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Adopt A Playwright Award

Guidelines for nominating and selecting candidates *(with special thanks to Fin Kennedy)*

What constitutes a playwright in need? How do you define a 'quality' play? How do you spot a 'promising' writer? How can you assess whether they are a 'different' voice? Different to what? How do you know your choices aren't too coloured by your own filters of cultural background and personal taste?

These are some of the questions it is necessary to ask as part of the Adopt A Playwright Award. Judgements of any artistic endeavour are usually largely subjective and this document is no exception. **Rather than a definitive guide, this is intended to be the start of a debate among the many professionals involved in this scheme.**

Our aspiration is that it becomes a 'living' document, constantly being amended, updated and expanded by many different people, until we have a sprawling 'bible' of assessment criteria, as thrillingly diverse as its contributors. While we are unlikely, if ever, to all agree on all the points in a document of this nature, our best guarantee of getting it right most of the time will be the diversity of backgrounds and professional experience among the people conducting the search.

Our 'living' guidelines start here:

A different voice

can be defined as different to the usual backgrounds and concerns of the majority of writers receiving commissions from the mainstream new writing theatres in the UK. We are therefore looking for playwrights who provide an insight into worlds under-represented in current British drama. This could include, but is not restricted to: minority ethnic or religious groups, non-western, working class, non-traditional lifestyles, so-called 'closed communities', rural communities, communities newly-arrived in the UK, communities stereotyped or demonised in the mainstream media.

A playwright in need

- Has demonstrated some initiative in writing and/or producing their own work in the past **and will have had at least one full length script performed;**
- **Is struggling financially** to continue writing;
- Relies on non-arts industry income to make ends meet (or non-creative employment within the arts, eg. ushering, office admin);
- Has not received significant funding from theatre company, Arts Council, or other arts funding body for their writing (in this context 'significant funding' would be more than **£10,000** in total over the course of their career although there is flexibility around this figure);
- Is not from a family or community who are able to support them while they write;
- At the point of giving up without financial assistance.

Quality of the playwright

Note: Candidates will be nominated on the basis of existing writing that has been seen performed and therefore we should be able to distinguish between a quality *play text* and a quality *production*. We should be able to see the potential of a good play given a bad production, yet not be fooled by a poor play given a slick production. We should also be able to recognise the potential of a playwright who has not yet written their best work, but who shows promise in their early plays.

A play of notable 'promise' or 'quality' is one which demonstrates **at least two** of the following:

- Some understanding of dramatic writing as being about writing stage action as well as words.
- Some understanding of dramatic structure – characters actively pursuing an objective as the 'engine' of dramatic storytelling.
- Some understanding of drama as being about a process of change, and of characters having gone on a journey.
- Some ability to write original, believable characters with their own voice and perspectives on the world.
- A delight in the possibilities of spoken language in all its messy complexity; dialect, slang, subcultural lexicons, puns, double meanings and misunderstandings, language as liberator of some characters and jailor of others, language as power, language as a tool with which we define the world and our place within it.
- A 'quality of mind': an interest in using drama to offer some original insight into the subject in hand. A feeling, having left the auditorium, that you have been in the presence of someone with something new and important to say about the world in which you live.
- An interest in the poetry of drama, physically as well as verbally, e.g. an ability to create resonant and memorable stage images; an awareness of metaphor; an ability to juxtapose dramatic action with dialogue; images and action creatively arranged not just for aesthetic pleasure but in order to actively comment on one another and add meaning to the overall story.
- Using lyricism or other non-naturalistic techniques intelligently, in the service of the overall play, rather than simply because it can be done.
- A play that has an emotional impact on you and moves you in some way.
- An ability to sustain these qualities over some time (i.e. 45 minutes plus). Exciting short plays are often unreliable indicators of promise as the real test is in sustaining energy, pace, wit and form over a longer drama.

A promising playwright is one who demonstrates **at least two** of the following:

- An interest in pushing the form of drama beyond the traditional western sensibility of the three or five act structure and/or an interest in questioning or challenging the traditional barrier between audience and actor. However, neither of these should be for the sake of meaningless experimentation, but in the context of serving an overall narrative and creating a theatrical experience in which innovation in form facilitates new and fresh understandings of the drama's content. Form should always be appropriate to content, and born out of it in some logical way. Formal experimentation should not be about 'showing off' but about adding new layers of meaning.
- Innovative ideas about staging, which cannot be attributed to the director alone, e.g. a script that responds imaginatively to a specific performance space, or an interest in merging text-based script writing with non-verbal, devised, or other performance media.
- Choice of a subject of some relevance and urgency to the modern world; awareness of current affairs in UK and beyond and the quality of mind to make an original and meaningful contribution to those debates.
- An interest in using theatre as an organ of democracy, to debate, stimulate and provoke audiences into discussion of difficult, complex or taboo issues.
- An interest in people and experiences beyond their own; an understanding that the writer's own love affairs and family dramas are not necessarily of equal interest to a wider audience. (Or, if these well-trodden subjects are used, to offer a new and original twist or insight.)
- An interest in presenting audiences with places, characters and communities that have not been seen before in British drama, or seen too seldom.
- An interest in analysing and providing some critique of the channels of power in any given society which seal a character's fate.
- An interest in undertaking research as a means to sourcing new material, and opening themselves up to new experiences.

Process

These guidelines are intended to help you, together with the immediate responses of your heart and gut, in selecting playwrights to put forward to Sofie Mason and the Advisory Panel. Every year, nominations will be invited up to November. The candidates will be notified immediately and asked to submit an application for the Award. The Advisory Panel will shortlist the candidates and interview the shortlisted candidates in January/February. The winner will be notified within the week. A public announcement will be made and the winner's year will begin from April when the search for their family of Angels will begin. If a winner cannot be found, the scouting will recommence, the Advisory Panel will reconvene in March and the winner be announced in April.

The Winning Playwright

The award winning playwright will meet with Sofie Mason and/or the Panel to discuss a structure for the coming year. Each structure will be different, depending on the needs of

the writer, and can include: apportioning some of the award money to paying actors to workshop the work, paying a dramaturge, paying for a 'retreat' or a course, subsidising travel or research or quite simply paying a monthly rent to ensure financial peace of mind.

During the course of the year, the playwright will be expected to email monthly updates to the Angels, submit the work-in-progress to the Panel for feed-back on a quarterly basis and offer one or more showcases of the work for the Angels to enjoy – culminating in a full reading in a West End theatre, in association with Masterclass, if the playwright wishes it.

The play written during the year of the award, while it still belongs to the writer, must be written exclusively for this award and cannot be affiliated to any other theatre or organisation. The Adopt A Playwright Award and Off West End Plays & Playwrights must be acknowledged in all future performances/productions/readings of the play with a full list of Angels credited by name.