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It Pays to Be a Stagehand
Raking in dough at two landmarks

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Forget the lottery or the stock market. There's a better way to make a bundle. Just ask some stagehands at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center.

How does \$382,066 in wages and benefits sound for working as a Carnegie Hall stagehand. You read that right: three-hundred-eighty-two-thousand, sixty-six dollars.

With a union contract that gives them double and triple time, missed-meal bonuses and other extras, the stagehands push themselves to the max moving props and scenery, loading tons of show equipment, doing carpentry and electrical work and other tasks to up their hourly base of \$30.

Their incomes set a new standard for blue-collar workers.

"I don't know of anything like this in the history of the American working man," said Kenneth Jackson, editor of "The Encyclopedia of New York City" and a history professor at Columbia University.

In fact, four of the five highest-paid employees at Carnegie Hall are members of Local 1 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, who averaged \$334,309 in pay and benefits last year, the Daily News has learned.

The top backstage earner last year was Dennis O'Connell, 49, of West New York, N.J., who made \$382,066, including \$297,327 in salary and \$84,739 in benefits, as the veteran Carnegie stagehand in charge of props.

Not far behind O'Connell at Carnegie Hall was John Cardinale, of Whitestone, Queens, the stagehand in charge of electrical work, who made \$330,610 — \$257,285 in salary and \$73,325 in benefits.

In contrast, only one executive at the W. 57th St. landmark earned more. Former executive director Judith Arron made \$386,131 in salary, with no additional benefits.

At Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, four of the six top employees are stagehands who pulled down an average of \$216,979, tax documents show. Only Lincoln Center President Nat Leventhal and Senior Vice President Andre Mirabelli earn more, taking home \$525,247 and \$231,761, respectively, in salary and benefits.

Union chiefs say crew members work doggedly, often racking up 24-hour days and going weeks without a day off. This allows them to clock hundreds of hours of overtime.

"Sure, the money adds up," said James Claffey, business manager of Local 1. "But you eat your Thanksgiving dinners at Burger King, you never sleep, and you don't get to see your family for Christmas because there's always a show." Music hall brass say it's a tough job. "The stage crew often works a 10-day stretch without a day off, and sometimes works 48 hours straight," said Franz Xaver Ohnesorg, the executive director of Carnegie Hall.

The reason for this is that the producers and the venue insist that the same crew that rehearsed the show must run the show, arguing that the quality of a production or concert could suffer if a different crew arrived at night.

But experts said the generous salaries can hurt consumers by leading to sky-high ticket prices. At Carnegie Hall, an orchestra seat can sell for as much as \$100.

"High compensation levels can have an enormous potential impact on ticket prices," said Martha LoMonaco, theater professor at Fairfield University.

The stagehands' contract provides for double and triple time, missed-meal bonuses, extra pay for up to \$500 when concerts are broadcast on TV or recorded for albums, and other special fees.

The premium pay helped Richard Norton, of the upper West Side, ring up \$228,463 last year in salary and benefits as chief of stagehands at Avery Fisher Hall, and Artie Connaughton, 47, of Matawan, N.J., earn \$204,420 in salary and benefits as crew chief and shop steward at Alice Tully Hall.

"It's a job that exacts its pound of flesh and takes a huge toll on our families," said Connaughton as he examined a sound console during a recent tour of Tully.

Family sacrifice comes with the territory, agreed Frank Ferrante, of North Caldwell, N.J., another stagehand at the 1,096-seat Tully. He made \$213,391 last year in salary and benefits. "My priorities are my four kids and putting them through college and seeing them in a different line of work," he said. "Anybody who thinks working a 22-hour day is a picnic never worked a 22-hour day in their life," Terry Dunleavy, another stagehand at Alice Tully Hall, said as he tested

backstage lighting for a recent rehearsal of the "Lincoln Center Songbook."

"I love my job here, but it sure takes its toll," said Dunleavy, whose exact salary was not known.

Senior executives at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall declined to comment on compensation or union contracts, but praised the workers. "At Lincoln Center, we demand — and receive — the highest level of expertise from our stagehands," said Mirabelli.

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