

Getting Pizza, Getting Beer, Getting Produced Panel

Date: Sunday March 21 2010

Time: 1pm to 4pm. Pizza, beer and socializing from 4pm to 5pm.

Where: La Val's Subterranean, 1834 Euclid, Berkeley

These notes were graciously taken by Tracy Potter while the panel was in session. They have been slightly edited, but retain their "notes while listening" spirit. Many thanks to Tracy for providing these notes to the public.

Panelists:

Nathan Sanders

mostly ignored in the Bay Area, Nathan has had nearly one hundred productions of his play *The Sugar Bean Sisters*. How has he done it? By leveraging the enormous, under-appreciated network of community theatres. Come hear how he is actually making a living as a playwright from productions in places like Paducah Kentucky! His play *The Sugar Witch* opens at New Conservatory Theatre Center this month and plays through April 4.

Patricia Milton (Pat)

Patricia Milton is president of the Playwrights Center of San Francisco. She has had plays produced throughout the US, including plays co-written with Andrew Black. They use a systematic process of leveraging festivals and finding suitable theatres to which to submit to maximize success. Patricia has also had two commissions. Learn more from Pat about how she does it.

Peter Sinn Nachtrieb

leveraged a production of *Hunter Gatherers* by local theatre group Killing My Lobster into a career that includes having the most produced play in 2009/10 as hailed in the annual round-up in American Theatre Magazine. How did he do it?

William Bivins (Bill)

was the most locally produced playwright in 2009. With both self productions and productions from local companies, Bill has enjoyed a very productive year. How has his self productions lead to entrees into local theatres? How has he gotten noticed by local theatre companies?

Lee Brady

is a San Francisco playwright whose work been produced in various theaters across the country and across oceans. She has won San Francisco kudos for her musical, "Southern Lights," and for her regional comedy, "Home for the Wedding." Brady is a full time teacher of Creative Writing; she is an actor/director and a columnist at the Pacific Sun Newspaper. Lee's latest work, "Brady's Shorts," a collection of plays about love (and disappointment) was produced last June in Carmel.

Steve Lyons

is moderating the panel. He has run Playwrights Cafe for over 13 years. He has had several productions in the US and Europe, but he mostly opens rejection letters. Steve, a consummate complainer, will be happy to explain the many methods he has found that do not work at all for getting productions!

- degree in electrical engineering
- recommends joining a writers group to help “vet” work before producing it

Nathan Sanders:

<http://www.nathansanders.net/>

Plays:

- *Divine Fruit/Kundalini Rising*
- *The Sugar Bean Sisters*
- *The Sugar Witch*
- *Little By Little*
- *Sweet Jesus!*
- *Heart In the Sand*

Nathan went to NY to become an actor (“invaluable training” for becoming a playwright) spent some time strictly acting, then switched to playwright after a while; acting helped him learn how to be a playwright; Nathan makes his living as a playwright and screenwriter simultaneously; first play, *Sugar Bean Sisters*, premiered off Broadway in NY and it was “a dream turned nightmare”, he “wouldn’t wish the experience on anybody”; the show had a lot of great actors, access to a space for rehearsals (friend’s synagogue), he had an equity production, but he was 27 when it opened off-Broadway at WPA Theatre and one of the lead sisters was fired a week into previews, and he had no clue what he was in for, his only good review was from New York News Day (female critic), he couldn’t get it published, he created a children’s theater company and didn’t think he’d write again, he was able to get a new production of *Sugar Bean Sisters* in Florida (more appropriate audience than NY), took 10 years to get published (even after 15 productions and good reviews), hard to crack into publishing, don’t market Southern comedies to Northeast (not their sensibility)

Nathan: some community theaters are bigger than professional organizations, some of best productions of *Sugar Bean* were in community theater, he sent copies of good reviews to theaters all over the country (spent a lot of time

doing this); he says these theaters can't touch the new stuff (too edgy) and audiences won't want it ... *Sugar Bean Sisters* was a huge hit and other community theaters wanted it when they saw it worked in a community theater setting; he worked hard to prove it was a producible script in the right place; community theaters don't want anything that will turn off audience ... he says there are some amazing community theaters out there; now high schools and junior highs are doing his plays; those schools found out about his play through the Dramatic Publishing Catalogue (<http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/>); he says it's hard to get productions without being in a catalogue ... a small ad in a magazine for a couple issues helped a lot (! Missed the title of the publication); lowest royalties are \$65/performance (schools) and goes up depending on the production, professional theaters usually get a % of box office, community theaters are usually a flat rate

Teachers have a lot of power in American Theater; professional theaters are "locked up" in a lot of ways; some require agents, some only want to work with specific agents; "You have to get into Brown, you have to get into Yale, agents are sitting there waiting for students to graduate and then they snap them up."

