

A Low-Cost Professional Backdrop

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A backdrop can add professionalism to your shows. It makes it easier for the audience to focus on you and allows you to make an entrance at the beginning of your program where there is normally no stage such as in a community room or gymnasium. It can also be positioned for use as a dressing or setup room for privacy. In this way, you can setup and tear down your show easily in front of an audience without them seeing you. During the program, it can hide larger props (or an assistant) from the view of the audience, provide a place for you to put your coat and packing boxes, and make your show seem bigger.

For some time, I was searching for a backdrop that was high quality, easy to use, lightweight, and low cost. I've finally found a solution.

I took a serious look at the Spider backdrop available through Laflin Magic. www.laflinmagic.com Although it is a fantastic product, the height cannot be adjusted, and it's expensive. A complete set is \$1495 (12 feet wide and 8 feet tall) and 35 lbs. It is also about 2 feet taller than the backdrop I chose. This means the ceiling must be at least 8 feet tall to set it up. To its credit, a taller backdrop might be better for a juggler, tall performer, or situation where the audience is looking down from a balcony.

I chose to purchase the Abbott's "Jet Set" stand. It is a very practical backdrop frame. It folds down to 3 feet long by 5 inches in diameter (at the flange) and can be set up in less than 30 seconds to make a frame measuring 6+ feet high and 6 feet wide. It is completely self-contained with no loose parts. Two units interlock for a 12 foot wide frame. One stand weighs less than 7 pounds. The Jet Set is available for \$110 from Daytona Magic item #UP432A www.daytonamagic.com (and several other dealers). Another advantage of the adjustable height is that it can be used for puppeteers.

Daytona magic also sells sets of curtains for \$225 to \$250 in various colors and styles made for the Jet Set. To save money, I planned to purchase raw material and sew something myself but I found something even better at our local JCPenney department store www.jcpenney.com. It was the perfect solution for a professional looking curtain that is lightweight, opaque, and wrinkle-free.

Here are the details so you can find them: JCPenney Home Collection, Grammercy Park 3 in 1 Panel Drapes of microfiber velvet. They are available in several colors. I liked: India Ink (Blue) #732 3184 1005 01 or Cabernet (Red Wine) #732 3184 0908 01. These curtain panels are 45" wide and 84" tall which is the perfect width to gather some for a proper curtain appearance and to use 2 panels for each Jet Set stand. They are sewn for a 2" rod on top and 1" rod on the bottom. If desired, you could slip a chain in the bottom for weight. There is a black backing on the fabric so they can be folded inside out to protect the velvet front fabric when traveling. Normally the panels are \$55, but they were on sale for \$27.50 each (and JCPenney's has frequent sales). Even at full price, they are about \$100 less expensive than those available from Daytona magic for a set of 2.

So, for a backdrop set that is 6 foot wide and 6+ feet tall you would spend about \$170 (sale price) for the stand and curtains. I highly recommend doubling the width by purchasing two jet sets and 4 curtain panels for \$340 total. This gives you a professional curtain system that is about \$1100 less expensive than the Spider system. The only major downside is that it is 2 feet shorter than the Spider system. This height difference can be made up by attaching a sign (with your performing name or program title) to the top of the Jet Set as suggested with the instructions included with the Jet Set.

Another nice touch is to add plastic protectors to the ends of the Jet Set legs and bars. I found these at our local hardware store. They're called furniture tips and were manufactured by Floor Shield #217-2237 (3/4 inch) and #217-2224 (5/8 inch). This will help protect a hardwood floor from scratches, your fingers from possible sharp edges, the curtain itself from getting snagged when you put it on, and it prevents the rods in the Jet Set from sliding all the way through. For only a couple of dollars, it's a good investment. You'll need 1 of the 5/8 inch size and 4 of the 3/4 inch size for each Jet Set.

You should also get a durable nylon carrying case for the Jet Set and curtains. I found the carryall duffle bag from Outdoor Products. www.outdoorproducts.com It's about \$13 and will hold two jet sets with the curtains. The length is the main factor. It must be at least 36" long and 40" would be best. I got the size X-Large at 14"x36" from our local Mills Fleet Farm. If you are traveling on an airplane, you'd need a hard shell suitcase to protect the Jet Set legs.

I recently became aware of another backdrop option. The Elegant banner system that expands to 8'x8' is about \$400 and an 8'x10' banner system is \$450. These systems are good quality and quite stable. They can be made of any fabric, they need a 3" to 4" pocket top and bottom. These may be purchased through Value Added Services via Mike Stenberg. <http://www.vasgraphics.com/index-4.html>
You can get graphics printed to advertise your name or you could use one to supplement your other backdrops that might be less expensive.

Now that you have the details on a low cost and quality backdrop, go out and get one to make your programs more professional!

