

Becoming a leader

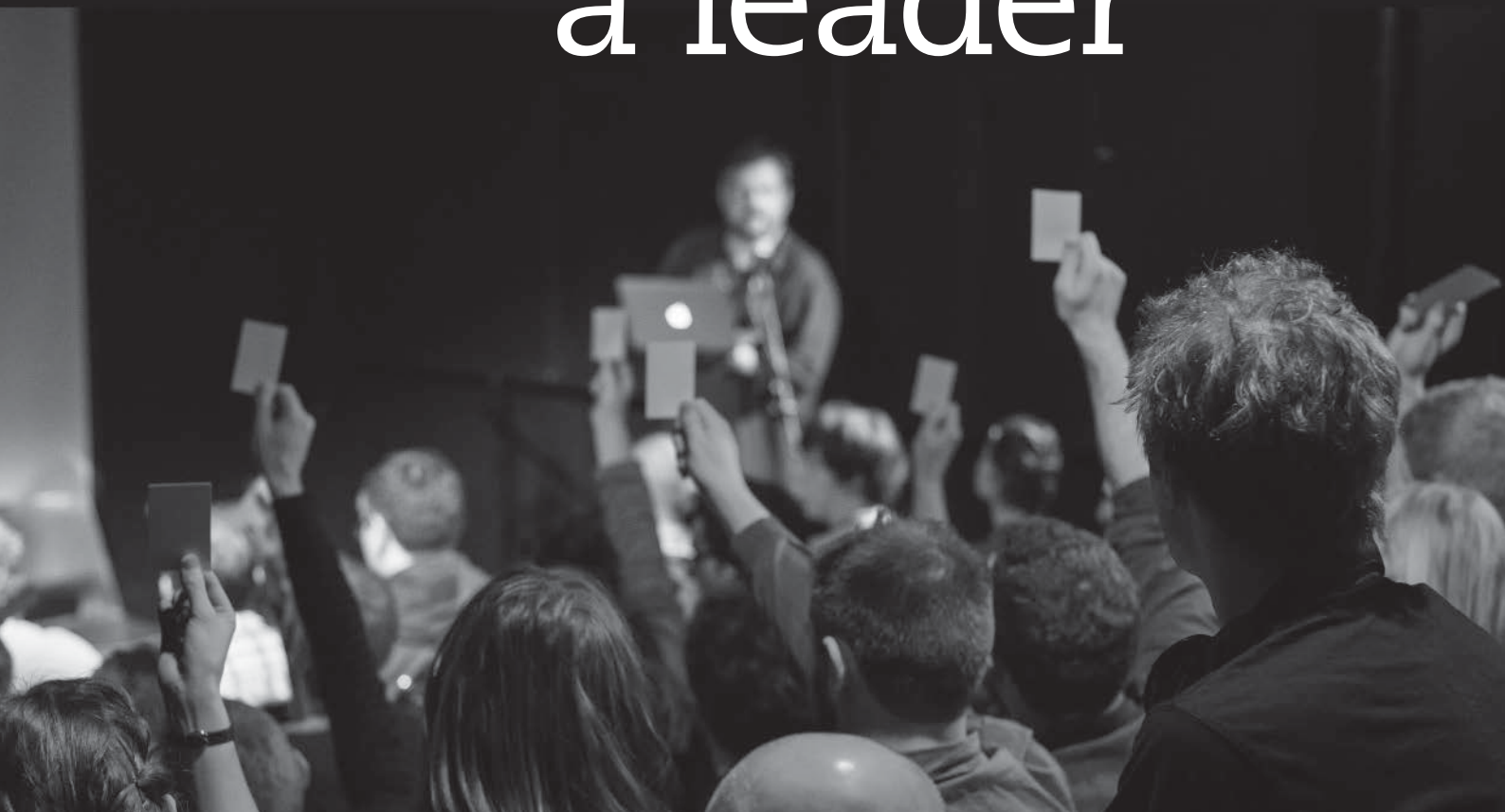


Photo by Camden People's Theatre.

