

Theatrical Production: A study of various aspects of production and performance

Ingmar Bergman, the famous Swedish director and producer, compared theatre to a "loyal wife" and film to a "demanding and expensive mistress", thus suggesting his faith in theatre over films. The other aspect of his reference can be read in terms of his loyalty of theatrical production over cinema. Though with passage of time the magnanimity of theatrical production has got a boost but limited resources has nevertheless managed to make a mark in the entertainment world of theatre. Today theatrical production has diversified immensely and entails a long list of personnel involved in putting up an act together. The success of a theatrical production depends on the cooperative effort of various people, namely director, producer, stage personnel, costumes designer, backstage support, music director and recording artists.

What is a theatrical Production?

It is very important to understand the term production before we have a better understanding of theatrical production. The term production finds its origin in the Latin word *producere* which means to lead or bring forth. Oxford defines the term production as, the action of making or manufacturing from components or raw materials, or the process of being so manufactured or the process of or management involved in making a film, play, or record.

A theatrical production is the process involved in conversion of a dramatic text into a theatrical performance which involves a diverse range of art forms from acting, direction, production, lighting, stage props, costume designing, music, backstage support etc. It is a transformation of one art form into another from text to an enriching visual experience of performance.

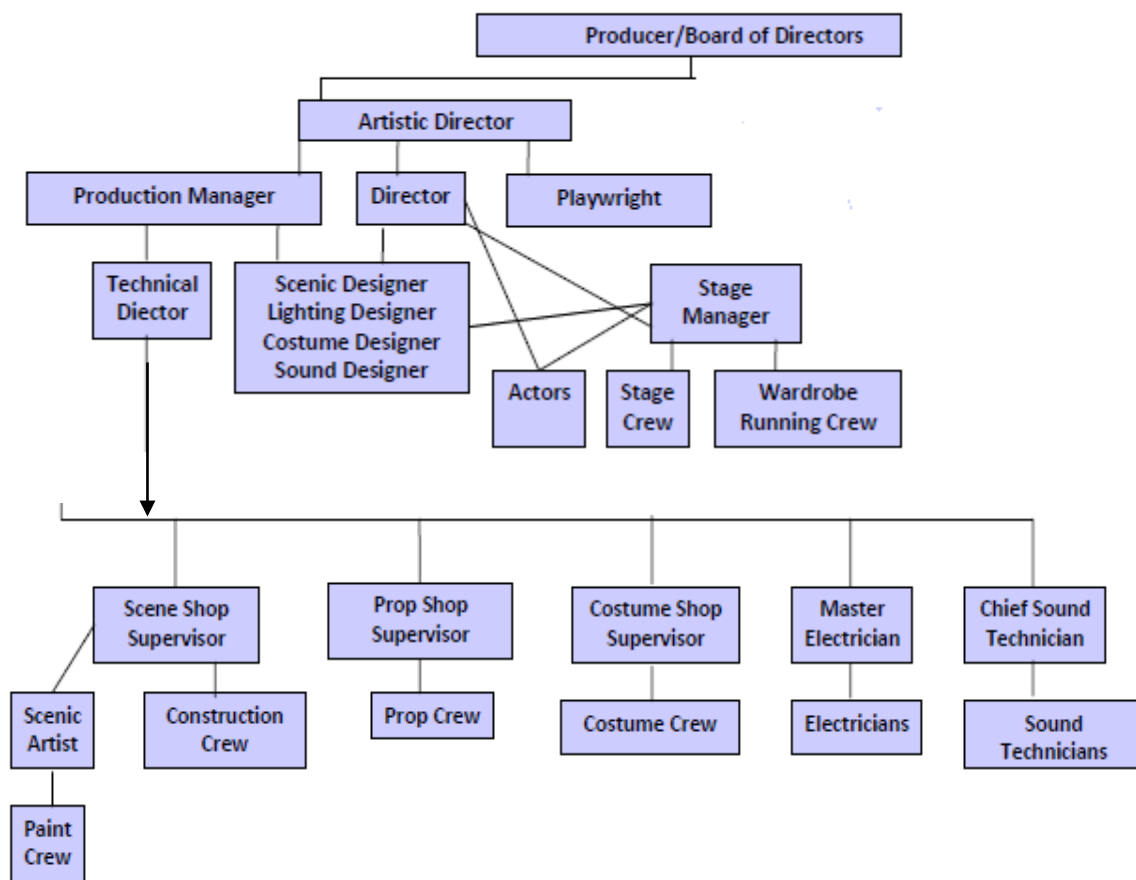
There is a production team which under supervision of production manager who ensures co-ordination of all the technical and staging requirements in a production house. There are certain theatres which have their own production or technical managers who co-ordinates with the creative team and are accountable for the sets, costumes, lighting, props, music and other expertise and cater to the creative team's vision.

