

‘What’s Wrong with this Play?’: Workshops, Audiences, and Horizons of Expectations.

By John Patrick Bray

Abstract

What is the role of the audience in new play readings? Studies such as ‘The Gates of Opportunities’ by David Dower and *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the American Play* by Todd London, Ben Pesner, and Zannie Giraud Voss, examine, and to some extent question, the role of the playwright in the American theatre as the larger production apparatus has taken precedence over the playwright function. In this article, I will consider the limitations of new play development in the United States, focusing on the role of the audience, and how the conditions of reception situate the audience in the role of diagnostician, looking for problems with a script, rather than in the role of spectator. I will then consider the ideological constraints of developmental programs to highlight how the system of new play development, which has come to be identified by playwrights as ‘developmental hell,’ may be working against the notion of artistic values.

In the summer of 2010, I finally gained a production of my play *Liner Notes* as part of an Off-Off Broadway festival in New York City. I began writing the play in 2001 while an MFA student in playwriting. The play was developed in three classes (two playwriting courses and a process lab) over the course of two academic years. Having crafted a draft that met my satisfaction, I began pursuing production. I should be clear that I see a script as a ‘blue print’ for production or a ‘code-book’ for human behavior. Any script, I believe, can change (and change for the better) during a rehearsal process, or in a forum where the work is read with other theatre practitioners (actors, directors, and designers). A writer can discover any issues of clarity, where a scene might be overwritten, and where the actors, directors, and designers can create their own stories within the groundwork that the writer has laid. However, a script ultimately needs a production,

and a staged reading, despite the best intentions of the companies that create developmental programmes, is a disappointing surrogate.¹

My script was a semi-finalist for the Christopher Brian Polk Award at the Abingdon Theatre in 2004, and it received additional workshops with The New School for Drama, The Actors Studio, Epic Repertory Theatre at The Players' Club, and the 3 States Theatre Company (3STC), and three open-to-the-public readings. The script was finally produced by the re:Directions Theatre Company as part of the 2010 Planet Connections Theatre Festivity Off-Off Broadway. It had taken *nine* years to gain a full production.

This example should sound familiar to playwrights working in the U.S. Dan O'Brien, whose play *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* was produced as part of the 2010 Humana Festival, told me that his play had been through a number of workshops in five years: with Yaddo (a writer's retreat), Primary Stages, the Irish Repertory Company, The Actors Company Theatre, Stage 13, Perry-Mansfield at Steamboat Springs, and then with the Actors Theatre of Louisville, which had conducted a workshop of the play at Louisiana State University prior to moving to production (O'Brien, Email). The play had been through seven workshops in five years.

O'Brien and I are fortunate in that our works have actually been produced. However, an examination of the various biographies of contributors to *The Dramatist: The Journal for the Dramatists Guild of America*, reveals that a playwright is likely to boast more readings, residencies and awards – the awards being more often staged readings – than full productions. Indeed, over the years a number of developmental workshops have emerged in the United States

¹ In the U.S. a staged reading may be performed at music stands or a table; it may have elements of blocking, it may have props; it may have been rehearsed once, or it may not have been rehearsed at all. In short, 'staged reading' is a much more open term in the U.S., as opposed to 'rehearsed readings' and 'staged readings' as used in the UK to indicate whether or not a work has motion (staged) or not (rehearsed). When I use the term 'staged readings,' it will be used to indicate that a work is read – whether at a table, or with some blocking – before an audience.

with the aim of helping or guiding a playwright, such as the O'Neill Conference and The Playwrights Center in Minneapolis; furthermore, a number of regional and not-for-profit theatres have started offering staged-readings open to the public (akin in appearance to the rehearsed reading in the United Kingdom, insofar as actors are seated at a table or behind stools), in which the audience is asked to discuss the play post-reading.

