



Quarterly Newsletter of the International Centre for Women Playwrights

December 2006

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Greetings from the Editor

From Where I Sit

Dear Readers,

I hope everyone has had a wonderful New Year. Here in New Jersey we are still waiting for snow. Well, there's always February!

We're thrilled to offer you a cornucopia of delightful articles in this issue of SEASONS. Our adventurous columnists have stretched their playwriting muscles, and we will all benefit from hearing their experiences.

Geralyn Horton describes her time attending the ICWP retreat in 2006 (the third one, and I still haven't made it there!) Karin Diann Williams details her experiences self-producing her play *Surgery* in the Midtown International Theatre Festival. Hortense Gerardo muses on screenwriting and playwriting. Maureen Brady Johnson writes about her adventures in assembling an evening of short plays with young actors. EM Lewis discusses rewriting a script while involving actors in the process!

As always, feel free to contact us with article ideas, feedback, article ideas, suggestions, and article ideas. And did I mention we always welcome article ideas?

We wish you all the best of luck with your writing and submissions. Look for another issue when spring rolls around!

Rachel Rubin Ladutke
Editor, *Seasons*
Weehawken, New Jersey

December, 2006

Message from the President

As we move out of the hectic holiday season, I'm pleased to report that many of the scathingly brilliant ideas proposed by various board members are coming to fruition. Marie-Jeanne Pense has re-established Her-Rah, new name to come. International Women's Day Readings events so far include; Boston, USA (Geraldyn Horton), Arizona, USA (Marie-Jeanne Pense), Bucharest, Romania (Lucia Verona), New York, USA (Rachel Rubin Ladutke), Hamburg, Germany (Elena Kaufman), AND Kitchener, Canada, (Paddy-Gillard-Bentley & Jenni Munday who will be visiting from Australia). We welcome Tanja Pineda, the newest member of The Board of Trustees, as Director of Public Relations. We are lucky and happy to have her expertise.

Your President,
Paddy Gillard-Bentley

OSU ICWP RETREAT
by GL Horton

On the way to Ohio, tingling with anticipation—but not before a cancellation whereby I end up on a NYC shuttle leaving half an hour after my scheduled flight, connecting at LaGuardia for Columbus. That connection is Tight. The shuttle lands early, but the airport congestion is such that it sits on the runway for half an hour waiting to be cleared for the terminal, and I arrive at my flight gate right before takeoff. The maddening extra security precautions that are supposedly causing the delays don't seem to be in force—the clerks at the desks do not ask to see my ID. I show it anyway. On the other hand, the screener has me take it out of my wallet and holds it up for intense scrutiny while I wonder what she's looking at. Red hair, glasses?—I'm back to the haircut I wore 15 years ago when the picture was taken. It looked younger than I really looked when it was taken, and is now even less plausible when compared to my birth date—but the resemblance is pretty close: it could be a photo of my daughter, or younger sister. Or is the screener checking to see if I live in a "safe" zip code? Anyway, I'm waved aboard. Since I've rushed onto the plane, I never got to check out the passengers to see if any look like potential Women Playwrights, going where I'm going. There could be 3 on this flight—women coming from somewhere and scheduled for arrival at about the same time I was supposed to be flying in from Philadelphia on a different plane. Our supporter, mentor, and fan, Professor Alan Woods, sent an email saying he'd pick up 4 of us together about 5:30pm. The 50 seat plane is only about half full, and most of the passengers are men. The few women seem to be in the back, and I glance at them to see if any look like I think an ICWP sister-lister might look. I have a "suspect" or two. If we'd been waiting in the terminal, I might have walked right up to the woman and asked if she were headed to the Retreat—but it's not a graceful thing to do, scrunched into a bucket seat 30,000 feet in the air.

I brought material to work on while in the air, both catch-up stuff and notes and documents for the play or plays I'm planning to work on in Columbus. I've high hopes that the amazing inspiration of the OSU Retreat that has enabled me to crank out good stuff at an unprecedented rate whenever I'm near that sacred location will kick in even before I arrive. But there hasn't been much uninterrupted time. I expected to sit around and wait, but instead it's been bursts of activity catching up to the new travel arrangements. All I've done is read the opinion section of the Sunday Globe and half of the current issue of The Nation. We're ten minutes from ETA—but then we all wait in the plane circling LaGuardia for at least 45 minutes—was that figured in when they announced the ETA? I think I just heard the plane make that "ding" that indicates a change of altitude, though—so maybe we are really about to land....

At the Columbus baggage area I don't see Alan or anybody who looks as if they might be sent by Alan. I saw a uniformed man in the baggage area and asked advice: he asked if I want to have Professor Woods paged—which I did. Not long afterwards Alan came strolling in—a very welcome sight. As usual, he radiates beneficence. Alan said that he was trying to find out when and where Carolyn Gage's fight would arrive, and we set about doing some detective work. We used my computer to get to the

email with Carolyn's info: well, that's one good reason for lugging a laptop back and forth! Her flight was listed as at 6:20 pm, and, though it was barely 6pm, as "arrived". So we scrutinized the deplaning passengers at the gate and baggage area, trying to guess what Carolyn would look like based on the pictures on her web site—and we guessed right! On to check in at the OSU Tower dorm next to the university's theatre complex, the Drake Performance Center; and then, a wee bit late, to the 7pm reading of the work the other writers, earlier arrived, had accomplished Monday. No sooner had I settled into my chair when Vicky Cheatwood gave me a wonderful comic monologue to read: "Real Dallas Woman". I'm afraid I did it in Generic Southern instead of a Real Dallas accent: there wasn't time to think or ask for an example to imitate. Several familiar faces among the OSU volunteer actors who are serving as readers: mostly they are from the Senior Theatre project.

Very tired after the readings, but unable to resist the "pajama party" with The Girls. When we gather together at whatever age for a PJ party, we revert to being The Girls. Lots of catching up to do. I was delighted to have Mirlalini Kalmath as a roommate again—what wonderful talks we had last year!—and overjoyed to see Mags MacSeveny, one of the most inspirational people on the planet and definitely our Fearless Leader. I hadn't seen her since visiting her in Edinburgh about 6 years ago, but her voice and presence are so central to the ICWP list that I can't help but feel close to her. Vicky C. was even more of a fireball than at the previous retreat. She has an event scheduled for Thursday back in Texas, and is testing and refining the material to be read at that event under the pressure of that deadline. Carolyn Gage has a deadline, too. Not only is she doing a Workshop presentation of her historically-based mono dramas to the Listers group, but her play about an opera singer with body issues is the main public event of the ICWP Retreat program, with a script in hand performance Saturday night. Alan sent out an email to the ICWP mailing list re: Monday night's readings: "of work done today by Vicki Cheatwood, Mrinalini Kamath, and some previous work preparatory to work Margaret McSeveney would have written today if she hadn't had to spend much of the day trekking about getting documents in place! Volunteer performers on hand were terrific. Carolyn Gage joined us a bit late, since she sat in on a rehearsal of "Til the Fat Lady Sings, to be read on Saturday night. Geralyn Horton, Farzana Moon and Diane Rao also here, already writing or getting ready to! We're in full swing....."

