



Publicizing and Promoting Your Play Reading

*A General Guide for
The Playwrights' Center of San Francisco
Playwright*

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Congratulations!

Congratulations! Your play was selected for a Staged or Developmental Reading. The benefit you will get from seeing it read by actors will be invaluable. The feedback from the audience can be even more valuable. Now it's time for you to help make sure that feedback **is** valuable and your reading is as successful as it can be.

This guide provides some general information about things to consider and simple things you can do to help promote your reading and get the most from the experience.

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The Purpose of the Reading

In the excitement of getting selected, don't forget the purpose of these readings in your development process:

1. A Staged Reading
 - a. Hear and see how well the play works
 - b. Get feedback from an audience
 - c. Find out what (hopefully) minor work is needed to get it "production ready"
 - d. Experience a bit of the play production process
 - e. Get it seen by producers and directors who might want to **produce** your work
2. A Developmental Reading
 - a. Hear how well the play works
 - b. Get feedback from an audience

- c. Find out what you need to do to bring it to the next level and hopefully get it production ready

The Actors, the Director, and PCSF

Just having the play read, and in the case of Staged Readings, working with a director through the casting, rehearsal, and performance process, will give you a feel for how well the play works and give you a truncated experience of the production process.

- PCSF handles getting the director, ensures there are actors, and provides the place for the reading.
- PCSF will also do some very limited and very general publicity to *help* get an audience in the door.
- The director and actors will help you understand things about your play which you could never have discovered without them.

BUT it's not enough and it's not ALL you should get from the process!!!!!!

Publicity is the Playwright's Responsibility

Let's repeat that. Publicity is the playwright's responsibility.

Unless you get a major production with a company that has a major publicity budget -- and even then -- promoting your work is the business side of play writing (or any kind of writing!). Learn to embrace it and do it with as much dedication as you did your writing.

With staged and developmental readings you will get as much out of this process as you put into it. However, it's not just getting enough people to fill the house. It's getting the RIGHT people into the theatre, which can make a difference in the kind of experience you have.

Why fill the house?

Besides making you feel good, filling the house as much as you can serves a very crucial role in your reading.

Not all of the feedback you get or information you learn is going to be from direct feedback.

- You will get some of it from observing the play being read in front of people.
- You will get an equal amount from getting the solicited feedback from the audience members who participate.
- You will get as much information from paying attention to how your audience reacts during the reading. Do they laugh in the right places? Do they fidget through a particularly long scene? Do they collectively hold their breath during a really tense moment?

It is a well-documented fact that more people in the audience and the tighter packed (how closely they sit together) they are will impact how much they respond to what they are watching. Five people spread out might think something is funny, but not laugh, for example.

Note: It is also true that different audiences react differently (i.e. one night to another), so be cautious in how you interpret the audience reactions.

Your Publicity Strategy

So, what is your publicity strategy? Answering these questions will help you begin.

- Who do you want to come see your play?
- What do you hope to get out of your reading?
- How much time, money, energy are you willing to put into publicizing your reading?
- What is your play about? Why would people be interested in seeing it?

Let's look at these in more detail in the next sections. Take some time to really think about and answer these questions, before you do anything else.

Who do you want at your reading?

Friends and family will fill the seats, you can usually count on them to give you the support and good “vibes” we all want when something good happens with our work. Getting a reading is something good. No one is going to tell you not to invite friends and family. BUT, beware they probably won't give you the most useful feedback. “I'm just so proud of what she's done.” Might feel great, but what does it tell you about the work itself? And remember these people like you and want to make you feel good, they aren't necessarily going to be completely up front if they don't like something.

Ideally the audience for your Staged Reading should include a good mix of supportive people you trust (10%), theatre professionals and frequent theatre goers who “know”

plays and what makes them work and what doesn't (30%), peers and fellow writers (60%), and people you hope will be interested in producing or directing your play (10%). After all, that's ultimately why you wrote the play in the first place, yes? To get it produced?

