

GETTING STARTED IN PLAYWRIGHTS' WORKSHOP

Playwright's Workshop is a process. It exists to allow the playwright the opportunity to hear a new play. Literally. Plays typically undergo many stages of revision in the process of getting born. Hearing the language and getting feedback from a director, actors, and audience is one of the first steps in shifting the play from inside the playwright's head to the stage, from the playwright's audience of one to the theatre's audience of many. This is what a Stage Reading provides.

A Stage Reading:

This is a presentation of a new play in an informal theatre setting in which actors literally read the play aloud while seated or standing, having rehearsed with a director. Of course, having rehearsed with the director, the actors have made character choices, decisions about timing, and relationships. The director has worked to shape the reading to release the characters and the tone of the play.

The Playwright's Role:

As the writer, your job is to listen. You are seeking to determine if what you hear in your head and think you have put on the page communicates to actors, directors, and, ultimately, to an audience. You need to know if you have managed to distill into dialogue all of the aspects of dramatic action and character that you have in your head. You will discover if you have crafted elaborate stage directions that help the actors support your dialogue or replace your dialogue, thus becoming unactable by actors and undetectable by an audience. You will discover if the nuances you have crafted to suspend the play are discernable or obscure. You will discover if the characters and action are as fully developed as you think they are. You also will have a chance to engage in dialogue with a director to clarify aspects of your play—but, remember: if you have to fill in a lot of background and in between the lines, then you haven't written it into the play.

The Director's Role:

As a director, your job is to shape the reading to release the voice of the play. You are not going to block a stage reading. Since the actors will have scripts in hand and the play will not have the same level of rehearsal as a fully staged play would, to block the play potentially would cause the audience to become distracted from hearing the play. To them, it would feel as though they are sitting in on an early rehearsal and they would try to focus on the meaning of the blocking and not the script. You will help the actors understand the meaning of the play, its architecture, its action, the relationships, the tempo-rhythm, the nuances, and the tone of the play. You will work with timing, intent (if appropriate), and relationship. You will coach actors to levels of performances that are expressive and orchestrate the play.

The Actors' Role:

Your job is not much different than it usually is, except you will not have blocking to score your choices. You will need to rely on your analysis of the script, your ability to surrender to the character, and your voice. You should feel free to ask questions about the script. You will find it helpful if you have read the play a great deal before the performance, so that the shape and the language are known to you and you can relax into your choices. You will also find it useful to make margin notes and to score the script as you would for a cold reading audition.

The Process:

Rehearsals:

Usually, about a week of rehearsal should be all that is required.

- *First Rehearsal:* General table discussion and read through with notes.

- *Second Rehearsal:* Stop and go reading of scenes or units (maybe not even the whole play, especially if it is a full length). Read a unit, discuss, share notes, go back and reread, share notes, and reread, share final notes and move on.
- *Third Rehearsal:* More of the same.
- *Fourth Rehearsal:* Start releasing more in terms of timing dialogue, shaping beats, finding climaxes in the beat action, driving beats, shaping acting choices, building and undercutting, pausing and driving. You may find that it helps to put some of the rehearsal on its feet so that actors may feel the physical impulses they will need to register while sitting. It may help to find the give and take of pursuit and retreat—but do not block, as that defeats the process of actors finding the impulses if they are feed to them. Encourage actors to use their chairs to replicate these impulses, rather than sit slumped and static. Stools can help actors to release physically more than actual chairs in which they tend to surrender completely to gravity.
- *Fifth Rehearsal:* More of the same. Get in a complete read through at by the end of the night.
- *Sixth Rehearsal:* Full reads with no stops followed by notes.

