CAREERS IN ART WORLDS: DILEMMAS OF MOBILITY IN THEATER WORK

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I describe the Chicago theater world as a context for a study of distinctive career problems of theatrical technicians and designers. I reflect on a conflict which exists between the moral order of the theater world—based on a creative and collaborative labor process—and practical issues of efficiency, status, and remuneration generic to all occupational groups. I draw on the interactionist tradition in sociology to argue that attention to participants' subjective priorities, as revealed by career histories, is essential to understanding larger features of their occupational world. After first laying out my conceptual and methodological approach to studying careers, I broadly describe the social organization and historical growth of the Chicago theater world. I then document and interpret several career dilemmas which confront aspiring technicians, hoping thereby to illuminate the subjective nature and occupational consequences of their ideological commitments. In seeking to extend the literature on careers in the arts, I (re)discover the salience of claims to artistic status usually ascribed only to performers.

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INTRODUCTION

"Theater technicians are people who go to fancy colleges in order to learn blue-collar skills like painting and carpentry, only to go out and earn a fraction of what blue-collar workers do." This pithy remark, by sociologist and Chicago stage actor Bernard Beck,[1] contains much of the problem to which this paper is addressed. This study describes the work of theatrical technicians, accounts for characteristic career problems which confront them, and links these problems to the social organization of theater as an occupation. The concept of career has been fruitful for the sociological study of work and occupations (and beyond, e.g., illness careers) (see Goffman 1961, pp. 125-169; Roth 1963), because of its analytic utility in simultaneously revealing objective contexts and subjective features of work experience. Everett Hughes, the sociologist who, more than any, informs the ethnographic study of work careers, writes,

> the career of a [person] is worked out in some organized system without reference to which it cannot be described, much less understood;...the *career of an occupation* consists of changes of its internal organization and of its place in the division of labor of which society itself consists (1958, pp. 8-9, emphasis added).

Hughes also paid explicit attention to the personal drama of work experience, in which career connotes a person's

> ultimate enterprise, his laying of bets on his one and only life. It contains a set of projections of himself into the future, and a set of predictions about the course of events in the [occupational] world itself (1984, p. 406).

In this research tradition (e.g., Barley 1989; Stebbins 1970, 1971; Tausky and Dubin 1965) cultural orientations and commitments are seen as influencing, as well as being influenced by, larger features of occupational and social structures. Also, much sociological study of work has assumed that careers take place *within* organizations and are defined by correspondence between rewards, prestige, and autonomy clustered at various positions in organizational hierarchies.[2] This correspondence is presumed to hold even in careers which unfold within a succession of employing organizations. A conventional definition states, "A career, viewed structurally, is a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered, predictable sequence" (Wilensky 1964, p. 314; see also Thompson 1967, pp. 104-108). Problems in technical theater work, however, reflect patterned disjunctions between autonomy, compensation for skill, and status honor in available jobs. Traditional attempts to resolve such problems—via labor union regulations—conflict with the collaborative labor process and artistic ideology with which participants define theater and account for its

character as an occupation. In short, tension develops between the moral order of the theater world and its organization as an entrepreneurial activity. Participants also have trouble reconciling the self-sacrificial ideology of theater work with general societal expectations about recognition and reward in work careers (see Beck 1981).

The concept of an *art world* (Gilmore 1990; Becker et al. 1989; Peterson and White 1989; Blau 1988; Faulkner 1983, 1971; Becker 1974, 1982) emphasizes both the structural arrangements which constrain individual careers, and the stable patterns of cooperative activity out of which careers are constructed. After describing the occupations under consideration, I will comment briefly on the social and historical development of the Chicago theater world—the locale for this study—and will describe features of its organization which are relevant for understanding career patterns and problems, the discussion of which will be the core concern of this paper.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

My data consist of 35 interviews conducted with technicians in the Chicago theater world between September of 1989 and March of 1991. I selected informants who are representative of the mix of occupations and work settings found in Chicago, the second-largest theater community in the United States. I interviewed 23 men and 12 women who average 10 years of professional theater experience. All but three are college graduates, and almost one-third have advanced degrees in theater arts; thus, they are as knowledgeable about theater history and literature as the actors and directors usually regarded as "creative" personnel. This point, about technicians' commitment to dramatic theory and aesthetics, is important for understanding career problems in settings where opposition arises between creative and practical aspects of work. Despite their relative youth—the average age is 28—most are well-established participants in *technical theater* (a term which, here, denotes a distinct set of jobs and an occupational subculture, consisting of those members of the collaborative team who do not perform onstage). This suggests the age trajectory in this line of work: aspirants make an early career commitment, often during the high school years, invest intensively in the career through their twenties, and either achieve stable employment or (more frequently) exit before reaching age 35.[3] Roughly one-third of the sample identify themselves primarily as designers, one-third as technicians, and the remainder either as stage managers, directors,[4] or technical directors. One-quarter of the sample hold academic positions in addition to their professional theater activities. Informants were selected independently or by referrals from previous informants.[5] Verbatim transcripts of the 35 tape-recorded interviews (lasting 90 minutes on average) constitute the primary data for this paper, and were

supplemented by observations of technical rehearsals, social gatherings, and work during performances. No one I approached declined to be interviewed.[6]

OCCUPATIONS AND ART WORLDS

An art world may be defined as the complex of relationships, activities, and conventions which come into play in the production of works of art. Though theater and other art worlds may be quite diffusely organized, they tend toward an aggregate stability. Because their members enjoy functionally interdependent relations,

> collectively, these networks of exchange resemble a formal organization. The difference in [such] systems is that exchange takes place through an "open system" in which collaborators are not specifically identified or linked before exchange takes place (Gilmore 1990, p. 151; see also Scott 1981, pp. 82-84; Thompson 1967).

The career of a theatrical technician takes place not in *an* organization, but in the extensive network of organizations, within and without the practice of theater, per se, which make up this particular art world. Reputations are made and broken, and careers sustained, in this larger network, whose administration resembles that of a craft community. Like other craft occupations (e.g., the building trades), training and socialization in technical theater are resistant to bureaucratic routines "because of the instability in the volume and product mix and of the geographical distribution of the work" (Stinchcombe 1959, p. 168). Rather, skills are transmitted through interactional networks which also inculcate a distinctive and bounded sense of cultural identification (Becker 1963, pp. 79-120). Previous research has dealt in general with the resources and cultures of theatrical communities (e.g., Becker et al. 1989); the present study is a detailed analysis of one such community, and attempts to link features of its social organization to individual career histories.

Technical theater work includes many of those (excepting directors and writers) who contribute to theatrical production but do *not* appear on stage: the three creative design positions, costume, scenic, and lighting; along with their corresponding technical counterparts, seamstress, carpenter, and master electrician (ME); the stage manager (SM), who supervises rehearsals and coordinates communication between actors and the technical staff; the technical director (TD), who oversees and coordinates all technical aspects of the production; and, as is increasingly common, a sound designer, who provides music and other audio effects. Other participants in theatrical production, who are not dealt with in this study, are property masters, dramaturgs (who provide the company with historical and interpretive background in preparation for the production), choreographers, and musicians.

