



## International Case Study

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# Finding the right people

## JiaXuan Hon – Consultant & Developer

London, UK

JiaXuan Hon is creative consultant and tech developer working at the intersection of arts and technology. Working for over ten years as freelance, independent dance/theatre producer working with new technologies she has taken work on tours across the UK and globally. She is a member of **body>data>space** collective regularly producing, curating, and presenting international group projects. She currently exploring her ‘second career’ as a software developer, currently working with enterprise software with ThoughtWorks.

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JiaXuan studied Dance and Culture with professional training in the UK before embarking on a freelance career in a range of dance and culture production roles under the name Black Winged Creatives. Between 2012 and 2016 she developed and delivered Akram Khan Company's National Engagement Programme and its delivery entity AKCT (a charity separate from the main company). She was founding company producer for AΦE since 2015, until 2018. With the vision to bring dance closer to the audience, AΦE placed the audience's physical thus emotional experience at the heart of their productions. In parallel to these commissions, she was developing more work at the intersection of arts and tech in partnership with Barbican and Trampery; setting up Fish Island Labs; an incubator to kick off the careers of creative entrepreneurs working across art, technology, fashion and design. Working on hackathons for the arts via make.it.now; Dansathon with Sadlers Wells and slowly building her team to take on more theatre producing roles. In 2019 she moved into becoming a software developer and is blogging about her current and past work. Born in Malaysia of Chinese heritage and currently living and working London, UK

### **What kind of creative entrepreneur are you?**

I see myself in the theatre industry, live performance. I could be called an accidental creative entrepreneur, given how life opportunities pan out. So, I dabbled in dance, musical theatre, skin care and theatre technology. How I see myself now is as a developer employee with creative sides projects. I am part of a creative collective body/data/space. Intersection of the human body, digital tech, project exploration really since 1990's. I got involved with them in 2017 and since be part of it. The collective is loosely defined, we are connected by the vision, when projects come sup we draw in resources and pool in the collective members. I don't count my side projects as within just the theatre industries as I am still working with dance/art/tech and how these all inter-relate. A great example is a remote dance and tech collaboration I was part of the team for the Battery Dance Festival in New York 2020. When the pandemic hit I responded to an open call and we made a couple of 5-10 min pieces completely remotely. The dancers were in the studio in New York and we all connected into the studio internet, and it did not collapse. The premiere happened during pandemic and it went really well. For the festival it was the first time involving technologists in the festival and it really opened their eyes.

Doing this work with the dancers and adapting to the restrictions made the work really interesting. I was mainly there to support and mentor the dancers, and then took on a producer role, to coordinate between the members. I supported with moving forward the creative process in the day, negotiations between the partners working with partners from New York and Brazil.

The main focus for me now though is my second career as a software developer.

### **How did you go about growing yourself and your various creative enterprises?**

- 🌈 I enjoy getting a bird's eye view on things in general, how I feel into a lot of different things. When I was in dance, I wanted to know what happening elsewhere in the industry i.e. fell into skin care. In my mind I knew dance was not a mass producible product and I got curious to know how a skin care product that is. I wanted to know how could I learn and apply their mass production process into dance.

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- ✚ I enjoy to keep abreast of the broader picture.
  - ✚ I used a creative coach which was part funded by arts sector support funding to grow creative enterprise via E-Nation (Enterprise Nation).
  - ✚ Lots of networking and attending events not just in my domain.
  - ✚ No real formal training for running a business but my background is in dance and culture.

### **What was freelancing like for you?**

It was tough in the beginning, transitioning from employee to managing my own business was a learning curve. This was why the coaching sessions appealed to get focus and some frameworks to work with around my business

### **Working with other freelancers**

I had too much work, set up as a Limited Company and formally employed staff. It was great to work in a team again of two to three people; working on the same things, and to bounce ideas off.

### **Any downsides to working with and building your team?**

- ✚ You need to worry to keep the business afloat, to pay wages, that was the most stressful part
- ✚ Also I had to ask myself what type of leader am I? I needed to ask myself how to lead, when my natural approach is to treat people like they are friends.
- ✚ That approach worked out well, eventually. I gave them the freedom to do things they wanted how they wanted but also knew how I wanted things to be done.
- ✚ Recognizing their strengths and giving time space to do that, vs. me prescribing what to do.

### **What did it take for you to get here?**

- ✚ Be curious and if you are afraid of something, that's why you need to do it!

### **How has it been in the collective vs. other ways of working?**

- ✚ Being in a collective is that you 'belong' somewhere, the more you experience the more you hear and listen to different ideas. It means this is the group of people I do not need to explain too much about my ideas/thinking/outlook, as they just get it.

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## **With regards to how you are moving into your second career, how has your creative entrepreneur journey influenced this?**

It's my strength in tech, they need people of diverse backgrounds. I have not yet met any other theatre producers in the sector. The collaborative skills are so grounded into the creative sectors, in the tech space this is not happening so much. I am bringing the thinking around bringing humanity, creativity, empathy to conversations and asking different questions like, "Let's have more chats about this..."

## **What did it take to pivot?**

A luck thing, the course I went on no longer exists, I got a course discount, and no fees until getting a job. Exposure does not feed you and it can easily lead to being burnout. I decided that I can't fight the system and I can't do it anymore. Brexit happened, with the creative industries I now come back to in ways that sustain me.

## **What is the top advice you give when thinking about growing your creative enterprise?**

- ✚ Knowing where the money comes from, why people would pay you to do what you do
- ✚ Value what you do
- ✚ When you are creating a theatre product and you believe Arts Council England (ACE) should subsidise / fund you for the tickets or you believe people should pay for the ticket. Ask yourself at what point would the audience be willing to stop paying for the service you provide? Learn when is the point is? It is tickets for £5, or £10, or £15, or £20? This thinking will enable you to know where and how to decide to bring in the funding for your enterprise?
- ✚ How much are you giving back? And how is your business sustainable? i.e. say you get £5 million funding, you make it, no one comes and then it is not sustainable.
- ✚ External circumstance will also depend on this thinking i.e. in the pandemic selling theatre tickets online when one of the main competitors are Netflix, the scale is key to look at.
- ✚ Ask yourself is it a one on one experience or one to many? Then make a plan of how to do that.
- ✚ You will need to understand the different types of competitors out there.
- ✚ Be drawn towards your interests beyond your art form i.e. tech draws me in because it is so different - the business model is so different.
- ✚ Theatre is so different - broadcast and make a theatre piece that sets up apart.
- ✚ Online experiences need to be high quality, the onboarding experience needs to be special.
- ✚ We need to help our audiences to learn how to onboard themselves into the online theatre experience - so audiences need to re-learn/learn afresh how to engage with more digital and tech experiences.

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- ✚ Consider as the theatre production company how you can build in rituals for the guests including have drink, get snack, still have an interval

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