

## CHAPTER 2

# THE PRELIMINARIES

### Submission Policies

It is an honor for playwrights to have their work selected for Play Readings. Theatres, labs, and other organizations receive hundreds of submissions, and the selection process is arduous. New plays pass through numerous steps of evaluation before the final decisions. One hopes that every work enters the process with an equal chance of being chosen.

Decisions are informed by more than the specific quality of the plays. Producers and artistic directors consider their theatres' missions and audiences' tastes, as well as the need to assemble a varied roster of plays. Cast size and costly production elements often influence the choices. Festival coordinators specify the length of the play, and competitions may have other restrictions. In all cases, requirements and procedures should be clearly stated in the submission policies.

Playwrights need to read submission policies and follow the instructions carefully. They should only submit work that fits into the parameters. Writers should also review mission statements and production histories. While it is the producers' duty to generate comprehensive submission policies, it is the playwrights' responsibility to fully research any institution before submitting their work. If the submission policies are unclear, playwrights can request additional information.

### Where to Submit

When writers submit plays, they hope to receive an offer for a full production. That may happen, but rarely. More often, if the institution is interested in the work, developmental steps will precede production.

At certain theatres, plays will not be considered for full production without a Reading, even if the play has had multiple previous Readings. Writers may feel that the play has been read enough and nothing more can be gained. Playwrights who are not interested in a Reading should not submit the play where Readings are stipulated, just as actors who are only interested in principal roles should make their intentions clear when auditioning.

If the submission policy at any organization states that selected plays will receive a Reading, or if Readings are a component of that institution's programming, when a playwright submits the work, they have, in effect, agreed to a Reading. If they are contacted with an offer, they should accept.

When playwrights feel their work will not be well served by the limited rehearsal period of a standard Reading, they should explore other options. Most labs and, increasingly, many theatres do not require Readings. Some offer Workshops, commissions, and residencies. These venues are valuable alternatives for Reading-averse playwrights. Wisely, they leave the developmental approach to the writer.

## The Offer

Information provided with an initial offer for a Play Reading varies. Some institutions include comprehensive details along with the offer. Many make the offer and details follow. If playwrights have not already agreed to a Reading by submitting, as discussed above, they may need more information before they accept. Eager to have their work seen, writers often agree to a Play Reading, later discovering stipulations or conditions.

*Playwrights should know of any attachment or subsidiary rights. They should never give up subsidiary rights for anything less than a full professional production.*

Ralph Sevush, Esq., Executive Director/Business  
and Legal Affairs, Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.

Playwrights should not interrogate whoever makes the initial offer or ask premature questions. They need to be mindful in all communications with the producer of how competitive the selection process is. A Reading can provide opportunities for development, exposure, or production. But before the writer makes a commitment, certain information should be entirely clear.

### Before Accepting the Offer

- 1) Producers should inform playwrights of any type of attachment or restriction, such as an option, retainer, or right of first refusal.
- 2) The purpose and goal of the Reading should be identified. Institutions present Play Readings for a variety of reasons, and producers should be as forthright as possible about why they have chosen to present a Reading of this play and what they hope to accomplish.
- 3) Producers should specify the type of Reading they prefer and how much rehearsal time is offered. While Play Readings are most common, some producers prefer or require a Staged Reading or a Reading of a selection from the play. Some leave the decision to the playwright and director. Preferences or stipulations should be identified with the initial offer.

When an offer for a Reading comes from a professional or community theatre, most playwrights are eager to know the degree of interest in the play. While it is

appropriate for a playwright to ask, they cannot always expect an answer. For many producers, the Reading will determine the extent of their interest.

*At the Abingdon, we don't do development for development sake.  
Any play selected for a reading is a candidate for full production.  
But a reading is a date, not a marriage.*

Kim T. Sharp, Literary Manager, Abingdon Theatre

While many theatres that present Play Readings have interest in the plays, in some cases there may be no chance for production. If so, the producer should state it directly. There are valid reasons for a playwright to accept an offer without the possibility of production. The producer may wish to begin an association with the writer, and the playwright may covet the chance to work with a creative team and develop a relationship with the theatre.

