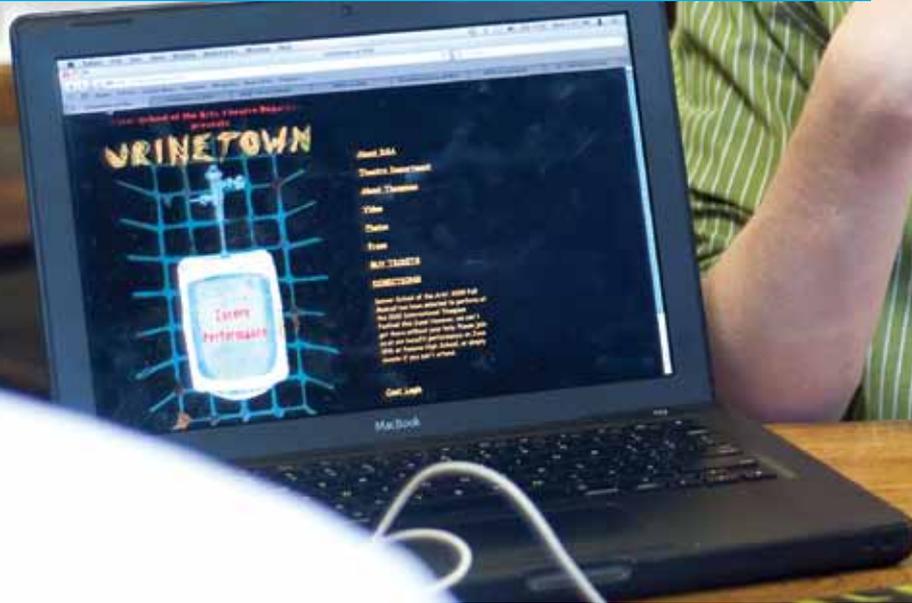


Show and tell



How to build and present a design and production portfolio

**BY CHUCK MEACHAM
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IF YOU ARE INTERESTED in studying and working in theatre design and production, you are going to need a portfolio. You probably need one now, as you prepare to meet with college representatives and apply for internships and summer production jobs.

Doubtless you will have some questions as you begin to assemble your first portfolio. What should you include? What should you leave out? What should the format be? How do you include photos? How big should they be? Are digital photos okay? What about a portfolio that is completely digital, either on the web or in your computer?

It seems like such a daunting prospect, but it doesn't have to be. The good news is that building a portfolio is not as difficult as you would think. In this article, we'll give you guidelines that will get you well on your way to creating a portfolio that showcases your talents and your work.

The purpose of a portfolio

A portfolio is a useful and necessary tool that those of us who work

Austin Allen, then a student at Denver School of the Arts, presenting his design portfolio in the Thespian Festival audition program.

in stage management, design and production use to show others what we have done and what we can do. Whether you are planning to interview for a college theatre program, an internship, or a summer job, a portfolio gives your work (and therefore your interview) a visual context. You can point to specific examples that display your talents. You can talk about the fabric you used for a costume you designed or the techniques you employed painting the scenery. With your portfolio at hand, the person interviewing you will have a clear understanding of the scope and scale of the project. They can see it. They can ask questions about it. They can begin to gauge a context for your experiences, the level of your talent, the types of situations and theatre spaces you have worked in, and the tools, materials, and technologies with which you are familiar.

What's in it

The best way to begin is by organizing a record of your work and brainstorming about what to include in your portfolio. Sit down and make a list of all the classes you have taken. Next, make a list of all the productions you have done. Under each of these, make a list of what you did specifically to help make the show happen. What made each experience valuable to you? What is unique about the experience that you could show in your portfolio? What materials should you include to support your experiences with each production? This list can also serve as the basis for your first theatre résumé.

The most important part of creating a portfolio is a careful and considered selection of which material to include. Ideally, you would be able to invite everyone to come see all the shows you do, but that isn't going to happen. Photos of your productions are the next best thing.

High-quality photographs are the most important content you can include. A picture really is worth a thousand words when it comes to showcasing your work. Photos can

be used to illustrate production values, the specifics of a performance space in which you have worked, and the process you used to create ideas and develop a project. For a hard-copy portfolio, lab-quality color prints are best. Color photocopies or inkjet prints are acceptable as this technology improves, but a print from a photo lab (or even a drugstore do-it-yourself digital printer) will be sharper, higher in resolution, and more color-accurate.

The size and shape of your photos can vary according to the subject matter and your formatting scheme, but keep in mind that larger prints do a better job of grabbing the viewer's attention. For a typical 20x24-inch portfolio board, 8x10 photos allow the viewer to see plenty of detail in your work. Additionally, this ratio of board to photograph size is a good choice to be able to combine in your board layout, for example, a photograph with a document (list or other paperwork), one or two smaller items (paint or fabric swatches), and the appropriate labeling. Whatever the print size, avoid blurry, over- or underexposed, low resolution, and badly composed pictures.

