

# From Page to Stage

*Seeking Your Play Production*



by Liza Lentini

For most of us, there was a time in our lives when we believed without question that a fairy flew into our bedrooms while we slept, lifted a baby tooth from under our pillow, and replaced it with legal tenure. As grown-ups, that now seems preposterous for so many rational reasons. Firstly, how did these fairies know where we lived? The status of our dentistry? Our patterns of sleep (including deepest hours)? And, most importantly, what would a fairy want with our gross, dead teeth anyway?

Most of us recall such simplistic idealism with a laugh and a head shake—and perhaps even a slight tinge of envy. As adults we have an obligation to understand the way the world works, to abide by the order of humanity, to respect the rules of give and take, work and play, addition and subtraction. The envy is thoroughly justified, as we simply must remain fully grounded in the real world in an effort to accomplish our all-important big girl/big boy goals. How great it would be to bottle that child-like innocence. How, in these difficult, ever-challenging times, could one replicate the purest, most absurd, rose-colored hopefulness of a child?

Just write a play.

Heck, why limit yourself to one? Write two; write three. If you're hooked on the high of completion, write more. But at some point in your playwriting Post-coital afterglow, you will, I assure you, sit back and wonder, "When will someone produce these?" For the very (and I do mean very, very) lucky new writers, there's someone waiting in the wings for the final click of the "save" button. But for the rest of playwrights, an unexpected idealism rises

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which harkens back to our tooth fairy days: "When will someone want to sweep into my life and produce my play...and give me money for it?"

If you happen to be destined for a more realistic production path (that is, the "Why the heck is no one banging on my door?" path), there are things you need to do to assure your work will be artistically sound for opportunities you yourself will curate.

## FORMAT YOUR WORK

Looks are everything. Well, this is not altogether true—it's what's *inside* your play that counts. But if your play isn't properly formatted, it's easy to spot the amateur in the room. Adam Greenfield, literary manager at Playwrights Horizons, knows exactly what he likes to see when your script arrives on his desk, and it includes a cover letter, résumé and synopsis: "A professional-seeming play submission will come bound (your choice of clips or brads). Your cover letter should be brief, fitting onto one page. Avoid using the cover letter to sell your play; instead, it should inform us of the play's history to date, and any relevant background information. A separate page should include your bio or a playwriting résumé. A separate page from that should include a brief (about 200 words) synopsis of the play; don't give us a moment-to-moment account, but rather a back-of-the-book overview. The cover letter, résumé and synopsis pages should be clipped to the front of the script."

There are several play formatting programs out there, and I'm sure they do the job just fine; however, I'm a firm believer in the old-fashioned way, where every single centered name and tabbed stage direction is typed by hand. Reason being, it forces you to re-live every little word, which is an invaluable experience.

## READ IT, BABY

Whether you're putting on staged readings or developmental workshops, inviting audience feedback or not, the purpose is always to see what *works* and doesn't, which lines are clunkers, which character is under-played, which through-line doesn't make its way through. Those are the essential nuts and bolts, but even more important, it gives you a sense of what *you* want to say, what you want it to be, and how it all sounds out loud.

John Clinton Eisner is artistic director and co-founder of the Lark Play Development Center, a 15 year-old community of playwrights and artist collaborators committed to nurturing unheard voices and new ideas for the theater. "People are often unclear about what they mean when they speak of 'creative process' and 'play development,'" John says. "Both terms

are frequently used negatively: in the first case describing a rambling or undisciplined approach to making a work of art, and in the second case implying a course of action by which producers seek to smooth out a play's rough edges for production by requiring a writer to compromise his or her work. I think of these ideas quite differently."

For Clinton Eisner, it's about a set of carefully considered steps in an artist-driven process to connect the ideas in a play to a whole work capable of engaging the audience the playwright has in mind. Play development is also connected to a playwright in the driver's seat making the play the kind of experience she or he has envisioned. "Another metaphor I like is of stones as stepping places across a river," he says. "A simple idea can be leapt like a small stream, but an ambitious idea requires a plan of attack to bring the initial vision into a form which it can be realized on stage. The struggle in defining these terms is about power. Is the artist in charge of the work being created, and at what point does collaboration—a hallmark of the theater—enter the picture?"

## DATE YOUR DIRECTOR

This entire book could be devoted to accounts of the playwright/director relationship. With that, there would be stories of playwrights and their director holding hands, dancing through a field of daisies down the path of success. The other stories would tragically resemble a marriage of a few famed Tennessee Williams characters, adding in some modern-day curse words and maybe even a lawsuit. A friend of mine recently came to me and said, "I found a director for my play...he's, well...he's very good and well-known...but he seems to hate the script."

My friend is well-known and very good at what he does, too. And the story made me enraged. I told him your director should be someone who treats you with respect, someone you can have a give and take with. That first meeting (and maybe the second and third) should be like a date—not literally, of course. (That, I promise you, I do not advise!) Only in the sense that this is a person who should have your best interests at heart. It's up to you, however, to know what your best interests are. You have to come into that meeting knowing what you are willing to change about your script. What you want out of the process. And, just like dating, if it looks like you two will never have staying power, give him/her a polite sayonara and move onto the next.

Andrew Goffman, writer and solo performer, agrees: "I think all good directors would have no problem working on a trial basis at first before anyone has to commit to anything. It's like a new relationship—first you go out to dinner, then the movies, and if it's still working out you go to

the next level. Once that happens it gets more complicated. But if you are compatible, a lovely baby comes out that everybody loves—your show!"

