

>> Snapshot

Helen Ayres

Actor

Equity



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Can you tell us a bit about your career to date?

Acting is a second career for me even though it has always been my first love. Although I had some great early experience with the Plymouth Community Theatre I didn't even try for drama school until I was 26 and then, didn't get in first time round – Top Tip don't give up! I was told by my School Career's Advisor that unless I'd been to drama school as I child, I'd never make it! Top tip number two – always get a second opinion. Always.

So, after a career as a psychologist working as a domestic violence counsellor and mediator, I applied again and trained as a mature student at the Bristol Old Vic, graduating in 2000.

Before leaving Bristol, I was entered for, and won the Carleton Hobbs Radio Award, where the prize is a year's salaried contract with the BBC. This was a fantastic opportunity to mingle with lots of established actors and a wide mix of producers, all with differing styles.

Since then I have done a wide variety of Theatre, TV, radio and voice over work. At one time I understudied for six different parts in the West End and, through an actor falling ill, ended up performing in three different plays in one day, for three weeks! Top Tip number three – if you're an understudy, always be ready to go on; always. I got a new agent out of it!

In The Handmaid's Tale at the English National Opera (ENO) I was hanged nightly. I've had roles in TV drama such as Trial and Retribution and Panorama. I've done audio books for children, audio recruitment work for UK Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) and recorded Heritage guides for Darwin's House, with presenters David Attenborough and Andrew Marr.

I'm currently looking to doing more work with artistic merit rather than mortgage merit. It's an easy thing to get

sucked into what feeds the meter, rather than what feeds your soul.

What do you like most about your work? Why is it so satisfying?

I love the work I do on so many levels. For example, I love the intellectual stretch of taking on something new and getting under the skin of the words and wanting to do it justice. The writing is so important. I love rehearsal, trying things out, playing and building on the words with other actors.

I also love working with other people. Being in a company is really special. There is healthy competition, generosity and support. I believe that being around talented people makes you better. I just love the variety. I've done One Woman shows and they're challenging on more than the obvious level of 'all the lines and cues are yours'.

What are the biggest challenges of maintaining a freelance career?

One big challenge has to be cash flow. However, in my experience, to adjust Coleman Cox's quote slightly, the more I look for opportunities the luckier I seem to get.

I think the real challenge is to keep yourself going, to carry on believing in your talents and finding ways to ensure that you don't become rusty. Establishing an on-going practice is essential. I make sure I do something every day, whether it is a voice class or using online resources such as the National Theatre warm up videos from YouTube, or other on-line resources. I find this practise helps me to stay confident and is a methodical approach to honing my craft. I'm a great believer in Up One Notch – what small thing can I do right now, that will take me up a gear.



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Writing massive long to-do lists can be a bit overwhelming for me.

Have you added new work/skills to your portfolio over time? What prompted you to do this?

One skill I have added to my portfolio is video games acting. This is quite unlike radio drama, where you are all in together because with video games you rarely meet any of the other players, you're often in a coffin-sized room on your own for several hours, which is an acquired taste! It's a good skill to have developed, and has provided useful income of course. If you happen to sound like a famous actor who was in the film preceding the video game, it's worth sending in a recording, as sound-alikes are a key part of the high profile games market.

What is the biggest challenge of learning the skills that you need?

For me the biggest challenge is getting started. You can talk your way out of everything if you let yourself. When you are learning new skills you're not getting the rewards that come from being good at something and it can be much harder to keep pushing through. So it's about taking the first step and setting mini targets to keep me motivated.

What FEU Training courses have you attended?

- Blogging for Freelancers
- Write that book and get it published
- How to Shoot and Edit Video on an iPhone or iPad

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What are the most important things that you've learned? How have you used what you have learnt in your work and how has it helped?

I've gained lots of useful skills and knowledge from the FEU Training workshops. While attending the blogging day, I set up my website on WordPress in the lunch break, it was that straightforward. It was such a well-run day, catering to all levels of ability. I really appreciated the immediacy of getting stuff done on the day. Having this website makes me look so much more professional, makes it easier to find work as well as give people something to browse before or after meeting me in person.

The workshop that really helped me was the How to shoot and edit video. I learned how to create and edit video footage quickly and more professionally and felt instantly skilled doing it. This has allowed me to very quickly create bespoke audition tapes. Understanding how to use the technology to do this has made me more responsive and has definitely led to me getting more work.

Write That Book was also really useful, with lots of practical tips and advice. I plan to publish a set of pocket books from my previous life as a psychologist with resilience tips this year, so I know this will come in handy.

What has encouraged you to attend FEU training sessions?

I love that you meet such a variety of people on these days and you can draw from the eclectic mix of four unions. I love the interaction.

I think the workshops themselves are pitched at the right level – the days are spread out and paced nicely. They are enjoyable days as well as being useful. I find them all really well structured and accessible.

The venues are all lovely too. I run training days myself, and know how important the venue is to create a good mood for participants.

Do you know any other organisation that offers business skills courses for creatives?

Not for entertainers, no.