

NOTES ON SUBMITTING PLAYS TO CONTESTS AND THEATERS

Finding Opportunities

Most playwrights reference two annual directories for submission opportunities. The first is Dramatist Sourcebook published by Theatre Communications Group. (www.TCG.org). This directory may be purchased by anyone, not just TCG members. The second directory is the Dramatists Guild Resource Directory (www.DramatistsGuild.org). This directory is sent to all who join the Dramatists Guild. It is not for sale.

So, thousands of playwrights use these two directories. But thousands of wonderful submission opportunities are not in either of these directories. How do you find these lesser known theaters and contests?

Several directories and newsletters, such as Insight for Playwrights (www.InsightForPlaywrights.com), The Loop (www.garygarrison.com/loop_index.htm), and the opportunities section of the Playwrights Center (www.pwcenter.org/opportunities.php) list obscure playwright opportunities. The enormous website Playwriting Opportunities (www.playwritingopportunities.com) is not to be missed.

Should you actually score a premier for your play, you will find it difficult to get a second production without glowing reviews to show for yourself. Therefore, the theatre review section of newspapers and free weeklies (which are more likely to review smaller theater productions) is an excellent source of obscure theatres that are on the radar of the local media. Look for reviews of productions of lesser known playwrights.

Local umbrella groups such as the League of Chicago Theatres (www.ChicagoPlays.com) list their member theatres, both large and small. Check the website America Performs (www.AmericaPerforms.com) for a listing of many such groups nationwide. Also try checking the bottom of the home page of theatre companies for their membership in theatre umbrella organizations.

Local theatre award organizations list past winners. Look in the "awards" area of a theater's website to find these organizations. For example, in San Diego you might find theaters boasting of winning the "Patte Award." You can then follow that link to www.patteproductions.com to discover other San Diego theatres that won Patte Awards.

National umbrella organizations, such as the Network of Ensemble Theaters (www.EnsembleTheaters.net) or Theaters Against War (www.thawaction.org) list their member theatres.

A great source of submission opportunities is from peer-to-peer newsgroups such as The Binge List (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/playwrightbinge>). Yahoo lists over 300 playwrights groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>).

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Investigate the production history of plays that are similar to your play, paying special attention to the development and premier of the play. Likewise, study the career trajectory of playwrights who you feel may be similar to you. Where did they study, what contests and residencies did they enter? You may discover patterns - for example every playwright you admire had a Jerome fellowship and won the Jane Chambers play writing award. The playwright's directory doollee (www.doollee.com) provides information on playwrights, big and small.

Several organizations list "congratulations" for productions of member playwrights. Dramatists Guild Magazine (The Dramatist) lists new productions of member playwrights. Instead of just getting irritated that they are getting productions and you aren't, find the web site of the company doing the production and determine if they might be a good match for your play!

People in the know insist that the best way to get produced is to "develop a relationship with local theaters." Indeed, my first production of a full length play grew out of a relationship I developed with a director I met through a local play writing contest. Directors may be more approachable than theaters, which are overwhelmed with submissions. Attend small theatre productions of plays that are similar to yours and contact the director. Tell him or her that you admire their work. Praise is always a good starting point. Produce a local reading using professional actors and then ask your actors if there are theaters they have worked with that may be interested in your play.

Deciding Where to Submit

Given the thousands of theatres and contests that you could pursue, how do you determine which are worth your time, and worth the time of the person on the other end of your submission?

theaters

For theatres, I look at their current season and their production history. If they only produce well known plays and playwrights, I pass. Also, when sending out an unproduced play (which include most of my plays), if they list no world premier productions, I pass.

Third, if a theater has more than 250 seats, I hesitate to send to them. Most larger theatres cannot risk producing an unknown play and playwright. It isn't easy determining the seating capacity of a theater. Try going to the "about" section of their website, or go to the "tickets" where you may find a seating chart. Some theaters rent out their space, so the "rental" section of their web site will include their seating capacity.

If the theater clears these first three hurdles, then I go on to the next step, which is determining if the style of the plays they produce matches what I have. Finally, I look at their submission policy. If they require agent submission, I don't qualify. If no submission policy is listed, I send a query to the literary manager, if one is listed - or to the artistic director or (better yet) associate artistic director, who may be

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less busy. When I first started submitting, I made the mistake of thinking the “development director” was the person to pursue. The development director is the fund raiser for the company. Pursuing the development director will just get you a solicitation for donations in return.