This complex process of conversion of text into performance begins with interpretation or drawing out of underlying meaning of a dramatic text through careful and comprehensive study of central themes and various recurring motifs present in the dramatic script. This interpretation or transformation very often undergoes a substantial degree of change in order to serve a specific audience, very often known as an adaptation in world of theatre and cinema. William Shakespeare has been one of the most adapted playwrights in theatres and even in cinemas. His plays have been widely adapted all across the globe. Various Indian theatre groups like Naseeruddin Shah's Motley Productions, Atul Kumar's The Company Theatre and The Madras Players theatre groups have staged various works of Shakespeare in original form and its adaptations. Besides theatrical adaptations Shakespeare's works has also been adapted widely into cinema by Indian directors like Gulzaar and Vishal Bhardwaj. Angoor, Maqbool, Omkara and Haider are a few well known adaptations by them.

Though theatrical production is a complex process which involves a varied range of expertise, a few of the most important components of theatrical production are as follows:

1. Acting
2. Direction
3. Production
4. Costume
5. Set design
6. Stage props
7. Lighting

Please refer to the flow chart of a theatrical Production which would give us a fair deal of understanding of the hierarchy in the theatre.



Direction

It has been rightly said by the famous Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio that, "You never know as a director what other directors do. Because you don't get to see what they do." So how do we evaluate the director in a theatre or a movie? We get to see it through the actors' performance, which is a reflection of director's expertise.

A director is the leader of the production team who brings together and coordinates with the complex pieces of production which includes actors, various experts like costume, sound, lighting and set designers along with stage manager and the crew. He is a visionary with an artistic approach towards the project and hence is known as an artistic director as well. The production is his brain child which he nourishes with his coherent and consistent artistic vision of the play. He also coordinates with other departments, in order to sustain the vision of the play. The artistic function of a director begins with the selection of script, its analysis besides researching the theatrical script, author's period and his style. He conveys his artistic vision to various departments, who is part of production in order to achieve a desired output. The performers co-ordination, their entrances, smooth exits, apt scene changes, usage of space on the stage, the pace and rhythm of the play; all of these together decides the capabilities of a director. Discussing the role of a director Jean Vilar in his essay, *Murder of the Director* states that, "Where the actor is concerned, the director's art is one of suggestion. He does not impose, he suggests. Above all, he must not be brutal. The "soul of an actor" is not an idle phrase: even more than the "soul of a poet", it is a continuing necessity. One does not win a creature's soul by brutalizing it, and the actor's soul is more necessary to the work of theatre than his sensitivity." He also goes on to say that, a director's role 'is to inspire the actor with confidence, to convince him that he has, in the very expressive phrase, "found" or "rediscovered" his character.'

He is the one who arranges for the auditions, rehearses and prepares the actors for the show. He is responsible for all artistic decisions pertaining production and may designate assistant directors and share any portion of his responsibilities. We have certain expectations from a director which includes having coherent understanding of the play and a general vision for the show. An excellent organizational and communication skill adds to the success of the production. A director is more of an amalgamation of artistic and managerial expertise, who functions for the success of the project and is the force behind the unification of the cast and crew as a team.

