

Artists can offer working stiffs lessons about surviving a downturn

By SEANAN FORBES and STEVE BRISENDINE

HERE are layoffs and cutbacks everywhere. The Dow is imitating an Olympic diver. Everyone's insecure and nothing's stable. Yes, times have changed — unless you're an artist.

For writers, actors, musicians and dancers, the economy has always been uncertain. Where's the next gig coming from, if it's coming at all? How to pay the bills while keeping up with auditions and classes?

It's not easy, which is why out of sheer necessity, artists of all kinds develop survival skills that can serve the average office worker in these hard times.

We should know. We've both been in the arts for years — acting, storytelling, writing, doing stand-up, taking photographs — and are still alive to talk about it. Between us, we've slung hash, sold cars, taught everything from CPR for EMTs to writing for fourth-graders, spun discs, poured drinks and otherwise fended off the wolf at the door.

We aren't unique, either. Within every artist is a hid-

den juggler, who's good at keeping enough work afloat to keep the body sheltered and the bills paid on time.

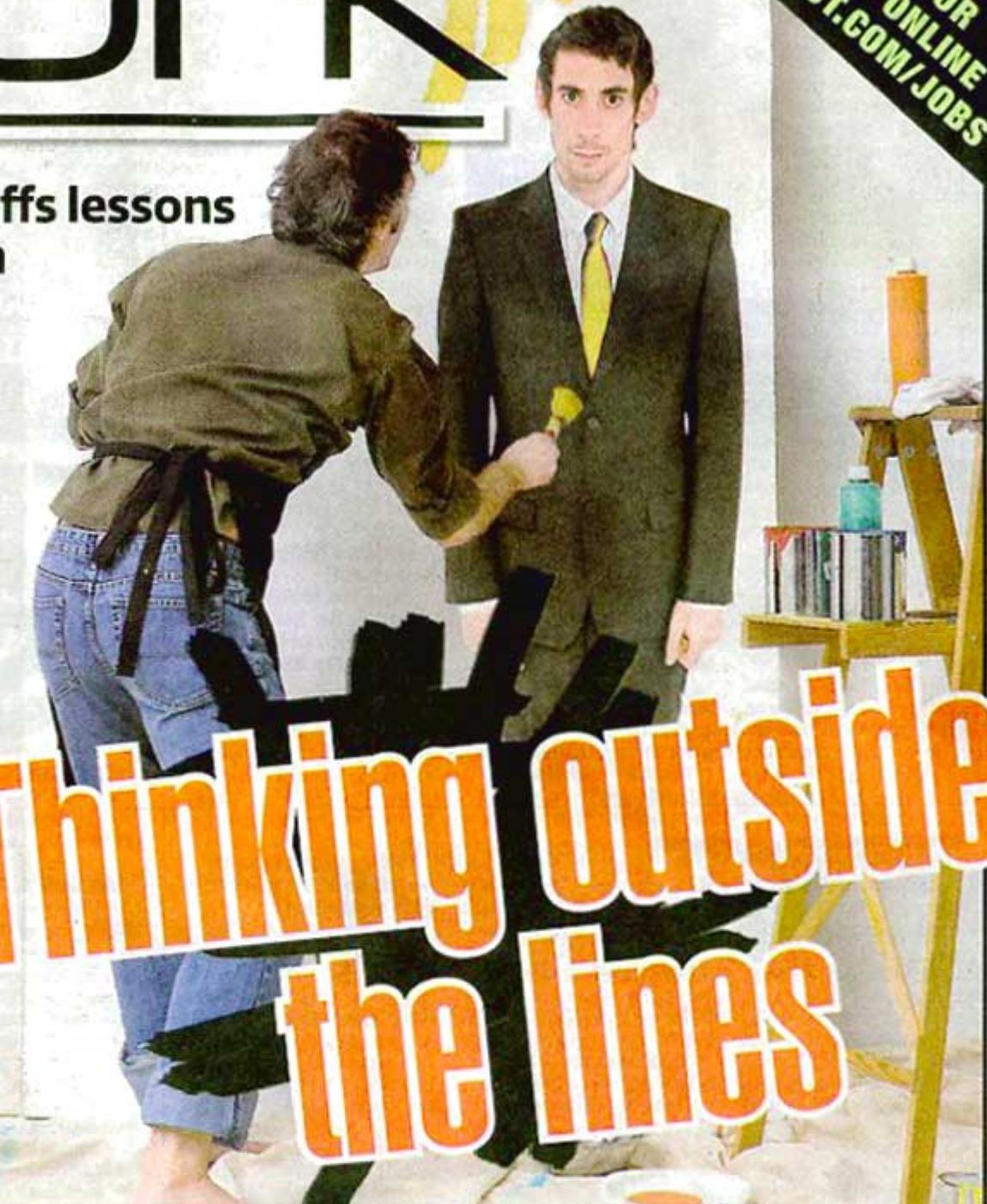
Since what feeds a creative artist can also feed a recently laid-off corporate worker — and just about anyone else — we've compiled a cheat sheet for "members of the audience" (as vaudeville folks once called those strange people who did not act, sing, dance or scramble around backstage). Think of it as "The Artists' Guide to Surviving Tough Economic Times" — a dozen rules that might just help you to thrive.