Audience: most community theaters won't do unpublished work

Many of Nathan's productions all over the country are at community theaters.

Production going on now: *The Sugar Witch* at the New Conservatory Theater in SF (<http://www.nctcsf.org/>), predominantly LGBT, run March 6 – April 4 (Nathan likes this production of the play)

He doesn't do contests anymore ... he feels it's a waste of time when they already tended to know what they were going to use ... he only enters something if someone invites him to submit; he doesn't win contests or grants, he just goes to theaters directly and uses connections to get his work read by people.

Network through actors (they've helped more than directors) ... if a part is good enough, actors will fight to get it produced.

He approached all theaters that did *Steel Magnolias* to get his show produced. (Approach theaters that produce work similar to yours.)

If he has a role for an African American lead, he'll search for the top regional African American actors to get them to advocate for its production.

He's excited to see if his play with subtle gay themes can sneak into community theatre.

Turned down a production from a theater that originally produced his work ... amazing little theater, really amazing premiere, North Side Theater Company.

He turned down their production because they don't have enough money to produce the show the way it needs to be produced; no good to have miscast people do your work; he gives the original theater for *Sugar Bean Sisters* subsidiary rights (5% for five years of publishing ... he says this is generous) ... it's standard for original company to get a cut of world premiere's.

Pat

<http://www.patricia-milton.com/>

- *The Only Virgin in Jubilee County*
 - *A Hitch in Her Pants (publishing title)*
- *Real/Not Real*
- *Busybody*
- *Solving Sunflowers*
- *Driven*
- *Porn Yesterday*
- *Strange Bedfellows*
- *It's Murder, Mary!*
- *Not Without Our Women*

President of Playwright Center SF (<http://www.playwrightscentersf.org/>); majored in theater arts at SF State (became a drunk and dropped out to do something else), finished credits at NY university; she believes her education contributed "minorly" to her playwriting experience; her first production was written in high school and taken around in high schools around the Bay Area, she met collaborator Andrew Black in early 2000, they co-wrote first play, *Porn Yesterday*, a play as well as a marketing concept, entered in local contest (Drama Rama with Playwright's Center in SF, Fritz Blitz in San Diego), combo of luck and idiosyncrasy of when you send your play out (gay play was put up during gay pride in San Diego which helped get produced), it's worthwhile to follow-through on theaters that accept your short plays (build up relationship)

Important to target & know your audience, sent a query to all theaters that wanted to produce a similar play that got pulled out (! I missed part of this story), check the mission of the theater you're applying to – it's hard to get ethnic leading man in non-equity production (see Nathan's suggestion); think of theaters as businesses, don't throw out artistic vision, but be aware of what theaters are looking for

If the contest can produce your play, especially in the resume-building stage, then it's helpful to win contests, you want a resume for yourself as well as for your play, look at the contest to see if it offers a possible production, there are tiers for contests in terms of a cash prize, see if the contest wants a play like your plays; there are a lot of community theater contests

Peter Sinn Nachtrieb

<http://www.peternachtrieb.com/>

Plays:

- *BOB*
- *T.I.C. (Trenchcoat In Common)*
- *Boom*
- *Hunter Gatherers*
- *Colorado*
- *Meaningless*
- *Multiplex*

Killing My Lobster (<http://www.killingmylobster.com/>) produced *Hunter Gatherers* ... he turned that local production into a career ... he has the most produced play in 2009-10 season, has an MFA degree in playwriting from SF State, bachelors degree in theater from Brown; he built contacts from both schools, meeting teachers helped meet people in local community ... best part of program was the classes ... he liked the dedication of time to focus on writing, he took a lot from the teachers and other writers; he makes his living as a playwright (other panelists did not, Nathan also writes screenplays); the first thing produced after college was a self-produced story that he acted in and took to the Seattle Fringe Festival; he worked with Killing My Lobster and they did a one-act he did in grad school, did some plays with Playground (<http://www.playground-sf.org/>).