Direction is not merely an interpretation of script on to stage but a careful absorption of an idea or work into another form keeping in mind the political and cultural contexts of the audience. As Karnad very clearly states, however, the attempt "was not to find and reuse forms that had worked successfully in some other cultural context. The hope, rather, was to discover whether there was a structure of expectations-and conventions-about entertainment underlying these forms from which one could learn."

Besides Girish Karnad, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, Habib Tanvir and Vijay Tendulkar are members of what is often referred to as the "Theatre of Roots" movement in Indian theatre, which began to study traditional Indian performance forms to understand what could be used in the conceptualization of a modern Indian drama.

There are certain other subsidiaries of direction which is in the field of music and technical expertise i.e. music director and technical director who works under the supervision of artistic director.

Producer

Producers are the people who create an approved budget for a theatrical production and ensure that the deadlines are being adhered. He is the one responsible for the arrangement of finance involved in the production, along with manpower and material. He conducts the weekly production meetings and spearheads the production along with the director. This person is responsible to source the performers with a team who will create and put up the show. In case if a theatre is not producing its own act, an independent producer takes care of it.

His act begins with developing budget for entire production. All the expenses are met by the producer, which includes performance fee, costumes, set designing, music, labor etc. Right from the arrangements of audition space, performance space to the securing of rights to production is handled by him. He handles the production schedules and may designate Assistant Producers and share any portion of his responsibilities.

Costume

According to Allen Sworth, "A good costume, like good speech or good dialogue or good business, should perform certain definite functions. It should cover and if desirable, enhance the appearance of the person wearing it".

Over the years costume designing has become a major part of theatre production in contemporary theatre. Costume design is the sum total of clothing and the overall appearance of a character required for a play. It has gone through various stages of development and its recognition as a separate field has lagged behind other fields like stage design and stagecraft. Earlier we had this economical concept of borrowing or renting of costumes which has found its way into disfavor. There are a few basic functions of costumes which help in projection of a character evidently. The first and foremost is defining of a character in a specific time and space. It establishes the approximate age, gender with help of wigs, fabrics, colors, fit and makeup. It helps us establish rank or social status of a character; reflects changes in character like richer, poorer, older, injured, fatter etc. through change or alteration of costume.

The second is to support the theme, concept and mood of a play. The costume must express the director's concept besides supporting the emotional feeling which penetrates the experience of the audience. The style, in which a costume is created, its texture, scale, color interprets a theatrical performance's theme, concept and mood. The costume can be realistically created which is close to actual demand of a play. A costume designer is supposed to have a strong visual sense along with knowledge of clothing styles and history and works within the budget of the theatrical production.

Referring to the role of a costume designer or expert's role in theatre production, Lucy Barton in her essay, *A major in Costume* states that:

'It must be insisted that the serious purpose of a costumer is not to give the actors "something to wear," not to "make them look pretty," not even to "dress the stage"; rather it is to aid in the interpretation of the play as a whole and of each character in the play. A good costume becomes part of the actor's characterization; it clothes the character properly, so that the audience is never aware of the dress as separate from the character. Therefore it is of prime importance that that costume shall be designed to express the character.'

It's quite evident how audience recognizes costume as part of the character and not as a separate entity in a theatrical production.

Why are costumes so important for the delivery of a role?

Costume provides a strong visual support to the context, storyline and concept of the play; it reflects the visual style of the production and enables actors in justifying the portrayal of their characters. There are several directors who prefer working together with their costume designers in realizing their work accurately and realistically. Nowadays costume designer's works in collaboration with the directors by participating in rehearsals in order to get an understanding how the dress will be used and to ascertain that the stylistic selections made in initial discussions of the production will continue to be part of it or would undergo certain changes.

