Interview with Amanda Dimond, artistic director of 2nd Story

A former physics major with dreams of being a doctor, Amanda Dimond’s ascent has been in her own words, “a long game.” Now the artistic director with 2nd Story and a respected member of the Chicago theatre scene, Amanda is in the rare percentage of people who actually do what they love on a daily basis. On the afternoon of March 7, she was gracious enough to meet up and discuss her role in 2nd Story and what it’s like to be a working artist.

David Jones: The first thing I really wanna know is how did you get started with 2nd Story?

Amanda Dimond: 2nd Story began as a theatre company actually and I was an assistant director on one of the plays. The director asked me to stick around and direct a single evening of 2nd Story so I did and apparently did a pretty good job. They asked me to come back to the festival and direct a whole bunch of things. And then, a couple years later they asked me to come join the organization and run the organization. So it was small steps over the course of many years. One of the most important things that somebody told me as I was trying to find my way was to find someone who was doing something I really loved and believed in, and make myself irreplaceable or invaluable to them. I’ve found that to be very successful, finding someone I really believe in and then being of service to them, so they can’t live without me and they give me a job.

DJ: What are your responsibilities with 2nd Story?

AD: I am ultimately responsible for the whole organization. So I do weekly meeting with staff members to check up on what they’re doing, answer their questions, see if they need any support, things like that. I do lots of meeting with our board and do board management. I write grants for the organization. I maintain the budget and make sure we’re on target. I manage all of the human resources, work with interns, liaison with all of our outside folks like Columbia and other theatre companies, at conferences, that sorta thing.

DJ: So you’re like the face of 2nd Story?

AD: For a lot of things, yes. Not always because Bobby sometimes is or Megan Steilstra or other folks. It mostly depends on the kind of connection we’re trying to make. Like if it’s a conference for writers, then it makes more sense for Bobby or Megan to go, but if it’s conference for storytelling or the theatre stuff, it makes more sense for me to go. We try to have the perfect match.

DJ: It sounds like you’re more of a behind-the-scenes person than a performer.

AD: No, I don’t perform. I used to do some writing but it’s not where I find the most satisfaction. I find much more satisfaction working with writers to help them create their best stories, to be the outside eye. Especially with personal narrative it’s so frequent that someone is telling a story and obviously they remember every part of it, what everybody looks like and where they are and all the relationships, but they might not know that they need to tell the audience that. So to be the person that asks those important questions.
DJ: You help with the overall development of the pieces?

AD: We call it curation. So there’s someone responsible for helping the writing develop their best story. I do a lot of that.

DJ: Do you sit in on the workshops and rehearsals?

AD: We have about a three month process that we put our writers through. There are two different people that help that process, the curator and the director. The curator, from the inception of the event through the first draft, will help the storytellers craft everything on the page. Once the words are on the page, the curator passes the story to the director, who makes the stories performance-ready. I’ve fulfilled both of those functions.

DJ: I was reading a little about you online and I know you do more than just 2nd Story. What other jobs do you have?

AD: I’ve done a lot of work as a teaching artist, which is mostly doing arts-based programs in the schools, either public or private but mostly public. That work is usually done through either a theatre company or through another arts organization. I do a lot of that, which I love a lot. And right now I’m working with The Looking Glass Theatre Company. I have a fellowship through the Theatre Communications Groups, which is like the AWP of the theatre world. I have a fellowship with them working with Looking Glass to learn about leadership and institute planning, and all the high-level stuff that makes organizations function and grow. So I’m doing that, too. And I had a lot of odds-and-ends jobs. I don’t have any of them right now. I worked as a barista, waiting tables, all sorts of things over the years. Lots of cobbling.

DJ: What’s a typical working day? Are you a 9-5 person?

AD: Up until a couple of months ago I was a freelancer so every day with different. Some days I’d need to be at school early in the morning so I’d go teach and do 2nd Story stuff, have a few meetings then go home for a while, go back to meetings. So it was very all over the place. But with this fellowship, I’m more at Looking Glass Monday thru Thursday during the day and then 2nd Story Friday, but I still do a lot of meetings on evenings and weekends because, in this particular world, there are a lot of meetings on evenings and weekends. It’s less of a straight 9-5 and more of a do-it-when-you-can-do-it sorta thing. My days are more structured now than they used to be but there’s still quite a bit of flexibility. I do a lot of work at home.

DJ: That was actually my next question. Do you travel a lot, or are you mostly in Chicago?

AD: Every now and then, I’ll do something with someone from out town, but I’m a much more local person. With 3rd Story, we’re trying to get some things going nationally and internationally but it’s a slow process. So I’m mostly in Chicago for now.
DJ: I took Story and Performance with Bobby and Megan, and I know 2nd Story has done a few things out of state to spread word about the book. That’s why I ask about traveling.