Such classifications conceal the fact that few participants consistently operate under one job title or practice one set of skills. Moreover, few of the theaters for which they work embody the normative division of labor which would allow for general statements regarding what responsibilities or "bundle of tasks" (Hughes 1984, pp. 311-315) are linked to a given job title. The inventory of occupations above—the neat distinction, for example, between lighting designers and electricians—suggests a rigid separation between conception and execution which does not accurately describe either the division of labor within most theaters or the orientations of most participants. Only the upper echelons of union theater have such a functionally specific division of labor and, as I will show, this turns out to be a decidedly mixed blessing. For the majority, there is, of necessity, great flexibility in the delegation of work. For example, lighting designers in nonunion theater often perform such tasks as hanging and focusing lights and operating the lighting console during performances, which are formally supposed to be performed by technicians. Furthermore, it is rare for lighting designers to be employed exclusively in that capacity: a designer this week may well be a stage electrician next week and may, in either case, assume other duties as well.[7]

The object of interest here is not the social organization of theater per se, but that of theatrical technicians and their work. In fact, the activities and skills which constitute the working knowledge of this occupational group are not confined to theater, though theater remains the dominant professional and ideological point of reference. Indeed, in order to survive in technical theater for any length of time, one must continually move back and forth between theater, other theatrical idioms,[8] such as dance, opera, and performance art, and such ancillary occupations as television/video, "industrials" (trade shows), and rock music concerts. In addition, many are employed in "scene shops" that design and build theatrical scenery under contract for theater companies, and in lighting supply houses that offer consultation and equipment-rental to a diverse range of clients. Scene shops and supply houses are important not only as sources of employment in the uncertain world of theater, but also as "clinics" where technicians receive intensive exposure to stagecraft and theatrical technology.

Increasingly, opportunities arise to apply such technology in nonperformance settings. Some lighting designers work for architectural firms, providing interior and exterior lighting for public and commercial buildings; lighting and scenic designers work for interior decorating firms. When asked whether such "nontheatrical" work diverts them from their primary occupational goals and sensibilities, respondents characteristically claimed, "It's all theater," a statement which both denotes the occupational networks in which they are embedded and serves to shield occupational identity from the invidious implications of failing to find steady work in one's chosen profession (Beck 1981, pp. 10-24).[9]

Furthermore, these sidelines are useful for maintaining careers in technical theater, since they provide for the formation of occupational networks and the acquisition of practical and professional information. Most established technicians in Chicago have been associated with one or more of the ancillary work settings mentioned above.

In order to thrive, theater communities must be sufficiently dense and varied to sustain interest and effort among participants. The Chicago community consists of (1) large, regional theaters such as the Goodman and Steppenwolf; (2) other select professional Equity theaters;[10] (3) "touring houses," such as the Blackstone and Wellington theaters, which serve as temporary venues for Broadway and other touring productions; (4) professional non-Equity theaters (particularly numerous in Chicago); (5) several opera companies; (6) an unstable yet vibrant and extensive "storefront" theater scene;[11] (7) a less extensive array of "performance spaces" offering dance, staged readings, and new and experimental plays; (8) academic theater, (9) commercial ("dinner") theater; (10) commercial, nontheatrical performance outlets ("industrials") and 11) commercial, nonperformance-related technical outlets, including scene shops and lighting supply firms.

For one seeking recognition in the technical theater world, this list, in descending order, roughly represents a status hierarchy based on artistic prestige.[12] As noted, the hierarchy is not unitary: some work settings (such as performance spaces) valued for their nurturance of the avant-garde, operate on a tenuous financial margin; others (such as commercial and academic theater) provide stable funding and job security, but tend to be artistically denigrated—in the first case because of an assumed subservience to popular tastes, and, in the second, because of insulation from audience and market competition upon which success in the theater can legitimately be claimed.

Academic institutions provide employment opportunities for those with Master's degrees in theater or related fields. In addition to major programs at Northwestern, Loyola, and DePaul Universities, several community colleges offer courses and degrees in theater arts. Faculty are permitted, even encouraged, to maintain professional ties in the theater world, which both enables them to keep abreast of constant changes in theatrical technology, and facilitates job placement for favored students. Academic theater provides stable jobs, as well as performing spaces which employ union, as well as student, technicians. Moreover, despite its ambiguous status among critics, academic theater affords a rare combination of steady work and relative creative freedom because productions need not sustain themselves by ticket sales alone.

Depending on participants and their career goals, each of these subsegments of the art world, discussed above, may be a self-contained sphere of activity or one among a disparate set of associations which make up a career. Furthermore, work settings vary in the exclusivity of the employee/employer relationship; a stint on an industrial show is, by definition, temporary, whereas most academic positions require a long-term commitment.

Some patterns are position-specific. For example, technicians (such as ME's and stage carpenters) are often offered resident status (i.e., continuous employment), because theaters need to have consistency in technical personnel in order to facilitate and implement the work of designers, who are typically hired on a per-production basis. Resident positions for designers, on the other hand, are quite rare, particularly in the most prestigious theaters, because of artistic directors' interests in ensuring variety in design elements from one production to the next and maintaining artistic influence within the company. Reconciling such contingencies is problematic precisely because a majority of "technicians" aspire to design, and seek to exploit their technical skills primarily in order to advance their design careers. However, before delving further into career problems, it will be helpful to sketch the historical development of the Chicago theater world. Clearly, the unique character of this theater community provides the context within which individual career patterns are rendered intelligible.

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE CHICAGO THEATER WORLD

In its current incarnation, the Chicago theater world is little more than 30 years old. Prior to the late 1950s (and to the founding of such improvisational companies as "Second City") Chicago was known mainly as an important stopover for touring Broadway shows. Since 1960, however, Chicago has exemplified a larger trend in American theater which, according to critic Welton Jones, "resembles nothing so much as a river that has changed direction. It used to flow from New York to the provinces but, with the growth of the regional theater movement, that has been completely reversed."[13]

The theater movement that developed in Chicago is based on a set of founding teachers and principles, at the center of which is the concept of improvisation (London 1990).[14] Teachers and directors such as Viola Spolin, her son Paul Sills and, more recently, Stuart Gordon and David Mamet, nurtured a distinctive approach to theater which placed primary emphasis upon spontaneous portrayal of characters in situational contexts—theater "games"—and on "companies"—stable groups of actors and directors committed to a shared aesthetic vision. This tradition has also been defined by close partnerships between companies and their surrounding communities, a tradition dating to the 1930s, when Spolin and others supervised drama workshops for children and adults under Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. A more recent practitioner of community-based

theater is Robert Sickinger, who, beginning in 1963, ran the Hull House Theater, located in the site of the original Jane Addams settlement house. Today the improvisational movement is a vital part of the "Off-Loop" scene which accounts for roughly one-third of the 200 theaters now active in Chicago.

After 1970, and spurred by the emerging national prominence of the improvisational company Second City (which became known as a training ground for performers who surfaced on television's "Saturday Night Live" in the late 1970s), playwright/director David Mamet, and such actors as John Malkovich and Joe Mantegna, Chicago became a magnet for aspiring theater artists from across the country. There are instances, though rare, of "hit shows" ("The Grapes of Wrath" being a recent example) which move to Broadway and provide extended employment, as well as residuals for the original designers and creative personnel. These, too, have heightened the attractiveness of Chicago theater (London 1990).

