
Professional Playwriting in a Hostile Context

Jordi CASANOVAS GÜELL

ORCID: 0000-0002-8262-1200

info@jordicasanovas.net

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: When he was three, he imitated Elvis Presley in the streets of his hometown. His mother told him he should go into theatre. When he was nine, he would take the mechanism out of his sister's talking dolls and assemble it in remote-controlled cars he invented himself. The neighbours told him that he should study to become an engineer. At fourteen, the doctor who treated him for the only epileptic seizure he would ever have warned him that he should never drink alcohol or take drugs. When he turned eighteen, he enrolled on a course in Advanced Telecommunications Engineering. Disappointed, he wanted to take the cookery course at a community centre and, as there were no places left, he enrolled on the only course with places available: theatre. After a few years, he took it up professionally: he wrote, directed and produced. He set up a company, opened a theatre, invented a playwriting tournament and also promoted a production company dedicated to Catalan drama. He has received several awards, which have spurred him on to outdo himself, and now he lives very happily with Blanca and Pep.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

Crises do not provide opportunities. Crises are moments of great difficulty, uncertainty and pain. Our work, playwriting, is a fragile and uncertain occupation, but it is also a long path, which should be professionalised and taken very seriously. We often associate playwriting with some romantic concept of authorship, but the playwright should have knowledge of all the cogs in the industrial, public and private theatre system. What does this industry expect from us and what can we contribute? What are the tools that playwriting professionals have in order to make their craft artistically and financially viable? What are the models that do not fit in with the most romantic stereotypes of authorship? What are the strategies or models that playwriting professionals can use in order to establish their career? What are the production mechanisms that can give freedom and continuity to text-based theatre creation?

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Crisis Is Not An Opportunity

There is some temptation to idealise crises as moments of opportunity. This happens because they are looked at later and from the perspective of those who have been able to overcome them with some success. But crises are terrible. Nobody wants to find themselves in an economic environment like the one we were left with after the 2008 crisis, or the one that will emerge from the current post-pandemic crisis, or the one left to us by the gradual impoverishment of the cultural system in Catalonia.

Normally, these statements come from people who, fortunately, experience artistic creation from a very comfortable financial position and almost always for reasons unrelated to their own artistic work. Because they know, consciously or unconsciously, that as long as there is no cultural transfer between classes, the elitist and classist hegemony in the culture industry will not be at risk.

What is true is that those who, while trying to survive and overcome moments of crisis, invent or reformulate how they work and, with a lot of luck, emerge unscathed, develop knowledge and formulas that will probably be very useful for them to grow and continue working when other periods of greater prosperity come along.

In other words, crisis is not an opportunity. But anyone who overcomes a crisis will probably have the resources to develop a long-lasting artistic career.

I will explain some of the personal inventions or formulas that fortunately saved me when all the doors, all the possibilities or all the conventional ways seemed saturated or non-existent, either because of the crisis of each moment or because of the endemic characteristics of the theatre system.

The Hostile Context

First, let me focus on the title I came up with. The hostile context. The moment of crisis itself is the hostile context, but there are also other factors that make the moment even more hostile.

This is not intended to be a list of grievances or complaints about the sector. We have the sector we have and, possibly, one day someone will be able to change it, but if that happens, it's a long way off.

Right now, we need to know how to examine the tics and defects, as well as the virtues, of our own system to try to find the ways, the cracks, the formulas to continue developing a career in the field of playwriting that is sustainable — both financially and in terms of mental and physical health —, continuous, satisfactory and true to oneself.

I will set out three points, which do not form either a complete or objective list; three points that, from my perspective, can negatively affect the future of a playwriting professional.

Ageing of the Catalan theatre circuit

More than forty years ago, the Catalan cultural and theatre system was reset. At that time, very young people undertook risky initiatives, broke with the dictatorship and, also, received great support from the institutions. Never again will you see tours like those that were contracted then. Never again will you see support operations to buy theatres like those seen at that time. Never again will you see promotional campaigns for creators like those experienced then. That time has gone.

Unfortunately, in many of these cases there has been a curious effect, as those who reach such a position believe themselves fully deserving of all the help they have received and do not think they have to give anything back; they simply think they have to enjoy and take advantage of it themselves.

