

Making a Living Writing for the Way, Way Off Broadway Stages

In the 1990s, Tim Kelly led a panel of playwrights in a discussion of their experiences writing plays and musicals for specific target audiences. Though the following abridged transcript of Tim's portion of this discussion is somewhat dated, his basic philosophy about playwrighting for the educational and amateur markets is still very relevant today.

Tim Kelly:

What we are going to do here is give a general overview by playwrights whose published works generate living wages and royalties from productions around the country. This is not a discussion of art vs. commerce. Not at all. It's for the guy or gal who says, "I consider myself a serious playwright, and I would like to make some money writing plays."

This arena of the non-Broadway show is a commercial arena. The plays are written to make money for the playwright and the publishing company. When you write for this market you will always, or almost always, be critically ignored if not critically dismissed, so if it's critical approval and publicity you are looking for, this is not the market for you.

Robert Anderson once said of Broadway that you can make a killing but you can't make a living. In the non-Broadway market, it's possible for you to make a living but not always a killing. In this market, you're not writing a general play that everybody can do, you aim at a target audience and go after it.

What are these target audiences? First, of course there is the market for children's plays, any creative original variation of *Puss in Boots*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, that sort of thing. Then there is the pre-teen market for more sophisticated plays that you might think of as children's plays: *Heidi*, *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates* or original works. Then you have the school market which breaks down into elementary, junior high, high school; churches that have private schools or theatrical troupes; colleges which will do any type of play; the little theater and community theater.

Let me say parenthetically that many little and community theater operations across the country are quite lavish. There isn't an Equity waiver theater in the city of Los Angeles that can compete with the little theater in Scottsdale, Arizona as far as its building is concerned. Some of them are lush Broadway-type physical structures, so don't be misled by that word "little."

To continue defining the target audiences, you have dinner theaters and melodrama theaters; the military, the special service branches, the APO mailing addresses and the stock companies.

If you are going to create a play specifically for this market, what are the rules? This is where it gets a little sticky. Generally, the plays cannot deal with morbidity,

death, misery, gruesomeness, despair, disease, sex—and they are very strong taboos, perhaps less now than they were some years ago. Profanity, vulgarity, drugs and drinking are out except to point out dangers from a moralistic viewpoint, as is anything that glorifies smoking, politics, religion. I once asked an editor how I could possibly come up with something outside all these restriction, and he told me, “Use your imagination.” That’s the key of it.

All right. You have the one-act play that usually runs 20 to 25 minutes. You have the children’s play that usually runs an hour (and if you think this is not for you, I’d be willing to bet that David Mamet makes more money from *Revenge of the Space Pandas* than he does on any adaptation of Chekhov). The youth plays usually run about 90 minutes. The community, university and dinner theater plays go for about two hours. As a rule, the settings are simple, no elaborate lighting or stage machinery. The full-lengths are usually in two acts.

You think you have a script that might work for one of these markets—now what do you do? This may surprise most playwrights: in most cases, you submit your script directly to the play publisher. Some of them put in their catalogues, “If you have a play you think might interest us, by all means send it in.” You don’t need an agent; as a matter of fact, most of these play publishers don’t want to deal with an agent. They only muddy the waters.

A reader reads your script to see whether it has possibilities for the marketplace—we’re talking dollars and cents here. If an editor likes it, it goes up to the publishing company president. So the play company says, “We want to publish this play”— what kind of a deal are they going to offer you? The basic deal is 50% of the royalties to you and 50% to the play publishing company. You get 10% of whatever the playbook sells for, and one of the wonderful things about this market is that you’re cushioned against inflation. As they continue to lift the price of the playbook, they lift the royalty.

Into the Play Catalogues

All right, they accept your play (some publishing companies will give you an advance, most will not) and put it into their catalogue. Some of these are thicker than the telephone book and quite elaborate. They go to every high school, dinner theater, university and summer theater in the country, describing your play, giving the number of its female and male roles. It’s like the movies in the sense that the distribution deal really tells the story, so the catalogue is all-important.

There are about 15 play publishing catalogues in this country, not counting the ones that specialize in religious or children’s plays or others of that sort. The theaters will have these catalogues with your play in their back rooms for years and years and years and years. Tens of thousands of these catalogues—or supplements updating them—are mailed out once a year. The play publishing company takes care of all the hassles, sending out the scripts, collecting the money. You don’t have to do a thing

except go to your mailbox and pick up your royalty check, paid twice a year in most cases (some four times a year, some once).

I can assure you, this is a very lucrative market. Along with the royalty statement, they will tell you how many single copies of plays they have sold, what they charged for them, where your play has been performed. For example, if you've seen a production of your work here in Los Angeles and it doesn't show up on the royalty statement (which happens quite frequently), you can check it out. Sometimes you own the copyright, sometimes the publisher will make it out in his own name.

