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# Theatre hanging: Keeping actors safe in dangerous scenes

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Raphael Schumacher was taken to hospital after being injured in a hanging scene, but remains in a coma

**The accident that befell Raphael Schumacher, an actor who is in a coma after being injured during a hanging scene, highlights the danger that is sometimes involved in theatre.**

Schumacher, 27, **was appearing in a production of Mirages at the Teatro Lux in Pisa** when things went badly wrong.

Actors can face specific risks on stages. There is no post-production; the audience is in the same room, and the suspension of their disbelief depends on illusion rather than editing. Here we look at theatre practises for keeping workers safe.

## Knives

Many theatres now ban the use of retractable blades, because they do not always retract on time. Instead, stage knives should have blunt, smooth blades and firm handles that can be gripped easily. Performers should use the same knife in every rehearsal and performance.

## Other weapons

Theatre staff should treat every firearm as a lethal weapon, whether it is loaded or not. This includes guns that fire blanks. They should be locked away when not in use, and people who are nearby when they are used repeatedly, for example in rehearsals, should have appropriate ear protection for their hearing. In many countries, theatre staff inform the police before using a real or replica gun.

The Health and Safety Executive in the UK has published a **guidance note**, saying that a producer must assess the risks of scenes involving weapons in advance, and agree any controls needed with the actors and the crew.

## Hanging

The normal method for hanging scenes is a breakaway noose, where the noose is fake and actually lies quite loose around the actor's neck. Meanwhile, the actor is suspended from a harness.

This should be set up by someone with experience in rigging, and it should be supervised.

## Fight scenes

The **Ontario Ministry of Labour** in Canada says fight scenes on stage must:

- be choreographed by a fight director, who is consulted about any changes to costume or props
- be adequately rehearsed
- be conducted between performers who are capable of the fight's physical demands
- be run through before every performance

Bart Williams, who teaches stage combat in the US, told the BBC: "The actor needs to do the fight between eight and nine times a week. It's about rehearsing it so that you can preserve the illusion."

## Planning ahead

Kevin Tanner, a technical director in Canada, told the BBC: "One of the most critical components of staging a production safely is the advance planning that should occur long before you arrive at the theatre.

"At the beginning of the artistic process for a production, the technical management should be developing a risk assessment that identifies potential hazards for the actors, artists and technicians, and identifies controls for those hazards.

"When it comes to actors, there is a huge trust in the production staff to ensure their safety."

It is also normal for stage managers to produce a **rehearsal report** with all the details of every time the production meets. This could include information about choreographed scenes; for instance if a performer looks shaky in a scene, the director and fight choreographer will be told so that the scene can be re-worked.

Rachael Presdee fell through a balcony being used in a production of Romeo and Juliet

### 'Theatres are dangerous places'

Martin Brown, the assistant general secretary of Equity, the union for actors in the UK, told the BBC: "Most accidents in theatre happen as a result of accidents rather than neglect.

"We represented a stage manager last year who was **very badly injured** as a result of a door on a corridor not being locked. The door led to a drop onto the stage and when she opened it, she fell into thin air. She will not walk again. The theatre was found liable in that case. They had a responsibility to make sure that door was locked.

"Theatres are dangerous places and they have to be monitored properly.

"Theatres will have different layers of management. The responsibility for ensuring that theatres are safe places always lies with the management but what we would say to actors is, you also have to do your own checks."

### What should the audience see?

Nothing. Not the hook at the back of the noose, not the choreography. Everything should be believable.

Bart Williams says: "Ideally the audience isn't going to be aware of any of it. If the audience ever feels like it's unsafe, then it's wrong. The audience wants to totally believe in the story.

"You want the illusion of danger but the audience should only ever fear for the character's life, not the actor's."

### On-stage disasters

In December 2013 **the roof of the Apollo Theatre in London collapsed** during a performance of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. Seventy-six people were injured, seven of them seriously.

In December 2008 an actor in Vienna **slit his throat** during a suicide scene, after a blunt prop was accidentally replaced with a real knife. He missed his artery and survived, and received two stitches to the wound before coming back on stage the following night.

The Broadway musical *Wicked* has seen **several disasters** in its run: an actor broke two ribs falling through a trap door, and another actor had to cut short a flying scene when her cape got stuck in machinery.

In 1981, a 6,000 gallon **tank of water burst across the stage** of the National Theatre in London, flooding the machinery. Some previews were cancelled but the production of *Way Upstream* went ahead.

In 1937, the actor **Laurence Olivier escaped injury** when a heavy weight fell next to him in the wings. He was preparing for a production of Shakespeare's play Macbeth, which has long been associated with bad luck and actors' superstitions.

In 1613 the Globe Theatre in London was **burnt to the ground** when a spark from a cannon used in the play set fire to thatching. There were no reports of any injuries. A year later the theatre was rebuilt, only to be demolished by the Puritans on ideological grounds, decades later.

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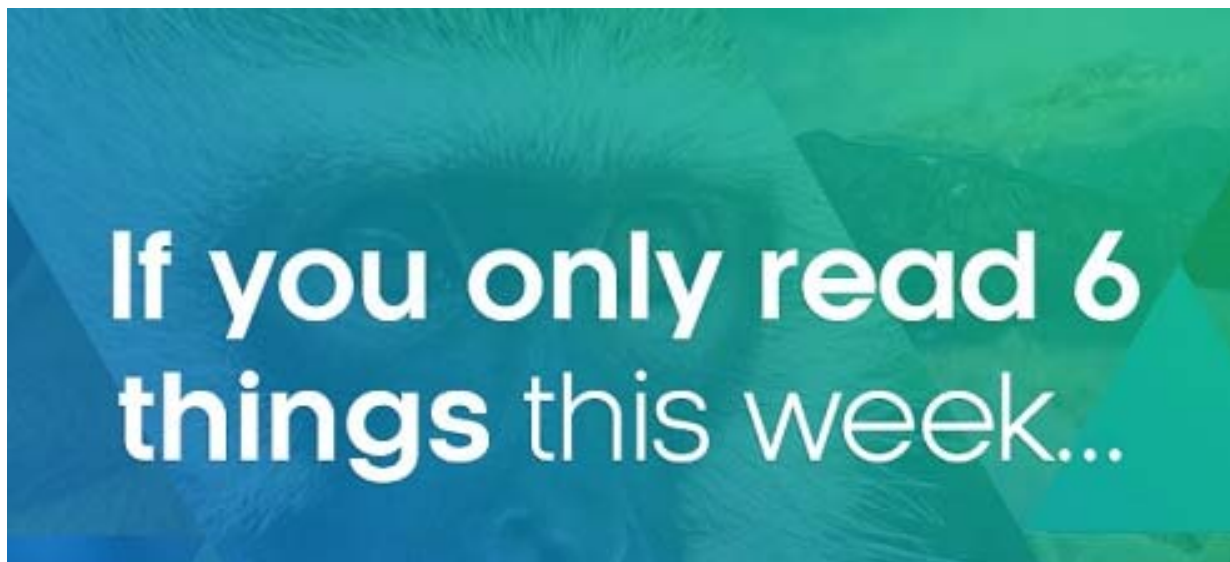
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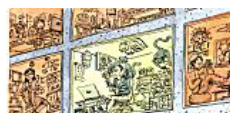
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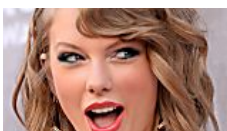
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