

THE ONLY WAY OUT IS THROUGH THE... NO

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Part of
Producing Liveness in Interesting Times

the uncultured

I trailed my departure from producing for some time – largely to try and make myself feel less guilty. I graduated from uni in 2013, worked at a social integration charity for the best part of a year, then was a Christmas temp at Waterstones from November 2014 – February 2015 and got my first full time arts job that summer, which saw me move from my hometown of London to Glasgow.

I got there via the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursary scheme and I mention all this because I don't think I could've got into the arts any other way at the time – providing paid entry level job opportunities wasn't something a lot of organisations, even those in receipt of regular funding, properly grasped back then. I felt like I had been invested in, and I'd invested in myself – finally I got onto a track! I couldn't throw all of that away, right?

On one level, producing is Not That Hard: once you get your templates in order, drafting a budget, sending out contracts and processing payments are things that can be done alongside other work if need be. It's not physically strenuous in the same way as being a firefighter or performer, and the occupational hazards are low. And yet, if you're reading this, you are probably keenly aware of the fact that producing is Kinda Tricky: sometimes you will get notes from funders, co-commissioners or venues that the latest work from the artist you support isn't quite up to scratch. It's your job to translate that frankness into something truthful but palatable. Despite your best efforts not to, you might find yourself slipping professional communications outside of established email channels and onto Whatsapp – including the dreaded, frazzled voice note.

Worse still, the projects and artists you care the most about may linger in development hell, while the most acclaim and box office revenue you get, might well be from the project you feel 'meh' about, with the collaborators who have treated you the worst. What next?

There are a few options. You can do an audit of the current projects and artists you're working with, and fill out a kind of points table, as if scoring a job interview, to work out which work is serving you, and which leaves you unfulfilled or drained. Your criteria may vary, but looking back, for me the following were the things I valued the most:

- **Potential for growth:** both for you as a producer and for the artist/company/participants
- **Strength of collaborator dynamics:** we don't need to be friends, but I've got to know you trust my artistic taste and judgement and vice versa
- **Opportunities to fundraise:** some things are just easier sells, unfortunately
- **Potential audience interest:** not always guaranteed, but it is good understand whereabouts something might sit, be that the contemporary performance festival circuit, a new writing studio slot for 4 weeks or something else entirely
- **How sad would I be to let someone else work on this project?** Sorry to say but part of my interest in producing included a bit of professional pride, or more honestly, ego
- **How stressful is it?**

I nearly didn't include the stress criteria there, but, in hindsight, that was the stomach knot no number of incredible, talented and good-hearted collaborators could get rid of. Likely, you won't rack up six grand's worth of debt while producing like I did, but if you do, or you get to a similar position of 'this can't happen again,' there is a nuclear option that bypasses the score sheet: quitting.

My first theatre producing work involved being a projects administrator for an independent producing company, who worked with a range of artists including Split Britches, currently a duo consisting of Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. The producer at the company recalled Lois' phrase to me as 'the only way out is through the show' so that's how I remembered it for all these years, but having looked up the title of Jen Harvie's book about Weaver's performance-making, I think it's actually 'the only way **home** is through the show.'

Regardless, I held onto the motto and its sentiment. Held on doing two part-time jobs while producing my first show, held on during techs and funding flops and demands for directors to be taken off projects and nerve-wrecking waits for the box office to pick up the week before we opened. It's a pretty affirming statement in so many ways. Do not worry: you will come out the other side and the audience will be there, eager and ready to clap.

But... there are other exit routes. When I was starting to think seriously about quitting the industry, I wanted to at least see one project I'd been linked to since the start of 2018 have a full run. I started my new job, as a trade unionist, in January 2022: due to a combination of factors, the largest one being covid, that didn't happen. I believe that the show will go on - just without me attached. The process of extricating myself from producing was longer than it needed to be, but if I were to advise anyone else thinking about it, here's what I'd say:

1. **Say it out loud.** In a way, admitting that your heart might not be in it any more is the biggest hurdle. You'll want to do it a few times: to non-arts friends and family, who will be supportive if you describe, honestly, how you feel; to friends in the arts who can act as confidantes and sounding boards, and then, finally, to collaborators.
2. **Create a handover document.** I didn't do this, but it would've been fairer to Eve, who I worked with at Broccoli, if I had. I say this because independent producing involves holding as many relationships and projects, and as much informal knowledge as working for a company, but you have fewer concrete reasons to assess your business. I never did an annual appraisal, for instance. The act of noting your work and presenting it in a way that someone fresh to it could understand will form a kind of reflection point, even if you're not technically handing over everything to someone else.
3. **Be ready to be surprised by the next step.** It's an adjustment, to think that the next job you do likely won't come from the weekly Artsadmin mailout. Where do all the Not-This jobs exist and how do I prove I can do them? You could start somewhere big and generic like Guardian Jobs but that can be quite daunting. Instead, consider boards specific to sector or industry: CharityJob, JobsGoPublic, the TUC... even the 'all roles' section on the Nesta website, which includes vacancies at their partner organisations. Before you stop producing, take a look at what roles are around. If you don't know what a job title means, read up one or two of the job descriptions to see if the competencies match all the various experiences you've gained from producing.
4. **Remember it doesn't have to be all or nothing.** You can take a 'break' from producing and that doesn't make you a traitor. You're trying something new - and if you don't like it, you can go back. Unless, of course, you don't want to. I miss the freedoms of being freelance now that I have a 9:30-5:30, every day in the office job for the first time in seven years, but I don't miss too much else, six months down the line. But I did tear up during the first scene of a remount of the last show I produced when I saw it recently. I missed being part of work that entertained and surprised people, but more than anything I was proud and happy for all my former colleagues, and grateful I had bowed out for all our sakes.

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