This moral lesson has not only stayed with the people of that generation, with a few honourable exceptions, but has also permeated many generations that have followed.

These people received, and some still receive, a lot of resources because they began their careers when they did, out of sheer luck, out of the privilege of having lived through that moment, as well as others; this I will not deny, we were privileged to enjoy some of the last opportunities before the crisis carried them off.

This burden, which is now beginning to disappear in the field of subsidies and inclusion in the listings, has made it very difficult for the consolidation and growth of projects that, under normal conditions, would have become much bigger and stronger.

And an apparently very banal example is that all the companies that had a very strong social impact are those that made a drama on TV3. Catalan television has created and, to a lesser extent, is still creating, a small Catalan star system. As the people in charge get older on television, the level of risk, for perfectly logical reasons, diminishes. Much of the Catalan theatre system also suffers from the same problem that afflicts Catalan television.

And it also happens in the case of the audience. We need a very powerful regeneration to move from the audience that was excited and found that Catalan theatre explored themes that interested them when they were twenty years old to today's audience. That audience is also the one that enjoys a voice in many media outlets, and nostalgia often plays tricks on them. Obviously, what they saw and experienced in their twenties was much better than what they see now. It happens to me too. But this is not because creation has lost quality, but because the capacity to surprise and amaze was greater when we were all that age.

I want to stress that getting older, being a very experienced creator or manager, is not a negative trait in itself. On the contrary, I aspire to grow old and keep learning and keep trying. However, the negative trait is that of not seeing that you need to know how to give something back; of not being aware of all the help received and that in some way you need to give something back to society for what you have received and has allowed you to have an artistic career.

If we were aware of this, the sale of the Teatre Victòria, a theatre that was bought with the help of the institutions, would have had an impact on the entire creative fabric. That has not happened.

Nepotism in public theatres

If someone wants to try and take risks in the field of playwriting (in its most artistic aspect, in its most investigative side among the shadows), they have two possible options: enjoying a life assured by the comfort provided by their family's economic position; or receiving subsidies, scholarships or paid commissions to write.

Some will argue that you need to work on other things and write in your free time. This will always be said by those who are already wealthy. It's a big lie. A person who works eight hours a day and then spends their free time writing is unlikely to reach the levels of perfection achieved by someone who can dedicate all the hours of the day to this endeavour.

Once again we have to protect ourselves from the creation purists because they are the ones who probably don't have to pay any bills. Now, if your way of dealing with artistic creation is apocalyptic, absolutely austere and isolated from any family project, what I'm going to explain next will probably not interest you at all.

Let's return to public theatres as a source of work to develop in the profession. In Catalonia we have just two or three eminently public theatres; that is to say, they can take risks with their content without depending exclusively on the box office: Teatre Lliure, TNC and Sala Beckett, as well as two festivals, Grec and Temporada Alta.

If the directors of these three venues, and these two festivals, that is to say five people, are not interested in your plays, things get downright meagre. It will be very difficult for such a professional to receive commissions or subsidies. It will be very difficult to keep experimenting until you find groundbreaking, innovative or socially relevant contents and forms. It will be very difficult to continue being a playwright.

What's more, many budding professionals despair and tend to think that their work is worthless because a total of five people, just five people, don't find it interesting. This is too few people to determine a career. We have too small a country. Too small a system. And we must recognise this.

In many cases, the people running these institutions, aware of the situation, concentrate the resources they have on those creators who are most interesting to them or who, directly, are closest to them. That's when this nepotism occurs, so apparent if we analyse the listings of the last twenty years, which often demoralises even the most motivated, who give up their career because they cannot find a way to make it sustainable.

Therefore, if there is a renewal in a theatre and you are not one of the lucky ones, you are not part of the list of names that support the candidacy and you have to look for alternatives.

The country with one of the lowest levels of cultural consumption per capita in Europe

Third point, but it could have been the first. We must be aware of where we are.

Spain is one of the countries in Europe with lower than average consumption of culture per household. And Catalonia is one of the autonomous communities where the consumption of theatre or cinema per household is the lowest in all of Spain, being surpassed more than twice by communities such as Madrid, Navarre or Valencia, according to statistics from 2015 and 2019, respectively.