Tuesday morning I got up, dressed, went to the Computer Lab and, with no "writer's block" at all, sat down and began turning my notes for the complicated play about Susanna Centlivre into speeches and scenes. I've been thinking about for this play for more than a dozen years! I read one play by this celebrated and successful woman writer early on, then began to read all her collected plays—3 volumes, not easily obtained—works by her friends and rivals, and some basic history of her era (approx. 1680-1720). The problem with any research project is—how much research is "enough"? At some point you just have to plunge in and write the thing! My plan—pour it out, listen to it being read and make notes, but Keep Going. If I can get a rough first act and a start on the second, I will be able to finish it—hopefully before the end of this year. I have files and journals full of sketches and notes for full length plays—but after pushing through with Boston's Brothers In Liberty at the 2005 ICWP

Retreat, I can now say that any script that I have managed to write more than half of is a script that I will complete! So, Onward! Got a salad from the Drake complex's student deli, continued writing till 4pm when there was a panel on Columbus Theatre. Here are my notes from the panel:

8/15: Panel on straight and GLBT theatre in Columbus. Third Columbus National Gay and Lesbian Theatre Festival in Columbus, September, 2006; Jon Putnam, Director: Puppet Queers; performer: Lori Cannon. Upcoming: G&LBT Festival, Actors' Theatre AD, does Shakes in the park.

CATCO: John Putnam Associate Artistic Director, CATCO does shorts fest. of 8-10 min plays based on a setting. 120 submissions last year: winners were mostly writers known to the company, including some fairly well known writers. Rewrites done during rehearsal, writers need to be present at some point. Last new main stage play was last fall, 2 years' work on that. The lit. dept. is buried in MS. The last produced script came with money to help support development and production—there was important local support for the subject matter, as well as key local people who believed in the writer's script. It did very well.

MadLabs: now gone. Did well when it had a liquor license and also could clear the set have a band play afterwards. Drew a non-theatre crowd with lively local-referenced stuff; exhausted the talent who had to do everything on a killer schedule to keep it happening.

Dee Shepherd, cofounder, Reality Theatre; Chris Brooks, performer. Reality Theatre: created own plays through improv. If a play happened to be perfect, they'd do it. Also, crazy shows like one that was simply an out loud reading of grant proposals.

New Venture: did some old, some new. Got a lot of submissions, had to reject any with large cast or difficult staging.

Beth Kattelman. Puppet Queers: dirty songs & stories; mostly just fun, although political.

Lori Cannon: performer/standup/writer. Equity actress—worked in ensemble doing 8 plays a year until she got her Equity card. Hasn't worked since— now does things like a 24 hour play production.

Columbus Arts papers have gone under, other papers have reduced coverage. Corporate funding doesn't want to be associated with controversial material. Small business is more supportive: will take out ads and donate in-kind stuff.

Suggestions for writers: write with a theme on a project for a community. Write industrial shows: people who need industrials are not swamped by writers submitting MS. New works do really look good on a grant proposal. If you can find an institution that gives grants, you can work through a theatre to put up work that qualifies for

funding. Local writer Brian Clark moved to Hawaii & was commissioned to write a whole series of plays based on Hawaiian history.

Bathhouse Cultural Center has been successful with a Festival of Independent Theatres: each gets a one hour slot, within which a show must get in, play, and get out. Now there's a second event, the Out of the Loop Festival. Columbus Center hosts community theatre on a rotating schedule.

Then out with writers to the Mall for dinner: probably a feast, certainly lots of good talk! Tuesday night we had readings, including 20 minutes of what I've written on my new play. People were only mildly confused, and some of the jokes got laughs! I consider this very encouraging. Can't wait to write more.

Wednesday was a big day for doing nothing but write! I skipped lunch and the 4 pm panel by *Howling At the Moon*—I know they are good, but I've seen them 2 years running and wanted to lock in my work pace. What a motivator it is to have actors ready to bring whatever you've written during the day to life that very evening! If I continue as I hope, I should finish the 1st act and get enough accomplished on the second to make it easy to keep writing once I'm home and subject to the distractions of daily life. Alan pictures took of a reading of a scene from the Centlivre play-in-progress. I should be the one standing on the right.... The ICWP days are beginning to blur...Writing, reading, staying up late in the dorm and talking, eating....Can this go on? I think today's the day our little ad hoc quartet got together and sang Jill and Carolyn's Golf song from their musical about Babe Dedrickson.

Hearing my scenes read I'm torn between wishing that I could have the same actors each session so that they would have some idea of who they were playing and what the play is about, and delight that new actors are able to pick up a handful of pages and find a character and get the laughs even if they are clueless as to what's gone on before.

Thanks to Alan Woods and his camera I have an objective view of this process.

Thursday I pushed on to the end of Act One. There will be time for writing tomorrow—Friday—, to sketch in some broad strokes for Act Two. But this night is the last chance to hear what's been written read. The actors have tomorrow off. The first night here I told the Ohio actors about my husband David Meyer's Podcast project, and how I was hoping that some of them would read one or more of my monologues into the Garage Band recorder I have on my laptop. David can edit their recording into a podcast. Several agreed, and I've been lugging my laptop and microphone around all week. But Carol Shelton is the only one who printed out a monologue from my StagePage web site and set aside some time to record it. It sounded good to me! I hope it comes out all right. David is the hardware guy. David usually handles the recording himself, and am nervous that I will click on the wrong toggle and vaporize what we've done. Robert Monaghan intends to do a monologue

too—a long one, from "The Prophet Freeman". But he wants to use his own computer Tools to do the recording and then send it to us as an MP3—as does the young man who has done some work at the university's radio station. Alan said he'd read for me too, but with all that he's doing for the ICWP group he hasn't had a spare moment. Looks like I'm supposed to do some long distance nagging when I get home.

The presentation this afternoon was on musicals. The same material as last year. I enjoyed hearing what was said and the examples the composer played, but like the production examples on Tues., I couldn't see any way to apply the experience of these artists to my own work.

