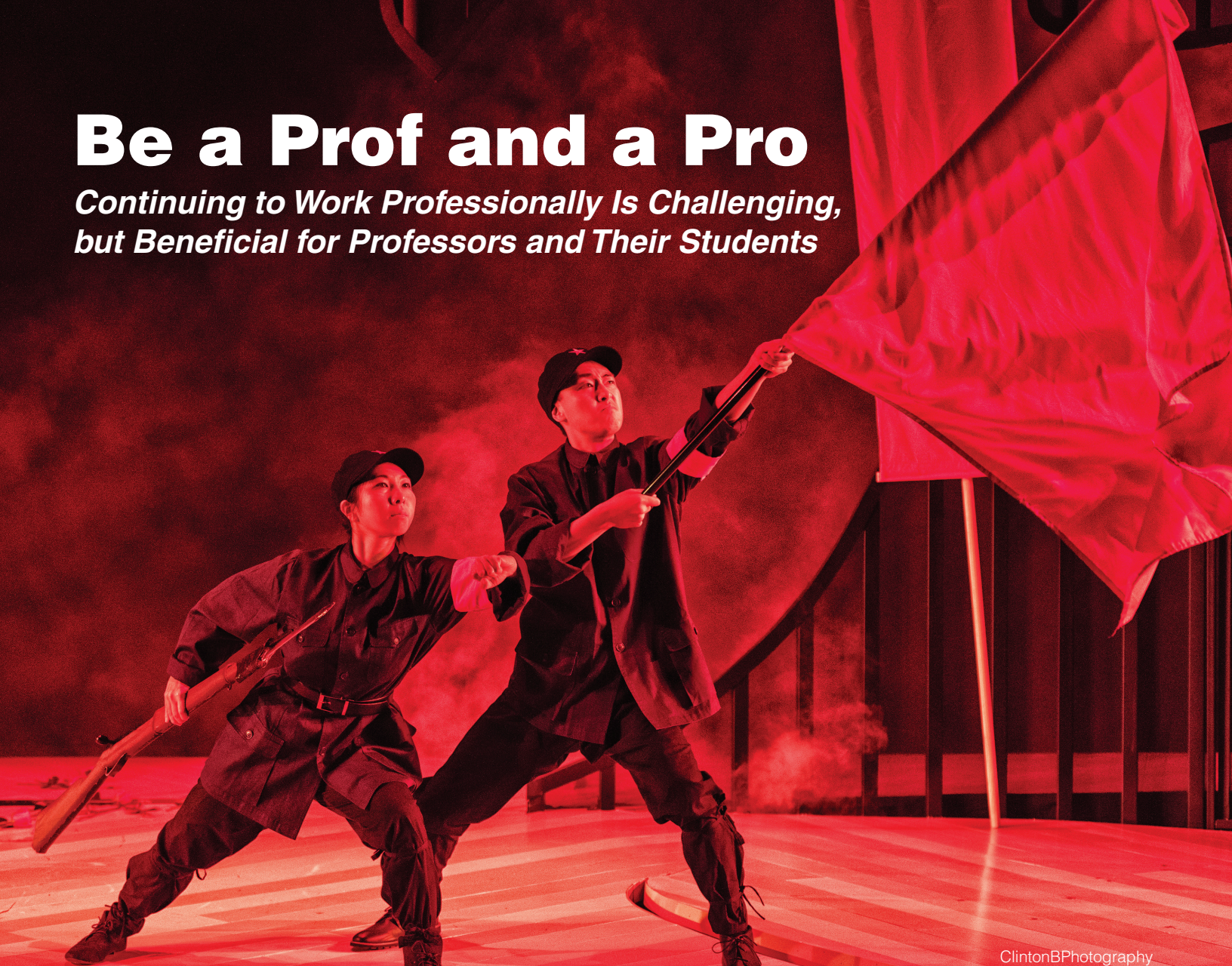


# Be a Prof and a Pro

*Continuing to Work Professionally Is Challenging, but Beneficial for Professors and Their Students*



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by Tom Alsip

Being a theatre maker while also working in higher education is the best of both worlds. You get to satisfy your yearning for creativity and artistic fulfillment while teaching your craft for the steady paycheck that many artists in this country lack. And chances are good that your institution actually encourages you to pursue continued professional work in order to keep your skills and knowledge fresh. So, where's the rub? Combining professional jobs with a teaching schedule can be a challenging proposition. Getting work in theatre is never an easy venture – and it is even harder when your availability is limited to the summer months and other occasional breaks from school.