As Lazare writes,

> Word began to spread through theatrical circles across the nation that an active theater community was taking shape in Chicago.... By the early 1980s, Off-Loop theater found it had access to a vast pool of talent willing to work for the experience and exposure rather than any great financial rewards (1990, p. 29).

Even to the present, Lazare concludes, "Off-Loop theater remains focused more on the theatrical experience—the art, if you will—than on the economic realities of developing a theater industry" (1990, p. 27).

"Storefront theater" is another term applied to this segment of the theater world, an allusion to companies taking root in any vacant space available, regardless of its technical limitations. While Chicago has a healthy and diverse mix of theaters, it is the storefront scene, and its impact on the labor market and creative environment, which most strongly defines Chicago as a theatrical community (Becker et al. 1989).

This history has been consequential for theatrical technicians in a number of ways. First, standardized technical conventions (Becker 1982, pp. 40-67), in place when theaters were designed as "touring houses" for Broadway shows, no longer apply This makes it more difficult to acquire and transmit technical skills and, perhaps, easier to fulfill audience expectations of what constitutes acceptable production values. Second, technicians' salaries are severely depressed by the abundance of aspirants and the economic vulnerability of many theaters.[15] Finally, much of the work is in nonunion theater, which lacks controls over working conditions and salaries; thus, even highly skilled and experienced technicians work without basic work protections and fringe benefits, conditions usually associated with jobs in the service sector or secondary labor market (Ritzer and Walczak 1986, pp. 158-164; Doeringer and Piore 1971). Ironically, then, the recent boom in Chicago theater has coincided with increasing adversity for the skilled artisans who make such expansion possible.[16]

This survey of the technical theater world has revealed a range of work settings which offer distinctive configurations of opportunity and constraint. As the aspirant negotiates this complex terrain, there is an endemic tension between the latitude to collaborate freely and the danger of exploitation; between achieving control over the conditions and resources of work, and sacrificing such control in order to ascend a status hierarchy based upon the artistic prestige attached to various theaters and creative positions within the collaborative team.

CAREER PATTERNS: ENTRY INTO THE CHICAGO THEATER WORLD

In this section, I examine three related processes that link the broad discussion thus far to individual career contingencies: (1) career entry, (2) establishing a reputation, and (3) attempts to balance collaborative freedom and responsibility. The third arises because theater is among those occupations in which the duties attached to a given occupational role are subject to constant discovery and negotiation.[17] This reflects the changeable labor demands among productions—between and within companies—and is intensified by the fact that the collaborative team often has no social existence which predates or outlasts the production at hand. This is not to imply that stable working relationships between colleagues do not develop over time; such ties figure importantly in hiring decisions and in networks of sociability (Peterson and White 1989; Faulkner 1983, especially pp. 36-45). Rather, my point is that the constant need to adapt to new collaborative teams and conditions is a property of this occupation with broad ramifications for career concerns and patterns.[18]

Career Entry

Successful entry into the technical theater world requires a general and eclectic mix of skills.[19] At the beginning of an interview, a woman described her qualifications in this, not atypical, way: "Mostly I'm a stage manager, yet I'm also a tech about town, mainly an electrican; I'm also a licensed hair dresser—I do wigs and haircuts for the stage, specializing in period stuff." Also required is a willingness to work in exchange for practical experience and acceptance into the "community."[20] As an aspiring scenic designer explained,

> In the beginning, I worked for most of the small companies. They'd let you design the set, you'd end up building most of it, painting it, and you'd get a cut of the

box office, and that would be your fee—fifty bucks maybe. And that'd be for three weeks of work.

Thus, initiation occurs through a tacit exchange of labor for practical experience. To survive, the novice must be attentive and resourceful in abstracting, from the often menial tasks at hand, skills and knowledge which are more generally applicable to technical theater. This presupposes an already firm sense of occupational commitment. Indeed, more than 50 percent of my informants chose theater as a career during their high school years, a time when the arts offer an exotic antidote to the staid paternalism of that life-stage.

A byproduct of the informal yet intensive apprenticeship through which theater craft is acquired is a broad and inclusive appreciation of both the technical and performance-related aspects of theater. The following statement, by a woman in her mid-30s (drawing on 20 years of professional experience) reflects the multifaceted approach to the theater so common among technicians:

> I started as an actress, but I'm only average and average won't do it. I am interested in live performance. I always have been. I don't categorize myself in any one particular area, and I've done just about everything in theater. I haven't designed costumes, but I've worked as a theatrical seamstress, and done everything else—I've acted, produced, house-managed, worked running crew, lights, sets—every aspect.

Such an orientation can also be explained by the exigencies of surviving in an unstable occupational milieu. As I learned from a veteran stage manager:

> Whatever you can do to make yourself marketable will help, and there's a double edge to that: the more I know, the better stage manager I can be, and the more I'll be able to weather the times when jobs are scarce. I can go and hang and focus lights, or be a dresser for a fashion show; I've worked as a photographer's assistant, or done wigs for a shoot, or for a show. I have all these ways of making money without having to go and wait tables. And there's real value in sticking it out and being perceived by employers as someone who'll stick it out, come hell or high water.

The following informants, having come to Chicago to find work as lighting designers (LD), touch on a common theme, that of "trading in" technical skills for the opportunity to obtain work as a designer. Their remarks also reflect the persistent shortage of highly skilled (rather than simply competent) technicians in a community filled with aspiring designers:

> During the summers, while I was still in school, I'd be up here doing shows, so I got my foot in the door. I just did all the theater I could—odd jobs, doing

> theater call—and after that I got a job at Wisdom Bridge as an electrician and stayed with that for about two years, learning an incredible amount about electrics and design. I wasn't frustrated at first about not being able to design, 'cause I knew it was going to be a long haul, so I was designing small (nonunion) theater stuff, and I still do. It wasn't practical then to think I could get beyond that level.
>
> Usually I was looking either as a designer or an electrician, and a lot of jobs came to me because there aren't that many good electricians in the city, and once people know you're out there looking for work, they'll call. They'll get your name from someone. It works out; lately I've designed two shows at a dinner theater, and I've also been working with a small non-Equity company for the last four years. I don't really get paid anything for it; I'm their "resident LD" and have been production manager—I've done everything for them; it's simply for an artistic outlet.

During this period, aspirants also gain contacts and familiarity with "spaces" (theaters), this being an essential element of the working knowledge needed to function as a competent technician:

> So I took a job as an electrican, started running the board for the Ballet, and got to know the Goodman Stage II and the people there, which was a great connection to have back then 'cause they were hot and happening. So I got to know all of those people and was able to get some design experience, and then I became the electrician for Goodman Stage II and, later, St. Nicholas, and I got a lot of design work there, so that's where it really started for me.

The guiding assumption, early in the career, is that one must establish contacts at as many theaters as possible in order to maximize the chances of sustaining a career (see Granovetter 1973). Seldom are novices able to work exclusively in their chosen position. A production manager, with 20 years of experience shared his surprise at an exception to this rule:

> Actually, a lot of people are able to work part-time, or work a number of jobs, and make a living. When they first hit town—say, trying to be a LD—they find other work to make money and do the LD work for free. And the two together can often sustain them. I was shocked to meet a woman who's a nonunion stage manager (SM) who's been in town for a year and a half and makes a living stage managing. And I was floored because I didn't know it was possible.

