



Making a Stage Where There Isn't One

Some ideas we tried that worked.

A high school where I was directing didn't have a theater (much to all the visual and performing arts people's dismay), but it did have a lecture hall. The seating was pretty well planned and comfortable in the room so a team of us including the drama coach, my husband, daughter, and I set about creating a way to turn the lecture hall's very classroom looking front into a stage with a backdrop, set pieces, and wings that turned the hallway stage left into "backstage." Variations of our ideas would work for just about any space.

Above is a picture of the lecture hall before...

And after



Not pictured are the side stairs on both sides of the stage. We cut the pipes for the backdrop frames different lengths (heights) to continue the backdrop up the stairs and give us performance space for small scenes.

The backdrop frames and curtains and black ABS frame, covered, used as a "wings" being used on the same stage.





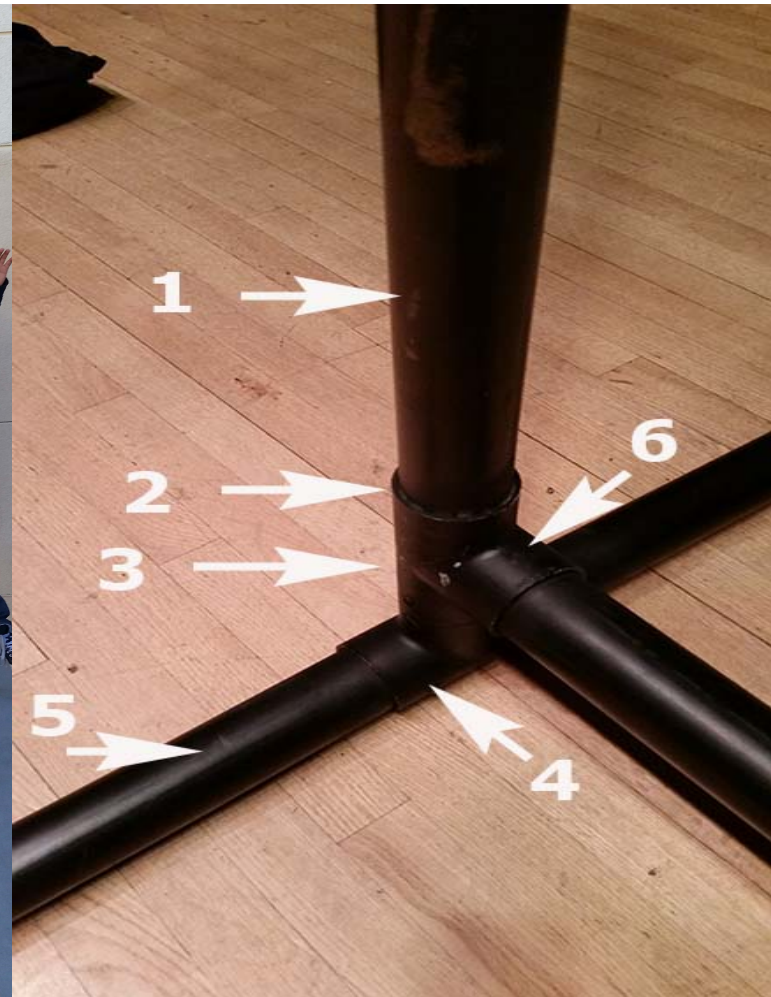
Black frame with black fabric used as a side stage wing.



What the large black frames are made of:

The elbows at the top are PVC elbows painted black like #2 in the frame joint picture.

PVC caps painted black finish off the feet.

