

Seasons

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NYC PRODUCTION, 2007: NY AND RESPECT FOR THE PLAYWRIGHT

by Linda Evans

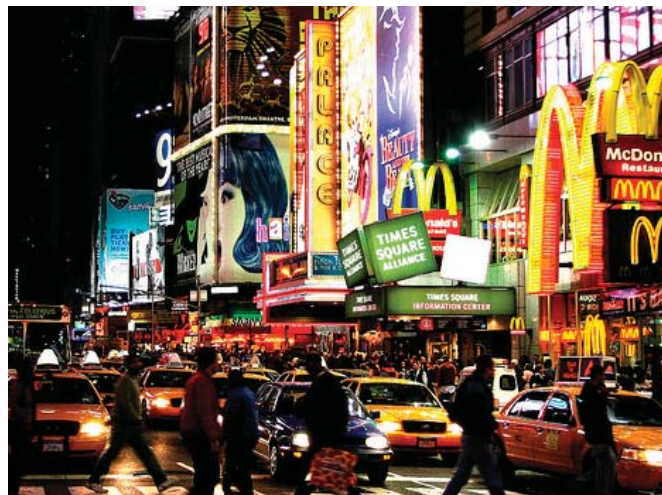
Forget your parents. Forget your friends, even your best friends. Do they admire your writing? They don't need to. That's not their job. The one best place on earth that I've found for respect is our own New York, New York. The best zip code for a playwright is 10036, within a block or two of the Big Apple's Times Square.

Let's face it. The heat from the lights causes some chemically-induced stupor.

Somehow, a magic carpet drifts between the gutter grates in front of the gargantuan McDonald's on 42nd Street and lifts you to that first audition. There your eager director, who thinks you are smarter than he is, greets you with a handshake/hug! Is this sounding familiar so far?

Jokes aside, I fell in love with New York when I saw the faces of my director and the actors who had been studying my play for a month. In those first few moments the words had flesh and a heartbeat from a Midwestern town. Respect! You can't buy it. You can't demand it. Perhaps in this catch-phrase society it only lasts as long as a 30-second commercial. But respect for the playwright in New York is true. It's real. And there is nothing quite like it.

The First Best Audience for the playwright is the director. He or she will be attracted to your words and then spend the rest of the time wondering how he/she could be in love with your brain but not necessarily the rest of you! The director will be outspoken and confrontational but always flirtatious, because ultimately the director wants to be liked by you! Behind a near face-off, there will be a grin, a drink or an exchange of stories. Enjoy the director; he/she has put aside writing and other projects to entertain the thought that you may be the next bright light on Broadway. We all enjoy a fantasy!



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Sister and Mister Listers!

The board is alive and active with tales and advice and experiences which can mean only one thing: our work is getting out there. And once it's there, it's making an impact.

This issue, we've got articles discussing coming up with a play on—literally—a moment's notice; one is a tale of turning into a teacher ...overnight; then we've got a fascinating tale of a fringe festival experience.

In each issue we want to hear about your experiences getting productions done, but I've also noticed huge amounts of information on the list alone: how to tell a bad agent from a good one; how to deal with rejection; how to deal with writer's block; and, a topic which suddenly has all of our attention, the WGA strike. Just a quick scroll down from these notes can show you that some of the messages are practically articles themselves!

So, fellow listers, we have to be there for each other, in good times and bad, and that means putting it down with your keyboards and sending it off to us. When one of us learns a lesson—about a theatre, a competition, a way of dealing with tricks and hazards of the trade, it's up to her to pass it on.

Keep up with the good work, and keep your words out there!!

Happy New Year
Scarlett Ridgway Savage
SEASONS Guest Editor
www.scarlettridgwaysavage.com

The next Best Audience are the actors. I love actors because I cannot do what they do. When the male actors began arguing about *Lipstick* with me at Ensemble Studio Theatre, LA, I knew I had something: a germ, something infectious, annoying. The men who played the character of Blake, the father, MY FATHER, in the play wouldn't let it go... i.e., wouldn't let me go. They pinned me in the hallways. They followed me with their eight page letters and phone calls to my peaceful home in Tucson, Arizona. (I don't remember leaving them my address!). Oh, actors!

My conclusion about these bold male actors is that they had acquired extra testosterone from the Los Angeles sun. Angst from leaving their beloved New York along with sun exposure had made them opinionated! Bless them all. It was these few bold men who took *Lipstick* away from me. They thought THEY were the character Blake, the father, MY FATHER!

The play belongs to the writer until it's exposed. When *Lipstick* hit New York, New York, the actor artists were respectful and engaged, yanking out the characters through the soles of their feet through their toes honed by years of study. Some of these actors were directors themselves and had their own production companies. The raw smack down of the fist-to-cuffs displaced LA actors was not there. Had we lost something?