How did he leverage local production to turn into bigger things? *Hunter Gatherers* was his thesis play at SF State; Killing My Lobster agreed to do his play a year before the production opened, it was their first full-length play and they put a lot of care into it (assembled great cast and director), production was great and ignited that summer; the producers had some commercial interests and friends were producers who saw the show because they heard good reviews; then he started seeking representation through an agent; he sent agents reviews of the show with the script; he asked literary managers which agents they liked working with (heard from two); he went with Agent Bruce Ostler (small boutique theater agency); he cold-called literary managers (got a Variety review, national review), got a Chronicle review during the first week of its extension, started meeting people in other cities that he got referrals for

With *Boom*, he developed a local connection (artistic director was his old acting professor); script won a prize that allowed him to get introduced to more theater people (they let him give a thank you speech that helped him get seen)

Needed help with contract negotiations because his play was being optioned by a NY producer; three plays published by Dramatists Play Service (<http://www.dramatists.com/>)

He found agents to be really helpful and thoughtful ... “They pound their pavement and you pound your own. They can get in piles, and you can be in piles, and the more piles you can get in ...” (that was really the end of the sentence!)

Find advocates for your work ... like Facebook, build a network that you can share your work with.

Commercial productions take 40% for 10 years (this is a percent of the playwright’s royalties)

William Bivins

<http://www.williambivins.com/>

Plays:

- *The Position*
- *The Apotheosis of Pig Husbandry*
- *The Afterlife of the Mind*
- *Pulp Scripture*
- *Out from Under it*

Self-produces. Playwright with most locally produced plays in 2009-10 (BA in English then went to agricultural school for background in farming); Will Dunne dramatic writing workshop with Peter (<http://www.willdunne.com/>); first production (lots of short plays), first full-length was self-produced, self-producing was hellish while he was doing it (attending to all the details, like running a business ,it consumes your life), he was satisfied with having the ability to control all aspects (marketing, look of poster), self-producing was the only experience where he felt everything was done right, he oversold all the shows and won a bunch of awards through the SF Fringe, he now knows what it’s like to be a producer, so there’s a common language when talking with other producers, a lot of people he knows in the community are through Will Dunne’s workshop

Latest production was a commission that came from a contest ... 10 minute script ... rolling audience voting in a short play contest (“ShortLived”; <http://pianofight.com/>); short is run for two weekends ... like *Survivor*

He has a play in SF Sandbox series, Jon Tracy emailed him and said Pacific Rep was looking for scripts, just zipped off an old script and a week or two later won the contest without knowing he was submitting to a contest

Theatre Bay Area Playwright's Showcase in 2008
(<http://www.theatrebayarea.org/programs/showcase.jsp>)

80-90 submissions and accepted 12 playwrights ... kind of led to a production

Lee Brady

http://www.mpctheatreco.com/about_the_staff.htm

She's a theater playwriting critic and instructor at MPC Theatre Company (link above). She won the George R. Kirnoble award; education in playwriting varies ... was at SF State and wanted a fuller theatrical experience with actors and other members of community, benefitted more from festivals that were more like a "total theater experience"; playwriting MFA's are really hard to come by; first play produced was a regional comedy by Ross Valley Players (<http://rossvalleyplayers.com/>). She started in Ross and moved to Phoenix & SF, southern regional comedies were really popular at the time; got the production through networking and friends; look for a director who believes in your work; Andrea Gordon was very involved in her work and she did several of her plays; Andrea had a producing company and she put together a playwrights unit and asked for help with writing a children's play

Pacific Repertory Theatre (<http://www.pacrep.org/>) just started an annual play competition

Playwriting is about the Network and Timing

Community Theater – pretty much run by volunteers, no artistic director, might have president of board, no literary manager, huge network of theaters, American Association of Community Theaters (AACT.org – have a resource book with 500 theaters), a lot of men don't volunteer for community theater (they like plays with female characters)

Steve Lyons

Helps if contests have a finalists category.

Audience Questions

Steve: company in Portland called Artists Rep (<http://www.artistsrep.org/>), script located in Portland (highly recommend getting into Ashland Play Festival: <http://www.ashlandnewplays.org/>), Artists Rep never returned phone calls or emails, even after he won a playwriting award in NYC and got the Oregon Historical Society to offer to tie in educational programs with play if it can get produced; he eventually reached the artistic director with an evening call ... he was interested in the play and didn't know Steve had been trying to

contact him; moral: just because they don't respond doesn't mean they're not interested

Lynn: dealt with someone who claimed to be a publisher (more of an agent) who wanted to get more involved with community and college theaters