AD: Megan and I went to Wordstock, the literary festival in Portland. I do a fair amount of traveling for conferences and presenting and that sorta thing, but I’d say 95% of what I do is here. We’re trying to get onto the national scene but it’s a process.

DJ: It sounds like you do a lot. How do you manage several different things at once? Is that difficult for you?

AD: Yes. I think it’s difficult for everybody. I know it’s something that Bobby and Megan and I talk about a lot, insofar as we can make it look really easy but it’s actually maniacally difficult. There are different systems I use for different things but the biggest thing is keeping track of all the different threads. What are all the different conversations that are happening? What are the most important conversations? Which communications needs to happen in front of others ones? It’s one of the hardest parts about freelancing, and about living in the modern world right now. So much stuff demands our attention that being present and focused on what you’re doing is still the single most helpful skill I have. It’s not about doing five things at once. It’s about trying to be organized, doing one thing at a time.

DJ: Do you use a lot of social media? Is that a big part of what you do?

AD: Not for me. I am a late adopter. Although I have a twitter account, I don’t really know how to use it. I actually have a date with Megan next week for her to tell me how to use it. I am on Facebook but it’s something that, as a professional, I’m not quite sure how to use. So right now I don’t really use [social media] very much. I certainly do more reading and researching online than I used to, but I still find myself calling and emailing people more than I’m on social media. I was at a conference last week and I met this woman who said something about how tweeting with some guy led to them going out to a bar for a glass of wine. And I had a moment of oh I’m actually missing conversations because I’m not on that particular platform. But at the same time, I find myself distracted and distractible enough that I don’t need an additional thing beeping in my face. I’m curious to explore it and learn more about it and figure out if it’s a tool I can use but right now I . . . the ringer for my cell phone is never even on, which people find crazy! Why do you ask about social media?

DJ: One of the things we’re talking about in my class is how to brand yourself and how to market yourself to get a job. All the social media is out there and, like you just mentioned, it’s possible to be out of the loop if you don’t use it. So I was just wondering how this pertains to you.

AD: You know, I can see it getting more and more important. I feel like, because I’m far enough into my career and I have a network, I hear about things anyway. I can see how someone coming up could benefit from staying engaged, and seeing all the different conversation that are going on. But I also know that, when people apply for jobs from me, I will google them and see what
comes up. I believe technically that’s not legal. Like, if you were applying for a job with me, I can’t ask about your religion, sexual orientation, or all sorts of things legally. But on Facebook, it’s possible to get this information. So if I happen to be homophobic and I find you on Facebook with your boyfriend, I could not hire you because of that information. Technically it’s not legal. But people are doing it, right? If there are naked pictures of someone all over Facebook, it looks bad and it says a lot about that human. I have found myself very trepidations about how to use it. Also, my students want to Facebook me all the time, and I don’t wanna do that with any of my students, mostly because they’re middle-schoolers and that would be weird. And because, with that kind of power dynamics, and me being the grownup, I can say I don’t do that with students. It’s all tricky and weird. A minefield.

DJ: I’m wondering when you were in college, what did you wanna do? Did you see yourself doing this?

AD: No. I have a bachelor’s degree in environmental science. I entered college thinking that I wanted to be physics major and a doctor. A couple years in, I got a work-study job at the theatre because they were looking for someone to sew and I could sew. I grew up sewing my own clothes. So I got a job as a student tech person, doing costume stuff for them and while I was there, discovered I was passionate about it. More than just theatre - the actual storytelling aspect of it, what you can do with stories and live humans in a room together. I wanted to switch majors and my dad said “No way!” So I instead figured out how to move from physics into something softer, environmental education. I stayed at University of Chicago and did a year long masters program in theatre and Spanish. When I came out of school, I knew I wanted to do something in theatre. I think I wanted to be just a straight up director of plays. But after a couple of years I realized that even though I loved it, the leadership aspect was something I enjoyed more. I directed a few plays a years and started to focus more on leading an organization.

I came out of school, waitressed for a long time, then got a job in social work. From that I knew I wanted to be a teacher and work with adolescents. I was able to talk my way into that. I got a lot of skills for teaching and working with that age group via that job, even though the social work wasn’t something I was really in for the long haul.

DJ: But it was a good experience?