In my opinion characters on stage are visually incomplete without proper costumes. The nature of the character on stage is reflected through appropriate costumes. The role of costume designers are not as easy as it seems to be, the shape, the color, the design, the fabric, everything is projected in a specific manner so that all the symbols in union with the act come alive meaningfully and elegantly. He is as involved in the act as an actor on the stage.

Make-up goes hand in hand with costume, and plays an important role in visual aesthetic of a character, its projection and even practical elements in a production. It provides the key information about a character at first appearance. Makeup and hairstyling enhances the storytelling and make a play look more realistic. If the dialogue acts as melody of a movie, the color represents harmony and a satisfying visual cohesiveness to the act.

The makeup and hair designer is responsible for ensuring availability of makeup supplies for the act which includes any specialty makeup and hair items. They also make sure that the actors have the appropriate makeup and hair style throughout the play. Besides they also hold makeup and hair workshops/rehearsals around production week for the cast.

Costume Terminology

COSTUME FITTING: First meeting between the actor and his/her costume. Enables wardrobe staff to ensure a correct fit, and to enable the actor to see if all necessary movement is possible.

DRESSING ROOMS: Rooms containing clothes rails and mirrors (often surrounded with lights) in which actors change into their costumes and apply make-up. Dressing Room doors have a list of the actors contained within.

GREEN BAIZE: Prior to 17th century actors dying on stage, a green baize cloth was laid down on the stage to save their costumes from needing cleaning. This was also a useful anticipation builder for the audience, especially if the cloth was laid during the interval halfway into the performance.

QUICK CHANGE: A change of costume that needs to happen very quickly takes place close to the side of the stage. Costume designers need to know about the need for a quick change so that the costume is made incorporating elements such as Velcro and zips rather than buttons.

QUICK CHANGE ROOM: Area adjacent to the stage containing lighting, a mirror and a costume rail in which actors can make costume changes quickly, sometimes with the aid of a dresser.

SEAMSTRESS: Member of the wardrobe department who operates sewing machines and carries out other sewing tasks.

SKIP (Costume/Props): A large wicker basket or box, often wheeled, which stores costumes and/or props for touring.

UNPICK: Small cutter designed for unpicking a sewn seam. Useful for undoing alterations to a costume following a production.

WARDROBE: The general name for the costume department, its staff and the accommodation they occupy.

Set Design, Stage props and Lighting

Set design includes a lot of other expertise besides creating a background which reflects the life and times of a play. It goes hand in hand with Stage Props. Set design mainly consists of the scenery and the stage properties which consist of the furniture, draperies and decorations. The set designer's primary job is to design the physical surrounding where the act is supposed to take place. The set must create the atmosphere and must be suggestive of the specific time and space of the action. It must reflect the style and tone of the production. The set is also a reflection of the director's concept of the production. Set designers are supposed to go through the script thoroughly in order to get the essence and demand of the script. Ideal set designers ensures everything to precision like historical period, seasons, locations, time of the day etc. They too work in collaboration with the director in order to under his vision of the play and works in achieving it through his designs. In order to give the production a unified look, they get along with other experts like costume, prop, sound and lighting designers.

One of the famous set designers Raffy Tesoro in his interview defines set designs as:

“...is all about creating a world. May it be a glimpse, a touch... or an entire panoramic view of reality and/or fantasy. Production designers like to joke that our job was the first one ever since God created a world to his liking... But yes, we create time (periods, timelines, etc.), space (rooms, worlds, props,) ideas (genres, concepts, and fantasies) and whatever else. Production design isn't only about making things to be placed in the physical aspect of the job... but also to design an aesthetic and create concepts that are pertinent to the work at hand. It's more mental than menial but don't let that fool you... there's a lot of hard, dirty, hands on work involved.”

