

January 14, 2010

## Playwrights' Nurturing Is the Focus of a Study

By [PATRICK HEALY](#)

CHICAGO — When the playwright [Tracy Letts](#) handed over his “August: Osage County” for production in 2007, the board of the [Steppenwolf Theater](#) Company here agreed to forgo a balanced budget to finance this 13-character drama and its three-floor set. The bet paid off. The play earned rave reviews, moved to Broadway, won a [Pulitzer Prize](#) and a [Tony Award](#), and recouped its investment.

Mr. Letts’s follow-up at Steppenwolf, “Superior Donuts,” was not so fortunate. Reviews were mixed, and its run on Broadway ended last week at a loss to investors.

No matter the track record, Mr. Letts’s relationship with Steppenwolf could not be stronger. “If Tracy Letts has a new play, we’re absolutely going to do it,” said Polly Carl, Steppenwolf’s director of artistic development.

Such close relationships between playwrights and theaters are increasingly rare these days, and developing more of them is one of the chief recommendations of [a new study of the state of the American play](#) that the nonprofit [Theater Development Fund](#) published in book form in late December. Yet several obstacles stand in the way, according to the study, which also looked at playwrights’ struggle to make a living and which has set off a debate in some theater circles.

The study, conducted over the last seven years, was based on surveys returned by 94 nonprofit theaters and 250 playwrights, who ranged from recent graduates with minimal professional credits to Tony Award winners.

Many of the playwrights see the nation’s major nonprofit theater companies as impediments to their work, favoring plays that have few characters to save money on actors’ salaries, for instance, or that have themes appealing to large audiences. Playwrights say artistic directors are obsessed with selling tickets in spite of their nonprofit missions and with pleasing board members by favoring world premieres or playwrights who are already admired by critics.

“We heard from artistic directors who admitted that they’re all going after the same 10 playwrights to produce their work, which is largely about getting prestige in their field,” said Todd London, the chief author of the study and book, “Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American

Play.” Mr. London, the artistic director of New Dramatists, a group that helps playwrights, declined to name those artistic directors or playwrights.

Theater leaders and artistic directors, meanwhile, are frustrated by the lack of private and government money available to produce new plays and feel under pressure to balance budgets just to survive, according to the study. These executives also tend to view playwrights as insufficiently savvy about the cold realities of the business and say playwrights harbor misperceptions — that executives are less concerned with audience reaction or controversial subject matter than playwrights assume, for instance.

[Victoria Bailey](#), executive director of the Theater Development Fund, which provides financial support to artists and theaters and runs the [TKTS discount booths](#) in New York, said the study showed that “the relationship between playwrights and theaters is essentially broken, and it needs to be fixed to improve the environment for exciting new theater.”

Ms. Bailey said that more theaters and playwrights needed to develop bonds like that between Steppenwolf and Mr. Letts, who is also a longtime member of that ensemble, and that theaters can take the first step by better explaining both their artistic visions and financial pressures to playwrights.

The playwrights know something about financial pressures. The study found that most of them cannot afford to live on their plays alone. According to the study, the average playwright earns \$25,000 to \$39,000 annually, with about 62 percent of playwrights making less than \$40,000 and nearly a third pulling in less than \$25,000.

[David Adjmi](#), an award-winning playwright whose drama “Stunning” was produced Off Broadway last summer by [Lincoln Center Theater](#)’s program for emerging writers, said he earned as much as \$40,000 from his plays in some years and as little as \$5,000 in others. Mr. Adjmi said he had never had health insurance and lived with his mother in Midwood, Brooklyn, for a time in his early 30s to save money.

“I was unable to write plays for two and a half years because I was temping to pay my rent, and money that I did make from playwriting went to fill a bunch of cavities that I’d let build up,” Mr. Adjmi said.

“The reality that the study paints is true for many of us,” he continued. “I think that when theaters think about risk taking, they think about it in terms of financial risk. Does this play not have a star in the cast? That’s a risk. Is this a relatively unknown playwright? That’s a risk. There’s just a tremendous amount of cynicism and mistrust between playwrights and theaters right now.”

Some notable voices have criticized the study, however, saying that playwrights appear self-serving

in some sections. They note that Mr. London has argued in the past for empowering artistic directors, so that they become influential patrons of new plays, yet now his study seems to be suggesting that artistic directors have disenfranchised playwrights.

[In an online commentary](#) that has drawn attention Chris Jones, the theater critic for The Chicago Tribune, described the playwrights as whiners and quick to make faulty assumptions about theaters and audiences. He argued too that “good plays deserve encouragement,” that “audiences need protection from bad ones,” and that playwrights know this “as long as we are not talking about their play.”

Mr. London said in an interview that what’s needed are both strong artistic directors and playwrights who are nurtured by theaters. Ms. Bailey said good plays often only developed through multiple readings and productions in which playwrights could make improvements based on feedback from actors and audiences.

“I realize that, yes, there seems to be a lot of whining going on, but we need to pull back from the whining and look at the disconnects between artists and theaters,” said Ms. Bailey, who traveled to Chicago and Minneapolis with Mr. London this week to begin discussing the findings of the study with theater leaders and playwrights nationally.

For some artistic directors the study reflects their own concerns about the state of nonprofit American theater in the last few decades of reduced government and foundation spending on the arts, which put more pressure on theaters to raise money and, in some cases, select plays that would be box-office draws. New work appears to have been a casualty. The average number of new plays on Broadway annually, for instance, fell to 14 between 1980 and 2000, from 29 between 1960 and 1980, according to the study. (The number was 130 between 1920 and 1940.)

[Oskar Eustis](#), the artistic director of the [Public Theater](#), said the economics of theater today “has exerted a profoundly conservative influence on all of our not-for-profit theaters.” He argued that in this environment theaters with sizable budgets owed it to playwrights to make an extra effort to support them by creating master-writer chairs that provide a salary, pension and health benefits. The Public has one, now held by [Suzan-Lori Parks](#).

At the same time, he said, playwrights need to understand that theaters have serious business concerns that limit their ability to favor playwrights over audiences.

“There is always room for artistic risk taking and experimental theater, but if we’re going to have a theater that matters, we have to make theater that people want to see,” Mr. Eustis said. “If as a field we resent that criterion, we’ll doom the field to oblivion.”

