

## PLAYWRITING AUSTRALIA

*KICKING DOWN THE DOORS*  
**EMERGING PLAYWRIGHTS FORUM**  
- 10 MARCH 2011 -

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### **1. BACKGROUND**

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On the evening of Thursday 10 March 2011, Playwriting Australia hosted a forum for emerging playwrights in NSW, with a specific focus on those based in and around Sydney. The aim of the *Kicking Down the Doors Information and Networking Forum* was to enable unproduced playwrights to:

- Learn about assessment programs and opportunities;
- Identify barriers and solutions to gaining access to theatres; and
- Build a community of playwrights able to network and explore shared goals.

*Kicking Down the Doors* is a partnership initiative of Playwriting Australia and Arts NSW, part of the NSW Government's Communities NSW. Beginning in 2010, the initiative involved an open call-out for unproduced playwrights from around NSW who had not had their work professionally produced.

More than 120 writers submitted a short extract from a full-length script. In September 2010 a full-day's reading of submitted texts were held with six playwrights selected to be mentored. Two of the mentored playwrights<sup>1</sup> had a professional reading of their plays at the National Play Festival held at Parramatta Riverside Theatre in March 2011.

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<sup>1</sup> *Heaven* by Kit Brookman  
*A Hoax* by Rick Viede.

A second part of the *Kicking Down the Doors* initiative for emerging playwrights was the hosting of the 10 March 2011 Information and Networking Forum.

Running from 5:30 to 8:30 the Forum was attended by over 50 individuals.

The Forum began with short presentations by five members of an expert panel invited to outline opportunities and provide advice for playwrights starting out. The panel comprised:

- Jane Bodie *Playwright, Head of Playwriting, NIDA*
- Angela Keefe *Australian Writers' Guild*
- Chris Mead *Artistic Director, PlayWriting Australia*
- David Ryding *Executive Director, NSW Writers' Centre*
- Katherine Thomson *Playwright, Australian Writers' Guild.*

Following the presentations the Forum was opened up to questions and answers from the floor. There were also a number of group discussions held over the course of the evening.

What follows is a summary of some of key issues and options discussed at the Forum. It has been prepared by Edwina Deakin, of EJD Consulting and Associates, who also facilitated and chaired the event.

## 2. RELEVANT ORGANISATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

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The panellists identified a number of opportunities for unpublished playwrights as summarised below. All relevant information is listed on each organisation's website. Playwrights are encouraged to regularly check these sites for information and updates.

➤ **Playwriting Australia:** <http://www.pwa.org.au>

As the national peak bodies for playwriting services, Playwriting Australia's aim is to support the development and promotion of great new Australian writing for performance. Their work involves working with established and emerging playwrights and the companies who produce their work to ensure more local artists have the opportunity to develop their skills and see their work performed. The organisation focuses on advocacy, industrial development and skills development. Playwrights can keep up to date with opportunities via:

<http://www.pwa.org.au/Info/Links/>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/PlayWriting-Australia/119779281425232>

<http://twitter.com/playwritingaus>

➤ **Australian Writer's Guild:** <http://www.awg.com.au>

The Australian Writer's Guild is the peak body representing Australian performance writers. They provide industrial advice, script assessment as well development opportunities. Individuals may become members or associate members of the Guild. Useful information, services and advice can be found on their website.

➤ **NSW Writer's Centre:** <http://www.nswwriterscentre.org.au>

The NSW Writer's Centre was established in 1991 to promote writing-based culture and the rights and interests of writers. The Centre offers literary resources and professional information to established and aspiring writers of all kinds. It provides opportunities for professional development by holding seminars, courses and workshops in all genres and aspects of writing. It has a growing library of resource material for members to peruse, including an extensive collection of Australian literary magazines.

➤ **National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA):** <http://nida.edu.au>

NIDA is a centre of excellence in training for theatre, film and television. NIDA's primary role is to select and train exceptionally gifted young people at a tertiary level, preparing them for careers in theatre, film and television. NIDA currently has six playwrights in its graduating class. It regularly offers short courses and courses for adults, all of which are listed on the website.

➤ **Communities NSW:** <http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au>

Communities NSW is the NSW Government agency responsible for the Arts in NSW. Opportunities relevant to emerging playwrights include:

- Quick Response Grants which provide additional support for independent theatre companies, groups and individuals. Guidelines and application forms for the May 2011 round are available for download.
- The NSW Writer's Fellowship is an annual fellowship. The 2011 application process closed on 21 March 2011.

➤ **Australia Council:** <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au>

The Australia Council for the Arts is the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body. It supports Australia's arts through funding, strengthening and developing the arts sector. The Council also collaborates to build new audiences, foster philanthropic support and deepen understanding of the arts through research.

2011 grants possibly relevant to emerging playwrights include:

- Cultural Leadership Skills Development – Theatre
- New Work- Theatre, including support for creative development, production and young artists' initiatives.

➤ **Varuna, The Writers House:** <http://www.varuna.com.au>

The Writer's House offers a range of programs writers can sign-up for. For example, on 23-29 May 2011 Katherine Thomson will run a 'Writing for Stage and Screen Residency and Masterclass'.

