

JACA
3(1994): 176-180

To Be Young, Gifted, and Out of Work

MARK MALINAUSKAS

TO be Young, Gifted, and Out of Work” may seem like a catchy title for an article, but for the unfortunate liberal arts graduates who find themselves in this position, the catchiness goes unnoticed. Market place uncertainties, periodic economic slumps, lay offs, organizational downsizing, and calls for technocrats are the hard realities theatre arts graduates face as they prepare to enter the current job market. Of course, we may all voice the resolve of the person: “I am only one person and I need only one job.” This is a good attitude to adopt, especially if it is accompanied by a well constructed strategy to seek and gain satisfying and lucrative employment. Before discussing a job search strategy, let us look at some employment statistics. The 1993 ATHE annual directory lists approximately 450 colleges and universities as organizational members with theatre programs. If we average each of those departments as having five-member faculties — many have less — the total of theatre faculty needed in any one year is 2,250. Attrition by retirement, death, job transfer averages generously - ten percent each year. Simple arithmetic indicates 225 job openings at the college level will exist in any one year. Now consider the number of graduates each year from these institutions. Concentrate on only the M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D. levels. If each institution produces only two graduates, you must conclude there are more applicants than there are positions.

Let’s move from education to the profession itself. Each June, the Sunday *New York Times* publishes a list of the principal summer theatres of the Northeast. This past June, 110 theatres were listed. If each employs approximately 50 actors, technicians and administrative personnel, the yield is 5,500 employed theatre professionals earning the weekly CORST X equity minimum salary of \$538.94. If this salary were earned year round it equals \$28,025 or roughly the equivalent of the compensation for a social worker, government service at the GS7 level and some secretaries, but less than sanitation workers in New York City, postal carriers, and apprentice plumbers.

If all of these summer workers invaded New York in the Fall to work at the 40 operating theatres paying equity scale, only 2000 would be employed leaving 3,500 to form unemployment lines.

Faced with such overwhelming statistics, two conclusions are possible. First, you may conclude you have the drive, talent, competitiveness, persistence, and luck to land a job in theatre without too much travail or heartbreak. Second, you may be a realist and conclude that you wish to take your career training and adopt it to another field or profession. For the former among you, I wish you god speed. For the latter, let's talk about transferable skills and their use on the road to employability.

Unfortunately, theatre study at the collegiate level carries a negative image in the civilian work world. Why it carries the pejorative connotation is historic (acting is an evil art). Theatricians cannot be buried in sanctified ground. It is also looked upon as a childish pursuit. Consequently, you must accept the fact that you will have to defeat an image and work harder at getting a job than anyone else. You must develop job hunting skills which are fashioned to promote you in the best possible image and you must be aggressive in pursuing the opportunities which are there.

Scanning want ads, writing a general cover letter, and creating a "theatrical" resume are insufficient and ineffective means in a job hunting strategic plan. The want ads normally advertise the knee jerk jobs and are devices for firms to go on fishing expeditions to find out who is available. Productive returns for individuals using this category are dismal. Writing a general cover letter does not address the specific job nor does it call to the reader's attention those items in the resume which should be repeated to give substance to the application. Creating a "flashily" printed resume on rainbow paper may appeal to art directors at the *National Lampoon*, but it does nothing for the conservative look which typifies the business world. Get the job first and then show your colors.

Devising a job hunting strategy may be the hardest work you do in your entire career. The most immediate task is the creation of a personal inventory. You should be honest and identify your real strengths. These will be incorporated into your resume when you are ready to construct it.

The attributes most employers seek to identify in applicants are the following: (1) A burning desire to learn and grow; (2) A brute determination to succeed; (3) A natural ability to get along with people; (4) Talent for persuading others; (5) An affinity for detail; (6) An enjoyment of the work; (7) A dedication to the organization; and (8) A willingness to accept responsibility.

