

# Theatrical Props

To design props for a show you need to read the script and note what props are mentioned. Talk to the director and find out what particular props he may want. Talk to the [technical director](#). He may know where certain props are stored or which props can be easily fabricated. Search for the needed props in the prop room. Go to rehearsals and determine when props come on and off the stage and from what side. Lay out props tables off stage to have them ready and handy for the actors. Recruit, train and schedule a crew.

## Contents

- 1 [The Role of Props in a Show](#)
- 2 [Getting Started](#)
- 3 [Acquiring the Props](#)
- 4 [TWS Props Room](#)
- 5 [Running props backstage](#)
- 6 [Contacts](#)
  - 6.1 [Properties Annual Chair](#)
  - 6.2 [Properties Technician](#)
  - 6.2 [Technical Director](#)
- 7 [References](#)
  - 7.1 [eBay](#)
  - 7.1 [TWS Yahoo email group](#)

## The Role of Props in a Show

Props is one of the few aspects of the theatre that, when done perfectly, doesn't get noticed. It blends so well into the fabric of the play; it becomes practically invisible. Props are not for those that crave attention from the audience. I have yet to hear someone say "WOW! The props were the best I've ever seen!" The acting, sets, and costumes always seem to get the bulk of the audience's attention.

Unless you are watching a mime, props are an essential part of the play. Webster's Dictionary defines Properties [props] as "an item of furniture, an ornament, or a decoration in a stage setting: any object handled or used by an actor in a performance." Look around you. What do you see; pictures on the wall, a television on a table, a laptop with a charger, a telephone and maybe a cup of coffee, a side table with a lamp. There may be a lot more but let's start there.

## Getting Started

If my living room were to be the setting of a play, all these things would need to be present. However, some plays do not specifically tell you the details of the props. It might say “Mary is sitting in her living room, writing an article while watching television. She glances around to locate her drink and finds it on the table next to her. On the table is a lamp with a flickering light bulb. She zones out while looking at the picture on the wall before resuming her writing. Her fingers fly across the keyboard but she pauses frequently to watch the TV or think about what to write next.”

We need to start with the basic question of time period. Obviously, this is not placed in the late 1800's. You might not know the exact year in which it takes place but there are clues. There is a television, so that brings it closer to modern day. We know she is writing an article, but how is she doing it? Pen, paper, or computer? The mention of a keyboard points you to a computer. We also know that she needs a drink, a table, and a lamp with a flickering light bulb. The exact details of these may be made clear by dialogue later on in the play. When it is unclear, the wise prop crew chair works in conjunction with the director and set designer to appropriately select the right items for the time period.

Once the time and setting are established, the prop chair can work on the different aspects of the props. What are some details that further define prop selection? The character's personality (messy vs. neat) as well as income level (low vs. high) can be a hint to the type of furnishings (informal vs. formal). If you know the character, you may be able to guess that the photo on the wall is family related and that the drink on the table is coffee and not beer. The character may talk frequently about her family and have turned down an offer of a beer. These details about a character can be revealed by reading the entire play before selecting props.

Some props have props that support them. For instance, if it is mentioned that the drink came from a fast-food place, the drink will most likely need to be in a disposable cup with a lid and a straw. If it is a drink that the character poured at home, it will probably be in a glass. Glass on stage could be dangerous. Using a clear plastic cup can give the same effect and help with the safety factor. If a glass is necessary, make sure you have extras in case of accidental breakage. A computer may need a cord, monitor, keyboard and a mouse. If it's a laptop the prop would only be the laptop with a charging cord. The table with the lamp on it may have a bottom shelf where there are miscellaneous items. If the script says that the character has a bad cold, there might be wadded up facial tissue on the floor to help set the scene and support character development. In this day and age, it is also unlikely that the character would be watching a television without using a remote control. The script may say “she turns off the TV” but if the script or director doesn't have her walk to the television, she would need to have that support prop.

## Acquiring the Props

It is rare that the TWS prop room has every prop needed for a given play. It would be nice if all a prop chair had to do is walk into the prop room and just pull out the props and set them on the stage.

There are usually some items that are on hand (e.g. a cup, a table, a television). Some of these items may need to be repainted or slightly altered to set the scene. There are hidden treasures in the prop room and it might take some looking and digging around to find them. Talk to the [annual chair](#) or the [technical director](#) if you are looking for something specific. They may know where to find it in the prop room.

