

Getting Everybody Out Safely

When an emergency strikes, your audience comes first

By Elbin Cleveland

Audience safety is a greater concern at intermissions and after the show, when hundreds of people want to go to the same place at the same time. The problem is magnified because many audience members are talking to each other about the show (We hope!) and may not watch always where they are walking. And, of course, people who are hurried or frustrated often make bad judgments which can lead to accidents.

Therefore, one of the best safety measures is to improve traffic flow and to make sure your audience has sufficient time during intermission. Have clear signage for directions. Use ushers to give directions and assistance.

A typical intermission problem is refreshment and concession stands, which often are understaffed and too close together. If your lobby space permits, consider the use of several refreshment islands located far apart. Staff them with enough people to serve everyone during the first two-thirds of the intermission. That will give patrons time to finish their refreshments without hurrying. Then workers can spend the last third collecting cups or glasses while the audience returns to its seats at a casual pace. Be sure sufficient waste containers are present and located near, but not obstructing the audience route.

These containers should be removed before the final curtain when the audience makes an exodus *en masse*.

Also remember that although the emergency exit paths may never be used, most state laws require they be checked within an hour before the house is opened for every performance. Some organizations require that a staff member inspect every exit path all the way to the street and report to the house manager before the house is opened. Any blockage that requires correction should be noted in the house manager's daily report so it can be prevented before the next performance.

(This is the same thing the stage manager does for the backstage areas. Although backstage emergency exits may not be intended for public use, the law requires they be treated the same. They are not spaces to store half-empty paint buckets, fake muskets for Act II, or semi retired directors.)

Exit halls and stairs must be well marked and well lit. They cannot contain folding chairs, coat racks, technician's bicycles, etc. Anything loose can be knocked down and fallen over. Such passages also must be free of any combustible matter such as costumes, extra stage draperies, unused decorations, stored paper products, and old programs.

In many cases, the exit path leads down a fireproof stairwell or corridor. All doors which open into these passages must be equipped with "panic bars" with latches and automatic door closers. The closers and latches prevent air pressure of a fire from blowing doors open and filling what should be a secure area with smoke and toxic fumes. Never allow workers to prop those doors open with stage weights or to tape down the latches.

You don't have to have a catastrophe in order to have a serious injury and consequent legal problems. A single patron who chooses to use the emergency exit for any reason must have

a clear passage to the street. One stumble over a backstage dust mop that shouldn't have been there will make you or your company liable for medical bills and a host of other expenses, possibly including fines for obstructing the passageway. Even a member of the company could use this infraction to recover medical expenses. Post signs that inform all workers that these exit passages must remain clear; mark the path with industrial marking tape. Be sure the passages have emergency lights in case of a power failure and test them to make sure they work.

Remember that all doors through the proscenium wall are supposed to be fireproof. They should have automatic closers and latches like those on emergency stairways. Again, do not allow workers to prop open these doors with stage weights or other objects or tape down the latches. Doorways through the proscenium that have only a drapery covering are strictly illegal; they won't block fire or smoke and are easily pulled down and become a trip hazard when many people try to make a hasty exit.

Don't stop inspecting at the exterior exit door. Look outside as well. Exterior emergency exits should have a clear eight-foot space beyond the door opening. Do not allow unused scenery, trash cans, dumpsters, or parked cars to infringe on this space.

If the exit path includes a fire escape, check it by following it all the way to the ground. If the lowest section of the escape descends mechanically, check to confirm it is not chained off, that it operates smoothly, and descends fully to the ground. Do not permit obstacles to impede its descent. Again, mark off the "clear area" below the escape with signs, paint, and industrial marking tape. The last thing to do is to check all public areas before the lights are turned off and the doors are locked. Although it is rare, there have been cases where people have fallen asleep or fallen ill and then were locked in the building. (Thieves sometimes hide as well; always have two people check the facility.) When you are confident that everyone has left the building, you can sigh, lock up, and go home.

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