The difficulty of balancing professional work with academic responsibilities has been the bane of artists working in higher education for years and is something that leaves new initiates into the world of artistic academia flummoxed. Many find themselves asking: How do you find work? How do you fit it into your schedule? What sort of support is offered by educational institutions to allow work in professional theatre while still serving students? And is the hassle worthwhile?

*Southern Theatre* posed those questions to a dozen theatre educators who have shown continued success working simultaneously in the professional realm and the world of higher education in settings ranging from Baltimore, MD to Fayetteville, AR. These educators, ranging from full-time instructors to adjunct faculty members, shared their insights on finding work, balancing professional and school responsibilities, and the benefits that accrue – to professors as well as their students – from making the effort to stay active professionally.

## HOW TO FIND PROFESSIONAL WORK

Finding work in the professional theatre world, especially with the time limitations of a full-time teaching gig, requires extra time and effort. The theatre educators interviewed shared four strategies they have used:

### 1 Retain ties with places where you have worked professionally

The majority of these educators had fairly successful professional careers before joining the ranks of academia – and they note that most successful job searches in the theatre world are tied to professional and personal contacts from previous relationships.

Eric Abele, a costume designer who teaches at the University of Maryland-Baltimore, is an example of a theatre maker who entered the world of higher education but maintained his professional ties.

“Before I started teaching, I was a resident designer at Lexington Children’s Theatre (LCT),” he says. “Given that we did 11 professional productions a year, I wasn’t designing anywhere else for those years. Since I left LCT, we have maintained an excellent relationship, and I continue to design anywhere from two to four shows there a year.”

### 2 Work to find opportunities in your new hometown

Taking a job in higher education often means making a move, which may expose you to a new city or region flush with theatrical opportunities. That was the experience of Jon Tuttle, who accepted a job teaching playwriting at Francis Marion University and found that the move was a shot in the arm for his professional career.

“I was fortunate to find in South Carolina a much more vibrant theatre community than where I came from in New Mexico,” he says. “I came to Francis Marion University in 1990 with only a few university and community theatre productions under my belt. One evening about 25 years ago, I found myself at Trustus Theatre in Columbia, seeing a production of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. The vibe was great, the audience was into it, and they served popcorn and beer. I thought about how perfect it would be to have

a relationship with them. That relationship started in 1994 when Trustus selected my play, *The Hammerstone*, for their annual Playwrights’ Festival award, which included a production of the award-winning work. Being no fool, I stayed in touch with them, and when my next play *Drift* was ready, I submitted it to them again. It won again, and at that point they asked me to be Playwright-in-Residence, which is, of course, the best gig any playwright could ask for.”

Similarly, Abele found that moving to a different location for his teaching job opened up new opportunities for his career in costume design.

“I’m sure this is different for everyone, but in my case being relocated to Baltimore makes this pursuit much more straightforward, as there is a rich theatre scene both here and in DC, as well as in the surrounding area,” he says. “I have secured work through colleagues, chance encounters seeing a show, Facebook and through old-fashioned meet-and-greets. Now that I’m entering my fourth year in the area, I think most of my work is coming through a developing professional network and relationships with directors and producers.”

### 3 Grow a network through professional events and theatre conferences

Not all artists are lucky enough to find that taking a job in higher education moves them to an area with an abundance of professional opportunities. If that is the case for you, then other professors say your priority should be keeping in contact with people you have worked with in the past and working to build new opportunities through networking. Perhaps the most effective networking events are the various theatrical conferences that happen annually around the country, such as the SETC Convention, the American Society for Theatre Research Conference, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference, the New England Theatre Conference, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education conference, the United States Institute for Theatre Technology conference, the Mid-America Theatre Conference, or the auditions and interviews that take place at the University Resident Theatre Association conference.

**Opposite Page:** Eric Abele was tapped to do the costume design for *M. Butterfly*, presented September 6 – October 8, 2017, at Everyman Theatre in Baltimore. Abele, a lecturer at the University of Maryland-Baltimore, has forged connections with numerous theatres since relocating from Lexington, KY.



Eric Abele  
Costume Designer



Jon Tuttle  
Playwright



Amy Herzberg  
Actor-Director

Paul B. Crook, a professor of theatre at Louisiana Tech and former associate artistic director for the Oklahoma Shakespearean Festival with experience as an actor and director at theatres in New Mexico, Arkansas, Tennessee, Ohio, Alabama and Georgia, notes that attending theatre conferences as an educator also can help professors make professional connections.

