



From Show to Business

How Performance Artists Switch Careers

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour-Lyell

The cliché of the starving actor waiting tables or “resting” has not emerged from nowhere. Stage artists – actors, singers, musicians or dancers – have a tough life, with intensive training and often intermittent work. Even Hollywood heavyweights can have “down periods”, though they are not often to be seen waiting tables or driving for Uber. Many performance artists, however successful they eventually become, make the choice to leave the stage at some point long before they are ready to retire. But not all of them become singing, dance or acting teachers. What happens to the others? Are they all in line at unemployment offices the world over? Or are there paths that are also trodden toward business success? In this article, we meet four

talented performers, who can all be deemed to have been successful in their artistic careers, and examine the transitions each one made, more or less voluntarily, and more or less consciously. There are undoubtedly some common themes, as there are striking contrasts.

At age 10, Anne had to be pushed up the stairs to her ballet school, kicking and screaming, so resistant was she to being forced back into ballet classes. She had spent the previous years becoming the junior ice skating champion of Ivory Coast during her family’s expatriation there and did not appreciate being “dumped” in a dance school, just because there was no local ice rink. However, it took less than a year for her to become hooked, and the grit and determination.

she had developed on the ice in Abidjan paid its dividends. Her artistic talent motivated her teachers to send her to audition at the prestigious Paris National Conservatory. Her parents allowed her to take up the place on condition that she maintained excellent grades in her academic work. Sadly, Anne was subjected to cruelty while in this illustrious establishment, due to the capricious attitudes of her teacher. But, while unpleasant, this experience contributed to her determination to succeed.

Don't Stop the Dance

On graduation, despite the lack of accolades from the twisted teacher, Anne was encouraged not to give up by another mentor, who made a few calls and connected her to her first contract in a small German ballet company. Now she was appreciated instead of being denigrated and this novel sensation was then further rewarded when she received a call from French choreographer Pierre Lacotte inviting her to audition to be one of the founding members of the reviving Ballets de Monte Carlo. Anne made the cover of Paris Match magazine for her exploits and became the first and youngest member of the company in 1985, touring the world, mastering a vast repertoire, and rising rapidly to the rank of principal soloist.

Seven years later, having married and divorced, and feeling a sudden need to “get out”, Anne moved to the U.S., where the Balanchine repertoire of which she was now a star performer, was particularly appreciated. After a long audition tour, she was offered an attractive contract in Seattle, at the Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB), and moved across the ocean with just two suitcases in hand. Adored by the local and global audiences before whom she danced, Anne stayed true to her own style and character, not attempting to “fit in”. This served her well both in her role at PNB and later. By 2000, having danced some of the most prominent and well-loved roles in ballet, she sensed a change of attitude at the top of the company, a move away from artistry, and more toward acrobatics, and decided to resign, having no idea what she would do next.

One of the ballet's trustees, a university

Name

Anne Derieux

Country

France

Education

Fundraising Management for Non Profit, University of Washington
Degree dance, Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse

Artistic career

Principal dancer, Pacific Northwest Ballet
Principal Soloist, Monte Carlo Ballet

Business career

VP of Institutional Advancement at Cornish College of the Arts
Director of Advancement at French American School of Puget Sound
Executive Director at Spectrum Dance Theater



professor, spent time with her, helping her see that the competencies and experience she had built up were varied and valuable, and piqued her curiosity around fundraising. She signed up for a university course in this area and, while she was planning to start classes, she discovered she was pregnant. Soon after, she received an offer to become the executive director of a local dance theater company. As she says: “when you quit a job in the U.S., you have no security, no cushion, and no healthcare coverage, so it was fairly easy to decide to push ahead on all fronts, however little I really understood about what I was taking on!”

In running and rebuilding the Spectrum Dance Theater, Anne used her ability to take rejection and turn it into momentum time and again. She secured funding and grants, having never before written a document of that kind, but using her creativity to learn by doing. She significantly built the business, utilizing her ability to connect and convince any audience. She used her capacity to fall and get back up repeatedly, as well as all her problem-solving instincts, to refocus and streamline many aspects of the business. And all of this while attending college three evenings a week, with baby in tow. She was able to work tirelessly

toward her goals, and to accept and use the fact that her work was never finished, just like in the balletic quest for elusive perfection.

