

BOOK REVIEW

## *The Entrepreneurial Artist: Lessons from Highly Successful Creatives by Aaron Dworkin*

Jessica Voigt  
*Baylor University*

**ABSTRACT:** Jessica Voigt reviews Aaron Dworkin's book *The Entrepreneurial Artist: Lessons from Highly Successful Creatives* published in 2019 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. DOI: 10.34053/artivate.10.1.147

Aaron Dworkin's *The Entrepreneurial Artist* shares case studies of thirteen (fourteen if you include Dworkin himself) artists who propelled their work to incredible heights. Aptly subtitled "lessons from highly successful creatives," this book serves as an enjoyable, elegantly written collection of stories, designed to inform and inspire its readers.

In his introduction, Dworkin shares the history around the formation of his renowned Sphinx organization. From the outset, Sphinx has existed to "motivate young musicians of color" (p. xii), evolving over the last twenty-four years from its origins as an annual concerto competition to become "the social justice organization dedicated to transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts" (Sphinx website). Sphinx now sits as one of the world's leading organizations on diversity and inclusion within the arts, having reached "more than 100,000 students and artists as well as live and broadcast audiences of more than two million annually."<sup>1</sup>

Through his own tale of determination, risk, and reward, Dworkin sets the tone for a book

---

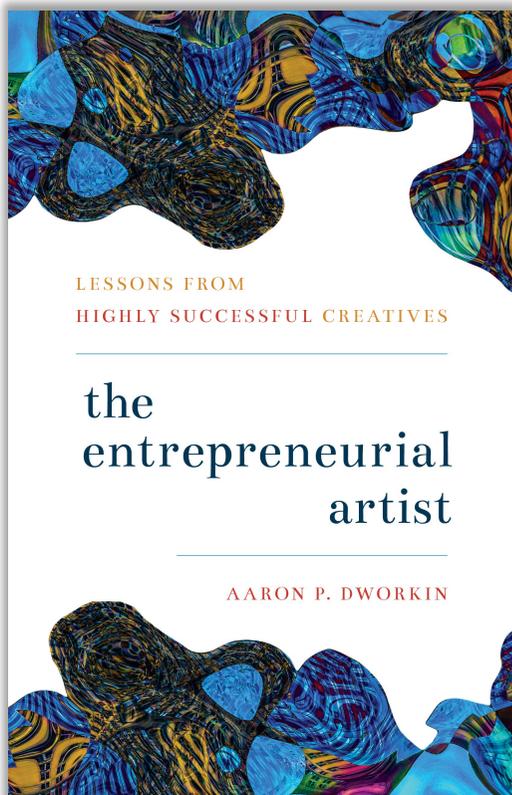
<sup>1</sup> "About the Sphinx Organization." *Sphinx*, <https://www.sphinxmusic.org/our-history/>. Accessed 3 February 2021.

that not only speaks of the steps an artist must take to reach their own goals but also lets readers peek behind the curtain. By sharing his remarkable journey at the very opening of *The Entrepreneurial Artist*, Dworkin immediately demonstrates that the addition of entrepreneurship to the arts is not only valuable but serves to elevate an artist's work and mission on a massive scale. In one illuminating example, Dworkin—speaking of his early fundraising efforts—shares that he “would spend late nights at the computer lab” (p. xiii) in order to print and send fundraising requests. Demonstrating his relentless passion to “make a difference no matter what” (p. xiii), Dworkin's bootstrapping, entrepreneurial spirit and his determination to “build [his] own network of fund-raisers” (p. xiii) resulted in a major contribution of ten thousand dollars to the Sphinx Competition.”

To further evaluate the idea that applying entrepreneurial thinking to the arts can be beneficial and answer the question of what truly separates dreamers from doers, *The Entrepreneurial Artist* then offers thirteen truly fascinating and inspiring stories of artists who, in Dworkin's opinion, “exemplify the term creative entrepreneur” (p. xix). He identifies that all of these artists are “exceptional at three specific things: Ideation, Organization and Communication” (p. xix), and further, that they are some of his own heroes. The artists featured, eleven of whom Dworkin interviewed personally, include: Jeff Daniels, Bill T. Jones, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Rachel Barton Pine, Damien Sneed, Lee Greenwood, Marin Alsop, Damon Gupton, Chip Davis, Midori, Wynton Marsalis, William Shakespeare, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Quite often, when we think of the artists we admire, we have a vision of that person at their pinnacle. We see them through a lens showcasing their achievements, their highest accolades and all of their greatest successes. While an inspiring vision, if we only seek to view artists in those moments, we fail to see the twists and turns, the unexpected challenges, and the creative problem solving that they have faced in pursuit of their success: the entrepreneurial side of the artist.

These steps along the journey are often the most valuable lessons we can glean from an artist's story, and it is in this realm that *The Entrepreneurial Artist* truly shines. Serving as both historian and arts-entrepreneurship scholar, Dworkin masterfully tells the stories of each



featured artist's rise—highlighting moments in time in which an individual has used a new skill or overcame a new obstacle—which provides the reader the opportunity to understand how and why they became who we see today.

Not only does Dworkin share remarkable stories of remarkable artists, he cultivates deep understanding for the ways in which each individual has created their own success. In the leading segment of each chapter, Dworkin contextualizes each artist's life, their trials and tribulations, their successes and failures. He then supplements this material with a short segment of “artist-entrepreneur takeaways” at the chapter's conclusion. This segment serves as a scholarly guide to further highlight entrepreneurial components that each of the featured artists developed and harnessed in their careers long before they knew who they would become: valuable insight for many young artist-entrepreneurs who may be in the early stages of their own careers.

One example of this insight is found in the chapter on Lin-Manuel Miranda. Dworkin turns the reader's focus to identifying the ways Miranda applied intentional ideation to his work *In the Heights* by being “actively open to feedback” (p. 52) and applying “discipline and rigor” (p. 52) to the development of his ideas. Through this discussion around Miranda's approach to his work on *In the Heights*, readers are able to identify how he embraced entrepreneurship in his artistic creation (ideation), to generate his own incredible successes.

In increasing numbers, artists are being taught to be entrepreneurial in their approach to their work. This is of course a wonderful thing, and *The Entrepreneurial Artist* can serve as a fantastic companion to supplement such training. Through its encouraging case stories and clearly outlined artist-entrepreneur takeaways—which include, among other skills, trusting oneself, being “relentless in your passion” (p. 130), developing determination, grit, and risk tolerance—an artist can find a plethora of examples of how to apply their training to cultivate success.

*The Entrepreneurial Artist* is no doubt a valuable addition to the library of any artist seeking to pursue their own unique career. Sharing stories of failure and of overcoming obstacles through grit and relentlessness, alongside victories and joys, *The Entrepreneurial Artist* not only asks “what truly separates dreamers from doers?” (p. xix), it guides readers toward some truly inspiring answers. The reader leaves knowing that success comes from a myriad of places, and that embracing entrepreneurship as artists can serve us in ways we can hardly even imagine.