"I got a directing gig through SETC while attending the convention as an educator one year," he says. "I was looking for a summer gig and was hired at *Trumpet in the Land*, in New Philadelphia, OH, to direct a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* for their summer season."



*Martine Green-Rogers*  
Dramaturg

#### **4 Create your own work**

Some artists find that the best way to stay involved professionally is to create their own work.

"I'm incredibly fortunate to have cofounded a professional theatre in Fayetteville, AR, where I'm head of acting at the University of Arkansas," says Amy Herzberg, who directs the University of Arkansas' BA and MFA acting programs. "We started TheatreSquared (T2) back in 2005. Since then, it's grown into a \$2.5-million Equity theatre that produces six shows a season, plus the Arkansas New Play Festival, which develops another four or five plays."

By creating her own company, Herzberg brought new theatre to the residents of Fayetteville and to the students at the University of Arkansas. She also provided herself with continued professional work.

"As T2's associate artistic director, I typically direct and/or act in one or two shows per season," Herzberg says. "And I've successfully grown my professional network through the now extensive family of artists who've worked with us at T2. Their connections and recommendations have brought me numerous opportunities to work outside Fayetteville."

#### **HOW TO BALANCE THE TWO WORLDS**

It can be difficult juggling the responsibilities of academia and professional theatre. All of the educators interviewed for this story said they benefited from working in theatre departments and universities that were supportive of their faculty and staff seeking outside work.

"My university makes time for it," says Martine Kei Green-Rogers, an assistant professor of dramaturgy at the State University of New York (SUNY) New Paltz. "I think it is because they hired me *because* I was out in the field doing the work, so it makes little sense for them to not want me to continue doing the work just because I started working for them. Plus, I

tend to want to bring the connections I make in my freelance work into my classroom – which tends to benefit my institution and our students."

Some universities also have special programs that aid professors seeking professional work. Tuttle, for example, got help from just such a program in making time for professional jobs in his busy schedule.

"At FMU (Francis Marion University), we have Trustees' Research and Scholar positions – about 10 of them, all chosen by the president. Those faculty selected – we come from every discipline – get an annual stipend and, more importantly, course release time."

Even in a supportive department, though, some creativity and help from co-workers is often needed.

"We have a small, three-person department," says Lee Crouse, an assistant professor of theatre at Mississippi University for Women, who spent last summer working as a production stage manager for *Tecumseh!* outdoor drama in Ohio. "While I have not taken a leave of absence for a theatre job, my colleagues have. We collaborate to cover classes, take up assignments, and teach where possible on our online platform. Our administration is supportive as long as the absence does not affect the students."

Kenton Yeager, a professor of lighting design at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, who has designed for numerous professional theatres, including the Denver Center Theatre, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, underscores the importance of communication and discussion when planning to take time off to pursue a professional theatrical opportunity.

"Developing a good relationship with your department head is key to continuing to work professionally: creating trust by making sure everything is covered at the university while you are away, including class coverage, student mentorship on projects, departmental and committee meetings (via Skype) and continuing effective and timely communication with your students," he says.

Robert Coleman, an associate professor of technical direction at Florida State University, acknowledges that sometimes hard choices have to be made when trying to balance work at school and in the field.

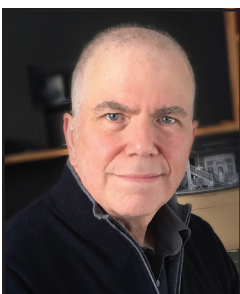
"It is challenging to support both one's own career (and perhaps tenure) without doing so at the expense of the student," he says. "I would suggest that one focus primarily on summer work during the 'off-contract' periods and to weigh very carefully work taken on during the academic year."



*Lee Crouse*  
Stage Manager



*Kenton Yeager*  
Lighting Designer



*Daniel Ettinger*  
Scenic Designer

Some universities not only tolerate their employees working in the field, but encourage or even require it for tenure promotion. Daniel Ettinger, a professor of scenic design at Towson University who has worked with numerous professional companies including the Roundabout Theatre Company, the Walnut Street Theatre and the Juilliard School, is working for just such an institution.

"My university expects faculty to do scholarship work, which we negotiate with the department chair in our yearly workload agreement," he says. "In general, my department has been very supportive of outside work, provided I do not miss more than three or four class sessions over the course of a semester. I vary between having someone cover those classes or just arranging the calendar in such a way that students can work independently. My university expects scholarship work for tenure promotion. While that need not be professional work, professional work is highly regarded as scholarship."

