clothes, but tends to coagulate a bit over time so it's a good idea to wash it out quickly. Blood capsules can be bought or (crudely, and for external use only) be made from e.g. filled condoms.

## *Guns*

The ADC Theatre has a number of stage (blank-firing) pistols (a couple of Glock style handguns, and a revolver), and these must be treated with respect and fired at a safe distance – contact [sam@adctheatre.com](mailto:sam@adctheatre.com) for details. Your production will need the appropriate licence to use a stage pistol - check with the producer that you have one. Be aware that anything that even looks remotely realistic, even if it doesn't fire blanks, is classed as a replica firearm and is subject to licensing laws and the Violent Crime Reduction Act of 2006 – this means you won't find any realistic gun in high street toy or party shops, only brightly coloured alternatives. The CUADC Props Store has a realistic replica sniper rifle, as well as some replica old musket pistols.

## *Smoking*

Again, needs a licence, which can be arranged with the venue by the producer. Be aware the cost of new cigarettes every night stacks up very quickly. If the actor or venue would rather not use tobacco, stage cigarettes with alternative herbal fillings can be obtained. There must be sufficient ashtrays in the wings and on stage, and they must contain damp sand.

## *Candles*

Need a licence, which can be arranged with the venue by the producer. Tend to be difficult for actors to light or inclined to blow out. Electric ones, especially with flicker bulbs can be quite an effective substitute, but check the batteries.

## *Breakable props*

Lots of plays involve the symbolic destruction of something on stage every night. This may be a sheet of paper that gets crumpled up or torn, a piece of crockery that gets dropped and broken or a length of wood that is smashed over someone's head. You can get hold of props (e.g. statues of Buddha) that are designed to be broken and then put together again, but if you are actually destroying something every night make sure you make/buy enough to last the run: one for every performance, one for the dress, one for the tech and a couple more for luck. Balsa wood is good for making breakable things.

## *Health and Safety*

There is often a need for bottles or glasses to be used on stage. Using real glass presents hazards whose severity will depend on the nature of the production: for instance, if actors with bare feet will be using the stage during or after a scene in which glass would be used, it may be considered too unsafe to allow glass to go on to the stage, unprotected. There are two popular solutions. The first is to cover the glass items with cling film or sticky-back book-covering film: some of the glass items in the CUADC Props Store are already covered in this way. Alternatively, plastic glasses could be used; the props store has a limited range of them. Buying convincing plastic glasses can be expensive.

All props used must be adequately flame-retardant. In cases where an object's flame-retardance is not obvious, the conventional test is to hold the flame of a cigarette lighter against the prop for 30 seconds: flames must not spread and must die out straight away when the lighter is removed. It is worth remembering that some plastic fabrics such as Nylon will simply melt in the flame and are unlikely to be acceptable. Most fabrics, and paper and card, can be made flame-resistant by spraying them with the liquid "Flamecheck", probably using several coats. Spray-top bottles of Flamecheck can be bought from the ADC Theatre's Sundries Supply Store (currently £15 for a 1l bottle).

## Get-in, Tech run, Dress run, first night

Prop managers often double as Assistant Stage Managers (ASMs), which means you are backstage with the Stage Manager while the performance is going on, helping to set up before and clear away afterwards, and carrying out scene changes. The Stage Manager may ask you to stay with him / her near the SM's desk on Prompt Side (which at the ADC Theatre means the stage-left wing) so you are available to find missing people / props.

If you are back-stage during the performance, remember to wear dark clothing. If you are not ASMing, you will probably need to be present at least for the beginning of the various runs and the first few performances, in order to finalise the setting of props etc. During the Tech and Dress, it's a good idea to note down what needs to be set both on and off stage, where, when and by whom. On the whole actors ought to take props from the prop table just before they go on, and replace them as soon as they come off. The Presets (props set on stage at the beginning of an Act) can cause problems. Make sure you know whether it is you or the actor that is meant to set something; if it's the actor, it's a good idea to check it anyway, at least for the first few runs.

## Afterwards

After the last performance and BEFORE the party, get all the props out of the stage area, and pack away as many as possible. Return borrowed or hired props religiously, since you will annoy everyone who has kindly lent you things if they're not returned. If you've spent your own money on things, keep the receipts and give them to the producer as soon as you can, for repayment.

You can combine Prop Managing with doing or learning to do various other jobs. Your help will be very much appreciated before the show opens with the Get-In and set painting, and you might be able to Stage Manage for a night or two if you can persuade the SM to teach you how. The same goes for operating the lights, Counterweighting (operating the big pulleys that fly bits of set in and out) and running sound. However, if you want to Prop Manage and do nothing else, then that's perfectly fine!

Good Luck, and have fun!

## Further Reading

- Chapter 6 of *The Staging Handbook*, Francis Reid, Second Edition, A&C Black, London, 1995
- *Stage Design and Properties*, series editor David Mayer, Phaidon, London 1993