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# 300 THOUGHTS FOR THEATREMAKERS

A Manifesto for the  
Twenty-First-Century Theatremaker

*Foreword by Alan Lane*



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# Introduction

## *Who Am I?*

I'd like to begin by explaining why I've written a book about making theatre, because technically it shouldn't exist – at least not by me. I'm not famous, nor am I prolific. I'm a relatively unknown theatremaker with one GCSE and no degree. See, with my background you're really not supposed to work in the arts – never mind be successful and then write a book about it.

Of course, I'm being glib, as we're *all* allowed to work in the theatre, but that message doesn't always get through to society – let alone to the lost artists who've been encouraged to 'Go get a real job.'

Take my journey, for example: I come from Clacton-on-Sea in Essex, where it's all about economic survival – and back in the seventies and eighties it *really* was. When you reached your sixteenth birthday you were expected to work in a chip shop or on the pier and that was you done. You'd peaked. Any deeper discussions about utilising your existing skill set or having a career... Well, there were no debates on either of those, as no one knew what they were and we probably couldn't afford them anyway. Dreams were for the rich. So, one week after my sixteenth birthday, I began real-jobbing in my local chippy, The Plaice To Be, and one week and one hour after my sixteenth birthday, I silently whispered: 'This isn't the place for me.'

Admittedly, I didn't know where I wanted to go next or how to get there but, as it turns out, it's enough to keep pulling at a thread, because I'm here now, working in the arts, despite society telling me that I couldn't, and my parents saying that I probably shouldn't.

From a very early age, every time I went into a theatre I felt completely at home. Its magic, its possibilities and its warmth were palpable to me. I wanted to live and work in there for ever, and thanks to my teenage whisper finally finding a voice, I got there. Here.

So, how did I do it? And how can you make a successful and long career in the arts? Well, what type of career do you want?

One piece of immediate advice I can offer you is that you should resolve right now that, no matter what, you're going to stick around. You should also acknowledge you really do wish to live your life in the theatre. It's only then – after you've given voice to your ambition – that the flimsy, self-imposed barriers that have stopped you from seeing the theatre as a real job will melt away.

Next, you need to redefine two words: 'industry' and 'success'. These two nouns are responsible for so many artists falling by the wayside because they seemingly couldn't get into the industry nor achieve success. So let's redefine them.

'Success', from this point forward, will be when you have begun to take steps towards achieving an income from your artistic work; and the 'industry' will now be called your 'trade'.

Now, I acknowledge that your path won't be an easy one – but that's one reason why we all feel so at home in the theatre, isn't it? We're not regular people, nor do we seek the 'normal' life. We desire creativity, freedom, stories, illusion, applause, a team, agency, travel – in fact: a life filled with imagination. Every day.

So, suit up; for you *are* allowed to work in the theatre.

### *Who Are the Theatremakers?*

A theatremaker is anyone involved in the making of theatre. Whether you are a director, actor, writer, designer or another creative, this – of course – makes you a maker of theatre. This book speaks directly to all of these roles as individuals and to its collective noun. The person who uses the term 'theatremaker' is a hybrid artist, a creative soul that can turn their hand to anything to get their show on.

I consider myself to be a theatremaker as I make theatre using my own resources. I come up with an idea, rehearse it, find a suitable platform, and then sell tickets however I can. I have no regular team, I've never used a set, sound or costume designer (yet), and I generally operate the lights myself. I write, produce, improvise, teach and choreograph. I'm also quite deft at finding cheap props online and can make trailers, posters and GIFs for publicity. Plus I know how to remove red wine from a costume (use white). I'm not rich and don't come from money (can you tell?), and I don't possess the urge to climb a career ladder either, nor become a prolific artist; and curiously I've never applied for public funding. I just make theatre. In a room. Any room. I theatricalise my idea and put it in front of an audience. For the most part, my ideas manifest on a live platform, sometimes online or like now, as a book.

I've staged work in New York, Toronto, London and Tipton, and in 2018 I made an online interview series with Digital Theatre+ that's streamed into schools around the world. I've directed art gallery films, commissioned an American playwright with an independent venue in London, and devised a new play with the same team over three years. Oh, and everyone's always been paid.

Sounds professional, doesn't it? Well, it is. So who am I? Well, I'm definitely not 'Fringe', as that's a reductive term used by the misinformed to describe and supposedly locate artists who, at some point, must surely be aiming for the 'Centre' (be honest). Nor am I commercial. No. I am an independent theatremaker, and you won't have heard of me because I don't exist – at least not under the regular terminology of 'director', 'producer', 'actor' or 'writer', terms that don't really represent my skill set any more, and so I rarely use them.

