

Full blog: Ellen Q&A

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Introduction:

For Ellen Kilvington, working as a professional in the technical department of South Hill Park offers the perfect mix of teamwork, variety and work-life balance with family commitments, all the while enabling her life-long love of theatre. We sat down with her to hear about her route into technical theatre, what it's like breaking barriers as a woman in tech, and what her standout moments from productions include.

How did you first get involved with South Hill Park

I'd performed in shows here before with some of the local amateur groups, such as East Berkshire Operatic Society (EBOS) and Crowthorne Musical Players (CMP), before I started getting involved with SHP productions, my first being *The Railway Children* in 2017. Off the back of that I was encouraged to audition for *Romeo and Juliet* in 2018. I was nervous as I'd never done Shakespeare, but I played Lady Capulet and loved it.

How did you move from performing into technical theatre?

I'd been performing in shows since I was a child, but I got involved in the technical side of things at Uni by joining the Tech Crew at the Students Union, where I learned lighting for union gigs and events. After Uni I was keen to get into technical theatre, but didn't know how and wasn't sure my event lighting experience would translate.

Life moved on and I had a family, and thought there was no way theatre work would fit around having children. Through my involvement in SHP shows I got to know some of the technical staff, and at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* I offered to help with the get out, but was told only staff would be required. So I went away and had a think and decided to contact the then-Tech Manager to ask if there was any way that I could get involved in working with the Tech Department.

I was invited in for a chat where we talked through my past experience, and I expressed concerns around compatibility with childcare, especially because I had always believed the majority of theatre work would fall at evenings and weekends. Fortunately, there is plenty of work done in daylight hours, so I was brought in as a casual, doing ad hoc shifts when they needed extra support. I really loved getting stuck in and learning new things.

Six months later when a vacancy arose, I was offered a permanent position as a general technician, specialising as a scenic carpentry assistant. I was a little apprehensive as the scenic carpentry was very new to me, but I absolutely loved it and have been here ever since.

What is it about working in technical theatre that appeals to you?

As a department, we do a bit of everything. We all have a particular area we're more familiar with, but we all muck in and do everything. My main thing is set building, but I also rig lights, sometimes operate the lighting desk, assist visiting companies to get their show set up, and I do stage management - running the backstage aspects of our in-house shows.

I like that variety, that you're not pigeonholed into only doing one thing. In some theatres you're a lighting person or a set person, but we all dabble in everything, so nothing is ever the same twice and every day is different. You're using the same skills but each time it's in a slightly different way.

For example, set building involves a lot of maths, engineering, spatial awareness, planning and problem solving etc and then of course the practical skills needed for woodwork and construction, using tools and putting things together. But each set design is different and throws up different challenges to solve. Then you might use those skills in a different way with stage management or rigging lights.

I've always been good with practical things. I took GCSE Technology and I'd help my dad around the house, plus I'm very crafty and have always enjoyed making things, so it was a good fit.

A recent survey from Women in Tech found that while the industry is less male dominated than in the past, women still face challenges around sexism, ageism or simply being able to balance family life with career development. What has your experience been of a woman working in tech?

I do get surprise from people sometimes, and sometimes with visiting companies I might get a certain attitude of people thinking I don't know things or I'm not strong enough, but never from my own team. I'm fortunate that there have been other brilliant women who have worked in the department before me and alongside me who have passed on knowledge and encouragement along the way. Our whole department is amazing though, we all respect each other and the various skillsets we have.

How do your children feel about you working in a theatre?

My children are 15, 11 and 3, so they just see this as what their mum does. Sometimes they get a bit confused between when I'm working on a show or involved with one for fun, especially

because it's usually always at the same place. I think they find it interesting, and they like the perks of a backstage tour.

Did you always know you wanted a career in the arts?

I wasn't expecting I'd be lucky enough to have one. After leaving Uni, I really wanted to get into it, but didn't know how to. I sometimes struggle with being under confident in what I can do – I don't know if that's a female thing – but I do undersell myself on what I can do. I wasn't sure I had the transferable skills from night club lighting to technical theatre, so I'm really pleased to have the career I do.

What's your favourite thing about your role?

Every set is different, every production is different, and each one has its own challenges and things to work out. It's collaborative, it's never just me, we work together to solve problems and figure things out. I love getting a set design and model box and seeing the build all come together to the point where it's all onstage with the actors interacting with it.

What about working at South Hill Park, what's your favourite thing about that?

I just love the team here in the tech department, we get on well and just work really well together. We can ask questions, we support each other and problem solve together. We get what it's like to work in an industry that can be tricky in many different ways, so we can always ask for advice. It's just a lovely team in a lovely space, and I like it when audiences come in and experience a thing we've put together, when they see the magic.

What do you think are the benefits that access to the arts gives to people?

It's an outlet for creativity, expressing things in a way you sometimes aren't able to in everyday life. It gives you an opportunity to work with different people – whether that's in the cast or crew – working on one particular thing towards one shared goal and end point. There's a sense of camaraderie, working together like that, it's so special.

Plus, being a professional member of the team, you must not get so much of the post-show blues when a project finishes?

As I get older, I don't tend to experience the post-show blues in the same way I used to, because life is so busy, the next thing comes along so it doesn't hit so hard, as you have other things to deal with. But you're right, in the theatre, in this department, we see things come and go every day, every week, and we always know the next thing will come. We take the theatre back to its bare bones, reset, and start again.

Do you have a favourite spot in South Hill Park, where you feel most at home?

Probably the dock, the space next to the theatre where set is built and stored and worked on. I spend so much time in there, whether it's doing the set build or crewing on a show, it's just come and go all the time and filled with all sort of bits and pieces, memories of shows past.

Finally, do you have a favourite memory of your time at South Hill Park?

I remember standing in the wings of the first panto I was stage crew on. They were doing the 12 Days of Christmas routine, where each cast member has something different to do and a different prop. I remember standing in the wings waiting to hand a massive balloon to an actor and thinking, 'this is my job, I'm being paid to do this.' It's just those weird and wonderful things you get to do in a theatre that you wouldn't do anywhere else in life.

Similarly, during Beauty and the Beast where I was Deputy Stage Manager, one of my cues was "standby duck drop" and I just thought, nowhere else in my life would I say that sentence. But that's theatre for you.