

U Can't Tweet a Play

Finding a job in theater is all about networking, but what kind?

Find out why social networking only gets you so far.



BY CHRISTOPHER ZARA

COUNTLESS new actors eagerly enter the New York City casting pool every year, and the vast majority of them learn just as quickly the exasperating truth about just how impenetrable the theater scene can be. After a few months of cattle calls and headshot submissions yield numerous disappointments but few tangible results, even the most resolute young hopeful can become discouraged by the maddening road to making connections in show business. Time and again theater professionals assert that acting is a business of networking, and young actors, weaned on text messages and online profiles, all too often forget that professional relationships are not built sitting in front of a computer and clicking the Direct Submit button. If you want to succeed, you will eventually have to meet people — the right people — face to face, the old-fashioned way.

But who are the right people? The obvious answer is that the right people are the people directly responsible for getting you work, i.e. agents and casting directors. However, while you might begin with these much sought-after casting professionals, your networking endeavors must not end there. For starters, agents and casting directors are constantly bombarded by actors, and they can be notoriously evasive as a result. And while many so-called networking organizations hold seminars and workshops in which actors can buy a few minutes of face time with a casting director or agent, such events — known as “pay-to-play” in acting circles — produce few real-world results. In fact,



many theater professionals believe fervently that pay-to-play events hurt actors in the long run. As the argument goes, the more money agents and casting directors make as hired guns for networking organizations, the less incentive they have to find work for actors.

It's important to remember, though, that many roles are not cast through traditional auditions and agent bookings at all, but rather through word of mouth and established contacts. In other words, the more contacts you establish now, the greater your chances of working steadily throughout your theater career.

Actor-Writer Relationships

In theater, as the saying goes, everything starts with the writer, and actors looking to break into the business should do the same. Unlike the film

industry, in which the writer is typically a lowly regarded hired gun — or a spec-writer who sells a screenplay, loses control of it and watches helplessly as Hollywood revises it beyond recognition — the theater industry still respects those indispensable wordsmiths who put a pen to paper and stories on the stage. Playwrights are often intimately involved in the casting of a new play, and more often than not they choose actors they've worked with in the past. Some theater executives point to the habitual practice of actor-playwright collaborations as a potential source of acting opportunities that too often goes unexplored.

“My advice to actors is find your playwright,” says Kara Manning, literary manager of the Irish Repertory Theatre. “Get to know the writers who are writing the kind of stuff you know you're good at. Seek them out.”

As literary manager, Manning over-

sees the Irish Rep's New Works Reading Series, a program designed to encourage the development of new plays about the Irish and Irish-American experience.

Manning says these types of events are often where playwrights begin to develop professional relationships with actors, some of whom they may continue to work with throughout their careers.

“The actor-writer relationship is one that definitely needs more attention,” she adds. “When you look at a lot of off-Broadway playwrights today — Annie Baker, Adam Rapp, Lucy Thurber — all of these people are good examples of writers who tend to work with the same actors over and over again.”

When approaching your favorite writers, it's important to remain respectful. Don't bombard them with headshots and demo reels or fill their inboxes with spam emails about your latest background role on *Gossip Girl*. If you simply want to land on a writer's radar, Manning suggests the more subtle approach of basic public relations. “If you're appearing in something, give a writer a comp,” she says. “A lot of times, writers don't have much money, but they'll go see a show for free.”

Readings Are Fundamental

One way to get in on the ground floor of new plays in development is to attend play readings, which playwrights and theater companies use to iron out the creative kinks inherent to any work in progress. For actors looking to meet people involved in theater, readings, particularly those at established theater companies, are a veritable goldmine of networking prospects.

“Actors should attend play readings

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MAKING FRIENDS Jesse Eisenberg might be known for playing Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, but in real life the actor has admitted that he doesn't even use the site. In fact, Eisenberg worked on tiny off-Broadway stages before landing his big break.

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at quality theaters to see who the up-and-coming playwrights are and to get to know people connected with a given theater," says Brian O'Neil, author of the seminal acting guide, *Acting as a Business*. "Readings at good theaters provide one of the best networking opportunities for the New York actor. There are contacts galore to be made."

O'Neil, a former talent agent who offers career development and coaching services for actors, says readings can be a window into future casting opportunities. Today's works in development are tomorrow's full-scale productions, and down the road those productions will need talent. Savvy actors should strive to have a handle on what new works are in development, and there are many ways to stay one step ahead of the open call, even after the reading is over. For instance, O'Neil suggests that actors set up Google alerts for the title of any play whose reading they attend. As an actor in search of leads, the alert will keep you updated on any progress in the play's development, including audition announcements. If the play has a role for which you think you are good fit, you can contact the playwright and explain that you had seen the reading and would like to be considered.

O'Neil is quick to point out, however, that starring in the play down the road is a long shot, and that the true benefit of attending play readings is the opportunity to network. "Whether or not the play ever makes it to the theater's main stage — which in most cases it won't — is entirely irrelevant," he said. "This business is about forging quality rela-

tionships. Meet good people at good theaters. This is far more effective networking than hanging out in bars where show folk supposedly gather."

