

## Editorial

# The hazards of work in the visual and performing arts

People who work in the visual and performing arts are an important, but often overlooked, part of the economy. In the U.S., full-time workers in the arts make up an estimated workforce of 2.4 million<sup>1)</sup> a sector larger than all of those in the legal occupations (1.2 million) or all law enforcement and firefighters combined (1.5 million)<sup>2)</sup>. It is estimated that the arts support 4.6 million full time jobs in the nonprofit sector alone<sup>3)</sup> and approximately 50% of the US population actively makes visual or performing art works intended for presentation<sup>4)</sup>. It is a surprise then, that the health and safety in the arts are so little studied and the work conditions are so poorly understood. As a result, treatment and prevention in this occupational sector have never been well addressed, making art workers similar to other underserved communities.

The lack of attention to the health and safety of this sector is not because the arts are relatively safe or workers encounter so few hazards. Every year students, amateurs and professionals get injured<sup>5, 6)</sup> and die<sup>7)</sup> directly from their participation in the arts. These account for the immediate outcomes of artwork accidents, but, as in many occupations, the chronic health effects of work in the arts are less well identified<sup>8)</sup>.

The list of hazardous materials, dangerous equipment and unsafe conditions in the arts are equivalent to many industrial settings<sup>9)</sup>. In the theater for example, set building includes all the common construction hazards; electrical work, carpentry, welding and painting. Many tons of these sets may be suspended overhead, then “flown” in rapidly to a darkened, noisy and often fog-obscured stage. Cast members in encumbering costumes, try to avoid collisions, trips and falls while still projecting to the audience. Behind the scenes, costume makers, hair and wig specialists, makeup artists and other have exposures to hazards that are better documented in similar professions outside the arts.

In contrast to industries where health and safety may be a regular part of training, skills in the arts are often handed down in an apprentice-like process with no guarantee of substantial hazard prevention or even recognition<sup>1)</sup>. It is not a surprise then that art hazards are often minimized when

schools of the arts and even the organizations that accredit these schools have few specific requirements for teaching health and safety to students<sup>10, 11)</sup>.

As a result, workers in the arts can be sent into the field with little understanding of the hazards they will face or the substantial resources available for learning about them<sup>12–16)</sup>. Without this basic understanding of health and safety, the prevention and early recognition of work-related disorders can be difficult, allowing for the development of chronic or serious conditions that are much more difficult to treat.

Physical hazards are not the only difficulties facing art professionals. Psychological stresses in the arts can be overwhelming. The pressure of learning, practicing and auditioning can precipitate debilitating performance anxiety<sup>17, 18)</sup>. Even after success in auditions, artists may feel that every show is a possible turning point in their career. This internal pressure adds to what has been termed “The Show Must Go On Syndrome”<sup>19)</sup>, a sense of anxiety that can drive artists to work overly-long hours in preparation, while, at times, ignoring time-consuming safety precautions or even their own symptoms. It does not help that suffering for one’s art is a time-honored ideal.

External stresses can have destructive effects as well. The recent pandemic and accompanying loss of work in the arts brought this issue into clearer focus. In Chicago, one of our revered blues piano players courageously described the deep depression he suffered during isolation. He reported that when his roles as performer and teacher abruptly came to a halt, he felt a profound loss of identity<sup>20)</sup>. It is clear that other artists can experience a similar sense of despair when those roles are taken from them, for any reason.

We have a lot to learn about the very real health and safety issues of work in the arts, and as demonstrated in other work settings, some of the best guides are the workers themselves. Some of these workers are telling us that it is time to reevaluate the hazards of work in the arts and bring this environment up to the standards we expect in the current era<sup>21)</sup>. It is important for all of us in the health and safety professions to listen carefully to our neighbors in the arts and to help them remain healthy and productive.

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