Like any other technical area of production, set and prop designers too need skills of a host of trained theatre personnel which are roped in for several theatrical production works. The most important being the carpenters who builds and installs the set for the show. Painter becomes another integral unit of this team effort where his sense of color adds meaning to the set and helps audience in identifying with the play. We have stage crews who run around to move various elements on and off the stage, while there is any change in scene. Prop designer's constructs and arranges for the stage properties required for an act and ensures that the prop crew keeps a track of the props during the performance.

Stage Props are the large number of small items that a play requires for theatrical productions. A prop in charge is a person who is appointed for procurement of all these small items. In a larger production we do have a prop designer who decides on what a prop must look like, in coordination with set designer and the director.

Student portal for theatre at Harvard defines set design as follows:

“Set design is an important part of almost any theatre production, as almost every show will utilize some sort of set, however minimal. Sets can be abstract, highly realistic, or anything in between, and they are a chance for a designer to showcase interesting concepts, new techniques, and unusual materials. The primary function of a set, of course, is to provide the audience with

some context for the play, but it can also be a chance to create something stunning to draw in the audience.

The most important thing to remember as a set designer is to be innovative and original; inspiration can come from almost anything or any place, and you should never stop thinking about creative ways to help tell a story. As set designer, you not only have to create a concept that is in line with the director's vision, but you also have to decide how it will be built, painted, and decorated. The look of the stage as a whole is largely your responsibility, and it can be as interesting as your imagination and ingenuity can make it."

Lighting

The main objective of stage lighting is to provide visibility and to provide focus on stage and create visual compositions and to establish a rhythm of visual movement. Lighting helps us identify the characters, their expressions, movements and mood on the stage. A lighting designer can influence various aspects of lighting like color, movement, direction and distribution to project the characters and set equally during the time of the play. They can follow-spot, fade, cross-fade and blackout which suggest the movement and form of lighting. They possess strong visual sense and have detailed knowledge of interaction of colors, light and shadow in three dimensional spaces. They coordinate cue- to- cue rehearsals, attends lighting focus, lighting hang, level set etc. during rehearsals and the final act. They coordinate with costume designer and director on a color palette. He creates lighting plot, elevation plan and cue sheets for a better projection of characters during the play.

Student portal for theatre at Harvard further describes another inevitable component in scheme of theatrical production, i.e. lighting of the stage. They define the role of lighting designer as follows:

"The lighting designer is usually called upon to both create the conceptual lighting design and to implement the design in the actual space. This involves deciding which lights to use and where to place them in the theatre, which color gels and which effects to use in a show, as well as the practical knowledge of how to hang the lights and cue the show. Lighting designers may be responsible for hanging the lights and the more hands-on aspects of lighting a show as well as designing the various looks and deciding on schemes. Your design must take into account both the design of the set, the mood of the play, subtleties and dynamics in scenes within the play, and the blocking of the actors throughout. To light a show requires more than hanging lights or even deciding where to place them; the lighting designer must have a more-thorough understanding than most of the other designers, and must take into account the designs and vision of all of the other designers. In order to be successful, a show must have not only good direction and a nice set, but must have a light scheme that shows both to their best advantage."

Lighting Terminology

Color Temperature: It's a measure of the color of white light. In fact, it is the color of a "black body" heated up to that particular temperature in the Kelvin (absolute) temperature scale. A halogen incandescent lamp usually has a color temperature of between 3000K and 3600K. Higher color temperatures are bluer than are lower color temperatures

Cue: An event in a production that is the signal for a specific action.

Cue Light: A light used to signal a cue. Red usually means stand by and green usually means execute the cue.

Direct Lighting: Illumination on a subject or area that goes directly from the front of the luminaire in a straight line to the subject or area.

Down Light: 1) Downward illumination, almost perpendicular with the floor. 2) A luminaire that provides such illumination.

Fade In: The gradual increase in intensity of light.

Fade Out: The gradual decrease in intensity of light.