Whether you're using a commercial print, a color copy, or a print from your home inkjet, take care to make certain that the color is true. Theatre light is much warmer than daylight. You need to make sure you are reproducing the color of the light, set, and costumes accurately, and it's really hard to go back later and fix it in Photoshop.

Advances in digital photography have made it possible for a skilled amateur using a midpriced digital SLR camera to capture images in circumstances that would have been challenging to professionals using film just a few years ago. Digital cameras are more sensitive to low light, more adaptable to different color temperatures, and capable of producing photographs of higher resolution than 35mm film.

Most digital cameras either adjust themselves automatically to the color temperature of the light or allow you

to manually choose the correct white balance setting (in which case you should set the camera's white balance to "incandescent"). If the camera has an automatic white balance sensor, you can help it read the color temperature accurately by walking onstage in a bright cue and pointing the camera at something white, like a piece of paper or fabric, with the shutter button partially depressed. As you shoot, compare the colors in the monitor images of your photos with the subject. They should match.

Make sure you shoot at the highest resolution. Never use a flash for stage photos.

Most of the photographs used in portfolios are production images shot during a photo call with actors, scenery, costumes, and stage lighting. This is true even if the work you did on the show—if you're a sound designer, for example, or a stage manager—isn't directly visible in them. Why? Because the photos will provide the interviewer with context. They show the kind of theatre space you've been working in and the level of production quality you've been involved with, which will help the interviewer get a reading on how to evaluate your work.

Another way to use photographs, especially effective if you build props, costumes, or complex scenic pieces, is to show before, during, and after shots in order to illustrate your process.

In addition to photographs, your portfolio should include research images, sketches, swatches, samples, trim details, paperwork, drafting, renderings, rough drafts, and anything else you can find to illustrate how you think, work, create, and solve problems. You can show the development of an idea by including a research photo, the original "napkin sketch," the pencil rendering, the color rendering, and a photo of the finished set or costume on stage under light. All these support materials help the interviewer get an idea of your creative process.

It's important to keep the material you include current. Do not think of your portfolio as a scrapbook of

what you have done or where you have worked. It has to be a constantly evolving document in order to continue to have value. Update your portfolio regularly and move dated material to the back (or move it out entirely) as you replace it with newer, better material. Include coursework and “paper projects” where applicable. Realized work is best, but sometimes you can use a class project to show aspects of your talent and skills that you haven’t had a chance to put to work on a real show yet. This can be especially important if your school’s production season is short, or if your school only does big musicals. Choose project work that serves as a counterpoint to your realized work.

Also, include related work toward the back of your portfolio. This section might include writing samples, cost estimates, budget tracking, or other materials from your work. These kinds of items are not as appealing (or as much fun to talk about) as photos and drawings from productions, but they are an important part of the process for many specialties, including theatre management, stage management, and technical direction.

You should also consider including non-theatre work in your portfolio, especially if it shows some aspect of your artistic expression that is different from the rest of the material you include. Sketches, drawings, painting, photography, collage, etc. are all interesting to show and talk about.

Packaging and formatting

Once you know what the materials will be, you can start thinking about the physical dimensions of the portfolio.

You may be tempted to buy a fancy leather presentation case for your portfolio, but when you’re starting out this is probably not the best choice. For one thing, they’re very expensive. A portfolio case also limits how you can present your materials and puts your work “under glass” behind those acetate sheets. We advise mounting photos, drawings, documents, and other flat materials on matte board. The size can range from 11x14" to

What’s in your portfolio?

HERE ARE SOME NOTES and tips on portfolio content for specific specialties.

Stage management. Show just one book, not three or four, if they are all essentially the same. Don’t show a rewritten, clean copy. Use the actual book you called the show from.

Scenic design. Always include a scale human figure in sketches and models.

Costume design. Make sure you take pictures under stage light, not of the performers wearing the costumes in the back hallway.

Lighting design. Keep copies of your plots and paperwork handy, but don’t feature them. Feature the production photos that show your designs at work.

Sound design. Edit down a playlist with short clips of sound effects and music. Ten minutes of crickets isn’t any more useful than ten seconds. (You’ll need to bring your own audio player for this, and an extension cord wouldn’t hurt.) Don’t show pictures of the sound equipment, but do show a picture of the production. Have an equipment list handy in the back of your portfolio.

Technical direction. Make sure you include budgets, calendars, and technical drawings in addition to construction shots.

Theatre management. Be sure to include all the promotional material you generate, including press releases, posters, and especially the production program. Get a good shot of the show.

Carpentry. Get good process shots against a neutral background, so we don’t see the messy shop behind your beautiful woodwork.

Stitching. Same as for carpentry. Get good process shots, preferably with a person wearing the clothes.

Props. Shoot your props work on neutral backgrounds, and include the research on props you built or found.

Scenic painting. Make sure you have pictures under stage light, not work lights, and include a copy of the scenic designer’s paint elevations.

—W.K/C.M.

