

Internships and work experience



Getting a foot in the door

Jo Caird considers the value for students of getting a bit of early experience under their belts

When it comes to gaining a better understanding of the world of theatre, developing your skills, or simply working out which area of the business you might be best suited for, a work experience placement or internship can be invaluable. There are a huge number of options to choose from, including short placements for students considering studying drama at college or university, longer stints for those already in training, and paid positions for young people at the beginning of their careers in theatre.

Local placements

A great place to start the work placement hunt is with your local theatre, or another arts organisation whose work you particularly like. Maria Crocker had been 'inspired by work at Northern

Stage for many years' by the time she heard about NORTH, a ten-week training programme for emerging actors run by the Newcastle theatre (it now runs for 21 weeks). 'I jumped at the chance to be part of the scheme,' she says, adding that the programme's business elements were a major draw. 'It offered training in producing, fundraising and marketing, which were things that hadn't been offered on my three-year course at drama school in London. I feel this training is essential to all emerging theatremakers because it's such a huge part of developing your own work.'

Nikki Smith recently completed a seven-month graduate placement with the theatre administration department at the Barbican Centre in London. 'I have always enjoyed the Barbican Theatre's programming and, having decided on a

career as a producer, it was great to have a chance to test my skills and knowledge in a busy and challenging environment without committing to a long-term contract,' she says. The experience was particularly rewarding because it brought her into professional contact with practitioners, playwrights and companies whom she had studied and admired. 'Being part of a team bringing such high-calibre international work to the stage was amazing,' she recalls.

Just like Crocker, Smith was able to build on her existing skills while picking up a whole host of new ones: 'I graduated in drama, but my degree didn't offer much information on what a career in producing would actually entail. On the placement I had a chance to really get stuck into the day-to-day life of a theatre, learning everything about how contracts are drawn up, how budgets and finances are reconciled, and even how to manage the expectations of visiting companies to establish strong working relationships.'

Using your initiative

Work placements come in all shapes and sizes, but what the best ones have in common is an environment where participants are afforded a degree of independence. Not only does this give those taking part a better sense of what it's actually like to work in that particular field or as part of that particular organisation, it also helps young people feel more engaged in the work they're doing – that there's something at stake.

Drama graduate Lili Davies recently completed a 12-week internship at Curtis Brown, a literary and talent agency based in London. Colleagues in the firm's theatre, film and TV department 'give you a lot of freedom and scope to progress', she says. Among Davies' duties were booking meetings with clients and producers, drawing up licences and contracts, raising invoices, and keeping track of advertised roles that clients might be suitable for. 'You're here to assist the assistants, and any extra hand you can give to everyone else is appreciated,' says Davies, adding that being given her own company email address and phone number was helpful in making her feel like a proper member of the team.

Not every element of a work placement or internship is going to be fulfilling or exciting, no matter how illustrious the organisation, which is why it's so important to find one that goes out of its way to make participants feel valued. 'With any placement there is the inevitable photocopying and tea making,'

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explains Smith, 'but this was a small part of a complex and enjoyable role in the theatre admin team. I always felt like my contributions were important and beneficial to the smooth running of the department, and my responsibilities were increased incrementally to keep the role interesting.'

Learning by observing

Even when the tasks aren't exactly glamorous, just being in a position to observe theatre professionals at work can be immensely beneficial in terms of steering a young person's thinking about their future in the industry. Each year Sheffield Theatres offers a year-long placement to two students at Birkbeck College, giving them the opportunity to shadow the artistic director and direct their own work.

'We believe it's important to offer the students the opportunity to learn from industry professionals and to develop their practical, creative skills,' says a spokesperson for the organisation. 'They can also attend senior management and board meetings to gain a deeper insight into the demands of managing a large-scale organisation.'

Maria Crocker found this aspect of her time at Northern Stage particularly beneficial, so much so that she and the other six participants formed their own theatre company, The Letter Room, after completing the scheme in 2013. 'Over the three-month period we gained a great understanding of how a venue functions on a day-to-day basis, which has helped us to form relationships with new venues all around the UK,' says Crocker.

Opportunities for school-age students

Young people don't have to take part in long-term placements to get a sense of how a venue or organisation works. Work weeks like those on offer at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, can be very useful too. The theatre runs two behind the scenes work weeks each year (one for 16 to 19 year olds, the other for 14 to 16 year olds), in which 20 young people from the Greater Manchester area take part in a series of workshops led by staff across the company. After learning about everything from sound and lighting to marketing and

casting, participants get the chance to put what they've learned into practice.

Placements like this one are particularly beneficial when it comes to opening young people's eyes to the sheer variety of roles available within the theatre industry. Students will probably be aware, without someone spelling it out, that it's possible to pursue a career in lighting, sound or costume design – how fundraising, stage management and marketing come into it will most likely be far fuzzier in the minds of most.

Sheffield Theatres also runs placement weeks for students aged 14 to 18 drawn from a range of schools, and shadowing is an important element of the experience alongside workshops and talks. 'Students who are interested in working in theatre get to see what it's like first hand from those who are already doing those jobs,' says their spokesperson.

Regional opportunities

While placements for young people still at school might set them on the road to thinking about working in theatre, schemes run for university students and graduates can actively help them in developing their careers. Davies says the team at Curtis Brown were 'very supportive in helping you find something [a job or further placement] once the internship had come to an end'. Interns at the agency also have the option to apply for internally advertised vacancies before these jobs are put out to the world.

Nikki Smith says her time at the Barbican has made her 'more assertive in approaching other industry professionals', and that her 'theatre network has grown exponentially as a result'. Maria Crocker is similarly positive about the impact of Northern Stage on her career. 'If it wasn't for the scheme, I probably would have moved back to London because



Gaining practical experience at the Royal Exchange Manchester

Joel Fildes

of the opportunities available there. However, the Northern Stage scheme has created opportunities for me in the north east, which has meant that I've been able to develop and grow as an artist while staying on my home turf. I now feel part of the theatre community in Newcastle and I'm inspired by other artists and companies who are making work here.'

Considering the logistics

Arts organisations can only support a limited number of internships or placements in any given period. As a result, young people hoping to secure a placement need to plan ahead to make the most of opportunities that become available. A lot of theatres and arts organisations put details of their placements on their websites, but some don't and it's always worth calling or emailing to enquire.

A final consideration is financial. Some work placement schemes for university students and graduates are paid (usually at around minimum wage), but others are not. Unpaid placements aren't inherently less valuable in career development terms, but young people should think carefully about whether they can afford to work for free before applying for these roles.

For Smith, this was an important element of her time at the Barbican, so she can have the final word here. 'Because the role was funded I was able to focus on learning and growing into the role rather than worrying about finding a way to pay the bills,' she says. 'My time with the Barbican team has given me a brilliant start to my career.'



Maria Crocker (third from right) with her group taking part in NORTH 2013

Topher McGrillis