

Thoughts on the Playwright's Experience



The playwright, like the novelist, is a storyteller—but without the time or space a novel can offer to spin out the telling. Moreover, the playwright doesn't have the option of using narration or description the way the novelist does. In a play, dialogue has to do most of the heavy lifting. Even stage directions can't tell the meat of the story. The audience isn't going to read stage directions; they're going to hear the characters speak and watch them contend with their lives. So the playwright must be prepared to listen to voices as well as picture the world she enters.

There's a saying I like that's attributed to Lillian Hellman: "When the lights come up on stage, they come up on trouble. Otherwise, you don't have a play." That maxim has become a min-mantra for me because it keeps me focused on my characters and their story. I'm old-fashioned enough to still love the intimacy between stage and audience a theatre can create in telling a good story. For me, that challenge never loses its attraction.

Athold Fugard once told a group of my students that the real challenge of playwriting is to figure out what to tell and when to tell it. Sounds simple—until you try it. Characters often have their own ideas about timing and can take over the direction of the story. More than once I've had an absolutely brilliant structure all laid out until my characters started asserting themselves, elbowing their way downstage into the spotlight when I'd planned for them to wait a bit longer in the wings. But then, I never really get to know my characters until we've arm-wrestled through the script. They all seemed so malleable when I first met them in an image or a fragment of conversation.



August Wilson described an image that stuck in his head—a big man, muscular and strong, standing alone outside a house, holding a newborn baby in his powerful arms. Wilson kept wondering who that man was, what his story was. The man turned out to be Troy Maxon in

Fences. But Wilson didn't know it was Troy when the image first came to him. He discovered Troy and Rose and the others as he listened to them conversing in his head, telling him their story.

For the playwright who is interested in character and story, who invites audiences to mull over what they see and hear, the journey from finished script to professional production can be long and discouraging.

A fellow playwright once remarked to me, "There's a reason they call it 'breaking into' the theatre world. It's because you have to BREAK IN; the doors aren't open very wide." That observation, unfortunately, is easily born out by the number of professional theatres that announce on their website variations of what has become a cliché: "We accept scripts only from literary agents and theatre professionals with whom we have an existing professional relationship." An equally challenging search, by the way, is to find an agent who represents playwrights. The ranks are very thin.

But there is good news to be had.



While traditional book resources are still valuable, such as Dramatists Sourcebook, the Internet has made finding playwriting contests and amenable theaters so much easier for us playwrights. I suggest NYC Playwrights as a great site to start off with. You can subscribe to their mailing list for free, and the site includes other helpful tabs such as one for play formatting guidelines. Subscribe and they will fire lots of opportunities right to your mailbox. The URL is <http://nycp.blogspot.com/>.

There are a number of other sites you can also check out, such as

- [Dramatists Guild](#)
- [Emerging Playwright](#)
- [En Avant Playwrights](#)
- [Playwrighting Opportunities](#)
- [The Playwrights' Center](#)
- [The Burry Man Writers Center](#)

~~Nedra Pezold Roberts

SWA member Nedra Pezold Roberts' play The Vanishing Point is a winner of the American Association of Community Theatres 2013 NewPlayFest and will open at Sacramento's California Stage Company in March. The play also won the 2013 Southern Playwrights Competition and will open in June at

Jacksonville State University's R. Carlton Ward Theatre in Jacksonville, Alabama. Visit [Nedra's website](#).