

2.d. **Dressing Props Trainee, Trainee Storeperson, and Standby Props Trainee**

In this document, we'll look at the trainee positions in the Props department. There are three trainee positions:

- Dressing Props Trainee – AKA “Props Trainee”
- Trainee Storeperson
- Standby Props Trainee

The Dressing Props Trainee position will give you the broadest range of experience, so if you've never worked in the industry before, I recommend this position. Therefore, we'll begin by looking at this position in more detail.

Dressing Props Trainee – AKA “Props Trainee”

As a Props Trainee, you will be working predominantly with the dressing team, but you might also assist the team working in the prop store, and sometimes even the Standby Props team.

Roles and Responsibilities

Your main responsibilities will include:

- Assisting the dressing teams to dress and strike sets
- Unpacking and repacking props (either as they are collected from a hire company or to be returned to one)
- Loading and unloading trucks as they come in and out of the prop store
- Helping with prop makes, where possible
- Repairing and cleaning props that are broken or dirty
- Helping to organise and clean the prop store
- Assisting with general errands

As you can perhaps infer, this is a varied position that involves a lot of hands-on work and a fair bit of heavy lifting.

Most of the time, you'll be helping to dress and strike sets, and to move props. When you're not doing this, you might be in the prop store doing things like cleaning and repairing props, helping the Storeperson with paperwork, sorting and tidying props, and sweeping up.

For example, on *Death on the Nile*, there were a lot of antiques that needed to be polished. Myself and several others therefore spent several weeks in the prop store polishing them all.

Within the Props team, there might be a carpenter and / or a prop maker. If you have any skills in carpentry or prop making, you may find yourself helping them – depending on the job and the current workload. (We'll discuss this further in section 3 when we look at the skills you'll need to work in the Props department.)

Smaller Productions Vs Larger Productions

On smaller jobs, you'll often have a more varied role than you would on larger jobs. This can be beneficial because it allows you to see and learn about a wider variety of things. However, the downside is that you're often required to work harder since there is a smaller team, yet still a lot of work to be done.

For example, on *The Souvenir: Part 2*, I was working in the Props department. However, there were times when I was also assisting the Construction and Special Effects departments. A couple of times, I was also asked to do some buying as well – in the same way as a Petty Cash Buyer.

The variety of tasks was nice. However, we had a relatively small team, so we were all having to work harder than if we were working on a larger production, where we would have had a larger team. On the other hand, on larger jobs, you might be pigeon-holed into one particular task / role, which can be less enjoyable.

For example, on *Fast and Furious 9*, I was employed as a Dressing Props Trainee. However, I spent a lot of time assisting the Storeperson with tasks like completing paperwork and organising the prop store, as if I had been employed as a Trainee Storeperson. This was because there were enough Dressing Prop Hands, but the people working in Stores needed an extra pair of hands.

Regardless of the size of the production, you'll often find yourself doing something you didn't expect to be doing, and probably learning something new in the process. For example, when I was working on *Bridgerton*, one day some rug makers arrived. They had brought with them a selection of very large rugs, but

each one was in several pieces (for ease of transporting them). This meant that they needed to be joined together on-site. Because this needed to be done quickly, I was asked to help the rug makers join them together, which allowed me to learn how it was done.

On *His Dark Materials, Series 2*, we were told that the owner of the Production Company's office needed redecorating. I and another member of the Props department were asked to help with this. When we were doing so, I got talking to a few members of the Production Office. This allowed me to learn more about how the Production Company operated, which was an interesting insight into the industry.

Location Work and Studio Work

Some jobs will require you to work in remote locations. This is often nice in the summer (albeit rather hot), but less nice in the winter when it's windy and raining.

The nice locations can include places that you're not normally able to access as a member of the public, and it can feel a real privilege to be allowed into them. You may find yourself in posh manor houses, meeting all sorts of interesting people you wouldn't normally encounter. Other times, you might be in pretty valleys as the sun is setting, or expensive hotels in central London.

Other locations can make you question your life choices, and make you want to leave as soon as possible. For example, you may find yourself standing in a remote quarry in South Wales at 6:00am – with horizontal rain, and 40 mph winds. Alternatively, you may find yourself in dilapidated buildings, or maybe a gypsy camp. You may even find that, over the course of a weekend, someone has installed a cannabis farm in one of the locations you're working in – true story.

Other jobs might be based predominantly in studios. Studios are convenient in that most places you'll need to visit are nearby, including the sets, props store, and canteen. It's also exciting to be able to walk around and see different sets for different productions. The downside – if you like travelling and being in different places – is that you might not get to visit as many locations.

In summary, being a Dressing Props Trainee involves a lot of physical, hands-on work, and often leads to a lot of adventures – some good, some bad.

I hope that gives you a bit of an insight into working as a Dressing Props Trainee. Now let's look at the Trainee Storeperson position.

