



# Playwrights, Productions, a Paradox

When is a writer more than just a writer?

BY ELIZA BENT

**THE CHALLENGE:** No one ever said that getting a play up and running was easy. That's why there are producers, after all. They're the ones who gather the money, the support and the resources to put on a play. But if you aren't yet a well-known playwright, you probably don't have producer pals or, for that matter, the cash or wherewithal for a production. Still, some playwrights aren't waiting. They've stopped idling their pens until a producer comes along with the requisite ink. They've taken the reins and banded together to produce their own pieces. *American Theatre* spoke with three such groups of vigilante playwrights: 13P in New York City, *Workhaus Collective* in Minneapolis and *Playwrights 6* in Los Angeles.

**THE PLAN:** The nitty-gritties work differently for each of the three groups. Here's a quick rundown:

13P formed in 2003 when 13 mid-career playwrights, concerned about the slow pace of new-play development, got together and devised a simple mission: "To produce 13 plays, one by each of the 13 member playwrights." The collective employs producers (rather than having that function assumed by members). "13P isn't about teaching these writers about producing," explains executive producer Maria Goyanes. "It's about giving them a full sense of the artistic responsibility for their work." The playwright whose work is being mounted takes on the job of artistic director for the duration of that project. Sheila Callaghan (P#7) will rotate into the A.D. slot when her *Crawl Fade to White* is in production this fall. Take note: "13P is really a 13-play project; we call it a company for convenience's sake," Goyanes says. "At the end of the 13th play, we don't know what will happen to 13P." In fact, Anne Washburn (P#1) calls this "the implosion model."

Workhaus Collective's Dominic Orlando and Trista Baldwin met at Minneapolis's Caffetto coffee shop in 2005 and discussed what their ideal theatre company would be. They decided to invite other Jerome and McKnight fellows and core members of the venerable writer-support organiza-

tion the Playwrights' Center into some "commie-style get-togethers." From there they worked out a model: Workhaus members "make all major decisions together and leave the day-to-day stuff to the producing directors" (Orlando and Deborah Stein). Institutional support for the three-show season comes from the Playwrights' Center.

Playwrights 6, which began in 1999, grew out of the workshop environment of L.A.'s Playwrights Kitchen Ensemble and currently includes five regular playwrights. Its mission is to "to develop, produce and promote high-quality new works by Los Angeles playwrights" without the assistance of outside producers. It also holds workshops for fellow writers and teaches them about how to produce their own work.

**KEY PLAYERS:** Rob Handel (P#3) says when 13P started out, it looked to companies whose producing scale and publicity style it admired, such as the Civilians and Clubbed Thumb. Handel also avows, "We would be nowhere without our press representative, Jim Baldassare." Larry Dean Harris, of Playwrights 6, strikes a similar note: "It's better to not hire a publicist at all than to hire a bad one," he warns. Workhaus's Orlando cites the slightly older 13P as an inspiration, but says the New York troupe, with its 13-production quota, wasn't quite a model for them. "The unique relationship we have with the Playwrights' Center may enable the Collective to have a life way beyond our time," he predicts, and adds that Playwrights' Center producing artistic director Polly Carl is indispensable for coordination, "bless her rebel soul."

**WHAT WORKED:** "Living in L.A., where so much of the community is driven by greed and selfishness, it's wonderful to have a group like Playwrights 6 agree on ideas and move forward," Harris says. "Writing is such a solitary thing, but with our workshops, readings, productions and social events, I'm not working in a vacuum." Notes Orlando, "The community has really come out to meet us, and that's been a happy surprise."

Goyanes contends that the individual successes of the playwrights in 13P have buoyed the reputation of the group as a whole: "Sarah Ruhl won the MacArthur genius grant, Sheila Callaghan won the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and the Whiting Award, Lucy Thurber was produced by Atlantic Theater Company, Winter Miller's *In Darfur* played at the Public and so much more. As Paula Vogel says, 'The circle rises together.'"

**WHAT DIDN'T:** "Our successes and failures are bound up together," admits Orlando. "It goes back to the tension between art and business, and the core of a playwright's personality"—which he describes as introverted. "Getting that personality to embrace all of what goes into production is a constant challenge." When 13P created its tagline—"We don't develop plays. (We do them.)"—it realized there might be some backlash from critics ("Well, this play could have used a little more development!"). Handel believes that "without putting the work in front of the audience—and the press—you can't see the play and understand how it works. It's only in the past 40 years, a blip (or more accurately, a glitch) in theatre history, that anyone has thought otherwise." Harris confesses that the learning curve of producing has been huge. Issues he's learned always to be wary of? "Parking," he groans. "Working around the other shows in a venue. Dealing with insurance. And making sure the press comes."

**WHAT'S NEXT:** Playwrights 6 is looking forward to two upcoming premieres, Gib Wallis's *Nymphony* in 12D and Harris's own *The Prodigal Father*. 13P is gearing up for a benefit in May—"a riff off our motto," says Goyanes. "We've asked established writers to give us overlooked or cut scenes or songs from their works—the lineup currently includes Christopher Durang, John Guare, Michael John LaChiusa and Stephen Sondheim." Meanwhile, Orlando pares down the essence of producing playwrights: "Mostly we plan to keep on writing, making theatre and bringing work to our audience."



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