I did manage to write quite a bit on Saturday, and to save all that I've written in various forms and on both laptop and thumb drive so there's no chance that I can "lose it between Columbus and home. (I once left the only copy of the first draft of a full length comedy on a train. When I couldn't recover it, I gave up on it. Nothing seemed funny after such an f-up.) The Big Event of Saturday was the evening presentation of Carolyn Gage's "Till the Fat Lady Sings". For a description of that, it's best to go to Alan's ICWP Retreat page—photos and details there. I was very much engaged by it—it touches close to home!—and quite vocal with my opinions. Carolyn is strong-minded enough that one can safely give her advice without worrying that she'll take it!

Wrote a little more by way of notes to myself on the Centlivre play on the laptop in my room, packed, then stayed up way too late at the post-show PJ party. How could I go to bed when I may not see some of these talented and lovable women again for years! It wasn't just shoptalk. The stories we told each other and the experiences we shared, the deep and full explorations of philosophy and religion and sexuality—these are treasures. In other circumstances I would have taken notes: I've never heard such a concentration of inspiring material! But I didn't write any of it down. These are writers. They "own" the experience they shared, and it will likely find its way into work that I may have the privilege of hearing in the future.

A few hours after going to bed I was up and on my way to the airport, Alan driving and Carolyn graciously heading out early in Alan's car because the later car which should in theory hold four women was too full of luggage to fit Carolyn and her stuff in too.

My flight left and met the next flight in Philly, which landed at Logan on time. I took the train to the Green Line without incident, and David picked me up at the Newton Highlands T stop. By that time I was too exhausted to even roll my suitcase up the ramp and lift it into the car: very glad my husband was there to help. We'd talked about going out to eat when I returned— of course by now there's no food in the house— but by this point I feel it is nap or die. I sleep, wake, greet relatives and pets, and sleep some more. It will probably be October or later before I get back to work on the Centlivre play. I have acting gigs scheduled, and some writing deadlines, too. But I'm not worried. I feel sure that when I do return to what I accomplished at the OSU retreat, the inspirational magic will continue and see me through.

Geralyn Horton

<http://glhorton.podomatic.com> - G.L.Horton's Stage Page Pod Cast

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PERFORMING *SURGERY*: A SELF-PRODUCING JOURNAL
by Karin Diann Williams

Last summer, my husband and I staged my full-length comedy *Surgery* in the Midtown International Theatre Festival. We made the decision to do this kind of on the spur of the moment...a film project had been delayed, we had a little extra money in the bank, both of us were feeling ready for an artistic challenge, and I missed producing theater—something I used to do full time as Producing Director of the Fritz in San Diego. Since moving to NYC five years ago, I've had several short plays and one-acts staged by OOB companies, but haven't done anything myself. At the MITF I discovered both rewards and challenges unique to the world's biggest, and maybe most expensive, theatre community. For anyone who's thinking of putting up a show in the MITF, NY Fringe, Fresh Fruit Festival, or a similar summer festival in New York, here's my best advice:

1) Plan ahead. Though festivals do have a selection process, they also need a lot of productions. We choose the MITF festival mostly by default, because the application deadlines for the Fringe and the HERE summer festivals had passed by the time we decided to apply. Application deadlines for most of the summer festivals come early in the year, February in most cases. If we do another festival next summer, most likely we will apply for the Fringe. MITF is less expensive, and arguably the MITF venue is much nicer than some of the Fringe stages, but the Fringe is a much higher profile event. We had several potential publicists turn us down when we asked them to do our publicity because they didn't think they could generate much press for an MITF show. I'm not saying this to discourage potential applicants to the MITF, just to urge potential producers to consider carefully their goals for the production, and which festival will best serve those goals. There are, of course, also artistic considerations. The Fringe has a reputation for staging edgier work. The MITF has focused more on musicals and family-friendly fare. Other festivals, like Fresh Fruit, focus on gay and lesbian work. A few respected companies like HERE and Dixon Place curate their festivals with a thematic idea or artistic style in mind. If producers plan ahead, they can apply to the festival or festivals that best meet their needs. Since I only applied to one festival, I have no idea how difficult it is to get in to any of the others. The MITF application stressed their desire to include serious, experienced producers as much as for good plays, and I imagine most of the other festivals have a similar perspective.

2) Have no illusions. NYC is one of the most expensive producing environments in the world. The city's many talented and dedicated arts organizations—large and small—are all struggling to pay the rent as a prerequisite to continuing to pursue their noble and valuable artistic missions. Staging a summer festival is a great way to keep the doors open in a season where many subscribers are out of town, audiences are distracted by outdoor activities and air-conditioning works sporadically. If you plan to produce in a summer festival, don't imagine that you are going to make any money—even break even. Most likely, you will lose a lot. Not only will you pay a substantial fee to participate, but you'll have to pony up for rehearsal space, on top of whatever production expenses and actor reimbursements you have. The MITF is kind enough

to make this clear to participants upfront. As long as you are aware of the financial reality of the situation, and aware that the festival producer won't shoulder much—if any—of the actual responsibility for producing your work, you'll be fine. Why would anyone want to enter into a contract like this?

3) Appreciate the joys of self-producing. You choose the play. You hire the director. You choose the cast. And you draw from the amazingly talented pool of dedicated professionals living in the NYC area. Artistically, I have never worked with a group that was more dedicated, experienced and professional. Our AEA Showcase production received literally hundreds of submissions from professional actors. The audition process was exhilarating and the actual casting decisions wrenching. It was an absolute joy to work on the script in rehearsals, and to receive the input of such a talented group. My script was improved immeasurably during the rehearsal and production process, and my producing acumen was definitely sharpened.

4) Be aware of the downside of the AEA showcase. As great as it is to work with professional actors, you can't ever lose sight of the fact that professional means just that. Most of the actors in our cast made a living from their art—and that meant almost any paid gig had to take precedence over our unpaid one. Our rehearsal schedule had to be changed and adjusted nearly every day because one of the actors got paid work, or had to audition for paid work. The AEA Showcase Code clearly spells out that AEA actors working for free must be allowed to absent themselves from rehearsals – and even performances—in order to pursue paid work, and our cast members definitely took this provision seriously, even to the extent of one cast member missing a performance when a film shoot he was on ran late (the director had to go on in his place, on book). Many times I found myself wishing nostalgically for my day in Southern California, where most of the actors—even the AEA members—have day jobs. Scheduling rehearsals was quite literally a nightmare, and I don't think we could have done it if I had a less flexible work schedule myself.