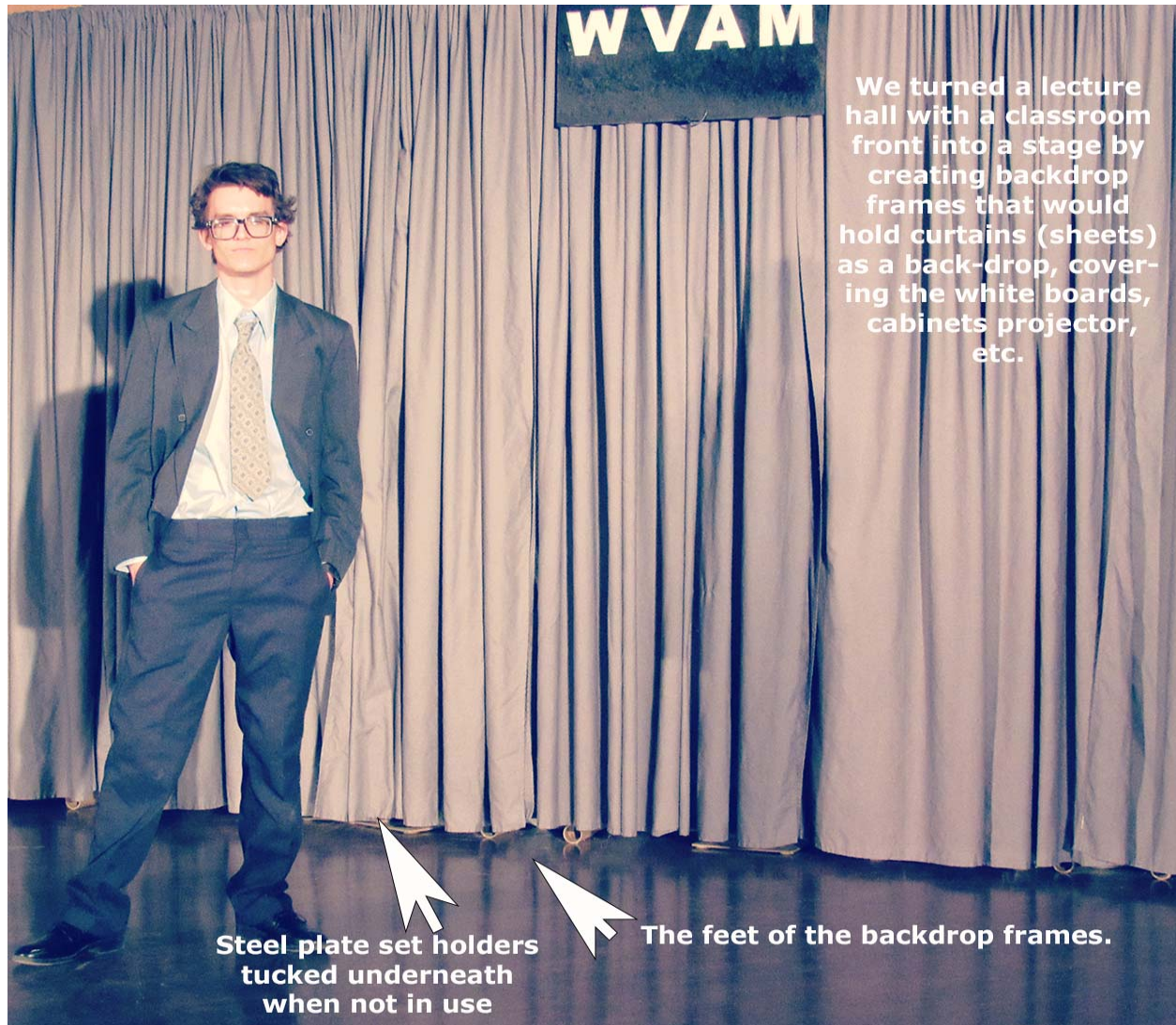


1. 2 inch ABS pipe
2. & 6. same piece – 2 inch PVC "T", painted black
3. & 4. same piece – 2 inch PVC "T", painted black
5. 2 inch ABS pipe

NOTE: ABS "Ts" are rounded and not square. PVC "Ts" are 90 degrees and fit any ABS pipe. Do not Glue ABS to PVC. It will not work. Use screws if needed to lock the joints together.



Backdrop frames with curtains :



