

## Theater

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#### **Playwrights' labors get a second life thanks to new independent presses.**

By Helen Shaw

So you're a playwright. You've had the most adorable idea for a script (Anna Nicole as a reverse-gendered Macbeth!), and you've actually hammered out 40 pages of dramatic genius. Perhaps you've even nudged your little gosling out into the generous duck pond of the Fringe Festival, or circulated it among your supportive circle of friends. But how do you get that definitive stamp of approval? How do you get...y'know...*published*?

Playscripts Inc., founded in 1999 by brothers Doug and Jonathan Rand while they were still at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively, can help. The once-scrappy dorm-room enterprise now ranks among the top four play-publishing houses in the country. Playscripts does a few things the major imprints don't—like not making writers wait six months between royalty checks. They woke up to the Internet revolution early, posting scripts online but encrypting them to prevent theft. And most important, they let prospective purchasers read 90 percent of the text online before buying. These innovations stem from the brothers being not just founders, but members as well. "I've submitted to Humana's ten-minute-play festival for the last four years—except last year, when I was getting married three days after the application deadline," says Doug. "We only started [Playscripts] after my brother posted his own play online, and before he knew it, his show was going up in Singapore."

There are almost as many reasons to publish a play as there are to write one. First, there's the laudable quest of earning a buck. Playwrights do have to eat, so many are desperate simply to get a book into a publishing catalog and watch the royalties roll in. Not so fast, Feydeau. Each year, amateur productions far outnumber professional ones (which usually follow a well-reviewed run in New York). Accordingly, the bulk of royalty income comes from community troupes and schools. Doug won't recommend that artists spurn



**TEXT APPEAL** Doug Rand, left, and brother Jonathan stay on top of new dramatists.

the mainstream, but he does want to remind them that there is a huge, untapped market in colleges and high schools. So while your 50-character stage version of *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* sits on the back burner, why not write a funny, kid-friendly six-hander about Thomas Jefferson? Drama teachers will eat it up.

The best advice Doug can give is “get your play performed.” That way it may come to the attention of Martin Denton, the Off-Off Broadway booster and not-for-profit publisher whose annual collections (including the just-out *Plays and Playwrights 2007*) provide a snapshot of fresh work. According to Denton, his goal isn’t about earning potential, but servicing the community. “I probably see 300 plays a year,” he says. “From those, I pick plays by writers that have never been produced, and that represent current theater trends. It’s about legitimizing the work.”

For stylists operating on the far edge, however, publishing has an almost academic appeal. Young Jean Lee, coeditor of Mac Wellman’s *New Downtown Now* collection (University of Minnesota), says the project exists as a tribute to outstanding experimental work that isn’t represented elsewhere—it may be hard to imagine a Midwestern junior high mounting Kevin Oakes’s provocative *The Vomit Talk of Ghosts*, for example. “These are playwrights playing with language and plot and narrative in a weird way,” Lee contends. “It’s not so much about having other people perform them as it is important to simply get them on the record.”

The heavy hitters in play publishing, Samuel French and Dramatists Play Service, tend to publish acting editions, steering clear of such anthologies and “best of” compilations—partially because they can afford to. A long history in the business, and massive stables of older, proven work, mean that they don’t need the same marketing hustle that the little guys do. Doug points out that holding the licensing rights to *Our Town* alone floats the larger houses financially. “We’re always going to be hungrier than they are,” he says.

Playscripts is branching out, therefore, with two new collections: NYC company Clubbed Thumb’s *Funny, Strange, Provocative*, and the yearly anthology from the Humana Festival of New American Plays. Having just returned from Louisville (“the closest thing we have to a theater lovefest”), Doug seems peppy about American playwriting. After Humana’s longtime original publisher, Smith & Kraus, refused to include 2005’s *Uncle Sam’s Satiric Spectacular* for political reasons, the Rands stepped in; they currently publish half the anthology’s authors. Now if they could only get their own, 21st-century *Our Town*.