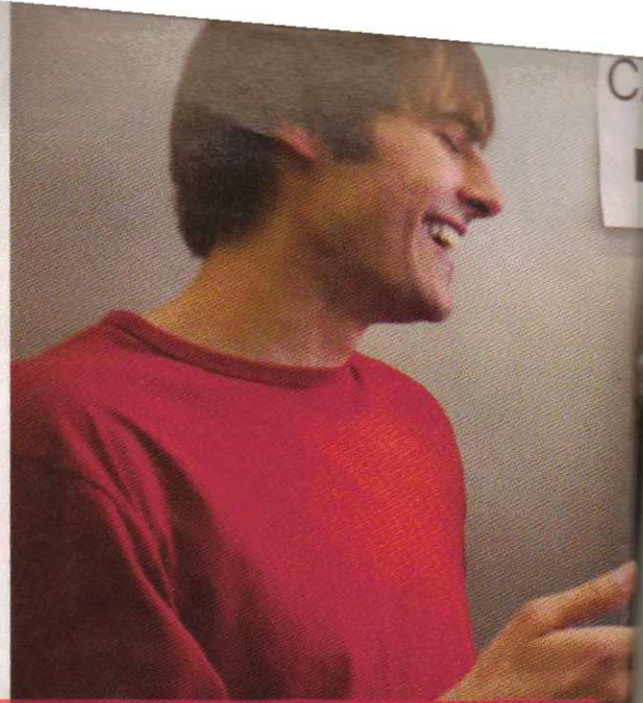




The challenge of writing for the stage, then seeing your work performed, brings instant rewards, says scriptwriter **Deborah M Sharpe**



Break into... writing for local theatre

When I first decided that I was interested in writing plays, I got some books on the subject and attended a couple of workshops. Although these were helpful, I felt as though I was missing some key link that would get me started, so apart from jotting down ideas and placing them in a folder entitled 'plays', I did nothing further.

That was until I saw an advertisement in the local paper asking for actors, backstage crew and anyone else with an interest in forming an amateur theatre company.

I went along and joined a poet, another writer, an aspiring stage manager and a few people who would quite like to act. However we did have one professionally trained actress willing to direct our first performance on the condition that we came up with the content.

Due to our limited acting experience she decided a review would be the best bet and did a series of workshops encouraging us to come up with ideas. I not only came up with ideas but wrote them and had them included in the performance. Since I started I've met other writers, in other groups, and discovered that amateur theatre companies love people who are willing to come along to help backstage or front of house, on performance nights. Some writers state that they have a play they would like the group to consider at the outset but many more bide their time, get involved, help out, make friends and then tentatively offer up a sketch or a play when they feel confident within the group.

GETTING STARTED

- Go to the Noda website and identify groups that appeal to you and are open to new writing.
- Join with a view to getting involved.
- Watch rehearsals. Attend play readings. Make friends.
- Let people know you write.
- ~~WRITE!~~
- At the right moment put your idea, or your sketches, forward.

Just seeing where centre stage is, where the actors come on and off, what the wings are like from backstage, how many people can stand on a stage and what the audience eye view is, really helps a playwright to understand the platform for their work.

Having been used to the writer's life, papered with rejections, polite encouragements or the occasional acceptance, with weeks to wait before seeing work in print; I was thrilled to hear people laugh at material I had written.

See your work come to life

When writing for a local company your work is in print, in script form from the start. At rehearsals your writing gradually comes to life, improving each week as the actors learn the lines and ditch the printed script. On performance nights you get a reaction, one way or the other and you will know whether it is polite or genuine applause.

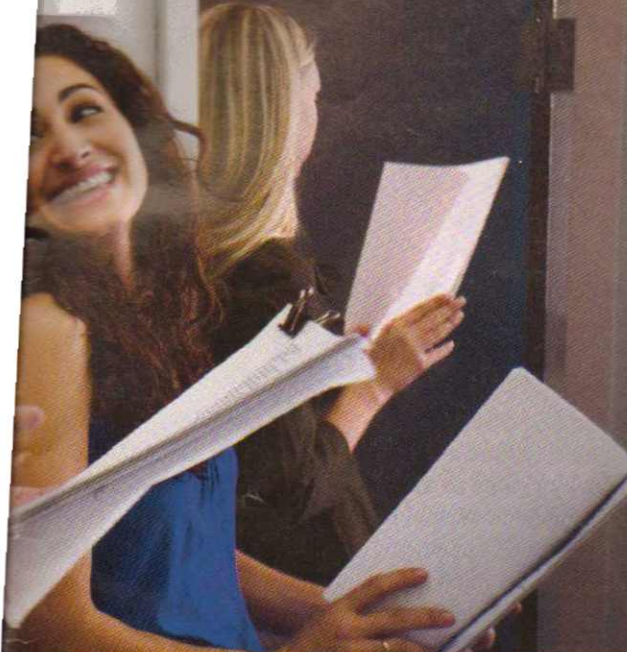
Joining a local amateur company is easy. Go to the National Operatic and Dramatic Association website (www.noda.org.uk) and click on the 'Noda regions' tab at the top of the page. Click on your region, choose districts from the side bar on the left and see the societies listed in your area. Aim for one that likes to try new and contemporary plays and productions. A group that always does Shakespeare or popular farces are less likely to want to put on anything else.