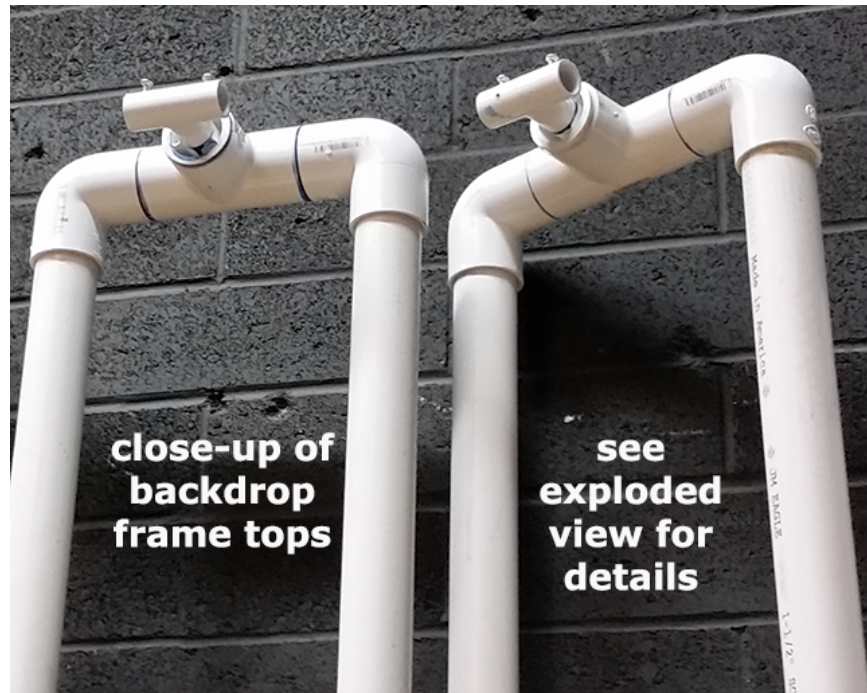
We turned a lecture hall with a classroom front into a stage by creating backdrop frames that would hold curtains (sheets) as a back-drop, covering the white boards, cabinets projector, etc.

For BROADCAST, we were going for an old 1940s movie look so we did costumes and set in mostly blacks, whites, grays, and sepia tones with splashes of color such as the villainess wearing progressively more red as the show went on, the jingle girls and boys props and costumes, and the patriotic scene at the end. We used gray sheets for the backdrop. Sheets work great because there are inexpensive and there is a pocket already built in.

