

EXIT STAGE RIGHT

The Career Change Handbook
for Performers

Ciara Pressler

Discover Your New Career

Find a Better Day Job

Create a Performance Lifestyle That Works

PRAISE FOR
EXIT STAGE RIGHT

“An essential guide for actors and performers transitioning into new careers.”

– Luke Crowe, *Vice President, Backstage*

"If you are a performer who wants to make a career change and still maximize all your creative abilities, Ciara Pressler's *Exit Stage Right* is the book you are looking for. Written with insight, clarity and through personal experience, Ms. Pressler guides readers through the period of adjustment and toward a brighter horizon. Excellent!"

– Brian O'Neil, *author of Acting as a Business: Strategies for Success*

"*Exit Stage Right* is the much-needed roadmap for actors exploring new career options. Ciara Pressler combines her firsthand experience with the principles of smart marketing to create a step-by-step process for performers ready to channel their focus and inspiration into finding a new, fulfilling role."

– Dallas Travers, *The Actors' Advocate & author of The Tao of Show Business*

"For performers looking to redefine themselves and harness their creative talents for a new career path, the first step should be Ciara Pressler's *Exit Stage Right*. Ms. Pressler has a perfect combination of experience and savvy to guide the transitioning artist to a career that feels authentic, resonant, and ultimately satisfying."

– Betsy Capes, *Founder & President, Capes Coaching*

“Finally, there is a resource for actors looking to utilize their innate skill set and creativity *and* transition to another career path. *Exit Stage Right* will undoubtedly help those actors who have lost their performing passion regain a sense of artistic control over their lives. Thank you, Ciara Pressler, for honestly sharing your experience and insight, and for giving actors a sense of focus in moving forward to an unknown horizon.”

– Jodie Bentley, Actor & Co-Founder, *The Savvy Actor*

“I always tell actors, ‘The life of an actor is rarely easy... if you can see yourself being happy doing something else, you should do it!’ Ciara draws upon her personal experience and marketing smarts to help performers determine if they need a new approach to their artistic life or a new career path altogether. This book will help artists create their professional destiny and step into a dream life.”

– Darbi Worley, Creator & Host, *Everything Acting Podcast*

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new york city

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How I Went from Performer to Former

Everyone's final bow is different.

I had landed in New York City just months after graduating college on a tidal wave of optimism and unwavering belief in the lyrics of "New York, New York." If I could make it as an actor there, I could make it anywhere: My own sitcom in Hollywood! Shooting an Oscar-bound film in Paris! Commercials for luxury beauty brands in Tokyo! Returning to my beloved Broadway for a limited engagement! Reaching EGOT status was as vivid a dream as my peers' goals of middle management, marriage, and (what I viewed as) comparable mediocrity.

In my quest for performing success, I left no stone unturned. I inhaled classes: scene study, Shakespeare, Meisner, improv, auditioning, on-camera technique, hip hop, ballet, jazz, voice training, repertoire coaching. When I wasn't training, I was working on the business of The Business: mailings, headshots, websites, networking, casting director seminars, the entire career department at Drama Bookshop. I tried every approach I could find, accepted every role I was offered, created my own work, hired a career coach, all the while contemplating Hamlet's eternal question: to MFA or not to MFA?

Sound familiar?

And it was exhausting. Even with the brazen energy of an early 20-something, by my second summer in New York, while working a full-time day job and rehearsing four shows simultaneously (*Don't turn anything down! You never know!*), I had my first panic attack. I was performing at full capacity and expending all my creative and mental energy, yet my sprint was

on a treadmill with no feeling of forward motion or tangible progress. I'd taken on too much, not out of career strategy or artistic passion, but out of fear of missing an opportunity. Ambition, when clutching my chest in its iron grip, became my captor instead of my motivator.

Eventually, even the idea of going to an audition began to make me nauseous. I started opting to work behind the scenes rather than take the stage. And after my last play in New York closed, I found myself back home in Oregon on my mom's sofa in a full-fledged quarterlife crisis. What was I doing – had I made a horrible mistake pursuing this as a career? The performer's lifestyle was not my dream anymore. Even if Spielberg himself had told me my big break would be next week, I was done.

After five years as an actor in New York, these were the things I was beginning to notice – the proverbial nails in my personal performance coffin:

Even A-list movie stars are unemployed most of the time. Very little time is spent actually acting.

Performing had never generated the income needed to cover my professional and personal expenses. I was usually working for free, and I was expected to do so.

