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Citation: Sparling, S. (2024). Where's My Compass? Navigating Uncertainty With Business Planning Tools For Performing Arts Graduates - A Teaching Case Study. Journal of Arts Entrepreneurship Education, 4(1), doi: 10.46776/2693-7271.1027

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.46776/2693-7271.1027>

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Where's My Compass? Navigating Uncertainty with Business Planning Tools for Performing Arts Graduates

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Abstract

This teaching case study examines the phenomenon of musical theatre students graduating in spring 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down both their graduation showcase opportunities and the majority of the audition and work opportunities that would normally be available to graduate performers. In both cases presented, the actors set up small businesses—in bookkeeping and video production, respectively—that allowed them to generate income to keep themselves afloat while preserving their primary identity as artists despite challenging market conditions. The accompanying Instructor's Manual uses SWOT Analysis and the Ansoff Matrix as tools to assist students in analyzing the case studies (and as planning tools for their own entrepreneurial ventures). The aim of these case studies is to make the abstract idea of performing arts graduates launching a “side hustle” business more concrete through example and examination.

Introduction

The 2020 musical theatre graduates featured in these case studies thought they would complete their four years of study and graduate into a buoyant performance market where they would have ample opportunities to use their performance skills. Unfortunately, the global COVID-19 pandemic struck just months before they graduated, resulting in their final showcase performances being cancelled and theatres across Canada (and much of the world) closing their doors (or “going dark” in theatre language). All of the career opportunities they imagined would await them disappeared within the span of a few weeks. These case studies examine *how* these graduates reacted to this situation, using their arts entrepreneurship skills to create small businesses tailored to their strengths and available opportunities.

SWOT Analysis, a widely-used business planning tool that looks internally at strengths and weaknesses and externally at opportunities and threats, can be a useful compass to help arts entrepreneurs navigate ever-changing terrain. The Ansoff Matrix, another common business tool, helps conceptualize how a business can grow and

evolve towards diversification, a form of business resilience. These tools are presented here as lenses to analyze these case studies, and as tools the reader can take away and apply to their own developing business ideas. Also included are suggested additional tools that may be of value to further develop business ideas.

The subjects of these case studies demonstrated resilience, adaptability and proactive business planning, which are all necessary to succeed as an arts entrepreneur. While these cases explore the experiences of students in Canada, their situations were similar to that of many performing arts graduates around the globe during the pandemic. Additionally, while their accounts are specifically in relation to COVID-19, scarcity, or limited work opportunity in the field of performing arts, is a constant barrier in most countries; COVID-19 simply made existing constraints more prevalent.¹ With research pointing towards a skills gap in entrepreneurial, financial and business management skills in arts graduates, the business planning learned through engaging with these case studies is of relevance to equipping performing arts students for the unknown.²

Methodology

The three actors profiled in these case studies were students the author taught in entrepreneurship and professional practice classes at a theatre school in Canada. They were asked to participate in this research in part because they started their own "side hustle" businesses after graduation in 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to capture and analyze their experiences with entrepreneurship. The students consented to be interviewed for this purpose. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author in the autumn of 2021, approximately 18 months after the participants graduated and as pandemic restrictions were starting to lift. Interviews were undertaken virtually using Microsoft Teams. Participants received drafts of the final case studies and were given the opportunity to correct or amend them. All names are anonymized to protect participants' identities. This research received ethics clearance from the author's university.

Case Study #1- Balancing the Books

Jesse, a musical theatre student at a top Canadian university, found that her final year shows were cancelled in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. What would normally have been a showcase opportunity with a series of live performances for agents and industry contacts shifted quickly to online video showcases, which made the most of a bad situation but were perceived by students as less effective and anti-climactic. After graduation, the only auditions available were video submissions or Zoom auditions, and the only performance opportunities occurred on similar media platforms. This was a far cry from the industry Jesse and her classmates imagined they would be graduating into

¹ Comunian, Roberta and Lauren England, "Creative and Cultural Work Without Filters: Covid-19 and Exposed Precarity in the Creative Economy," *Cultural Trends* 29, no. 2 (2020): 112-128, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2020.1770577>.

² Frenette, Alexandre, and Steven J. Tepper, "What Difference Does It Make? Assessing the Effects of Arts-Based Training on Career Pathways," in *Beyond the Campus: Higher Education and the Creative Economy*, ed. Roberta Comunian and Abigail Gilmore (New York: Routledge, 2016), 83-101.

after four years of demanding (and expensive) training. Instead of preparing for auditions and planning her future, Jesse was instead having to make decisions about how she would support herself and keep her creativity alive while the industry was largely dormant.