In this article, I want to consider the role of the audience in new play development in the United States. I will begin with a look at the scholarship of Mary Luckhurst, who suggests that the model of United States development may be adopted by the U.K. I will then consider some of the current issues with new play development in America. I will suggest that the audience at a staged-reading in the U.S. is situated not as a spectator, but as diagnostician, who seeks to identify (and sometimes, prescribe) issues within the play as written.

In *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*, Mary Luckhurst suggests that the current rehearsed reading culture in the U.K. finds its inspiration in the staged readings featured in developmental programs in the U.S. (209-16). In the United States, a number of nonprofit theatres have a developmental wing, in which a literary manager (who may double as a dramaturg) either solicits scripts, or accepts unsolicited scripts, which are given a reading before the public. In the United States, there is the implicit suggestion that if a play is given enough development, it may one day be 'production ready,' a very subjective term with no clear criteria. Luckhurst considers some of the issues of new play development. In her interview with Steve Waters, playwright and lecturer in playwriting at the University of Birmingham, Waters suggests:

New play development is often inherently reactionary. If it's about making the play 'work,' then it can too often result in conversations about the 'well-made-

play.' But Edward Bond's *Saved* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* broke with convention and didn't 'work' – in ways that turned out to be revolutionary. (214)

If it is true that the model for new play development in the U.S. is being inherited by the U.K., then Waters' suggestion that new play development is 'reactionary' and champions the 'well-made play' aesthetic, is not without some merit. In *Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development*, Douglas Anderson conducts an exhaustive history of new play development in the U.S., from the decentralization of the theatre, through the creation of The O'Neill National Playwrights Conference in the 1960s (and its various emulators), to the financial crumbling of Off-Broadway in the late 1980s. In his conclusion, Anderson laments:

I began this study fully prepared to scream about the scandalous lack of opportunity and financial support for new work. I was quickly disabused. What the industry lacks isn't opportunity; it is taste, intelligence, and vision. It doesn't lack funding, but appropriate management of its re-sources. There's no dearth of talented writers. But we've institutionalized some damaging developmental formuli, placing the creative process in predictable, uncreative environments. (82)

The 'formuli,' as suggested by Anderson, are based on a system created by the O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, the most visible (and controversial) developmental program in the United States. With the O'Neill Conference, seven or eight scripts are selected out of seven to eight hundred during an open submission process, and the work is developed over the period of a week, culminating in a staged-reading. Many of the playwrights who have had work developed at the O'Neill have gained regional and Broadway productions (August Wilson is one example of a playwright 'discovered' at the O'Neill).

Anderson notes that the 'O'Neill system' promotes the idea that, when it comes to developing a new work, 'massive input is helpful, [...] massive on the spot rewriting improves a

text,' and 'directors can be randomly assigned to texts and respond to them with creativity and insight.' He also puts forward the notion that 'a public debate with audiences and a wide array of conference members is valuable' (64). The first point, that 'massive input is helpful,' and the final point, which involves 'public debate with audiences,' both suggest the beginnings of 'developmental hell,' which will be discussed later in this study. Anderson also notes that during talk-back sessions, the playwrights made 'choices to please everybody,' and as a result the structure of each play 'became linear,' while a play that is experimental 'doesn't stand a chance' (64-65). The notion that an audience needs to nurture playwrights by debating with them suggests that the audience can both diagnose the problems found in the play (that is, the reasons why the play does not 'work,' suggesting a culturally coded knowledge of the well-made play formula) and suggest how to fix the problems in order to make sure the play is structurally sound. As Anderson notes, with developmental programmes, plays 'start to look like other plays' (65).