Unschooling in drama, I heard the words "Shaw and Chekhov" tossed about by the director and actors like candy bars—only they were attributing those iconic spirits to me, my words, my play, *Lipstick*. Had we mislabeled something?

There is nothing like getting respect in New York, New York—, even if it's just for one Side Salad moment. Take that magic carpet ride in front of McDonalds on 42nd St. It's a short ride, and you will fall off in no time. But the fall doesn't hurt much, buffered by the gaze of that first best audience, your new family of NY directors and actors! Thank you!

LIPSTICK ON A PIG played at the Samuel Beckett Theatre on 42nd St. in May, 2007 for 25 performances, as an Equity production

LIPSTICK was developed at Ensemble Studio Theatre, LA Project; Act II was further developed when I was a playwright-in-residence at Ensemble Studio Theatre, NY, NY.

I fell in love with New York when I saw the faces of my director and the actors who had been studying my play for a month. In those first few moments the words had flesh and a heartbeat from a Midwestern town.

THE COMPUTER PAL'S DIARY

By Hindi Brooks

April, 1994

My son, Josh, an actor living in New York, calls to say that he and his actress girlfriend are looking for a short play to do together. Do I have anything? No, but I'll write one for him.

May, 1994

I write the play, *Computer Pals*. It's about a man and a woman, both drab and near-sighted, who meet on the Internet, become friends, and lie extensively about how attractive they are. Then they decide to meet. Both try to live up to their false images by a change of clothes—falsies for her, an open shirt and gold chains for him—and without their eyeglasses. So they arrive at the pre-arranged place, can't see each other and go back to their computers to end the relationship. Until they meet again by accident, the truth is out and they live happily ever after.

I send the play back to my publisher, I.E. Clark, who had rejected it earlier.

This time I send pictures and the positive reviews. He sends me a contract.

June, 1994

I bring the play to my workshop, The Playwrights Group, get valuable critique and rewrite.

July, 1994

I send the play to Josh. He loves it but he's no longer with the actress girlfriend. Thanks anyway.

1994-1996

Rather phlegmatically, because I'm really more interested in other projects, I send the play a few places and gather an equal amount of rejections.

December, 1996

Computer Pals is a finalist at PlayWorks in West Virginia. They hold it until May and then choose a different winner.

January, 1997

The play is accepted by a college in Maryland for a production in April. And would I like to come at their expense, during the run, to lecture to the students?

I would, and I do.

The students, mistakenly believing that writers in Hollywood are important, fawn all over me. I stay in the charming home of an English teacher, and we talk theatre over tea and scones. I'm given a late model car to drive.

I go on my first ever ride in a tiny private plane—to have Sunday brunch with all the amateur pilots at an airport in a nearby town. I eat too much at an event in my honor and watch a student production of the play. Everyone there loves it; I cringe under my approving smiles.

November, 1997

I take the play to the Writers Workshop at Theatre 40. It's accepted into FortyWorks, their upcoming one-act festival.

January, 1998

Howard Teichman, who has a background in Comedia Del'Arte, directs the play for FortyWorks. But first he helps me on a rewrite. The play is now a third shorter, has music and choreography, and is the hit of the production.

February, 1998

I send the play back to my publisher, I.E. Clark, who had rejected it earlier.

This time I send pictures and the positive reviews. He sends me a contract. But, at the same time, the play is accepted into the Love Creek Festival on Theatre Row in New York City. The winners of that one get published by Samuel French.

I explain that to I.E., who agrees to my holding off signing his contract and wishes me luck.

April, 1998

The play, with director and cast (Barbara Keegan and Jeffrey Winner) intact, goes to New York—each of us bringing along assorted family members. We visit friends and relatives, see some great theatre on and off-Broadway, do the show to a very receptive audience and then lose first place to a drama. Seems they already had enough comedies from the other nights of the festival.

July, 1998

Computer Pals is published by I.E. Clark with a cute picture of Barbara and Jeffrey at their computers.

September, 1998

I.E. tells me that the play is doing very well.

October, 1998

I receive my first royalty check. Computer Pals IS doing well. Very well.

Who says I'm not a playwright!

The Overnight Professor

by Lisa Soland

I have lived in Los Angeles several years, working as an actress, singer, director and producer, but primarily now as a playwright, with my work being performed around the globe. In August of 2006, I was asked to head up the MFA Playwriting Program at a leading University for the upcoming fall semester. Having no previous University teaching experience, one could certainly refer to me as “The Overnight Professor.” For this reason I was asked by the editor of this publication to write an article about approaching an academic playwriting position from the perspective of a non-academic. Though this particular perspective proved helpful in writing this article, I can assure you it was not helpful in my ability to adapt to this new and unfamiliar environment.

