

# Production Innovations

Sets, Costumes and Props

by Nate Metcalf

NTC  
Ed Talks







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I would like to give you a behind-the-scenes look at how I design, build and test the technical theatre elements of NTC's educational productions.

We tour theatre programs into schools designed for all age groups in elementary, middle and

high school. NTC's

program catalog has hundreds of titles about a variety of important societal issues and life skills. Every year, we cast hundreds of actors who tour in acting troupes that perform in thousands of schools reaching millions of students.

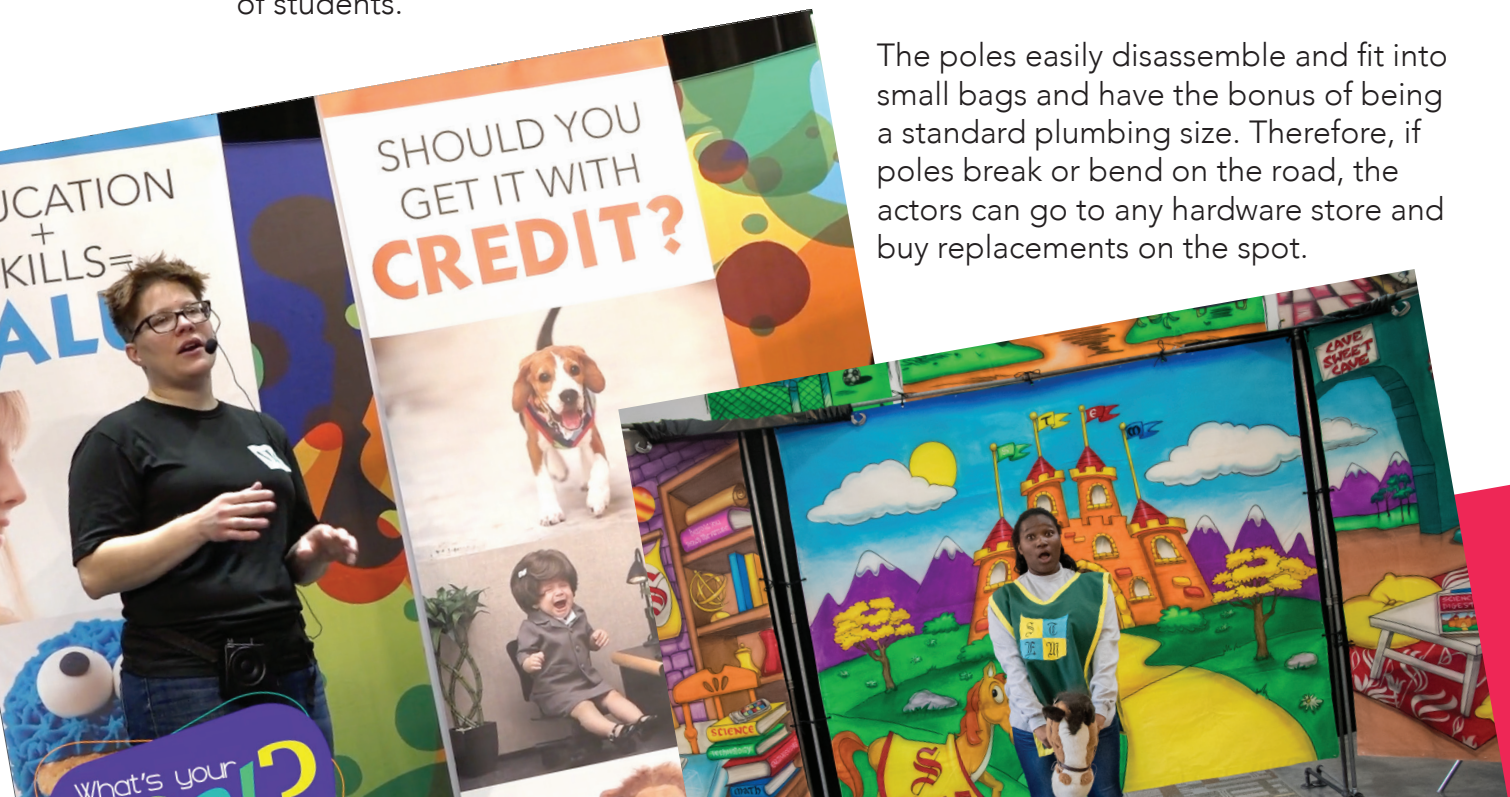
## Scenery

Each production always gets a unique set. The design takes into consideration the topic we are teaching and the target audience. Our shows have unique demands. Not only do they have to look good and serve the story, but our sets must be durable enough to survive the rigors of touring life. They must be simple enough to set up in under 15 minutes, and most importantly, they must be compact enough to fit into one vehicle, along with all the props and costumes. Plus, let's not forget the actor's luggage and personal belongings.

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Sets are built on a series of plumbing pipes to which we attach elaborately painted canvas flats.

The poles easily disassemble and fit into small bags and have the bonus of being a standard plumbing size. Therefore, if poles break or bend on the road, the actors can go to any hardware store and buy replacements on the spot.



At times, the scenery becomes part of the show itself. For example, in *Bee on the Team* the show takes place in a beehive. The hive gets destroyed and it must be rebuilt. We devised a way for student volunteers to rebuild the hive, in front of the audience, using honeycombs and strategically placed Velcro.