While successful, Anne did not necessarily create only friendships and smooth relationships along the way. She recognizes that her own demanding nature, applied to others, often came across as stubborn and tough, and was once told in a 360° feedback session that many colleagues saw her as a “my way or the high-way” sort of leader. However, another common feature of dancers is their capacity to take feedback and build, so she learnt to be “a little softer around the edges”.

When asked what advice she would give to other dancers contemplating such a move from principal ballerina to fund-raising executive, her overwhelming comments are about “just doing it”. Her big frustration is at the fact that there are not sufficient artists and creatives in business, and she uses her own success as evidence that the transition is possible, if not easy. “If we could remove boundaries and work together more, we would achieve more greater things”. Anne recruits artists and creatives wherever she goes, and she is now the VP of Institutional Advancement at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, one of only three colleges in the US that offers degrees in performing and visual arts. Her crusade is to ensure that more “feelers” have their impact in her professional world, and comments that her local tech organizations are finally starting to recognize this need also, even if they are not yet adept at making the leap. No doubt Anne will continue to use her powers of persuasion to change the landscape further.

Erik was confident and persuasive from the very beginning, and had his fingers in multiple pies early on. In high school he was the soccer star and the lead in musical theatre while also excelling academically, and his social circle was just as eclectic as his interests. Continuing the same approach, he went to university with a plan to study economics on a Navy ROTC scholarship that would have prepared him to become a naval officer, but pursued studies in acting and singing instead.

Name

Erik Lautier

Country

United States

Education

MBA, INSEAD

Master of Music, Opera, New England Conservatory of Music

BA Drama, Duke University

Artistic career

Professional actor and Opera singer

Starred in the Broadway National Touring Company of “Beauty and the Beast”, role on ABC’s “One Life to Live”

Business career

Senior executive in marketing, e-commerce and digital strategy at public and private pure-plays and multi-channel retailers

Non-profit trustee and Advisor to multiple startups



In the summer after his junior year Erik attended a training program for opera singers that fueled his passion for the art, and his decision upon graduation was to pursue a master’s degree in opera singing. He was successful in auditions for several top schools, finally choosing to take his place at the New England Conservatory of Music. Erik possessed the confidence to believe in his future as an artist and upon graduation moved to New York where he acquired an agent, auditions and work in quick succession, including jobs in opera, in musical theatre, and even TV, as he landed a recurring role on a soap opera for several years.

Meanwhile, not content merely to be regularly employed as a performer, he turned his talents to promoting himself via a website he created on his own, which was no mean feat in 2000. He took advantage of a month of “rest” to learn all required coding and techniques, and within just a couple of weeks had created a convincing website. So when he spread the word amongst his friends and colleagues in the acting industry, many of them asked him to create something similar for them. Thus his first company was born. Shortly afterwards he was

on the set of his soap opera when one of the show's stars mentioned to him she was starting a cosmetics company. Minutes later, he showed her a few of his websites and she hired him on the spot to build hers. Erik was instrumental in growing her business, not only into an e-commerce operation, but also in other channels, such as the American televised home shopping channel QVC.

Bohemian Rhapsody

At this stage Erik realized that he was developing into a businessman as well as a performer, and found himself frequently improvising and figuring out how to do things that he was asked to achieve, without having ever known how to do so before. Other business opportunities came his way and he continued his approach of learning on the hoof, and juggling with his performance career. But he reached a tipping point when he realized that he would need to learn more of the language of business if he was to be convincing and successful in developing further. This led him to apply to do an MBA at INSEAD, dropping his performing career literally a month after *Opera News* called him “as good a prospect for stardom as [we’ve] seen in a while”.

Erik discovered his greatest asset at business school was his background, coming from a different world and contrasting experience, earning him admiration, scholarships and praise along the way. One comment that stands out from this time came from a classmate, who said, “when you speak in class, I don't know if you're right, but you sound right!” At this point Erik was convinced that his presentation and conviction skills were going to be a significant asset in his future. He says that he is comfortable speaking to boards and groups, knowing how to read his audience and craft his message accordingly, and never really having imagined quite what a strong tool this would be in his kit.