We often overlook this, that not much theatre is consumed in Catalonia. Making a living from theatre in Catalonia is therefore more difficult than in Madrid, and much more difficult than in Berlin. All the examples that come to us from those places must always be questioned and evaluated in the light of the information we have.

Directing Yourself / Producing Yourself / Finding a Venue

This analysis, which can seem catastrophic, does not seek to send a negative message but quite the opposite, to make us aware of the situation to try to explain where the formulas or ways to break or hack this system can come from and penetrate its cracks.

When I'm told that I can't go ahead with this text or that project, my answer is always the same: direct yourself. I've been writing for twenty years and no Catalan director has ever asked me for a text and put it on stage. In the cases where I have been directed by other Catalan directors, it has been because I produced the project or because I started it in some other way. I have been asked in other places, in other contexts, such as Madrid. I know it's a personal case, but I want to explain it to show that if a person who has been lucky enough to have had many premieres finds himself in this difficulty, what about someone who has yet to have a premiere?

SALA FLYHARD (2010)

The initial proposal is always to direct yourself, produce yourself and find a venue. All of this can be seen at its best with the example of the Sala Flyhard. 2010 was the year when the peak of the economic crisis particularly affected the performing arts here. 2010-2012 was the period of greatest decline in our sector.

At that time we realised that if you took a forty-seat theatre and kept the entire box office takings, you made more profit than going to any small format theatre at the box office with the percentage that was usually agreed with companies. It was crazy. Too many companies and too many creators still continue to work precariously, or worse, in a precariousness that offers neither control nor freedom. They have no possibility of continuing the projects. The best way is to set it up yourself. The Sala Flyhard was initially an illegal initiative. Aware that we could be closed after a few weeks, we had accepted this without complaint. But time passed, months passed, years passed and it became so important that we then had the opportunity to reform it and to have all the permits ready. The Sala Flyhard became socially indispensable and has been able to continue to this day.

Continuity and staying in the listings are essential. Unfortunately, we have overproduction, more and more theatres close and the ones left can't accommodate all this production. On the other hand, to achieve relevance, reaching the ideal audience for each show, whatever its format or subject, demands time and continuity. Every play has an audience that may be interested in it, but when we limit the run time to a few days, it is not possible to reach that audience.

We avoided the requirement of acting names. When playwrights consider bringing a play to any theatre in Barcelona, they must do so by associating it with acting names. Otherwise, it will be hard to move forward with the project. Unless, I emphasise again, it is in the context of small and very unstable venues. If you control the venue, you control this factor.

The production design always had to be bigger than the venue. We designed the project and chose the texts when we thought they would be able to fill larger capacity auditoria. Thus, having a potential audience bigger than what we can accommodate ensures full houses and a long run. You need to know in which theatre and which auditorium each show is performed. You have to be realistic and use common sense, although there is no formula for success that guarantees this. As playwriting professionals, we also have to ask ourselves these questions and try to resolve them, especially when we don't have this constant help from public theatres that can give us *carte blanche* to do whatever we want.

Freedom was also achieved in the Sala Flyhard despite the precariousness because, although it was not the best economic condition to work, you could do what you wanted there and forge ahead despite the lack of names.

This was, in a moment of crisis, a possible hacking of the system and, fortunately, the Sala Flyhard has continued, and goes on with the same spirit and philosophy. There is no doubt that the results from then until now have been wonderful.

VILAFRANCA (2015)

This also came about in a context of crisis, in this case possibly more personal. In the 2013-14 season, the artistic directions of some theatres changed and, personally, I didn't have the option of receiving commissions from these public venues.

I had been lucky enough to premiere *Una història catalana* at the TNC, in the Sala Gran. Many municipal theatres were interested in it; they wanted to have a large-format production at a time when the big productions in Barcelona didn't tour in municipal theatres. There was an attempt to put together a tour and concentrate all the performances in a few weeks to lower operating costs, but it was not possible for various circumstances, many of them related to the obstacles inherent in public theatre.