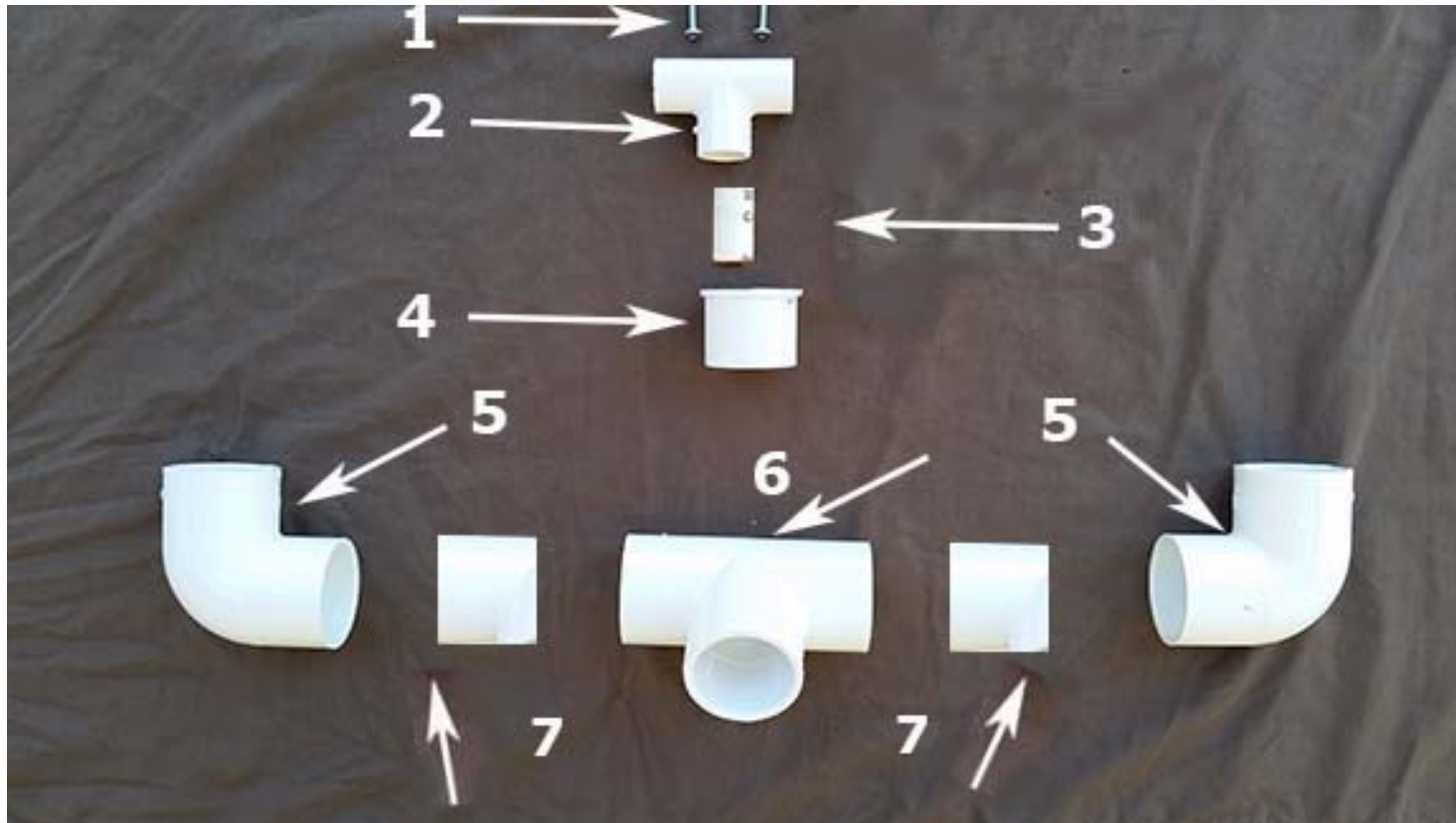


Backdrop frames with conduit going through the PVC T at top. These two frames are different heights so we could go up side stairs with them.





Backdrop frame top, exploded view

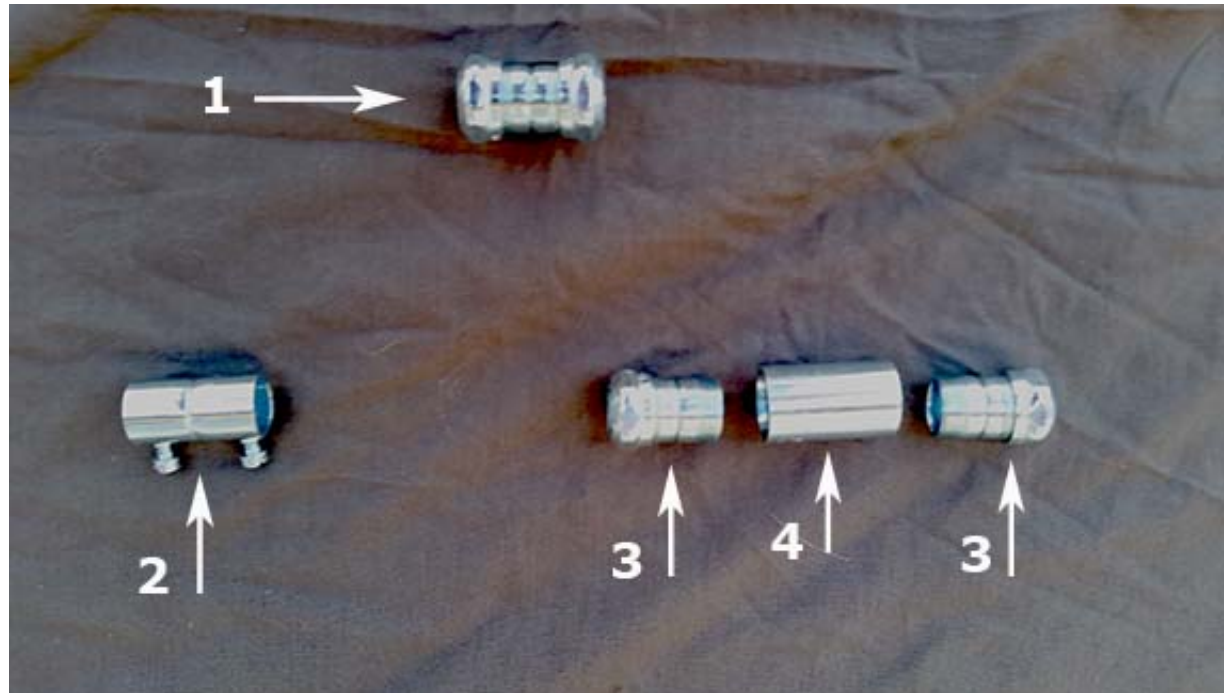


1. Panhead sheet metal screws (grind points flat to make them set screws)
2. 1/2 inch PVC "T". The conduit going through part #2 was 1/2 inch conduit.
3. 1/2 inch PVC pipe cut to sleeve size
4. 1 1/2 inch to 1/2 inch PVC reducer
5. 1 1/2 inch PVC 90 degree elbows
6. 1 1/2 in PVC "T"
7. 1 1/2 inch PVC pipe cut to sleeve size

Looking inside part #2
with screws intact

Hardware used to couple the backdrop frame conduit pipes together after the curtains have been slid onto the conduit pipes.