Working actors weren't making anything close to a living wage: the median *annual* performing income for an Equity actor was around \$7,000.

I did not have the dancing or singing chops to make it in musical theatre doing eight shows a week – and neither did most auditioners, even those who had been studying for 10+ years.

I wanted to live in New York, not relocate constantly for regional or touring shows.

I wanted weekends. I wanted health insurance. I wanted to go on vacation without worrying I'd miss *The Call That Changes Everything*.

I no longer felt connected to my artistic colleagues.

I didn't care much about what was going on in the industry.

In short, I'd lost my passion.

And so, for the second time in my professional life, I took a leap into the unknown. My circumstances were different, but they felt the same. I thought I was back to square one.

I soon discovered, however, that my years of experience in the performing arts would be invaluable for my next career chapter.

In retrospect, there are certainly things I could have done differently to experience more success and satisfaction in my acting career. While I did have the incredible fortune of a fairly formidable arsenal – enough talent, a versatile look, endless energy, mercifully flexible day jobs, and very supportive friends and family, I was pretty firmly in my own way well before I tried to take my place on the Great White one.

The turning point was when I let my frustration propel me to action. Reframing failure as learning who I had become and what I truly wanted proved pivotal to my career transition. As performers, we learn not to internalize a “no” as a rejection. We are merely gathering information – on what they could have done better, what makes casting directors respond, what material suits us, even what to eat for breakfast to perform at our personal best.

Failure is vital because it teaches you how to dust yourself off and try again. As cliché as it sounds, failure is one of the most important qualities for success, not just in the arts, but in life.

Persistence is also key and can certainly pay off. Taking a long-term view of your career as talent can radically change how you measure the day-to-day. But as the initial romantic spark fades and reality sets in, it becomes all too apparent that success doesn't come easily. When dreams downgrade from front row at the Academy Awards to front of the line at an Equity call, we're left wondering how we got here in the first place.

Fortunately, the months I spent reading every career book in print and doing real-life research on what I could possibly do next based on my experience, interests, desired lifestyle, and true passions paid off. Not only did I discover a new path that still ignites me daily, but also all the information I gathered, analyzed, and organized during that pivotal transition is yours in the chapters to come.

Act I

The Options

Some careers end gracefully; others leap into an unexpected sequel. The first step is to determine whether you need to:

1. Fix your performing career,
2. Develop a support career, or
3. Create an entirely new career.

Perhaps you're not as sure as I was. You've had some success and know there's more work for you around the corner. Your technique is solid, your network is strong, you know your strengths, and your resume gets progressively better. Maybe you have representation that pushes for you, or you've created your own work and have a loyal audience. But still, there's a growing dissatisfaction with the lifestyle of performing, with your particular career circumstances, or it's simply time for a change.

Perhaps you're afraid: you don't know what else you can do. Your degree is in music or theater or dance, you went to conservatory, or you convinced your parents that an MFA was a blue-chip investment. You can't let your friends and family down. You feel you've already invested too much time and money to back out. Or maybe you simply want different things than you did when you first decided to perform professionally.

No matter where you are in your decision process, you must be honest with yourself.

This book is not designed to lure you out of your artistic career. It is only a safe space to explore what your career means to you, what you want out of life, and how to go about getting it. You might even learn that you're already exactly where you're supposed to be. But the unexamined life isn't worth living, so it's time to shine a light on the why, the what, the when, and the how.

We'll start by looking at what might reignite your performance career – are you missing a crucial element that could be standing in the way of your success? Then we'll examine the value of a support career – could a better day job give you the financial and emotional stability that would be the perfect complement to your performance career? And if you're ready for the big transition, the majority of this book will map out how to gracefully exit your performing career and discover your next great role.

If you don't already have a pen and a notebook, grab one. Self-discovery exercises are on the way. Lists, glorious lists! But don't stop there – bookmark! Highlight! Jot down any ideas that come to you in the margins. Let this be your journal for getting to know yourself, both professionally and personally, *as you are right now*.

The best part of all? There are no wrong answers. You are allowed and encouraged to be as brutally honest as possible as you work through the ideas presented in the pages to come. You are allowed to be unsure. Play. Discover. Create.

What you are not allowed to do, however, is be ashamed of your experiences thus far. Chances are, any feelings of change resistance are just the remnant of how you expected everything to unfold. Life rarely turns out the way we expect – thank goodness! In fact, the black-and-white notion of “making it” may be the only thing that's hindering your current career. I became an actor to scratch the “What if?” itch, and I'm eternally grateful I did. Change is inevitable; the blessing is to be able to design your own life and prepare yourself for the best change possible.

