

Keeping Your Audience Safe

Safety in the theater applies to everyone

By Elbin Cleveland

Your audience is there because you promoted the show and sold tickets. But guests are at a disadvantage, when it comes to safety, because they don't know your theater home as well as you do. Therefore, you must pay special attention to their needs.

First, you pay attention because you don't want anyone injured. Second, because you don't want to deal with the mess of paperwork even small injuries bring. Third, because you don't want to expose yourself or your company to a lawsuit.

Many companies give audience safety short shrift because they only think of major disasters like fires. They rationalize their inattention by pointing out that the theater has plenty of well-lighted exits, a full sprinkler system, etc. This is very short-sighted. It may be true that your theater and production practices make a fire unlikely. However, fire is not the only, nor even most common cause of injury. Accidents due to falling far exceed all other single causes of injury and death.

Your responsibility for audience health and safety begins when your first promotion reaches the public. You need to inform your audience if guns will be fired, a strobe flashed, lasers employed, or if fog or smoke will be released, nudity revealed, or wild animals brought on stage. It may not bother you, for instance, to have trained pigeons flying over the audience, but some people are deeply phobic about birds and they need to be warned in advance. A lighted cigarette on stage may provoke asthmatic attack. All promotional material should carry the appropriate caveat.

Your next concern should be the immediate safety of your guests as they arrive at the theater. If your lobby entrance opens onto a public street, you are probably not responsible for its condition. In nearly every other situation, however, such as a private driveway or audience drop-off and pick-up area, you are.

If you have a parking lot or a garage, is it well lighted for visibility and to deter crime? Are there pot holes or obstacles? Is there an attendant? Does your entry path comply with ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] guidelines? Are all curbs, steps, ramps, or changes of level well marked? Are ADA spaces clearly signed and is the parking restriction enforced? Do low-hanging limbs or untrimmed shrubs partially block sidewalks? Do they cast dark shadows where criminals can wait unnoticed? Are all sidewalks and other pathways free of debris, ice, and snow? Are there sunken areas covered with puddles of rain water which patrons must leap over? For more information, visit the ADA website [<http://www.ada.gov/>]

Since falls represent most injuries, one easy task is to inspect your public area (from parking lot to rest rooms) for trip hazards. Play a little acting game with yourself by pretending to be a mean-spirited patron looking for hazards to use for a negligence lawsuit.

Once you actually look, you will be surprised at how many problems you find. Even well maintained theaters will have several potential hazards. Things like chipped concrete steps, uneven floor levels, loose or missing hand rails, curled, wrinkled, or loose carpets or entry mats,

extension cords, burned out aisle lights, wet or slippery floors can pose serious problems. Such items should be corrected before the building is opened to the public. If that is not possible, clear warning signs should be posted or the hazardous area should be roped off.

Follow the path of your imaginary patron all the way to the theater seats. Stop at the concession stand. Are refreshment spill mats flat and secure? Any loose extension cords? Overloaded electrical outlets? Are audience control ropes and stands well placed and secured? Are products and/or the display racks secured?

Stop by the coat check room. Is traffic flow improved or impeded by audience control devices? Are there easel signs or other displays which could be knocked over? Then check all the rest rooms. Look for plumbing leaks which may cause a wet and slippery floor. Are ADA handrails in place and secure? Do partition doors close and latch properly? Any loose, broken, or missing floor tiles? Is ventilation satisfactory?

When you finally get to the theater itself, check every seat. If each seat is clearly numbered, there will be fewer people who settle into the wrong one and then have to get up and move, tripping over others as they go.

Are all seats firmly anchored to the floor? Are arm rests secure? Do all seats automatically fold up as required for American-style seating? Are aisles and steps well lighted? Are aisle carpets flat?

Now look up. Do all the house lights work? Are all stage spotlights and accessories, overhead scenery, and other rigged and flown items properly secured with safety lines?

It's safe now to open the house. But as the patrons enter, new hazards present themselves. Your house staff should be trained to be alert for these problems and to diplomatically correct them at once. Common examples are long winter coats which hang over the arm of the seat and onto the floor, umbrellas which protrude into the aisle, large packages, and knapsacks on the floor which could prevent safe exiting.

Two common problems must be avoided at all costs:

- *Never permit SRO patrons to sit or stand in the aisles.* This is especially true if the aisles have any steps. Latecomers walking down the aisle to their seats, or a patron who needs to leave the auditorium mid-act, can fall over these people and injure themselves and others. The only place for SRO patrons is behind the SRO rail. If your theater doesn't have one, then do not sell SRO tickets. In many cities, fire ordinances forbid both standees and sitting in the aisles.
- *Never place extra chairs in the aisles for overflow audiences.* Such chairs and the patrons in them restrict the aisle space below safety design standards. Even empty chairs are loose obstacles which become trip hazards at intermissions and after the performance. They also make it difficult to evacuate patrons in case of fire, and thus are illegal in most cities. In addition, placing more people in the auditorium may exceed the legal limit for the auditorium. It's much better to perform an added night or to turn away a few hundred dollars in ticket sales than to face several hundred thousand dollars in lawsuits or fines.

Now then, if everybody is properly seated, on with the show!

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