

Want to be a theatre director? Here are my 10 top survival tips

I love my job, but theatre is a tough business to break into. My advice is hone your entrepreneurial skills – and make friends

The world is full of aspiring theatre directors. Some of them are young, some not so young. Some are already working in the theatre, others have yet to break into it. They all know, or think they know, that they want to try their hands at directing. Directors, they believe, have control and vision and authority. They choose the plays, the actors and the designers. They are central to the creative process of the theatre but never have to write a play, act a part or sweep a stage; they have the perfect job. Well, maybe they have.

I love being a director. But the job is not as simple as it looks, and getting into the game can be a painful business. The problem is you can't learn this complicated craft without doing it – yet no one will employ you unless you've already proved you have some aptitude for it. And you can't direct all on your own. You need actors and a play and a theatre. So before you know how good you're going to be in rehearsal, you have to prove yourself as an entrepreneur, gathering all your forces around you and drumming up financial support from sceptical sources. But entrepreneurial skill is not the same thing as directorial talent.

It can take years for a director to break into the business – years that require stamina, persistence and sheer bloody-minded optimism. It's a sort of apprenticeship by attrition. The trick is to keep learning. But how do you do that when all doors seem barred against you?

Ten survival tips for directors

1. Read. However literate you think you are, keep reading. Read plays and novels and adaptations and screenplays. Read social histories and biographies and diaries. Read all around the plays that most interest you. Prepare yourself as best you can for the searching questions your actors will fire at you on the rehearsal floor.

2. Go to the theatre. All sorts of theatre. Whatever you can afford. And don't be too discriminating. See everything – the National, the RSC, the Royal Court, your local rep, the school play. The latest blockbuster musical may be beyond your purse, but if you can blag a ticket, go and see what the fuss is about. And don't ignore the fringe. You might learn more by watching a rough theatre production in the upper room of a pub than anywhere else.

3. Travel. The world is your oyster – and there is theatre all over the world. Broaden your view about what constitutes good theatre by seeing it in its myriad traditions and cultures. If you speak another language, don't let it slide. Practise it, study its theatre literature, translate from it. Make it a special corner of your expertise.

4. Meet playwrights. Directors don't have anything like the authority you might imagine. Playwrights are the primary creative force in theatre. Get to know them. Read their plays. Help them develop their work. Set up readings with actors. The more playwrights you know and who trust you, the more likely it is you will be asked to direct one of their plays.

5. Meet actors. Directors should love actors. If they don't look forward to the time they spend with their actors and genuinely appreciate the actor's process, they will never be good directors. Actors are remarkable creatures: what they do, night by night, performance by performance, is extraordinary. Get close to it. Strive to understand the creative chemistry of the actor becoming the character. It's at the very heart of the business.

6. Form a company. However small, however poor. The idea of a company is at the heart of all theatre practice; little groups of like-minded artists ganging together to create plays. Raise some cash and put the plays on. Learn from your successes or failures and move on to the next project.

7. Work as an assistant. Write to all the directors you know or whose work you admire. Explain why you think the two of you would be a good match. Have something to show on your CV to prove your point. If you get taken on, be attentive and loyal and company-minded. Learn everything you can about your principle's method but don't get addicted to assisting. There's a limit to the usefulness of watching from the sidelines.

8. Work in the theatre. Any job will do. Directors should understand how every other department in the theatre works. Get a job in the wardrobe department or with the stage crew, or in the lighting or sound departments; or as a dramaturg, a box-office clerk, usher or dresser. The more you know, the better you will be at the directing game.

9. Observe the world. Whether you work inside the theatre or out, don't get trapped by its artifice. Wherever you live, wherever you work, you will meet the original versions of the characters you see in plays. Learn to observe people closely and analyse them accurately – their psychologies, predicaments and family lives; their fears, failings and aspirations. If you want your productions to be true reflections of real life, you must know your subject matter in the greatest possible detail.

10. Read my book. Theatre Craft by John Caird