Some items will need to be fabricated. If food is consumed every night, it will need to be replaced on a daily basis. Some props are used and altered every night (for example, calendar pages pulled off) they will need to be replenished for each performance. Talk to the [technical director](#) about making props from scratch. The set construction crew may be able to help you as well.

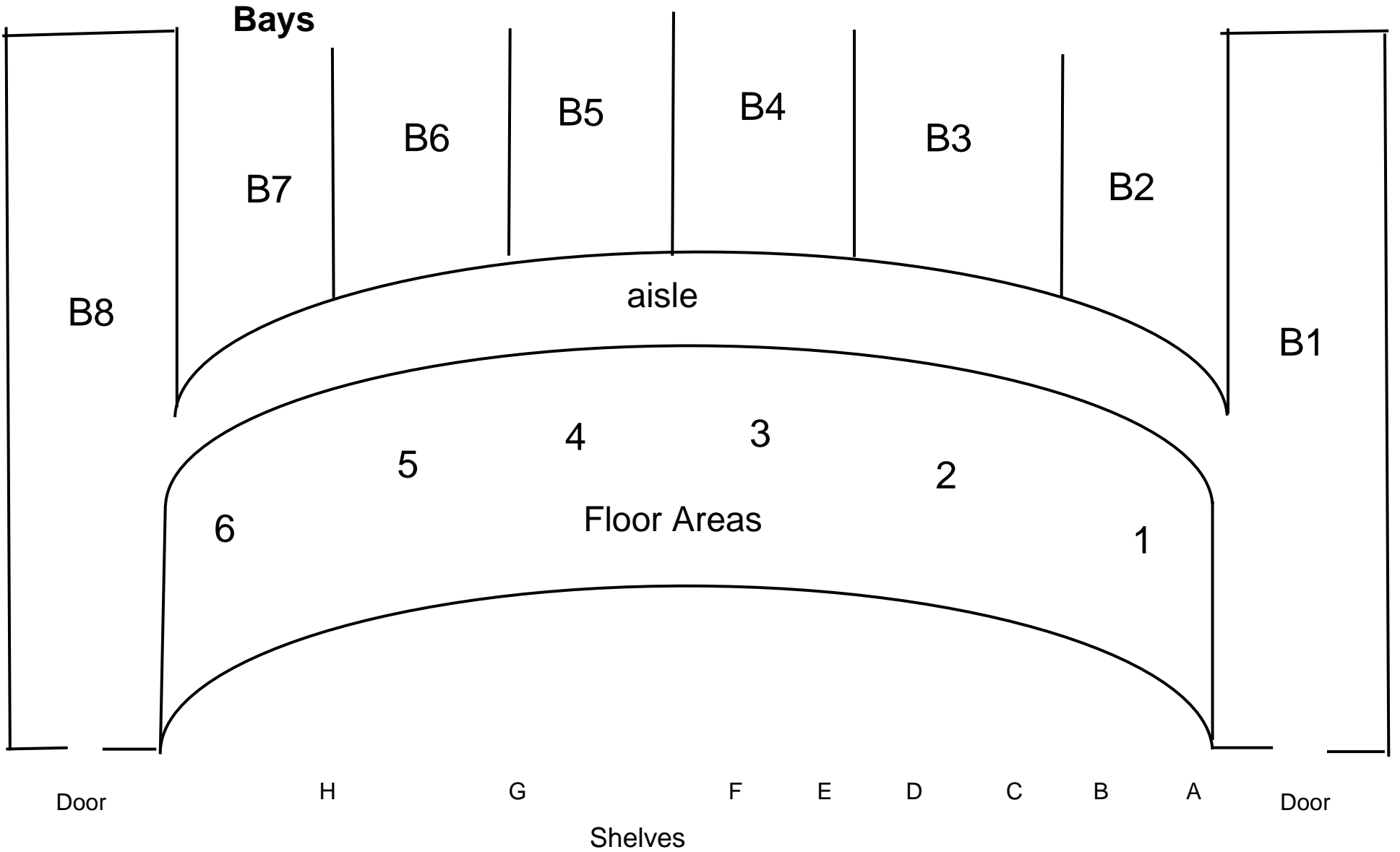
There is a phrase that prop people use in acquiring props from outside sources “beg, borrow, or steal”. We obviously don’t use illegal methods but the phrase emphasizes the importance of getting what is needed. Many sets have been decorated with items from cast and crew’s homes. Theatres may borrow from each other or trade items on a regular basis. Talk to the [technical director](#) about getting props from other theatres. Write an email to the [TWS Yahoo email group](#) and ask for needed props. Think of who else may be able to help you (e.g. a friend with an antique shop, someone who works at a historical society). Ask friends, acquaintances and coworkers. All are possible sources. Don’t leave a stone unturned!