5) Don't underestimate the time commitment required. Casting—because of the sheer number of applicants—took twice as long as I anticipated. Rehearsals had to be added. Early in rehearsals, an actor had to be replaced (because he got a paying job that conflicted with our schedule) so more auditions and rehearsals had to be added. Because of the bizarre performance schedule assigned us by the festival, pick up rehearsals had to be added. Lots of calls had to be made, and emails sent, every day. And, as usual, props had to be found, and publicity materials prepared and stage crew recruited. Once again, it really helped to have a flexible day-job.

6) Get help. Stuart and I have our own small business, which afforded us both the money and flexible schedules necessary to mount this production. But—because of work and family commitments—we don't have a lot of time to spare. I wish we had gone into the MITF with at least one additional producer—someone to focus on production responsibilities while Stuart directed and I functioned as a playwright. Of course, one of the main reasons for self-producing is the distinct shortage of theater producers who are willing to dedicate themselves to facilitating the artistic work of playwrights and directors. Nevertheless, in the absence of a dedicated producer, it

doesn't hurt to recruit as many willing friends and family as possible. Whenever possible, delegate.

7) Make sure your script is ready. Thinking this full-length play would run as quickly as most of my scripts do, and perhaps lulled into complacency by a couple of past readings that breezed by pretty quickly, I informed the MITF that my play would run only 90 minutes. At the first table read-through with our cast, the play timed out at well over two hours. I immediately—painfully—cut thirty pages, hoping that would cut half an hour. And at the first full run-through the actors did off book, the play still timed out at two hours. One of the downsides of working in a festival is that you have shows on stage before—and after—your production, and not much time in between. After that first run-through, I spent one of the most agonizing nights of my writing life cutting another fifteen pages, and then endured one of the most agonizing rehearsals of my life the next day, handing out cuts that nearly all of the cast rebelled against, axing scenes and monologues they had worked on and loved performing. While I think overall my script is much better for all the work I was forced to do, I definitely should have had a better estimate of the running time before I choose this play.

8) Think simple. Even though our show scored a run in the largest MITF space—a basic, comfortable and functional 65-seat venue called the WorkShop Theater Mainstage, the stage space we had to work with was still fairly small. And my show featured a cast of 8, all on stage at the same time! While Stuart, my director, sailed over this hurdle with relative ease, we were similarly challenged by the lack of storage space for props and costumes backstage (one tiny storage box) and lack of time to set up and strike (15 minutes, tops.) We nearly went to war with the management over our only set pieces, eight folding chairs that ended up doubling as dressing-room chairs for the entire festival—that was the only way the MITF management would allow them backstage. We planned a bare-bones production, and still ended up carrying a large sack of props, a bag with programs and PR materials, and a laptop, back and forth to and from every performance ... the laptop because the CD player in our theater functioned so sporadically that we didn't feel confident playing our sound cues from a CD, and instead ran MP3s. While I didn't feel overburdened, I saw many of the other festival productions hauling huge boxes out of vans before every show. Keep in mind that fast-and-dirty tech is the hallmark of this kind of festival, where everything moves quickly, many productions run simultaneously in the same theatre building, and many plays are assigned to makeshift or out-of-the way venues. It's not the environment for anything technically ambitious, or plays with a cast of thousands.

9) Publicity will be a challenge. Besides the artistic satisfactions of staging a play I cared about, my primary objective for producing in the MITF was publicity—and while I am thrilled about the good PR I did receive, I had no idea going into the festival how hard I would have to work for it, or how much I would have to scale back my expectations. Despite hiring an independent publicist—which is also a major expense—my show only received two actual reviews. We got a couple of excellent preview articles, and many good listings. Our excellent graphic design and photos

were a big help. But, in the end, what we ended up with was one excellent press quote from a major publication ... one quote that, however much it may help me market my play, seems pretty expensive in retrospect. There are so many festivals and artistic events fighting for attention in the NYC media that it's very hard to make any kind of splash. This may or may not make a difference to anyone contemplating a production, but it's another important fact to be aware of.

10) Celebrate. One of the greatest things about my MITF experience was the incredible support and appreciation I received from friends and family. I've had many shorter pieces produced in the NYC area, but none were as well attended and supported by the community, both friends and strangers, theatre-people and non-theatre-people. Audiences take a fully-staged, full-length play more seriously than a 10-minute production or a reading. I enjoyed no end of praise from viewers who were impressed with the work itself, the professionalism of the staging, and the sheer accomplishment of achieving this kind of production Off Off Broadway. Come to think of it, I agree. Overall, I'm glad I choose to get my feet wet producing in a summer festival, but I'm also on the fence about doing it again. It's great to be part of a large event, to re-connect with old friends and to meet some of the artists involved in other productions. On the other hand, I think we might have had a better chance being reviewed by major publications as an independent production at another time of year. And, all things considered, I don't think it would have cost too much more money or been too much more work to simply rent a small space and handle the box office ourselves. Right now I'm so exhausted from Surgery that I don't want to think about producing something else for another three or four months...which, of course, contradicts own advice: plan ahead. I guess I'll have to think about it soon.

Karin Diann Williams
culpepperwilliams.com

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On Whores, Dogs, and a Good Dry Martini: Notes from a Novice Screenwriter and Playwright

By Hortense Gerardo

A recent article from the Sunday *New York Times* described the recent rift between the screenwriter, Guillermo Arriaga, and director, Alejandro González Iñárritu.¹ According to the article, the director banned Arriaga from attending the screening of their latest collaboration at this year's Cannes Film Festival because the screenwriter claimed credit for much of the success of their previous film, *21 Grams*. The author of the article pointed out that although the director's behavior made him look "petulant", the screenwriter was guilty of being "a vocal and remarkably insistent promoter of the importance of screenwriters." Their argument over who deserves more credit in the making of the film—any film: director versus screenwriter—seems so ridiculously hackneyed for two such talented players in the film industry to be engaged in, that the only obvious explanation for it having been played out in such a public way is that it was, in itself, a highly-sophisticated form of publicity for their film, entitled not-so-coincidentally, *Babel*.

As anyone interested in the film industry knows, the making of movies is primarily a business venture, and producers are the major powerbrokers over both directors and screenwriters. With the exception of a select few who have achieved the Triple Crown of film (written, produced and directed by), the last word in most aspects of the filmmaking process is in the hands of those who hold the purse strings. However, in the public eye, filmmaking is commonly seen to be the product of the artistic vision of the director. Yet even as a kid watching movies on the big screen in the days before multi-cineplexes, I thought of the screenwriter as the unsung hero of film. I can remember consciously thinking this the first time I learned that the Epstein brothers had written three different endings to *Casablanca* in the 1974 MGM film, *That's Entertainment*. Conversely, although the words of a playwright are rightfully viewed as sacrosanct, a healthy reminder of their mutability by an insightful director can infuse new life into a production. Both of these observations were hard but healthy lessons brought home to me during my recent experiences as a screenwriter and playwright.