Trainee Storeperson

You don't have this position on every production. As the name suggests, you'll be working predominantly with the Storeperson and Assistant Storeperson. (Sometimes there won't be an Assistant Storeperson. On smaller jobs, there might be only a Storeperson.)

The Trainee Storeperson position will allow you to learn the necessary skills to become an Assistant Storeperson and ultimately a Storeperson.

Roles and Responsibilities

The position will require you to work with the Storeperson and the truck drivers to:

- Load and unload trucks as they come in and out of the prop store
- Unpack props that have arrived from a prop hire company, and re-pack props to be returned to a prop hire company
- Complete and organise paperwork – for example, paperwork relating to prop hires
- Repair and clean props that are broken or dirty, where possible
- Organise and clean the prop store
- Help the Dressing Props team to dress and strike sets, when the workload requires it

Let's look at these responsibilities in more detail.

Unloading Purchased Props and Hired Props

Throughout the course of the production, various props will arrive at the prop store. The vast majority of them will have been procured by the Set Dec department.

Some of the props that arrive will be purchased, and now belong to the production company. Others will be hired from a prop hire company, and will need to be returned at the end of the hire period.

If a purchased prop is lost or damaged after arriving at the prop store, this is inconvenient because the Set Dec department will probably need to buy a replacement. However, because it is owned by the production company, there aren't many further consequences.

However, if a hired prop is lost or damaged as a result of being used on the production, the hire company will apply a "Loss and Damage fee". This is often a lot of money compared to the original hire cost of the prop.

On the other hand, if a prop arrives and it's already damaged, the production company won't have to pay a loss and damage fee, providing the prop hire company is notified as soon as the prop arrives. This is because it's assumed that the props were damaged when they were sent out by the hire company, which isn't the fault of the production company.

With this in mind, when hired props arrive at the prop store, you'll help to document what arrives and the condition that they're in. If props arrive that are damaged, the hire company will need to be notified.

Dressing and Striking Sets

You may also be asked to go to a set to help strike it. However, your role probably won't be the same as that of the Dressing Prop Hands. Instead, you will have two main responsibilities:

1. Firstly, you'll help to ensure that all the hired props are accounted for, and none have been lost or broken while being used on set. To do this, you will need to consult the documents that were made when the props arrived at the prop store.

Depending on the set and the scene that was shot on it, this can be straightforward. Other times, you might find a set has been used for various stunts, in which case it looks like a bomb has dropped on it – almost literally. If this is the case, finding the necessary props and organising them can be like looking for unusually shaped needles in a rather chaotic haystack.

If any props have been lost or broken since being used on set, the prop hire company will need to be notified. This will incur a loss and damage fee. To avoid some loss and damage fees, where possible, you may be asked to repair and clean any hired props that are broken and dirty.

2. Secondly, you'll help to ensure all the hired props are returned to the correct prop hire company. To do this, you will probably work with the Dressing Prop Hands to group the props according to which prop hire company they are hired from. They will then be boxed up, loaded onto a truck, and sent back to the relevant hire company.

Organising the Prop Store

You will often be helping to tidy the prop store and organise the various props. Props are often organised according to the set they're due to be used for, but they can be organised in all sorts of ways, depending on the needs of the production, and the way the Storeperson would like them to be organised.

When things aren't too busy, you might have a chance to clean and sweep the prop store. If there's ever a period when you haven't got much to do, this is a good thing to fall back on.

If there's a particularly busy period, you might be asked to help the Dressing Props teams to dress some sets. However, as a Trainee Storeperson, this probably won't be a common occurrence, and it may not happen at all.

As with a Dressing Props Trainee, there will be a lot of loading lorries and general heavy lifting. Finally, you'll assist with any other general errands. For example, you may be asked to go with one of the Prop Drivers to collect some props and help load them onto a lorry.

If you've ever worked in a warehouse, this could be an ideal position for you – particularly if you're organised and good with logistics. Alternatively, some people find the position a bit restrictive because you're often working in the Prop Store all day. Some people prefer to be out and about, and when they're working in the prop store all day they feel like they're missing the party.

I hope that gives you an insight into being a Trainee Storeperson. Now let's look at Standby Props Trainees.

Standby Props Trainee

This position will allow you to learn the necessary skills to progress as a member of the Standby Props team, ultimately giving you the chance to become a Standby Props Hand.

As I explained in section 1, the Standby Props team is slightly different to the rest of the Props team. Most of the time, the Dressing Props team will be working "behind the scenes" and won't be present on set when shooting is taking place. The Standby Props team is the opposite; they are present on set when shooting is taking place, and don't get involved with work "behind the scenes".

The Standby Props team tends to consist of two people. However, on busy days, they can have three or even four people in total, one of which could be a Standby Props trainee. Alternatively, on smaller productions, the second person in a two-person team could be a trainee.