*I usually suggest that my clients agree to an offer for a Play Reading. Readings are very often the first step in the formation of a relationship between a playwright and a theatre. Everyone wants to put one toe in the water and see how things go. Even if that particular play does not end up being developed, it can help create an atmosphere of trust and excitement about working together that can lead to other opportunities down the road. The main reason I might encourage them to turn down an offer is if the theatre is requiring some kind of "first refusal" to produce the play following a reading and the playwright is unsure of making that commitment.*

Elaine Devlin, Agent

With this knowledge, playwrights can make an informed decision to accept or to decline the offer. They will know what is required of them and what the prospects might be for the play's future with the organization.

## **Playwright and Producer Discussion**

Once the playwright accepts the offer, he or she should meet with the producer—in person, on Skype, or by telephone. It is vital for theatre artists to establish personal relationships. Email communications are not recommended. Even at festivals and other events where a large number of plays are chosen for Readings, personal contact between the producer and playwright is a worthy goal. Their first discussion is key in establishing a productive collaboration. Producers and playwrights become acquainted with one another, discuss the play, and establish a relationship based on mutual respect.

Institutions disseminate data in various ways. Producers should provide comprehensive information about the Reading that was not included with the initial offer as soon as possible.

Below is a list of questions playwrights might want to ask of producers. Not all of these questions apply to every Reading. Some may be more suited to labs or festivals than theatres. Playwrights should use their best judgment about which questions to ask and when to ask them.

## Playwrights Ask Producers

- What is the exact date, time, and location of the Reading?
- What are the date, time, and location of the rehearsals, and is there flexibility?
- Is the play under consideration for production, or is it part of a Reading series with no chance of future production?
- Is there a possibility for additional developmental steps after the Reading?
- Will the producer expect or allow rewrites in advance of the Reading?
- If the playwright does not live in the city where the Reading is being held, will he or she be brought in at the theatre or organization's expense?
- Will housing be provided?
- If it is not possible to bring in the playwright, can they be Skyped in for auditions and rehearsals, or can they participate via cell phone?
- When is the final draft of the script needed?
- Is the organization presenting the Reading to interest theatres, universities, producers, or investors?
- Can the playwright continue to submit the play to other organizations?
- Can the playwright invite other producers to the Reading?
- Is a director attached? If not, will the playwright have input in the choice?
- Will the Reading be cast through offers or auditions, or will it be cast in advance without the playwright or director?
- If the Reading will be cast through auditions, where and when will they be held?
- Will the Reading be In-house or open to the public?
- Will the Reading be held in a rehearsal room or a theatre?
- What is the anticipated size of the audience?
- Who is the likely or intended audience?
- Is the playwright responsible for securing an audience?
- Will the Reading be followed by a talkback or a public response?
- Who will moderate the talkback, and is there a time limit?
- Will the playwright have a say in how the talkback is handled?
- Is a synopsis or any other materials required for marketing purposes?
- Is a character breakdown required?
- Will there be a follow-up discussion with the producer after the reading?
- Is there a possibility of a residency or commission?
- If the play is a finalist in a playwriting competition, is the winner chosen based on the play itself, on the Reading, or a combination of both?
- If the play is a finalist in a playwriting competition, what happens if it wins?

## Securing a Director

After the initial communication between the playwright and producer, a director should be secured. A playwright needs a director who responds to the material and is eager to direct the Reading. At many theatres, playwrights suggest a director, often someone with whom they have a previous relationship or whose work they admire. The producer usually needs to approve the choice. Occasionally, playwrights will

ask for suggestions or leave the decision entirely to the producer. A director should respond to an offer to direct a Reading promptly after reading the script.