The predictable, uncreative environment has become home for the U.S. playwright. How is this environment created? Is there a figure in the apparatus of theatre production (or development) responsible for this? Studies such as *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play* by Todd London, Ben Pesner, and Zannie Giraud Voss and *Gates of Opportunity* by David Dower conclude that artistic directors and literary managers have become more conservative in production choice due to economic constraints. Staged readings for the public may serve two purposes: the work is performed (although, not produced), and the organization hosting the reading benefits by appearing more grant-friendly. Jeremy Cohen, the recently appointed Artistic Director of The Playwrights Centre in Minneapolis, argues that

regional theatres are in fear of losing their subscriber-base, which constitutes (mostly) an older audience that may be put off by new works and new aesthetics:

Development is all good, but we need productions right now. We've got to get on regional theatres and push them through their fears of producing new works, because if we don't we're going to let [issues of] money be the dying out of great new theatrical work, and we can't let that happen. (Cohen, Interview)

What damage is being done to American plays through the system of new play development?

According to playwright Steven Dietz, playwrights in the U.S. have adapted in order to write for the reading, rather than production:

Many of these plays [in staged readings], viewed later in full production...do not begin to match the magic of their script-in-hand predecessors. The reason is simple. Our playwrights have, with the adaptability of cockroaches, learned to write brilliantly to fit the form – and in today's theatre, more often than not, the given form is not production; it is the staged reading. (43)

Furthermore, for Dietz, there is a 'wealth of these well-made plays because we have a wealth of staged reading writers' (43). Key to his conversation is that the 'well-made' aesthetic, as calcified at the O'Neill, has haunted developmental programs in the United States, resulting in writers who are creating works in a single aesthetic (the well-made, psychologically driven, realistic play). By 'haunted,' I am referring to the term used by Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage*. Carlson states: 'Derrida and others have argued that all texts are in fact haunted by other texts and can be best understood as weavings together of preexisting textual material – indeed, that all reception is based upon this intertextual dynamic' (17). Furthermore, when compared to other literary arts, drama 'has always been centrally concerned not simply with the telling of stories but with the retelling of stories already known to its public' (17). In other words, a play in creation is coded by a playwright who is familiar with previous works, just as an audience who

receives the play is coded with a horizon of expectations based on its knowledge of pre-existing works, and decodes each work it encounters in accordance with these expectations. In short, the audience, haunted by previous experiences with plays, will guide the playwright in making crucial artistic decisions with the play.

The Role of the Audience

One of the key concepts with developmental workshops at not-for-profit theatres is that the audience has a voice in the creation of a play. For example, in a recent e-blast from a non-profit theatre in New Jersey, a staged reading was advertised letting potential audiences know their help is vital in the redrafting of the script:

For those of you who are not familiar with staged readings, they are a large part of the development of a new play and we hope to bring many plays to you in this forum. Actors perform the play with minimal rehearsal and read with 'script in hand' so it can be heard by the audience, playwright and director for the first time as they receive feedback on the new work. (South Camden)

The e-blast concludes:

We invite you to join us for this unique experience as we allow our audience members to engage with theatre in a new way and have a part in the development of a new American play. (South Camden)

This invitation highlights the practices of a number of theatres which have developmental readings: the first, actors read with their script-in-hand; the second, because there is minimal rehearsal, there may be some movement, but still without any props, set, lights, etc.; finally, the audience is invited to give feedback to the director and playwright who are present the night of the reading. Although this is certainly not a new way for audiences to engage with work-in-development, the reading is presented to the community as if it is something exciting and new.

The assumption is that their remarks will help the playwright, thereby shaping the play. In short, the audience is being invited to the reading because the playwright needs its feedback in order to gauge what is working and what is not. The audience is a problem-solver.

Another way to view the invitation is to suggest that the audience is being asked to attend the development of a work, in order to decide whether or not the play-as-read should be moved forward to (a hypothetical) production. If we view this as the case, then the audience member at the reading/talk-back session becomes a potential consumer of the play in full production: a problem-solver whose role is to iron out the quirks prior to deciding whether to spend any more time (or money) on this piece of theatre industry based on his or her opinions of the reading. If the audience member is a potential consumer, then how much of the fully-realized play (i.e. what the play may look like when fully produced) the audience actually sees becomes essential in order to attract interest (financial or otherwise). Because staged readings are presented 'bare bones,' with actors holding a script in hand, this creates a problem: the diagnostician/potential consumer is only getting a blueprint. That is to say, a full production presents codified bodies moving fully in space, while the staged reading usually has the actors looking down toward a script (occasionally at one another, but certainly with limited 'connectedness'), while sitting and turning pages. The spectator has very little to *look at* vis-à-vis the visual, dramatic action. If the diagnostician suggests that 'something is missing' in the work they have just heard, it would be the additional elements that make it a fully realized production; however, music stands, which performers use to hold their scripts, as sites of performance, may confuse the spectator, as they represent 'performance' (when used at a concert, for example) while holding back the actor/performer.

