

“What would you like to share with those completing their training and entering the theatre milieu?”

Fire and Chance

By Judith Thompson

When I graduated from the National Theatre School, I was like a rocket. I had been broken early on by that system, but I repaired myself and became stronger than ever. I was creatively fulfilled, especially by work we students shared with one another, and hungry for more. I was healthy, looking my best and feeling empowered, ready for anything and everything. All my thoughts were about getting an agent and the perfect photos and launching myself into the scene.

That somewhat delusional optimism was critical for survival in the world of theatre. I did book two jobs right away—one was a role in a bittersweet American play, which we would tour to Ontario schools—right up to Rainy River. The other was an Alan Ayckbourn play in Winnipeg, directed by a man who had been a guest director at the school. I had chosen that over another offer, also by a guest director from my time at the school. So things seemed to be going quite well.

But the golden key to my real artistic success, and in fact, my future, was a big mess of a manuscript sitting on a desk that had been made from a door, in the room, I rented in a big old student house on Albany Avenue in Toronto. During that first summer out of school, before I booked the roles, I was worked as a waitress, a tutor, and a supervisor at a group home for folks with disabilities. I also worked on a play that I had begun back in theatre school, centred around a traumatizing and life-changing event that occurred a few summers back when I worked as an assistant to a social worker in Kingston. I showed the play to another director/dramaturge who had been a guest artist at the school. He was wildly enthusiastic, and gave me some sound dramaturgical advice, as well as showing the play to everyone he knew in the theatre.

So, looking back, there were two keys to success: one was having the **fire** in my heart, and the lifelong love of literature, and the *encouragement of my peers* when writing my own monologues for our Friday student run shows, that compelled me to write *The Crackwalker*, and the second, just as important, was having the *connections* I made in theatre school. If I had just submitted my play to a slush pile, I don't think anyone would have produced it. These days, there are many more opportunities for new playwrights than there were then, but it is still challenging. As far as acting, my artistic focus and hunger simply shifted over to writing.

Unless you work steadily, in play after play after play, or you are a Stratford or Shaw star, it is almost impossible to make a living as a stage actor. However, if you combine stage work with television and film work, it is possible. There is a lot of competition, so you have to understand and build your unique strengths. Are you funny? Never hide that in auditions. Work it. Are you loud and outrageous? Let it shine. Are you physically unique? Do NOT try to look like everyone else. They are finally looking for unique. Casting directors look for types to fit the roles in the script “bibles.” Know which type you are. This is only slightly true in the theatre, where the combination of talent, dedication, respect for the process and the company plus likability will take you a long way.

You also need to be willing and able to continue your artistic practice without compensation, for a while. Nobody commissioned my early plays, I just wrote them and hoped for the best. I wrote them because I had the burning need to bring those characters to life. When I had written four plays, and gained a lot of recognition, I was recruited by the University of Guelph to interview for a job teaching there. Much later on, when I had a secure job at the University of Guelph, I was in a position to co-found RARE theatre, a company dedicated to giving a

theatrical platform to communities who felt unseen and unheard. We managed to secure a few good government grants, which enabled us to hire artists, usually without experience, from these communities, for example, a cast of 9 artists with Down syndrome, and surround and support them with professional designers and stage managers. I was able to work without pay, so we could use what would have been my salary, to hire extra cast members, or support team.

Think of theatre art like poetry. Nobody expects to make a living at writing or producing poetry or spoken word. They do it because it is their passion. It gives them a place in the world. It is a community they thrive in. You can make theatre in a community centre, a laneway, a van, or someone's living room. I have seen brilliant work in all of those places. It doesn't have to be Mirvish or Broadway or even Tarragon to be legitimate art. If you are still struggling to make a living, the greatest hope is to find a *theatre adjacent* way of making an income: teaching public speaking, running a theatre camp, or, if you have succeeded artistically in indie theatre, after a dozen years or so you may be hired by a college or even University to teach your art.

As a sixty-eight-year-old artist who has been practicing in the theatre since I was twelve years old, I can tell you that the most gratifying moments of my life, apart from my family, have been and continue to be practicing my theatre art, whether it be playwrighting, or devising. Do what you have to do to make a living, but never stop being who you are, a theatre artist.