TO PARAPHRASE "A CHORUS LINE": YOU'RE NOT YOUR RESUME

The words made it into the show for a reason: Every day, dancers struggle to improve their skills and get the next gig — and those long-suffering hip sockets have a limited life span. This means any dancer whose sense of self is defined by that sheet of paper is going to have despair as a roommate. It's vital to stop identifying "I" with a job, or even with a career. Most artists have second or third jobs, but that doesn't threaten their sense of identity. If you let anyone make you feel like you're just a blank

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Thinking outside the lines



[COVER STORY]



THE ART OF SURVIVAL

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on a job application, then you're letting yourself be diminished, and that serves nobody at all.

BECOME A SLASH

"Embrace the slash," says Holly Swangstu. As an artist/art gallery director/art teacher/creativity workshop leader, she's a true multitasker — and she's not unique. Novelist Colleen Thompson says there are many "slashes" — people juggling two or more careers — among the colleagues she meets through the group Romance Writers of America.

"Some are MDs. I've met a jet pilot. I've met people who do an incredible array of work," she says.

Many artists multitask

even when they don't have to. Art isn't generated in a vacuum, and neither is life. The more you do, the more you are (and the more you earn). Find your inner "other" and put it to work.

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Writer and pianist Virginia Lloyd advocates living widely. Her rule is, "Don't be afraid to go outside your normal circle." The more contacts you have, the greater your odds of finding jobs. You'd be amazed how fields overlap. Fiction writers find work in corporations. Actors toil in hospitals, helping doctors develop bedside manner. And you never know who knows whom or what. Keep your smile wide and your mind and ears open. Conne-

tions you never imagined are waiting to be made.

SHARE INFORMATION

Writers, musicians and other artists constantly share news and exchange tips. Being inside the loop means you know what's going on beyond the trade papers and the tabloids. Yes, someone else's success may have that little voice asking, "Why her and not me?" It also whispers, "If he can make it, so can I!"

And don't overlook the value of just talking to others. If you're in the limbo of unemployment, having a support system will give you structure.

VOLUNTEER OUTSIDE YOUR FIELD

Actors use this as fuel

for roles, writers for creating characters, visual artists for sparking new work. At the least, it will change your perspective and give you a chance to grow. You'll meet people with whom you have nothing in common but the volunteer work — people who have their own networks and aren't competing with you in your field. And if you're curious, it helps you see possibilities and generate ideas. That's good for artists of all stripes.

ZIGZAG

Actors are forever adding things to their list of skills — and not always things one associates with acting. Thespian thinking is that you never know what they're going to want on the next episode of "Law & Order." So whether it's bartending, in-line skating or bricklaying, an actor wants it on his resume. Each skill makes you more marketable. So think far from your comfort zone. Become the equivalent of an actor who sings and moves well — and can lay a mean brick wall.

BE A TWO-TIMER

No, you're not a failure if you can't get a full-time job. Two part-time jobs will pay the bills, offer variety and keep your brain and reflexes alive.

If you take a part-time drudge job, view it as keeping yourself alive so you can study or spend more time with your friends. In other words, it's the scaffolding, not the building.

And think sideways. Find something you love — working with pets, making chocolate — and work it for one of your jobs. It may offer pleasure while you're waiting for the economy to turn around — maybe even enough so you can stop waiting and be happy where you are.

TEACH OTHERS

Actors love an audience, so teaching is natural for them. There's a buzz in seeing someone light up with new interest or comprehension. Substitute teaching is one possibility. Another is leading a course in what you know. Consider The Learning Annex, the Y, night classes at local schools. Pitch something you had fun learning, and bet others will like it, too.

COLLABORATE

Out-of-work actors band together to stage showcases, to keep their skills sharp and get them in front of prospective employers. Lesson: Your options expand when you work with others. Do you have friends with whom your skills mesh? Take one

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