My teaching experience has been gathered primarily through “The All Original Playwright Workshop,” which I started and have been running for many years now. The goal of the workshop is to create an environment of inspiration, and a place where I can hopefully pass on to others what I have learned from the world of playwriting. Like many self-taught writers, I had little hands-on mentoring, other than occasional guidance from my friend, playwright William Luce. So I basically plodded my own path down the road less taken, particularly by women.

My thought was this -- if I could give to others what I did not have, my students could cut years off their journey to productions and publications, and make more significant progress than I had been able to. And because I have seen significant results with my students' work, I felt the same approach might be equally as successful, if not more so, if set within the world of academia.

But things have changed since I was in college. Young people today have significantly more disposable income which enables them to own the new technology available today, like cell phones. I actually

wrote letters to correspond. And today's students wouldn't think about leaving home without a laptop. I borrowed a typewriter to write my papers. As an overnight professor it took me weeks to realize that the rectangular objects hanging around students' necks were not stylish, modern-looking necklaces but a handy tool called a TravelDrive, making it impossible for them to use the now common excuse, “My printer broke.” But because of this new, fast-paced world of “not getting it right but getting it right *now*,” I found that the attention span of young people had been dramatically shortened, further explaining the popularity of the ten-minute play.

Even more disappointing, and much more destructive to today's developing new writers, is their inability to put off gratification. Patience is a quality that must live at the core of a person if they are to see true, lasting success. When I was in college I would wait for weeks for my mom's “care packages” to arrive, filled with delicious homemade cookies. I recently returned to my alma mater to teach a four-day workshop on the ten-minute play, amazed to find a Starbucks conveniently located in the lobby of the campus library with an unending line running out the door. And where do they get their money? When I was in college I walked everywhere. I couldn't even afford a bicycle, yet many students today are driving finer cars than their professors. It's mind boggling, really.

It's no wonder that they look at college as being an *instant* leap into an already established career as opposed to how we looked at it in my generation – just a very good start to a long climb.

The *Washington Post* recently printed that “Researchers at Florida State University studied teens' educational and occupational plans between 1976 and 2000 and found a widening gap between what teens believe they will do after graduation and their actual achievements.” The report showed that high school seniors in 2000 were much more materialistic than students had been in 1976. In 1976, 26 percent of students said they planned to get an advanced degree and 41 percent planned on working as a professional. In 2000, 50 percent of seniors intended to continue their education after college, and 63 percent planned to work in a professional job. However, the percentages of high school graduates between the age 25 and 30 who actually attained these goals has remained the same. Students today are much more verbally ambitious, but much less likely to actually do the work necessary to achieve these goals.

So, as a playwriting professor, I found students wanting to *write well, right now*. And you and I both know that ain't gonna happen.

Writing is all about process. But due to their familiarity with instant gratification, most of my students wanted to feel as if they'd nailed a piece with their first draft, when they hadn't. (Who does?!) So despite the fact that I would attach pillows to any constructive criticism, the words still landed on them like a ton of bricks, which made listening even more challenging for them.

As a guest speaker, I am often called upon to discuss the format of the ten-minute play and rarely, if ever, asked to address the mysterious turns and shifts of the full-length (probably because it would take too long). So, who would possibly be interested in a three-act? Inspire young writers to read and attempt to wrap their brains around the quality and depth of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and you've made some real progress. Playwrights like O'Neill were placed up on very tall pedestals in my day. Because of superb work like this, I continue to approach the blank page with a humility that often renders me inoperable. In the author's dedication written to his wife Carlotta, O'Neill writes, “*Dearest, I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood... a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play...*”

(Cont'd on page 4)

No one writes in tears and blood today. No one faces their dead. Instead, they go to the psychiatrist and are quickly prescribed Xanax, which they swallow with their low-fat Starbucks Latte, and then they go to the gym. In today's world where the attention is primarily on good looks and plenty of money, there is very little reward for facing honestly the pain of our past, and offering it up as redesigned art, with the higher, loftier hope of transforming society into something greater. Don't misunderstand me, psychiatric drugs have their place and are invaluable to those who need them. But let's face it -- without this medicated fast relief, we had Van Gogh. And though he suffered through much of his life, he left behind a plethora of work that will never be forgotten.

Along with patience and sometimes long suffering, another indispensable quality for a playwright is the ability to take critical feedback with a disposition of gratitude, modesty and class. Developing this quality can make all the difference in one's writing career because it enables one to improve upon that which has been written. After all, writing is rewriting, right? That's what all the really good writers say. And in order to rewrite most effectively, we need to consider the input of others. So this too became one of the qualities we worked together as a class to strengthen.

