

# ASHLAND NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL

## READERS HANDBOOK

### Our Mission

Ashland New Plays Festival assists playwrights in the development of new works through public readings and offers an educational forum to the community through discussions and workshops.

### Contents

Overview .....	2
Checklist for New & Returning Readers.....	3
Features of a Great Play .....	4
Questions to Ask When Evaluating A New Play .....	4
General Guidelines.....	5
Techniques for Reading Plays .....	6
Techniques for Evaluating Plays .....	7
Techniques for Reading a Challenging or Difficult Play .....	9
Scoring Overview .....	10
Round 1 Reading/Scoring Process.....	11
Round 2 Reading/Scoring Process.....	12
Final Meeting.....	13
Reader Appreciation Party.....	13

*Knowing how to read a play—learning how to read one—is not a complex or daunting matter. When you read a novel and the novelist describes a sunset to you, you do not merely read the words; you “see” what the words describe, and when the novelist puts down conversation, you silently “hear” what you read . . . automatically, without thinking about it. Why, then, should it be assumed that a play text presents problems far more difficult for the reader? Beyond the peculiar typesetting particular to a play, the procedures are the same; the acrobatics the mind performs are identical; the results need be no different. I was reading plays—Shakespeare, Chekhov—long before I began writing them; indeed, long before I saw my first serious play in performance. Was seeing these plays in performance a different experience than seeing them through reading them? Of course. Was it a more complete, more fulfilling experience? No, I don’t think so.*

—From Edward Albee, “Why Read Plays?” *Zoetrope* 4 (4), Winter 2000.

## Overview

**W**e enjoy and appreciate plays on multiple levels. The Ashland New Plays Festival focuses on giving new plays public readings that provide feedback for the playwrights. As readers for ANPF’s flagship festival, our primary responsibility is to read, score, discuss and recommend plays from which four will be chosen to present at the annual October festival.

Scripts are submitted to ANPF from playwrights across the country and even internationally. To be accepted, a play must be an original work that has not been previously produced in a theatrical setting. We may read 50 to 60 plays in a season. Although this may sound daunting, the reading is spread over five months. We read and score many assigned plays (approximately 30) in Round 1, where each play receives at least three readings. In Round 2 all readers read all plays (approximately 24). At the end of that process, 10 to 12 plays will be designated as finalists. The Artistic Director chooses the final four plays.

After ANPF training, readers are placed in groups of approximately six to eight members. These reading groups have a group leader(s) and meet periodically to discuss plays and evaluation techniques. ANPF asks that each reader commit to reading all assigned plays in Round 1 and all the plays in Round 2. Scores are submitted to the tabulator-in-chief, Penny Mikesell and can be changed at any time. Penny tabulates the scores and produces a cumulative score for each play. The plays are then ranked in order of the absolute average of the scores.

Scripts are available as PDF files. A very limited number of hard copies will be available for a few readers.

## Checklist for New and Continuing Readers

1. The reading calendar starts in December and ends in May. Do you have the time, energy, and interest to commit to reading plays for five months?
2. Can you commit to attending most meetings, including reader training and small group discussion meetings either in person or through technology (e.g. Skype)?
3. Information regarding meetings, date changes, deadlines, etc. are communicated through email. Are you willing to utilize and regularly check your email and respond to requests in a timely manner?
4. We go to great lengths to keep the reading process “blind.” Will you support this process by resisting any temptation to research plays or playwrights during the reading period?
5. If you believe you recognize a play or playwright, please don't share your assumption (or knowledge) regarding a play with other readers. Discuss privately with your group leader.
6. If you are a playwright and choose to enter a play into ANPF's competition, you may not be a reader that year.

## **Features of a Great Play**

Adapted from the writing of Angelo Parra, MFA.

