

Seeking inspiration

Taking centre stage as a playwright is difficult – **ANNE GIACOMANTONIO** offers some prompts

One of the most difficult tasks anyone faces in the performing arts industry is making themselves heard or getting noticed among the thousands of talented voices out there. Say you are a budding playwright: convincing someone in industry to accept your play and work with it can be a daunting experience.

However, universities and colleges are good places to make contact with other up-and-coming directors and performers, and find venues that are willing to give your play a chance. James Grieve is artistic director of new writing company Nabokov, which he started while still at university. "I did a bit of acting at university and from there I directed my first play, which we did in a bar at the University of Sheffield's students' union," he explains.

He found that he could approach fellow students at university to write for him. "I was finding plays that other students at my university had written," he says. "I was largely working in the short play format.

You can't expect anybody to write a two-and-a-half hour, three-act drama, but people can write good 10-minute plays if they are good writers. I was just getting people to write for me – it wasn't commissioning because I didn't have any money!"

There are organisations and awards out there specifically targeted to develop and discover new work in the theatre too. Grieve's project allowed enthusiastic new writers the opportunity to see their works performed in front of an audience; a very important tool according to Roxana Silbert, artistic director of Paines Plough, one of the leading new-works companies in the UK. "I think the way people really learn is to see their plays in front of an audience – I don't think there is another way," she says.

Paines Plough encourages emerging and young writers in various ways. The Rod Hall Memorial Award for young writers is awarded in conjunction with Rod Hall Agency (a London-based specialist literary agency), and provides the opportunity to launch a writing career. There are about 500

entries for the award – given every two years – and the prize is a £5,000 commission to write a play for Paines Plough, plus ongoing representation from the Rod Hall Agency. The competition is open to all playwrights between the ages of 18 to 30 who have never been professionally represented.

Paines Plough also runs a programme called Future Perfect, which puts seven writers on attachment with the company. Over the course of a year, participants do various projects, including a short play produced on the Globe Theatre stage, a site-specific piece and writing a play that they then perform in. With the help of the

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company's experience they also write a full-length play.

Silbert is keen to add that "[What is] important for us is that we are not trying to teach playwriting in a theoretical way – we are trying to give them the experience of seeing their work performed in front of an audience and learning to flex different theatrical and writing muscles. We also give them the contacts."

Can anyone get involved? "It's a scheme that's aimed at people who consider themselves to be dramatists – or know that they want to be – and who are writing but probably haven't yet got a production. It's for people who are at the very beginning of their careers and are quite serious about making a go of it."

It is a rewarding experience to have your work taken to a professional level and see it come to life. It is also hard work, but by no means impossible. Grieve adds that although people in the industry tend to stress the importance of contacts, the truth is that if you have the drive and enthusiasm,

you can make it. "You won't get to know anybody unless you have work on," he says. Just keep putting on plays and if they are any good, people will come to you."

Silbert echoes the importance of regularly producing new material. "[Paines Plough are] open to receive unsolicited scripts. "It's worth doing – sometimes the plays are not right but it's often where you can spot talent, even if it's a play that's not ready to be produced by us."

So, the message is that if you have the ideas and the energy, there are people and organisations who want to know about you. "If someone stands out we will notice," says Silbert. "It's happening across a bunch of theatres. It's just about taking the opportunities to practice putting your work on."

Visit www.painesplough.com for more information about Future Perfect or The Rod Hall Memorial Award. To find out how to see the new works at Nabokov visit, www.nabokov-online.com

WEB WATCH

Arts Council England
Provides support for arts across the UK, including new works, literature, touring and interdisciplinary works
www.artscouncil.org.uk/subjects/homepage.php?sid=15#nw

Edinburgh Fringe Festival
If you think you have the talent, festivals are often a good place to test the water, or even observe other people testing them first...
www.edfringe.com

BBC performing arts fund
Mainly for performers, this fund was set up to encourage people in the fields of music (both urban and more traditional) and musical theatre. There is also financial help for buying instruments and equipment.
www.bbc.co.uk/performingartsfund

www.independent.co.uk/student