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Possibly due to the newness of the program, none of my students in the undergraduate or graduate classes had been taught professional playscript format. This, along with their difficulties with basic spelling and punctuation, motivated me to base 50 percent of their grade on how well they were able to capture the way a character actually spoke. This ability requires effective punctuation, proper formatting and accurate spelling. The benefit of sharpening these skills really shows at the point a script is handed to an actor for the initial cold read. It is only at this stage in development that you are able to see how successful you have been with your writing, since plays are meant to be heard and seen, not necessarily read.

There were unexpected challenges, for sure, but by the end of the semester, a good, solid style of working had been established between me and my students. Unfortunately, it was then that I had to make my way back to Los Angeles.

One of my more gifted and hard working students (funny how those two things seem to go together), graduated, moved to Los Angeles and signed up for the "All Original Playwright Workshop," where she continued to excel as a promising writer. I asked her recently what she feels is the difference between the playwright workshop -- what she perceives now to be the "real world" -- versus academia in general. She replied, "I felt like we [as students in the University] had a pretty good idea of what playwriting was. The faculty encouraged us to do it but they didn't show us how." She's referring to the established structure of teaching versus the realities of show business and what it requires. Academia uses the basics by the book, but the "business," as it is referred to, often looks in another direction, outside the box, in order to succeed.

My friend and writer, Steven L. Sears, said on the subject, "In the business the energy is designed toward the newness; changing direction like the wind. That's what keeps it fresh. In academia it's like trying to turn the Titanic with a rowboat. At best, you can just slightly

alter its course." As an objective outsider, an overnight professor, I feel this is one of the most significant realities working against academia, particularly in the larger colleges. Even changes for the better come slowly, and this requires patience from everyone -- professors and their students.

I was particularly struck, however, by the degree to which instructors genuinely cared for their students; willing to work tirelessly for an inch of progress. Many of the professors oversee oversized classrooms and are overworked and overstressed. Professors are highly encouraged by the administration to pursue outside stimulation -- to participate in the creative aspects of their particular craft outside the University setting. But because of the above mentioned restraints, this outside stimulation, which would be for them like a breath of fresh air, necessarily often becomes the lowest priority.

Again, though my perspective is limited, it seemed to me that the biggest challenge for the college professor appears to be isolation. And the more physically isolated the school, the more vulnerable to this the professor can become. If they become isolated, the information from which they have to draw upon to teach their students becomes outdated, stale and possibly even inconsequential. And...the longer the isolation...the more susceptible to this...they seem to become.

So the question remains -- are our students being taught what they need to learn in order to prepare themselves for the world outside academia?

A student stated in a departing letter to me, "I feel that many of my classes have been the theatre world according to a textbook or academia with very little actual practical experience. In your class, I had no idea I would really experience working with actors and see my work as part of a production in front of an audience, not once but three times. I also learned proper formatting, how to write appropriate letters of introduction, as well as basic tools to help me write producible material. For the first time I feel like I had a class which actually prepared me for the real world."

Shouldn't this be how we approach providing their education? Shouldn't this be how we properly prepare them for the real world? This was my initial thought when I entered the University environment. This is why I thought I, a non-academic, had been chosen to contribute in this academic setting and this is what I tried to do; I tried to prepare them to win more effectively than I had been prepared.

During my visiting semester, my undergraduate Intermediate Playwrights and my MFA Professional Writers produced two evenings of theatre that contained lengthy monologues written, produced and directed by each of my students. Then as their final, we cast and directed staged readings of their original ten-minute plays. In addition to these three events, my MFAs wrote and staged readings of their one person, one-act plays. I found the students responded extremely well to this "real world" hands-on, experiential approach. They were learning a great deal, from *doing*, and it held their attention too because the demands on them equaled what they were actually capable of doing, which is a whole other subject.

Another student of mine shared with me that he felt the class had been taught practical application skills for working as a playwright in the real world. "[Lisa's] token motto was always 'I want to set you guys up to win.' She takes what she knows from the real world and tells us how to better our work, based on her experience. That is more valuable than any textbook could offer." It's the old apprenticeship thing, right? I take someone on as an apprentice and they learn the ropes by working alongside me. And together we learn by doing.

Throughout my stay as a visiting professor, I continued to ask of the situation one favor -- "If I could please make a difference in just one student's life." This hope is the furnace that fuels me, that fuels us as teachers. But even now with this particular visiting professorship behind me, who knows? Do we ever really know the impact we have on each other, and on those who trust us with preparing them for their future? Jimmy Stewart's character George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life* had the unique opportunity to learn just how his life affected others, but I believe for us in real life, we can only guess.