For Developmental Readings your audience mix might be a little different, because Developmental Readings serve a different purpose. You want the same kind of mix, but be more cautious about inviting from that potential producer / director pool. At this stage you want to get feedback about complexity of directing the piece, problems there might be in getting it produced, and other technical components, not necessarily market and promote the play as something they would like to produce.

Ultimately, who you target will also depend on what you are hoping to get out of your reading....

What do you hope to get out of your reading?

In general you want a good mix of audience members, but for certain things you will want to target specific types of people more than others. It is critical that you be honest with yourself and where in the development process you feel your play lies.

So, what do you want to get out of your reading, specifically?

Are you concerned about how well a particular element of your play is working? Is it funny? Is it too long? How is the pacing? When x happens, does it make a big impact? How believable is the dialogue? The situation? The characters?

- A good mix of "average" audience members should be on your list.

Do you believe in your play? Do you think that with some minor tinkering it will be ready for a production?

- Exposure to targeted theatres, producers, and directors should be high on your list.

Are you looking to understand how understandable the play is? Is what you are trying to do with it effective? Does the structure work? Do the plot elements all line up? How strong is the writing? What kind of production issues might it have?

- Peers you respect and other theatre professionals should be a big part of your target list.

Regardless of your mix, you should have a clear idea of what you want to achieve with your reading before your reading, BUT remember to be open minded to discovering things you never would have thought to think about.

How much are you willing and able to put into your publicity?

How much time you are willing to put into your publicity is going to determine a lot about what methods you use.

On the most fundamental level you should do a minimum of the following:

- Send an email to those people close and familiar to you. Something simple, brief, and enthusiastic.
- Post announcements in any of the member group sites you are involved in.
- Bring it into conversations at parties or gatherings, especially when you meet new people and are discussing what you “do.”

The following sections discuss these and other methods in more detail.

Targeting the General Audience

The following are some ideas for targeting a general audience.

- Email and eVites
- Posting on Member Group Bulletin Boards
- Community Calendars or press release to local or special interest publications
- Fliers or postcards left around the neighborhood and local haunts

Email

Email and eVites (electronic invitations offered by sites like Evite or on Myspace) are great for people you know and are familiar with. With an eVite, people generally have to specify if they are coming or not, which if nothing else, gives you some idea of how many people to expect from this effort.

- Email is not as good for people you don't know and aren't familiar with.
- The content of your email should be personable, enthusiastic and SHORT.
 - Tell people it's happening.
 - Give them the details for when/where/how much
 - Ask them to come see it and thank them
 - Include a little teaser about the plot.
- Consider sending an announcement a month or so before the reading and a reminder the week before. eVites can help you do this automatically.
- Consider including drinks or coffee or something else after the reading to encourage this group to stay for the feedback (and for you to celebrate with afterward.)

Here's an example:

Hi everyone! I am very excited to announce that my full-length play “That Play I Wrote” will be having a staged reading by The Playwrights' Center of San

Francisco next month. I would love to have you join me. The reading will give me a chance to see how well the play is working, provide an opportunity to give it some exposure, and get really valuable feedback to help me make it perfect. We'll meet for drinks and desert afterward at The Great Desert Place around the corner. Here are the details and please let me know if you can make it:

That Play I Wrote

When a boy-meets-girl night on the town goes all wrong, it really goes wrong!
Can they save the night and live happily ever after or will that monster in the lake ruin the whole thing?

When: September 18th, 7:30 pm

Where: The Off-Market Theatre, 2nd Floor 965 Mission between 5th & 6th Streets

How Much: \$10 non-members, PCSF members free (think of joining!) – no reservation needed.

Posting on a Member or Group Website

Do you participate in a member group online? Member groups are a growing phenomenon on the web and could be a perfect place to blow your own horn and get people who share your interests to come out and see your play.

Because they are online, chances are that most of the members are not in the area, but that's going to depend on the type of member group it is.

Put together a little press release that includes the name of your play, an eye catching and interesting tag line, your bio if appropriate, and the details for when and where the reading will be. You can explain a little bit about what the reading is for and how people can help you develop your play by coming to see it.

