



Stage Curtains

For many years stage curtains were made of cotton velour fabric that was treated with a chemical flame retardant. Samples were lab tested for the mills regularly. Testing was conducted in the theatre using the field or “match test”. We have often specified that extra strips of fabric be attached to the back of the curtain for lab and field testing purposes.

In the late 1990's, it was determined that the field test did not accurately predict the performance of the curtain and retardant in an actual fire, and it was deleted as an option from NFPA 701. Currently the only means to test a curtain is to remove a strip of fabric, hopefully a provided test strip or from a hem where it will not show, and send it to a testing lab. Note the field test was moved to a new recommended practice, NFPA 705, but this is primarily to protect the person conducting the test and the building from fire, and is not intended for determining flammability of the material or how it will perform in a fire. The truth is lab tests are rarely done once the fabric has left the mill. The alternative is to have the cotton velour curtains retreated, which is usually accompanied with dry cleaning followed by the flame retardant treatment. To do this properly and maintain the appearance of the curtain requires opening hems and some seams and then re-sewing after cleaning and retreatment. The result is that the cost of this cleaning and treatment is roughly half the cost of complete replacement. So unless the curtains are in very good condition to begin with, a replacement makes more economic sense over the long run.

It is estimated that the useful life of a set of cotton velour curtains can be expected to be 10 to 15 years. This can vary greatly depending on the conditions and how they are cared for. Certainly stages are hard on fabrics.

One of the consequences of the change in the test standards was the accelerated development of inherently flame retardant (IFR) fabrics suitable for stage curtain use. Because these are synthetic, the first products tended to be “shiny” which is undesirable on stage. None-the-less, there are now several good fabric options for most stage curtains which are inherently flame retardant for the life of the curtain. While the cost of the material is perhaps a third or half again what cotton velour costs, it also lasts longer than cotton, typically 15 to 25 years. In summary, we strongly recommend the use of the IFR fabrics for stage curtains, and recommend replacing cotton curtains as soon as funds permit.

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