Early this year I was told by a producer who had optioned one of my screenplays that the backers were courting a specific A-list actor to be in their film and that, although they liked my screenplay, said producer suggested that the point of view be changed with the famous actor in mind playing the male lead.² My original script was written from the point of view of the female lead and as any writer would know, accommodating this request entails far more than switching "she said" to "he said." However, I wanted to see the script go to film, so I proceeded to re-write the screenplay, telling the story from a different perspective. Some might argue that this was a kind of selling out, but I saw this as a challenge, the kind of assignment I might be given as a student in one of several writing courses I'd taken in the past. Perhaps if I had written a script which I'd researched for years and which had taken me a long time to write, I would feel differently, but this was a work of pure fiction, written as

an extended daydream while commuting on the subway. Consequently, re-write was just another writer's exercise, at least in this particular instance. Still, it struck me as either flattering or presumptuous that it was assumed I could make the necessary changes without compromising the essence of the story line. I learned to accept the idea that my words are disposable, for better and for worse.

By contrast, in May of this year, one of my short plays was selected for production in an evening featuring new works by students at a prestigious university (although admittedly, not one ordinarily associated with the performing arts.) The plays were directed by a faculty member who is also an esteemed playwright and director whose work I admire. I was discreetly told by the stage manager at the outset that after two or three rehearsals during which time the cast and crew were free to ask me anything they pleased about my play, the director preferred that the playwrights not be present until the production went onstage. To my delight, this injunction was lifted, in part because I was careful to honor the director's request to put in writing to him any observations or suggestions about the rehearsal process, rather than speaking directly to the actors.

In spite of these seemingly Draconian rules of conduct, the director was very mindful of my play and conscientious about calling the actors to task when they wandered from the script. He made several editorial suggestions to the script, most of which genuinely improved it in some way. At one point however, a suggestion was made to cut a specific set of lines, which by now, trusting the director's instincts, I agreed to, until one of the actors pointed out a flaw in continuity in a text that was beginning to lose its coherence. Thankfully, the director never insisted on a change if I could make a cogent argument for keeping a particular passage intact, and the process made me more mindful of the way I had constructed the play in the first place. By the fifth rehearsal, I marveled at how everyone involved in the production seemed to know every nuance and symbolic meaning behind the script far more than I had consciously realized it in the first place. They rehearsed the play far longer than it took me to actually write it. This fact was a matter of no small wonder to me, and I was grateful for the insights of the director and for the dedication of the actors in knowing their characters, creating sub-texts and back-stories and truly embodying their roles.

I made several changes to the script of my play at the director's request, just as I did for the producer with respect to my screenplay. The main difference was that the changes made for the director of the play were for the improvement of the play for its own sake, which was to be shown to an audience for free at the university, whereas the changes made for the producer were to enable the film to be made, which according to the backers, required attracting an A-list actor, who would in turn attract a potentially international, paying audience. There's a common perception among writers that screenwriting is a kind of prostitution, presumably because the screenplay itself is seen as a "work for hire" giving the producers free reign to manipulate it as they see fit, as opposed to plays, which are viewed as a purely creative expression by the playwright. But from this writer's perspective, both screenplays and plays are informed by the writer's experience, which is never entirely hermetic. In the case of my screenplay, I accepted the challenge of the re-write because it forced me to write

outside of my usual comfort zone. The result is a more fully realized screenplay, and the producer and director concur. Murray Schisgal wrote, “for a playwright, engaging in the practice of love is a means of earning a livelihood. In that respect alone, he’s a whore. The more freely we’re able to express our feelings of love, the less significant our experience of it.”³ However you choose to express it, getting your hands dirty is one of the vocational hazards of engaging in the act of visceral writing.

Arriaga argues for the importance of screenwriters because, “People remember the films for the stories.” This would seem like a valid argument if it can be assumed that the screenplay is the pure product of the artist’s vision. More often, however, a screenplay is filtered through the realities of the studio system. With luck and good instincts, those realities converge to give birth to a work of art.

In the case of the playwright, although the play itself is presumed to be a work of art from the start, too often these works end up never seeing the stage or are so poorly funded that compromises end up having to be made to the artist’s original vision. The playwright, José Rivera, invokes us to write, “in all of your plays...at least one impossible thing”⁴ But that “impossible thing” is often the difference between a play that will get produced, and one that will not. This, too, was a lesson I learned from the director, who did NOT choose one of the student’s plays precisely because, although well written, it had technical elements in it that were too problematic to stage.

Ultimately, screenwriting and playwriting are implicitly collaborative acts. Arriaga revealed to Kevin Conroy Scott in an interview that his usual modus operandi was to undertake ten drafts of a screenplay before considering it his first draft, and that he regretted showing the actual first draft to Iñárritu. Iñárritu’s response was to respond that “looking back, that was the best thing that could’ve happened. From that point forward, I was more aware of everything.”⁵ However, this argument only serves to confirm what the director of my play said to me, when all was said and done, the “lively discussions” over script changes were finished and the play had gone up smoothly. In a post-mortem discussion, speaking as a mentor in playwriting, rather than as a director, he said to me with a wry smile, “Directors are like dogs: they like to piss over everything to make it their own.”

So what’s a struggling writer to do but to write: whether the words end up on stage or on film is ultimately irrelevant. Again quoting from Schisgal, “There is one thing I know that probably very few playwrights know: the joy is in the work, the writing. The rest is a dry Beefeater martini with a twist of lemon at five o’clock in the afternoon.”⁶ If you’re lucky, your work manages to find an audience. If you’re even luckier, someone will pay you for it. But the ultimate bit of luck is to find someone who is actually willing to commit your words to a bit of unused real estate in brain space, or to let them linger in their mind’s eye, or (ah, success!) maybe rumble about in a jangled sound byte that sits in their craw. “Tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wish’d,” to quote someone who was fairly good at it.

Footnotes

1 Rafferty, Terrence 2006 “Now Playing: Auteur vs. Auteur,” *The New York Times*, Sunday October 22, 2006, p. AR 13.

2 It should be noted that this suggestion was made without any threat to my involvement in the project, nor was there any increase in pay promised in exchange for the changes made to the script. The re-write was suggested as a way to increase the likelihood of signing on the A-list actor to the project, which would then likely increase the overall production values for the film.