After his MBA, a classmate invited him to take on a brief project at Bono and Ali Hewson's Edun. Having created, designed and coded a full-scale e-commerce operation in less than three months, he was asked to stay on and

eventually became a key member of the growth team. In this way, Erik achieved a full integration into the business world and getting on stage became a distant but useful memory. LVMH soon took an interest in the company, and while the initial casual environment transformed dramatically, Erik was able to learn more about working in a corporate setting.

Erik attributes his success in this first corporate role as well as later moves into bigger executive roles in retail to a number of factors that extend far beyond his ability to figure it out along the way. He was headhunted into several roles due to his “ability to get things done”, and is now the top marketing and ecommerce executive in a publicly listed retail company, Francesca's.

Respect for process is key to Erik's more recent success. He realized that as a performer he was often tempted to skip steps, and wished to jump straight into a leading role before learning the technique necessary to sing it, for example. He has learned since then that if he takes care of the “now”, and follows the right steps, things will work fine. As he says, “I treat my job with urgency but my career with patience”. This attitude eventually served him well as a performer, and undoubtedly contributes to his current success and satisfaction in business. He always asks himself, “what do I need to work on right now in order to do bigger and greater things?” Seldom defeated by negative words and rejection in his earlier auditions and performances, Erik is attuned to non-verbal feedback and has developed a great sensitivity, which allows him to adjust approach better than many, adapting flexibly to changing situations. It is exciting to observe the virtuous circle that he has completed, as he has now become a Trustee of the Houston Grand Opera. Moreover, Erik makes an effort to include artists in his hiring practices, firmly of the belief that EQ is playing an increasing role in business. He says, “the blend of art and science has never been as important as it is today”.

A blend of ideas and natural characteristics played a significant role for our next subject too. Mary's practical disposition gave her a balanced

start in her acting career, and allowed her to build her craft carefully. She had been painfully shy in childhood, but took advantage of a move to a new neighborhood and high school to let her theatrical juices flow, getting involved in all aspects of drama, and moving on to a Theater major in university. By this time she was hooked, but she felt a need for a plan B, dipping her toes into various linked areas such as broadcast journalism and psychology. None of the alternatives felt quite right, however, though she did realize that they were all somehow linked to a “connection with people”. She auditioned for graduate school, did well, and made the inevitable move to New York city in 1990. Here, she began her professional career in regional theater, taking roles across the country, as they came, scrupulously honing her auditioning skills along the way.

Working Girl

More importantly, Mary decided to work as a temp whenever she was not engaged in an acting role, and obtained a first job as an assistant in a large investment bank. She was so appreciated that they adapted her timetable to whatever she needed for auditions and even performances. It was important to Mary to be financially responsible, to avoid living from paycheck to paycheck as many of her peers did, and so this situation suited her perfectly, even as the roles she obtained became better and better.

A brief and fruitful move to Los Angeles to enter the TV scene was cut short when her father passed away, and Mary felt her priorities realigning, returning to be closer to family and friends on the East Coast. At this point, she started to feel the tension between her investment banking job and actress professional identities. She started to consider what might happen next, sensing that it would be in or around teaching, but concluded that university teaching was not compatible with her acting career, due to the rigid timetabling involved.

A moment of enlightenment allowed her to spot an opportunity to help executives to improve their presentation skills. She began networking, making many connections, and aligned with a woman who had her own busi-

Name

Mary Proctor Trane

Country

United States

Education

Master of Fine Arts (MFA), Acting,
Florida State
Bachelor's degree, Theatre/English,
University Gustavus Adolphus College

Artistic career

Professional actor, theatres across the
U.S.A.
Appearances on various television shows

Business career

Coach and facilitator, executive
presentation skills, team management
and leadership development
Director, Training & Development at
Bumble and bumble



ness with many clients in the beauty industry. This mix of serious work and the buzz of fun, creative people around her felt like the right solution. Bumble & bumble (a brand owned by Estée Lauder Companies) became her major client, and over the next few years, she was repeatedly offered the chance to work full time for them. However, she didn't feel ready to make the jump yet: her acting career was flying, and she enjoyed the mix.