Note: If you don't use sheets, sew your pocket for the conduit pipe wide enough to allow room to slide over all the hardware and PVC parts.



1. $\frac{3}{4}$ inch compression coupler
2. $\frac{3}{4}$ inch coupler with set screws
3. $\frac{3}{4}$ inch threaded to compression coupler
4. $\frac{3}{4}$ inch threaded coupler

Feet of backdrop frames

Face the feet in the opposite direction of the top that holds the conduit so you can weigh them down with sandbags if needed and the feet won't stick out from under curtains (trip hazard).



Made similarly to the black frames but using all PVC pipes, T's and PVC caps. In this case, 1 ½ inch. We painted them brown to blend in with the wood floor of the lecture hall.



Although your backdrop frame could be wider, using the narrow frames with conduit cut in varying lengths hold the backdrop curtains enable us to conform to backdrop to follow the angle of the room and to follow the elevation change going up the six stairs on stage right (stairs not pictured). This gave us another small scene area far stage right.

Moveable Set Pieces

For most of our Plays in Days productions we wanted to have easy to move set pieces. We've used several designs, including using the big black ABS frames like we used for the wings, and also PVC frames using PVC pipes of smaller sizes, depending on the show.



Three black ABS frames covered and painted to look like brick walls for the dungeon scene in The "H" Factor. The red fabric and map seen in the picture on the previous page are sewn on the back side of these "pillowcase" frame covers. Easy to turn the black frames around for scene changes. Also, their feet can fit easily inside each other for a tighter look (like above) or the pieces can be separated or turned quickly - whatever you need.

Sample of (smaller than black ABS frames),
2 ½ feet wide and 4 feet wide PVC pipe
frames:



We needed to move these frames to a small
scene side stage that was actually just this set
of steps.

Because we needed all the floor space we could
get on the steps, we couldn't use the normally
longer PVC frame feet we had used in
productions with more floor space, so we came
up with a new design – steel frame set holder
bases.

(See exploded views for details.)

(See exploded views of safety

covers for details.)

Instead of using the PVC pipe feet like those of the smaller PVC frames (shown in a few pages down) we slid the open PVC frame bottoms right onto the pipe on these steel bases. (These bases have two different size pipes because we wanted to re-use frames from a previous production that were made from two different size PVC pipes. "Reduce, reuse, recycle!" ☺) If you build these, pick one size of PVC for your frames and you won't need two different size pipes on these steel plate bases.

For quick and safe movement of the set during the show:

Stage Crew Team 1:

- Removed the safety caps off the step steel plate bases, preparing them for the set pieces

Stage Crew Team 2:

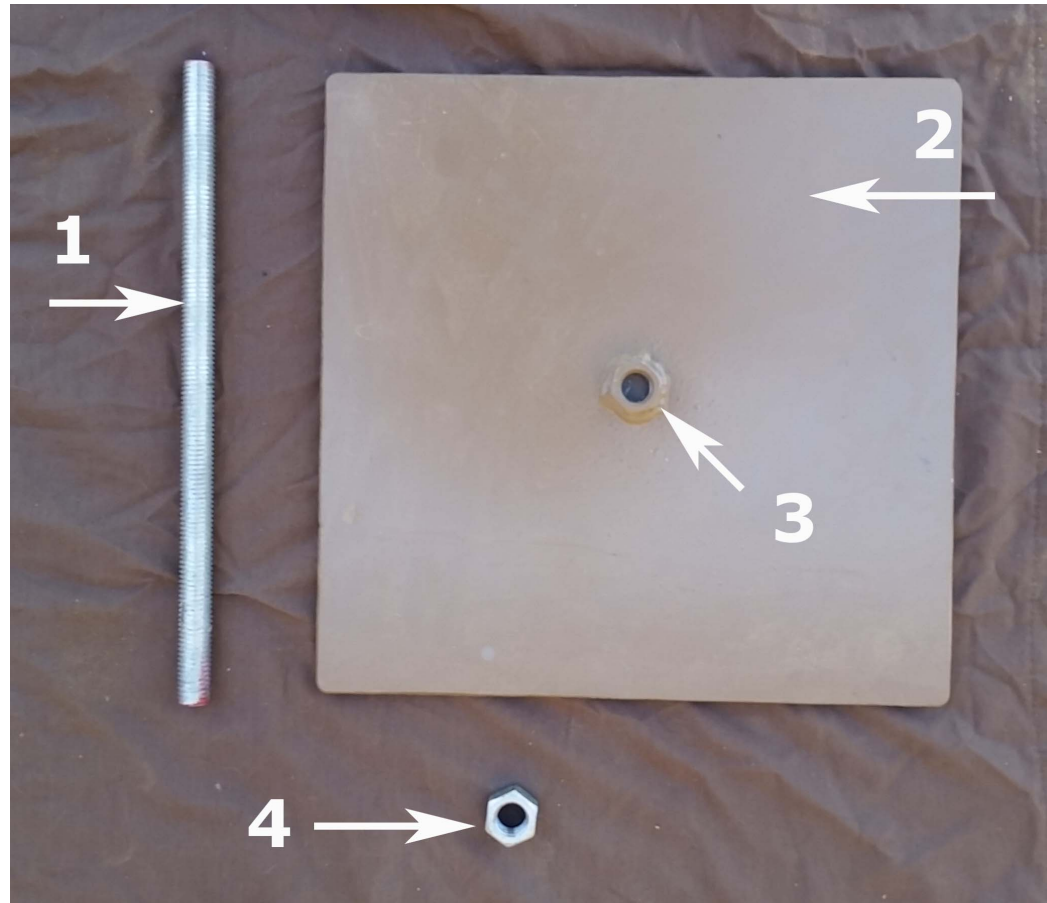
- Lifted the set piece frames off the steel plate bases on the main stage
- Moved the set pieces over to the steps and placed the pieces on the now uncovered steel plate bases

Stage Crew Team 1:

- Put the safety caps on the stage steel plate bases (after Team 2 lifted the set pieces)
- Slid the bases underneath the backdrop curtains where they awaited pulling out to use for another scene change.
- ***Stands should remain covered with safety caps **whenever** they are not in use!***

