

TEN TIPS FOR PLAYWRIGHTS

Mickey Birnbaum

OVERVIEW

Theater is one of the oldest and most enduring of the arts. Playwrights honor the history of the art form while being true twenty-first century innovators. Playwrights are charged to speak uncomfortable truths about society, and to acknowledge the complicated spectrum of the human experience. The playwright's text is the creative seed from which a powerful and immersive live performance grows. Here are ten tips for surviving and thriving as a playwright.

TIP ONE: LISTEN

Playwriting is *language*. And language is about rhythm, rhyme, the meaning beneath the words. It's about how people lie, how they trip over their tongues, how they rage, how they make sense of their experience by telling stories. The good news is that the raw material of plays lives all around us, waiting to be mined. Whether you keep a notebook, or just observe, it behooves the playwright to become hyper-sensitive to the infinite plays unfolding in front of her eyes and ears every day.

TIP TWO: READ

The play is an ephemeral form. Once a run closes, the performances vanish, kept alive only in the hearts and minds of the audience. But plays from antiquity to the present day live on in published form, giving us access to work that can feed our own imaginations. Read plays voraciously. Borrow their techniques if they suit your voice. The book closest at hand should always be the complete works of William Shakespeare. He will teach you most (but not all) of what you need to know.

TIP THREE: EXPERIMENT

Theater has become a marginalized art form. Playwrights experience commercial success only when they migrate to arenas like television or film. But there's freedom in being on the margins. Use it. Don't feel beholden to old forms. Break the mold and create something entirely new. This is what theater has been doing beautifully for thousands of years. The best playwrights are explorers, not followers.

TIP FOUR: SPEAK THE UNSPEAKABLE

Along those lines, use the forum of live performance to address the issues and emotions that other dramatic forms ignore because of commercial considerations. Some of the best plays, from *Oedipus Rex* to *Angels in America*, address desires or political realities about which mainstream media is silent. People come to see plays because they are hungry to see these difficult truths expressed.

TIP FIVE: JOIN A GROUP

Being part of a circle of like-minded playwrights, directors, and actors is invaluable to the playwright. Find a community of theater creators whose opinions you trust, and whose vision you share. They will support you in envisioning your work, and some of them will become your hands-on collaborators.

TIP SIX: INVITE OTHER ART FORMS TO PLAY

Theater plays well with others, too. There may be a place for dance, music, digital video, or art in your work. Cooperative ventures with other art forms expand the idea of theater, provide playwrights, with an extended theatrical language, create new funding opportunities and new audiences, and are just plain fun. Consider creating relationships with artists in other disciplines.

TIP SEVEN: KNOW WHO YOU LIKE, AND COURT THEM

The early-career playwright has to be his own agent and manager, and constantly send out work to theaters across the world. But don't be

indiscriminate in your submissions. There's no point in sending radical work to a theater known for its conservative taste. Know a theater's production history (usually available on its website), and send plays out only to theaters who share your aesthetic. Also, learn the art of the succinct, articulate cover letter. Literary managers love great new work, but you have to get them to read it.

TIP EIGHT: REWRITE

The playwright's best friend is perseverance. Finding the form and the music of your play is not always easy (for me, sometimes it takes years), but it's essential. Theater history is full of examples of playwrights who struggled to create their best work, from Tennessee Williams to Eugene O'Neill. Be patient. Be humble. Be stubborn. Do not release work to the public that isn't ready, however much you may be yearning for a production. At the same time, know when your first thought is your best thought, and leave it be. Don't rewrite blindly, for the sake of rewriting, but wisely and often.

TIP NINE: WORKSHOP

A workshop or reading of your play, in which you get feedback from a director and dramaturge, and hear actors speak your words in front of an audience, is the single most valuable tool for a playwright. It will alert you to the holes in the play, the dialogue that doesn't ring true, the dead spots in the play, and the moments that shine. Plays do not exist solely on the page. They are meant to be acted. They exist, loudly, in the world. Please give yourself the gift of workshopping your play. If you can't find a theater to support your workshop, do it in your living-room.

TIP TEN: PRODUCE

Of course, the next step is producing. When your play is ready, submit it to theaters you love, and hope to find a home for it. If all else fails, produce it yourself. It is essential that a playwright get up out of her chair and into a theater. This is how she learns what works on stage and what doesn't, how to talk to actors, how to fight for the integrity of her work, and how to survive failure and critical drubbing. Production is also the greatest joy of a theater life.

The endless hours spent working in the company of talented actors, directors, and designers is a reward that surpasses money or fame.

RESOURCES

The Playwright's Workbook. Jean-Claude Van Itallie

3 Uses Of The Knife: On The Nature And Purpose Of Drama. David Mamet

Playwrights At Work. Edited By George Plimpton

ABOUT MICKEY BIRNBAUM

Mickey Birnbaum has written screenplays for Universal, Paramount, Columbia/Sony, Interscope, Warner Brothers, and Leonardo di Caprio's Appian Way Productions. He wrote The Tie that Binds for Interscope/Hollywood Pictures, and his screenplay Used Guys is in development with Ben Stiller and Twentieth-Century Fox. He recently collaborated with director Steven Shainberg (Secretary, Fur) on a new screenplay. His stage play Big Death & Little Death inaugurated Woolly Mammoth's new Washington D.C. theatre in 2005. It has been produced subsequently around the country. The play was nominated for a Helen Hayes/Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play, and was a PEN USA Literary Awards Finalist. Mickey is a founding member of Dog Ear, a Los Angeles collective of nationally-renowned playwrights (visit www.dogear.org). Contact Mickey at robotclam@gmail.com.