#### **WHY IT'S WORTHWHILE**

You may worry that time away for professional work will have a detrimental impact on your students' education, but many educators say that just the opposite is true. Not only does professional work keep his artistic skills fresh, Abele says, but "I also see the outside work as enriching my classroom teaching, because I continually learn new and better methods for design simply through practice."

Other professors interviewed for this story also note that outside theatrical work has a positive impact on their theatre departments – and on their students.

Dawn Larsen, associate professor of theatre at Francis Marion University and creator of the one-woman show *The Vicious Hillbilly or Dating in the Deep South*, points to the real-world knowledge she brings to the classroom as a result of her artistic work.

"If I'm out there auditioning, then I can better prepare my students to go out and do the same," Larsen says. "For example, in my 20s and 30s, auditioning for film/TV was very different than it is today. It was live, using printed headshots and resumes. Today it is all electronic submissions, websites, social media. I can help my students prepare for that because I do it. I strongly, strongly believe that a combination of praxis and scholarship produces the best practitioners and scholars. You have to do it to think and write well about it – and you have to be able to critically analyze to do it well. It gives my dramaturgy, directing, characters and my scholarship much more depth."

Annie G. Levy, who heads the University of Alabama's directing and stage management BA/MFA programs, agrees.

"A large part of my job (as well as my responsibility) as a professor is to remain active professionally in order to stay current in the trends of national and international theatre," says Levy, a theatre maker whose work has appeared at NYC's City Center, the Tank and HERE, as well as the Edinburgh Fringe and Theatre Due in Rome. "Theatre is constantly evolving. If you are not staying active, how will you evolve with it? And more importantly, how can you teach your college students if your professional understanding of theatre stops at some point in time?"

Avoiding professional stagnation is also a key benefit noted by Scot Mann, the head of theatre at Mercer University and an active fight choreographer with credits at numerous theatre companies including the Alliance Theatre, the Steppenwolf, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and True Colors Theatre.

"For me, it [working professionally] keeps me connected to industry trends and exposes me to professional situations where I learn from professionals who are freelancing full-time," he says. "It keeps me sharp as an artist and honest about where my skill level is in reality. It's easy to build yourself up when you're insulated."

Ettinger also emphasizes the importance of learning from others in professional jobs – and then bringing that expertise home to students.

"I think working professionally is critical to both my growth as an artist and the experience of my students in the classroom," he says. "I value the interaction with different directors and artists. Different technical directors expose to me to new solutions and materials that enhance my next project. I bring my professional experiences into the classroom, from research, preliminary designs, and experiences during tech."

While the information passed on to students in the classroom is invaluable, professors' artistic work also can directly benefit students' careers as they enter the world of professional theatre, Green-Rogers notes.

"I can keep tabs on the trends and movements in the field of dramaturgy in an immediate way," she says. "Plus, it allows me to help my students find potential employment as they finish their program. I think one can do that without working professionally but it is a whole lot harder to do so if you are not in the world."



*Dawn Larsen  
Actor-Singer*



*Robert Coleman  
Technical Director*



*Annie G. Levy  
Director*



*Jim Lile  
Technical Director*

Herzberg agrees: "Practicing my art form, I'm reminded repeatedly of what it means to do this work, and I remain rooted to the very real challenges my students will face – artistically and in their professional relationships. Also, and of perhaps equal importance, I'm able to extend my own professional network to them. There's no question that my ongoing professional work makes me a better teacher and mentor."

Some professors also find professional work provides opportunities for hands-on learning by their students. Jim Lile, an assistant professor of technical production and management at Florida State University with experience at the Utah Shakespeare Festival, Pensacola Opera, Nashville Opera and more, is one of them.

"When I serve as technical director for regional opera companies, I am able to bring two students to assist me," he says. "I'm able to bring real-world practices to the classroom and assignments."

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## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

There is no doubt that juggling a full-time schedule as a professor and trying to work in professional theatre is a difficult task, but those who have succeeded say the effort is worthwhile on many levels.

"As a teacher, I think it is essential to practice the craft I teach.," Herzberg says. "But I should add that, as an artist, there is an intangible value that I place on being able to practice – actually *do* – my art. It fulfills me, it feeds my sense of purpose,

it reminds me why I became an actor, and later a director, in the first place. And all of that energy I bring back to my students. It directly contributes to my enthusiasm, my passion, for teaching." ■



Tom Alsip is a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Alabama, where he is pursuing an MFA in directing. Previously, he spent 10 years in New York as an actor, director, educator and voice-over artist. He was the 2017 recipient of SETC's Leighton Ballew Directing Scholarship.

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