Throw: The distance from the fixture to the performer or scenic unit being lighted

Light Plot: A drawing or drawings showing the location of each fixture, its fixture type, color, channel, dimmer, and focus

Dimmer: A device which regulates light intensity

Fresnel Spotlight: A spotlight employing a single Fresnel lens that produces a soft edged beam, and usually provided with a spherical reflector and a means to adjust the focus from spot to flood.

Cross-light: The illumination of a subject from both sides.

Light Plot: A plan view of the Set or location showing some or all of the following: the position, height, type, and Size of the lights, their intensities, accessories, gels, and beam shape, etc.

Cross-fade: Lighting levels are gradually altered from one setting to another.

Interviewing Performers

Example 1

The excerpt below is an interview of Anupam Kher about the success of his autobiographical play *Kucch Bhi Ho Sakta Hai* (KBHSH). The veteran actor talks about the play, his performance and his life as it unfolds through the show.

Aditi Sharma: How has the play evolved through 300 shows?

Anupam Kher: There have been no significant additions or subtractions in the script except for the fact that in the end I add an update about where life has taken me lately. Depending on my ease and connectivity with the audience, the play might take on a different nuance. There are people who have seen the play 4 or 5 times and they come backstage to tell me that the play has changed a lot but that reflects a change in my understanding of the play. What has changed significantly in the script, however, is that a number of people I used to talk about in the present tense have passed away, so from hain it's become the.

The idea to do the play came from an offer to write your autobiography. Are you happy you never wrote the autobiography and chose to turn it into a performance instead?

Absolutely! It would not have made an impact at all - on the audience or on me - if I'd written an autobiography. KBHSH has made me come alive as an actor. I have been doing all kinds of roles in cinema, so for me, theatre was not about doing different work. I believe in the theatre of communication and the performance should be such that it becomes an inspiration for the audience. The play should work towards changing people's perspective towards life.

Do you still get jittery before going on stage?

I'm very superstitious and I don't want to sound overconfident just days before a show but even so, I'd say that I'm much more confident now. Initially, I would get stressed about forgetting the lines or maintaining the graph of the play. I focused a lot on the technical aspects of the play which I've stopped doing to a certain extent. Then again, the play gets tweaked on its own because of the way the audience reacts to it. I believe it is a triumph of theatre that we've been able to do 300 shows of an autobiographical play. It's a two-and-a-half hour play and it forces me to be fit enough to carry it through each show.

What's your favorite sequence of the play?

I like the first half of the play. The second half, post interval, is connected to cinema and is not as exciting for me because it becomes one-dimensional. My time in Shimla, in college, my days as a struggler, my student days at the National School of Drama, my first kiss... add a value to the story telling aspect of the play. The boy from Shimla then had not yet encountered dishonesty

and had not lost his sense of wonder and innocence. I find it exciting to re-live him. The part where I talk about my grandmother telling me stories makes the audience think about their own grandmothers. But when I talk about the success or failure in films, or about Subhash Ghai or Mahesh Bhatt, the audience knows who I'm talking about, so the play becomes restrictive.

A number of your peers from the film industry have called it a brave performance. Did you think it would be a brave thing to do when you decided to do it?

They think it is brave because they wonder whether they'll be able to do it - be brutally naked and put their own life on stage. But doing KBHSH gives me an edge because I've disclosed everything; there is nothing left to fear. Audience members tell me, "Aap mein bade guts hain, ji." For me, every show becomes cathartic and I feel like the tallest man on earth, post the show.

KBHSH happened during a rough phase. Do you think theatre came to your rescue?

My own experiences came to my rescue. The play has given me maximum courage, satisfaction, work and money. It's become my life's philosophy - courage decides what you become in life. It's also inspired my book, The Best Thing About You Is You!

KBHSH will turn 10 in August this year. How long do you think the play will live?

I hope to perform the last show in a wheelchair some 20 years later. I'll continue to perform the show until I'm physically able to. Even after I'm unable to perform, the words will live on. I want to keep the boy from Shimla alive as long as possible.

