

A Guest in the Prompter's Box

Colin Blumenau, Artistic Director of The Production Exchange, wonders whether we really are communicating...

If I were to adopt an ever so slightly provocative position I would respectfully suggest that for an industry whose purpose is to communicate we're not very good at it.

Wherever you look there is a plethora of theatrical production. It stretches across the country, where there remains, for the most part, a theatre in every town and city. It permeates our green and pleasant land, where rural touring schemes bring artistic endeavour to a village hall or community centre near you. It has established a hermit-crab-emulating, colonising grip on diverse railway arches, upstairs rooms in pubs, disused industrial buildings, old churches... The list is endless. Other than personal experience I have no yardstick by which to measure the overall quality of the work itself but I suspect some is excellent, some is execrable and most is somewhere in between.

How this panoply of provision is achieved, however, is the bug that currently buzzes around my increasingly fevered brain. There is the argument that I often hear promulgated that "the cream will always rise to the top". This contention means simply that the best work and the best workers will somehow force their way into the consciousness of those who might potentially be profitable collaborators or employers. I demur, finding it lazy and sloppy thinking. In a business which notoriously relies on another distasteful truism, that "it isn't what you know, it's who you know", there is a real danger that, unless you are well-connected in some way, the North Face of the Eiger is as child's play compared to launching an assault on the theatrical *status quo*.

Having spent the last forty years working in the industry, I have witnessed many developments in the way our business infrastructure works. The most radical is the introduction of electronic communication technology. The opportunities to engage with others are unparalleled in history. Every day offers boundless email, mail-merge, Spotlighty, Twitter, Instagrammy, Snapchatty, Facebooky ways to sell our wares, to catalogue our achievements and shout our plans from the rooftops. Yet communication is a two-way thing. You can shout as loudly as you are able but it is bootless if no one is listening.

And I sometimes wonder whether there is nowadays an insidious propensity to hide behind the excuse of an overwhelmingly stuffed Inbox rather than to genuinely listen to what is being said. It is so much easier not to listen. I hold up my hands. When programming the three theatres for which I had responsibility I used to rely on the companies I trusted. I tried to encourage new initiatives but the risks are great and the results can be calamitous. It was easier to ignore rather than to listen to the approaches. It is so much easier to go on booking the actors and the companies that one knows. *Mea culpa*. As a director I often employ people I know. It's such an easy thing to do. I often file "Dear Mr Blumenau, I am a recently graduated actor..." letters in Trash.

But I don't think I am alone and I fear that this institutional placing of collective fingers in collective ears is reaching epidemic proportions.

Let me offer two examples.

Firstly: a peculiar demonstration of this inability to listen is that having pencilled a ten-week tour of a play that was being directed by an early-career Director, I found it impossible to get the ten venues involved in the tour to respond to my electronic and telephonic pleas to co-ordinate their confirmations. Consequently the tour, which was logistically and financially viable, fell by the wayside. The result perhaps is that those venues will revert to productions from their habitual collaborators – "it isn't what you know, it's who you know".

And secondly: in my role as an agent I recently wrote to an Artistic Director I know well to advocate on behalf of an actor who I felt was a particularly good fit for a part. I wrote to them directly, apologising for using up their Inbox megabytes but suggesting that it would be worth their while to consider this particular actor. Inevitably, I received no reply. Rather more disturbingly there appeared on Spotlight the following instruction in the form of a "Polite Notice": "Can I remind agents not to email regarding this project. This includes emails to the theatre or Artistic Director." And how often are casting breakdowns preceded by the words "no emails or phonecalls please"?

It feels very like passive lack of reaction has become active prohibition. I understand all the reasons for trying to limit the amount of traffic, believe me. I recently had nearly 5,000 submissions for a project we were producing. But it feels that half of the communication bargain, i.e. the listening part, is increasingly not being kept.

I don't ascribe blame nor do I have a solution, and I know that there is nothing new under the sun, but I tend to think that a difficult conundrum has been made worse rather than better by the flow of increasingly one-way information.

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