Amber Massie-Blomfield, Executive Director of Camden People's Theatre, reflects on the benefits of moving into a leadership role from a marketing and communications background

Communications people are mounting a quiet revolution in our theatres, taking the top jobs and demonstrating exactly how it ought to be done. Check the CVs of chief executives or executive directors in any of the major venues, and you'll find they're just as likely to have started out as a press officer or a marketing assistant as a producer or administrator.

It's a transition that makes perfect sense. After all, the basic skills of a marketing person are exactly what you

need to run a venue successfully: an ability to communicate with a wide-range of people; a capacity to think both long-term and to be responsive; and a good grasp of budgets (check, check, check). Above all, what we 'comms' folk understand better than anyone is audiences: who they are, where they come from and what makes them tick – and that's what it's all about, ultimately.

I made the switch from Head of Communications at the Albany to Executive Director of Camden People's Theatre (CPT) about a year



Above Camden People's Theatre's in-house show *This is Private Property*. Photo by Helen Murray.

ago. I'm not alone. While the majority of executive directors tend to come from producing backgrounds, an increasing number are from marketing and PR backgrounds – take Jonathan Gilchrist at the Bush (formerly Marketing Director at the Lowry) and Alan Stacey at the Young Vic (formerly Commercial Director at Young Vic and Marketing Manager at Bill Kenwright Limited). Even Nick Starr, the poster boy on every executive director wannabe's bedroom wall, started his career in the National Theatre's press office.

Camden People's Theatre has been a brilliant place to cut my teeth as an Executive Director. We're a tiny organisation, which means I have to learn how to do absolutely everything. One day last week I appeared in front of a government select committee, sorted out a leak in the roof, wrote a funding bid and proofed a brochure,

before jumping behind the bar to help out. I never know what the day is going to throw at me and that's why I love it. My dad made a good comparison to being a goalie: you don't want to play for a team that's got it too sorted, or you're never going to get any practice.

It hasn't all been plain sailing. It's taken a while to get into the rhythm of funding applications: the world of marketing is so fast paced, getting used to having to wait six months for a decision on something is agonising. Managing budgets and accounts is far more complex than it ever is managing a marketing budget. And I still have no idea how the lighting desk works.

But I'm a firm believer that if a job doesn't push you outside your comfort zone in some way, you shouldn't be doing it. For the most part, I've found that, as long

as I'm honest about the areas I'm less skilled in, and clear about what I intend to do to address them, people are really supportive. There's always someone willing to give you advice in exchange for a coffee or a pint, and it's amazing how much you can find out from Google.

I read an interview with Rufus Norris just before he started at the National Theatre, in which he said the secret to his success is surrounding himself with smart people, and making decisions. This strikes me as pretty good advice for being an executive director, too.

You can't be brilliant at everything, but you can find people who are brilliant in their fields, and support them to excel. I'm lucky to be surrounded by an amazing team at CPT, who are passionate, smart and incredibly hardworking. The secret seems to be finding people who understand the vision and buy into it; it's part of the director's job to ensure that vision remains fresh and relevant in people's minds. You've also got to trust people to get on with it. It took me a while to figure out that not everyone approaches tasks in the same way, and just because others don't manage things exactly as I might, that doesn't mean they'll be less successful.

Being willing to make decisions is, in my opinion, just about the most important trait an executive director can have. It can be incredibly difficult sometimes, especially when the decision is something that will have a significant impact on the long-term future of the organisation. I've realised that there's often not a right or wrong

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DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

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answer – just two paths that will steer things in slightly different directions.

When you start in a director role, a lot of people ask you about how you plan to change the organisation. While it's important to have a sense of where you're heading, it can take some time to get a real understanding of the organisation and its role in the ecology, and I think it's quite helpful to be humble about acknowledging this. Many aspects of an organisation work in a certain way for a certain reason, and you won't really understand that until you've had some time to get to know it. You're not starting with a blank sheet of paper; rather you have to understand your materials and work with them to start sculpting the organisation you want to lead. ■



Photo by Lydia Stamps

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