For some, however, hopes for a full-time design career are scaled down, over time, to a compromise in which infrequent designs are seen as consolations in a career offering other rewards:

> I've just accepted that I'm a good electrician and I can earn a good living at it, and I don't have any illusions about how hard it can be: being a full-time LD

can be very, very difficult. Even those few who do it all do something else—teach, consult, or do industrials, something besides being a LD for the theater. So long as I can design occasionally, I'm happy enough, especially now that I have a job that pays pretty well. I'd rather not be in commercial theater—I get tired of musicals—but I'm the rare case of someone making a living.

For the majority, however, who eschew such a compromise and continue to strive for the creative expression afforded by design positions, the objective is to establish a reputation within an occupational community that is both tightly knit and exacting in its standards (see also Peterson and White 1989, pp. 243-259).

Reputation and Community

Serious aspirants learn early that to be accepted:

> You do whatever work you can find—nonunion, storefront, whatever—and you place yourself in the *community*; you become visible and do your job well, show enthusiasm. Because, at first, it's a personality thing as much as competence.

Another informant alludes to the practice of referral, which is so crucial to a viable career:

> There's the community of it too; it tends to be a fairly small community, even though there are a lot of people involved. But if someone's good, you hear about it, 'cause you talk to your friends, and they're hanging a show and someone asks if they know anyone offhand, and they say, "This guy's really good, here's his number." And if you're bad, they'll hear about that too. You get your work on the basis of reputation, and in this town it takes *one day* and everyone in town knows what's going on.

The cohesiveness of the community is often the source of benevolent support, an attribute which may distinguish Chicago from other large centers of theatrical activity. A stage manager with 12 years of professional experience reports that,

> The stage managers in this town are, for the most part, very supportive of each other. Many people arrive from both coasts, and they've called [offering me] jobs I couldn't take, and they'll say, "I don't suppose there's any point in asking for a recommendation" and I say, "Oh sure, I can give you five names, and I'd stake my reputation on these people; they'll be good in my place." And outsiders are astounded by this because on the coasts it's like, "If I can't do it I'll be damned if I tell anyone else." Whereas here, you pass it along, and it pays off for you in the end because it comes around again.

If aspiring technicians are dismayed by the difficulty of sustaining a career, they are encouraged by the plentiful amount of work available—particularly for those willing to work nonunion, where labor is exchanged for experience as much as for money:

> For me there hasn't been a lot of seeking out of work; that hasn't been the problem. My roommate and I and an actor friend who makes his living as a tech used to live in a three-bedroom apartment, and we'd sit around in the morning, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and the phone would start ringing at about 10:00 am, ring every twenty minutes until 4, 4:30, with a job for one of the three of us. Ted did carpentry, electrics, and acted; Nancy did props, painting, and scenic design, and I do lighting and electrics —we had a mini-production staff. So, after freelancing for two seasons, I've designed fourteen shows and, in that time, I've yet to send out a resume.

An early period of intense career involvement gives way, however, to a more selective balancing of opportunities and rewards. One woman, something of a *grande dame* of nonunion stage managers at 36, speaks of this transition point:

> I've done enough shows now, and am regarded highly enough, so that phone calls often come to me. Unfortunately, a lot of those calls come when you're too busy, or from small companies which can only pay you $100 for an eight-week show, and there's no way you can do it. There's a point of no return, moneywise, where you have to set some standards for yourself.

Despite the apparently loose organization of the theater community, with its simultaneously high levels of recruitment and attrition, aspirants earn communitywide reputations and can track the progress of potential competitors with great accuracy.[21] I asked one scenic designer about the stability of the occupational networks in which he works. His reply reveals both the importance of relations of trust and the difficulty of rising through the stratification system alluded to above:

> Well, over a five-year period there's not a big turnover. There's a certain consistency with the people who work regularly; it's fairly rare to see a new name come into town and start taking more than three shows per year. Again, it's partly supply and demand, and people are comfortable with those they've worked with before. But people get stuck in classifications too. Some people I feel so badly for; they're real good but aren't going to break out of that storefront thing. They'll stay there and wind up burning themselves out; they don't do enough industrials to be able to support themselves; they haven't plugged into that network. Me, I've got a teaching job, so that's my fail-safe.

Collaboration and Responsibility

How, in a collaborative enterprise such as theater, can one balance the freedom of creative input and the burdens of excessive responsibilty? This dilemma is a recurrent one for theatrical technicians, and is not the topic merely of idle reflection. Producing theater is complex and labor-intensive, often involving the collision of deeply held aesthetic orientations and occupational prerogatives. Such conflicts are played out in all spheres of work, both at the individual and the occupational level.

Hughes defines the problem:

> If an occupation is a more-or-less standardized one-[person's] part in some operating system, it follows that it cannot be described apart from the whole. A study of occupations, then, becomes in part a study of the allocation of functions and the consequent [task] composition of any given occupation (1984, p. 292).

The case of theater is provocative in this regard because, in practice, there are as many divisions of labor as there are work settings and, as one technical director explained, "The particular job tends to expand to make use of whatever skills the person brings." Because career survival depends on acquiring an ever-broader arsenal of skills, novices are eager to learn. Also, they are reluctant to conceal skills relevant to a given production, believing that, ultimately, assumption of responsibility reflects the confidence of peers and will be recognized (and rewarded) in the community.

As the career progresses, however, and the aspirant seeks to establish a specialized reputation, they pay more attention to defining and delimiting occupational roles and protecting those tasks which are seen as falling in the proper domain of the desired job category. Stated differently, while one is well-served, early in the career, by being a "jack-of-all-trades," *maintaining* such an orientation invites exploitation and decreases the chances of achieving mastery in particular skills required for promotion to positions in more eminent companies. More generally, Hughes (1984, pp. 311-315) has argued that an important source of change within occupations is the attempt by practitioners to rid themselves of undesirable aspects of their work, while reserving those tasks which confer greater prestige or autonomy. One implication of the often transient relationship between technicians and companies—and a chronic source of stress for the former—is that the continuous and long-term interaction required for negotiating over occupational "turf" is absent. Such an arrangement contrasts with bureaucratic careers, in which, as Thompson writes, the job, contained within an organization "provides the individual with an arena or *sphere of action* in which to seek solutions to his career problems, and thus to meet the demands placed upon him by the social system" (1967, p. 106, emphasis in original).

Although notable in theater generally, this problem is perhaps especially acute for stage managers, whose responsibilities entail both the technical and the socioemotional.[22] The stage manager is a conduit for technical and performance-related communication between the technical staff and the company, as well as a minister of good will, responsible for the care and feeding of an array of forceful egos. Given the importance of this position for the production, it is surprising to learn from a practicing SM that,

> Very few people really know what you do. I come in with my *own* expectations; I know what's best for me to do, and what's best for the show and the company—which is probably much over and above what the company may think of or expect.

