

# Designer Timeline

## The Project Schedule

One of the biggest and most common problems I've run into over the years is not allowing enough time for creating and building a set. The process for technical elements in theatre is very straightforward, but each step takes a certain amount of time to do correctly.

Here is a sample schedule, allowing adequate time for the set designer to work with the director and prepare design drawings and shop drawings.

Sample Project Schedule							
Week	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
1	Initial meetings and discussions; start design phase						
2	Design phase						
3	Design phase						
4	Design phase						
5	Design phase				Final design approved		
6	Set designer prepares shop drawings						
7	Set designer prepares shop drawings						
8	Set designer prepares shop drawings						
9	Set designer prepares shop drawings				Shop drawings due		
10	TD reviews shop dwgs, organizes build, orders materials						
11	Build/paint/install						
12	Build/paint/install						
13	Build/paint/install						
14	Build/paint/install						First Tech
15	Dress rehearsals				Opening		

The first few weeks allow for a kickoff meeting as well as two or more subsequent meetings to review the progress of the designs (set, lights, costumes, and so forth), and develop them into the final form. During this period the director will be thinking about his or her vision for the show and finalizing it as the designs develop, helping to tie the whole production together.

Once the designs have been finalized, the set designer can prepare the construction drawings, painters' elevations, and other deliverables. Once these are in the shop, the TD can take a few days to review the drawings, ask questions, organize the build, and order materials.

Then the actual construction period starts, which includes fabrication, painting, installation, rigging, and other tasks. I'm showing four weeks in the sample above, but five or six weeks is a more realistic period, especially if the crew is made up of students or volunteers who only work on the show part-time. The worst that can happen by allowing extra time is that the work will be completed earlier (in relation to opening night), which is a great problem to have.

And let's not forget an immutable fact of life: Murphy's Law. Since opening night is locked in, it's always a good idea to allow for things taking longer than we expect. In addition, the designer(s) may be working on more than one production at the same time, which is often the case with professional designers.

I've seen cases where the TD prepares a schedule, but then keeps it to himself like it were a secret. This doesn't help anyone, or the show itself. The production schedule should be posted prominently where everyone can see it, and refer to it, and keep track of the progress.

## How Long Does It Really Take?

One of the most common misconceptions I've run into over the past thirty-odd years, mostly in non-professional theatre companies, is that "everything always happens at the last minute." Although I've run into some companies where this idea is so ingrained that you can't break through it, I've also seen a few companies that did change the way they did things and were very successful at it. And all it really took was sitting down and looking at the last few productions and realizing why things happened at the last minute.

For the most part, the problem was just a matter of not allowing enough time for what had to get done in that particular company's realities.

Creating a set is just a process like any other process. There's nothing magical about it: you do this first, and then you do that, and then something else. Each step takes a certain amount of time, but it also has built-in variables, one of which is Murphy's Law. Say you schedule five weeks for building the set, but the primary carpenter comes down with the flu up front or has to work elsewhere. Or the painter has to finish another show that's running late. Or the director requests a major change. That's where things slow down, but, since opening night doesn't change, it all comes crashing together near the end.

I worked with a theatre company some years ago that had this ongoing problem, and here's what we did. This company mounted four to five large productions each year, had a full shop and staff working Monday thru Friday, and hired mostly professional designers.

First, we realized and accepted that the set always did seem to get finished at the last minute, even though the schedule always called for it to be complete by first tech. This is where the ugly specter of “whose fault was it?” comes up so often, and we decided to not go there. We just looked at the reality.

Then we looked at typical production schedules over the past few years and noticed that the production process for each show took three months, from the first meeting to opening night. So, by the time the director and designers were on the same page, and the basic design was complete, we were down to two months from opening night.

At that point the set designer and TD always got into the argument about when shop drawings would be ready. The designer needed time, since he or she was working on other shows at the same time, and the TD wanted them as soon as possible. So the usual compromise was to agree on when construction would start, and to request the shop drawings on that same date.

But here’s the problem. Construction couldn’t start on the day the drawings arrived, because the TD needed time to go through them, order materials, get the crew and the painters lined up, and so forth. So, when Murphy’s Law expressed itself, which it always did, there was no room to maneuver. Suddenly construction would start a week (or more) late and run well into tech week.

And we noticed that this happened over and over again.

So we looked at each other and asked, “why does the production schedule run three months from first meeting to opening night?” And the only answer we could come up with was, “because that’s the way it’s always been.”

And we decided to change it. We started at opening night and worked backwards: one week for tech, five to six weeks to build and paint, one week for the TD to go through the drawings, three or four weeks for shop drawings, and so forth. By the time we agreed on all this, the production schedule for each show had expanded to six months instead of three. Because we did several shows a year, the schedules would overlap, but this was not a problem since each show would be at a different stage of production.

It made a huge difference even with the first show on the expanded schedule. Now there was time to do the work properly and to account for Mr. Murphy.

Then came the second part of the solution. Because the designers’ deadlines had never specified the dates on which each deliverable was due, there was nothing to fall back on. So we added due dates to the designers’ responsibilities for each phase of design, based on the particular production schedule. A little negotiation usually had to happen here, but it was resolved by the time the designer signed on, and the dates could be put on the production schedule for all to see. By the way, designers were hired prior to the six-month production

period; in fact, they were usually all hired the previous season, during the planning process for the new season.

It took a bit of work to make all this happen, but the results were amazing. Now the production schedule could include dates for everything else, including lights, costumes, props, and sound, and we all went over it at the first production meeting, with everyone around the table at the same time.

The primary — the most important — thing that made this work was realizing and accepting how long it really took to actually build one of our typical sets (what our audiences had come to expect from us) given our shop and our crews. After some discussion and reminiscing, we agreed that six weeks was adequate for building most of our sets, but smaller ones could possibly be done in five. But we kept it to six weeks throughout, figuring that the worst that could happen is that we would finish early.

Be sure to check our production calendar for your due dates!

**Welcome aboard and I look forward to creating another MacTheatre production with you!**