So open your mind, be honest, and get ready to learn something new about who you are, what you want, and what might be next for your life, both professionally and personally. It's the best investment you can possibly make.

Ready? Here we go...

Entr'Acte

Is It Time for a Career Shift or a Career Change?

Every career has its ups and downs, and the performing arts are no exception. When it comes to an unpredictable career path, the arts take first place. Few industries have volatility as intricately woven into their DNA.

What other areas of business define as major events, we're familiar with as daily occurrences. Economic disaster? We never had financial security in the first place. Company closures leading to layoffs? Closing nights mean we get laid off constantly, only with no unemployment checks. Inconsistent income, few to zero benefits, low-paying jobs located in cities with the highest cost of living, high turnover, unsavory work environments, unbelievably demanding hours, even more demanding physical standards... The common assumption is that the hardest part of being a performer is rejection, but being told "no" is only the tip of the iceberg.

From constant coping strategies to temporary denial of reality, being an artist means accepting all of this as part of the lifestyle. On our best days, the life is romantic. On our worst, we seriously consider checking ourselves into a mental institution.

We've all heard the numbers. The average annual income for a member of the Screen Actors' Guild is under \$13,000. Fewer than 15 percent of Actors' Equity members work during any given week. The median hourly wage for dancers is \$13.16 with most dancers relying on unemployment compensation. In 2011, The U.S. Department of Labor projected the median hourly income for actors as a meager \$16.20. Try living independently on the

equivalent of a \$34,000 salary in a major city and your lifestyle will be bohemian at best.

The National Endowment for the Arts reported that there are nearly two million professional artists in the U.S., and, as a segment of the workforce, they are more educated but less compensated. Surprisingly, for an industry that's regarded as progressive, women are still underrepresented. Dips in the economy are especially harsh on artists – unemployment rates rose twice as quickly during the recent recession than for the rest of the workforce.

In other words, it's not all in your head – the arts really are a harder path than most careers.

But you probably didn't get into this business for the money, or at least not for the security. You undoubtedly had an enviable combination of passion, ambition, and talent: a need to follow your dream that couldn't be ignored. These qualities, especially when nurtured with persistence, can take you a long way.

What we need to figure out first is whether you're at the end of this journey or simply need to re-chart your course. How do you know whether you're done or just stuck?

A career, in many ways, is like a long-term relationship. It's exciting at first, a blissful beginning where every new development is a thrill. But gradually, reality sets in, and your initially sexy lover now may not be the best lifelong match for the person you have become or want to be.

Falling out of love comes with many signs, some more obvious than others. First, a creeping suspicion, then actual manifestations, and finally, anything from a graceful exit to a total apocalypse. But let's avoid the drama and take the high road. Just because you're out of the honeymoon stage doesn't mean the romance can't be rekindled.

There are common overarching obstacles that can often be interpreted as exit signs. Only you can decide for sure whether your current frustrations are dealbreakers or challenges to surmount with creativity, determination, a little industry savvy, and a lot of self-reflection.

Even if you're ready to run screaming from your current career, pay attention: your obstacles have a funny way of resurfacing in your next endeavor. Just like making a conscious decision to stop continually dating the wrong type and start making healthier choices, being self-aware about your career obstacles can help you avoid making the same mistakes twice.

Career Clarity Questions

Do I Understand the Business of The Business?

Often, when artists go into panic mode, they take a craft class. But if you've already spent multiple years and many more dollars on private instruction, group performances, even a college degree, perhaps the problem isn't your performance technique but your business skills.

When you first dreamed of becoming a performer, you likely pictured yourself shining on stage or creating sheer brilliance in rehearsal, not drowning underneath a pile of agent-bound manila envelopes. Between the networking, self-promotion, auditioning, seeking representation, managing budgets, and the myriad details that go into the business side of being a performer, it often seems there's hardly time – or money – for cultivating your craft, let alone doing the work. Even if you have a degree in drama, dance, or music, chances are your school only gave a cursory once-over of how to navigate and build your career with intention and control.

The biggest problem with artists' training programs today, specifically with colleges and conservatories, is that they train artists in their art with little attention to the fact that they're sending thousands of entrepreneurs into the world each year. As a performer, you're CEO of You, Inc., which means you're responsible not only for creating and maintaining an excellent product, but also for selling it. Even if you have representation, it's you who ultimately has to call the shots and decide what your career will become.