Even my request for a description of tasks which are generally assigned to the stage manager failed to resolve the ambiguity:

> You get everything ready for rehearsal, including measuring out the floor plan (to indicate the location of sets and props), taping it down, rehearsal needs—ashtrays, coffee, chairs—as well as pianos, props, cuing lines, the whole bit. And you're the link between the office and rehearsal, and between the designers and rehearsal, and between the actors and the director, so that folks aren't just off doing their own thing. You're the link.
>
> You see, when you work in theater there often aren't delineations; the artistic director doesn't *just* do "this," and no more or less. Each company is different. It's often based on personalities, or on the show: Alan does it this way and Rick does it another way. You kind of feel out who needs what from you and who doesn't; you have to be flexible; your job is to serve the show and the company. You have to negotiate from there.

Continued experience lets aspirants determine their personal limits and the more widely held expectations which are attached to various job titles. A former lighting designer, now a staff member at a community college, explained that,

> You have to learn to ask hard questions. I had to learn to define what *I* will do under the title, "lighting designer." I learned to request the supportive staff which I need to execute a strong design or, if not, I'll limit the design accordingly. But that's a luxury I have here; I have a salaried position and if someone wants to hire me as a lighting designer and they say, "You have to find your own crew, and you have to hang and focus between the hours of midnight and 5:00 am," I can choose not to do that at this point. [But] if you're up and coming, you don't have the choice.

The fluid division of labor also makes it difficult for those in hiring positions to evaluate the professional experience of those occupying various echelons

of the theater world. For instance, aspiring designers win jobs at more prestigious theaters by accumulating design credits (and, they hope, good reviews) which demonstrate competence and a distinctive aesthetic approach. Yet, as a production supervisor, responsible for hiring designers, explained, "There are legions of people designing part-time. In small theaters there are overlapping roles—everyone does everything—so I don't know if you can call that designing or not."

Despite the variety of ways in which labor is apportioned within theaters and productions, technical prerequisites remain universally important. A stage manager, speaking from the privileged vantage point of a resident position in a union theater, reflected on the stable and elaborate division of labor which surrounds her and concludes that,

> Even in a storefront theater... Well, someone *has* to take that role (of SM)—it may be someone who's simply interested in the survival of the company—but someone has to know all the decisions that are being made and has to convey the information to the right people. It might not break down into this specific package of duties we have here, but actually it may be *more* important for a storefront theater to have strong stage management. It might not happen as gracefully as it does here, but someone's got to be doing it.

Difficulty in specifying the scope and nature of responsibility associated with various job titles creates a problem not only for the practitioner, but for the occupation as a whole. As a technical director explained, a central issue in the agendas of professional organizations within technical theater[23] is to formalize job titles and descriptions,

> So that you can point to something and say, "That's *not* my job." Because the way it is now, virtually anything can be seen as your responsibility, and you get a horrible gap between the hours and energy invested and the money in return. What happens is [that] you get people investing a few years and then they get out. So all you have left is the young horses, but the technical skill and experience doesn't get handed down, doesn't continue to inform the theater. So I see this as a real issue of preserving the theater itself.[24]

One response to the chronic ambiguity about the delegation of work tasks in technical theater is to covet the certitude and control which appear to come with union affiliation. A woman with a lengthy career as a nonunion stage manager describes the impact she thinks union protections would have on her working conditions:

> It's one of the most frustrating things, especially hard, to be a nonunion stage manager. A union stage manager has specific duties that they're expected to perform, and they have specific things which they're not *allowed* to do—such

> as ordering lunch for the company—which pull you away from your own work. So the union rules tend to protect you from doing that stuff. Actually, this is one of the few theaters I've ever worked at where they actually have a job description of what the SM is expected to do. It has about 40 things on it; I do those, as well as 40 more that aren't on it.

As is noted below, however, the benefits of union affiliation are often gained at the cost of restricting both the number of jobs for which the aspirant is eligible, and the freedom to determine one's collaborative involvement in accordance with the demands of each production.

DILEMMAS OF CAREER MOBILITY

Some characteristic dilemmas in occupational mobility result from the structure of the theater world as described thus far: (1) rejection of resident positions because of temporal constraints, (2) "sinking" mobility, and (3) creative constraints within the upper echelons of the theater world.

Temporal Constraints and Resident Positions

A stubborn, practical problem in managing these careers is how to reconcile considerations of mobility with the intricate temporal arrangements needed to coordinate and synchronize work tasks; this is especially true because most are forced to work a "day job" to survive. Indeed, working in theater tends to draw one into the ranks of those vagabonds who carry out their central activities during the dark hours (Melbin 1978). In the following account, an electrician/lighting designer had just spoken of a hectic period during which he was simultaneously juggling three productions despite having turned down an offer as a resident electrician. During our interview, he received a call offering him a design job at a well-established theater on Chicago's North Side. Given the fatigue etched in his face, I asked why he accepted yet another assignment:

> I couldn't refuse, 'cause for me that is a step up in the level. I've been freelance now for two seasons; I started out lighting for community theaters, doing free shows, and I'm constantly trying to raise my level—by "level" I mean artistic reputation, and the caliber of the people you work with. And I'm trying to keep that moving upwards because, again, it boils down to making a living in this business. Some people do, but very few make a living, without having to teach, or consult, or these other options. But I'm 29 years old and I'm looking forward to a time in my life when I'm 40, wanting to have a family, and I couldn't think of that now. The way I see it, I'm in a race, a race to make enough money so that when I'm in a position to have a family I won't have to quit theater to do that.

In order, then, to remain free to allocate time flexibly, the aspiring designer must avoid the very step which, to outsiders, would represent a rational career move: acceptance of a resident or staff position. These positions offer stable and conventional hours and, at times, insurance benefits (a rarity), yet my informants tend to equate such a move with acceptance of defeat, a pitfall to be avoided. Another lighting designer had anticipated this choice before arriving in Chicago:

> I knew that coming into Chicago I had to be careful about how much of a long-term deal I was going to get into as an electrician, because most of the designs I've gotten so far have come up fairly last minute—within a couple of weeks of opening. People get into a bind and the reason my name comes up is that others have fallen through. That's how you initiate a per-show deal with a theater; after that they'll come back to you and you'll have more time. But also, you're always trying to work on as many shows as possible, constantly trying to shave away the time that you have to spend on each.

Ambitious designers, then, risk unemployment by choosing to forego less creative positions which monopolize their time. Thus a lighting designer whose life is marked by constant insecurity regarding income and working conditions, can nonetheless boast,

> I'm one of the few people in electrics and lighting design in this city who's purely freelance. At my level I may be the only one. And that's a big advantage for me, 'cause I'm the one that's going to be free; there are two friends of mine who compete with me for the same niche in the market, but one works in a supply house, and the other is staff electrician at a dinner theater. I'm the one that's free, so I end up getting most of the designs.

In summary, the long-term objective of increasing one's status and salary as a designer takes precedence over decisions which, in the shortterm, would provide job stability and fringe benefits.

