Living the Freelance Life

It's not an easy road, but the work is there. Who gets it, and why? Trade secrets from the pros.

Say you're playing a freelance gig and the conductor calls you out, even though you know you're playing exactly as directed. What do you do? Go into a long explanation of why you're right, impressing him with your phenomenal word-for-word memory of his earlier instructions?

Not even. According to John Miller, BM '68 (double bass), who has enjoyed a thirty-year career in New York as both a thriving freelance musician and as one of the most sought-after music contractors in the business. “Don’t protect your position; correct your position.”

Instead, say “How would you like it?”

That’s just one pearl students gleaned at a highly entertaining and informative Arts Enterprise-sponsored presentation by Miller and his wife Constance Barron, BM ‘69, MM ’74 (voice).

Of course the busiest freelancers know how to play their instrument. But they know something else as well. Show up on time. Come prepared. Dress appropriately. Play the music the way they want it for that particular situation. “Your goal,” Miller says, “is for all the musicians there to be so impressed with your performance that they will hire you again AND recommend you for other gigs.”

Barron, who has made a name in television, theatre, and film—and, incidentally, taught the earliest classes in musical theatre at Michigan—spoke to the actors in the group. One tidbit? Before going to an audition for a commercial, set up a camcorder, on a stool, in your kitchen. Learn the copy and deliver it to the camera until you’ve got what you want.

“This is where all the nervous tics show up,” she says, “and we all have them. The way your voice rises when you’re nervous. The awkward way you sit. Looking in the wrong direction. You’ll also find out how little you have to do for the camera versus the stage.”

“We have to look at ourselves objectively,” Barron says. “What are my strengths? Who’s out there doing what I want to do? Do I have that look? Do I have that ability? What’s my type? To be ‘typed out’ is not necessarily a bad thing.”

The same is true of musicians. “Look at the players who are getting all the work,” Miller says. “Try to learn what it is he’s doing that you’re not. Is he a better sight reader? Does she have a better sound? Does he have a better attitude? Why is everyone talking about this player? Where am I weak? Work on that. Who are the best teachers? Who do I take lessons from?”

Both Miller and Barron, who met at Michigan in a MUSKET production—she as Maria in West Side Story, he as a player in the pit—stress accepting every possible assignment to build up a body of work.

“We musicians don’t have agents,” Miller says. “We have each other. There are a lot of players in New York who are better than I am, but don’t seem to get as much work as I do. Ask yourself what you can do, right here, starting today. Accept all the offers. The more versatile you are, the more marketable you are. If you can double up on saxophone and clarinet, do so, and say that in your resume. But you need to be out there playing, all the time.”

After all those years supporting other musicians, Miller just released his first CD, Stage Door Johnny, a compilation of Broadway standards. “Johnny takes a boogaloo down Broadway in this impressive re-imagining of the classics” says Paul Shaffer of Late Night with Letterman. “I never thought show tunes could sound so fresh, new, and invigorating!” And who, after all these years, is the CD dedicated to? His Maria ... Connie, of course!