

1996 - Performance in Print

Getting a play published might not seem a priority. The immediate and natural desire is to see the work in performance, the particular medium for which it was written in the first place. And how a play is received in performance - by audiences and critics - is the primary means used to define its worth. If the play is then published it might possibly reflect the measure of its performance success, or at least the natural climax to a text's first life-cycle.

The relationship of performance writing to publishing, and specifically new writing, is a more complex affair however. Drama has long held a certain status within literature and the study of literature, by virtue of the published text. At one time it might have been regarded as a poor relation to fiction and poetry, bar of course Shakespeare, Sheridan and one or two other 'geniuses'. The emergence of the university drama departments in the 1960s in Britain helped to more systematically promote the consideration of a dramatic text in its performance context, teaching the subject of drama as a specific practice, not merely as an adjunct to literature. This would have included a consideration of the contemporary drama of that period, namely the New Wave - which the publication of texts permitted.

However, although drama as a discipline has achieved a certain recognition in this respect, the status of the published play text, and most notably the new text, remains precarious. Michael Earley, Drama Publisher at Methuen, says that "there is little in the press and media about new play publishing...it has a low profile generally". Cheryl Robson of Aurora Metro, an independent publisher specialising in women writers, says that what also needs addressing is "the literary establishment's low regard for playwriting". This is reflected perhaps most acutely within the Arts Council itself. Whilst independent fiction and poetry publishers are funded by the Literature Department, there is no such provision for new play publishing. This says Robson sends out a clear message, "playwriting isn't literature".

New fiction and poetry writers may therefore expect to join what amounts to a heritage industry. For the new published playwright, what similar validation exists? If "playwriting isn't literature", it still remains a particular and unique practice. The solution is perhaps located in publishers, critics and funders acknowledging the interdisciplinary nature of performance practice, of which (in British culture) new writing is a fundamental component.

The publication of new performance writing is never going to be up there with Jeffrey Archer on the best seller list. Michael Earley describes it bluntly as "uneconomical". Methuen is principally a backlist publisher with only 20% of its income coming from new plays. Yet it remains, followed by Faber and Faber, the leader in the field of play publishing. Earley wants to see "new plays on the same plane as new novels...to read, not only to study". This would require a radical shift in the culture, not least in drama education at secondary level. Cheryl Robson looks to the growth in BTec and performing arts courses which are "eating plays".

There is also the point of access and distribution. Getting booksellers to take plays on requires "aggressive marketing" says Earley. All that considered, new

play publishing is now experiencing something of a renaissance. Publishers are not simply publishing more new work, they are responding more imaginatively to the current explosion in new writing production.

At Methuen Michael Earley has initiated a new series of "Fast Track" publications. The Royal Court Writers' Series has been a familiar feature since 1981, with a single publication combining programme and text. Similarly, Fast Tracking allows tying in a production with a publication. Earley says that "this is one of the best ways of promoting work, and can be of particular benefit to the writer". Terry Johnson's *Hysteria* sold 10,000 copies in the Royal Court series during its recent run at the Duke of York's. The Fast Track series is also serving new writers, and to date has involved tie-ins with a number of companies, including the Traverse and Bush (David Harrower's *Knives in Hens*), the Gate (the *Biennale Season*) and Method and Madness (Philip Osment's *Flesh and Blood*). Also launched is the Two Play Volume, with writers such as Joe Penhall (*Some Voices* and *Pale Horse*) and Judy Upton (*Bruises* and *The Shorewatchers' House*) already published in this series. The Two Play Volume is indicative says Earley of "how fast many new writers are working". It also demonstrates a commitment to developing a long-term relationship with a writer.

Michael Earley describes these initiatives as "research and development" for the backlist. One in seven plays used to make it to the backlist; Earley now expects it to be one in three. Later this summer Methuen will also be launching the Contemporary Dramatists Series, putting into collected form the work of younger and newer writers.

And it doesn't end there. Last year saw the publication of *Black Plays 3*, *Frontline Intelligence 3* and *Made in Scotland*, all anthologies of new and contemporary work. Also published were three volumes of *Making Scenes*, a selection of plays for young people commissioned for the Royal National Theatre's BT National Connections Festival for young actors. *Frontline Intelligence* will now become *Frontline Drama*, combining plays and polemics on such areas as theatre criticism and adaptation.

Methuen also published the text from Theatre de Complicite's production of *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*; texts from the work of Robert Lepage are also planned for the future. Recognising the emerging importance of text in traditionally non-text based performance practices is a major development in drama publishing. Joining all of this will be a new film list of screenplays by both British and international writers, beginning with Jonathan Harvey's *Beautiful Thing*.

This is all accompanied by a "bold, young image targeted at audiences who reflect the new vigour of British theatre", as the Methuen publicity proclaims. Yet, clearly, more than the packaging is being reinvented here. Methuen are re-energising their focus on contemporary British drama whilst retaining the mixture of classical and contemporary work necessary for economic survival.

Michael Earley's predecessor at Methuen, Peggy Butcher, took over as Drama Editor at Faber and Faber last year. Faber traditionally boasts "a catalogue of the finest playwrights of this century". Butcher's initiatives have breathed new life

into their publishing programme. Building on the success of the backlist, the new Contemporary Classics series of collected plays "aims to provide a body work, in collected form for all the Faber playwrights". What is exciting about this series is that the likes of Alan Ayckbourn and David Hare are joined by Sharman Macdonald, Nick Ward and Timberlake Wertenbaker. Also new are the anthologies *Coming on Strong* (New Writing from the Royal Court), *The Dazzling Dark* (New Irish Plays) and *New Plays from the Bush Theatre*. In both single play and anthology, some fifteen writers are new to Faber in the past year alone, including Nick Grosso, Catherine Johnson and Tamsin Oglesby.

Peggy Butcher distinguishes between a commitment to a writer and a play. The desire is "to see a writer progress from anthology to single play to collected volume". Looking for that kind of investment means making important and informed choices, particularly in a climate where genuinely good new writers can be lured into television.

If such choices are an issue for a major publisher, they are even more so for the smaller, independent publisher. Nick Hern has been operating the award-winning Nick Hern Books (NHB) as a full independent specialist theatre publisher for four years. Hern says that "one is operating at a different level completely...you are faced with greater economical and organizational constraints". The NHB backlist, which now includes Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, David Edgar and Tony Kushner, provides an obvious security. But new work from new writers is continuing to come through; Simon Block, Jez Butterworth, William Gaminara and James Stock are all recent appearances. Hern has also initiated a series in contemporary Irish drama "as it happens", closing the gap between production and publication. For Hern, "making a contract with a writer is a very solemn moment", yet he also speaks of "responsive" as opposed to "responsible publishing". "Play publishing" he says, "shoots itself in the foot by merely following what theatres do...it should be about commitments to individual writers". For example, Hern has published the Scottish writer John Clifford in two anthologies and the single play.

NHB are also taking over the publication of the journal *Live* from Methuen. *Live 4*, published this month, will be devoted to independent theatre and live arts, examining new forms and aesthetic practices. The areas of Criticism and Theatre Practice in drama and theatre publishing are activities too frequently ignored by the industry and beyond. This is perhaps symptomatic of a culture suspicious of research and development. Yet such publications have more than an academic bearing. *Live* will soon be joined by Methuen's aforementioned *Frontline Drama*, and both will serve to partly fill a gap left by the slow demise of broad sheet theatre criticism and coverage. In the area of practice, Faber has already published *Making Plays: The Writer-Director Relationship in Theatre Today* by Richard Nelson and David Jones. Following this will be *Writing, Directing and Acting Theatre for Children* by David Wood and Janet Grant. Methuen, Faber and Nick Hern are high-profile play publishers within the industry. Aurora Metro is a small independent publisher specialising in women's writing. Cheryl Robson says that the aim of the company is to "build a cannon of work at a national level". Their publications to date include a collection of *Plays by Mediterranean Women* and *Six Plays by Black and Asian Women Writers*, with *Young Blood: Plays for Young Performers* forthcoming.

Specialist independent publishers clearly play an important role in accessing and developing work from marginalised constituencies. Robson is "looking for a gap in the market". The economic pressures are continuous, particularly where

distribution and marketing are concerned. Independent play publishing constitutes a vital research base for the development of new writing and new work. In Britain it is essentially "the agent who promotes the writer" says Robson, but publishing can also perform that function, and does so abroad. In countries such as Germany and Italy play publishing is a funded activity. Only four publishers have been considered here, but several others, such as Absolute Classics, Amber Lane and Collins Educational appear to be demonstrating an increasing commitment to new writing and new writers. This trend is possibly a form of recognition of the state of the art, which one would wish to see continued. Yet play publishing is now clearly more than a reaction to what the industry produces. Some of the benefits are obvious - such as the stimulation of second productions. Less transparent perhaps is the possibility of the publishing industry positively impacting on the theatre industry in the development of new performance writing.