Sinking Mobility

Another characteristic career dilemma involves the inverse relationship between the prestige level of the theater and the creative power and responsibility vested in positions available to the aspirant. Stated differently, jobs which afford the aspirant greater creative control—director versus stage manager; designer versus carpenter—are obtainable only in theaters which are low in the prestige hierarchy. The resulting system is perverse, inasmuch as many of the most ambitious members of the theater community work in settings which are most fragile and poorly rewarded. There are institutional halos which confer great advantage upon aspiring theater technicians and

designers. Those who arrive with a degree from Yale Drama School, or Juilliard, or with Broadway credits, can bypass the hardship and select jobs from among the most respected Equity or regional theaters.[25] Unless one enters the tournament with a head start, however, there is no alternative but to seek openings in the lower echelons. According to a stage manager/musician who has lately worked with a major opera company:

> There's constant growth going on, especially with tech people. Because when you're at that transition period—say you want to be a designer when you grow up—you're not going to start out at the top, you'll be designing for a buck eighty [at a storefront] and you'll also be running costumes and sweeping floors at the same time.

Often, technicians, having already established themselves in resident positions, will initiate such contacts, leading to a frustrating necessity to sacrifice earnings for the prestige that comes with a creative position. Conversely, a staff member at a community college laments that she cannot accept the design work earned through 15 years of credits because, "I can't afford to take the pay cut." Most participants, though, regard an opportunity to design in the most humble theater as more desirable than a position as staff technician in a more elite company. Storefront theaters offer nominally "resident" positions as incentives to designers anxious to gain credibilty in the community. It is questionable, however, whether such pro bono work provides the aspirant with the wider status or the technical resources necessary to translate the experience into mobility:

> I was working as a directing intern at "Wisdom Bridge" [a respected Equity theater] and I got a call from a friend at a storefront on Clark Street. He said he wanted to improve the production values—they wanted someone to come in and design, rather than just throw something up on stage. And when I started designing lights for them they were terribly impressed—there were cues and colors and angles, and it was fun. But I'm sort of growing out of working with them over the past year or so. The pay has never increased, and they haven't really grown, and they only have about 15 [lighting] instruments, so that bigger theaters aren't too impressed by my "resident" title.

A technician and technical director whose history in Chicago theater stretches back to the early 1970s, when I asked about the acceptance of nonunion credits in the union world, said:

> You can try, but it won't mean anything. [For example] academic theater is too safe—the show might've been terrible and you could be inept, and how would I know? Generally, credits are only good from level to level, 'cause somehow we've subdivided this whole thing. The whole theater business is stratified, and

> credits from higher levels work down, but those from the bottom, well you might as well take them off your resume. Unless you're working constantly—a design per week—which might prove that you're good because people keep rehiring you.

In the absence, then, of shortcuts to mobility, there are few alternatives to working up through the nonunion ranks. In this vein, I spoke with a woman who had achieved the top ranks of Equity stage managers, but who came to realize that her hopes that this would lead to directing opportunities were unfounded.[26] In retrospect, she reckons that her misstep occurred not in the rarified atmosphere of the Equity world, but in failing to cultivate relationships among storefront theaters:

> I was caught between two worlds. I think that if you connect with a small company in Chicago, serve them as a stage manager or in some other capacity for a long enough time, and let it be known that you *really* want to direct, that once you've paid your dues, they'll likely offer you a production. That's a possible way of doing it [getting opportunities to direct]. But I'd gotten myself into the big leagues, stage-managing-wise, had gotten my Equity card, and it's really hard to throw that union status away and work for free for five years in the hope that, someday, you might get a chance to direct. And I got myself into that bind, where I couldn't go back to square one. It was shortly after that that I started thinking about getting out of theater. I felt I hadn't used good strategy in that regard. Again, I could've gone back to the nonunion world, just dug my heels in... gotten a foothold. But I stopped having a vision that it was possible.

Finally, there are prominent examples of small, poorly funded theaters which grow and prosper; thus, hopes in the storefront world are not restricted to one's own career but are joined to that of the company itself. Indeed, the renowned Steppenwolf Theater is a case in point. Though such stories are rare, they represent an alternate, and symbolically important, justification for continued effort toward career goals.

Practical Benefits versus Creative Constraints within the Upper Echelons of the Theater World

The elite of the theater world, in terms of institutional stability and financial rewards, is found within Equity theaters (which include regional theaters) and professional non-Equity theaters.[27] These work settings offer higher and predictable salaries, and the relative security of a subscription-based season. As one Equity stage manager reminded me, "At the Goodman, for example, the show runs whether it's a hit or a flop, cause we have a six-production season and the tickets are mostly presold. There's a certain civility at this level." Entry into the upper echelons also affords access to a national network of theater professionals, who get the majority of available design and directorial work.

This is also the segment of the theater world that tends to attract corporate sponsorship, which is now especially vital because of recent reductions in federal support for the arts.[28]

However, despite this cachet, career dilemmas discussed earlier continue to be evident. In Equity theater, union contracts create a sharper division between creative and technical tasks than exists in the nonunion realm. And resident positions, common for carpenters and electricians, are quite rare for designers, so, unlike the storefront world, the two groups occupy segregated work routines and social circles. In general, union theater has a more formal and elaborate division of labor. Accepting this arrangement is difficult for many since, as noted, people starting out typically master technical skills chiefly to facilitate creative participation. A costume designer who specializes in historical recreations explains:

> When I entered [regional theater] I found a strange attitude that I hadn't run into before: If you knew anything about the technical end of costuming—how to sew—then [it is assumed] you must not be able to design. And I'd always been taught that first you learn to build, then you design. But management [within regional theaters] has a very different notion, and they categorize you as a builder or as a designer, but not as both. I've since learned from friends that this is the prevailing attitude within regional theater.

There are clearly features of the upper echelons which many welcome. For designers, recurrent relations with particular companies allows for consistency of technical staff; this engenders highly valued relations of mutual familiarity and trust. For technicians, long-term employment in particular theater "spaces" allows them more fully to utilize their own expertise, as well as the technical possibilities of the particular theater, from one production to the next.

On the other hand, improved working conditions are often perceived to be accompanied by more conservative theatrical sensibilities and, in general, by reduced autonomy from the audience. Becker (1963, pp. 79-119) has pointed out, with respect to jazz musicians, that maintaining control over repertoire vis-à-vis audiences and commercial interests is an important occupational ethos for those working in the arts. Here, I have asked a scenic designer whether, in his view, the more stable Equity and LORT theaters are associated with higher aesthetic quality than is found in the nonunion world:

> No. What the Goodman and Steppenwolf—theaters of that prestige—have over the non-Equity places is money, and they can hire the best artistic personnel. As for the quality of the work, I think the core of Chicago theater is in the smaller, non-Equity theaters; that's where the important work is being done. A lot of the LORT [League of Regional Theaters; see note 27] theaters do OK work, but they have a subscriber base and they have to play to that. They have to do safer work.

In sum, work settings that offer the greatest financial reward and job security contain features that are at odds with the collaborative flexibility and autonomy from audience demands, which are prominent components of occupational culture. Other career options, such as commercial theater and industrials, also offer high salaries but draw the participant still farther from the theatrical community and its defining values. It is an anomalous state of affairs when the economic pinnacle of an occupational career draws one away from the central culture and practice of that occupation.

