



International Case Study

Build Your Business

David Medina Águila – Set & Costume Design

Barcelona, Spain & London, UK

David is a freelance set and costume designer creative entrepreneur. He is a trained theatre and set designer after pivoting from his first career in media and communications. He proactively developed his skills within the creative industries in a range of runner, set and production assistant jobs, supported by working a second job. During the pandemic he is developing a series of self-directed collaborative projects alongside paid commissions as he builds his freelance portfolio. His long-term ambition is to set up his own creative design studio “2024”.

David Medina Águila

David initially studied media and communications before realising he wanted to follow his passion for stage and set design. He moved to London, UK from Barcelona, Spain to develop the necessary work experience whilst taking on a range of projects to develop his portfolio to pitch and secure a place studying on the MA in Theatre Design in Wimbledon College of Arts (UAL). Getting onto the course gave him the opportunity to apply all this life and professional learning to his design practice, grow his network as well as learning the abilities to convey my ideas and imagination in a non-verbal medium. Since graduating he is working on a range of self-directed projects, paid commissions as a theatre designer and is part of the UAL Incubation Hub creative entrepreneur skills development programme. Born in Spain and is currently living and working between Barcelona, Spain and London, UK

What sort of creative entrepreneur are you?

I am a set and costume designer, not just theatre, music, films, events. I can do anything that involves temporary space that needs to be built, somehow. I want to be an entrepreneur who brings people together. I want to create an environment that feels right for me, for the people I collaborate with. For me we are all in it together, collaborating. I am all about the people and making stage spaces where people can be themselves.

What made you start up?

Two different things - in my industry and job, I could see no one would give full time work so I needed to become self-employed, this involves making your own business. Secondly, I did not like the environment / sectors I was working in, they were very jerky and lacking in diversity. I could not see myself within the industry and I did not share the same working ethics. So, I wanted to create a place I could be comfortable and work, so I started off making projects. My long term objective is to make theatre great again.

And at what stage are you now? Longer term plans?

I registered as self-employed (also called freelancing) in the UK, I am starting my first paid commissions with The Curve, a theatre in Leicester, UK. And in parallel looking out for other projects. I have started doing producing because of the pandemic via Amalgam - this is my hybrid company I am creating with UAL. I am setting this up with my friend Alice - we did a call out for scripts. We selected three and are working on recording, making the work, which is a monologue and it will be made to become a live, recorded performance.

My bigger vision is I want to have a studio - called "2024"; is the working title. The importance is I will create the vibe and the people who I work with. A design /production company that pays what they deserve, is it diverse, how we speak is open, based on feedback, based on healthy relationships with others. I see a physical space where we can meet together and make work that matters, speaks to issues that are important to me/us.

How have you approached learning about building your business?

I am part of the UAL Graduate Incubation Programme that started in Summer 2020. Getting interested and learning about admin, finances, systems that are so important to being an entrepreneur. This is the stuff that we creatives consider to be 'boring' but we need to know about it. My sister started her business ten years ago and saw her, as I was a teenager at home. Seeing this I knew looking for a job wasn't the only route in life and that doing my own thing and funding my own projects could work.

Being on the incubator programme helps me narrow down my vision and do more of what I want that is relevant to building my vision and the business identity. I am learning to start with the small steps to build towards the bigger vision.

A good example is the pocket project = we are making monologues with a budget of £450 which we have had funding for Genesis Network, via The Young Vic Theatre, and some funding from Birkbeck University.

I get mentoring through the programme from an established creative entrepreneur and this supports me to set goals, help me understand myself, what I want and what is important and how to get there.

Who are you working with to build your business?

- With Alice Chambers; she is a director
- With Anna B. Sexton; mentor and creative entrepreneur
- Alyssa Becht; Head of UAL Graduate Incubation Hub
- Jennifer Baker; director of Blood Wedding, The Curve
- My course leader Michael Vale beyond graduation he is still an important part of my professional and personal network, he is a huge support to me and my career

How are you setting up? Structure wise, anything else...

