

Hi Gemma, could you tell me about Action Hero?

[Action Hero](#) is the name co-artistic director James Stenhouse and I give the collaboration between the two of us. We often borrow from existing live forms: things like sporting events, stunt shows, music gigs – anything that is naturally theatrical. We love to look closely at popular culture, things that seem superficial or banal at first, and uncover what they say about who we are and the world we live in.

We get excited by the possibilities that exist when a group of people come together. We love working with ideas that create temporary communities; we like all the potential inherent in a live moment. Our work has been called live art and it has been called theatre, but the label isn't important; we just want to make brilliant live events that people love and are inspired and surprised by.

So much of your work involves the audience, as both collaborators and co-conspirators – is there such thing as a good or bad audience for you?

[Audiences](#) are complicated beasts. Our work often constructs a role for them and there's a sense in which they "play their part" for the performance to be at its best. That's our responsibility though, not theirs. Our job is to lay the foundations for that collaboration and like all collaborations, sometimes it goes well and sometimes not so much. There's no such thing as a bad audience, but I do think an audience has some work to do in creating a successful collaboration. A good audience enters with an openness: they engage with the work on its own terms; they don't decide whether they like it or not before it's even started.

If they can do that, we can do the rest.

You've spoken before about exploitation in theatre – how has the landscape changed during your time in Action Hero?

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It's a tough time for independent artists, whose work is fuelling the entire sector. That's not just theatre-makers but freelance directors, jobbing actors, freelance technicians, writers and production managers too. Institutions who make money because of the work we all do, via government funding, ticket sales or philanthropy, have a responsibility to the sector. It's a crazy kind of economics to stop investing in the very reason you exist. The best kind of artist development any organisation can do is to pay its artists properly.

The thing that gives me a lot of hope is the increasing visibility of open and frank conversations around money in the arts. Often what's been missing from these discussions is how money is apportioned within larger organisations: how is a budget decided? How much, as a percentage, is spent on the programme in this theatre, or that arts centre? How much is reasonable? 5%? 10%? 50%?

We've been part of the [I'll Show You Mine conversations](#), a-n has its [Paying Artists campaign](#) and Equity has [No Pay & Low Pay](#). These initiatives make me feel really positive that we can change things. We all have a responsibility to safeguard the future of Britain's stages, which starts with investing properly in the people who are making the work, from grassroots to the very top.

After almost 10 years together, how do you and James ensure the collaborative process stays fresh and strong?

We've always trusted each other as artists and trusted that the best work comes from a genuine collaboration between the two of us. There's something about the space between us that creates the most potent ideas, so we always try to cultivate that space. It means swallowing ego and giving up on ideas you love personally if the other isn't into it. We will always argue through our ideas but we know when to give up on something. Being comfortable arguing is also helpful. We don't hold grudges; we're happy to have a fight about an idea and then drop it as soon as it's over.

We're also really honest with each other and don't push too hard or guilt trip each other. We're happy to say: I need to stop working on this right now and go for a walk. We're generous and allow each other those things. I think that's why it's been okay for nearly 10 years!

We also just love doing this. We love working together, having ideas together, being on the road together. It's brilliant.

What tips would you give to some of the wannabe smaller-scale touring companies out there?

Ask your peers for advice: they'll know where to go, where to avoid and who to talk to. We've found having a mentor very useful. [Third Angel](#) mentored us in the early days and we continue to go to them for support and advice. Being able to ask someone who's been doing it longer than you is incredibly valuable.

Also think of other artists as allies and friends rather than competitors. Sharing and learning from each other is such a valuable part of making it work. It's such a challenge running a small touring company; you can't do it on your own.

Finally, the key to a successful rehearsal in the early stages of a new project is dark-chocolate digestives. Or failing that, bourbons. But never, ever, custard creams.