Our first show was well received and before long I had befriended the other writer in the group and we decided to collaborate on writing a sketch show.

We decided it would be a great idea to write and test sketches out in rehearsals by the reaction of other actors and stage crew. This was a mistake. People had differing opinions, we wrote far too many sketches, and ended up with a show which, despite extensive cutting, was far too long. We hated the cuts, but the experience means I don't get precious if editors cut my work.

Still, the performance and the sketches made people laugh and I sat backstage feeling absolutely delighted with every chuckle.

Get to know other members to understand what the group needs



This is a simple sketch but follows a good comedy format. You hook the audience with a highly charged dramatic situation, swerve away from what they were expecting to happen and present an entirely alternative ending.

Stepping into the limelight

Somebody saw our sketches and asked us if we would be willing to write and perform sketches for a conference for carers with the theme of health and safety in the home for the elderly. This would provide substantial funds for our group. There is nothing like a focus for the mind, and we agreed to provide nine sketches each.

The audience enjoyed the sketches, but the proof of the pudding is the fact we have been asked to do another performance with new sketches and a separate idea later this year (more funds for our group.) When anyone puts hand to chequebook it is a very positive sign that your writing is going in the right direction.

Don't lose the plot

The next step was my first play. I wrote a one-act comedy about neighbouring families whose lives become intertwined in unexpected ways. My plot was complicated, with characters interweaving in and out of each others lives, so I created a storyboard for the whole play with the key scenes, and also a storyboard for each character which helped to ensure that each had a cohesive story with a beginning, middle and end, within the main play storyline.

Storyboarding is an excellent way to plot. Put key scenes, events or points on to slips of paper and then stick them on a corkboard arranging and rearranging them until you are happy with the result. Then you can write each scene in or out of order, knowing exactly where they go.

People liked it! They really laughed, beamed and bellowed at the end, for three nights. Full of confidence I sent it off to a play competition, but I didn't even get shortlisted. Still, I realized that I believed in it enough to send it somewhere else, and that has a lot to do with the reaction of those who saw it, and the boost it gave me.

One thing leads to another and since I started writing for amateur theatre I have started to write professionally for various markets and not only sketches but articles, ideas and scripts. I hope you will too.

Simple beginnings

A very simple sketch was as follows:

WOMAN 1: IS ON STAGE SEATED, LOOKING TEARFUL. WOMAN 2 COMES IN LOOKING TIMID.

WOMAN 1: How could you? (PAUSE)

WOMAN 2: (LOOKS ASHAMED)

WOMAN 1: My best friend. With my husband.

WOMAN 2: I'm sorry. It, it... just happened.

WOMAN 1: I see. Your naked body parts accidentally collided and you slept with my husband.

WOMAN 2: No, yes. I don't know what to say.

WOMAN 1: There's not much too say. I just couldn't believe it when I found out. I mean You! and Him!

WOMAN 2: Please don't...

WOMAN 1: Him! And You!

WOMAN 2 (SILENT WITH SHAME).

WOMAN 1: What on earth possessed you?

WOMAN 2: I don't know. I don't know. I really don't know.

WOMAN 1: (DISGUSTED) My husband and my best friend. My very best friend.

WOMAN 2: I don't know what to say. I feel so awful.

WOMAN 1: Well I'm not surprised, you poor thing. (PUTS AN ARM AROUND HER) He is awful, he's dirty and smelly and he picks his toenails. How could you bear having sex with HIM? Eaaaauch!

TIPS

- Seeing plays and sketches come to life can give you immediate gratification and an understanding of what works.
- There are many local opportunities such as writing a school pantomime, murder mystery plots, gags or skits for stand-up comedians and sketches for groups that perform in old people's homes, hospitals or prisons.

Useful websites

- www.noda.org.uk
- www.komedia.co.uk
- www.outofjoint.co.uk
- www.royalcourttheatre.com
- www.painesplough.com
- www.warehousetheatre.co.uk/ipfio.html

WRITING SKETCHES

- Keep a notebook with you at all times and jot down newspaper snippets, quirky things that happen in a supermarket, anything that makes you smile.
- Think laterally. What would be THE most unexpected ending? Jot down as many ideas as you can and choose the best.
- Or show people something that we all recognise, but caricature the character or situation. For example, a traffic warden that tickets bicycles, prams or mobility scooters or a car boot fair where everyone does sell boots.