Here's an example:

Staged Reading of "That Play I Wrote," written by Jane W. Playwright and
Directed by Joe P. Director

The Playwrights' Center of San Francisco will be producing a staged reading of my play, "That Play I Wrote" at the Off-Market Theatre in San Francisco on Tuesday September 18th at 7:30pm.

"That Play I Wrote" is a farcical twist to the boy-meets-girl story where everything is turned topsy turvy when a monster emerges from the nearby lake and takes the town by storm. Inspired by a recent sighting of the mythical monster in Lake Tahoe and themed around dating difficulties in today's busy world, I attempt to bring a tongue in cheek approach to our true favorite national pastime.

Staged readings are a script-in-hand directed and rehearsed reading of the play to provide a glimpse of how the play would be in a full production. It is an

opportunity for the playwright to see it “on it’s feet” and get valuable feedback from an audience.

Tickets are sold at the door and are \$10-15 for non-members and free for members.

The cast includes local actors:

Sara Burnhart

Laurence Oliveoil

And Ethel Murmane

Local or Special Interest Publications

Especially in a metropolitan area like San Francisco and the Bay Area, chances are that in addition to a plethora of neighborhood newspapers, if you can think of an interest or hobby or trade, you can find a local newsletter or paper dedicated to it.

- What is your play about? Would it appeal to one of these papers?
- Most of them have community and event calendars. Look into having your reading posted there.
- Neighborhood papers are also frequently looking for stories about their inhabitants. It might be a perfect opportunity to pitch a story and get a few moments of local fame too.
- For the community calendar check their guidelines for how and when to get things listed.
- For a story pitch, you can check guidelines, a press release is usually a good way to catch their attention. “Local playwright is having a reading of their latest work about xyz.” Make sure to slant the information in the press-release to appeal to the publication’s readership.

Around the Neighborhood and Your Local Haunts

Do you frequent a local café, restaurant, bookstore, laundromat, or bar? Are you on speaking terms with your neighbors? Do you go to a regular meeting after work on Thursdays?

Consider putting together a little flyer or printing up some post cards. Many establishments will let you leave or post them and you can mail them or give them to your neighbors.

The Playwrights’ Center of San Francisco provides a simple template post-card format and a simple flyer format, but you are strongly encouraged to get creative. This is why you spent hours making collages and finger-painting in kindergarten, training for your publicity!

Targeting a Knowledgeable Audience of Peers and Theatre Professionals

Following are some ideas for targeting peers and theatre professionals. Many of the items listed previously might be applicable methods for reaching these potential audience members, but they may require something special or more personal.

- Your network and groups
- PCSF events
- Local theatre events
- Classes

Targeting Potential Producers, Theatres and Directors

This is possibly the most difficult group to target.

It is as bad an idea to send out blanket announcements to every theatre as it is to not target any at all.

Even if you don't plan on asking them yet or don't have much hope that a particular artistic director or producing director will attend you should have a feel for where your play would be a good fit.

Not every play is a good fit for every theatre.

Think about productions you've seen at different theatres.

Where would you like to see your work produced? Do they normally produce your type of work? Does the theatre produce new work?

If you decide to invite any of these professionals, make sure you know who to direct your communications to. If you don't already know, take the time to contact the theatre and get the appropriate information. This could be the dramaturge, the producing director, art director, an assistant, or someone else. It is going to depend on the theatre, its size, and how it operates. Take the time to find out.

Be sensitive to how busy these people are and how often they are being contacted. Be professional.

In most cases a postcard with a personal note is the basic approach.

Remember Publicity Doesn't Have to be Somber; Have a Little Fun

Let your imagination give your materials or methods a little boost.

- Create a collage or create great artwork for your fliers or postcards. Collect postcards from theatre productions and other promotions to get a feel for how others have put their materials together. Pay attention to fonts, white space, layout, colors, content.
- Is there a tie-in to current events or cultural phenomena that you could take advantage of?
- Use humor (when appropriate). The tone of your material should match the nature of your play.
- Create your own website for your playwriting and use it to keep people abreast of what's happening. Post quotes from the feedback after the reading!
- Spend the time to come up with a great tag line and teaser; one that makes people say "hmmm that sounds interesting, I want to see that."