Example 2

The interaction given below is an excerpt from an interview with a Canadian theatre actor, Jonathon Young, National Arts Centre March 2006 (Ottawa, Canada)

How important is training to you?

I think it's very important in that, I mean, it all depends on the kind of person you are and how motivated you are and how focused you are. The great thing about school is it forces you to work and it connects you to a theatre community. It opens doors and I think that's the hardest thing about coming to a city. Some people are so motivated and so extraverted that they can march in and they know they are going to make things happen. But if you're not that kind of person [then school] gets you in, directors work with you and that's huge. And I think also that if you want to become a film actor, you know, some people just have an idea that they're just going to waltz in and do their thing. But what school really gives you of course, is the means to do work or to do a good audition or perform even when the inspiration isn't there. Often times in television you're working with scripts that are just so dreadful or so thin that I find that's when I go back to the training: to apply a bunch of questions that you learn to ask or games to play to try and find something to bring. And I think that's the great thing about theatre school, I discovered while I was there, it's that it's very much a rehearsal school. You learn how to rehearse; you learn how to ask the right questions and how to interpret. When you come up against a wall you learn how to drill through it using your own personal idiosyncrasies but with the tools.

What are the actor's tools?

An actor's tools...how to build a character, say. Where to begin to build a character. Asking the right kinds of questions about...well, it's different for every script or every part because they all demand different questions but you need to decide on what you want and what your goals are. You ask yourself what this person might want and why they might want that. I think for monologues, which are such a big part of a theatre actor's audition process you need to know where to begin a monologue, what the moment before a monologue is, what the overall context of the monologue is, what the journey of the monologue is, and ways to approach lines of text. How to take a thought through to the end of a text?

Are there physical things that make up an actor's toolbox?

Sure, yes. Totally. For example, how to convey something physically, knowing when you're too physical, knowing when you're pushing as opposed to living in it and letting it live.

What about the voice?

Yes. Sure. For some people vocal work is no problem and articulation is no problem. And for some people it's a huge struggle. Again, it comes down that point when you get nervous and suddenly your voice is up here and you've lost your breath and then you just hear that voice

teacher saying, Here's a simple thing to do. Just get down in your diaphragm and just keep the breath down there. When you are in a very nervous situation it's great to have something extremely physical and concrete to do. Just to breathe deeply. It's something practical that is essentially easy to do.

How does a person know if he or she is a potential actor?

I suppose you could ask yourself, why? It's a hard answer sometimes, but if you come up with the answer "I want to be famous," and really that's what you want then you have to make some choices based on that. Lots of people do get into it because they want to be famous. I think many, many people do, especially for film and television. I don't really know. I always wanted to be an actor, ever since I was young. It was very clear to me. I think for someone who's quivering.....and there are lots of people in theatre school who weren't really sure and who afterwards just didn't do it, but, sometimes it takes doing that, going to theatre school, to find out if you really want to do it or not because it can be brutal and difficult...

Is the artist an important person in our society?

I think so and I also question that a lot myself. In Vancouver people are shocked when I tell them I'm an actor and that's how I make my living. You know, people are just floored that there actually are people in Vancouver that live that life. Often, too, the impression is that it's a hobby, that it's not a legitimate living. So, when you're faced with that constantly it's difficult to remember that the artist is an important person in society because you realize how many millions of people in our country are not at all aware of theatre as something that's going on: as an art form. It never touches their life, or it touches them only very minimally. But then you look at other countries where artists are respected. I was just reading something about Berlin and you go to live in Berlin and you get a passport that stamped "Actor" or "Artist". This is your profession: Artist. And how different that is. The perception is different. What I love about European countries, with the history, is the cultural identity and the richness of the culture and I think with Canada being so gigantic and being relatively new, especially in the west coast for us European folk, there is a lack of that identity or that cultural grounding.