Theatremakers are like the 'Where's Wally?' of the arts – we're here, but you have to look really hard to find us. We'll pop up at festivals (a lot), but you'll rarely see us on the popular stages, as our transient nature could be performing cabaret or dance one week, then borrowing from the conventions of mime or puppetry the next; and that's hard to categorise using the regular ways of classification. Maybe we're indefinable?

So how did we manifest? By the continued slashing of budgets, changes of policies within funded theatres, and the ever-

persistent commercial sector sucking up the air through the vacuum of nostalgia and film? It's a theory.

How about our extended periods of unemployment as we wait for 'heavy-pencilled' jobs to turn into half a day's work? (#actorslife) What about that devious myth that there are too many artists and not enough places for them to perform? Couple that with the cold hard truth of not enough affordable rehearsal spaces, outlandish financial demands on our already delicate reality – and how long was it going to be before we grabbed hold of the reins? Again.

In the same way that the actor-managers of the nineteenth century morphed into the director, the theatremaker is the next aggregation of the desires of the actor. And this seismic evolution/revolution was born from our exclusion from too many parties – for all those times we should have been the hosts, we were miscast as the caterers. And now that the theatremaker roams freely, they have discovered that the theatre itself needed them, before it too became a muted servant.

Theatremakers no longer spend days waiting for permission to cross the Rubicon to that utopian centre. No. We have walked off down the road and created our own trade, and us Jills and us Jacks of all the trades are fast becoming the majority.

Maybe one day, the birth of theatremakers – and their dirty ways – will be studied in schools, paving the way for more like us? Imagine the possibilities.

So, let it be known: the theatre is being reoccupied by its original tenant: The Maker of Theatre. And if you're salivating right now, come join us off the radar. You can plough up the stalls, erase the interval and even tie some knots in the curtains if you wish, because it's your trade too. But be warned: you'll need to tear the tickets, serve the drinks, bring up the lights, and then go break everyone's heart with your self-penned aria. Yes, it's back to the old ways: make a show, sell your tickets, make some money, then make a new show.

Spread the word: the theatremaker is now the centre.

## *How to Use This Book*

The endless academic theories on the making of performance don't chime with me much, so *300 Thoughts for Theatremakers* is more of a practical, grassroots, help-yourself book on the endless minutiae of live art-making that I have observed or used over the years. It is not a method, nor a practice, and I am not your teacher. It's more of an accessible sense-making tool whereby you can drop in occasionally for a provocation or a reflective moment which may usher you along to your next decision.

Some of the thoughts give specific examples of my experience, others offer up ways towards clarity. Most, however, are designed to shunt you – the career-driven, professional artist – towards an independent way of thinking, whilst I secretly slip out the back door leaving you to your own discoveries.

The book has five parts in total, each containing sixty thoughts. Some of my musings slot nicely into specific sections, but, because the making of theatre is a holistic process, some sit comfortably in any one of the sections.

The three hundred thoughts are jumping-off points, they are provocations, and whilst you may not agree with all of them, I merely seek to encourage new thinking, debate, discussion – and maybe some disagreement. It's full of contradictions and if it wasn't, I'd be very worried, as there is no one way to make theatre, but there are a million new questions to ask.

The future of theatre will belong to the maverick minds who possess the skills to mix things up and who have enough tools in their box to trick the game. In fact, I'd say that you and I – the Trojan horses of theatre – are required now more than ever.

# WHAT DOES THE WORLD NEED?

Before you make some new theatre – stop. Park your idea for a moment and ask yourself: ‘What does the world need from the theatre right now?’

As a theatremaker, you should – in fact you *must* – learn to foster a mindset whereby you can divine what the world currently needs. This isn’t necessarily about making something that represents what is happening now – that lives in the realm of documentary which probably (truthfully) will be happier on screen or radio. No, discovering and then devising the world’s next piece of groundbreaking *theatre* is embedded in you being able to tap into the zeitgeist – to the world around you, to the one that you can see and feel.

But how do you conjure this skill?

I suspect everyone must find their own way to tune in. But to hear and answer the call to arms, first you must learn to listen to the questions and cries from humanity. Does the world need political art right now? Protest? Fun? Clowning? And what about the theatre: what does it need? Another *Hamilton*? More verbatim work? Fewer autobiographical shows?

Answer some of the above, and you will begin to create theatre with a responsibility to the ‘Now’.

# WHAT DOES THE WORLD NOT NEED?

Still, pausing for a second, I want to share a secret with you: there is a real desire inside some producers of theatre to repeat what has come before.

You only need to study the plethora of failed jukebox musicals that followed *Mamma Mia!* and the opulent, Wagnerian shows that snapped at the heels of *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* to note the many challenges to their thrones. As of today, though, those top-three musicals still reign supreme in the West End. Why? Because we don't (truthfully) need any more of them. Sure, there have been a few shows that maybe lasted seven or eight years and were deemed to be 'hits', but that's usually down to financial backing rather than a never-ending audience demand and any specific artistic contribution to the genre.