Taken to an extreme, the room the reading is held in could support the notion that something is missing from the experience of the staged reading. As Ric Knowles has argued in *Reading the Material Theatre*, ‘space itself exerts its influence, silently inscribing or disrupting specific (and ideologically coded) ways of working, for practitioners, and of seeing and understanding, for audiences’ (62-63). In other words, having a reading in a physical space – whether in a darkened theatre, a rehearsal room, or a theatre space with the set of another show behind the actors – impacts on the audience’s reception of the work. Space operates as a context for the reading of performance; the context is an ideological construction that guides the decoding process of an audience.

Knowles provides an example of how the introduction of a table at a rehearsal of Judith Thompson’s *Sled* created a new power dynamic, in which the rehearsal moved from ‘an exploratory workshop involving a designer, actors,’ and ‘script assistants’ who were ‘all working with the playwright-as-director in the exploration and evolution of an experimental, expressionist script, growing and spreading throughout the undifferentiated rehearsal space,’ into ‘a proscenium-like performance space with a defined separation between the actors and the audience’ (61-62). Although Knowles is suggesting that this dynamic changed the nature of a rehearsal, I would suggest that the placement of actors at a table or a music stand creates a different power dynamic than that of a full production. I suggest that this has to do with the body being still at a table, making very little contact with other actors, and very little contact with an audience. In short, an audience receiving the play has a horizon of expectations based on encounters with preexisting works – that is, the play is haunted by other works, as suggested by Marvin Carlson. Based on this ‘intertextual dynamic,’ an audience will guide a playwright to make decisions which, according to Douglas Anderson, make the plays more linear (Carlson 17;

Anderson 64-65). The furniture used at a staged reading (which may include music stands) hides the performing body from view, holding back the energy of a piece, giving the impression that something is inherently lacking in the play. If the audience is situated as a problem solver (as South Camden implies via an invitation to be part of the development process), then there are a number of factors that will reinforce the role; these include its previous experiences with plays and the power dynamic of the reading body with other reading bodies (obscured in part from the audience's view). If this is the case, if the performing body is obscured (in a proscenium style arrangement), and if Anderson's notion that plays at readings look like other plays holds true, then how can a playwright navigate the talk-back session?

For some, there are practical ways to consider an approach to the feedback environment. Playwright Jeffrey Sweet has stated that 'Improperly run talk-backs are often either worthless or destructive,' and furthermore, the playwright should be prepared to 'sit through a lot of advice, mostly well-intended but also often aggravating' (Sweet, 'Feedback'). This 'advice' is the audience's way of solving problems it finds in the script, in order to be a part of the play's development. Sweet reminds the writer that talk-backs are 'required by the grant that is subsidizing the series, or they are a part of a theater's desire to increase the audience's emotional investment in the company' ('Feedback'). Therefore, 'talk-backs are for the audience' in two ways: first, asking audiences for help with a script may ensure that they will see the fully realized production (pre-consumer); and second, as Sweet suggests, 'the opportunity to instruct and enlighten artists can be very satisfying' for audience members (diagnostician) ('Feedback').

Playwright and teacher David Rush has also suggested that the playwright and facilitator of the stage reading have a meeting beforehand in order to ensure that the audience session does not stray directly into problem solving (Rush 53-54). Furthermore, when he acts as a facilitator at

a student reading, he has ‘worked with the writers long enough to have a sense of the play’ (61).