3 Schisgal, Murray “Confessions: A Playwright Confesses” IN *The Dramatist*. Spring 2006: p. 33.

4 Rivera, José 2003, “36 Assumptions About Writing Plays” IN *References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot and Other Plays*, TCG Books.

5 Kevin Conroy Scott 2003, “Don’t Be Afraid of Death” IN *21 Grams*. London: Faber and Faber Limited. p. xxvi.

6 Op.cit.

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Theatre on the Move: Switching Venues, Opening Minds

By Maureen Brady Johnson

Over summer break, I ran into a few of my students who had moved on to study theatre in college. One student dropped by to fill me in on what he had done during his first semester, mentioning a creative approach taken with one particular production. The audience moved around a building to see the scenes in a play. New room, new scene. The entire building was the venue for the show. It sounded very exciting and reminded me of the way carts traveled from city to city in medieval times, circling around and presenting plays to a town. The audience moved from wagon to wagon, viewing scenes from the Bible or from the life of Christ while the performers stayed put. I wanted to start out the school year with something new and engaging, so I decided to adapt this idea for our opening year performances. I called it *Switch: A Moving Theatre Experience*.

The (length of the) play's the thing

Many years ago, when I first started teaching theatre, I had only one class. We began season with a one-act play performed at the end of the first quarter. That experience convinced me that making parents come out during for a half hour performance was just not enough. The following year, I had two theatre classes and we produced two one-act plays for an hour's worth of entertainment. The time length was better, but I couldn't help but feel we were coming up short. I was still searching for the right kind of show to put on for parents in those first several weeks of school.

This year I was confident I'd found it. After a letting those first quarter performances lapse for a long time, I would start them again with my now three-class strong department. Each class would do a thirty-minute production three times and have three different venues with the audience switching every thirty minutes. It would give my theatre students a sense of what it's like to do a play more than once an evening and the parents would get to see not only their own student's performance, but the performances of three different theatre classes as well. It would also give the parents an idea of how a student grows in theatre.

My early teaching experience had taught me the importance of a play's running time. I decided that for this project, running time was key. Each play had to run thirty minutes at the most. I chose excerpts from *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* for my Theatre One class. This is a great show that gives you the flexibility in cast size and choice of vignettes. For Theatre Two I chose a short one-act play called "Kaleidoscope," a futuristic Ray Bradbury play in which black costumes and hand-held flashlights can be used for a fantastic special effect. Advanced Theatre presented me with a unique challenge. I wanted to give them something more complex that would reflect their more sophisticated understanding of the art, so I chose three ten-minute plays by New York writer Robin Rice Lichtig. As it turned out, each play was a premier—a world, state, and regional premiere, something that rarely happens in high school.

By selecting short plays, I gauged that the evening would run about an hour and a half, which seemed like a reasonable length of time for parents and friends to spend watching theatre. The next thing I had to do was figure out the logistics.

The venues

I contacted the two music teachers in the classrooms on either side of our black box theatre. (All of the fine arts teachers have rooms in the same building.) I decided that it would be easier for the audience to move from one room to the next if they were all side-by-side. Also, the two music rooms had enough room to set up chairs to hold about thirty or forty people. I asked my fellow teachers if we could practice in their rooms a few times before our performances, scheduled to take place on the last day of the first quarter. They were very accommodating and extremely adaptable. They also had enough chairs in each room, ones they used for their music students and they offered to set them up the night of the performance. I ended up using their choir risers for set pieces, too.

The set up

I knew I'd have to keep the length of the plays to thirty minutes but I also had to consider absolute simplicity in costuming and set. Because I was doing a lot of things on my own (as I'm sure you often do), I tried to come up with the easiest, yet most attractive looking set and costumes possible. Theatre One used a set of brightly colored t-shirts and their own jeans for their costumes. Each Theatre Two student wore a black t-shirt and black pants and would add a vest, hat, or scarf to denote a simple costume change as the play progressed. Advanced Theatre had the privilege of going into the costume rooms and pulling the more intricate costumes for their plays.

The sets were very simple. I used what we had available: risers, black boxes, benches, step units, flowers, fake trees, and large platforms. The lighting in the two music rooms had to be "lights on." If you have the tech students and extra equipment and instruments, you could have a complex lighting set up in each of your rooms. I didn't have the resources to do anything extensive. Only the Advanced Theatre group would be doing any kind of lighting design since their plays would be performed in the black box. The casts I was directing the shows for Theatre One and Two. We had read-throughs and then I cast the shows. For the Advanced Theatre class, things were a bit different. Each play had two characters, simple sets and costume requirements. We read "Seducing Ramona," "Purity and the Prince," and "Life 101" aloud in class and the students decided which ones they wanted to work on. There were three groups of five students and I asked one student from each group to direct. The directors had two class periods in which to hold auditions and cast their plays. I acted as a consultant, asking the directors questions about their casting choices and giving my opinion when asked. We also discussed who was organized enough to be their assistant directors and stage managers. There was a lot of give and take and everyone walked away with a cast and crew and a good feeling about the shows. Since this was a brand new experience, both in performing and directing these steps helped solidify

the unusually high collaborative attitude that was absolutely necessary for this venture.

The rehearsals

Rehearsals for all the classes took about a month. Our class periods run forty minutes and they meet five times during a six-day cycle. I ran rehearsals for Theatre One and Two and was a producer/troubleshooter for the Advanced Theatre class. I chose music for each of the shows I was directing and the Advanced Theatre directors chose their music to open and close the shows and mask the scene changes from one ten-minute show to the next. Musical interludes proved to be very important to the evening of “Switch” because as one show was finishing, the audience from the other shows knew that when the music ended, it was time to MOVE. We decided to play “Switch” by Will Smith out in the hallway as the audience changed venues. I asked for a student from Theatre One and Two to run the music. During the rehearsal period, I met with the assistant directors to pull costumes for the Advanced Theatre plays. We also coordinated the posters and publicity for the shows.

The rehearsals for Theatre One and Two went smoothly. I had to negotiate for time in the music rooms to rehearse and there were the usual absences due to fall illnesses with some cast members. The two younger, more inexperienced, theatre groups learned to be highly flexible with their blocking in a venue that wasn’t designed to be a theatre. Attention was paid to pacing the shows because we had to keep them short. The Theatre Two group found that using the flashlights was challenging because batteries tend to run out of power at the most inopportune times. The Advanced Theatre group had to rehearse with intense attention to pacing and scene changes since there were three ten minute plays in the same theatre space.

