

SO YOU WANT TO WORK IN THEATRE?

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Introduction

Theatre is like an iceberg. For every actor you see performing on stage, up to ten more people are behind the scenes, out of sight, working their socks off, one way or another, to bring the show to you.

Theatre, without ‘the’ in front of it, is not a building. It means the whole activity of creating live performances and it can be done anywhere, in almost as many different ways as there are people. Think, for example, of the differences between street theatre, site-specific theatre, promenade theatre and devised theatre. Educator Rachel Kimber describes theatre simply and inclusively as ‘the presentation of thoughts, concepts and emotions by individuals or groups to an audience’, and I can’t better that.

Some of these theatre workers, such as stage managers, dressers and scene-shifters, are physically close to the actors and only just out of the audience’s sight. The people operating the lighting rig and sound system are slightly further away, but still nearby if this is theatre in a building.

Before the show you’re watching saw the light of day, designers worked with the show’s director. Then there are the people who made the costumes and built the sets to the designer’s specifications. Together this creative team has ensured that the set, costumes, sound and lighting support

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the director's overall vision for the play – which had to be written by someone who may still be alive and around, if it's a modern piece.

Elsewhere in the venue, whatever form it takes, there may be a theatre manager and people selling tickets and programmes, collectively known as 'front of house'. Others could be on hand to sell you ice creams, interval drinks or other refreshments.

And behind the show is a producer or production company who invested money in it, or persuaded others to do so. Someone marketed the production so that the public knows about it. That means posters, flyers, internet exposure and working with the press.

It adds up to a large hidden workforce, all of it creative and skilled. There is a great deal more to 'working in theatre' than acting or performing, which is only the visible tip of that huge, unseen iceberg.

Really large companies, such as the Royal Opera House, National Theatre or Royal Shakespeare Company, employ hundreds of people, including some whose jobs you might not immediately associate with theatre. These include accountants, administrators, engineers, finance managers, health-and-safety staff, IT experts, human-resources managers, security staff, education managers, website developers, fundraisers – and more.

And once a show is finally staged, in comes the press, who write reviews so that their readers know what's on and whether or not it's any good. Theatre critics are, in a sense, 'working in theatre' too.

So is anyone else who writes about it. I, for instance, am working in theatre by writing for *The Stage* and by penning books like this one. And don't forget publishers such as Nick Hern Books either: everyone involved in the publication of this book is working in theatre too.

Opportunities

This book introduces you to some of these jobs and how you might get started in these many and various, exciting careers in theatre.

And the good news for young people wanting to work in theatre is that in many areas there is a serious shortage of people who can do many backstage jobs, especially the technical ones. The industry has – as everyone knows – plenty of actors, many of whom have to deal with long periods of unemployment. You are much more likely to find work backstage.

In 2008, research by the then newly founded National Skills Academy for Creative and Cultural Skills conducted a survey, which predicted that by 2017 the industry would be short of 30,000 skilled people to undertake backstage work for theatre and other live events. Some progress has been made since then towards setting up training opportunities to deal with this shortfall. That means more ways for you to get into these jobs.

The preparatory years

If you are serious about wanting to work in theatre, what should you be doing to prepare yourself? No one who wants to work in the industry can have too much theatre experience.

That is why the first section of this book is about grabbing every chance to ‘do’ theatre in the years before you start vocational training, which in many cases means while you are still at school, in your teens and/or even younger.

Choices

The second and longest section of this book is about the many different jobs in theatre that are open to you. You certainly don't have to act to work in theatre, although you probably need to be passionate about the world of theatre.

If, for instance, you love theatre but are good at, and drawn to, hairdressing, has it occurred to you that you might do hair and wigs in theatre?

Suppose a career as an electrician is beckoning, but you don't really want to turn your back on your beloved theatre. Why not combine the two and become a specialist live events or theatre lighting designer or technician?

Are figures and money what you're drawn to? Well, accountancy will probably please your parents and it will certainly pay the bills. But, if you're determined enough to work in theatre, you could aim for an accountancy job within the performing-arts industry. Or you might consider producing, which is all about money.

The options and combinations are almost endless.

And if you really must...

Finally, of course, although I've been playing down performance as a way of working in theatre, every show needs a cast. Even though, as we've seen, they are just the visible tip of the iceberg, theatre also depends on its frontmen and women – its actors.

That's why the last section of this book tells you about some of the routes open to you if you are determined to act, and how you might fund training.