AD: A good experience, and components of it fit into my larger picture. So if you’re a writer and you wanna be a writer, right? Then what are the jobs that have writing as an aspect? So you can be developing some of those skills. But the job might actually be assisting an executive director of something. But you’re gonna be writing all of their correspondence, writing all of their whatever. Being able to write makes you more a qualified candidate than someone who can’t. It also gives you network possibilities and you can learn admin skills. It’s all about figuring out what is the kaleidoscope of this position, and what parts of the kaleidoscope serve my long-term goals? And what are things that I don’t mind doings while I find something else? No one has ever graduated college and made it as a novelist the next year. Nobody has ever finished college and made it as an artistic director the next year. It just doesn’t happen. I think most of the folks you talk to will tell you that it probably takes at least a decade. I would say that I didn’t actually make a living doing what I love to do until probably 32. I’m 35 now. And “making a living” is
still a scant term. Technically I was below poverty level but I made enough, doing everything I wanted to do, that I could still pay my rent. It’s not a short game. It’s a long game.

DJ: You mentioned before that you used to write. Have you considered getting back into it when you have free time?

AD: Writing’s not really my passion. My passion is telling stories to live audiences, rather it’s 2nd Story or more traditional theatre. There’s something about the live experience and people sharing air in a room that I’m really passionate about. I still do a lot of writing, just not stories. I write grants, emails, etc.

DJ: So you do need writing skills to do your job?

AD: Oh my god, yes! In fact there are multiple things I was hired for in my lifetime because I’m a good writer. And I can tell you, as someone who gets job applications and résumés all the time, the folks who write poorly I really don’t even bother with because the work that we do is so based in writing and communication that if it’s not demonstrated, it’s hard to see that person as a viable candidate. And there are lots of people that interview really well and they’re go-getters but they don’t have writing skills and it hurts them.

DJ: That leads into my next questions, actually. What’s your tip of advice for a student about putting together a good résumé? What would make you put down a résumé without looking at it?

AD: Spelling and grammatical errors, for sure. And it’s impossible to have a single résumé that’s functional for everything. I haven’t had to give anyone a résumé in a long time but when I used to send out résumés, I’d have four or five different versions. I had my teaching version, my director version, my director-theatre version. It’s helpful to know what you’re sending the résumé out for and crafting it to that specific purpose. Something I’ve found helpful is to have a master résumé, which is eight to ten pages long and has everything you’ve ever done. Then condense the master résumé specifically to what you’re trying to do. I’m not saying to recreate it, just tailor it to that specific thing. If you’re looking for a position as an assistant to a writer versus an editing position, there are different things you’d want to stress.

For me, being able to read a cover letter and a résumé and know that this person is applying because of who we are, and not just because they need a job; it makes a difference. They know who we are and the letter is addressed to the right person. When I get things addressed to the wrong person, obviously that writer wasn’t paying attention. And maybe it’s just because I’m super anal-retentive, but things like improper formatting make a résumé look like the person hasn’t taken the proper time. And unfortunately, the harder it gets to find work, the more important those little tiny details are. If your résumé and cover letter are the first things that people see, you want them to represent you. Font choice. Paper choice. All sorts of things can make someone stand out, especially in a competitive field. Also it’s important to know the difference between being proactive and being annoying. Following up is good, but no one wants to work with someone who’s a pain in the ass. It can be hard to know the difference! If you send something in on Friday and follow-up Monday, that’s a little excessive. But if you send something on Friday and haven’t heard back for three weeks, that’s different.
DJ: One last question. It seems like you enjoy what you do now. You mentioned it being a process, you getting to where you are. Were there any moments where you got discouraged?

AD: Oh my god, yes! I feel incredibly blessed to be a human that loves what they do. I don’t think it’s common. I think 75% of people hate what they do. I really approach it like a blessing. I’m lucky to make a living doing something I love. There were certainly lots of times where I was like “what the fuck? I’m done! I can’t do this anymore!” I even sometimes now have that. I’m smart enough that I could have chosen a different path and theoretically I’d be much more comfortable.

DJ: But it wouldn’t be what you really enjoy doing?

AD: Exactly. When I’m looking at my checkbook and trying to figure out what to do with the money I have, it’s ok that I’m not gonna get this thing I want because I’m getting pleasure from the work that I really enjoy. If I’ve decided that I need to do work that I’m passionate about, that’s more important than anything else. It’s about setting priorities. I also think it’s perfectly fine to decide at some point that you’d rather be comfortable than to do something you love. My husband is an example of that. He’s also a theatre maker, but he makes a living doing something else. He made the decision that it was more important to have a steady income, than to find his life’s passion. Completely valid choice. It depends on your priorities and your stamina. I think it’s also being able to find the enjoyable parts of work but – even the job I have now – parts of it are so boring. Spreadsheets, phone calls, stuff I couldn’t care less about! Even with the stuff you love, there will be parts of it that you hate. That’s just part of being an adult. When you’re famous, then you can hire someone do that stuff for you, right? But until we’re famous, we have to do our own spreadsheets.