The Irish Rep's Manning, a graduate of Columbia University's MFA playwriting program and a playwright herself, also sees readings as an integral part of the development process of any new work. Last year, for instance, her romantic dramedy *Killing Swans* had a reading at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, and her play *Sleeping Rough* had one at Baruch College as part of MCC Theater's PlayLabs. For her readings, Manning says she not only prefers to work with actors she already knows, but sometimes she will write characters with a particular actor in mind. "As a playwright, you get these actor crushes," she says. "You become enthralled by their work, and you just want to write for them."

Introduce Yourself

Getting to know a playwright may not sound as daunting as landing an agent, but actors still need to remember the basic rules of professionalism when submitting themselves for a play reading. David Staller, who produces and directs Gingold Theatrical Group's reading series "Project Shaw," says actors who submit their headshots should treat readings as they would any other potential acting gig. "You'd be surprised at some of the things I get — pictures on torn pieces of paper and whatnot," he says. "If you can't present yourself professionally with a submission, how can I expect you'll be professional in the reading?"

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Still, Staller cites the sheer number of submissions he receives as proof that readings can be a valuable professional outlet for actors at all levels. "I'm constantly hearing from actors — and their agents — who want to get involved," he adds. "Readings are a great way for actors of all kinds to stretch those acting muscles, even if they've been in Broadway shows."

Create Your Own Opportunities

In the mid 1970s, an unknown actor-writer named Sylvester Stallone managed to generate studio interest in a spec screenplay he'd written about a washed-up boxer who gets the chance to fight the heavyweight champion of the world. Executives at United Artists saw the story as a potential vehicle for Burt Reynolds or Robert Redford, both established icons at the time. But Stallone had written the story for himself, and, in a now-legendary demonstration of either fortitude or foolhardiness, he refused to sell the story unless producers agreed to cast him in the lead role. The studio reluctantly relented, and the film, *Rocky*, went on to become the highest-grossing movie of 1976, turning Stallone into a house-

hold name in the process.

Stallone's underdog tale has since become one of the most famous in showbiz lore, but the acting world is full of success stories involving actors who create their own projects. The frustrations of auditioning, of being typecast, or of simply not finding the right roles are enough to compel actors at all levels to make their own prospects, rather than wait for opportunity to come knocking. In theater, this scenario is particularly common. The Atlantic Theater, LABYRINTH, the Amoralists — all of these companies began as actor pet projects, concentrated theatrical communities in which actors, writers and other creative types could network and collaborate.

Jenna Weinberg, a local performer and founder of Brooklyn's Mainspring Collective, recalls moving to New York, in 2007, and instantly realizing the need for an insular creative group in which she could network with other like-minded artists. "I moved here with my best friend from Indiana University, and we decided to start our own theater company," she says. "We did it in hopes of building a community and environment to do our best work, to build something together and get

noticed in the sea of New York City theater."

Mainspring Collective has since garnered critical acclaim for its Monster Literature series, which imagines what would happen if popular children's tales were hijacked by monsters. Weinberg says the collective owes its success to two things: effective networking and effective marketing. "I basically learned by watching others, asking theaters that we worked with for their publicity lists," Weinberg says. "Some are happy to give them to you because they want you to do your own publicity and get people to their venue. For contacts that were out of date, I made lots of phone calls checking up on new staff and different places. It's a lot of work compiling this data, but the more organized you get yourself in the beginning, the easier publicity for your shows becomes."

Brandon Walker, founder and artistic director of the Seeing Place Theater, agrees that if you choose the D.I.Y. route, you must be prepared to wear a lot of hats. "We all start companies thinking about how wonderful the art is going to be, but when it comes down to it, we all spend the majority of our days sending and answering emails," he says.

"New companies should try to devote all their spare time and energy to promoting, getting reviewers, calling friends, writing personal emails — anything and everything they can think of."

The Anti-Social Network?

With Facebook, Twitter and other social-media sites now well ingrained in the mass consciousness, no one denies the power of such sites as potential networking tools. In the three years since YouTube propelled Justin Bieber from obscurity to tween idol, discussions about whether social media will rewrite the rules of networking have all but ended. However, while it's easy to tweet about your latest acting seminar or upload headshots to your online profile and feel like you're doing something to advance your career, theater professionals warn against getting complacent.

"The Internet is a great resource in a lot of ways, but I don't believe it's the be-all, end-all of publicity that some make it out to be," says Weinberg. "Facebook is an excellent tool for letting friends and others know about your projects, but it's being totally overused right now. I receive so many Facebook invitations to events, performances and fundraisers, that I've stopped paying attention."

Emily Owens, a theatrical press representative in Brooklyn, agrees. "A common mistake people make when using social-networking tools is bombarding people with the same information over and over again," she says. "Good networking does not mean sending out five Facebook emails a day or sending out fan requests 10 times to people who clearly don't wish to become a fan."

Despite the apparent ubiquity of social media, not to mention the allure of reaching thousands of people with the click of a mouse, it is the networking you do in the real world that will offer you the best opportunity to meet people working in all aspects of theater. And in an industry built around the adage, "It's all about who you know," the value of making real-world connections can never really be overstated. "Word of mouth is the strongest networking tool you have," says Walker. "Personally, I find it important to constantly reach out to people I know. We tell people at every show to please tell their friends. We let them know we're struggling for a good cause." ■

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