When we talked about it with the theatres, and when we saw their need to schedule large-format shows, we proposed turning the idea around. We suggested that they buy two performances more than they would normally buy, so that we could plan a tour long enough to make much of the production viable. This participation of Teatres Amics in the production, in a way that didn't involve them taking excessive risks, made the production of *Vilafranca* possible. All this made it feasible to produce a large-format show, trusting in the idea that there would be enough of an audience for all three performances. Some of the theatres lived up to this expectation, but others did not. Even so, the coverage and publicity of the production started by this group of theatres compensated for the possible lack of an audience in some of the performances. The operation was successful both for the theatres and the creators, as we have been able to develop a large-scale theatrical project completely to our liking. Finally, the show had a season in Barcelona, at the Teatre Lliure, and even became a film for television.

It is just an example, a personal one, to emphasise that you have to avoid knocking on the same doors and that there are possibilities that have not even been explored yet. And also to bear in mind that we have to ask ourselves a series of questions when we think about our texts or projects, such as: What does the market demand? What is lacking? What do we need to build dramaturgically that can interest the market and the audience?

Professionalization

From my experience as a producer or director of more than twenty productions based on Catalan plays written by others, I have been able to develop some of the most important traits that a playwriting professional must have in order to work frequently in our environment and context.

Flexibility

Having the ability to understand that theatre is a team effort, facilitating dialogue with other creators and understanding that rehearsal processes are intense and other views emerge. Trusting the rest of the team just as the rest of the team trusts in what you have written.

Why does it make more sense to work on a text by a foreign playwright when they are not a household name here? Perhaps the most obvious answer is because it's more comfortable, it's easier. I have suffered from it as a director and as a producer and every time I have doubts again about working with local writers for this reason, because it is still a symptom of amateurism and a lack of professionalism.

Rigour

It is important to carefully calculate the necessary wages and time that will be spent to make a commission possible. It is essential to avoid excessively tight timings. And you have to expect the unexpected. Be rigorous in your commitment and be aware of who is asking for the text and who will stage it.

Pay attention to what interests society

Pay close attention to what interests society. What concerns it, what other people want to ask. We know that the theatre is a space for communication between people who don't know each other, where you want to feel reassured at times and challenged at others. It is important to know to which audience the questions are going to be asked. An exclusively artistic and apocalyptic perspective can lead to great future works of art but an absolute lack of income. One might think that both things can happen, but this is rarely the case. Let's not fool ourselves. What can be done is to combine the two. I recommend combining, unless you come from a very well-off family. In fact, those who speak out saying that theatre takes few risks and is not very demanding are often people who do not need any kind of income from theatre, and therefore know that if they force others to turn their backs on the audience, they will fall on hard times and end up giving it up. And they will leave the world they do not want to abandon to them.

I'm not talking about making banal, easy or stupid theatre. Obviously, this kind of theatre can be done. In fact, once you taste it and see the economic returns it gives you, it's hard to believe that it's worth going back to experimentation and risk, because it means living a precarious existence again. But the nature of the artist, of the dramatist, of the creator, calls for searching, testing and taking risks.

For me, as someone who, from 2013, saw the staunching of the possibility of paid commissions from public theatres that would allow me to continue experimenting with stage language, it was a salvation to be able to have two lines of work. A commercial one, in which I always wrote what I liked and it gave me pleasure, but with form and contents that were presumably more in line with the general audience, and a research one, which has led me to advance in documentary theatre and has allowed me to evolve and question my own materials, find new narrative paths and highly stimulating codes of representation.

A hostile context in the best moment?

It is important to define the hostile context to remove certain pressures. Often it is this context that marks the success or continuity of those who want to take up playwriting professionally.

It is very easy for us to think that we are not good enough or that we are not at the right level because we can't find a place, but you have to consider the positive and negative characteristics of the environment, of the context, to be able to look for the cracks and not end up exhausted and defeated after constantly knocking on certain doors.

Playwriting is a job that needs to be funded/supported to be able to develop it in its riskiest aspect. But playwriting in a commercial market is possibly experiencing its best moment, and we probably find ourselves in the period in history when more Catalan playwrights can live off their work.

A moment of contrasts that must be analysed and, perhaps, exploited.