The clock

When we started running the shows, it became very apparent that two of the shows were running short at twenty-five minutes each and the three ten-minute plays were running at a combined forty minutes! We discovered the set changes, even though minor and simple, were taking up too much time. So we called a meeting of the directors and told them they had to practice the set changes until they took one minute or less. By the end of one class period the directors had determined who was doing what and they had lopped eight minutes off their running time.

The performances

As the audience arrived on the night of the show, we funneled them into the venues so that each space had a full house. One student from each class gave a short explanation of how the evening would run: “Welcome to *Switch: A Moving Theatre Experience*. Tonight you will see performances by Theatre One, Theatre Two, and Advanced Theatre. When this show is over, please wait in your seats until you are given a signal to move to the next venue.” And so it began.

During the first performance, the two twenty-five minute shows ran short and the Advanced Theatre shows experienced a few set change glitches so there was a five-minute gap in the action. But the audience members were good sports about it and ended up sitting patiently until they got the cue to move to the next venue. As they heard the song “Switch” playing in the hallway, some of them even started to dance to the next venue! Students acted as guides for the audience members, making sure that each venue was full. The set changes went more smoothly between the ten-minute plays and the lag time between switching became less with each performance. At the end of the evening, the audience had seen three theatre classes perform and not a soul had dozed off.

The assessment

The students learned a lot about the challenges that come with doing the same show three times in one night and ways to keep each performance fresh. They remarked how different each audience reacted and how much the evening challenged them, especially when it came to keeping each play running on time.

As I look back on the experience, I realize that two ten-minute plays might have worked better than three. There would be more time to give the students some breathing room in case anything went wrong. I think I would have chosen a comedy instead of a serious drama for the Theatre Two class to do, keeping the tone of the evening consistent, light and fun.

The Theatre One class mentioned that they learned a lot from trying to keep the shows paced evenly and also found it difficult to perform three times during the evening. The Theatre Two class talked about how much fun each audience was, reacting in a wide variety of ways to their show. They mentioned that being adaptable was a key ingredient to performing the show three times. The Advanced Theatre group was the most energized after the performance. They tackled the difficulties with set changes and audience reactions with a sophistication I would expect an Advanced Theatre class to have. They were highly cooperative and their problem solving ability was the most developed.

In the future, I would also try to get a block of time to allow the groups to sit and look at each others shows, perhaps an after school or evening event just for the students. They all mentioned that they really wanted to see the other classes’ plays and I think the younger students would have benefited from seeing the older students in performance. Despite the fact that did not see each others’ performances, the excitement generated from this collaborative evening solidified a community feeling between the all of my theatre classes.

As an exciting way to begin a new year in theatre, Switch can’t be beat! Parents get an immediate idea of how their child is doing in class and the kind of growth in theatre skill that takes place as their student continues to take theatre classes. Such a moving theatre experience can also be a fertile subject for a discussion at parent-teacher conferences, which usually happen during the weeks following the first

quarter. “Switch” was mentioned over and over again by parents as a powerful audience experience. My conferences began with high praise for the students and their level of performance skills. The parents loved this imaginative evening of student theatre.

All in all, I felt that this new approach to performance allowed us to start the school year in a completely different way. I knew that we could build on this great wave of theatrical energy. We were electrified, so to speak, when we pulled a Switch.

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Catching the Moment: A Playwright Works with Actors to Develop a Play

By EM Lewis

My name is Ellen Lewis, and I am a playwright—originally from Oregon, but now working and writing in Los Angeles, California. I’ve been writing all my life, and writing plays for about three or four years now.

Mostly, writing is a solitary pursuit—and I don’t mind that, as I’m a fairly solitary person. I belong to a writing workshop (which I love), but even then, the writing is done alone, then brought to others on Saturday mornings for review and discussion. Writing for the theater, though, sometimes gives a lucky person the opportunity to come out and play with actors. The following is my account of a recent exploration of how a playwright can work to develop a play with actors as part of the process. It’s in five parts: The Project; Laying the Groundwork; Delving In; The Reading; and What I Learned.

1. The Project

About two years ago, give or take, I had an idea for a play. I knew I’d call it “Catch.” I knew it would be about an accountant named John, whose life had been shattered into pieces when something in his past came back to haunt him. I knew that time and space would need to be fractured in the play, to reflect the fragmentation of his life and thought processes. I knew I wanted to have nine actors in the play, because baseball was going to be a repeating leit motif, and there are nine players on a baseball field at a time. I knew who most of the characters would be. I knew a lot of things about the play.

What I didn’t know was how to write the play.

Most everything I’d written previously had been linear. When I first started playing with time and space, I didn’t go too wild—just had two or three plot lines running simultaneously, in different places and times, but still with everything moving forward, neat and tidy, toward a smash up at the end.

What I wanted to do with “Catch” was very different. I wanted past and present, and here and there, and who was telling the story, to twist like a prism. At the same time, I wanted the audience to emotionally connect with John, and go on a journey with him as he tried to gather up his broken pieces and move forward.

I worked on the play on my own for a bit. I tried taking it into one of my workshops, where you can bring in 7-10 pages at a time each week, but with the jumps in time and space that the play was taking, it was more confusing than helpful. I took it into another workshop, which was more grounded in language playwriting (which I hadn’t learned too much about before), and this was more helpful. The crazy exercises and explorations helped me look deeper into some of the characters while, at the same time, broadening my idea of what the play could do. Magic! Word play! Music! The

sky's the limit! By the time that workshop was finished, I had a 50-page draft of something I thought wanted to become a full-length play.

I'm not afraid of rewriting, but somehow, rewriting (or continuing to develop) this particular play was giving me difficulties. Between its non-linear structure and large cast of characters, it felt like I had to hold the whole story in my head to rewrite it, not inch through it step by step, then over and over again, like I'd usually rewritten my plays. I felt like a composer trying to write for an orchestra—attempting to keep all those instruments in play and moving effectively, simultaneously, in one direction. It wasn't working. I was daunted, and didn't know where or how to start. There was too much going on in my head, and I couldn't hear what I was doing. And then it occurred to me that maybe getting it out of my head was the key. Actors! Maybe what I needed was actors.

2. Laying the Groundwork

Two nice things about belonging to a theater company are having access to rehearsal space and having access to actors. I decided that the thing to do would be to find a group of good actors who were willing to come play with me on this. We would meet three or four times, with me rewriting between our meetings. At the end of the process, we could do a little reading, to see where we'd gotten with our work together.