DILEMMAS OF UNION AFFILIATION: RATIONALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A fateful career decision which confronts virtually all participants in technical theater, and which intensifies the dilemmas described above, is whether to join a theatrical labor union. Consideration of issues surrounding union affiliation also illuminates features of the labor market in which theatrical careers unfold, as well as tension arising from the imposition of rigid work rules upon so variable and collaborative a process. In this, theater exemplifies other work environments, including modern industry, in which traditional union contracts based upon closure of lines of authority and fixed delegation of work tasks conflict with the need to maintain flexibility in response to changing conditions.[29]

Reasons bearing on whether to "go union" range from the practical to the ideological. It is hardly surprising that theatrical technicians want union benefits such as wage guarantees, hourly limits, and insurance coverage. But benefits must be weighed against the potential losses of employment and creative independence which come with membership. Those who have worked for long periods without union protections appreciate achieving some control over working conditions. One Equity stage manager explains that,

> On the union level there are minimums, basic parameters—especially in Chicago, which has the strongest language of any of the city contracts. There are bounds beyond which they can't go, like if they say, "You gotta do this and that" you just pull out the contract and say, "Excuse me, can't do that." Besides, I really like the union protections: I like being paid, and on time; I like being bonded; I like being assured of overtime if they're going to work me to death; I like controlled rehearsal hours; I like it that the actors are being paid a decent salary so that they don't have to work six jobs and I don't have to juggle 18 different work schedules; I like having insurance. I simply could not go back to stage managing, which is an enormous job, under nonunion conditions.

However, a scenic/lighting designer, speaking of the benefits of representation by the United Scenic Artists of America (U.S.A.A.) alerts me to the importance of timing in making the decision to affiliate:

> I knew it was time. I was non-union for most of my career and I wanted to take a load off myself, in terms of some of the business stuff. So I knew it was time. Being union actually prevents you from getting very few jobs, because if you *really* want to do the job they're probably not going to stand in your way. And membership really helps a lot, in terms of making sure you get paid and get basic things you're entitled to.

This informant makes reference to a potential hazard in mistiming the transition to union status: Once having joined, one can formally be barred from accepting jobs from theaters which do not hold union contracts. This is an excessive cost for the majority of participants in technical theater, for whom control over working conditions must take second place to more immediate needs: to keep working and to maintain professional contacts in the more extensive nonunion ranks. For the following designer, the dilemma is ever present and bears on his ultimate survival in the occupation:

> It's a tough call. At this point I feel like I can't afford to join, because I'd have to have a union contract with whomever I worked with, and there aren't too many non-Equity theaters that are willing to pay a U.S.A.A. minimum. So my preference at this point is to keep building my reputation, trying to up my rates on a nonunion basis. It would be risky [to join] because there are a number of union designers and not much union work. There's much more nonunion work. It's tough because the gap in salary [between union and nonunion companies] can be as much as $1000.00 per design. At the beginning, you take designs for as little as $100, even knowing that it requires weeks of work.

Another stage manager warns that,

> Some people get in too soon, and it can be a hindrance. You maybe work one show, and then you might not get another one for a year or more, whereas if you don't have the Equity card you can keep on working—either as a nonunion stage manager assisting a union person, or you can go off into the nonunion theaters and gain experience and contacts, which is also important. So I won't put myself out of work by going union—although it may happen anyway. I'd face a huge gap [lost work] if I joined now.

Even for those who have successfully entered the union ranks, troubles—manifested in slightly different form—remain, in variations on the familiar theme of autonomy and flexibility. A staff carpenter (and former union member) at a major scene shop explains:

> It [union affiliation] would never work here; with the union the attitude is, "it's not my job." We think nothing here of spending a day in another department. And we've got a real interesting bunch of people working here: one guy's got

> a degree in civil engineering; after a couple of months in an industry job he said, "This is no fun" and came to work here. Another guy has a master's degree in physics and that comes in real handy. Like we've done shows that required hydraulic lifts to elevate parts of the set, pneumatics to propel things on stage, and he had no problem with that stuff. Well, I worked on it with him, so next time, if he's not around, I can handle it myself. Between us we can figure out what has to be done.

Similarly, a production supervisor for an opera company expressed this view, typical of many, regarding union provisions:

> There are times when the union rules get in the way. I push my luck as far as I can; there are times when I really want and need to be building scenery, and I'll push it as far as I can until the union comes and says, "Uh, we think you better let us get someone in for this job." You see, it's a fairly close-looped union, and I'm interested in doing many areas, as opposed to being restricted to just one, and that's what you end up with if you join the union.

Taken together, these comments illustrate that barriers to union affiliation within technical theater are practical as well as ideological. The former arise from the fact that,

> The nature of technical design and construction in theater is such that you have to fit your schedule around those of a great many other people, so there's no way to legislate how many hours you're gonna work—it just depends on too many things. And there are wide differences between levels, even within theaters here in Chicago who are under contract to the same union: Some have two on staff, some have five, some use volunteers—so, just by the nature of it, they can't legislate very much. It's basically pay-scale and that's it.

Finally, affiliation is resisted by many due to perceived boundaries of occupational cultures; this is illustrated by the view that nonunion technicians have toward members of the (International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees) (IATSE), the union which represents stagehands, carpenters, and electricians. An electrician states baldly what others only implied:

> Maybe it sounds bad, but we in the business don't consider them in the business because their knowledge is... I don't know what their knowledge is sometimes. Most IATSE people don't have technical *theater* knowledge, and they have no sense of that tradition.[30]

It is understandable, given the difficulty of reconciling these career tensions even within the upper-reaches of the theater world, that the longevity of such careers is severely attenuated.

FINALE: DEPARTURE FROM THE THEATER WORLD

The cumulative effect of the career dilemmas described above is to drive the majority of theatrical technicians out of the occupation before they reach their late thirties. This woman, a former Equity stage manager, tells a story which is echoed throughout the interviews:

> All the people I started doing theater with have left; One's a lawyer, one's a teacher, I'm in graduate school in psychology. There's a steady movement out and [at some point] either you make it, or you leave. Now, "making it" means different things to different people; for me, it meant making enough money as a director to live. And *everyone* in theater has a second job. There's a loss of idealism that happens to everyone, because you can't rely on theater to make your day-to-day life. So people either transition out of it, or they find something else they can make money doing and do their theater stuff. You think you can starve forever when you're 22.

It is important to recall that most of those working in theater come from middle-class backgrounds and are college educated. If the choice to enter theater represents volitional class descent, clearly the sacrifice is intended only to be temporary; having invested unsparingly in what they see as a professional career, though, aspirants grow to resent the chronic deprivation. As one scenic designer, fortunate to subsidize his theater work with income as an interior designer, told me:

> Essentially a lot of people wind up where they're tired of starving—they want to have a car, a house, maybe a family, and they're not getting it. They get physically and emotionally abused and worn out. And they're killing themselves over something they don't get much feedback from, and so they burn out.

