

10 Ways Being in Theatre Prepared Me For Success!

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Studying lines for a production "The Servant of Two Masters"

I have a confession to make. I was a theatre major in college (yes, complete with the snooty but appropriate "re" spelling). I'll wait for you to stop snickering. [Judson University](#) (it was Judson College when I attended), the small liberal arts college outside of Chicago labeled the major course of studies as "Communication Arts" which is what I tend to put on resumes and bios because I realize that "theatre major" tends to elicit thoughts such as "Do you want fries with that?"

When I chose my major, I had no pipe dreams about becoming a professional actor. I did it because more than one wise adult had advised me that my actual major in college would have less impact on my eventual job search than having the actual degree. "Study what you love" I was told, "not what you think will get you a job." I listened for once and chose theatre because I'd done it all through my secondary education, I had relative success doing it, and because I simply loved being a part of it. Fortunately, my parents gave me absolutely no grief about my choice (unlike most of my fellow majors. Thanks mom & dad!)

Fast forward 25 years and, like many people, I am no where near the waypoint on life's road I envisioned I'd be back in college. Almost 20 years as a [business consultant](#) and

now a business owner with a modestly successful track record in my business and [blogging](#), I realize how much being a theatre major set me on the road towards success.

Here are 10 ways being a theatre major helped me succeed:

1. **Improvisation.** The great thing about the stage is that when it's live and you're up in front of that audience anything can, and does, happen. Dropped lines, missed entrances, or malfunctioning props require you to improvise while maintaining your cool. Theatre taught me how to focus, think quickly and make do while giving the impression that you've got it all under control. It's served me well when clients, airlines, coworkers, or technology wreak unexpected havoc at the worst possible moment.
2. **Project Management.** A stage production is basically a business project. You have teams of people making up one team working to successfully accomplish a task on time, on budget in such a way that you earn the applause and an occasional standing ovation. Being taught to stand at the helm of a theatrical production was a project management practicum.
3. **Working with a Limited Budget.** Everybody who has worked on stage knows that it's not the road to fortune. Most plays (especially small college shows) are produced on a shoestring budget. This forces you to be imaginative, do more with less and find creative ways to get the results you want without spending money. Ask any corporate manager and they'll tell you that this pretty much describes their job. Mine too.
4. **Dealing with Very Different Human Beings.** The theatrical community is a mash-up of interesting characters. It always has been. From fringe to freakish to frappuccino sipping socialites and everything in between, you're going to encounter the most amazing and stimulating cross-section of humanity when you work in theatre. In my business career I have the unique and challenging task of walking in the CEO's office in the morning to present our findings in an executive summary presentation and to receive a high level grilling. I will then spend the afternoon presenting the same data to overworked, underpaid, cynical front-line employees and get a very different grilling. Theatre taught me how to appreciate, understand and effectively communicate with a widely diverse group of human beings.
5. **Understanding the Human Condition.** Most people have the mistaken impression that acting is all about pretending and being "fake" in front of others.

What I learned as a theatre major was that good actors learn the human condition intimately through observation and painfully detailed introspection. The better you understand that human being you are portraying from the inside out, the better and more authentic your performance is going to be. In my business I am constantly using the same general methods to understand my clients, their customers as well as myself and my co-workers. I believe that having a better understanding of myself and others has ultimately made me a better (though far from perfect) employee, consultant, employer, and ultimately friend. I didn't learn methods of observing and understanding others in Macro Econ, I learned it in Acting I & Acting II.

6. **Doing Whatever Needs to Be Done.** When you're a theatre major at a small liberal arts college there is little room for specializing within your field. You have to learn to do it all. Light design, sound engineering, acting, directing, producing, marketing, PR, set design, set construction, ticket sales, budgeting, customer service, ushering, make-up, and costuming are all things I had to do as part of my college career. Within our merry band of theatre majors we all had to learn every piece of a production because at some point we would be required to do what needed to be done. I learned that I can capably do just about anything that I need to do. I may not love it and I may not be gifted or excellent at it, but give me a task and I'll figure it out. I now work for a small consulting firm that requires me to do a wide range of tasks. The experience, can-do attitude and indomitable spirit I learned in the theatre have been essential to success.
7. **Hard work.** I remember creating a tree for one of our college shows. We had no idea how we were going to do it, but we made an amazing life-like tree that emerged from the stage and looked as if it disappeared into the ceiling above the theatre. My team mates and I cut out each and every leaf and individually hot-glued them to the branches of the tree. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of them glued on while standing precariously on a rickety ladder high enough above the stage that it would make an OSHA inspector soil his boxers. Sleepless nights, burnt fingers and a few brushes with tragedy were needed to get that tree done. But, we got it done. It was fabulous. And a few days later we tore it down, threw it out, and got ready for the next production. C'est la vie. In business I have periods of time with unbelievable workloads in which there are sleepless nights, seemingly endless days and tireless work on projects that will be presented and then will be over. The report will be archived and I'm onto the next project. C'est la vie. I learned all about that as a theatre major.

8. **Making Difficult Choices.** You've got four parts and twenty four schoolmates who auditioned. Some of them are your best friends and fellow theatre majors. Do you choose the unexperienced jock because he's best for the part or the friend and fellow theatre major who you fear will never talk to you again if you don't cast him? My senior project was supposed to be performed outside in the amphitheater but the weather was cold, windy and miserable. Do I choose to stick with the plan because it's what my actors are comfortable with and it's what we've rehearsed and it will only stress out the cast and crew to change the venue at the last minute? Or, do I choose to think about the audience who will be more comfortable and might actually pay attention and appreciate the performance if they are inside away from the cold, the wind and possible rain? [I changed the venue]. Any business person will tell you that difficult decisions must sometimes be made. The higher the position the harder the decisions and the more people those decisions affect. Being a theatre major gave me a taste of what I would have to digest in my business career.
9. **Presentation Skills.** Okay, it's a no brainer but any corporate employee can tell you horror stories of having to endure long training sessions or corporate presentations by boring, unprepared, incompetent or just plain awful presenters. From what I've experienced, individuals who can stand up confidently in front of a group of people and capably, effectively communicate their message while even being motivating and a little entertaining are among the rarest individuals in the business world. Being a theatre major helped me be one of them.
10. **Doing the Best You Can With What You've Got.** Over the years I've told countless front line service reps that this is rule #1 of customer service. You do the best you can with what you've got to work with. I remember an Acting I class in college in which a pair of students got up to present a scene they'd prepared. They presented the scene on a bare stage with no lighting, make-up, costumes, props or set pieces. It was just two students acting out the script. It was one of those magic moments that happen with live theatre. The rest of the class were transfixed and pulled into the moment, reacting with surprising emotion to what they witnessed. You don't need Broadway theatrics to create a magical theatrical moment on stage. You don't even need a stage. The same is true of customer service. You don't always need the latest technology, the best system, or the greatest whiz bang doo-dads. A capable CSR doing the best they can and serving a customer with courtesy, empathy, friendliness and a commitment to resolve can and does win customer satisfaction and loyalty.

I'm proud to be an alumni of Judson University. I'm really saddened that the school's theatre program waned for a while and am encouraged that it shows signs of life once more. What I have learned I've tried to pass on to my own children. Study what you love. Follow your passion. It will serve you well wherever life's road takes you.