Nathan: Join the Dramatists Guild (<http://www.dramatistsguild.com/>)... check with business affairs office before signing contracts ... \$95 Associate membership and they give advice about contracts, he would eat soup for a few weeks to pay for membership if he needed to (they can warn members of theaters that screw playwrights and don't pay them, etc), theaters know they can't take advantage of guild members

Lynn: lawyer from Lawyers for the Arts (<http://www.calawyersforthearts.org/>)... \$30

Bill: pulls sample contracts from Dramatists Guild

Pat: contests have different timeframes ... set up a tickler to follow-up

- **Patrick Dooley at Shotgun** (<http://www.shotgunplayers.org>) open to new playwrights ... company in transition, will listen and will tell you honestly what they're interested in (very straight with playwrights)
- **Stagebridge** (<http://www.stagebridge.org/>) ... building a bridge between elders and young people ... also growing ... playwrighting group classes, acting classes
 - Their actors are improving
- **Black Repertory Theater** (<http://www.blackrepertorygroup.com/>)... also improving ... open to working with actors and playwrights
- Had two table-top readings and want it workshopped ... thoughts on college workshops
 - Steve felt they're closed
 - Pat offered a workshop through Diablo Valley College to workshop a musical (has a relationship through composer)
 - Ross Valley Players <http://www.rossvalleyplayers.com/> has RAW Festival for new plays by local playwrights.
 - City Lights Theater (<http://www.cltc.org/>) will take submissions by local playwrights
 - Play Café (<http://www.playcafe.org/>)
 - Berkeley Rep summer festival of staged readings (have to pay to be in the class)

- Can produce your own readings (Nathan)
 - Actors will do reading for free if they like the script
 - Slowly get work out there
 - Give your card to actors if you have scripts that might interest them
 - Don't charge for reading
 - Act like you're writing people's comments even if you're not
 - Always get one good idea from a reading
 - Feedback, building network
- Nathan was able to talk to board members to pressure a particular director to read his script (that director is now directing it)
 - Be persistent, patient, try not to go "too far" (doors may close)
 - Be careful about approaching board members
 - Good champions
- Good to get readings even if they're never produced
 - Helps your writing improve
- Relationship between director and playwright
 - Directors can't change the words in a play
 - Can suggest changes
 - Can't change stage directions
 - Directors don't often like having the playwrights around
 - Pat never had a bad experience with a director
 - Meet up front and talk about the rules of the relationship
 - Don't want to be high-maintenance and know what battles to fight
 - Bill had mostly good experiences with directors
 - A good director will give good notes: be open to that

- Nathan: if you don't have a good director
 - Don't let directors destroy your work
 - Writers take the heat for new plays
 - Would pull a production before letting a bad one go up
 - Follow your instincts
 - Talk to directors if you have a problem or think the director doesn't understand your work
- Pat has worked with musicians
 - Fantastic experience with partnership adding a third person to composer
 - Some collaborations go terribly wrong (end up in court)
- Karen: suggest getting a director before doing anything else if producing your own script?
 - Nathan directed own readings early on
 - Like to have a different person's eye
 - Makes your job easier, especially at talk-backs after reading
 - Looks funny if writer is the director of the reading
 - Want to hear it when it sounds great
 - Peter suggests getting a director to focus on text and control the situation
 - Especially a director who knows how to do workshops and work with new works
 - Bill will do cold reads if the draft is early
 - If play is further down the line, get a director
 - Quality of feedback can vary
 - He doesn't do feedback sessions
 - Asks people to email comments (get great feedback via email)

- Lee: invite actor/directors to readings to get their feedback and to help you out
- If 40 or older and can't go back to MFA, are there books/classes that could approximate MFA.
 - Over half of MFA students at SF State are over 40.
 - Many are part-time students who take up to 7 years.
 - Take master classes with notable teachers.
 - Will Dunne's book "The Dramatic Writer's Companion"
 - Be around other writers and do exercises
- Tony: Following steps of children's plays that have been produced.
 - Baker's Plays (<http://www.bakersplays.com>)
 - Huge demand for children's plays
- Jim Colgan (chairman of committee and is a lawyer): readings of new plays ... one time shot, part of season ticket holders package (Masquers Playhouse in Point Richmond: <http://www.masquers.org/>) ... 99 seat theater ... workshops ... five a year ... sit-down read (maybe music) ... 20-30 min talk-back afterwards ... will find director and actors
- Nathan: easier to get work done if it's one-person plays ... The Marsh (<http://www.themarsh.org/>) and PianoFight.com
- Bill: if you find a director first, the director can help find other team members
- \$100 to rent LaVal's for today