At festivals and other organizations, directors are often assigned. These directors should have a genuine interest in the play and in directing the Reading before making a commitment. Assigned directors should arrange a discussion with the playwright after accepting the offer. When a director is assigned, a playwright has the right to challenge the decision if he or she feels the director is not suited to the project. Producers should support the playwright's decision.

### **Finding the Right Director**

*It's important for the director to care about the piece, to feel connected to it in some way. And it's also important that the writer and director have a long conversation about the work, about their communication styles, and about how they will work together. Writers can be very protective of their children. We need to feel like the script is in good hands, and that the director will honor the story, and hopefully make it better. Writers should come to an understanding with their director. If you can't be open and honest, then you'll hold back your opinions and build up resentments.*

Mashuq Deen, Playwright; Actor

*The director is there to help playwrights hear their characters, the intentions, to shape the rhythm of the piece. In their conversations with the playwright, directors should ask what the writer wants them to listen for.*

Hayley Finn, Director

*I must be involved in the choice of the director and the cast. When I was starting out, I had two experiences in which a theater wouldn't let me work with the director I wanted to work with—or very strongly suggested a director I didn't know. It's hard to resist these things when you don't have a lot of leverage, which a lot of young playwrights don't have, but in one of the instances, the theater made a great choice, and I'm thankful for their pushing me. In the other instance, the theater (and I) made the wrong decision in hiring someone. My advice would be, if a director you don't know is being strongly encouraged by the theater, a playwright should sit down with the director and get to know them as well as possible, with specific questions about the director's process and the play itself. If you have any misgivings, go back to the producers and explain your misgivings. There's always another option.*

Rajiv Joseph, Playwright

*Faculty directors are assigned in advance of the KCACT Festival. The Vice-Chair matches directors with playwrights, based on subject*

*matter and personal judgment, which works well. They are encouraged to talk to each other well before the festival.*

Nancy Lee-Painter, KCACTF National Playwriting  
Program Chair, Region 7

*Generally, I like to see a director's work before hiring them. But sometimes, we'll hire someone "on faith." If actors or writers say they loved working with a director, that's a plus.*

James Morgan, Producing Director,  
York Theatre Company

*Playwrights should choose directors based on a common understanding of what the play is. But they should be open to what the collaborator can bring to it.*

Ralph Sevush, Esq., Executive Director/Business  
and Legal Affairs, Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.

Selecting a director must be done with care and sensitivity, and the playwright's preferences should be respected. Some minority writers feel strongly that their work should be directed by someone who shares their ethnicity. Many women or LGBTQ writers feel similarly, particularly if their work deals with themes related to gender or sexuality. Other minority writers have no preference as to whether the play is directed by someone who shares their race, gender, or sexual orientation.

The best approach to securing a director for a play is to consult the playwright first. While situations exist where honoring the playwright's request is not possible, every effort should be made to do so.

## Information for the Director

Before accepting the offer, a director should examine the protocols that were provided to the writer. Since their responsibilities differ, directors may require further information about the Reading. Below is a list of additional questions a director might ask a producer. Again, not all of the questions apply to every circumstance. Directors should use their best judgment in deciding which questions to ask.

### Directors Ask Producers

- Are there preferences or policies about the type of Reading the producer wants?
- Who is the contact person before the Reading and during rehearsal?
- Will a stage manager, line producer, or coordinator assist with the responsibilities?
- Will the rehearsals be held in the same space where the Reading will be performed?
- Is it possible to rehearse outside of the allotted rehearsal time, in another space?

