

RC-Annie Courses

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'Every day's a school day' is one of the many good mantras passed on to me by a wonderful CSM friend. Stage Management is a constant learning process, never boring and you amass a wealth of eclectic knowledge and skills gathered from the various productions and projects you work on.

However, formal opportunities to improve and expand your knowledge once you have graduated are rare. Especially as a freelancer you are either looking for work, working or recovering from work and it is hard to find the time and money to get to one of the few and far between learning opportunities. Often it's happening only in London (no good if you're on shows at the other end of the country), or with travel added to the course fee it's out of budget range, or the thought of having to expend large amounts of brain power on your precious week(s) off is beyond possible.

Then the lockdown met Zoom and suddenly there was an overwhelming clamour for ways we can continue to engage with, learn and keep hold of some part of our theatre world and actively ensure that the very minute our industry returns we will be more than ready to get back to work.

So, I was happy to see companies and individuals reconfigure their training courses for an online format. Having heard great things about RC-Annie courses for years but never been able to attend due to show call/being the other end of the country/in post-show burnout, I now immediately signed up for *How to Prepare for Intimate & Violent Moments* and *Theatrical Handguns*. I had never actually been taught how best to work with a fight director or the safest way to approach working with firearms. All my work in those areas up to now has been rooted in common sense and applying my own learned experience.

These Zoom courses are led by Rachel Bown-Williams and Ruth Cooper-Brown, the Company Directors of RC-Annie. RC-Annie are one of the most well-known and experienced dramatic violence companies in the country, exemplified by their use of anecdote as teaching material, ensuring everything they recommend or teach is backed up by their comprehensive experience in rehearsal and production processes. Both Ruth and Rachel are personable and engaging tutors, enthusiastic as well as knowledgeable about their subject which means it is a genuine pleasure to spend a few hours in their (online) company. They aim to ensure that everyone leaves the workshop more confident in the subject than when they started so are happy to answer questions or discuss specific points relevant to particular people.

Everyone was asked to introduce themselves and give a bit of information about why they were taking the course and what they hoped to get out of it, which both lessened the awkwardness of being 'amongst' strangers but also brought some different perspectives to the group: plenty of stage managers, but also university tutors, stage technicians from venues and trainee fight directors. Ruth and Rachel were mindful of the different perspectives of everyone as they moved through the material, often stopping to check that everyone understood specific jargon or to expand on a point for a specific need.

After the initial introductions you can then decide on your own level of interaction with the group. Zoom has several functions that can help make a potentially one sided lecture feel more inclusive: RC-Annie used the 'raise hand' function for a quick quiz to determine how much the participants were already aware of information and the 'Chat' function allowed us to ask questions as the workshop progressed without having to interrupt.

I thoroughly enjoyed both workshops. I came away from the first feeling much more confident in my own ability to work successfully alongside a fight or intimacy director and to ensure that the rehearsal room and technical process is much safer and supportive for rehearsing such sequences. I came away from the second workshop again much more confident but also rather horrified at just how haphazard and staggeringly illegal my experience on past shows with firearms had been. The course clearly and concisely (in so far as that's possible to, considering the complexity of UK weapons legislation) laid out exactly what you need to know about handguns: legal terminology, exactly what laws you WILL break, how to reduce the risk and take steps to protect yourself and the wider production team, what things to ask and raise if a play requires a gun and of course thoughts about how to accurately document and provide paperwork for the whole process. Rather than internally groaning when the script or director asks for a gun and praying that someone else knows what to do, I think I may be actively hoping that I now get to work on a show with a handgun so that I can apply all my new knowledge.

Training opportunities do cost money (RC-Annie do have a discount for SMA members) which will be a barrier to some in this uncertain period, and it's hard to find a way around that as the practitioners also need to keep money coming in and no one should ever be asked to work or give their knowledge away for free. In the future there will be a way to start making training courses more financially accessible but for now, I would urge you, if you can, to take the opportunities offered as the more we equip ourselves with good knowledge and practice, the more we can help teach others. RC-Annie will also only hire guns to people who have taken their courses so you might one day find yourself in a useful position as the only person on a team who can source something.

It was also very heartening to share some time (and virtual space) with other theatre professionals in a positive context. After lots of sometimes rather circular discussions about COVID-19, I loved being able to engage my brain fully once again with work and learn more about how to better my contribution to the production process. Feedback from friends and colleagues who have also completed RC-Annie and other training courses echo this delight in being able to engage with further skills training and connect with our industry again. When we do return to work there's going to be quite a few well-informed stage managers – literally armed with knowledge!