

A DINOSAUR'S SECRET

by David Copelin

Even as a graduate of Yale Drama School's program in "Criticism and Dramatic Literature," I only knew the word *dramaturg* as something the German theatre had invented. I didn't pay much attention, because I got my DFA degree in 1972 with a dissertation on John Arden and Margareta D'Arcy's early plays, and because LMDA didn't exist until 1985. I taught dramatic literature at the University of California, Davis, until 1974. A year later, I got my first job in professional theatre, as Literary Manager at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. There, I learned how to read, assess, and report on scripts of new plays. I was reading for the late Gordon Davidson, the Taper's founding Artistic Director. It took me a while to understand that a play's intrinsic merit would have to compete with more practical aspects of a contemporary not-for-profit theatre, and that reality wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

I learned from my "assistant," Marian Barnett, how to read and assess a new, unproduced play. Marian had been reading scripts for the Taper for some time. In her varied life, she had also worked with John Houseman as well as the Rolling Stones. Marian knew the difference between character dialogue and the other languages of theatre in performance, and how they could interact. From Marian, I learned how to synopsise a script, how to comment on it for readers higher on the Taper's food chain than I, how to see its potential for an audience that was willing to take certain risks, and how to argue persuasively for it when others needed convincing. Along the way, I had become a dramaturg, and though I never held that title in a staff position, I served as such at a number of theatres, including New Dramatists, the Phoenix Theatre, and Arena Stage.

Meanwhile, the need for a national dramaturgical organization was becoming apparent. I am one of the founding members of LMDA; as its third President, I organized LMDA's first annual conference on the West Coast, in San Francisco in 1988, and I recruited LMDA's first Canadian member. I asked Anne Cattaneo to succeed me as President, and we are lucky that she did so.

I also had a secret.

I wanted to write plays, but I was afraid to. Why join the thousands of wannabes, submitting scripts to theatres where the first readers might be too inexperienced or too cautious to see their potential? Why not continue as a staff member, a theatre bureaucrat, someone who got paid a salary, however puny? I was scared of rejection, of being judged, or worse: of being ignored. I feared getting lost in the sea of scripts that I knew well from the Taper, where submissions went from about 800 scripts a year to over 1,200 after Michael Cristofer's *The Shadow Box*, which had premiered at the Taper, went to Broadway and won both a Tony and a Pulitzer. Ultimately, I was scared that I had no talent for playwriting, that I'd be found out if I wrote a few, that I was better off as what John Glore once called a "handmaiden" to *real* playwrights than as a playwright myself.

So I worked as a dramaturg, sometimes as a scriptreader, sometimes as a dramaturg on a single project. Many of my theatre friends wrote plays, some quite successfully. I had watched John Patrick Shanley write many plays at New Dramatists, as he was learning his craft. Some worked, some didn't, but John kept writing. He and others, playwrights as varied as Susan Miller, Jeff Sweet, Maria Irene Fornes, Judith Thompson, August Wilson, Carmen Aguirre, Robert Anderson, Emily Mann, Romulus Linney, Paddy Gillard-Bentley, Charles Ludlam, Marcia Johnson, Gus Edwards, and so on – if they could trust their gifts, take risks, put their work out there and keep going no matter what anyone thought or said, maybe I could, too. Even the harshest criticism is rarely fatal.

But where to start?

In 1965, I saw a revival in Paris of Victor Hugo's 1833 melodrama *Lucrece Borgia*. The play and its subject intrigued me, so I did some research and learned that Lucrezia Borgia's reputation was a lot nastier than her actual life. Starting in 1997, I translated Hugo's play into English, but its more than 33 characters made it a very long shot for production. So I adapted my translation, reducing the cast size to 6, inventing new characters, focusing on the elements that seemed to have meaning now. I called the new play *Bella Donna*. That title was a riff on belladonna, the reputed favorite poison of the Borgias. I

submitted the play to a few theatres, and one day I got a call from the Toronto Fringe Festival. They had chosen my script as Best Play, and offered me a production! Thanks to director Sue Miner, a strong cast, and some imaginative designers, the production became a “Patron’s Pick.” The play has since been staged in venues as diverse as Terrace, British Columbia, and St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador.

So I guess I have become a playwright after all. Who knew? I still have some dramaturgical skills, and I’m even confident enough to hire a dramaturg to work with me on a new play that is complicated and maddening. I’ve now written monologues, ten-minute plays, one-act plays, a couple of full-length plays, and some of them have been produced.

That’s my story, and, I hope, my credibility.

Heather Helinsky has asked me to offer suggestions to dramaturgs in many different situations who deal with script submissions. As a playwright who has to choose where and why to send my scripts, what factors affect my choice?

1. I will not pay a fee to have my work read, except for the O’Neill and similar prestigious, respected, and credible development opportunities. At the Taper, we *never* charged playwrights to pay us to vet their work. These days, some theatres treat playwrights as profit centers, instead of compensating their scriptreaders from other budget streams. Do such theatres also charge actors a fee to audition?

2. Every script submission deserves a response, maybe two: one, saying that you’ve received the script, and two, after it’s been read. Too often, I and other playwrights submit our scripts – and hear *nothing*. Ever. This is weird, because it’s a lot easier to send an email than it used to be to send a letter to a play’s author, along with the script, using the SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope) stapled to the back cover of the script that had been submitted by snail mail. Moreover, such silence contradicts many theatres’ boilerplate statements of respect for the writers whose plays they produce.

3. Some playwrights want feedback on their scripts. I would avoid giving in to the temptation, unless your theatre is making a commitment to the play, or to the playwright. I recommend three kinds of response:

(a) a courteous email rejecting the play, thanking the author for the opportunity to read it, but being clear that your theatre is not interested in it; or

(b) an email saying that this play is not what your theatre is looking for, but you are interested in its author's writing and would be happy to read other plays they've written, or will write; or

(c) an email saying that the theatre is interested in the play and the playwright, which will ideally lead to a phone call and/or a meeting with the author. Tread carefully here, as it's easy to get a playwright's hopes up before it's appropriate to do so. I learned the hard way that you need the interest of your artistic director or another staff director before sending such an email. A script excites you? Good! Pass it up the food chain with a strong recommendation. And if, despite enthusiasm, your theatre is not going to option the play or offer a commission to the playwright, get permission from both your Artistic Director and the playwright to share the play with dramaturgs at other theatres. Collegiality among dramaturgs is a good thing.

4. Playwrights may ask you for a critique of their work. Unless you want to be in dialogue with them, especially if you say something that suggests to them that you didn't understand their play and its potential, don't give a critique. As a paid scriptreader, you are working for the theatre that employs you, not for any individual playwright. Playwrights have been known to create a page of positive quotes from dramaturgs, then use that page as a sales tool.

5. Please, please, do what you can to stop your theatre from putting playwrights through script submission hell before they can even send you a script! I'm talking about such things as asking for log lines, synopses, resumes, ethnic or cultural information, the script's first ten pages, and the like. You don't need it yet. Just read the damn script!

I suspect that much of the information that theatres ask for from playwrights is to satisfy grant application requirements, or to convince themselves that they are being sensitive and encouraging to playwrights who have been excluded from our stages for various reasons having little to do with the quality and potential of the writing. But if asking for that information in advance deters any writer from sending you their scripts, what have you gained?

Finally, may you all have the wonderful experience of finding a script in your slush pile that transcends its genre or creates a new one, that speaks to you in a unique voice, that reminds you of why you do this odd and complex job with the funny name. It won't happen often, but when it does, there's nothing like it.