- Characters the audience can care about or identify with, either psychologically or emotionally. Protagonists do not need to be likeable, but the audience does need to care or have an opinion about him/her.
- A story line that isn't predictable or obvious. The play should be a step ahead of the audience and keep them guessing about what will happen next.
- The subject matter should be timely and relevant. Great plays say something about human nature, how we live, and the challenges we face as humans, whether the play was written hundreds of years ago or last year.
- A great play should transport the audience to another time, another place. It should be so engaging that the audience is diverted from their day-to-day lives.
- Great plays contain language that provokes, challenges, or inspires the audience with dialogue that is evocative and true to the characters.
- It is a bit of a paradox, but a good play should have enough specificity that it can be unique, and enough simplicity that the story is clear and universal.
- A good play illustrates the human condition, it makes a statement and leaves the audience with something to think about.

### **Questions to Ask When Evaluating a New Play:**

- Does the play explore the edges, depths and/or heights of human experience?
- Is the play's narrative structure robust, intelligent?
- Does the play use language with originality and vibrancy?
- Does the play have a distinct point of view?
- Does the play show us something new, or is it formulaic?
- Does the play offer a distinctly theatrical experience?
- Will the play stimulate conversation and engagement with the audience?

## General Guidelines

1. We respect the playwright's creativity and willingness to share a new work with us. Even if we don't like the play, we realize that it took an enormous effort to write it. Readers are encouraged to read each play from beginning to end. If you find after reading ten to twenty pages that the play has little merit and does not engage you, you may put it aside or skim the remainder. It is not necessary to read every page of a play that you deem unworthy in Round 1.
2. Although each play comes with a synopsis, we suggest you read the play first and then read the synopsis. Many readers have found it valuable to write their own synopsis to use when discussing plays.
3. Read the play in one sitting and read at a pace that replicates a performance. If needed, take a break at the "intermission."
4. It is extremely important to jot down notes, reactions and questions. The more detailed your notes, the easier it is to describe what aspects of the play you feel are noteworthy. Some readers create a written summary of their critique of a play; others use their notes. You will need some method to keep track of why you scored each play as you did for your group discussions.
5. Don't spend hours reading a play—60 to 90 minutes per play should be more than adequate to read and evaluate each one.
6. Be aware of your own prejudices and how they may affect your opinion of a play. If you really love a play, read it again and look for flaws. Because a play makes a point that you think needs making does not necessarily make it a good play. Learn to distinguish between sentiment and sentimentality. Sentiment creates a thought or view that arises out of good description and character development/dialogue/interaction. Sentimentality manipulates emotions through highly charged imagery that elicits unearned feelings.
7. It is important to evaluate a play according to the playwright's aims. Does the play succeed at what it is attempting to accomplish?
8. Your opinion is valid. Everyone in your group need not agree. As our Artistic Director says, "A play is a work of art and art should make you feel something." Every person will react differently to a specific play. We are seeking diversity of thoughts and ideas.

## Techniques for Reading Plays

1. Notice how the playwright sets you up for the experience of reading the play. What do you learn from the title, the descriptions of the characters and of the setting?
2. Is the play funny or tragic? Can you identify its genre (comedy, tragedy, romance)? Does the end fit the preceding action?
3. Try reading aloud, especially sections that you don't understand. Imagine what the lines would sound like in performance and what an actor would look like speaking the lines.
4. Can you summarize the plot? What are the basic plot points? How does the action build up to the climax of the play?
5. Can you describe each character? Who are they? Can you picture them in your mind's eye? Characters who recite talking points can be one-dimensional, flat, or uninteresting. Does the dialogue for each character ring true, is it believable?
6. Look at the stage directions. How do the directions contribute to the overall work? \*
7. What happens in the play? Are the characters affected or transformed at the conclusion? Is there an arc to the play?
8. What is the play's theme? Can you describe it?

\* Don't be concerned, if in your estimation, there are many stage directions and how this might impact a play reading. The director will make decisions about the stage directions if the play is selected for production.

## Techniques for Evaluating Plays

Plays can be scored on several criteria. We suggest that you **focus on character, dialogue, and structure**. Evaluating these categories will help you arrive at a final score that you can explain to yourself and others.

### ***Character***

1. Are you engaged by the characters and their actions and reactions?
2. Are there clear objectives the characters are striving to reach? Does the pursuit of these objectives move the play forward?
3. Do the characters tell you everything, or do they hold things back? Is this unspoken subtext clear? Does this make you curious and add an element of suspense to the play?
4. Do the characters' responses to the challenges and the conflicts in the play seem believable?
5. Are the characters affected or transformed by the conclusion of the play?
6. Do you know more about the characters by the end of the play?

