



dear john

Q A

What are the skills – besides technical knowledge – needed to progress in a behind-the-scenes career?

In previous columns, we have featured guests who have effectively combined backstage or behind-the-scenes roles with onstage and on-screen work, sometimes on an alternating basis and sometimes while doing the same jobs. While versatility is a useful quality to have in any area of the industry, the reality is that for every job available 'in the spotlight', there are a far greater number of jobs and opportunities actually operating those spotlights, cameras and other elements essential to making a broadcast production work.

There is also a range of vital jobs, from marketing to accounting to general running, which may or may not sound 'showbiz' but are no less fundamental. Each area has a specific skill set, but as with performance-based career goals, there are also things that can really only be learned from experience. Our two guests this week have established themselves in a relatively short period of time as 'go to' people for effective and reliable behind-the-scenes work. Here, they explain how they achieved this.

what the experts say...



Mimi Barber

Mimi Barber graduated with a degree in media performance from the University of Bedfordshire in July 2012. She worked freelance as a translator and researcher at several companies, including Channel 5, which is where she works now full time as a production runner in the in-house department.

"After graduating, I was pondering looking for jobs and my friend tagged me in a post on Facebook where someone was looking for a Japanese speaker to translate for a new Channel 5 programme (I'm British/Japanese – I lived there until I was nine and was raised bilingually). That's where I met my current boss and it all began for me.

"My media course taught me to stay on top of things and make sure I didn't leave anything to the last minute. It's only in my job now that I realise just how important that is. Organisation and prioritising are so key. I also learned people skills at uni, which is something else that is important – especially learning how to deal with different people in different situations.

"When I started studying, presenting was what I wanted to do, and before that, musical theatre.

But it was in training in front of camera that I found I actually wanted to be organising the stuff behind the scenes.

"I never saw media as a glamorous career option – I just really wanted to do it! I think the thing that helped me was the work experience I did. I made sure that I was doing something during holidays, even if it was on a short film for two days. Someone once looked at my CV and said, 'you can tell you've been proactive, that's what most people look for'.

"Once you're in, it's about being yourself, and making sure you're hardworking but not in always 'in your face' – people are watching you, you don't need to flaunt every single thing you're doing.

"Make connections naturally. Don't try and be friends with someone just because you think they'll get you somewhere. It's painfully obvious when someone is doing that.

"Genuine enthusiasm is important. You can't just be doing what you're asked to do – you need to actually show you're willing and enjoying doing it."

Sophia A Jackson

Sophia A Jackson is the founder and editor of Afridiziak Theatre News, which celebrates its fifth year of operation this month. Since setting up the website, Sophia has honed her skills as a PR and marketing professional specialising in diverse theatre productions.

"I studied for a masters in journalism studies at the University of Westminster – it was my exit from a career as a personal assistant. I worked as listings editor for the New Nation newspaper and made some good contacts, so when the publication went into administration I decided to put them to good use and launched Afridiziak Theatre



News with my brother Basil Lumsden, the site's web developer.

"As editor of the site, it enabled me to nurture my love of theatre and passion for spreading the word on all the must-see African-Caribbean productions. Theatres and playwrights started approaching me to assist with their marketing campaigns or manage their PR.

"As the PR representative for a production, you don't want it to be about you – it's always about the client and ensuring they and or their production are the ones getting all the attention – and lots of it. Performers can help by having a good quality, high-resolution head shot. It can be frustrating for the publication and the PR if there isn't a strong image to go with the interview. It's also helpful for performers to be mindful of what they are saying in interviews.

"Earlier this year I worked with another PR, Ann-Marie Baptiste, on *Desperately Seeking the Exit* by Peter Michael Marino – a production I felt was out of my comfort zone. I practically talked Ann-Marie out of giving me the gig because I lacked confidence. Her advice was that if I was willing to work hard, then I'd get the results. She was right. It taught me that sometimes we sabotage opportunities that come our way due to a lack of self-belief. Don't!"

dear john sums up...

It strikes me that while they have both invested time in training for their respective professions, something that both Mimi and Sophia flag up as equally important is to have a passion for what you are actually doing rather than being one of those people who approach behind-the-scenes roles as mere stepping stones to a position in the spotlight. Although both of our guests this week are obviously very happy working backstage, there is certainly nothing wrong with viewing such positions as part of a wider career plan. However, even if being in front of the camera or on stage is your eventual end goal, you have a much better chance of being presented with an opportunity to work in that capacity if you make a name for yourself through making the best impression with the behind-the-scenes opportunity you are currently being given. That's where tapping into your passion will keep on you on track, and as Sophia says, will bring you even bigger challenges where you might surprise yourself with what you can achieve.

John Byrne is an entertainment industry career advisor. Details about advice sessions, workshops and copies of *The Right Agent Right Now* e-book and other resources are available from www.performingcareers.com. Mimi Barber is on Twitter @mimbarber and also on LinkedIn. Sophia A. Jackson can be contacted via Afridiziak Theatre News at www.afridiziak.com, via email at sophia@afridiziak.com or by phone on 07855 867778.