Finally, there is the most basic way of getting a prop; buying what you need. The [technical director](#) creates a budget for each show. Setting aside funds for set construction, costumes, props and so forth. Talk to the [technical director](#) as early as possible if you think there is a prop that can only be acquired through purchase. Some things like food will obviously need to be purchase. Buying a prop should be a last resort and used only after all other options have been tried. Start looking at re-sale stores. Used items can be more affordable and already have that “used” look to them. No point buying a new baseball that you need to scuff up when you can go to the local sports re-sale store and find buckets of them for half the price. Saving money on as many props as possible can pay off when there is a larger ticket item that you can’t avoid paying full price for. The internet has been highly useful to track down items and cut down on wasted gas while you search all over town. Online auction sites have been helpful to find a prop that can’t be found locally. [eBay](#) is a good source for finding obscure items.

## **The TWS Props Room**

The props room is on the lowest level of the theatre under the mainstage auditorium. There are 8 bays and 8 shelving units which are labeled on the walls of the prop room. The shelves are against the wall opposite the bays. I have designated 6 general floor areas. The diagram on the page following shows the general layout of the TWS props room. The 6 pages after the diagram, shows sample pictures of some of the bays, shelves and floor areas. On the page following the photos, a table describes the contents of the different bays, shelves and floor areas.

# TWS Props Room



## TWS Props Room



**Bay 1, Chairs**



## TWS Props Room



**Bay 2, Stoves, Refrigerators**



## TWS Props Room



**Floor Area 4, Paintings**



## TWS Props Room



**Floor Area 6, Luggage**



## TWS Props Room



**Shelves A (actually a cabinet) and B, Silverware – Glasses and Bottles**



## TWS Props Room



**Shelf H, Small Suitcases, Table Linen, Pillows, Bedspread**

<b>Floor Area</b>	<b>Contents</b>
1	Preparation Table
2	Musical Instruments, Weapons
3	Office Equipment, Floor Lamps
4	Paintings
5	Artificial Plants
6	Luggage
<b>Bay</b>	
B1	Chairs, Benches, Wheelchairs
B2	Stoves, Refrigerators
B3	Sofas, Tables, Desks, Dressers
B4	"
B5	"
B6	"
B7	"
B8	Children Theatre Props
<b>Shelf</b>	
A	Silverware
B	Glasses, Bottles
C	Dishes
D	Vases, Old Telephones, Small Sculptures
E	Books
F	Record Albums, Stereo Equipment
G	Table Lamps
H	Small Suitcases, Table Linen, Pillows, Bedspreads



## Running Props Backstage

You are likely to be in the process of acquiring props when rehearsals begin. Talk to the director. Typically, directors and actors like to start using props early in the rehearsal process. Find or setup a table in the rehearsal space which may be the lobby or the Lauren Wilson room. Place the props that you do have available on the table. Ask the actors to replace the props at the end of rehearsal. It is a good idea to cover the table with a cloth at the end of the rehearsal and put up a sign saying these are props for the given show. This will help prevent the props from walking away between rehearsals.

### A Props Table



When rehearsals begin on stage, set up props tables off stage. Give each prop its own space on the table and label that space with a piece of masking tape as shown in the picture above. Go to rehearsals and determine when props come on and off the stage and from what side and to what side. Have your crew start coming to rehearsals to

learn how to set up the props for the top of the show and how to reset the stage between scenes and acts. During the run of the show the crew must dress in all black and be quiet backstage. At strike have your entire crew present to put props away in the prop room.

## **Contacts:**

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## **References:**

### **1. eBay**

<http://www.ebay.com/>

### **2. TWS Yahoo email group**

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