20x24" (or even larger, up to 24x36"), depending on the content and the formatting choices you make. The boards can be organized into an inexpensive paperboard art portfolio wallet, available at any art supply store.

For smaller materials, such as a stage manager’s promptbook pages, a black three-ring binder with matte sheet protectors will work fine.

If you have some large life drawings that you want to include, you will need a case big enough to fit them in, or another way to display them. You may find you need an additional box for three-dimensional objects, or a tube for large rolled drawings and drafting. Let the size and quantity of the work you are including dictate the

style and type of portfolio you use.

Create a format or layout scheme for each page and stay consistent with that format throughout the portfolio. Be sure to orient your work all in the same page layout direction (portrait or landscape). That way you and the interviewer won’t have to keep rotating the boards to look at them.

The final major element in formatting is labeling. This is a critical part of the process of creating and presenting a portfolio. *Everything* in your portfolio should be labeled. The label should include the title of the show (and the playwright’s name), your position or responsibilities on the production or project, when and where it was produced, and when ap-

appropriate, the techniques or materials you used in the work that is shown. You should avoid letting the label get too big and wordy, however. Be concise and brief. For example, the date can be just the month and year. If it's a class project, note that, and use the name of the class, not the number.

The easiest way to make a label is to typeset the text in a word processing program, print it, and trim it out to size. (Handwriting or lettering is also an option but only if your hand is *very* neat.) Labels should be consistent in font and size throughout the portfolio. They should be in a clear font big enough to be read from three feet away. This is the approximate distance from the interviewer's eye (when standing) to the table on which the portfolio rests.

The digital portfolio

You may be creating a digital version of your portfolio for submission with online applications, and it is tempting to do away with all of the photographs, drawings, paperwork, and bulky presentation cases and take your portfolio to the interview on a laptop. Computer presentations like PowerPoint can be great. Remember, though, that software crashes, battery failures, and other technological calamities tend to happen at the most inopportune times. If you decide to go digital, our advice is to take along a paper version as a backup.

The other major pitfall of digital presentations is that the technology itself can often distract you and the interviewer from the work you are showing. It is difficult to pay attention to what you have to say and at the same time keep up with a scrolling display of images and text.

Digital portfolios find their best application for some things that don't show well on paper. If you are a sound designer or in theatre management, you might find interesting ways of using a computer for audio playback or to illustrate your familiarity with specific software. The real trick of any sort of digital portfolio is to practice interviewing with it and

to find ways to integrate it seamlessly into your interview. It's too easy for a presentation on a laptop to end up like giving someone a TV to watch: mesmerizing but, ultimately, a solitary activity. The presentation is supposed to be about you, not your computer.

Finally, just like with digital photography, you need to pay particular attention to the quality of the material. It is very easy to quickly (and perhaps unwittingly) end up showing material that is sub-par. Digital does not make it better, just easier to manipulate. The quality of the images you include needs to be carefully considered as you put materials together in any portfolio, whether it's electronic or on paper. Perhaps the best regular application for digital media is for the multitude of options for archiving and manipulation.

If you are considering both paper and electronic versions of your portfolio, invest some time in thinking about how you might tie them together. Pay attention to the similarities between the two versions in layout, font choice, and other aspects of the graphic presentation. You should identify ways for digital versions of your portfolio materials (whether website, PowerPoint presentation, or some other application) to be easily recognizable as yours by creating visual and navigation ties between the two formats.

Preparing for the interview

How you will organize and sequence the material in your portfolio will depend largely on how you want to shape the interview. Think about the arc and order of the work you are showing. Make sure the order provides you with smooth conversational transitions between the different shows and projects. If it is easy to talk about, you will feel calmer and more confident.

Reverse chronology (starting with most recent and going backwards in time to oldest) is not necessarily the best way to organize the material in your portfolio. You should lead with your strongest work, even if it is not the most recent.

Anticipate questions. You should be able to get a good idea of what some of the basic questions will be just by thinking about the context of the interview. That is, if you are interviewing for a college theatre program, you can expect to be asked how you got interested in theatre or your specific field, what you hope to gain through a college theatre experience, and what you see as your strengths and weaknesses. Next, plan how you will use your portfolio to help you answer the questions the interviewer asks.

Rehearse your presentation. You can ask family, friends, and teachers to do a mock interview with you. (This will work best if your mock interview partner is not familiar with your work.) A session like this will help you identify the areas of your portfolio or your interview that still need work. Finally, review your materials just before showing them. Make sure you remember the names of all the plays and playwrights represented, the plots of the plays, and the sources of your research.

There are three rules for interviewing that we share with our students. Here they are:

1. You have every right to be proud of your work. *Don't apologize for anything about your portfolio or your presentation—ever!*
2. Never tell stories about directors you hated or situations that were really horrible.
3. Relax.

Use the portfolio as a tool to illustrate your talents, and use the interview to win over the interviewers. If you are genuinely excited and proud of your accomplishments, you will enjoy great success every time you open your portfolio case. ▼

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This article has appeared in slightly different forms in past issues.