Jesse had one advantage in that she had already determined that the financial up-and-down of even the most successful actors was not desirable to her, nor would it support some of her larger goals such as owning a home and having a family. Having worked through these decisions, she planned to create a *portfolio career* with an adjacent business alongside her acting—in her case, bookkeeping. Musical theatre and bookkeeping might seem to be strange bedfellows, but Jesse knew she wanted flexible work that she could do at home, and that waiting tables or working other hospitality jobs would not make her happy or give her the kind of income she wanted. In researching summer jobs between her second and third year of college, she noticed a lot of postings for bookkeeping positions that were often well-paid with flexible, home-based hours. She had taken an accounting class in high school and was good at math, so bookkeeping seemed like a good fit for her as a second income stream.

Having identified that bookkeeping would be a good fit, she sought out flexible bookkeeping training she could do alongside her musical theatre training. She enrolled in a three-semester self-study certificate program from a local college. The certificate content was broad, including financial planning, business accounting and client management as well as advanced training in Microsoft Word and Excel. Since she was studying part-time for this certificate, funding was not available. As a result, she self-funded her way through it, paying for one course at a time and fitting the courses in around her musical theatre degree requirements.

Setting Up Business

Jesse graduated in spring 2020. Her business set-up costs were minimal—buying an inexpensive Windows-based computer (the bookkeeping software didn't work on Apple computers) and subscribing to accounting software costing around CAD\$50 per month. In the beginning, she worked from home, eliminating overhead costs for office space. Clients sent her financial information via email, and she used either the phone or Microsoft Teams to meet with them. One advantage was that there were few monthly deadlines to meet for various reports and statements, meaning she could flexibly complete the work around her other commitments and interests, like taking singing lessons or continuing to audition for performing opportunities. With her client base coming from networking and word-of-mouth, she had no initial marketing costs. She was bold about pitching her services when she met friends or contacts who were starting their own businesses. These marketing techniques landed her an initial client roster.

Jesse's knowledge of the arts and culture sector in Canada helped her win work; compared to other bookkeepers, she had more knowledge of and experience with her clients' sector. This created a synergy where her arts and culture knowledge landed her bookkeeping clients, which helped her build contacts in the arts and culture sector, expanding her reach for both bookkeeping and performing work. Having a portfolio of jobs within one sector continues to help her to feel like her identity is not splintered

across different sectors.

While her bookkeeping business continues to grow, she is facing a common start-up challenge in that many of her bookkeeping clients are also arts-related start-ups themselves, meaning they are not able to pay her much money. As an entrepreneur, she views the time she is putting in as an investment. Her strategy is to become part of the start-up team in a creative venture, even if that means accepting lower pay, with the hopes of growing with the company. As the company becomes more viable (with her financial assistance), her importance to the company grows and her potential to earn more improves. This means that bookkeeping is not totally viable as a business yet, requiring her to earn money elsewhere. Without much available acting work, she has taken a job working the front desk at a gym. However, even in this work she has been pleasantly surprised to find that her bookkeeping certification gives her additional skills that are recognized by employers. As a result, her gym job is a better-paying opportunity than she would have otherwise been able to secure without that extra credential.

Reflecting On Business and Personal Impact

Jesse is finding that, as she gets more experience doing bookkeeping work, she is realizing it is more “mundane” than she anticipated. Once you complete the initial set-up for a client, the monthly bookkeeping tasks can be quite basic and repetitive. She anticipated more interaction and communication with clients, so she is reflecting on doing more training to be able to offer more advanced services to clients, perhaps looking more towards financial advising.

Jesse's bookkeeping training means she has become much better at her own budgeting and financial management, and this is allowing her to invest more in her acting business—for example, taking classes and workshops. She also finds that the analysis and attention to detail bookkeeping requires informs some of her acting work, like script analysis. While there is crossover in the skillsets used, she also finds that the bookkeeping work makes her excited to get back to her acting work.

Jesse imagines a future where bookkeeping serves as the “side hustle” to her acting business, giving her extra money towards saving for a house or other life goals. Besides hope for more acting work, she also considers running a theatre company with her partner and dreams of ways to pass on financial know-how to actors.

Challenge: How does Jesse grow her bookkeeping earnings while keeping it as a “side hustle” so she can quit her gym job and have time to pursue performing? How does she balance two businesses? In what directions will she grow and evolve her bookkeeping business as it starts to become more routine and less intellectually stimulating?

Case Study #2- Fearless Experimentation

Angie and Adam met at one of Canada's top musical theatre schools, hitting it off first as friends and later as boyfriend/girlfriend. Like so many 2020 graduates, they spent four years looking forward to their final year performances only to find all of them cancelled

due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Four years of dreams about using final year performances to launch into an active performing arts industry died as government edicts shut down live performance overnight. They found themselves asking, *What can we do if the thing we really want to do, which is perform, is not available?* It is one thing to audition for a gig and not get it, and a totally different thing to have no gigs to audition for, either at present or on the horizon. Circumstances forced them to consider a “plan B” for after graduation.