It also discusses some of the less obvious professional jobs actors might consider, such as corporate acting or working in schools as facilitators.

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One of this book's main messages, however, is that there are many more lucrative and reliable opportunities to work in theatre off the stage than on it.

Casting Director

What does a casting director do?

A casting director assembles a group of actors who are suitable for a role and presents them to the director and producer to choose from.

That involves talking to agents, doing availability checks, setting up casting sessions, typing 'deal memos' (an informal agreement) and contracts – possibly juggling two or three productions at once. So it's potentially quite stressful.

Some institutions still maintain internal casting departments – the National Theatre, the RSC and the BBC, for example – but most casting directors are independent freelancers running their own offices, expanding their staffing needs on a production-to-production basis.

How do you become a casting director?

Most casting directors start either as a casting assistant or casting associate by working alongside someone with experience. But it is not an easy job to get into. It's all a matter of timing, patience and persistence and getting to know how the industry works. The current edition of *Contacts*, updated and published annually by Spotlight, will help with this.

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Paul De Freitas, a former child actor, started work as a casting director aged sixteen and set up his own office when he was twenty-two. 'There is no real training for this work apart from watching actors at work on stage and screen as much as you can,' he says.

He recommends that you train yourself to watch every performance with a casting director's eye and ear. 'Ask yourself how you would cast this actor in other shows. It's a case of getting into the right mind-set. I never just watch TV. Even with commercials I am thinking about how they've been or could be cast.'

'Casting directors draw on years of artistic taste, imagination, knowledge, research and political expertise – all this before the collaboration with the director, producer, writer, etc. begins. It is a job that requires an understanding of psychology, artistic taste and style, interpretative taste, current and historical social politics – and, of course, knowing our core subject thoroughly – the different levels and styles of national and international actors and acting. We have to assess the limits to which actors can be pushed artistically, when to take a risk, when to cast against type. It is our job to know them intimately, and to use our knowledge of the wide variety of their skills to conjure up an acting company for a project that allows the visual story to be told. We are constantly interviewing actors, assessing and filtering theatre, film and television performances; often hundreds of actors will be considered for roles before you even set up an audition list.'

From the Casting Directors' Guild website

Some casting directors work first as agents and, according to Paul De Freitas, it helps to have some acting or directing experience, although it isn't essential. 'I've never directed a show but I find myself directing audition sessions,' he says.

Working as a children's casting director

Some casting directors specialise in working with children. Jo Hawes, for example, casts and looks after the children for many of the top London musicals and plays such as *Oliver!* and *The Sound of Music*. Jessica Ronane is responsible for the children in *Billy Elliot the Musical*. Unusually, at the time of writing, Ronane and Hawes are working together on the children's casting for the RSC's *Matilda the Musical*.

One of the complications of working with children is that there has to be three or four teams to cover eight shows a week, as children may, by law, work only for a very limited time each week. And Hawes has to spend a lot of time obtaining children's licences to work from the local authorities in which the children live. There are also issues with finding suitable accommodation in London for performing children from all over London, as well as working with chaperones.

'I began in 2003, two years before the show opened, by creating a massive, nationwide database of dance schools, clubs, teachers and so on, and then began to trawl. And we still work in the same way.

Each summer around six to eight boys are brought to London for an intensive summer school lasting five to six weeks. They live in the large 'Billy House', which is rented by the company in a leafy London suburb. The children sleep in dormitories, and are looked after by houseparents. They have workshops each afternoon and the progress they make is astounding.

From this group, some boys emerge as the new Billys. We watch them carefully and observe their commitment, attitude and stamina, as well as their dance and, to a lesser extent, singing and acting ability as they progress through the audition process. Then final decisions are confirmed by the show's choreographer, Peter Darling, who deliberately doesn't see the boys in development.

Since the average boy works on the show for two years, the company also has to ensure that his own education needs are met. We have two tutors and classrooms in the Billy House. The tutors liaise closely with the boys' schools to make sure that they don't lose out, and that they make the academic progress expected of them – and more. Some of the parents see this one-to-one teaching as a real bonus.'

*Jessica Ronane, Children's Casting Director,
Billy Elliot the Musical*

Further reading

Children in Theatre: From the Audition to Working in Professional Theatre, Jo Hawes (Oberon Books, 2012)

Useful websites

Casting Directors' Guild www.thecdg.co.uk

Paul De Freitas www.pauldefreitas.com