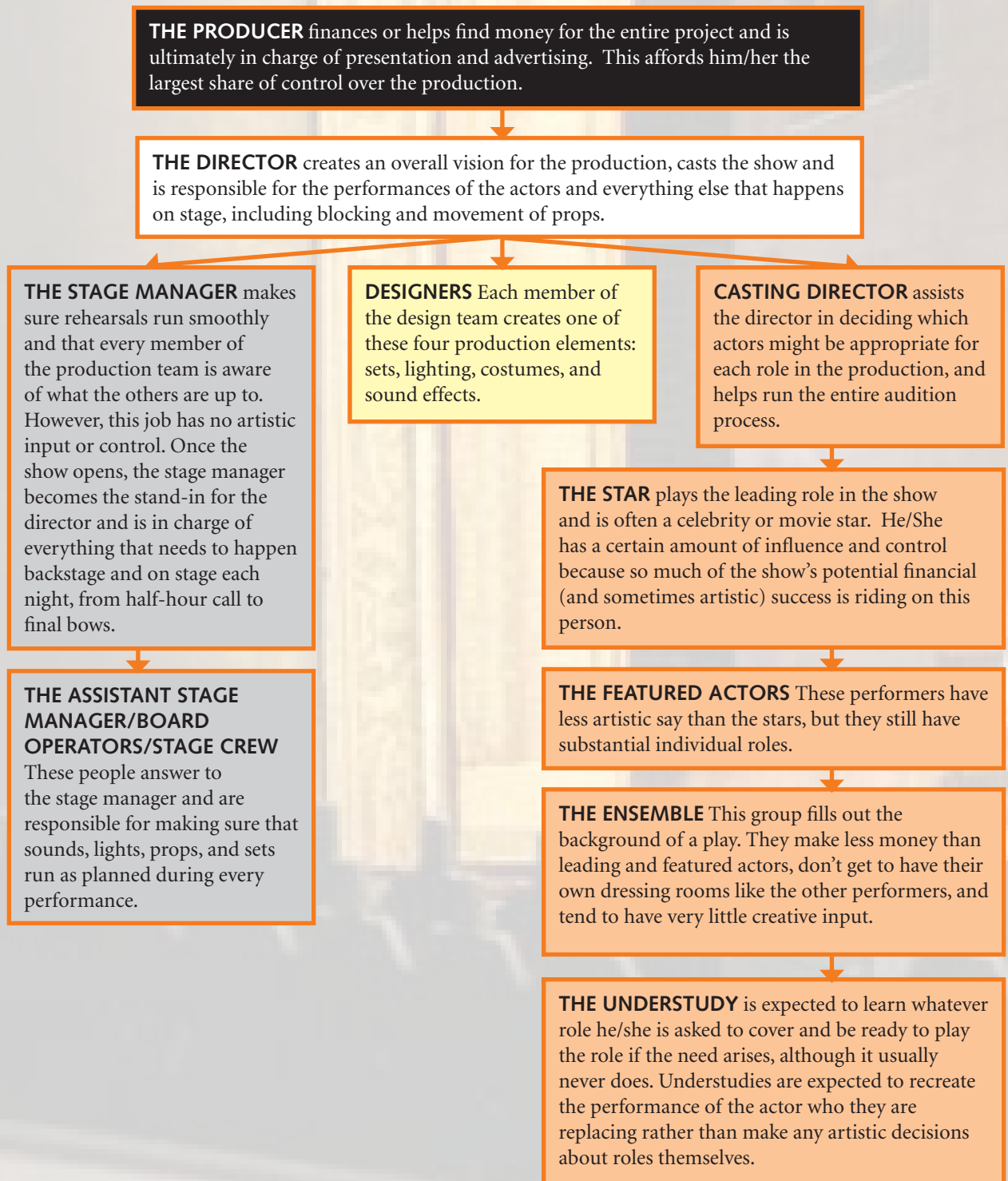


World of the

THE HIERARCHY OF THEATRE

THE THEATRE FAMILY TREE: BREAKING DOWN THE HIERARCHY



PLAY

FAMOUS UNDERSTUDIES

Although *The Understudy's* Harry never gets his shot at the spotlight, many Broadway understudies have gotten the opportunity to make it to the top. Some have gone on when the star couldn't and became hits in their new roles. Others have gone on to become successful leading actors in their own right years later. And while today all these actors can call themselves movie stars or Broadway leads, they all started as understudies.



In 1954's *The Pajama Game*, star Carol Haney was injured during the run of the show, and at a moment's notice, her vivacious, redheaded understudy had to take her place. That young understudy, an actress named Shirley MacLaine, stepped in and not only became a sensation in the role, but more significantly, also attracted the notice of a Hollywood producer, who just happened to be in the crowd that night. This led to movie stardom and later to an Academy Award for her performance in *Terms of Endearment*.



At the 2001 Tony Awards, an actor who started off the season as an understudy ended it as a Tony nominee. That actor was Brad Oscar, who had begun as the understudy for the role of Franz Liebkind in *The Producers* and who had been called in (and eventually taken over the part) when the original actor, Ron Obach, was injured. A year later, at the 2002 Tonys, it was Sutton Foster's turn. She had gone on as *Thoroughly Modern Millie's* title character at the last second at an out of town performance and was later given the role full time on Broadway. Foster not only went from understudy to Tony nominee—she actually made it onto the stage of Radio City Music Hall, winning the best actress statuette.



And although she is of course fictional, *42nd Street's* plucky Peggy Sawyer is perhaps the archetypal understudy—the one who takes over the lead at the last possible minute and becomes an unbridled success. Somewhere, in the back of their minds, every understudy remembers the famous quote: “Sawyer, you’re going out a youngster, but you’ve got to come back a star!”



“WHEN GREGOR SAMSA AWOKE ONE MORNING FROM TROUBLED DREAMS, HE FOUND HIMSELF CHANGED INTO A MONSTROUS COCKROACH...”

—Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*

FRANZ KAFKA

Understudy playwright Theresa Rebeck uses the stories and novels of German writer Franz Kafka as inspiration for her play and the fictional play-within-a-play. Kafka, whose family was of German heritage, was born in Prague in 1883 and went on to write a series of classic novels and short stories including *The Trial*, the tale of an innocent man accused of an unknown crime; *The Castle*, a dreamlike work about a man trying to gain access to a mysterious organization; and *Metamorphosis*, the story of a man suddenly turned into a giant cockroach.

Kafka and his three sisters grew up with an intensely overbearing father who, it is widely agreed, was responsible for many of the feelings of intense guilt and self-loathing that play so big a part in Kafka’s work. As one critic wrote, for Kafka and his sisters, life with their father was “a trial in which they were inescapably guilty.” Very few of Kafka’s works were published during his lifetime and, when Kafka knew he was dying of tuberculosis, he asked his best friend, Max Brod, to burn all of his writing once he died. However, when Kafka passed away in 1924, Brod didn’t destroy the manuscripts and instead readied them for publication, feeling that deep down that was what Kafka actually wanted.

Kafka’s unique works of fiction take place in worlds that are irrational, nightmarishly bureaucratic, and darkly ludicrous, in many ways similar to the bizarre, uncontrollable situation Harry, Jake and Roxanne find themselves in during *The Understudy*. Perhaps the most succinct summary of Kafka’s worldview came from the author himself when he said, “In the fight between you and the world – back the world.”

[\(Click here to watch a clip of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*\)](#)