Business Idea

Angie and Adam developed video production skills in high school. Angie completed some iMovie training and Adam grew up wanting to be a YouTuber, so neither was a stranger to working with video. As their immediate plans in musical theatre came to an unceremonious end, they wanted to give their classmates one last chance to perform in the format of a graduation video. Each student filmed themselves individually singing the Alanis Morissette song “You Learn,” which they combined into a video montage. They launched the video on social media and to their surprise it went viral. For many, it captured the survivor spirit of so many students at that time, which led to it getting shared on social media and finding its way onto the TV show *Canada's Got Talent*. Not only was the success of their video a pleasant surprise, but they also discovered that they really enjoyed creating it. They asked themselves, *Is this something we could do more of, and is it something we could make some money at?* The seeds of a business idea were planted.

Launching a Business

Their first iteration of the business was to focus on theatre schools that were asking for video audition submissions instead of their usual in-person auditions. Angie and Adam thought they could offer audition coaching and help film auditions for young people looking to go to college. However, as they started to shop this idea around, they found the market was asking for something else: editing footage from dance and theatre schools to create online “performances” that could substitute for live performances. There was some resistance on their part to this change of direction. They were not sure they had the necessary skills, and they did not feel passionate about these projects, as they did not involve coaching and mentoring young talent. However, there were bills to pay, and offers of paid work were hard to turn down. They decided to say yes to the offers and figure out how to do the work as they went along. Whenever they were unsure about how to do something, they turned to YouTube to figure it out.

As they threw themselves into this work, a new challenge emerged. Between COVID-19 lockdowns and spending all their time in isolation editing videos, they found they were missing the creative interaction of working with others and realizing their own visions. They decided that while they undertook the editing work for others, they would start making time for their own creative pursuits, particularly as singer-songwriters. They decided to invest some of the money they were earning back into themselves as artists starting to view themselves as creators rather than enablers of other people's creativity. They already knew how to write and perform their own songs, so they set

about learning how to record, produce, mix and master their own music. It naturally followed that they would shoot and edit their own music videos, which they could share on social media. In so doing, they created their own end-to-end music production business.

They found that the more they created and shared their own work with the world, the more this work attracted clients asking for their production skills. Their portfolio of self-produced work opened the door for them to move from being editors to being videographers—something they never thought would happen as musical theatre graduates. Investing in themselves as creatives opened new avenues of work and helped to develop their business.

Along the way, they bootstrapped their business, gaining skills needed using free and available tools (a *bricolage*³ approach) until they could afford to invest and upgrade. They utilized experimentation and education to maximize their ability with accessible tools, such as learning how to effectively shoot a video on an iPhone or how to use household lighting and daylight in optimal ways for filming. As a partnership, there was tension over money, with Angie not wanting to buy new equipment until they were earning more and Adam feeling that they needed to invest in equipment to make money. They found a middle ground by adding equipment slowly as they went; however, there was a big jump forward in their capability when they invested in a professional-level camera, which they thoroughly researched to determine exactly what they needed. This new tool lifted their video work to a new level, though Adam stresses that even a fancy camera is no good if you do not know how to use it. They invested time, research (on YouTube) and experimentation to maximize its potential. They are adamant that you do not need expensive gear to make a good product and that skill outstrips gear anytime.

While they had some arts entrepreneurship classes in their degree, the biggest help has come from Adam's mom, who also owns her own business and has offered advice. Their approach to business has been guided by a principle of surrounding themselves with others who started businesses, not being afraid to ask questions and jumping in and figuring things out for themselves. Throughout their journey of building a business, they have also worked in the service industry. When the video work picked up, they reduced their service hours, yet retained their service jobs to take the financial pressure off the business and provide assurance they could meet their living expenses while building their venture.

Reflecting on the Business

Initially, Angie and Adam's business was viewed as a "stop-gap" and a way to earn money while live performance was shut down. But to their surprise, they really like the work and are reevaluating their future career plans. Performance will still be a component, but they want to continue their music and video production work as well as further develop their own singer-songwriter careers. As they resumed auditioning for live performance projects, they found that the confidence they developed through writing, producing and launching their own music videos on social media—and the positive feedback they received—boosted their confidence as they entered audition

³ Bricolage is an approach to art-making focusing on the application of available resources.

rooms. In addition to having a stronger sense of self-worth, launching their business demonstrated the scope of their skills and what they can offer the industry.

Challenge: Do they keep the business at a certain level, so they have time for other creative pursuits (possibly acting work), or do they maximize the growth opportunities of the business? How should they navigate as business partners if their romantic relationship ended?

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