### ***Dialogue***

Does the dialogue reveal the actions and intentions of the characters? Is it purposeful?

1. Does the dialogue sound as though it is spoken by actual human beings?
2. Does each character have a distinctive voice? Do you have to read the character names to know who is speaking?
3. Do the speech patterns seem appropriate to the classes of characters portrayed?
4. Is there all talk and little or no action? Are you told—or do you see through a combination of action and dialogue—a character's emotions and reactions?
5. Are there long monologues? Are they compelling, or do they bog down the action and cause you to lose interest?

### ***Structure***

1. Are the place and the time of the play clear from the stage directions and set descriptions?
2. In the first eight to 10 pages, what does the script tell you about the play's characters and their world? Does it capture your interest?

3. Is there sufficient movement or forward momentum to pull you into the unfolding drama? Does the play's momentum keep you turning the pages to see what happens next?
4. What, if anything, about the play is unique? The theme may be one you have seen/read before. However, does the playwright have something fresh or original to offer?
5. The playwright's promise (what the play is going to be about) should be clear in the first 15 or so pages of the script. Is there a promise that you can identify?
6. What is the challenge or conflict the protagonist is facing? Is it interesting enough that you care what happens? Are other characters involved? Is the conflict compelling?
7. Drama arises from conflict. Do the play's complications sufficiently intensify the action and compel your interest? Are the complications true to the play's special world, or do they seem contrived?
8. Are the climax and the resolution logical, believable, and inevitable?
9. Did the playwright honor the initial promise of the play?
10. Be wary of plot turns or developments that depend on outlandish or preposterous coincidences, unless the play is a farce, which relies upon outlandish coincidences.
11. George Pierce Baker said, "**A playwright has only two jobs: one is to gain the audience's interest and two is to maintain or increase that interest until the end of the play.**" Does the play you are reading accomplish this?

## Techniques for Reading a Challenging or Difficult Play

1. Try to put your biases aside when evaluating plays with topics that are uncomfortable or difficult to read (e.g. incest, homelessness, drug use or sale, cruelty, addiction, PTSD). Plays with untraditional characters, themes, setting, time spans, language patterns, etc. should also be considered thoughtfully. Challenge yourself to evaluate a “difficult play” on its structure, characters, and dialogue. Try to suspend your initial reactions and be open to the playwright’s vision.
2. When we evaluate a play, our primary purpose is to determine how well written it is and how well it will play onstage, not whether we like or dislike the content, the language and/or the characters.
3. We find comfort in the familiar, while the unfamiliar can be uncomfortable or even threatening. A play that makes you uncomfortable or that is unfamiliar in other ways is not necessarily a bad play.
4. A play which contains original characters, unique dialogue and/or unusual actions may be challenging to evaluate.
5. If you feel uncomfortable with the play’s content or language, try to put those feelings aside and see how the content or language advances or hinders the direction of the play.
6. Consider whether the actions and language you find objectionable are true to the characters and their situations. Ask yourself if the actions and language provide insight and understanding.

### NOTE:

When people say that know what they like, they often mean that they like what they know. We urge all readers to be open to the unfamiliar and to reward originality.

## Scoring Overview

Our job as readers is to find the best plays submitted to ANPF—those with the most promise. In general, trust your instincts and keep in mind that even the very best play will have flaws. Look for well written plays that engage you from the beginning and keep your interest to the end.

The four winning playwrights come to ANPF to discover ways to improve their work. They hear their plays read aloud, they work with their directors, and they receive feedback from one another and from the audience. The goal is to help them polish a good play into a great one.