If you look back on your work in theatre, many of the jobs which were assigned to you required demonstration of these attributes. Remember when you were assigned to do properties for that 18th century show that required a Queen Anne chair. You demonstrated initiative, creativity and salesmanship in procuring the chair by seeking out Mrs. Muchbucks and persuading her to loan you the precious chair. You accepted responsibility for the task of obtaining the chair. And you enjoyed the process.

The numerous day-to-day chores of creating theatre are similar to most problems confronted by any manager in the business world. When you write that resume, be certain you have included these special skills into the description of your work history in action terms.

Let me turn now to putting your academic and work experience to your advantage in the job search. Richard Irish (1973), who wrote *Go Hire Yourself An Employer*, writes of the several categories of jobs for which you qualify. He calls them "judgment jobs" which fall in the areas of design, marketing, management, and evaluation.

After you have completed your personal inventory and know who you are, what you want, you are ready to act on that information. The job search is easy. Look up what you want to do for a career alternative in the *Standard Industrial Classification Manual or the Direc-*

tory of Occupational Titles. In these manuals, you will find a bewildering array of titles. The numbering system is explained for you, however, so you needn't despair.

From the SIC number you can then identify every business in the country in your area through *Moody's Register of Corporations*. Moody's also gives you valuable information about the firm. It prepares you to ask those perceptive questions relative to the firm which inevitably impresses the interviewer with your foreknowledge and piercing inquiry. Moody's lists, for example, a firm's history and its subsidiaries. The products produced and plants where they are made are included, along with income accounts and balance sheets. Most important for you are headquarters' addresses and a listing of the management. As you prepare to "hire yourself an employer," these are the folks you'll want to meet and correspond with in the organization. Avoid personnel managers, for their job is to act as the organizational bouncer.

I'd like to share three or four areas with you in which I believe the person with a theatre degree can validly pursue a career option. The first of these is working as marketing representative. We have a lot of these folks at this convention. You'll find them in the display area. The entry level average salary in this position is \$2,000 per month. That's about \$24,000 a year and is not bad. So, what are the job requirements? Those which you already have. You must speak and write well. Exercise judgment. Possess a willingness to travel and work awkward, if not difficult, hours. Be disciplined and be motivated. The marketing representative is the company. In your position, you will be expected to obtain clients and maintain your contacts with them. You will be called upon for market reports from the field which will include listing competitors' activities. It is not so much industrial espionage as it is maintaining a winning edge. You will be called upon to comment on the design of the packaging of your product and to suggest revisions. You, in a sense, become the organization in microcosm. In industry, you're considered the last of the individual entrepreneurs. Your progress within the organization depends upon your success at this level, and if successful, you can expect to assume a significant management post within three years. Incidentally, top executives are generally drawn from marketing backgrounds.

Since you may have abhorrence to travel, but still value personal contact strongly, you may want to explore work in retail merchandising. I don't mean for you to purchase Dr. Scholl's foot pads and prepare for a career of standing behind a counter all day. I mean for you to seek the involvement in all phases of retail management. This means hiring clerks, training them, ordering merchandise, creating a sales campaign, writing promotional copy and meeting customers. It means creating floor displays and constructing them. The job will tax your tact and stimulate your ingenuity. It, too, is a judgment job.

What can you expect as a reward? You should start at \$1,500 a month, with bonus and incentive plans built into the salary deal. The job is pressure packed and changes daily. You will gain an appreciation for others and enhance your own self image.

Your response at this point is negative to the prospect of selling, which these two alternatives demand. I suspect your theatre training reminds you too much of Willy Loman, but the fact is we sell all of the time. We've got to sell our production to audiences, sell our program to prospective students, sell ourselves at auditions or even in convincing Mrs. Muchbucks to loan that chair.

Does public relations work appeal to you? Can you see yourself as a personnel manager? These are also options open to you.

In the former, you will sell, but without the onerous one-on-one contact which many find burdensome. In this career, your preparation in writing publicity materials and marketing the theatre will be helpful. Your outgoing personality and desire to look good are also pluses. You can expect to write speeches for executives, give a few yourself and create promotional brochures which extol the virtues of your organization.