Things soon became more haphazard for Mary, starting with the death of her mother, a period of acting roles juggled with the logistics of flying back and forth, and handling her grief. During that period, Mary found herself in love and then pregnant a year later, aged 42. Motherhood, as she told us, “was something I had thought I would miss out on. Now I had a real reason to get a stable job – for the healthcare insurance, benefits, and so on!”. So, following a brief call to her friends at Bumble to convey the double good news, Mary received a job offer that allowed her to put an end to her acting career, and become a training leader in the cosmetics company. She had finally found the next solution along her path of practicality, even though this had been catalyzed by the unexpected.

At Bumble & bumble, Mary thrived on being

10 Transferable Skills Developed by Performing Arts

1. Autonomy and self-discipline
2. Achievement orientation, search for excellence
3. Creative self-expression
4. Capacity to leverage feedback and learn
5. Presentation and conviction
6. Self-awareness
7. Confidence
8. Ability to improvise, risk-taking, adaptability
9. Resourcefulness, coping skills, resilience
10. Collaboration and teamwork

“the expert”, something that “never happens as an actor”. She enjoyed the sense of team and family as well as the money. An important aspect was her confidence: “As an actor, you are always subject to others’ approval, and this is not a healthy way to be feeling”. The new sense of internal accomplishment, as opposed to external validation, was crucial. What is more, she was able to utilize fully all of her acting skills, presenting in front of large groups, finding her own story and authentic voice, and helping others to do the same.

After over ten years with Bumble & bumble, Mary felt the pressures of a changing beauty sector, with increasing competition from newcomers, and an industry-wide environment of reorganizations. The shine had gone from her job, which felt less about education than sales, and, perceiving that the possibilities for her work were declining, she diplomatically found an opportunity to start her own consulting business, combining the best of both worlds. This was a return to an independent situation, as when she was an actor, and that background has facilitated the change, giving her courage and confidence to move forward to the next phase. Once again, her practical and sensible nature have come to the fore, and she combines contract work as a facilitator and trainer with coaching and more.

Mary points out that many companies choose actively to work with actors, as they tend to know themselves well, having been through training for just that, and because they tend to

be good with people, resourceful and responsible. “Acting forces you to be comfortable with fear”. She believes that her ability to “accept the risk of making a fool of herself” gives her a real edge in life as well as in work. “It is an amazing gift to know it is OK if you get it wrong”. Perhaps there should be more theater teaching in primary schools the world over?

Next, we meet a subject who had set out on his path to artistry even before he began school. When Frank started ballroom dancing in a local dance studio at the age of three, there was, according to Danish society in the 1970’s, nothing more natural. His parents danced, though only as social enthusiasts, and many of his friends were waltzing and tango-ing through their weekends too. His taste for the dance world was not absolute, however, and he took a break for a few years during primary school to try other activities such as drumming, football, swimming, and even rifle shooting. This demonstrated the kind of balance he has sought and acquired from then on. Bribe back to the dance studio via the purchase of a drum set by his theater costume designer mother, he went from strength to strength, exploiting his natural talent with increasingly hard work. He took part in competitions, with a series of partners, having finally stopped dancing with his sister, who had taken more interest in the gymnastics field.

Ballroom Dancing

Dance was life and life was dance, for Frank, who found his “tribe” in the dance studio more than at school. Having tried other sports, he realized that the music and rhythm aspects of dance were not available elsewhere, and this was his main driver. He travelled for both competitions and training sessions with his partner all through high school, taking the wise decision to spread his final academic year over two calendar years, to achieve the equilibrium required to succeed in both school and on the dance floor.

By now, Frank was exploring the virtues of extreme balance across his whole life, and having fallen for a childhood dance school friend, who had become his dance partner and

whom he eventually married, he set to, with her, to create a masterplan for dominance of the dance universe, without compromising the rest. They decided to attend the same university, taking the same course, to facilitate the synchronization of classes, training and more. While this may surprise some, it is worth mentioning that both of them were competing at a national team level, so were well supported with mentors, coaches and psychologists, and thus able to anticipate and manage most problems associated with their unusual set-up. The benefits outweighed the costs, as they became national champions, and competed at European and World Championships, all the while keeping up the university grades.