### FLEXIBILITY

An advantage to using the system of three flats is its versatility. We play in a variety of performance spaces. Although we prefer an auditorium or gym, sometimes we find ourselves in a media center, a single classroom or even a hallway. These sets are meant to be flexible. If the space isn't big enough for all three of our flats, we eliminate one or both side flats and use just the center flat.

This flexibility allows us to play to more schools and educate more kids, and get the messages home to more students and families and educators.



**In *The Energized Guyz*, three distinct locations are depicted; Agency Headquarters, a retired superhero's apartment and Bert the Dirt Expert's flea market**







## Props

What are props? Props are anything that the characters carry or use on stage. They're things like coffee mugs or baseball mitts, kitchen utensils and skateboards. In our case, these things border on the ridiculous such as a voice-activated electric fruit basket or a prosthetic limb for Captain Hook's evil cousin, Captain Doorknob.

### TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Of all the props we use here at NTC, none is more important than the scroll. Teachers tell us all the time that to convey our message to all of the kids, we need more than just lines of dialogue. We need something visual. Enter the *Scroll*.

Scrolls are our way of reinforcing our four key messages in every show. (See: *NTC Ed Talk, Production Innovation: In-School Theatre for Students, Teachers and Parents, 2018*)



Whether it's showing facts like the water content of the human body or explaining new vocabulary like opportunity costs, we use scrolls to boil down our message to simple visual cues.

The canvas and wood make them durable, and the design allows for them to roll into a compact size suitable for packing. Plus, the innovative design allows the scrolls to be hung over the top of the set thereby eliminating the need for strings, wires or easels.

### MIKE SWANSON STRESS TEST - REAL STORY

My predecessor built a broccoli-powered brain switching device for a mad scientist character. It was beautiful. It had lights and electronics and it made noises. As he was showing it to the creative team, without warning, Mike Swanson throws it to the floor. It was smashed into a thousand pieces. The builder was almost in tears and said, "What did you do that for?" Mike said, "Oh well, that's what the actors will do when they are on the road, so I just wanted to see if it would hold up, guess not, huh." He was right, that is what happens to props on the road. From then on, all props must pass the *Mike Swanson Stress Test*.





## Costumes

Costumes are important to any theatrical production, but when you're creating children's theatre, the costumes must tell a lot about each character, and do so in a hurry. Is this person good or bad? What is their occupation? Are they even human?

These seem like obvious considerations. When writers create a butterfly who is also a hippie, a supervillain with four arms, a dinosaur, a slug who wastes electricity, a talking cow, a hibernating Martian, a fish who doubles as a French maid, and my personal favorite, the flu itself . . . well, you can see the costume design challenge.

In addition, costumes at NTC are bound by a few unique constraints. Not only do they have to look good and serve the character in the script, but unique to NTC, they are required to fit a wide variety of actors' body types. They must be durable enough to survive touring life, and be built to allow for quick changes.

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

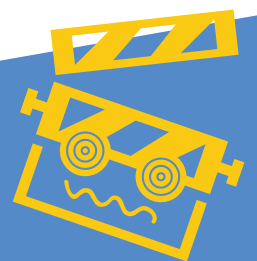
It would be much easier to make elaborate costumes that require 10-minute changes and three assistants. But the reality of our touring shows requires that one actor plays four or sometimes five different characters per show, necessitating the need for quick and easy costume changes.

Using glasses, hats, wigs and accessories goes a long way towards defining any character. Many costumes that look like three-piece suits are actually a piece and a half. The four costume pieces – shirt, tie, vest and jacket are sewn together as one piece. Easy on and easy off.

Other techniques include:

- Split-legs in jumpsuits and overalls, so the actor can slide their legs in and out without removing their pants or shoes.
- Any conceivable animal can be reproduced with animal features sewn on to a simple hood. They are

representational enough to get the point across without the need for prosthetics or makeup.







## DURABILITY

Durability of these costumes is also a challenge. Finding fabric that won't wrinkle or tear can be the most difficult part of the creation process. Hockey jerseys work well in this regard. They don't wrinkle at all and have the added benefit of fitting a wide variety of actors, whether they're a hamburger or hot dog body type. Our job is to find costume pieces that look good in any situation.

These ideas didn't just magically come to us in a flash of inspiration; they evolved over our 40-year history. It is an interactive process using imagination, creativity and especially engineering. In the end, all aspects of technical theatre must support the story and reinforce the learning that makes a difference in the lives of students, teachers and parents.



NTC is a premium provider of educational programming with operations in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand. We work directly between schools and clients to promote beneficial behaviors and life skills to students in grades K-12 on a local, regional and national level.

Since 1978, we have formed connections and helped develop relationships between thousands of schools and corporations, nonprofits and governmental organizations. Our value is not just in the impact we create; our turnkey services also change the lives and trajectories of students, mobilize parents and entire families with beneficial messages, and cultivate community-wide goodwill for clients.

Our award-winning educational programs are provided free for schools and are customizable to accommodate specific messages and goals for clients. Through formats including live performance, in-class discussion, graphic novels, print curriculum, and digital games and activities, we present topics such as energy conservation, safety, financial literacy, STEM, water and environmental stewardship, and health and social responsibility in ways that engage and empower students. In doing so, we are helping our clients to be forces of change for students, parents and communities.

Everything  
Connects with