- What is the size of the venue?
- What are the dimensions of the playing area?
- Is the venue seating raked (on an upward incline)?
- Will the Reading be presented on a stage where there is a set for a full production? If so, can the furniture be moved?
- Is it possible to attend a Reading or performance at the venue in advance of the Reading?
- Is it possible to make a “site visit” to the venue before the rehearsal?
- If a visit is not possible, can photographs of the venue be obtained?
- Are there time restrictions for setup and strike?
- What is the anticipated size of the audience?
- Is it possible to use light or sound cues?
- Are CDs or MP3s preferred?
- Should the sound cues be sent in advance or brought to rehearsal?
- Is preshow music a possibility?
- Will there be body mics, enhancement mics, music stand mics, or no amplification?
- Will one-sided, three-hole-punched hard copies of the scripts in binders be provided?
- Are music stands, stools, and chairs available for rehearsal and for the Reading?
- Are dressing rooms available for the actors?
- Are there restrictions or requirements about what the actors can wear?
- Are there any union requirements?
- Will there be a printed program, and if so, what information is needed and when?
- Will there be a faculty advisor?
- Is there a stipend for the creative team?

The more information producers provide, the fewer questions playwrights and directors need to ask. If the information is not forthcoming or is incomplete, contacting the producer is necessary.

## Guidelines

*National New Play Network provides specific guidelines for the directors of the readings presented at our Annual Showcase of New Plays, but not hard-and-fast rules. We're open to thoughtful, considered adjustments in the guidelines, based on the needs of the play. We restrict blocking and limit production elements, but the directors control the look and feel of the reading, with the oversight of a line producer. With each Showcase, NNP is going into a different community, so we want consistency from year to year and reading to reading.*

Nan Barnett, Executive Director,  
National New Play Network

*There is an “assumption of knowledge” regarding how the readings are presented in KCACTF Region V. We prefer that the readings are clear and simple, and people who have been doing them a while know this, but there are no specific rules or guidelines for the readings.*

Julie Mollenkamp, KCACTF National Playwriting  
Program Chair, Region 5

*At first, we didn’t suggest policies for how readings were to be presented at Arcola, but it became clear that the more blocking or props, the less successful the readings. We tried to be hands off, but we learned that there is a best practice. Our guidelines grew out of trial and error. We prefer that actors are seated, with scripts-in-hand (in binders). They can stand to indicate they are present on stage, and some directors have had some success placing seats in different spaces of the stage to indicate location, but the other conventions remain the same. While the guidelines are still evolving, we’re moving toward stipulating. But we’re still testing.*

Nick Connaughton, Creative Entertainment Manager,  
Arcola Theatre

*At Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region VII, we prefer simple readings, at music stands. When directors did staged readings, it was harder to concentrate on the script, which is what we were evaluating. Most playwrights agree with this approach. We emphasize that we prefer this type of reading, but it’s not stipulated, and sometimes, a little staging helps. The KCACTF National Playwriting Program is relatively new. Everything is evolving. It takes a while to see what works and what doesn’t.*

Nancy Lee-Painter, KCACTF National Playwriting  
Program Vice-Chair, Region 7

*Any theatre or organization that truly cares about supporting the playwright will provide guidelines to the directors, especially if those directors are guest artists and therefore not intimately familiar with the culture of the company. Several guidelines are dictated by the type of Equity contract the theatre is operating under. Additionally, each theatre or organization will have aesthetic guidelines, based primarily on the level of production support available and the knowledge of what their particular audience expects. The most important aesthetic guideline—and young directors often miss this—is to provide as clear and accessible a reading of the play as possible. The audience comes to Hear a play at a reading, so the mode of storytelling has to be adjusted for an Auditory experience rather than a Visual experience.*

Jason Cannon, Associate Artist, Florida Studio Theatre



Playwrights and directors should compile their questions into as few emails as possible. Readings are only part of the programming at most institutions, and producers are involved with various projects. Responding to numerous email inquiries is time consuming, and something significant may be lost. Consolidating emails is a courtesy that helps to establish a healthy collaboration. This approach should continue throughout the pre-rehearsal process.

A stage manager, coordinator, or line producer may share the duties, allowing the director and playwright to focus on the presentation. When additional support is provided, most institutions have procedures for the distribution of responsibilities. However, in many cases, the playwright or the director is in charge of all aspects of the Reading.