### 3. ADVICE AND COMMENTS

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Over the course of the evening the panellists and some members of the audience shared numerous tips and advice to assist unpublished playwrights. A summary of some of this advice (as recorded by the facilitator) is listed below:

- When most unpublished plays are being assessed, a structured decision making process is used. In the case of Playwriting Australia, a matrix type review process has been adopted. In the end, the final decision is usually made by an individual, in the case of Playwriting Australia this is Dr Chris Mead, the Artistic Director.
- When unpublished plays are being analysed a number of key components are usually considered by the reviewer. These include issues such as:
  - Is the premise of the play interesting?
  - What dramatic question is being investigated?
    - *What is the central idea driving the drama?*
    - *How is the audience engaged in this?*
  - What is the dramatic action in the play?
    - *What do the characters want?*
    - *How are they going to get it?*
  - What dramatic economy is used?
    - *How is the premise and drama transacted?*
    - *What illustrative devices are used to present the drama?*
    - *What metaphors are used? How much is necessary? How much is too much?*
  - To what extent have the characters been developed?
    - *How do characters develop over the course of the play?*
    - *How convincing are the characters?*
  - What is the overall aesthetic of the play?
    - *How is the audience hooked in?*
    - *Is this just a private topic of the playwright or is it something an audience can identify with and become engaged in?*

- Plays need to be read aloud, however they also need to have integrity on the page as this is how most unpublished plays are encountered in the first instance.
- Most successful playwrights will admit to having help in developing their plays. For some this might be a skilled and critical partner, for others this will be a paid dramaturg. The assumption or norm should be: 'I will need help to complete this play'.
- All plays need to be subjected to criticism and review as part of the development process. 'You have to be hard on yourself or someone else will be'.
- Playwriting is a hard, emotional and exposing thing to do. It is hard to put your feelings, ideas and sweat in the public arena and then have people pick it apart. One way to assist with this is to develop a network of people whose opinions you trust and whose prime motive is to help make you a better writer.
- Drawing together a network of fellow playwrights, actors and other creative people can significantly help you as a writer and support you to hone your craft.
  - Playwrights need to ensure that the help that is provided is appropriate and constructive, not unpleasant and challenging to your confidence.
- Working with a good dramaturg is often essential to completing a play.
  - A good dramaturg can help you maintain your passion about your work. They will also help you to become clearer about what you are trying to do and say.
  - A good dramaturg can assist you to keep on track and to maintain your focus.
  - Some playwrights' relationship with their dramaturg works a bit like a job. Appointments are made in advance with the playwright driven to complete agreed components before the next meeting. For example an initial meeting to discuss the story; two weeks later the characters; month after that a draft Act 1 etc.

- If a play is still under development, it is sometimes good to delay input from designers and directors as sometimes their creative and interpretive ideas can 'confuse' your intent. A dramaturg on the other hand can be very useful during the final drafting and polishing phase.
- There are a lot of people in NSW who claim they can assist in making scripts better. However playwrights need to be wary as evidence suggests a significant proportion is not particularly skilful, or at least not skilful in all genres and styles.
  - Especially when you are paying for a service, be sure you are getting the best possible individual for your style of writing.
- A vital feature of being a successful playwright is stamina. Whenever you think you can't do one more amendment, or take one more suggestion or criticism of your play, you need to persist. You need to be fully convinced you are a good playwright and keep at it with conviction and determination.
- On the question of what is more important to a play- the story or the characters- advice differed. In sum without believable characters the story has no vehicle; without an engaging premise and plot, the characters have no purpose. Playwrights differ on where they start their creative process, but generally agree on the critical importance of both being fully developed in the end.
- Emerging playwrights should ensure their rights are protected. If a company is staging your play, and is charging for tickets, then you should be given an appropriate proportion of the takings.
  - In any production, be sure you are clear at the outset how the costs and profits are being distributed. These should be documented, and agreed to by all parties.
  - The Australian Writer's Guild has guidelines and advice on matters such as this.
  - Your craft is very valuable. Be sure you are not exploited in the drive to see your work produced.

- As most playwrights begin writing while doing other work, it is important to be very disciplined about your craft and set aside a regular time (and space) where you write every day.
  - Ideally set aside up to two hours a day- in the early morning, late at night, in your lunch break etc.
  - This time should be treated like an appointment with your self and be protected from other activities.
  - When writing, you should avoid all other distractions including music, reading emails, SMS etc. 'It should be just about you and your craft'.
- At the end of the forum, playwright, Joanna Erskine was keen to promote her blog to those interested- <http://www.joannaerskine.com/cluster>.

The blog aims to overcome the isolation felt by many emerging playwrights.

#### **4. FORUM WRAP-UP**

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Forum participants thanked the panellists for their generosity in sharing their experiences and advice.

At the close of the plenary discussion, participants were invited to organise themselves into small groups based on geographical locations, and to use the forum as an opportunity to network with other playwrights. This opportunity was enthusiastically taken up by some of the participants.

The forum was officially closed at 8:40, though informal discussions and networking continued for some time after this.

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