

Chris Foxon & George Turvey

# BEING A PLAYWRIGHT

A Career Guide for Writers

N

H

B

NICK HERN BOOKS

London

[www.nickhernbooks.co.uk](http://www.nickhernbooks.co.uk)

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	xi
<b>ACT ONE: STARTING OUT</b>	<b>1</b>
Training	3
Writing for Theatre	37
Redrafting and Editing	75
Getting Noticed: The Road to Being Programmed	91
<b>ACT TWO: MAKING THE SHOW</b>	<b>125</b>
Working with Collaborators	127
Making Deals	145
Researching and Developing (R&D)	161
Going into Production	173
<b>ACT THREE: TAKING THE NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>199</b>
Reflecting	201
Moving On	209
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>233</b>
Training Opportunities	235
Theatrical Literary Agencies	240
New-Writing Venues and Companies	242
Theatre Publishers	244

Playwriting Competitions	245
International Companies	246
Potential Funders	248
Industry Resources	249
List of Contributors	250
Select Bibliography	253
About Papatango	256

## INTRODUCTION

To become a professional playwright requires more than just the ability to write a great script. This runs counter to many of our cultural reference points, which perpetuate the romantic image of the writer as a lone genius, penning something of such outstanding wisdom and artistic worth that the world falls into line to accommodate them. Think of the wonderful story of George Devine rowing out to John Osborne's little houseboat, where the writer was literally stewing nettles to survive, so eager was Devine to announce that *Look Back in Anger* would headline the Royal Court's next season. But this story is wonderful because it's so exceptional. Usually the myth of the sudden 'breakthrough' is just that – a myth. Most playwrights have to labour for a very long time on a lot of things besides their script before they achieve success.

That's one of the reasons British playwriting still has significant failings in representation; if talent were truly all it took, we'd see new playwrights emerging from every avenue of society. Instead, the writers who make a professional career in theatre are, disproportionately, from more privileged, insider backgrounds. This is for many reasons – cultural capital, confidence, education, wealth to fall back on – but perhaps the most crucial is having the connections and know-how to navigate the business, not just the art, of playwriting.

Successful playwrights have to understand how to promote their script, how to build relationships with venues and companies, how to collaborate with different practitioners, how to navigate different deals and production opportunities, and how to maximise the

impact of such opportunities. These are just a few of the practical realities that writers must master if they are to survive within a competitive, often flawed, theatre industry.

Since 2007 our theatre company, Papatango, has worked to discover new playwrights, develop their writing, and support them in building careers, focusing on artists who might otherwise struggle to access professional resources. We have time and again been asked the same questions, faced the same uncertainties, resolved the same complications.

Hence this book. If each writer who emerges, blinking, from the creative sanctuary of the bedroom/garret/studio faces the same challenges as the writer before them did and the writer after them will do, then it seems there is a need for an accessible, unpretentious guide to the business of playwriting. And maybe, just maybe, that will help to diversify playwriting and open up pathways into theatre.

This book therefore shares our experiences and the experiences of the many brilliant writers and theatre-makers with whom we have been lucky enough to work, both through Papatango and independently. It is the result of thousands of conversations with hundreds of artists. In that sense it is a collaboration, as any work for theatre must be. It would not exist were it not for all the individuals who have had the desire and daring to ask how to be a playwright. We will make it clear when we are referring to a particular writer's experiences. Huge thanks to all who have shared.

The book is structured in three acts to work through the main stages of an emerging writer's career, from getting started to making a production to capitalising on a show's run. Each act addresses the situation of a writer at a different level of experience. If you've never attempted to write a play before or need some guidance on how to reach out to companies, start at Act One; if you feel fully equipped to write a script and share it, but are keen to know more about how to turn it into a production, then check out Act Two; if you've already had a full professional production and are looking to capitalise on this, then you might decide to go straight to Act Three. The appendices contain some useful lists and expand on the references outlined in the book.

Regardless of where you are in your career right now, we trust this book will prove a useful resource. By tackling the recurring questions and challenges encountered on a writer's journey, we hope to enable playwrights to flourish – especially those who would otherwise lack the knowledge or contacts to overcome the barriers of what can be a monolithic industry.

## What It Offers

This book is not an academic analysis of playwriting or the theatre industry, nor is it a guide to writing a play. Instead, by distilling our experiences as producers at the coalface of new writing, we attempt to explain in clear terms what being a playwright means, how the business of playwriting often works, and some of the ways you might go about it.

New writing is a changing industry: in recent years we have seen the rise of more playwriting awards (often in place of commissioning); moves towards devising and collaboration rather than traditional text-based practices; and a shift of public funding away from the focus on new writing that characterised the decades either side of the millennium. All of these impact on how playwrights navigate their place within British theatre today. Rather than be drawn into discursive reflections on the reasons for these trends, we focus on the practicalities of how playwrights can carve out successful careers within this landscape.

The proviso is that Chris is a producer and George an actor and artistic director (we'll explain these terms in the chapter on 'Working with Collaborators'); neither of us are playwrights. While we have both taught playwriting within drama schools, workshops and universities, we do so from the perspectives of our different disciplines. This book therefore is categorically not a guide to writing a play. There are already several impressive books on that subject (we recommend some in the chapter on 'Training'). Instead, this book outlines how to make the most of any play that you have written, because even Shakespeare would never have gone very far if his manuscripts remained trapped in a drawer.