I made up a casting wish-list, made up of members of the theater company I belong to—Moving Arts—and other actors who I have connected with over the last few years. (Some of the things I thought about when putting together my cast list: Are they good? Are they right for the part? Are they good to work with? Are they willing to play? Do I think they'll do it?) I sent the actors an e-mail describing the project, the process I wanted to use to explore the play, and the character I wanted each of them to be. They all said yes. I love actors! I had a cast. Dan Billet as John. Tom Kiesche as John's best friend, Pete. Christel Joy Johnson as John's wife, Ann. Peter James Smith as their son, George. Michael Shutt as the psychiatrist. Liz Harris as the District Attorney. Mary Boucher as the Docent. Tom Boyle as John's boss. Karen Anzoategui as a juror.

Now all I had to do was secure our little theater space to work in, and find a time that worked for all ten of us!

We began with three Saturday mornings in a row—from 9am to noon. I told them they should bring their own coffee, but I provided fresh bagels, cream cheese, grapes and bottled water each morning. I also brought the scripts—double sided, to save paper, but in 3-ring binders, to make them easier for the actors to work with. I am the queen of things done at the last minute, but I made myself finish my drafts and make my copies the night before, not the morning of, our rehearsals. You never know when something's going to go wrong, or take longer than it should.

I tried to always be at least half-an-hour early, to open up the theater, set out the chairs and food, and compose myself before we began. Nine people were putting themselves in my hands, and helping me with my play. I felt a strong responsibility toward them. Give them the best words you can. Respect their time and opinions and talent. Bring them bagels.

3. Delving In

Our first rehearsal was August 19, 2006. I wrote myself a little lesson plan for our first day, because I was nervous. I'd never done this before. I didn't know how to do this. I didn't want the actors to feel like I was wasting their time. For that matter, I didn't want to waste my time!

First, hand out the scripts. (Have extra highlighters and pencils available.)

Second, offer them bagels.

Third, do introductions. We spent about forty-five minutes on this step, and I think it was time well spent. I teach training classes as part of my day job, and have found that taking the time to have everyone introduce themselves and say where they are from and why they are there helps a group to bond and its members to understand that they are an important part of the group. If this was going to be a successful adventure, I felt like we had to know who was on our team.

Fourth, describe the goal and the plan. I told them that I had a 50-page play that I felt wanted to become a full-length play. I'd worked on it on my own, and in a workshop—but felt like at this point, working with a group of actors—hearing the piece, discussing and rewriting, then hearing it over again—would be helpful in bringing the play closer to its final form. I told them that during the rest of our time that day, we would read through the play in its entirety, then have a little break, then come back with questions and ideas. Then we would read the play again.

This was the basic structure of all our rehearsals. We only did introductions the first time, but the first fifteen to thirty minutes of each rehearsal was always spent handing out new scripts, grabbing bagels, talking, and waiting for any stragglers, if we needed to do that. Then we did a read-through. Took a break. Talked a bit. Then read it again. I encouraged them to e-mail me in between times if they had other thoughts or ideas about the play—and many of them did.

Hearing the play over and over again was remarkably helpful, all by itself. I'd had trouble keeping the piece in my head when I was on my own, but now I had voices and bodies and faces to go along with every character and scene. I was hearing the music of it. I brought a revised draft of the play every time we met, working in between our meetings to make the script better, stronger and more fully developed.

I believe that discussions of new works and works-in-progress should contain a mixture of saying what's working, and helpful, specific suggestions for what's not. Our discussions were wonderful. Actors are very smart people. They are also more

tuned into the characters you've created when they're playing those characters than anybody else in the universe will probably ever be. My actors asked questions about things that confused them, where they were in a scene, how long they'd known another character. They talked about things they liked—words and scenes. Things that made them laugh, or that they connected with. They told me when they didn't understand what their character was trying to do, or when they thought two characters needed a scene together, because we'd never seen how they interacted together, only heard about it. Sometimes they asked if they could try something. I tried to always say yes! This was the place and time for trying things. Sometimes they told stories from their own lives that illuminated something their character was dealing with. I tried to listen very carefully to all of their suggestions, but then listen to the play when I was rewriting, to make sure I didn't blow off course.

We met three Saturdays in a row, then took a month and a half off, then had another rehearsal. In that time, I went from a 50-page draft of the play to a 65-page draft—but I rewrote a whole lot of the fifty pages substantially, along with gaining fifteen more. The play still wasn't finished at the end of our process—but I had gained a whole lot of clarity about where it was going, and how it was going to get there through the process of working with these actors. I was pleased.

4. The Reading

To hear the play in a more formal setting and to mark the end of the process of working together with this group of actors on the play, I decided we should have a reading. Ceremony is important. Acknowledging hard work and kindness is important. And hearing a play in the dark, with stage lights on and an audience in the seats, is a very different experience from hearing it in a work environment.

We had the reading on October 25, 2006. Some of the actors brought friends and significant others, and I had several friends and fellow writers there as well. Not a big crowd, but... maybe fifteen or twenty people? Enough to feel like an Audience. My palms were sweating.

I love it when the lights go down. The actors committed one hundred percent to their roles, were present and real with one another, and I was able to hear my play. Still not complete, room yet to explore, but... closer! Much closer than I'd been before. And it was singing. There were places where I could hear it sing.

5. What I Learned

So... I ended up with more of a play than I'd had before I started. A wonderful gift! I also learned a few things about the process a playwright goes through working with actors.

One: Only undertake this process if you are either in an absolutely exploratory place in your development of an idea, or you have a very firm idea about where your play is going. Otherwise, I think it would be very easy to get lost, with all these other voices in the room with you.

Two: Be prepared and be organized. The actors you are working with are giving you their time—be respectful of them by not wasting that time. Know what you want to do with the hours you'll be spending together, tell them what you're going to do, then do that. Finish on time, even if it means you don't get to re-read your grand finale.

Three: Leave yourself more than a week in between work sessions, if you plan to do rewriting in between every session and also have a full-time day job. Two weeks would have been better, and less stressful.

Four: Make the process fun. Be positive. Listen to the people you've invited into the room with you. Don't argue with their criticism—listen to it, and try to understand where it comes from. If I do this again, I'd like to try to include more exercises and improvis for the actors, because I think they'd enjoy that, and it might be useful to me as well.

Five: Love your actors. Listen to your actors. Feed your actors. Thank your actors. They are the wonderful people who make our plays come to life.

Six: Be bold—in your storytelling, but also in your writing process. Don't be afraid to try a new way of working. You might find it inspiring! I certainly did. What's my next step with the play? Back to some solitary work again. Since the development process and reading, I've figured out some more of what the play needs—a new scene here, a little more character work there. But working alone is fun, too. And now—thanks to this process and these wonderful, talented, generous actors—I know what I need to do.

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