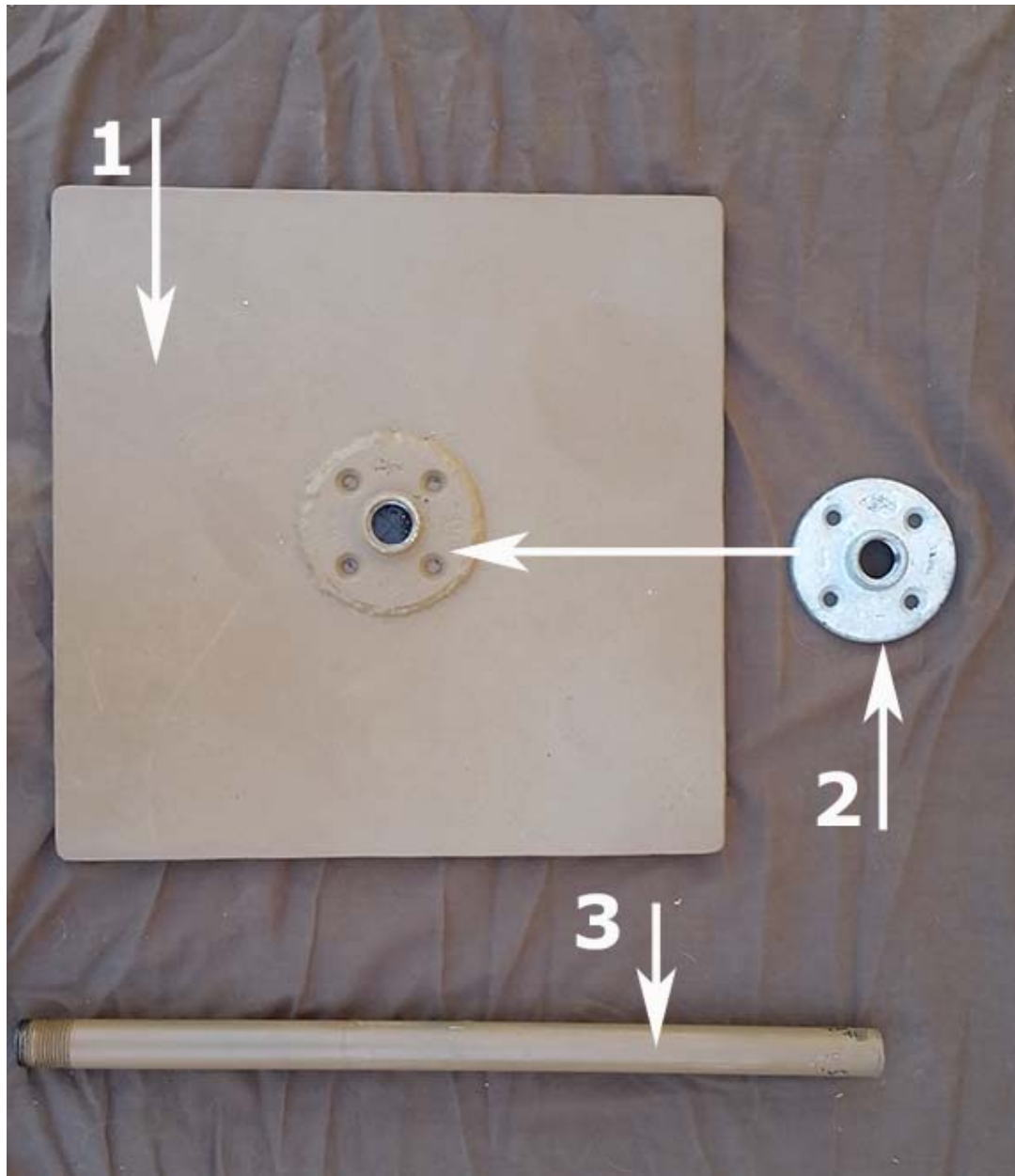


Use pipes and nuts of sizes to fit snugly into whatever size PVC pipe you decide to use for your frames. For the smallest PVC frame set piece, we used 1/2 inch size pictured below.



1. 1/2 inch standard threaded stock 2" in length
2. 12x12x1/4 steel plate (we painted brown to match stage floor)
3. 1/2 inch standard thread nut welded in place
4. sample of 1/2 inch standard thread nut before it is welded in place

You can use steel pipes and nuts of sizes to fit snugly into whatever size PVC pipe you decide to use for your frames. The larger the PVC pipe, the larger the steel pipe. Alternate size and design shown next page.



Larger pipe with a flange was used for this medium PVC pipe frame base. Either design will work. Pick your size.

1. steel plate
2. threaded steel floor flange welded on
3. threaded pipe



Safety caps for steel plate bases

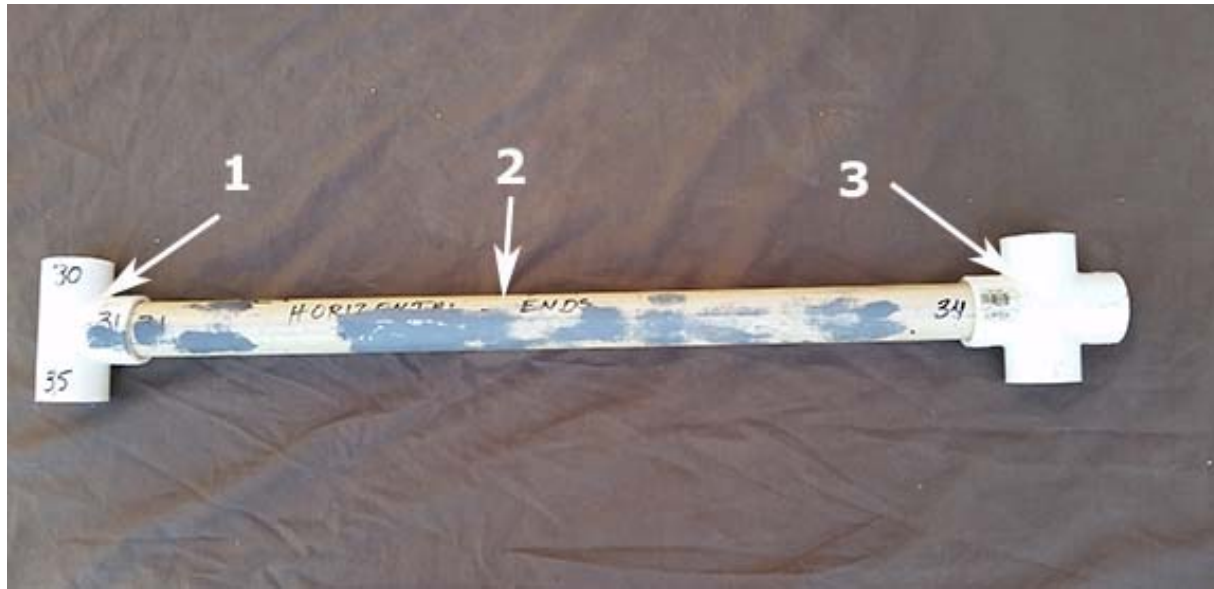
1. 1/2 inch PVC pipe cut to 6 inch length
2. 1 x 1 1/2 inch PVC reducer
3. 1 inch PVC end cap
4. completed