I have set up as a freelancer in the UK, via HMRC. My structure is a sole trader also know as freelancing in the UK. I needed to set up as a freelancer as I started work as a production assistant to further my aims to become a set designer, to get experience and build a portfolio pre applying to do the MA in Theatre Design. I came from being an outsider to the industry from as my BA is in Media and Communication so working with music, fashion, marketing and advertising. So the business set up allowed to get the work and get paid as this is main form of 'employment' within the creative industries in the UK. At some point I will set up in Spain, and this will depend on where my permanent residency is.

What does working across different borders, time zones mean for your business?

It means adapting to the world, I do not see myself as just targeting one city or country now. I am in Barcelona, designing with a team virtually in Leicester, or London in the UK. I see this is the way to go.

I want projects in Barcelona and I can see myself working anywhere. But of course working with the US could be a bit more tricky, but/and it is important to be flexible and have meetings when needed, even if it is 3am. For me I want to be open to handle the ups and downs of the more global approach to working.

How do you approach finances and potential avenues of funding in your business?

The way I approach is timing, I want to pilot small projects that scale. I see the smaller projects are ways to get into bigger partners such as Netflix, eventually. I can bring in small amounts of money myself and with other funders and then use the experience to scale up and build a pitch. I am looking for bigger projects and investment to hire people, get we paid more. We have started small, we are working with friends and this gives us work to show, which allows us to leverage on a real product. I am an organised person anyway, so keeping my business finances are very separate from my personal accounts. I have a separate bank account and a spreadsheet to track what I am making, what we might be losing and figure out all the costings and implications on projects we are working on and planning in the future.

How is working with other funders

With the Young Vic they gave the funding because of the pandemic and we are part of a network that was offered funding, we decided how to invest. We got £200 in total. With Birkbeck University we have to do a presentation to pitch for the funding, as Alice is a student there. We had to describe clearly what we would do with the money. We got the award of £250. In these cases we do not have to do any reporting back to each of the funders about what we make. I plan to create more projects to build my portfolio and start to share my work with theatre companies with more social theatre objectives, present to the Arts Council of England (ACE) to gain part funding. Through Almgam I will work more with film and approach film companies. I can bring in my marketing experience to shape the brand as we go along, and it is vital to have work to show, share and inspire people with to get backers.

What advice would you give others in the process of starting up and building their business?

- ✚ It is really important to find the balance between what your ideal of your business is, what you will do from your heart and then what the market really needs.
- ✚ Be surrounded by the right people
- ✚ Look and find support, as starting out on your own you will get further from getting the right advice to get you and your project going, you feel less alone.
- ✚ Do not be scared, try and fail. It better done, than perfect and the image you have in your head might to be a bit different to get it done.
- ✚ Here is no point trying to work with people who do not want to work with you, find your tribe and people who will give you the chance.

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- ✚ I am from Spain, I have self funded my education through working as a freelancer and working for Apple, my parents were not wealthy to support me or had not ever gone to university themselves. I am gay and being in the UK pre and during Brexit was sort of like being an immigrant i.e. people judge my accent, even though I am white I am still a mixture of all these things.
 - ✚ Trying to get into your niche within the creative industries, keep your eyes open to the obvious and unseen barriers i.e. the theatre industry in the UK is very white, old fashioned, conservative. I found this out through getting in as a production assistant and it was bitter sweet. I was happy I got in, but I was the generally the only non-English speaker on the team. This inspired me to drive forward my business idea as I want and can something different than this is, and be more inclusive, diverse.
 - ✚ I can be so shy in going out there to pitch and share my work, so I make myself go out there and pitch my work. Make sure you are willing to step out of your comfort and email people via LinkedIn, Instagram. And clearly decide that if people don't get back you, move onto the next person, they are not rejecting you.
 - ✚ Often my worse block is the blank piece of paper when working; so I start off researching before I tackle the piece of white paper. I go to Google, Pinterest and find other companies to inspire my thought process. You cannot stay with the blank piece of white paper for ever
 - ✚ All creatives think we are the only people who get scared after reading the play or seeing the brief - you will always be worried about not understanding the play, or that the design isn't right - you are not alone.
 - ✚ You will always find someone on the same page, share you fears it will help.

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