

Specificity in relation to the Business of Theatre.

a theatre poem, fall 2023, Jacob Zimmer

The “Business” isn’t great. You know that. Also, it never has been.

There are many unknowns in a life in the theatre. As there are in life.

This is the terror and the possibility.

The business is bad. AND, the craft and practices of live performance will continue.

And will need people like you.

Especially if business is bad.

In the bad times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the bad times – Brecht

Many Ways

There are many ways to make a life in the theatre. Your path will be as specific to you as mine has been to me.¹

“Embrace your specificity, along with the specificities of time and place” is one of the few pieces of advice safe for the next half decade. Any tips, tricks, and perspectives in this “book” are specific to those of us writing them – reflections of what’s worked for us, or what we wish we’d done.

¹ Often, I think previous generations do a disservice by glossing over our realities of entering the field and we concentrate so much attention on the brightest stars, that we obscure the truths of the rest of us.

I’ve never paid the rent for a year “only” being “in studio.”

To pay rent I first spent 12 years in combinations of theatre and event production crews, retail, serving and bartending, grant writing, teaching / facilitating, Employment Insurance, Ontario Works.

These were the jobs that covered rent and had enough flexibility to take on projects. Or the safety nets I needed to get through. Also, I’ve had caring and kind partners with “real jobs” and a supportive family who could take me in, if needed.

I decided very early that I was more of a self-producer than a gigging actor, director etc... I didn’t have the constitutional make up for bulk auditions or freelance creative life. But I do have stubbornness, opinions, and desire to see and be a part of remarkable experiences. And I believe that theatre can contribute to a world I want to live in. And those beliefs shape the theatrical rooms I’m going to be in – both the one that will have me and the ones I want to be in.

Making that decision has repercussions of course. If I also wanted to be on Netflix shows and take a swing at the fame lottery, I’d have to adjust my approach and accept that somethings may be mutually exclusive.

And it is entirely because of the experiences producing and creating that way that I have the job and life I do now. Which doesn’t mean I don’t have days I wish I had taken other routes, but those days are inevitable no matter the route taken. Meditation, therapy, embodied practices and friends can help with such inevitable doubts.

We can change our minds, of course. Writes the 47-year-old in grad school.

Cultivating specificity

Aided by contextual awareness,
Find rooms for listening more than talking.
Noticing what is specific in what you notice.
What isn't happening that seems obvious to you? Try that.

What ingredients and preparations go into creating meaningful experiences? What missing tastes do you crave?

Areas of specificity may include:

Relations to money; Content of stories; Visual aesthetic; Relation to place; Relation to history; Interests; Identity; Use of language; Performance approach; Fame; Validation; Promotion strategy; Use of space; etc...

Sometimes it is hard to recognize and name our specificity and so we claim that our positions are universal or “best practice” – this disconnect weakens our specificity.

Self-awareness is developed by trying things out, conversation, collaboration and good talk therapy.

Embodied relations to people and places.

How do you want to spend your time?
Where? With whom?
What rooms in the theatre appeal to you?
Which room in the theatre do you excel at?
Which room in the theatre can provide the quality of life you need right now?²

What kind of non-art work can you do sustainably?
What sense of self exists grounded deeper than external success?

Note on the limits and uses of planning

Plans with specificity make the divine laugh.

Detailed ten-year plans aren't worth the bits the PDF takes, but the process of planning can be very helpful articulating priorities that suggest directions. If I want a life of touring 11 months a year or if I want my life to be mostly off-grid, I need to make some different choices, no matter the winding path that may or may not get me there.

Also, if I say, “I want to live in Whitehorse,” AND “I want to be at the heart of Canada's creative industry”, one of those desires needs to transform.

My desires are strong, but they are in relation to outside realities.

² These three don't always align in time and place, and that is the cause of pain.

It's all relational.

Being specific doesn't mean refusing influences, agreements or community norms.

Theatre is an activity of commitments between humans.

We are coming together with other specific times, places, and people. And they are all relational.

Specific People

Theatre is mostly spending time with people.

Make work with people you want to spend time with.

In collaborators, pick time and commitment over talent every time. Find rooms for listening more than talking.

Be curious and eager to make new friends.

Find ways to play / jam / experiment in low stakes ways.

Music, comedy, and dance remain out ahead of theatre on this. See what they're up to.

Show up and show interest.

Notice the people at the panel who roll their eyes the same time you do and go talk to them. Talk about the art you love and the experiences that excite you. And ask others about theirs. Sometimes the "secret of business" is to not talk about business.³

Specific Places

Places exist and places are created. Create places you like being with people in.

Notice the places you are. Notice neighbourhoods and communities of practice or love. Latitude and proximity to other people.

Theatre is local in the moment, and in the means of promotion and production and interpretation.

The "internet" is a place containing many smaller places. It's possible now to mistake the internet for the only or best place.

My busy-ness with theatre is confirming that other places are important too.

There are places in this country where a major ambition of many people who live there is to live in that place. I grew up on Cape Breton Island, which is one of those places. The Yukon is also one of those places.

³ Corporate mindsets want to reduce the relational to "networking," which then can feel like forced socializing, schmoozing or boot licking, but if we avoided everything that's been co-opted, we'd have little left. Plus, they stole it because of its value.

Places change ambitions. We get to choose.

Specific Times

Theatre is temporary. We tell stories in passing moments. Sometimes, ideas or projects come at the wrong time, and sometimes the stars align, and the timing is perfect. It can be very hard to tell in advance.

Theatre is temporary specific – even a published script will mean different things across time. A show in January means differently in June. *Three Sisters* is a different play if there's a war in Europe.

I hear the Brecht quote at the beginning suggesting not that all the singing during bad times should make people feel the “bad”ness, but that singing of all kinds can continue in relation to the times.

In these bad times, the songs I need are ones of pleasure and love.

Of the capacity of humans to strive for right relations.

Of the struggle of honest effort to be better together.

This isn't “escapist” in the sense of distraction from the bad times, but in the sense that getting out of the bad times will require inspiration, capacity, and wisdom.

I also want to say it's ok to be or feel “out of time” as well - to be too early or to be the monastic caring for ancient wisdom.

These positions are also “in relation” to the current one – or so I tell myself.

Your turn.

Relational mixes of these specificities are my inspirations and hope for theatre in these times.

And we'll need people like you to weave that future.

Thanks.

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