That said, there isn't a Standby Props Trainee on every production. Therefore, it's common for Dressing Prop Hands to become a member of the Standby Props team, without becoming a Standby Props Trainee first. Therefore, if you're certain that you'd like to become a Standby Props Hand, it might be beneficial to become a Dressing Props Trainee first, then step-up to become a Standby Props Hand.

Roles and Responsibilities

You'll work predominantly with the other members of the Standby Props team and the Standby Art Director. This is an even more varied position than working in the Dressing Props team.

The primary role of the Standby Props team is to have to hand the necessary props and equipment needed for the scenes that are being filmed that day. The necessary props and equipment are predominantly action props (character / hand props). These are bought and handed over by the Action Prop Buyer, if there is one, or the Set Dec department, if there isn't an Action Prop Buyer. During this handover, the Action Prop Buyer might explain how a particular action prop is used. The Standby Prop team will then ensure the actor uses the prop in that way.

There can be other props and equipment supplied by other departments as well. For example, the Props department may provide bags of rubber gravel for a stunt performer to land on during a stunt scene. Alternatively, the Special Effects department may provide pieces of equipment that are designed to work in conjunction with an action prop to achieve a particular effect.

For example, on *The Winter King*, Merlin was required to hold a drinking horn which then became filled with blood. The drinking horn had been designed so that it could be attached to a blood pump. The drinking horn was therefore provided by the Action Prop Buyer / the Set Dec department, and the blood pump and fake blood was provided by the Special Effects department.

Although being in the Standby Props team can be more varied than working in the Dressing Props team, it can also be more fast-paced and hectic. Part of the reason for this is because you're sometimes required to react to spontaneous

requests from the Director, Cinematographer, and members of the other departments.

For example, a scene being filmed that day might require an actor to cut a piece of fabric. It might be agreed in advance that the actor will cut the fabric with a pair of scissors, which you will have been provided with by the Action Prop Buyer.

However, at the last minute, the Director might ask if they can cut the fabric with a knife instead. It's then down to the Standby Props team to facilitate requests like these, where possible. In this example, you'd see if you have a suitable knife available, assuming the Action Prop Buyer hasn't already provided one as a backup.

It's not possible to facilitate every spontaneous request. However, it's often noticed and appreciated when you have the means to make last minute requests possible. Therefore, you're often required to think creatively and work quickly under pressure.

This is just one example of what could be requested on-set, and it's by no means the most ridiculous example. You'd be amazed at some of the things that can be requested at the last minute.

Furthermore, a prop that's been provided to fulfil a particular function might not work in the way it was intended. When this happens, either the prop needs to be altered or an alternative solution needs to be found. In addition, props are prone to breaking when being used (and sometimes abused) on set, so quick and temporary repairs often need to be made.

With all the various things happening on set, there are often a lot of time pressures. An entire film crew can cost tens of thousands of pounds per hour, if not more. Therefore, it's important to waste as little time as possible. Because of this, it's important to work as quickly as possible, particularly when dealing with unexpected problems.

All of these scenarios mean that working in the Standby Props team is a very "reactive" position. You're constantly reacting to things happening and problems occurring. This means you have to think on your feet and be spontaneous when something unexpected happens.

Working in the Standby Props team can therefore be hectic, stressful, and relentless. For this reason, some people hate it and prefer to avoid it altogether. However, other people enjoy it and find it exciting.

Although it can be stressful and frantic, you're very much at the centre of the action. You're able to work closely with the actors and Director, and experience some memorable moments. Furthermore, you can build a real sense of camaraderie with the rest of the crew. This is particularly the case when you're shooting in remote locations.

If you're shooting in remote locations, the production company will provide you with a hotel room for the night. The crew will typically be put in the same hotel, where possible. After a busy day on set, you can imagine that the hotel bar can be quite... lively in the evening.

Moments like this allow you to get to know other members of the crew and build contacts who might be able to offer you other work in the future – all while having a good time. Overall, the position involves a lot of hard work, but it can also be very exciting.

Benefits of Being a Trainee

The benefit of being in a trainee position is that you will quickly gain an understanding of how the department works, and of the specific responsibilities of other positions further up the job tree. This will help you to decide where you'd like to go next in your career.

Perhaps you'll decide that Props isn't for you, and that you'd prefer an office-based position in either the Art Department or Set Dec. Alternatively, you might decide you really enjoy working in Props, and it will give you further information and additional contacts to plan your next job.

Whichever trainee position you're in, the important thing is to get as full an experience as possible. Ask the people you're working with about their roles and the roles of other departments. Try to work with as many different people as you can, learn as much as you can, and make as many contacts as you can.

Epilogue

I hope that gives you an idea of the trainee positions in the Props Department. In the next document, we'll explore the lifestyle of each trainee position by considering aspects such as where you'll be working – either in an office or on site – and the type of work you'll be doing – either hands-on work or something desk-based.