
Pivoting Into Business After an Artistic Career



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The stories of three performers who successfully joined the corporate world.

The career path of performing artists is rarely easy. Although less at risk of bussing tables than aspiring film actors, even stars can have slow periods. Whatever the reason, many actors, singers, musicians and dancers end up leaving the stage before they are ready to retire. While some happily turn to teaching, what happens to the others? Are they all queueing in an unemployment office? In this article, we meet three successful artists who have gracefully pivoted into business.

Erik Lautier was confident and persuasive even as a kid. In high school, he was a star on the football pitch and in musical theatre. An excellent student, he qualified for a Navy ROTC scholarship that would have prepared him to become a naval officer, but chose to study acting and singing instead, eventually pursuing a master's degree in opera at the distinguished New England Conservatory of Music.

After graduation, Erik moved to New York and soon worked in opera, musical theatre and even television, landing a recurring role on a soap opera. In 2000, well ahead of the trend, he built a portfolio-style website describing his performance work. Many of his friends and colleagues soon asked him to create something similar for them. Thus his first company was born. Shortly afterwards, a fellow actor told him she was starting a cosmetics company. After looking at his websites, she hired him on the spot to build hers. Erik helped her grow her business online and elsewhere, such as the televised home shopping channel QVC.

Emotional intelligence and confidence

Ultimately, Erik applied to the MBA programme at INSEAD and discovered that his acting background was his greatest asset. A classmate told him: “When you speak in class, I don't know if you're right, but you *sound* right!” Erik gathered that his sense of conviction and strong presentation skills would open doors for him. Comfortable speaking to boards and groups, he knows how to read his audience and craft his message accordingly.

After his MBA, he took on a project at Bono and Ali Hewson's fashion brand EDUN. Having designed and coded a full-scale e-commerce operation in less than three months, he was invited to become a key member of the growth team. Erik wholly transitioned to the corporate world after the LVMH Group acquired EDUN. He is now the top marketing and e-commerce executive at Francesca's, a publicly listed retail company.

Along the way, Erik has learnt not to skip steps. As he says, “I treat my job with urgency but my career with patience.” He always asks himself, “What do I need to work on right now in order to do bigger and greater things?” Seldom defeated by negativity and rejection in his earlier auditions and performances, Erik is attuned to non-verbal feedback and can adjust his approach in changing situations. In fact, firmly believing that emotional intelligence is critical in business, he looks favourably upon job candidates with an artistic background.

People skills and risk taking

A shy kid, Mary Proctor Trane let her theatrical juices flow after switching high schools. In 1990, she moved to New York City and began her professional career in regional theatre, taking roles across the country. Resolved to work as a temp whenever she had no acting role, Mary obtained

her first job as an assistant in a large investment bank. Her employers appreciated her so much that they gave her the work flexibility she needed to go on auditions and even take on performances. Mary thus avoided living from paycheque to paycheque as many of her peers did.

While this arrangement worked for a long time, she eventually felt the tension between her banking job and her identity as a professional actress. She was weighing her options when she spotted an opportunity to help executives improve their presentation skills. Bumble & bumble (a brand owned by Estée Lauder Companies) soon became a major client. Though Mary was repeatedly offered the chance to work full-time as a trainer, she was not ready. Her acting career was going well, and she preferred to continue mixing the two.

Mary soon experienced a series of turning points. After her mother died, she struggled with grief and the heavy travel required by her dual career. She also found herself in love and then pregnant a year later, at age 42. This finally motivated her to get a single job. She spoke to her friends at Bumble & bumble and quickly received a job offer that allowed her to end her acting career.

As a training executive, Mary thrived on being “the expert”, something that never happens in the acting world. She also enjoyed being part of a team and was able to make full use of her acting skills as she presented in front of groups, finding her authentic voice and helping others do the same.

After ten years with Bumble & bumble, Mary decided to strike out on her own as an independent facilitator, trainer and coach. She points out that many companies choose to work with actors, as they tend to know themselves well, be resourceful and good with people. “Acting forces you to be comfortable with fear,” she says.

Balance and poise

Born and raised in Denmark, Frank Radich started ballroom dancing at the age of three. Though he tried other activities in primary school, such as drumming, football, swimming and even rifle shooting, teenage Frank found his “tribe” in the dance studio. All through high school, he travelled for dance competitions and training sessions.

After he married his childhood dance school sweetheart, they set out to create a masterplan for dominance of the dance universe. They decided to attend the same university, taking the same course to facilitate the synchronisation of classes, training and more. With support from mentors, coaches and psychologists, they were able to become national champions while keeping up with their studies.

10 Transferable Arts-Related Skills

1. Autonomy and self-discipline
2. 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 and take risks
9. Resourcefulness and resilience
10. Collaboration and teamwork

Graduating with one of the top GPAs in his class, Frank interviewed with all the top consulting firms on campus, but found out that none would give him room to continue his dance career. So he became the development manager of a new consulting firm linked to his university, drawing on his experience as the co-founder of a local dance school. After a year and a half in that role, he was still Danish champion, alongside his wife, a title they retained for three years.

Frank does believe that holding a job, however flexible, prevented the couple from becoming world champions. On the other hand, poor competition results didn't upset them so much, as they both had other things to focus on.

This pattern of creating a healthy balance between dancing and corporate life continued, with Frank taking on new roles as an international dance

teacher and top adjudicator in world championships even as he climbed the corporate ladder.

Frank says that three things helped him with his career transition. First, he was willing to put in all the hours necessary to produce a great outcome. Second, his confidence and his ability to perform comfortably in front of judges helped him tremendously. Third, people who do not know his artistic background have often commented how he “stands out from the crowd”. He believes that his long years of dance training must have honed his poise and “carriage”.

However, Frank also had to unlearn certain things, especially in terms of communication. The ballroom dance world is full of direct feedback, but “corporate life is very different and it would not work if I talked to my peers or my team in the same way,” he explains.

A transition that cannot be improvised

The success of these performers is in no small part due to education and an energetic willingness to learn. While the competencies of the stage, like confidence, risk taking and resilience, act as a boost, one cannot totally improvise the leap from pirouettes to PR or from arias to accounting.

As transitioning artists typically receive very little support, they need to rely on their resilience. Wouldn't it be wonderful if more recruiters and leaders were open to bring the skills of the arts into the business workplace? As Erik said, “The blend of art and science has never been as important as it is today.” We couldn't agree more.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/pivoting-business-after-artistic-career>

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