

The Business of Theatre in Canada: *What you need to know as you graduate and pursue a career*

My first thought when asked what graduates need to know about a career in theatre was “Don’t do it!”

But this is supposed to be 1000 words and I’m nothing if not diligent. So let’s expand on that.

There is a major difference between the art of theatre and the business of theatre.

The business is the hardest work. The work we aren’t always prepped for. For instance the realities of type casting, and personal biases and nepotism in the industry and leaders not wanting to take risks, lead to some folks getting hired ahead of others. Some people are just better at talking the talk and “schmoozing” and padding their resumes. Some people get ahead with very little talent or skill.

But theatre artists TALK and if you are bad at the job or not good in the room, word will get out. So don’t worry about others successes or even their failures, focus on your journey and do your work to the best of your abilities. That will eventually be noticed.

Here are some tips that I wish someone had told me:

Do not be an asshole (i.e. find value and respect in people regardless of gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, ethnicity, national origin, age, sexual orientation, religion, different ability, economic class, employment status, or education to name a few!).

Do not be difficult to work with.

Say yes to the offer.

Get the job done, and meet the deadlines agreed upon. Be diligent and detail oriented and a team player concerned about what your collaborators need regardless of how your brain, body and heart functions. Manage yourself and don’t make it other people’s problem.

You are not the most important person in the room. Theatre is a collaborative medium and many others have deadlines that intersect with yours.

Don’t use the past experiences of your life as a way to get out of doing the work. Making art can be hard and can feel unsafe. Examine what safe truly means. Coming into a process vulnerable and open is your responsibility but this is different from coming in messy and fragile. Make sure to ask questions about the story, the project, the team so you can make an informed decision – YOU CAN SAY NO to accepting a project, especially if it is likely to bring up unresolved trauma in the room. This is not the same as aforementioned “saying yes to the offer”. In that case once you’ve done your research and accepted the job....get fully on board.

Endeavour to create brave spaces with the team. Lay out community guidelines at the beginning of the process but don’t get too caught up in building a container that you forget to do the work that fills it.

Invite people to see your work but do your research. Know the person’s name, how to spell it and what their title is. Know the name of their theatre company and how to spell that correctly.

Know every theatre company in your town or city. Know their mandates. Know who runs them and who they took over from and when. Know what their upcoming season’s are and what they did over the last few years.

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Go to openings or closings and stay for talk backs. If you can't afford tickets some previews are free. Ask about discounted or subsidized tickets and rush tickets. Find the artist resources in your community (Vancouver has the Greater Vancouver Professional Theatre Alliance as an example) that will list artist meetups or search them out on social media. Sign up for newsletters of companies you like and read them. Donate to companies you like. Even if its \$5 once a year. It will go a long way. Give back and be of service. Volunteer! Join Boards of Directors.

Say hello to people at the industry events. Introduce yourself. Ask genuine questions about other people at industry events. Do not tell people what you are working on next if they don't ask you. Talk about life and your other passions and hobbies. Make genuine connections with people.

Be humble. When you think you're working hard enough, work harder. Document ALL your work and learn how to make a good looking website so you can put it all on there. Look at other websites and make yours professional looking.

Get used to living with very little money and likely working 6 joe jobs. Find joe jobs in theatre if you can help it.

Find an industry mentor and try and work for and with them. There are grants you can apply for. Start writing them early. Ask for help with these. But sometimes you have to do a bit of free work for a while before you'll get hired.

Your work is probably good but you are not that special. And there are many other people who can likely do what you do. So be a good human above all.

This is not rocket science or brain surgery. We are not literally saving lives or saving the world. We can work towards that but don't get too precious with what you do and who you are.

Life is too short to work with assholes. So don't be one yourself.

Remember that the final ingredient of theatre is the audience. They are vital. If they don't come you are sitting in a dark room navel gazing. Find ways to connect to the communities you exist in and entice them to come to the theatre, make sure there's something in it for them!

Keep in mind as you age the romance of being the starving artist might fade. There is always the realities of paying rent and perhaps trying to have a long term relationship and perhaps having children who need attention and focus and food and so much stuff!

Life isn't and shouldn't be all about work. And yet to get ahead in this industry you have to be hyper focused.

So sometimes its good to let your dreams change and evolve as you grow. Sometimes its good to let go of old ideas of what you think your life will be in favour of what actually makes you happy and fills your cup.

Wherever your path leads if you have given it your ALL (and then some more), if you have been a kind, considerate, team player dedicated to the bigger picture, dedicated to making positive change in this world then you have succeeded and you have likely had a positive impact on those around you.

Ok so 1088 words. Told you....always do more!