Nor is this book designed to advocate any ideal process. Something as personal as writing stories cannot follow any fixed route. Instead, we consider all the elements that affect a playwright's career, so you can navigate the best pathway for yourself.

## What is a Playwright?

This seems an easy question, no? The answer appears obvious: someone who writes a play. But it's not quite that simple.

Firstly, 'writing a play' covers a vast range of approaches, from an individual scribbling away on a literary masterpiece, to a devising ensemble with one person nominated to turn collective ideas into a single text-based story, through to teams of writers coming together to edit verbatim material into a script – and many more practices besides.

Secondly, even if the writing is a solitary pursuit, plays are never individual enterprises. For a script to become a play it needs to be performed, meaning actors, directors, producers, designers and stage managers will get involved. The script will almost certainly evolve according to their contributions. That doesn't (at least, it shouldn't) diminish the playwright's role, but it does take us beyond the apparent confines of the title.

Thirdly, etymology muscled in to reveal that 'playwright' is a compound word which has no linguistic basis in the word 'writing'. It is comprised of 'play', which derives from the Old English *plega* meaning 'brisk movement' (remember that next time you're entering the fourth hour of a Trevor Nunn production), and 'wright', deriving from the Old English *wrihta* meaning 'worker'. We rather like this: it's a reminder that a playwright is someone who works to make movement happen, and that their play is wrought, hammered, beaten into shape – however it's done. That seems a far more inclusive concept for all the different forms that playwriting can take than the initial assumption from which we started.

(On a sidenote, the word 'writing' itself comes from the Old Saxon *writan* which means to write and also to tear. So tearing your hair out is an honourable part of writing.)

The point is that being a playwright is not just something you decide to do, it's something you decide *how* to do.

For the purposes of this book, we're assuming that 'playwright' means someone with at least a partial creative stake in a text-based script that they want to see performed, and who has an interest in continuing to make more text-based scripts for performance. We don't champion any particular creative process but just explain various approaches in how to build a career as a playwright, informed by the principle that certain practical challenges recur regardless of individual artistic practices.

The most important thing to remember is that you are a playwright if you call yourself a playwright; no one has the right to dispute that by picking holes in your CV, training or process. We trust that this book will help your plays to be successful, however you choose to make them.

We've worked with hundreds of new writers, who have gone on to win BAFTA, OffWestEnd, RNT Foundation and Alfred Fagon Awards, and had their work premiere worldwide as well as in the West End. They've all been very different, as people and as artists, except for one thing: every one of them built a career from nothing more than an idea for a play. So can you.

Papatango's motto has always been: 'All you need is a story.' We hope we can now add: 'And perhaps also this guide.'

Good luck.



# ACT ONE: STARTING OUT

This first act is aimed at writers at the beginning of their careers. Wondering how to learn about playwriting? Sent off scripts to a few companies but never heard back? Don't know what producers want to see in a theatre script? It's all explained here.

Respective chapters discuss: options for training and how to acquire the skills of a playwright; how to shape your script for the stage, addressing the formal and practical concerns of decision-makers; techniques to redraft and hone your script; and the best ways to share your finished script with maximum impact.

These cover everything it takes to give your script the best possible chance of being produced. We discuss the pragmatic factors that influence script readers, and detail tricks of the trade that may help your script overcome the hurdles of programming.

Acts Two and Three will discuss what happens after your script has been accepted for programming.

# ACT TWO: MAKING THE SHOW

Once you've learned the skills of playwriting, polished and shared the resulting script, and been programmed, it may seem like the hard yards are over. In a sense, yes: only one in a thousand scripts will come to fruition, so getting to this stage, hopefully *the* stage, is a remarkable achievement.

In another sense, however, only now can the really vital work begin: as long as a script is contained within the relatively safe circuit of submissions and scratches, there is always the reassurance that it is not yet necessary to perfect a rehearsal draft or face the glare of public scrutiny. Once someone has programmed the script, that changes. A playwright must switch to production mode, requiring a different set of skills. That means working as hard as ever.

This act discusses the various processes that prepare a script for production: how to collaborate with theatre-makers and understand different roles; what to expect from and how to negotiate deals and rights; R&D and how to get the most from it; finally, what to do once a show is in rehearsals, previews and production. Making your script into a play – that's what this act in a playwright's career is all about.

# ACT THREE: TAKING THE NEXT STEPS

This is the third and final act – though in many ways it takes you to just the start of a professional career. It covers what to do once that production is in the bag and your thoughts turn towards even bigger and better things.

Most writers find it such a task to attain a production that they naturally assume that things can only be easier thereafter. In fact, the gradient remains as sharp, possibly even steeper. British theatre is very small, geographically and often financially, and there is a fetish for new writers. Funders prefer to plough money into a discovery, audiences are drawn to something new, and companies often emphasise debut talent in any programming that ventures away from established artists. Odd as it sounds, opportunities for emerging or even mid-stage writers are perhaps scarcer than for brand-new writers.

To land more productions, it's often a case of returning to the drawing board and repeating many of the initial steps outlined in the first acts of this book – only, hopefully, these become a little easier with familiarity, and you will be armed with extra know-how, reputation and track record.

This act, therefore, tackles how to transition from being a writer with one or two full productions under your belt, to being a professional playwright able to earn a living.