As a personnel manager, you are the organizational bouncer. While not the best of the

judgment jobs, it can be demanding if you find yourself in the happy position of being the head hunter for executive recruitment. It is a lucrative and challenging occupation. It involves finding the right person for an ill-defined position because you are searching for the person who will define the job. It can also involve simple screening of applicants at placement offices on college campuses to discern if they meet the needs of the organization. In this regard, you operate as a contact person and middle man. While travel is involved, it is minimal. Incidentally, this position brings into play everything you have learned about non-verbal and verbal communication skills. You will find yourself acting as a devil's advocate in one instance or a pre-trial investigator attempting to ferret out facts about an individual. It will test your listening skills and your ability at creating personality profiles from a resume and twenty to thirty minutes of interview time. And, you'll make mistakes!

Some other career options which you may not have thought of exist in government. Have you considered taking the "Professional and Administration Career Exam" (PACE) as administered by the Federal Government? I might say this is highly competitive with very little assurance of eventual placement. Have you thought about the merit or civil service system in your own state? What about writing directly to the United States Information Agency? The Voice of America? These two areas provide for continued change and the opportunity for foreign travel.

Arts management, recreation specialist, entertainment director at resort hotels or on cruise ships are other occupations for which you are prepared and to which you should apply.

Most of these positions are jobs which are found in the hidden job market. You find them by interviewing for information. It involves visiting employers and talking to them about the positions, opportunities in the firm, what's not being done that should be done and their own work. It means following up your interview with a thank you note which expresses your interest in the job and your knowledge that you can do the job.

This brings us to the matter of resume writing. Several rules apply. It should be short, concise, and include sufficient white space to make it attractive looking. White space also allows the manager to pencil in marginalia about you, rather than attaching separate notes which can get lost.

The resume should be written in action words. Let's say you directed a studio production. A portion of your entry might read:

Directed studio productions. Coordinated event. Coached individuals. Established interpersonal/small group rapport. Motivated others. Organized people and tasks. Formed a team.

If you were engaged in promotion, your entry would read:

Created promotional campaign. Edited brochures. Wrote advertising copy. Arranged and set photography sessions. Scheduled interviews.

Finally, if you worked and managed the box office, you write:

Established accounting procedures. Maintained records. Wrote profit/loss statements. Supervised sales staff. Trained customer relations representatives.

These are the entries which employers understand, for they are phrases employed by personnel staffs and managers when occasion demands the writing of an advertisement or job description. They are action oriented, rather than obituaries. They truly reflect what you have accomplished. They mirror you as a no-nonsense, short- rather than long-winded individual.

They indicate your capability of digesting information into a precise, communicative description. Remember, your ability in writing an attractive and appealing action resume will determine your success in the job market.

Let me conclude this paper with some observations. As a liberal arts graduate with minimal course preparation but significant employment experience as described above, you possess decided pluses for the management/administrative positions which are open. If you have combined a broad education (business related courses are a decided plus) with skills that enhance employability, stress the skills you've developed for the market place of your choice.

Always bear in mind that people get fired for the same reasons they don't get hired. These include a negative personality, poor impression, lack of motivation, inability to communicate, lack of work experience and unidentified goals.

I've sketched a bare outline of some preparations you must make to pursue career alternatives. Your search must not be a piecemeal process. Finding a job isn't easy, but the satisfaction that comes with a successful job hunt is confidence building and prepares you for your next step up the corporate ladder.

If I might paraphrase Dylan Thomas — Do not go gentle into that good world, but be bold and forceful. You'll like the results.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

Mark Malinauskas (Ph.D., University of Oregon, 1970) is Professor in the Department of Speech Communication and Theatre, Murray State University, Murray KY 42071.

Irish, R. K. (1973). *Go Hire Yourself an Employer*. Garden City, N.J.: Anchor Press/Doubleday.