According to that study printed in the *Washington Post*, if students today are much more ambitious than they were 30 years ago, but unable to accomplish what they set out to do, we as teachers must ask ourselves why. If they aren't able to look at the reality of life and how we must work for what we achieve, what good are all those reality shows? What good is affluence? Have we baby boomers worked so hard for our children that we've lost track of teaching them how to work for themselves? These are the questions I find value in asking.

Switch!

By Maureen Johnson

Over summer break, I ran into a few of the students that had moved on to study theatre in college. One such alum dropped by to fill me in on what he had done during the semester. He mentioned an extremely creative approach to a production in which he had been involved. 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. I wanted to start out the new school year with something exciting. Maybe I could adapt this idea! I decided to call it *Switch: a moving theatre experience*.

The (length of the) play's the thing

I decided have each class do a 30 minute production three times in 3 different venues with the audience switching every 30 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. It would give them an idea of how a student grows in theatre, too. The evening would run about an hour and a half. 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. 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. They had enough chairs in each room, the ones they used for their music students.

Choosing the plays

Running time was the most important consideration. Each play had to run 30 minutes MAX. I chose excerpts from "All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" for my Theatre One class. This is a great show which allows for 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.

I wanted to give my Advanced Theatre class something more complex to present. During the summer months, I had attended a playwrights retreat hosted by the International Center for Women's Playwrights. I met a wonderful playwright, Robin Rice Lichtig, (dramamama@nyu.edu). She and I talked about all of the ten minute plays we had written. I asked her if I could read some of her ten-minute plays. They were funny, dear and thought-provoking. When I knew that my Advanced Theatre students would be needing ten minute plays, I chose three of Robin's for them to produce. As it turned out, each play was a premiere—a world, state and regional premiere, something that rarely happens in high school. Robin was also extremely gracious in answering a wide variety of questions via e-mails from the groups working on her plays.

Casting the Plays

I directed the two shows for Theatre One and Two. For the Advanced Theatre class things were a bit different. Each play had two characters, and simple sets and costume requirements. "Seducing Ramona," "Purity and the Prince" and "Life 101" were read aloud in class, and the students decided which ones they wanted to work on. I asked three students to direct and made students in each group assistant director and stage manager. There were three groups of 5 students. The director's had two class periods in which to hold tryouts and cast their plays. I acted as a consultant, asking them questions about their casting choices and giving my opinion when asked. We also discussed who would 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.

Rehearsal

Rehearsal for all the classes took about a month. Our class periods run 40 minutes and they meet five times during a six day cycle.

Timing

When we started running the shows, it became very apparent that two of the shows were running short at 25 minutes and the 3 ten minute plays were running almost 40 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 ran 1 minute. By the end of one class period they had organized who was doing what and they had lopped 8 minutes off of their running time.

The Performances

As the audience arrived on the night of the show, we funneled them into each venue so that each space had a full house. At the start of the evening one student from each class explained to the audience how the evening would run.

"Welcome to *SWITCH*, a moving theatre experience. Tonight you will see performances by Theatre One, 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. The two shows that ran 25 minutes ran short and the Advanced Theatre shows had a few glitches in changing the set, so the audience was sitting for 5 minutes or so. But they were good sports about it and ended up talking among themselves until they got the cue to move to the next venue. Students acted as guides for the audience members, making sure that each venue was full. The set changes went smoother between the ten-minute plays, and the lag time between switching decreased each time. At the end of the evening the audience had seen three theatre classes perform and not a soul had dozed off. The students learned a lot about performing three times in a night and trying to keep each performance fresh. They also remarked on how differently each audience reacted.

Reflection

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. As an exciting way to begin a new year in theatre, *SWITCH* can't be beat! It gives the parents an idea of the kind of growth theatre students can look forward to and they get an immediate idea as to how their child is doing in class. The students loved jumping right into a production like this.

All in all, I felt that *SWITCH* began the school year with something completely different. I knew that we could build on this great wave of theatrical energy, electrified, so to speak, when we pulled a *SWITCH*.

—July 2006

ICWP MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of ICWP is to support women playwrights around the world by: bringing international attention to their achievements; encouraging production of their plays, translation, publication, and international distributions of their works; providing means for communication and contact among the sister community of the world's women dramatists; assisting them in developing the tools of their craft, in determining their own artistic forms, and in setting their own critical standards; encouraging scholarly and critical examination and study of the history and the contemporary work and concerns of women playwrights; and supporting their efforts to gain professional equality, and to express their own personal, artistic, social, and political vision without censorship, harassment, or personal danger.

ICWP welcomes all who support our goals and share our vision.

MEMBERSHIP IN ICWP

To become a member of ICWP, visit the website, <http://www.internationalwomenplaywrights.org> and click on the Join! button in the menu. Anyone can support ICWP by becoming a member. "Sister" level membership is US\$25.00. Those who can afford it pay more and those who can't, pay less. Other currencies are accepted, using PayPal. "Service-for-dues" membership can be obtained through providing a service, instead of paying dues, and there are always a range of skills and abilities required, to advance the mission of ICWP.

