



Orchestra Pit Safety

For many years theatre people recognized the hazard of the unguarded stage edge. Stage edges, along with loading docks, are the only fall hazards which building and fire codes exempt from guards. Stage edges, especially where they are open to an orchestra pit and the fall may be eight to ten feet or more, are notorious for serious injuries. Even a fall from a stage of 30 inches to the audience floor can cause painful injury. We believe it's prudent to mitigate this hazard without affecting the theatrical use of the stage.

Currently, there is a proposal to add to the Life Safety Code a requirement for some consideration of this hazard. The working draft is:

Where a guard is ordinarily required but not provided in accordance with the exceptions for stages, a written plan shall be developed and maintained to mitigate the fall hazards of unguarded raised floor areas and vertical openings on stages.

The following advisory appendix note for this is proposed:

The written plan should identify the unguarded areas and should include precautions and provisions to mitigate the fall hazard. Such precautions and provisions may include:

Training

Choreography

Rehearsal

Restricted access to the stage

Restricted access to unguarded edges

Warning lights

Audible warnings

Tactile edges

Warning barriers

Signage

Temporary barriers

Personal fall protection

Fall restraint

Spotters

All stages more than 30 inches high should have a plan that includes at least training and an emphasis on awareness of this potential hazard. A simple temporary warning barrier, such as posts on weighted bases or in sockets with rope or chain, put in place when there are no audiences is just one example. Where a full depth orchestra pit is present, we recommend a safety net at a minimum to protect the people on the stage as well as performers in the orchestra pit. Lighting can also be used in many ways to alert individuals on the stage both when audiences are present and when they are not, such as for night security, custodial staff, or tours.

The goal should always be to find a way to mitigate the hazard while not affecting the use of the stage. We don't believe that guardrails belong on stage during a performance or even during a rehearsal in most cases. Stopping short of guardrails we strongly support having a plan to keep performers, technicians and building staff safe.

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