The Playwright in Rehearsal:

This is tricky, as the playwright needs to feel assured that the cast and director get the play, but must also stay out of the process enough to assure that the play is “gettable.” If the director and the playwright feel that the playwright should be at every rehearsal, it should be agreed that they will confer with one another *after* rehearsal, and the playwright will avoid addressing the cast during rehearsal, beyond the occasional general note. It is a good idea for playwrights to come into rehearsals sporadically to hear progress, as being there nightly can be torture. Remember, the playwright hears (and may even see) the play internally with all the nuances and idiosyncrasies in place so it can be painful to not hear that replicated. BUT—it is very likely that the playwright will hear what is and is not in the play and may make unanticipated discoveries that illuminate the play or reveal its needs for more attention. Ultimately, the playwright and the director should work out the presence of the playwright and both should feel comfortable advocating their position, but the director should have the final say.

The Performance:

Placement on the Stage: The director should decide where characters should sit. It may be useful to have a semi-circle and put the protagonist and antagonist on the ends so that they may use the tension between them. It may be necessary to put the lovers next to one another so that they may feel the connection between them. Consider what happens if you have actors reading multiple parts. Encourage actors to use their bodies even though they are sitting—they can turn away, slump, sit up, use the edge of the chair, pull up their feet, lounge—there are a host of attitudes that will help to score choices and relationships.

Stage Directions: Choose either an actor to or have the director read the stage directions. Read them well and expressively, but--not every word need be read. Edit to read pertinent information about time and place and other given circumstances, but avoid reading qualifications of emotion or blocking (other than an entrance or an exit that is not otherwise clear). Emotive stage directions are the kind that an audience should be able to hear enacted and not have narrated to them. Stage directions that function as inner thoughts may have to be read, but only if they are intended to be performed as such onstage. If there are long passages about what the character is thinking or back-story that are not intended to be performed, then the playwright is leaning toward the craft of fiction and not playwriting. This is the information that should be in the dialogue. Of course, there may be some complicated stage directions

that explain a technical detail for the benefit of the director and designers, but it is unlikely that will need to be read.

Introductions:

The Director or person reading the stage direction should introduce the actors and the characters, and characterize the setting and/or context. Short and sweet.

Music:

Sometimes there may be house music selected to help set the tone before and after the play (or acts). You should not score the play, however. If there are crucial sound cues, they need to be read as stage directions.

Props:

These should be avoided, though an actor may find a simple hand prop helpful—a pen, gun, fan, handkerchief, glasses. But do not go much further in trying to ground the reality of the setting.

Lighting:

Lighting should not really be necessary, but in some instances, stage readings are done with an area cue that is used before the play and then a setting cue with simple lights up/lights down at the beginning and ends of acts or formal scenes. It is unlikely that will be the case in our Studio Theatre, though.

The Talk-Back Session:

This is a crucial part of the process for the playwright. The audience's reception of the play is as important as the actors' and director's ability to penetrate it. Someone needs to moderate the post show discussion with the company and audience. This person could be the director or some neutral person, such as a dramaturg, the PW Coordinator, or even house manager. But—it should not be the playwright. The playwright needs to listen and take notes during this process. The moderator might confer with the director and playwright beforehand to ascertain if there are specific questions that they would like addressed, and then may ask those questions or prompt the playwright or director to do so. The moderator should be familiar enough with the script to know what the themes are and what the play is trying to convey. The moderator should be ready with a specific question to kick off the discussion. This should be about the play rather than its thematic meaning, unless that is key to having understood the action. The moderator may offer a viewpoint as a starting point for discussion and should then ask the audience specific questions. It can take a bit of time for an audience to loosen up and start talking, so the moderator should be prepared with multiple questions for the audience, as well as the company. The moderator should try to include all members of the company at one time or another in the discussion. The playwright and director may or may not join the company on the stage, but the audience usually likes to meet them for a peak behind the scenes. The moderator should thank the audience and close the discussion when either it needs to wrap up or is clear the audience is done.

After the Process:

The playwright should have a short session with the company to have the opportunity to ask final questions and obtain any further feedback. It might be useful for the playwright and director to confer longer.

The Next Step:

The playwright should decide if this is the director to take the play into production and the director should decide if this is a project to continue to develop. If so, the play may move on to petition as a bare stage production and eventual full tech support. BUT—there should be revisions in between each of the processes. AND—the playwright may submit the play for further stage readings if the author feels the revisions have been substantive enough and another hearing would be desirable.