If you do not wish to complete your transaction online, you can download one of the forms off the website and mail it in with a check in US\$.

Notes from the Fringe

by Sharon Eberhardt

I had heard the stories of fringe festival shows going on to amazing success: *Urinetown*, moving from the New York City Fringe to Broadway, and *Thom Paine (based on nothing)* going from Edinburgh to a long run off-Broadway.

But I had also helped out on or sat through enough poorly-attended, stifling hot, poorly scripted and under-rehearsed Fringe productions to make me start to think I'd be happy never going to another Fringe.



Sharon Eberhardt

Then I started to write a play a new way, performing it myself. I met regularly with a rehearsal partner, a wonderful San Francisco-based performer-writer, Randy Rutherford, who was preparing for a tour of Canadian Fringe festivals. He explained how the Canadian Fringe circuit was different from some American Fringes: unlike New York, which has a selection committee, Canadian Fringes are unjuried. Unlike San Francisco, the only Fringe I knew aside from New York, 90-minute pieces are allowed. In some cities, the whole town comes out for the fringe, the major papers review several shows, and performers can sell-out 150 and 200-seat houses—and several of the theaters are air-conditioned. A person can almost make a living at it.

Still, I was skeptical. I continued to work on my piece, intending to one day turn it over to another performer, but when I performed, I really liked it. Another respected performer and director suggested getting more acting experience, perhaps in a fringe festival. His rationale was that it is a way to go before audiences without wearing out friends and family. The Fringes have some built-in audience, and if you don't do well in Saskatchewan, it is unlikely that word will filter back to San Francisco.

My friend Randy recommended some festivals that he was planning to attend. I missed the deadline for Edmonton, the largest theater/art festival in North America, but did apply to festivals in Winnipeg, Regina and London. Winnipeg has a lottery system, and I was not selected. Regina, Saskatchewan and London, Ontario, two smaller Fringes, are both "first come, first selected." I filled out the one-page applications, sent my application fee and \$350-500 (Canadian) check, and was in.

My show, *Savage Arts*, is a one-woman play based on the true story of a Native American witchcraft trial that took place in Buffalo, NY in 1930. A story of Art, Passion, and Murder, it is told through the eyes of a naive housewife fascinated by the French artist at the center of the witchcraft trial.

I made postcards and posters, bought plane tickets to Regina, Saskatchewan and London, Ontario, and got sweet emails from the local volunteers who would put me up in their apartments during my stay.

And it was a wonderful experience. Okay, the audiences were small, especially in Regina, the 2nd largest city in Saskatchewan, where the

Fringe Festival was only in its 3rd year. It was hard performing for just the tech guy—even harder doing the show for two people on a Wednesday at 5 pm. The last two shows, with 30 and 42 people in attendance, made me feel like I had a hit.

Then on to London, Ontario, a more established Fringe. My friend Randy promised that I would have big audiences here. My first show had 15 people! They laughed in all the right places, just as people in San Francisco had, something that hadn't happened in Regina. And they gasped at the right places. Unfortunately, Cirque du Soleil was in town for the first time ever, and receipts for the Fringe dropped across the board. My audience went down to 12 people, then seven. My heart started to drop.

After twelve performances, I knew the characters and the show in ways that I had never known them before.

Until I read the online reviews. I knew I should not do this, in case I really lost heart. But the online reviewers loved my show. They urged others to come see the work, called it top-notch, off-Broadway caliber, engaging throughout. One even noted the erotic heat generated in the cold air-conditioned room. Audiences crept up over the remaining three shows, peaking at 40 on the final night. Between that and seven rave reviews online, I felt pretty good. The director of the festival said I deserved better houses than the ones I had and hoped I would return next year.

Best of all, after twelve performances, I knew the characters and the show in ways that I had never known them before. I made small changes to the script and huge changes in my performance.

My friend Randy, trying to make a living in his eighth year on the Fringe Circuit, was disappointed at his 2/3 full houses, but it was hard for me to imagine a more gratifying experience. The people who came to my show were passionate about it. In each city one person saw the show twice. I was able to come back to San Francisco and confidently approach two artistic directors asking for a run, forwarding my Fringe Festival audience reviews. The Fringe experience definitely gave me the courage to ask for a run, and I think it helped me get one, scheduled for January-February at The Marsh, San Francisco.

I highly recommend a fringe festival as a way to develop work. It is much less expensive than self-production, and performing away from your usual theater networks gives you freedom. For me it was a chance to try out a new role, as a performer, in front of people who don't know that I am "really" a playwright. Without the experience of performing 12 times, I am pretty sure that I would have turned the play over to an actor by now.