Writing in 2000, Rush offers the anecdote:

Last summer, a writer had created a minor character to add comic relief to the intense story of euthanasia. The audience had found this character attractive, and the writer was tempted to give him more jokes. When I sense this coming, I stop the discussion and ask the writers to take me back to the beginning of the process. I ask them to define for me what the play is meant to be, to tell me where it came from, and so forth. I ask if this is still the play they want to write. (61)

Having a dialogue with the playwright can create confidence that the writer knows his or her work before approaching the diagnostician audience. By meeting beforehand, the facilitator and playwright can keep the conversation on track, which, for Rush, means that the audience can simply state what they saw and heard, rather than be given a platform to diagnose and prescribe a remedy.

What becomes problematic is the notion that an audience is asked to assume a role in which its assistance is needed in shaping a play, rather than supporting a company through patronage and trusting that the company is producing works which may enlighten, entertain, or at times even challenge an audience’s expectations. Because development has become commonplace in the U.S., it is likely that a play will be shepherded through more than one developmental program without the possibility of production. This has become known as developmental hell.

In Rona Edwards and Monika Skerbelis’s *I Liked It, Didn’t Love It’: Screenplay Development From the Inside Out*, the authors note that the term ‘developmental hell’ was ‘used often by producers and writers to explain the lengthy amount of time it takes to get a movie produced’ (2). The process of development is a means to ensure a large box-office return. In the theatre of the U.S., developmental hell is the process by which a script is brought through

various workshops with different theatre companies (and therefore, different audiences), and changed accordingly (as, with the O'Neill model, 'massive input is helpful,' (Anderson 64)), but without a production. This series of readings creates a scenario similar to 'test audiences' in the movie industry, as each audience brings with it its own horizon of expectations, its own aesthetic preferences, and its own coded notions of community, which then operate to 'fix' the conventions of the script which do not immediately meet the community's needs.

Because of the finances involved with production, most theatres of the U.S. are non-profit, and rely on individual and corporate donations in order to operate. This creates a scenario in which the content of the play has to be 'appropriate' for a general audience, as theatres have an ethical responsibility to corporations, corporate stock-holders and consumers, individual donors, and potential and actual subscribers. As Bob Jude Ferrante, the Managing Director of Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre has noted, 'Risk is the enemy of anyone who runs an organization' (Ferrante Interview).

Conclusions on the Role of the Audience

As I have argued throughout, talk-back sessions at staged readings guide the audience in diagnosing and repairing the script, as the readers are either seated behind a table or at music stands, a site of another kind of performance, with their (un)coded bodies obstructed from view, giving the sense that something is missing. The playwright and the rest of the development and production team need to recognize this when presenting a work. A reading may be an art-object (as David J. Eshelman argues in 'The Art of the New Play Reading'), but it is, in the end, a poor surrogate for a fully realized production. While I do not mean to suggest that every play that is written should be produced, I do want to suggest that if a company is willing to present a play to

an audience, it should be committed to producing the play. A single community can and should be involved with a dramatic work, but leading a play from one location to another creates a developmental hell akin to the Hollywood motion picture industry. I asked the literary department at the Royal Court Theatre if they would consider audience response at a reading when selecting their season and received the following response:

We very, very rarely do public readings and the idea that we might take direct public response into consideration would be considered very odd (and very 'movie industry'). We do, of course, take account of audience reaction during preview performances but in the actual selection of the program we back our own judgement. (Email)

The email above alleviated some of my concerns regarding new play production in England. England has a reputation for being an extremely new-play and new-playwright friendly country, and it is my hope that it will remain as such. Taking this email into account, I am hopeful that if the U.K. is to learn anything from the U.S. model it is to avoid bringing in the audience too early. Rehearsed readings, after all, should be for the playwright working *with* the rest of the company. The culture of developmental programs in the U.S. has created new power dynamics in the theatre, as well as a new role for the audience: the potential consumerist/diagnostician.

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