Frank had one of the top GPA's in his class, and was starting to consider a professional career, beyond dancing. However, while he was invited by all the top consulting firms to interview with them on campus, it transpired all were incompatible with a continuing dance career. At this point, his pragmatic approach took over, and he joined a newly established consulting firm anchored with his university. As Development Manager he worked with three renowned strategy professors on building a 'strategy laboratory' from an early stage entity to a great success. Having already started his own dance school, creating and implementing the strategy of growth came naturally. After a year and a half in that role, he was still Danish champion, alongside his wife, and his mind was straying to the private sector, professionally. He applied for companies in Denmark, and was offered a great job with an engineering company, 200 kilometers from home. Thus started a weekly commute and the beginning of the end of his active dance career which concluded with a third consecutive win of the national championship.

He reflects that "we were likely the only ones among the top international dance couples doing both. And that is doubtless why we never managed to become world champions. You make compromises along the way". On the other hand, the "others" were likely emotionally harder hit by "bad" results, as it was the "only thing they focused on", whereas he and his wife

Name

Frank Radich

Country

Denmark

Education

MSc Strategy and Business
Administration, Aarhus University

Artistic career

Professional dancer, triple Danish
champion (2004-2006)
Co-owner of a dance school

Business career

Consulting, marketing, corporate
strategy and R&D executive roles at
Grundfos Management A/S and Danfoss



could be more balanced as they did not depend solely on dancing. Indeed, education and curiosity have been key tools for Frank from the outset until now. He loved learning the tools of strategy as much as he cherished the process of perfecting another dance move.

This pattern of securing a healthy balance between dancing and corporate life continued, with Frank slipping into new roles as an international dance teacher and top adjudicator at both World Championships and Grand Slams. Even while he was expatriated for three years in Lyon, France, he continued to further educate himself within the dancing profession, taking on new responsibilities within the dance federation, starting teaching and coaching of new talented dance couples, and further expanding the scope of the local dance school in Denmark that he and his wife had established back in 1999 when they were still students.

When asked to reflect on what has helped him with his career transition, Frank mentions three different elements as key. Firstly, the willingness to invest energy: putting in all the hours necessary to create a great outcome. Next, he mentions the ubiquitous communication and presentation abilities: being confident and comfortable in front of people, and being evaluated, without suffering any drama. And finally, he says that he is frequently told he "stands out from the crowd", by people with no

knowledge of his artistic background, so he believes this could be linked to the poise and “carriage” which he worked so hard to hone for those long years of training.

On the other hand, Frank believes that there were some things to unlearn, especially around communication style. The ballroom dance world is full of very live and direct feedback, but, as he says, “corporate life is very different and it would not work if I talked to my peers or my team in the very same way!”

Consistent progress and promotion demonstrate that Frank has figured out his transition, and much of it can be attributed to his lifetime quest for balance, in addition to his brain, which has been as well trained as his body.

Here for You

And here we begin our conclusions, and hardly need point out that education and an energetic willingness to learn seem to be key to the success of this transition, as with so many others. But here, while the acquired competencies of the stage, like confidence, risk-taking and resilience, are a benefit to bring to the new table, there is nevertheless a need to learn content and practical aspects, as the leap from pirouettes to PR or from arias to accounting is not totally able to be improvised.

But what of the support for these transitions? Do any of the former dancers, actors and singers benefit from financial help or otherwise? The answer is “sometimes” and “not usually enough”. There are national bodies in the dance world, for example, which will, under

certain stringent conditions, finance part of a study course, or counsel their members. But, realistically, the conditions of entry are steep and exclusive, involving dancing in a national company, for more than several years, and so on, making this inaccessible for many. Part of the problem appears to come from the fact that stage artists are itinerant, flitting smartly from opportunity to opportunity, and thus not accruing any kind of “rights” from any of them. This builds their strength and grit on the one hand, but creates their financial downfall on the other. Only the savviest survive the transition, and too many small children have been the victims of cruel, frustrated ballet teachers, embittered by their return to the “real world”, or of depressive singing teachers, unable to fit back in to a place where they are not center stage.

So, if the theater and dance companies are not supportive, what kind of opportunity does this represent? Would it not be wonderful if more recruiters and leaders were thinking like Anne and Erik? Offering opportunities to bring the skills of the arts into the business workplace? It has been demonstrated to be valuable, so, will more companies do it? We would like to believe so, and to be part of the trend.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Harbour-Lyell** is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption!