



*September 07, 2006*

## **By GWEN OREL**

The following is an overview of playwrights' groups, many of which also include actors and directors. For the purpose of this discussion, each group has met regularly for at least six months and is not considered a class, workshop, or retreat. Established writers, newcomers, or both may participate, in numbers ranging from two to 30.

According to Lisa Rosenthal, editor of *The Writing Group Book: Creating and Sustaining a Successful Writing Group* (Chicago Review Press), "The most important thing for a writing group is to meet regularly. Another important key is effective critiquing, always remembering that you're there to help each other move forward in the craft." A public reading, she adds, can keep people motivated: "Playwrights need results, and the more contacts and connections you can make, the better."

Playwright Jennifer Maisel, who, with director Wendy McClellan, won the first Collaboration Award from the New York Coalition of Professional Women in the Arts & Media ([www.nycwam.org](http://www.nycwam.org)) for her play *Birds*, is part of the Los Angeles writers' collective Dog Ear ([www.dogearplays.org](http://www.dogearplays.org)). The group meets monthly and works on large chunks of writing—usually a draft of a full-length play. Like the RCL Writers Group, Dog Ear has created collective projects: *Goody Fucking Two Shoes*, Maisel's contribution to a series of "witch plays," was produced at Actors Theatre of Louisville's 2005 Humana Festival and was a finalist for the Heideman Award.

Natalie Picoe came to playwriting through acting: She took a class for actors who wanted to write, led by playwright Leslie Ayzajian, at

the Ensemble Studio Theatre. Picoe later joined several writers' groups, including one affiliated with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre ([www.prtt.org](http://www.prtt.org))—whose mission is to promote Hispanic playwrights, though not all its writers are Hispanic—and another with Naked Angels ([www.nakedangels.com](http://www.nakedangels.com)). When her first play, *God's Good Earth*, had a reading at PRTT, "it was thrilling to hear my own words interpreted in ways that I hadn't even imagined when I was writing," she says. But she found that later trying to expand the play with a different writers' group wasn't working, so she brought it back to Allen Davis III, her mentor at PRTT and director of the company's Playwrights Unit: "He met me for lunch and politely read me his comments about how something had gone terribly wrong. I couldn't write for a year," Picoe says. The lesson: Different works need different types of feedback and development.

Writers Bloc ([www.writersblocpresents.com](http://www.writersblocpresents.com)), founded by Back Stage contributor Jeffrey Sweet, has included actors from the outset. "I thought actors could give feedback writers couldn't," Sweet says. "Writers learned how to act in that group, and that improved their writing." New York members have included Donald Margulies, Jerry Stiller, Anne Meara, Percy Granger, and Jane Anderson (the group also has a branch in Los Angeles). Each week, members bring in material and everyone—even nonwriting actors—completes an exercise called "six lines," which involves writing at least six lines of dialogue and three exchanges. "If people go out for coffee, the group is healthy," says Sweet.

Actors who don't write may also find a writers' group to be a valuable callboard. Playwright Sheri Wilner found actor Reno Roop through a writers' group run by the Dramatists Guild, and Roop wound up playing the title role in Wilner's *Father Joy* at this year's Summer Play Festival. Wilner says Roop was "uncannily perfect for the role I was writing." She has also met actors she continues to work with through a group at Primary Stages, where bringing in a certain number of actors is a rotating responsibility among the participating playwrights.

The Actors Studio has two writers' groups: a playwright-director workshop and a playwright-director unit. The workshop presents

three rehearsed excerpts in each two-hour period, followed by discussion. Says group scheduler and playwright Billie Roe Colombo, "Working with such incredible actors raises the bar as far as playwriting is concerned, and to have a weekly forum to go to keeps the creative momentum going."

A group that meets at The Players, a private club on Gramercy Park, gives actors a workout through cold readings and double-casting. Actor-playwright T. Cat Ford says group leader Meir Ribalow "likes to change actors reading the roles halfway through the script so that the playwright can hear whether or not the roles are written consistently." Playwright Spence Porter appreciates Ribalow's tight control of each post-reading discussion, which never turns into a "'Wouldn't it be better if you wrote a different play?' type of criticism," Porter says. "This is unique in my experience of playwriting groups."

Many producing organizations, like PRTT and Primary Stages, have in-house writers' groups. So if you're a fan of a company's work, check out what's available. By taking a class at the theatre, submitting a play, or working as a volunteer reader, you can become acquainted with the theatre's literary department, even if its writers' group is invitation-only.

If you're able to join a theatre-sponsored group, though, be sure you understand its purpose. Playwright Keith Josef Adkins, currently working with Atlanta's Alliance Theatre, has participated in groups at New York Theatre Workshop, the Public Theater, and Playwrights Horizons, as well as the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. While Adkins enjoyed the meetings of one group, he remembers, "we weren't clear whether we were writing plays for the theatre or just writing plays." Some groups were too short-lived to be helpful, he says, but the Taper group (now also defunct) helped him. "It provided a special sense of community in a town that is so industry-driven, theatre isn't a priority," Adkins says. "The group fueled my desire to write, knowing I'd have a community to hand it to. We were always encouraging each other to be better storytellers." In that group, six or

seven people would sign up to read up to 10 pages each, and, as at PRTT, end-of-season readings were offered.

Playwright Brooke Berman has been part of MCC Theater's Playwrights' Coalition ([www.mcctheater.com](http://www.mcctheater.com)) since 2000 and has completed several plays while working with the group. "Literary manager Stephen Willems goes out of his way to create a home for writers," she says. Berman also wrote her play *The Triple Happiness*, produced as part of Second Stage Theatre's New Plays Uptown series in 2004, while participating in Soho Rep's Writer/Director Lab ([www.sohorep.org](http://www.sohorep.org)). Theatre-affiliated writers' groups are not usually integrated with the theatre's production schedule—which can be a bonus, she notes: "None of the theatres can claim any kind of rights over the work produced in these groups."

True to its name, the Lark Play Development Center ([www.larktheatre.org](http://www.larktheatre.org)) is a resource for playwrights. Led by playwright Arthur Kopit, the group includes five to nine writers, whose work is read by professional actors. The organization also presents an annual Playwrights' Week Festival, to which anyone can submit a play. Playwright Rajiv Joseph, whose *All This Intimacy* was part of this summer's New Plays Uptown series, was recently part of the group. He says it offered him a new way to work: episodically: "Every Sunday night I was scurrying around to write 15 pages. After a few months I had compiled a packet of plays with scenes and characters." Joseph also had to tell the Lark what kind of actors he needed before he had written the scene, which led to new discoveries. "It was one of the more instrumental experiences I've had as a writer," he says.

Don't discount groups run by smaller theatres. Actor-playwright Laura Rohrman, who recently had two short plays produced in New York and one in London, belongs to two such groups: the RCL Writers Group, an offshoot of Love Creek Productions, and Vital R&D, an arm of the Vital Theater Company ([www.vitaltheatre.org](http://www.vitaltheatre.org)). Love Creek runs Samuel French's annual Off-Off-Broadway Original Short Play Festival, and one of the group's goals is to polish plays for submission. Its director, Le Wilhelm, also asks the group to work on

collective projects; the plays on this year's topic, "Women in Boats," ran at the Producers' Club last month. Vital R&D, meanwhile, is both more competitive and more loosely structured. "Some people bring in short stories or movie treatments as well as plays," says Rohrman, who credits the group with helping her figure out her full-length play *Reporter Girl*, which will receive a workshop at Second Stage.

If you aren't accepted into an existing group, you can always start your own. All you really need is one other person who won't accept "the cat ate my pages."

Actor-playwright Melissa Maxwell is part of a long-standing group—of two. Maxwell, whose play *Salt in a Wound* received a recent reading at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, "meets" weekly by phone with a college friend who is also an actor. They used to meet weekly to go over monologues, but now they've transferred that commitment to their writing. "We email each other on Friday or Saturday and talk at a designated time every Sunday," she explains. "We don't let each other off the hook. It's safe, but we also challenge each other. We can't get anything by each other because we know each other so well." Maxwell has been invited to join other writers' groups but is cautious: "As an actor, you just don't take any acting class. You can do damage going to a bad acting class; there are people who can be destructive."

Karin Diann Williams, whose play *Surgery* was part of this year's Midtown International Theatre Festival, is a member of a group called the Manhattan Oracles, founded by members of the International Centre for Women Playwrights ([www.netspace.org/~icwp](http://www.netspace.org/~icwp)). At the group's weekly meetings, three or four writers will bring work to be read by actors. Williams enjoys the feedback even though the writers work in different styles, because "we're very much in tune with each other and the artistic mission of other writers in the group." The collective has started to publicize its members' work and to hold readings at places like the Drama Book Shop.

Hip Replacement, run by New York actor-filmmaker Dave Simonds, meets weekly and includes actors, screenwriters, poets, and fiction

writers as well as playwrights. Simonds, who ran the now-defunct Obie Award–winning Cucaracha Theatre, advises young artists arriving in the city that instead of doing an Off-Off-Broadway showcase and inviting agents, they should "form a group and meet every week and read something. That's how Cucaracha started. Our focus wasn't 'How do we make it?' but 'What do we want to do?' You never know what can happen that way."

Which writers' group is right for you depends on what you need. Some writers find feedback distracting, while others need a weekly deadline to stay motivated.

A playwriting class can get you moving, too—and also be the basis for a group. Michael Ladenson, part of the Working Playwrights Group, which was formed by classmates in a summer workshop led by playwright Arthur Giron in connection with the Ensemble Studio Theatre, acknowledges that "there are writers who spend their lives taking classes and financing theatres through their fees."

Naturally, there are risks to writers' groups. Playwright Adam Kraar cautions that "there is a danger of writers looking to groups to help them with things that they may best discover on their own, such as why they're writing a play." Not every play lends itself to a cold reading, so develop a thick skin if your play is non-naturalistic.

Most important if you're part of a writers' group: Show up—and not just when your own work is being read! Be as helpful and open with your critiques as you are bold and free in your writing. At the end of the day, writing is still a solitary activity: Only you can write your play. But a writers' group can help you find your way on a lonely road. <