Clearly, this frustration is a product not only of fatigue, but also of age-linked pressures and expectations which are more keenly felt as middle age approaches (e.g., Neugarten and Hagestad 1976). An illustration of the difficulty of achieving such a balance is that, even among my informants who have attained resident or academic positions, fewer than one-third expect to remain in the theater after reaching age 40, a level of attrition consistent with those revealed in a national survey of technical directors (Aitken 1988). Although it may seem plausible to view such a world as exploitative of technicians' labor, it is well to remember that most of the theaters (the employing organizations) are, likewise, operating at a financial loss, and that aspirants commonly invoke the honorific mystique and sense of community attached to doing theater as (almost) adequate payment.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper draws on the notion of an art world in order to analyze career contingencies and conflicts in theater work. Attention to the art world as a unit of analysis is useful for detecting cooperative linkages which might be obscured by exclusive adherence to participants' idealized definitions of occupational or status boundaries. More importantly, I have sought to discern typical career problems among this group as reflective of a conflict between the desire for stable working conditions and rewards, and values of collaborative freedom and membership central to the occupational culture and identity. Stated differently, a tension exists between the desire to introduce *rationality* into the work process—through basic work protections and wage guarantees—and *rationalization* of the labor process—by fragmenting it into discrete, routinized tasks—associated with traditional, bureaucratic organization (Stinchcombe 1959).

I have argued that the practical career problems considered above are rooted in participants' attempts to reconcile this tension and, further, that there is a shift over time in the primacy of ideological considerations—dominant early on—toward practical matters of security and salary as participants' hopes for solving the dilemmas appear to grow more remote.

Another implication is that this case appears to contradict the expectation that practitioners of highly technical and specialized skills will parlay these into power and autonomy in the labor market (Reimer 1982). Comparison of this case with conventional craft occupations may help specify the conditions under which skills are translated into occupational advantage. For example, in the case of theater, the skills (such as carpentry and electronics) are not the "domain" of the occupation, per se, but are borrowed and applied in eclectic ways. Clearly, the relationship between skill, autonomy, and labor market power is a function of how particular occupations are situated in the wider political economy (Roth 1974), but that has not been my concern here. Instead, I have tried to show in some detail how, in this case, individuals' work histories reveal the importance of ideological orientations, and suggest ways to revise career models to be more sensitive to occupational experience which does not conform to the putative "orderly" career model prominent in the sociological study of work.

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NOTES

1. Personal communication. Northwestern University, 1991.
2. For example, a comprehensive analysis of a "career system" in a large corporation can be found in Rosenbaum (1984).
3. In this sense, technical theater is similar to other lines of work, such as ballet dancing and medicine, in which there is pressure to forge an early occupational commitment. Lortie (1975, p. 38) refers to this as a "narrow decision range."
4. Although it is not appropriate to include directors in the ranks of theatrical technicians, they appear in the sample because of their close working relations with technical personnel.
5. This strategy, sometimes called "snowballing," is an accepted method of sampling when the researcher seeks access to closed settings or communities (see Singleton et al. 1988, p. 310-311).
6. Indeed, the enthusiasm with which these men and women discussed their jobs with me confirmed the truism, noted by Roger Angell, the baseball writer, that, "if you want an earful, go to a [person] in a highly technical profession who feels he is unappreciated" (1988, p. 23).
7. An informant reports, and several others have confirmed, that, "You could count the full-time lighting designers in Chicago on one hand."
8. I use the term "idiom" here to denote that, while technicians working within various performance genres, such as opera, dance, and theater, share similar resources and practices, there are conventions unique to each genre. Thus, a scenic designer and stage carpenter with a decade of theater experience reported, after several months with an opera company, "I'm frequently reminded that I'm in a new world, and I'm learning constantly."
9. Edward Wellin, an anthropologist, suggests that technicians are better able to reconcile "nontheater" work with career aspirations than are actors, because in a dramaturgical as well as in a literal sense, the former are backstage. For instance, actors performing in television commercials must exploit their most personal resources—their faces and voices.
10. "Equity" refers to Actor's Equity, the union which represents professional stage actors and stage managers. Equity contracts stipulate minimum salary, limits on rehearsal time, and authority relations between actors, directors, and stage managers. Chicago is notable for several professional non-Equity theaters. Equity is distinct from United Scenic Artists of America (U.S.A.A.) which represents designers, and the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) which represents stagehands. Theaters may hold contracts with one union without being affiliated with the others.
11. For a brief description, see section headed "Brief Historical Sketch."
12. I do not claim that this list is exhaustive, nor do I imply an imposed value judgement regarding work settings or the talents of participants. The list and its order are based on consensus among my informants.
13. Quoted from a panel discussion on theater criticism, National Public Radio, May 25, 1991.
14. For a detailed account of the historical development of the Chicago theater scene see "Chicago Impromptu" by London, (1990); for more recent history of the same, see Lazare (1990).
15. Although no distinction is made between technicians and actors, the League of Chicago Theaters reported in 1988 that the average annual income for those working full time in theater was $8,500.
16. Granted that the "boom" has benefited many who work in theater, in the aggregate a smaller percentage are able to make a viable living. I am indebted to Paul Hirsch for this observation, and for his suggestion that I survey the recent "social-history" of Chicago theater as a framework for understanding career problems.

17. The obverse, of course, is represented by careers in bureaucratic organizations, in which the power and responsibility of the office tend to be defined by formal rules.

18. I am indebted to Bernard Beck for this insight. Also, see Faulkner's (1971, 1983) superb work in this regard.

19. At the beginning of an interview, a woman described her qualifications in this, not a typical, way: "Mostly I'm a stage manager, yet I'm also a tech about town, mainly an electrician; I'm also a licensed hair dresser—I do wigs and haircuts for the stage, specializing in period stuff."

20. Technical theater is exemplary of those occupations in which formal classroom instruction is less valuable, to the aspirant and the occupation, than practical experience (see Becker 1986).

21. In an informal network analysis, the author (with the permission of the informants) revealed the names of previous interview subjects to each informant. Even excluding social ties which were a function of the sampling scheme, levels of recognition exceeded 90 percent.

22. The stage manager position also represents the convergence of tensions regarding gender roles in theater work. This research indicates that, in Chicago, women stage managers are largely restricted to the nonunion ranks, where low rewards and the functionally diffuse division of labor produce an emphasis upon the nurturing elements of the position. Men clearly predominate, however, in higher level Equity SM positions in which formal authority—backed by union provisions—and larger budgets combine to lend a managerial air to the job.

23. For example, the United States Institute for Theatrical Technology (U.S.I.T.T.), a trade organization, has attempted to define job descriptions, and to standardize theatrical technology in order to enhance the stability of the working conditions and resources of technical theater work.

24. For elaboration of this issue in terms of job satisfaction, based upon a national sample of technical directors, see Aitken (1988).

25. I am grateful to Edward Sobel for bringing this feature of the stratification of theater work to my attention.

26. Although inroads have been made in the cinema, theatrical directing continues to be a male preserve. Even in Chicago—a community with over 200 theaters—my informants were able only to name two women who have sustained successful directorial careers.

27. Over the last 25 years, several stable and respected companies have become established under the League of Regional Theaters (LORT), a consortium of theaters that have joined to obtain funding, negotiate labor agreements, and promote institutional relations. The LORT includes such companies as the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and Chicago's Goodman Theater.

28. For example, recent cutbacks in funding by the National Endowment of the Arts alone have deprived some established theaters of as much as 25 percent of their operating expenses.

29. For a collection of recent articles addressing "flexible specialization" and the implications of new manufacturing technologies for traditional labor relations, see Hyman and Streeck (1988).

30. Other informants take issue with this rather condescending view of IATSE, claiming its members provide knowledge and continuity to the theater world nationally.

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