### Scoring Matrix

<b>Score</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Grade Equivalent</b>
5	This play affected me. I continue to think about this play long after reading it. One of the best I've read. I want to see this play produced at the Festival.	A
4	This is a play that isn't perfect in all aspects (character, dialogue, structure, etc.). However, it is a very strong contender for production and worthy of being read by all readers. Potential festival play.	B
3	There are some aspects of this play that are interesting, but overall it isn't strong enough for production at this time.	C
2	There isn't enough "right" with this play to spend time on it. Thought it may have one or two redeeming aspects, it is too seriously flawed to be considered.	D
1	Poorly crafted play. Among the worst read. Don't spend a lot of time discussing it.	F

Scores in Round 2 should be sent via e-mail to [penny.anpf@gmail.com](mailto:penny.anpf@gmail.com). Be sure to include the number of the play along with part of the title. Always CC: your group leader.

Scores can be revised at any time. If you wish to change your score, e-mail Penny (with a CC to your group leader) and clearly identify the number of the play, part of its title, your old score, and your new score. Send in only those scores that need to be changed.

Please report your scores at a minimum of every two weeks, so that Penny is not forced to input hundreds of scores at the eleventh hour.

## Round 1 Reading/Scoring Process

1. Qualifying plays will be distributed randomly and in equal numbers among the reading groups. This will be shortly after the Reader Training.
2. Each play will be assigned to three readers in a group.
3. Read each play carefully, focusing on character, dialogue, structure, and overall impact.
4. Using the Scoring Matrix, decide what score to give each play you read.
5. If one or more of the three initial readers believe that a play has great merit, they should ask all the members of the reading group to read the play. Each reader should score the play using the scoring matrix and submit their score to the tabulator.
- 6. In Round 1, send scores to Penny only if all members of your group read the play.**
7. Send your scores to [penny.anpf@gmail.com](mailto:penny.anpf@gmail.com), stating each play's number, title, and score. Put "ANPF Scores" in the subject line. Always CC: your group leader.
8. To revise a score, send Penny the number of the play, the title, its previous score, and your new score. Put "ANPF Score Change" in the subject line.
9. At the end of Round 1, the tabulator will prepare a spreadsheet showing the cumulative and average scores of all the plays from all groups. The two dozen (or so) plays with the highest average scores will be designated as semifinalists and move into Round 2.

**Discussion groups should meet at least three times in each round. Bi-weekly meetings have proven to work well and are encouraged.**

## Round 2 Reading/Scoring Process

1. Round 2, the semi-final round, will commence shortly after the conclusion of Round 1 and will last about eight weeks.
2. In Round 2, **every reader is required to read and score every play** (even the plays read in Round 1 that made it to Round 2), using the 5-point rating scale and submitting scores in a timely fashion to the tabulator-in-chief. Please report your scores at a minimum of every two weeks, so the tabulator is not forced to input hundreds of scores at the eleventh hour.
3. Discussion groups should meet at least three times during Round 2. Again, bi-weekly meetings are strongly encouraged.
4. At the end of Round 2, submit your top six favorite plays in rank order to Penny (in addition to any remaining scores you need to submit). Make sure you submit your top six plays in order. Once you send your ranking in to Penny, you may not make any changes.

List each play in rank order (your favorite as number 1.) For example:

1. The Children's Hour (#138)
  2. Joe Turner's Come and Gone (#257)
  3. The Glass Menagerie (#155)
  4. All My Sons (#221)
  5. Waiting for Godot (#38)
  6. The Goodbye Girl (#14)
- 
5. At the end of Round 2, the tabulator-in-chief will prepare a spreadsheet displaying the cumulative and average scores and the rank order for each play.
  6. The ranking process will determine the top 12 plays to be submitted to the Artistic Director and Associate Artistic Director for selection of the 2019 Fall Festival winners.

## **Final Meeting of All Readers**

A week or so after the conclusion of Round Two, a general meeting will be held. All readers are invited to attend. The meeting provides an open forum for the discussion of the top 12 plays that are submitted to the Artistic Direction team. The first gathering of the entire readership since the initial training, this Final Meeting provides a valuable opportunity to share and hear viewpoints from outside the small discussion groups.

## **Reader Appreciation Party**

ANPF will host a party for readers in the summer to celebrate the process and to thank readers for their efforts. At that gathering, the Artistic Director will announce the ANPF Fall Festival winners, prior to the public announcement.



**PO Box 3314  
Ashland, OR 97520  
(541) 488-7995  
[www.AshlandNewPlays.org](http://www.AshlandNewPlays.org)**