## **STRAP YOUR BALONEY METER ON**

At my college graduation, Carl Sagan very unscientifically advised us to strap on our baloney meter, a guard against insincerity and all-around balderdash. It's important for life, yes, but imperative for playwrights. Playwriting is different from every other medium because, for better and for worse, the writer is drawing a great, big target on their back and asking to be stabbed. That's every single person who witnesses your work: actors, directors, technical folk, grandmas-who-don't-get-it. I always tell my students, if you don't want your audience to find you and offer their opinion, don't write plays. Do absolutely anything else. Because people can't help it, you're sitting right there and they want to talk to you about what they've just seen.

It's your job to keep your baloney meter—your filter—so tightly secured that anything that doesn't complement your intentions and your process gets a gracious nod before it's thrown straight out the window of your existence. This applies to professional critics, too. Leonard Jacobs, editor of *The Clyde Fitch Report* ([www.clydefitchreport.com](http://www.clydefitchreport.com)), has been a New York theater critic for 20 years, covering Broadway, Off Broadway and Off-Off. He knows plays—and playwrights—and says: "Just as playwrights must discern between constructive and unhelpful criticism from directors, producers or dramaturgs, it's about extracting the information that seems well-founded and discarding the rest. But playwrights should make an effort to enter into dialogue with critics more. It needn't be public. But they should attempt to keep channels of communication open."

Leonard's solution in a nutshell: peace, love, and understanding. And I agree.

## **CULL YOUR CONTACTS**

When I first got to New York City, I sat down with legendary Broadway producer Arthur Cantor and asked him how I could connect with other producers. He thought for a second, turned to me, and in the most matter-of-fact tone he gruffly pronounced, "Call them up!"

The creative side of playwriting is obvious, but the rest, I hate to say, is pure business. You can and should use all of your contacts to your best advantage. Support your fellow playwrights by going to their readings; create a community for yourself. Get to know their directors and find out who the new blood is.

If you think the world is small, the world of theater is infinitesimal. If you were interviewing for a regular old desk job, I'm guessing your best tactic for landing the position wouldn't include pitching fits and insulting people. The same goes for building your reputation in theater. You never know who knows who, and which intern is going to be the next star literary manager five years down the road. There is such a natural generosity in the theater, but it's also full of its own creative (and often difficult) animal species. Treat people wisely, and keep those that are good, smart, and talented close to home.

How do you meet people? Become a board member for an organization you really believe in, join an association or union, or, plainly, volunteer for your favorite theater company to be brought into the fold. As another theatrical Liza once proclaimed: "What good is sitting alone in your room?" E-mail is great, but allowing people to get to know you face-to-face and creating relationships is much, much better.

## FIND A HOME

A playwriting home, that is. This can be a dingy little theater, a bright, open room, a basement, or your living room. And a home isn't a home without a family of like-minded individuals who care about you—and your work, so that you both always have a place to flourish. Even if you've had the greatest success, inevitably, your play will close some day. What then? How do you stay playwriting-minded in a world that, let's face it, isn't encouraging you to flaunt your creative side. I say, design your days so that flaunting is a must.

As with most true homes, they're not always storybook. They're better! At least that's what I found when I started working with Manhattan Repertory Theatre in 2006. The space itself is small—but it turned out to be the perfect venue for me to take risks and make mistakes. The dynamic duo who run the company, artistic director Ken Wolf and director of productions Jennifer Pierro, actually encourage risk-taking. I'm very fortunate to have a theater that supports my wackier works, but in 2006, I also decided to make a home of a different nature, in the form of a children's theater charity. It's called Elephant Ensemble Theater ([www.elephanttheater.com](http://www.elephanttheater.com)), and we tow children's hospitals all around New York City bringing professional performances to sick kids. For me, it's a consistent reminder of why we perform—to change lives. I never wanted to write children's theater before our first tour, but when I see the effect our work has—light in front of us, on these kid's faces—it feels like home to me.

## HAVE HEART

When I was just a wee lass, I met Irish playwright Miriam Gallagher, who told me ever-so-wisely, "Playwriting is not for the faint-hearted." I remember those words, so many years later, every time I want to throw in the theatrical towel. This is the reason I know playwriting is a calling; we develop plays for so many years in hopes they get produced, often earning little or no money while doing so, yet making tremendous sacrifices of time and energy. The trick is to appreciate it for exactly what it is, a life of building your craft doing something you love. There are no guarantees in this playwriting life, only the promise that, if it truly is something you're meant to be doing, you won't give up, no matter what.

Before playwright Eric H. Weinberger was a Drama Desk and Lucille Lortel Award nominee, he was writing his first play. A full-fledged grown-up at the time, he believed the world of playwriting would be a much easier road than it really was. "I wrote my first play for a well-known and respected actress. It is a one-woman play. I thought with her talent and fame, it would be fairly easy to get produced. I was wrong. There are so many people attempting to get plays produced and not everyone wants to do one-person ones despite the lesser costs. I found it very hard to get producers to read this first play or to come to the multiple readings we did of it. But we persisted with doing readings and finally, two producers of a non-profit theatre came forward and said they wanted to do it. They gave us a very fine production. After that, we did it Off-Broadway, but raising the money for it was a nightmare! In the end, I had to use a lot of my own money to make it happen."

So: Is it worth it? If it's your passion, then it's worth it without question. Despite Weinberger's travails, he wouldn't have it any other way. "It is very tough in many respects, but I love it in spite of the negative parts and know I wouldn't be happy unless I'm doing it," he says. "I love creating something and then seeing it come to life. I love my characters even if they are flawed. I love being able to work with so many brilliant, talented, creative people. It keeps me feeling young and alive and fulfilled. I love it if I can make audiences laugh or be moved or inspired in some way. I love applause!"

If that's not a great curtain line, I don't know what is.