Sometimes a literary manager is not listed, but a dramaturg is. In that case, usually the dramaturg acts in both capacities.

contests

Contests often result in a reading. If your play is still in the development stage (ie: you feel it needs rewrites), then a reading is reward enough.

But if you feel the play is ready for the stage, then you want to use contests as a stepping stone to production. Therefore, if the contest is sponsored by a theatre, I go back to the five points listed above to determine whether to submit to the contest. Are any of the contest winners produced by the theatre?

If the contest is not sponsored by a theatre, then your yardstick for determining whether or not to enter the contest is very different. For example, if the contest results in a reading, and you are still in the development phase, then the contest may be appropriate. If contest winners receive a reading, yet you are not seeking to further develop (rewrite) the play, then only submit to the contest if participating in the reading may create relationships that could translate into a production. Of course, placing in a contest helps build your resume, and looks nice in a cover letter. Investigate previous contest winners. Did the winners go on to successful play writing careers?

A few contests are so famous for advancing careers, such as the National Playwrights Conference at the O’Neill Center, Jerome Fellowship or Sundance Institute, that entering may be appropriate regardless of the prize.

In the event that you place in a contest, be sure to ask about the total number of entries, which helps with your resume. So you can say, for example, “Semifinalist (top 100 of 700 entries) 2009 National Playwrights Conference”

Rejection

The plight of the playwright is to be rejected. As you wander about the web, you will find that a small pool of plays are done by thousands of theatres. It is hard to enter that crowded pool.

Playwrights must steel themselves against rejection. A good day is when a rejection comes in that includes some personalized note with a kind word about the rejected play. If someone is rejecting an entire play, that means they spent two hours of their life reading the play. Such people deserve and need a thank-you note. The thank-you note is not the time to argue with the rejection but to praise them for taking the time to read your play. This is the arts. No one is paid enough. Thanks helps. (By-the-way, if you actually get produced and critics review the play,

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send them a note thanking them for taking the time to attend and write about your play, even if they rip it to shreds.)

Feedback

The worst rejection is when, a year later, you discover some major flaw in your play that you could have (should have) corrected prior to sending out the play. A theatre will not look at your play again once it has been rejected. Many contests have the same policy. Make sure you get it right the first time by joining a writing group, organizing a reading with audience feedback, or enticing friends to read the play and give you comments.

A short note on how to incorporate feedback from a staged reading: First, just hearing your play out loud is the best feedback. Often no one needs to tell you what does and does not work. You know from simply sitting in the audience and listening. After audience feedback, what do you do with all that information? How do you decide what, if anything, should change? My rule is simple. If two or more people say the same thing, I consider that very seriously. Or, if only one person raises a concern and I had that same concern, I likewise give that weight.

Getting A World Premiere

If a theatre expresses interest in a producing your play, great! Just be aware that the play gets only one world premiere production. From then on, it is damaged goods, as evidenced by all those theatres demanding that any play you send them must be unproduced. The only production harder to get than a first production is a second production.

Therefore, before agreeing to the production, ask if the theater has had reviews of previous productions. Find the reviews on the web or have the theater send you reviews. If your play loses its virginity without a review of its performance, no one will date it again.

A few other considerations before agreeing to a production include:

- What is the theater company's budget for your play?
- Are the actors and director paid? How much?
- Who will do the advertising and PR? What is the budget for advertising?
- What is the size of the house?
- How long is the run?

Some contests result in a production, but you soon discover that the production is for two weekends only. That is very little reward for having spent a year or more writing and marketing your play.

Keeping Track

The "Submitter" spreadsheet helps keep you organized as you submit multiple plays to hundreds of contests and theatres. "Submitter" comes pre-loaded with over five hundred opportunities. Go to www.PlayCafe.org/Playwrights/ and click on "Submission Organizer."

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This article copyright 2009 by Steve Lyons, whose plays have been produced in London, Edinburgh, New York City, San Diego, Boulder, Los Angeles, San Francisco and elsewhere. He founded Playwrights Cafe in 1998. salyons@PlayCafe.org