Take *Mamma Mia!*, for example. It's the pioneer of the modern jukebox musical and perfectly captures a particular audience's desire. I remember thinking in 1999, when it opened, that it is a flimsy plot with some ABBA songs attached, and that it was not a musical – but it has proved to be a brilliant partnering of hit songs and it tapped into a zeitgeist. Coupled with an astute marketing campaign, and *voilà*, the genre of jukebox musical was reborn again. A theatrical *coup d'état*.

I guess it makes sense to copy it. You see a formula working really well and find a way to reuse it again. And again. But whilst this is tempting and can (on occasion) be financially lucrative, I believe replicating an existing piece of theatre will always be short-lived. It will create a career based on the past, rather than one that wishes to renew the theatre and remain relevant inside its ecosystem.

If you want to make the 'Next Big Thing', you are going to need to bend a genre, repackage it, and then bring something new to the table. We need it.

# STAGING IS NOT ENOUGH

I have come away from shows in the past and thought that they were staged very well, but they lacked life. After further contemplation I realised that the shows had been blocked. That awful, old fashioned, insipid technique that is basically the overmanagement of everything by way of choreography masquerading as direction. Blocking can be seen inside the Disneyfication of musicals, the facsimiles of plays, and it's all born from the trade's unflinching attempt to commodify the theatrical experience.

But how can we resist overchoreographing a show within an inch of its life? By way of actors. The theatre is theirs, and the audience have come to see them live out a life, so give them back some territory. Of course, the direction must exist every night, but there has to be some air for spontaneity. It goes back to that thought about sound. No one person, other than the actor, must – or can – truly drive the rhythms of the show by their live decisions.

If you're wincing at that statement you are probably a director, producer or teacher; I'm here to tell you – as someone who wears multiple hats – we are overmanaging our actors, stunting their skills, or worse – removing them altogether by co-opting their autonomy and attempting to preside over every inch of the live experience. The theatre belongs to them, not us. Everyone else is a mere footman, door opener, cushion plumper, and if you don't take glee by secretly knowing it's you that facilitates their process, get out of the dark and on to the stage; it's probably where you secretly wish to be.

Yes, I know theatre is collaborative, and everyone is needed, but dial it back because nothing must invade the air created by the performer.

# WALK AROUND THE ROOM

A quick thought about originality. If you want your company/ensemble/movement to be an original beast, there are other minute ways for you to mix things up other than what type of theatre you create, and checking in with any habits you may have picked up over the years is one of them.

One of the age-old sentences actors hear before they begin a session is 'Walk around the room'. Once this instruction has been uttered, performers, dutifully, walk around the room. Why? Because they've spent their whole career up to this point doing that, so what's one more round? This is a regular theatre environment and regular theatre company, right?

Wrong. Freak them out. Mix it up. Shift it to 'explore the space' or walk in a spiral, anything but 'walk around the room'. It's the same with sitting in circles; change it to a square or sit on your hands. Try a warm-up without speaking and feel the energy shift. Anything. Go wild. This may seem like a ridiculous thought, but trust me; thinking differently is the key to creating differently and everything must be up for change.

# DESIRES

I mean, come on; what do you want from your company? Global domination? A major theatre brand? A venue? Three venues? Three hundred venues? To break the mould? To remain in a mould? Community work? A school's programme? To tour? Equipment? Costumes? Logo? Website? To be worshipped? An educational arm? To restart the rep

model of theatre? Five stars every time? To host a festival? Merch? Mailing list? To be known as the greatest theatre company ever? To be effective? To take down the government? To rebuild a government? To perform in the streets? To go into film? To be a charity? To earn a wage? A pension? To get time off? To be sustainable? To be eco-friendly?

# BUSINESS MEETINGS

...are necessary.

# THE INDUSTRY DOESN'T EXIST

The reason I challenge the word 'industry' is that we don't produce anything.

WAIT. What I mean is that we are, at base, just storytellers. That's not an industry, it's a skill set. Of course, we produce published playtexts and T-shirts and CDs and mugs – but that's retail.

We trade in stories.

# THE TERM 'REGIONAL THEATRE'

...was invented by a Londoner. Ignore it.

# THE UNFUNDED ARE THE MAJORITY

There are many, many artists out there who do not have funding, yet still find a way – but this thought won't chime with the funded, as they seem to presume that you can only work in the arts if you have funding.

You only need to go through the Edinburgh Fringe programme to note that the majority are not funded by anyone but themselves. If this is you, sit comfortably in that space for *you* are the majority. You may not be prolific, but who cares? Make some groundbreaking theatre and the rest will come.