Fortunately, many services now exist for artists who need career help: a business plan, a better-defined set of goals, financial structure, help with their marketing strategy, or perfecting the audition process.

"The commonplace thought is that if you focus on the business, you're selling out," says Jodie Bentley, co-founder of The Savvy Actor, a company that coaches stage and screen performers on turning their craft into a business. She and partner Kevin Urban, both working actors themselves, work with hundreds of people each year to get them un-stuck through learning the principles of business and marketing.

"Once you understand this is a business, you can take the personal out of it," says Kevin. "It's not that everyone is for or against *you*. Actors are trained to be all things to all people, but businesspeople have to be up front about

what they have to *sell*. You have to be aware of your strengths, what you do really well.”

Approaching your career like a business means building a case for the value of what you do as a long-term investment:

- What are your goals?
- What is your niche?
- Who is your target audience?
- Where is the market for your unique product?
- How much money does it take to get started and keep going?
- What investments do you need to make?

If the whole idea of art-as-business churns your stomach, perhaps you aren't cut out to tackle the realities of making a living as an artist. There's a difference between not selling out and simply not selling. To be in business, your product must be something people will buy.

Have I Defined My Goals?

Your career is like a road trip – it's impossible to lay out the route unless you've determined the destination. Sure, you have to be available to opportunities that arise, but being too flexible can result in career complacency which, in turn, can result in a sudden realization that years have passed with no real progress, just a few more lines on your resume.

Anyone can say they're a performer, but what does it mean to you to live it professionally? If you bounce from audition to class to workshop with negligible progress or artistic growth and quickly become dissatisfied, you might feel like you aren't moving forward. But how can you achieve success if you haven't defined what success means for you?

The lack of a clear-cut path to success in the arts is usually what makes the grass look so much greener on the other side of the career fence. From the outside, it seems like all you have to do is follow the [MCAT, med school, boards, residency, doctor!] path to be guaranteed a life of reliably escalating status and income. Unlike school, with a concrete structure of performance and advancement, careers rarely follow a predetermined route.

In this industry, there's a glut of talent compared to the jobs available. What will truly set you apart is making the decision to design your own

career, be ambitious yet realistic, and map out the steps to get from here to there.

So how do you determine your goal? Start by brainstorming everything you could possibly want during your entire career, no holds barred. Spend at least 15 minutes writing these all down on paper. This is not based on what other people are doing. This is about what you truly want, and what will keep you in the game. Next, go back through and put a number after each goal you wrote down corresponding to how many years you think it might take to realistically reach each one: 1, 2, 5, 10, 20. Start by honing in on each one-year goal: is it specific? Is it doable? Are there definite concrete steps you could figure out to accomplish this? Do you have, or can you get, the resources you need to move closer to this goal?

Go deeper: what's the true desire behind your goals? Can they be more specific? Let's take a common one: Get Representation. It's time to cross-examine the witness:

- Is my real, underlying desire is to get more work, better-paying work, higher-quality work?
- Is an agent absolutely necessary to do this?
- What other steps could I take to get there?
- And if I do need an agent, who is this agent exactly?
- Am I best represented by a boutique agency or a large one?
- Would a manager be a better option for me?
- What's my timeline for getting representation?
- What are the actions I will take to get signed and when?

Be relentless. The more specific and honest you are about your goals, the more likely you are to take tangible steps to accomplish them.

Are My Goals Too Unfocused?

This one goes out to my Type-A (or type ADD) artists. You don't just have a goal; you have a whole spreadsheet full. You wake up with a new goal every morning and go to sleep with its revised version every night. You have a vision board and every self-improvement book and a subscription to O Magazine. To everyone else, you seem like a superhero. But stand still for one second: if you have ten things in ten ovens, something's bound to burn.

Is there such thing as too much ambition? Not necessarily. But there is a major obstacle in unfocused ambition. At some point it becomes not just pragmatic but also necessary to narrow your focus so that instead of running in circles, you're moving toward a finish line.

Also look at your longer-term strategy. Are your goals building upon one another, or are they scattered in every direction?

People with multi-goal syndrome tend to do the best with an outside accountability partner, such as a mentor or career coach. Those with no shortage of drive often thrive with a little external management.

Another cause of over-ambition is lack of clarity about what you really want. Are you running around trying to please your parents, impress your friends, outperform your peers? What are you trying to prove?

There is nothing more irresistible than someone who is clear about what they want and that unique, amazing thing they have to offer the world. Find that, focus on it, and let the other stuff melt away. You'll find success landing in your lap in no time.

Continued...

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Here's to your career,
Ciara