John Deeney

Thanks to Peggy Butcher, Michael Earley, Nick Hern and Cheryl Robson

Getting Your Play Into Print

The following information was researched and compiled by NPT member Mary Rensten.

I was pleasantly surprised recently to discover that two of my plays for children were available from my local resources library - full sets as well as single copies. No one had told me and my royalty statement from the publisher had given no indication. If you want to know what's happening to your printed material you have to ask.

You also have to ask, and keep on asking, when you're thinking of sending off a script for publication: Will it receive serious consideration? Who will read it? How long will they keep it? Will they publicise it if they accept it? And most importantly: should I have sent it to them in the first place?

Here are some of the answers from four publishers of plays:

Faber and Faber, Samuel French, Methuen and New Playwrights Network (NPN).

1. Criteria for considering a script.

Faber and Methuen requires a professional production and it helps if the writer and their track record is known to them. Methuen does not encourage unsolicited scripts. Samuel French doesn't need to know the writer; ideally they like the play to have had a production - professional or amateur - but it's not a must. NPN have no pre-conditions other than a good script. All require saes and a properly typed, preferably bound script. They DON'T want: translations by unknown translators (Faber); sketches (NPN).

They DO want: one-act plays for competitive festival market, fulllength plays for children to perform (i.e. with large casts), comedies, thrillers, drama (Samuel French); plays that have had or will have a production (Methuen); all types and lengths, including musicals (NPN).

2. Length of time a script is held before acceptance/rejection.

This varies considerably, owing in part to the number of scripts received. Faber (receives 15 scripts per month) and says one week!, Methuen (20 per month) and NPN (8 per month) both say approximately one to two months. Samuel French (receives 300 unsolicited per year) says two to six months, or much longer (upto eighteen months) if the script is being considered for a future schedule. As a general rule, if the script is not wanted, it will come back fast.

3. Process of selection.

Faber gives it one reading and doesn't send a crit with a rejection. A script sent to Samuel French may get as many as three readings, the final one by a senior member of the company. If a rejected play warrants it, you may get relevant comments. Methuen give two or three readings, no crit.

NPN gives two readings and a written assessment to all submissions. The snag is they charge a reading fee, £10 for a one-act, £25 for a full-length.

4. Criteria for acceptance.

Faber and Methuen want brilliant writing. Samuel French are looking for plays with widespread appeal to amateur performers; plays with good roles for women have an advantage. Plays for NPN must have market potential.

No publisher wants to risk printing a script that won't be bought.

So...you've got that part right; your play has been accepted for publication and you've signed a contract - not without reading the small print. Remember, the play is your, don't give it away. What does the publisher do for you now?

5. Payment.

Faber, Samuel French and Methuen pay an advance plus royalties. NPN don't pay an advance, just royalties.

6. After-publication publicity.

All four publishers produce catalogues, which are distributed to libraries and booksellers. Samuel French also advertises in Amateur Stage and NODA News and have stands at exhibitions and conferences. Methuen send review copies to relevant people, e.g., critics. NPN has a quarterly newsletter. And finally...

7. The best way to make an initial approach to a publisher.

Faber: letter plus CV of stage or other published work; invitation to attend production or reading. No phone calls, faxes acceptable, no examples of other work.

Samuel French: letter, synopsis of plot, cast break-down and a couple of scenes. No full scripts, no phone calls. No examples of other work.

Methuen: prefer to be approached through agent, not writer.

However, if you have no agent, send a preliminary letter and/or invite publisher to production or reading. No phone calls. Happy to see examples of other scripts.

NPN: preliminary letter or phone call; invite to production or reading. Send full script. Happy to see examples of other scripts.

Contact addresses:

Faber and Faber Ltd.

(Peggy Butcher) 3 Queen Square, London
WC1N 3AU. Fax: 0171 465 0034.

Samuel French Ltd.

(Paul Taylor) 52 Fitzroy Street, London W1P
6JR.

Methuen.

(Katherine Fry) Michelin House, 81 Fulham Road,
London SW3 6RB.