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The Curious Case of Charles Mee

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accepting submissions on an ongoing basis. Theatre organizations such as SETC (www.setc.org) and the American Association of Community Theatre (www.aact.org) regularly provide information on opportunities for playwrights. Many state organizations, such as my own Kentucky Theatre Association (www.theatreky.org), also provide playwriting opportunities in our newsletters. The key is simply finding a contest or event that suits your material.

The good news is that the time when only a New York or London production got a serious look from publishers is past. For example, French's Dingledine notes that the National New Play Network (www.nnpn.org) has helped talented playwrights get their

work produced at regional theatres. "With the advent of organizations such as the New Play Network, we are seeing a growing number of plays that bypass the New York market and receive rolling premieres in various regional markets," says Dingledine. "Thus, new works can gain national exposure without the traditional or expected New York stamp of approval. We have taken notice of this and have broadened our acquisitions to reflect this movement."

Tip 3: Know the publishing market for your play.

Many publishers have niches and therefore license and/or publish only plays of a certain genre. Theatrical Rights Worldwide (www.theatricalrights.com)

The Curious Case Of Charles Mee: 'Feel

by David Wohl

One of the highlights of the annual SETC Convention is the "Meet the Publishers" workshop, where representatives from the major dramatic publishing houses discuss rules and policies and promote their newly published acquisitions. At the 2009 workshop in Birmingham, an audience member asked about the plays of Charles Mee. There was a moment of silence as publishers looked at one another and collectively rolled their eyes. Finally, one of the publishers replied: "Well, he's probably the only playwright in America that makes all of his plays available for free – and we really don't have anything to do with him."

Mee is the 70-year-old author of such plays as *First Love*, *Limonade Tous de Jours*, *Orestes 2.0*, *Full Circle*, *Time to Burn*, *Big Love* and *bobrauschenbergamerica*. One of his newest plays, *Under Construction*, was performed at the 2009 Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville (KY) by the SITI Company, directed by Anne Bogart.

While many playwrights today worry about unauthorized use of their plays because of easy Internet accessibility to works, Mee has posted full-text versions of all of his plays, including *Under Construction*, on the Web. His website tells readers, "Please feel free to take the plays from this website and use them freely as a resource for your own work: that is to say, don't just make some cuts or rewrite a few passages or rearrange them or put in a few texts that you like better, but pillage the plays as I have pillaged the structures

and contents of the plays of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of *Soap Opera Digest* and the evening news and the Internet, and build your own, entirely new, piece – and then, please, put your own name to the work that results."

He talked in a phone interview during the Humana Festival about why he decided to make his plays available online, free of charge. Mee notes that his move in that direction began nearly 20 years ago. When he wrote his version of *Orestes* in 1990, he thought it seemed odd to claim it as his own intellectual property because he had (in his words) "ripped off a play from public domain along with using material from other sources such as magazines and newspapers." Mee had a computer-literate friend who suggested making the play available over what was then an early version of the Internet.

"So I put the play online and it felt good – it was impulsive, not a philosophical principle – and as time has gone on, it just continues to feel good," Mee said. "There were no copyright laws in Shakespeare's time or in the time of Greek drama and I thought maybe that was connected to the quality and depth of the work being produced during those periods."

Mee is quick to point out that he's not against playwrights earning a living. "In general, I am in favor of open-source access, but I also understand that playwrights need to support themselves in order to write plays," he says. "But I don't think you should want all your support from the government or the marketplace or even from foundations. They all have agendas and a mixture of sources gives writers the

and Music Theatre International (www.mtishows.com) deal exclusively with musicals, with Theatrical Rights serving as a publisher and MTI serving only as a licensing agent. Playscripts (www.playscripts.com) specializes in high school one-acts, but has expanded its focus in the last few years to include musicals. Anchorage Press Plays (www.applays.com) specializes in theatre for young audiences. Houses such as Samuel French (www.samuel french.com), Baker Plays (www.bakerplays.com), Dramatists Play Service (www.dramatists.com), and Dramatic Publishing (www.dramaticpublishing.com) all serve a wider gamut.

When you're ready to begin searching for a publisher, go to the various publishers' websites. There

you will find lists of the types of plays they produce, as well as submission policies, prerequisites and protocol.

Tip 4: Don't write off the youth market.

Consider expanding your market scope if you don't currently write for young people. The theatre for youth genre supplies a revolving door of audience members who have an insatiable appetite for riveting stories and characters. Perhaps the most exciting trend of late has been the blossoming of new talent in this area. Marilee Hebert Miller, publisher at Anchorage Press Plays, has taken note: "A new generation of playwrights is choosing to write for the (theatre for youth) field. Numerous experienced playwrights are

Free to Take the Plays from this Website'

greatest latitude and freedom."

Mee does differentiate between publishing rights and performance rights. Theatres that wish to perform his plays must seek permission from his agents. He began this practice because, several years ago, two companies in Seattle produced the same play at the same time and, as Mee describes it, "they were angry at each other!" To prevent such conflicts and have some control, Mee developed a "performance rights" policy.

"I created a two-tiered system," he said. "In general, companies that charge money to see my plays must pay for these rights, but students and organizations that do not have budgets are given permission to perform the plays without being charged."

Mee believes that his system would benefit other playwrights, too, because it would help them get their works produced.

"By and large, writers make money from performance rights, not by publishing their works, and what I've done seems to me a good model for other writers wanting to get their works out there so that they will be read and produced," Mee said.

However, Mee does not proselytize his views on intellectual property. His methods work well for him, but he's quick to admit that they may not for other playwrights. He does insist that playwrights should be honest with themselves regarding the concept of ownership: "None of the classical Greek plays were original: they were all based on earlier plays or poems or myths. And none of Shakespeare's plays are original: they are all taken from earlier



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work. Sometimes playwrights steal stories and conversations and dreams and intimate revelations from their friends and lovers and call this original. And sometimes some of us write about our own innermost lives, believing that, then, we have written something truly original and unique. But, of course, the culture writes us first, and then we write our stories." As he states on his website, "There is no such thing as an original play." ■

David Wohl is dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at West Virginia State University and a past president of SETC.