No, my show did not become the next *Urinetown*, *Thom Paine*, or *One Woman Star Wars Trilogy*, but it is still mine, and still evolving. And I am working on ideas for my next adventure on the Canadian Fringe.

Sharon Eberhardt's SAVAGE ARTS will be at The Marsh Theater in San Francisco, January-February 2008. Her play, BECCA AND HEIDI has been produced by Shee Theatre, San Francisco, Alleyway Theatre, Buffalo, NY, and Collective P.A.S.T. at chashama, NYC. Her one-acts have been performed around the country.

Going from Stage to Screen

a conversation with Mrinalini Kamath

Why Did You Decide to Produce a Short Film?

Well – there's the obvious: I like movies. But that's not the reason why I decided to adapt this play into a film. The idea first came from a theatre reviewer in Australia three years ago. He had seen my play *The Some of All Parts*, at the Studio Theatre of the Opera House (yep, THAT opera house) as part of a showcase for a ten-minute play festival. Not only had he declared it the best show of the night, but he also said that he could easily see the play being made into a movie. While I was flattered at the time, I wasn't really into writing movies then.



Mrinalini Kamath

Yes, But Why Now?

For several reasons, the biggest of them being that I've been writing plays for about 11 years now, and while I have had many readings and a decent number of publications, I have had very few full productions. I know the race is not always to the swift, etc., but dammit, I have stories to tell, and I want people to see and hear them, not someday, but NOW. If the stage ain't takin' 'em, why not try the movies? I thought I'd start small with something I could actually self-produce (because if I decided to look for a producer to do it, I'd be back where I was with the theatre) and came back to this play, which I could see potentially doing well on the film festival circuit.

How Did You Become a Producer?

Drum roll I took a class!

Sorry – I'm a nerd.

Growing up, if I ever wanted to figure out how to do something, I'd go to the library and find a book on it. In the age of the Internet, I google it, and if it's something that I think might be a little beyond book/website learning, I try and take a class in it. I just happened to see an ad for a class called "Make It Happen" being led by the Artistic Director of a theatre company who had also produced short films as part of her day job. It was advertised towards actors: "Are you tired of going to audition after audition and coming oh-so-close to getting the part, but just not getting it? Take matters into your own hands by producing your own play or film," or something to that effect.

About half of the class wanted to produce plays (some self-written, some not) and half were looking at doing films, filmed sketches and webisodes. Not a single person in the class had produced anything before, so I was in good company: We were all starting from scratch.

How Has It Been Going?

Well – it's been a mixed bag, really.

The first thing I did was secure a director. I got someone who really liked the play, who had directed the play and had just finished directing his own feature-length film, which he bankrolled with his savings. He was enthusiastic about the idea and offered to work for free and allow me to pick his brain as much as I needed, as I learned the ropes of producing.

Next came the actors. I eventually ended up with the same actors I had used for a New York staging of the play, who were all willing to work on a deferred SAG contract. (Only short and student films can have this type of contract with SAG, where the \$100 per day that they are to be paid can be deferred until the film has been sold.)

Then came the crew. This was probably the hardest for me. As one who has never worked on a film before, let alone produced one, I had no idea what to ask or what to look for. Luckily, my director had some experience with this. With his help, I was able to secure a Director of Photography (AKA cinematographer), a production designer, an editor and a composer. I learned about Shooting People (www.shootingpeople.org) a website/organization that was started in the UK but has branches all over the States now as well, and mandy.com, a premier source for finding crew (your first posting is free). I also found that just by telling people what you need (i.e., throwing it out into the universe) recommendations would come floating back. I'm still in the process of hiring a sound person and a line producer (oh, all the terms I learned in that class!) but I'm much more confident about it, especially since I had a mini-production meeting with the DP, director and production designer, who all seem to know what they're doing.

The most difficult part of all of this was scheduling. I really wanted to run with the energy and excitement I had built up while taking this class and wanted production to take place the first and second weekends in November. To my chagrin, my director's bosses in DC (where he currently holds a theatre directing fellowship) wouldn't let him out for those two weekends. We moved to the next month – the first two weekends in December. Again, the director had a conflict. We then switched to the second and third weekends in December, when two actors ended up having conflicts. We finally managed to settle on the second and third weekends in January. Later than I wanted, but with less likelihood of changes having to be made to the schedule, since it's too early for theatre shows or other projects to be in swing. If I tear out half as much hair during production as I did trying to *schedule* production, I'll be a happy camper.

What About Money?