Smaller PVC frames uncovered, on steel plate bases:

Structured basically the same as the ABS frame, except that using all PVC parts will work. For the wider of these two frames, we used PVC Ts on the sides and PVC crosses in the middle to hold extra horizontal bars for stability. (The thinner PVC pipes tend to bend and pull loose from their joints if the pipe pieces are too long.)
Sample parts next pages.



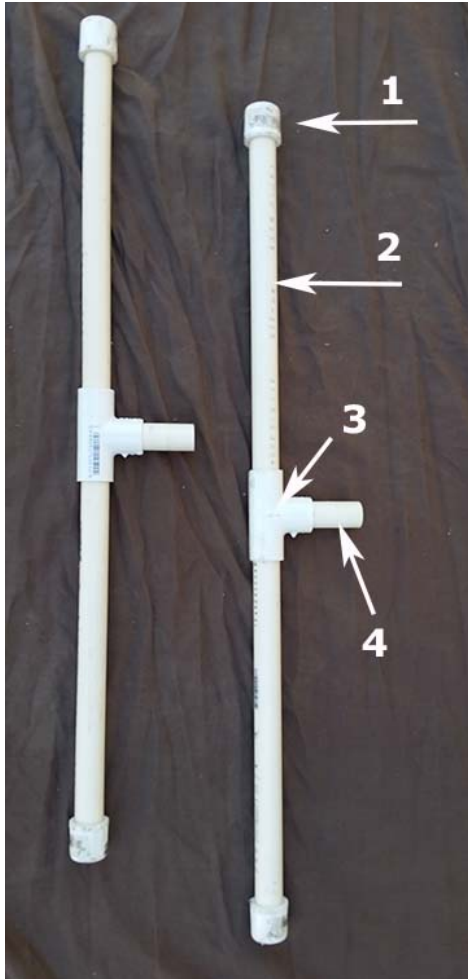
If you have room on stage for your PVC frames to have feet that stick out farther than 6 inches from center as they do when using the steel plate bases, OR if you want to be able to flip the pieces around and / or have them be light enough for a youth to pick up and move easily, you can use feet instead of bases. We did for most productions. Parts for these frames are shown in this and the next page.



This is the horizontal piece for the 4" wide frame.

1. PVC "T"
2. PVC pipe
3. PVC "Cross"

Part sizes will vary according to your needs and choices but the basic parts for the PVC frame pictured above are PVC pipes, "T'S of matching diameter, "Crosses" of matching diameter, PVC caps of matching diameter and feet (pictured next page)



These are the feet of the smallest PVC frame when not using the steel plate bases.

Use an additional PVC "T" (not shown) to connect these feet to your frame.

1. PVC cap
2. PVC pipe
3. PVC "T"
4. PVC pipe

Medium PVC frame feet



Other uses for frames.

Shorter ABS frames wrapped in paper and leaves and being used to depict a withering tree: (top cross pipe removed)...

...and to depict a grape vineyard.

We hope these pictures and diagrams have helped spark a “We can totally do this thing” feeling in you. Don’t let a lack of a stage stop you from fulfilling your dreams as a director. We hope your “MacGuyver” helper is as wonderful as ours was but, if not, we hope he helped you see how this can be done.