Some notes on tag lines, teasers, summaries, and synopses:

- A tag line is something used after the title of the play to characterize the play and is usually only a sentence or phrase.
- A teaser is generally a couple of sentences that provides enough information to tantalize the potential audience member and make them want to know more – i.e. come and see it!
- A summary is a paragraph that describes the events of the play at a very high overview level and may describe what the playwright is attempting to achieve, what inspired the play or other illustrative information.
- A synopsis is a scene-by-scene or act-by-act breakdown of the action and plot points of a play.

For publicity purposes you want both a tag line and a teaser in particular (though a summary is useful as well in some circumstances). Of the two the teaser is more important. Here are some do's and don'ts about teasers.

DO:

- Be short and to the point, keep it below 50 words
- Use humor where appropriate
- Build curiosity by including plot cues
- Provide words or phrases that tell the potential audience that this play is new or different or unexpected, without saying "new" "different" or "unexpected"
- Aim to get a reaction and surprise the reader
- Read as many play teasers as you can get your hands on
- Write a few and have a trusted friend(s) and / or peer(s) look at them and tell you which they like best – which would most pique their interest

DON'T

- Be too vague or too generic
- Be too specific or revealing
- Brag or make claims about how 'great' the play is
- Use cliché phrasing or descriptions

Make Publicity Part of Your Skill Set and Routine

- Chances are your reference library contains dictionaries, how-to guides on formats and how to tighten dialogue, and reference books about your given subject. Add marketing and publicity books to your library.
- Make it a habit when submitting a play to sit down and develop a strategy for publicizing it if it were selected.
- Keep a list of your network and people you'd like to keep abreast of your progress. Keep it up to date and use it.

Your Tool Kit

These can all be found on the PCSF website under Publicity Kit.

- Publicity Worksheet
- Post Card Template
- Flyer Template
- Press Release Template

What PCSF Does

PCSF will do some general promotion for the reading series and some broad announcements for each reading.

- Listing in the weekly newsletter and on the website
- Announcements at other PCSF events
- Listing in Theatre Bay Area
- Other general promotion for the season

PCSF's responsibility is to build interest in PCSF programs and events in general and our marketing is geared toward this goal. Your responsibility is to build interest and get an audience for your specific play and your publicity should work in conjunction with ours toward that goal. Only you know the answers to the questions we explored in this guide.

Publicity Doesn't Stop When the Play Reading is Over

Publicity for your play doesn't stop once your play reading is over, in fact you should look at the play reading as the START of your publicity strategy. Here are some things you should do at the reading and beyond to keep momentum and interest and continue publicizing your play.

Immediately after the reading, before people leave:

- Mingle with the audience members who stayed for the feedback session. Meet them, thank them, ask them who they are if you don't know them, give them your contact information or ask for theirs.
- Thank the actors, talk to them, ask them what other shows they are in, ask if you can add them to your email list.
- Write down some notes about what people said, was any of it quotable? Find out if you can quote them and get the necessary information (name & email primarily).

The next day:

- Add all those new people you met at your reading to your distribution list – they've now made it to your email category – and can get more frequent (though not obnoxiously so) and more casual announcements from you.

No more than three days after your reading:

- Remember the website you created? Post the quotes, provide an update on how the reading went, give people insights into what you learned and what you are going to do next.

Anytime and always:

- Make a point to go to other playwright's readings, ESPECIALLY if they came to yours. Build a relationship with your peers and they will help promote your work and you should help promote theirs.
- Make a point to support the actors who were in your reading, go to their shows, publicize their work to your network and chances are very high they'll do the same for you. When you publicize their work add the statement: "The actor who played Mira in the reading of "That Play I Wrote" in September is in a play at..."
- Do the same for your director if it was a Staged Reading.

our mission

The mission of the The Playwrights' Center of San Francisco is to encourage and develop local playwrights and promote script writing, audience development, and related arts.

PCSF is a proud member
of Theatre Bay Area



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