Ah, money. Well, I decided early on that I was going to set a budget and see if I could work within it. I set a small budget that relied on a chunk of my savings. The original idea was to see if I could get people to work for free—something that was suggested in the class. But as I asked around for recommendations of names for various crew positions, I kept hearing the same thing: Offer *something*. It doesn't have to be the going rate, or what would normally be charged. Figure out what you could comfortably afford to pay—a set fee, rather than an hourly rate – and offer it. Even for small amounts of money, I was assured, people are willing to do a better job. It's a pride-in-your-work sort of thing.

So I did. I figured out what I could afford, and offered all of my key crew members the same amount. Thus far, no one's turned me down over it. In fact, almost every crew member asked to read the script, and after reading it, said they would love to work on the shoot. Encouraging, no?

But Where Did You GET the Money for Paying the Crew Members? Are You Independently Wealthy?

Would I be shooting a "low-budget" movie if I were independently wealthy? Hell, no. Yeah, I have some savings, but there was no way I was going to use most or all of it on this project (which would be easy enough—I don't make a lot of money). I got most of the money by asking for it. I applied to a non-profit arts service organization called Fractured Atlas (www.fracturedatlas.org) who became my fiscal sponsor. Now anyone who donated money to my film could get a tax write-off. In return, Fractured Atlas takes a 6% administrative fee. After receiving my fiscal sponsorship, I immediately sent out letters to thirty people, mostly close friends, family and family friends, explaining the project and telling them that in exchange for their donation, they'd receive a thank you credit in the film.

(Cont'd on page 9)

Seasons

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If you have questions, comments, or article proposals, please send an e-mail to icwpmem@rachelwrites.com. We look forward to hearing from you!

When I sent the letters out, I figured that I'd be in decent shape if they all wrote back donating at least \$25 each. (I had been planning on keeping production costs low, after all.) To my surprise and delight, people were incredibly generous, giving all sorts of amounts. Some gave \$25, but some—most, in fact—gave much more. I was in pretty good shape.

Next came the possibility of having a fundraiser. One of my classmates mentioned a bar in NYC where they hold charity nights—that is, if a charity wants to hold a fundraiser, the bar charges a \$5 cover for all-you-can-drink Bud and Bud Lite with other drinks for \$3, and lets the charity keep all the money. Now, I don't know if it's just because I'm a writer and sort of introverted (to put it mildly) the idea of holding a fundraiser with lots of people in a bar didn't really thrill me. More to the point, my gut balked. I know a lot of people, but would they all be willing to come to this? And even *more* to the point—if the cover was just \$5, I'd have to get an awful lot of people to come on over if I wanted to raise a decent sum of money. The more I thought about the amount of time and effort I would have to put into this (versus putting in time and effort on the actual *film*) the less the idea appealed to me. I did a gut-check by asking a friend of mine who is a professional freelance event planner what she thought, and she absolutely agreed with me. It was not worth expending so much time and effort for so little in return.

But I knew I was going to have to do something else. Production and post-production costs aside, I wanted to enter the finished product in film festivals, and festival application fees generally run between \$35 and \$50 per application. And I would have lab fees, DVD replication fees, etc. I was definitely going to have to raise more money, and applying for grants wasn't terribly feasible. Yes, there are grants for films out there, and grants for short films, but very few and far between for short *narrative* films. The majority of money available to short films is for funding documentaries. While I definitely planned on investigating and applying for grants, I wasn't holding my breath.

And so the idea of an online raffle was born. I wasn't terribly certain I was going to be able to hustle prize donations, but, as I've come to learn in this process, you never know until you try. Again, people were extremely generous. A friend who works at Comedy Central was able to get me VIP (i.e., guaranteed seats that allow you to jump the line) tickets for a taping of *The Colbert Report*. A co-worker at one of my jobs who also has a practice as a massage therapist was happy to donate a one-hour full-body massage. Another friend who is assistant to a producer was able to get me some great DVDs, and so on. That's the beauty of throwing things out into the universe.

So Where Are You in the Process, Now?

I'm in pre-production, still. Finishing with crew hires, looking into grants (I found some for which I might just qualify) futzing with the budget numbers and filling out the paperwork for our January shoot. I'm also researching restaurants in the area of the shoot that might be willing to give us 25 – 50% off (I figure it's January, one of the deadest months of the year for restaurants on the East Coast). I have to say that, while at times I wonder what the hell I've gotten myself into, I do enjoy something I feel I've never had as a writer: a sense of power. Whether or not this movie gets made (and it WILL get made) it is up to ME. I have not sent the script off, I am not waiting for someone to give it the green light, I have not made changes to it in the hopes that the changes will move it one step closer to a full production—this sucker is getting produced.

And I like that.

Mrinalini Kamath is currently converting one of her short plays into a short film. In addition to her Writer credit, she will be sporting a Producer credit as well. She's currently running an online raffle to raise funds – see www.fourthdatethemovie.com/raffle for more details.