What's the usual press run in a publishing house? Five hundred to 1000 copies, reordered in runs of 500 copies. If it's tremendously successful, of course they will keep on re-running. How long does a play stay in a catalogue? Apart from some prestige items, as long as the play publishing house is making money from it. Once they make the initial plates to print your play, it doesn't cost them too much to run off another set. There are groups who are not sure they want to do your play but will order copies; you get royalties from the sale of playbooks whether or not they do the play.

What happens if the play isn't doing any business after some years? It's dropped from the catalogue to make room for money-makers. Do you get back the rights to your play if it's dropped from the catalogue? In some cases yes, but in most cases no. Why? Because people may not get the latest catalogue from which your play has been dropped, but they keep past catalogues in which your play is listed for 10 or 15 years and may be ordering it from one of those old catalogues.

What's the life of a play in this market? For a moderately successful one-act, from 15 to 20 years, and if it's very successful it's never dropped. For a moderately successful full-length, 10 to 25 years. You have an annuity.

How soon do you know whether your play is going to be a hit in this market? By the second season of the catalogue. Why not the first? Because the theater group or the school has usually decided what they are going to do a year in advance. They may ask for a reading copy of your play from the catalogue, but they've already selected the plays they are going to do this year. If you're not doing well in the second season, it's a danger sign, and if it hasn't picked up by the third you are out of luck.

The Crossover Play

The real money-maker is what we call the crossover play: a play written for a specific target, and lo and behold, suddenly dinner theaters become interested, universities become interested, film companies become interested. I did an adaptation of the novel *M*A*S*H** as a high school play and now it's done everywhere, even in European theaters. Such plays leap out of the target area, and you have yourself a property that is going places.

What are the average runs? The production of a children's play usually runs four to six performances, but remember, that you may have a dozen theaters around the country doing it at the same time. High schools usually do one to four performances, community theaters six to twelve.

If somebody asks you, "May I turn your play into a musical?" all you have to do is say "Yes," and you can get 25% of the royalties right off the top. Musicals are very hot right now. The average high school in California does one musical (usually the last half of the season) plus two one-acts and one full-length yearly, and there are 824 high schools in California (plus 431 continuation schools, 4,087 elementary schools, 823 middle schools, 153 junior high schools and 340 special education alternative schools).

There is no way of estimating accurately the number of university and community theaters in the United States. It is thought to be between 5,000 and 6,000. And these plays go anywhere else that English is spoken (Canada is a very good market), including our military bases.

The fees for a one-act production range from \$20 to \$50 a performance, with books from \$4 to \$5; for musicals, \$60 to \$90 a performance, with books from \$4 to \$5 and a small cut on any orchestrations used.

For some playwrights this market is a nice income, for others it's a sizeable chunk of money. Let's say your play is bringing in \$2,000 a year. The next year you write another, and soon you're getting \$4,000 a year in royalties. After the third play, your royalties are up to \$6,000. You have to keep feeding the kitty. This may not seem like much because you're getting it in dribblets, but at the end of 20 years you may have made between \$125,000 and \$130,000 on these three plays. There are other playwrights whose royalties amount to six figures a year and they usually incorporate.

And there's another subsidiary benefit: you don't have to deal with the dramaturge who tells you he or she can't locate the subtext in your play. There are no artistic directors to call you up in the middle of the night to tell you that the kernel of truth in your script is muted.

Questions from the Audience

Q: Is a professional production—on Broadway, say, or in the movies—allowed, even though your play may have been in someone's catalogue for a number of years?

Kelly: Sometimes a play publishing company may have all the rights, but not necessarily. Some will have many of their plays contracted for amateur rights but not professional and stock rights. Other play publishing companies might want all the rights.

Q: If a play is published in book form, and then a play publishing company wants to offer it in script form in a catalogue, what's the relationship between the two?

Kelly: The agents for the two outfits work out a deal.

Q: Is it true across the board that you can't get a play published until it has been produced?

Kelly: There are exceptions, but as a rule they prefer it to have been produced.

Q: How do you approach a publishing company after your play has been produced?

Kelly: This market is no different from a professional market. Everybody says, "We need plays," then you give them one, and they usually say, "I don't want that one." Mail your script in, but before you do I suggest that you find out who the editor is and how they want you to proceed.

Q: I just checked with a major publisher and they say they will not read it if it isn't in a professional format, and to send a self-addressed, stamped return envelope —and that they will take it if they think it will sell.

Kelly: I said up front, this is not a discussion of art vs. commerce, this is a commercial market. They want to publish your plays only if they think it will make money. If the play doesn't make money, it's out of the catalog eventually.

Q: With musicals, you submit the book. What about recordings of the score?

Kelly: Sure, absolutely.

Conclusion

As I once wrote in a magazine article, no thrill can compare with that of a royalty statement saying, "Your simple-to-produce one-act has had a hundred productions in a single year, stretching from Dawson Creek in the Yukon to Furnace Creek in Death Valley." With a road tour like that, who needs Broadway?