

WHAT CHARACTERISTICS MAKE A SUCCESSFUL COMMISSION
OF A NEW PLAY FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES?

by

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ABSTRACT

Guiding Question: What characteristics contribute to a successful commission of a new play for young audiences?

Defining various types of commissions taking place in the field of theatre can help to set a precedent for defining commissioning processes and goals within the field of theatre for young audiences. Each field has their own specific needs, and I am interested in how the details of various commissioning processes can help to articulate some of the vital aspects of this work. This thesis looks at the broad process of commissioning a new play for young audiences through the study of one specific commission process. While the word 'successful' remains relative and depends greatly on who and what is defining any given notion of success, for this study, I define a successful production and script as one that pushes the field forward in at least one way, invokes strong audience responses, and involves artists who care about the integrity and value of theatre for young audiences.

This study analyzes the commissioning process for *Turning Ten* by The Potomac Playhouse in the Theatre for Young Audiences program, through detailed interviews, journal observations reports, and research on theatrical commissioning. As I closely observed this commissioning process, I explored the following questions: how does *Turning Ten* fit into a 'type of commission' as referenced earlier in the thesis, how does *Turning Ten* fit my preconceived notion of a 'successful' commission?; how do the responses of the audience and production team members contribute to a successful

commission? Throughout my research, my ideas of commissioning were broadened by the eagerness of the artists involved to bring what they believed to be a valid story to the stage and make it as unique and influential as possible. *Turning Ten* involves bringing a specific community and culture to life on stage and the team involved in making this happen proved that commissioning a script can be a valuable and worthwhile task in order to put something you feel passionate about in front of a live audience. I realized that the success of a particular project deals first with the script and the writing that is put on the table; then, the commission involves the ability of the creative team to shift and change with various timeframes and the willingness to work with the different personalities involved. All of these factors proved successful with this particular commission and a strong way to approach my research about this topic.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Commissioning a new play for young audiences can be a difficult but rewarding experience for a theatre. For this study, I am interested in what contributes to a successful commission of a new play for young audiences. To explore this question, I examine various steps throughout a commission process, as well as other possibilities, expectations, and details that might arise for a theatre or individuals involved in commissioning a new play.

When beginning the thesis process, I knew I wanted to research some aspect of commissioning new plays. Throughout my time at The University of Central Florida and The University of Texas at Austin, a few of my experiences focused around creating new plays for theatre, but did not specifically emphasize theatre for young audiences. I also had the opportunity to attend an international new play festival for young audiences that took place in Washington, D.C. and involved rehearsed readings of new plays for young audiences with a brief discussion response from the audience immediately following each reading. These experiences helped me realize that I have a great passion and energy for the development of new scripts for the field of theatre for young audiences. Watching and listening to new plays and having the opportunity, as an audience member, to respond and possibly help shape the piece of writing was an immense awakening for me as a novice in the field.

Based on my own interest in the field of theatre for young audiences and new play development, I became curious about what commissioning means to the field of

theatre for young audiences and why more theatres are not participating in the development of new works for this target group. I pursued an internship for the Fall 2007 semester at a well-respected theatre for young audiences institution in Washington, D.C. (For the purposes of this thesis and to protect the anonymity of my sources, this institution will be referred to as The Potomac Playhouse.) The Potomac Playhouse focuses on new play development throughout their producing season each year, and during my internship, I had the opportunity to see multiple commissions at various stages of development, from basic treatments to full productions.

To examine what characteristics contribute to a successful commission of a new play for young audiences, I chose to focus primarily on the commission of one new script, which for the purposes of this study will be called *Turning Ten*. I recorded my own thoughts and observations as an intern peripherally involved in the commission process, and also interviewed the artists and production team members bringing *Turning Ten* to the stage. In order to position my study of *Turning Ten*, I also gathered perspectives on commissioning from other sources outside of the *Turning Ten* commissioning process. I interviewed several artists about their own projects and ways of working on a commission. By interviewing these artists, I was able to get a broad idea of some of the characteristics that are typical of any theatrical commission of a play, for adult audiences or young audiences. I then compared these perspectives to what I observed with the commission of *Turning Ten*, as well as the information I gathered from artists involved directly with that commission and production.

By looking at commissioning as a whole and exploring one commission project in great detail, I work to establish some tenets of a successful commission process. To that end, I gathered data on the various ways to begin a project and the responsibilities that fall upon the producing body of the production. Specific to *Turning Ten*, I examined issues of communication and accessibility within the production process, and as an outreach of the production, as well as the interactions among the team members both as a group of artists within the creative team and with the actors portraying the roles in the production.

CHAPTER TWO: MATERIALS AND METHODS

When beginning the research for commissioning in theatre and theatre for young audiences, I found a lack of literature available that discusses in detail the process of commissioning a new work. I discovered writing about dramaturgy with new plays, but I wanted more information to focus on the process of getting a play or production ready for those initial meetings with dramaturgs, designers, and directors. What has to happen to get to that stage? Is every play work-shopped with a creative team or actors to promote the development of the work? I was not sure and my research offered little help. New play festivals had material written about them, but I found more on the specific works or productions at each festival than the actual festival process.

Published sources also reveal information about ensemble-based theatrical productions. This type of work provides a great deal of research for commissioning, but is very specific to devised performance, which often differs from commissioning new plays for theatre for young audiences. I also found research written about dance commissions and one-person productions, both of which are usually commissioned by a specific theatre, which is similar to work for young audiences, but could also be commissioned and produced because of a specific grant given to the artist or ensemble. The resources I found online offered general explanations of these projects, and although they have similarities with theatre for young audiences because they are all creating new pieces of theatre, they were not specific to text-based work developed by

a writer or playwright. Devised pieces as well as original dance pieces are often generated from artists' writings and improvised performance work. Other art pieces are commissioned specifically for an artists' medium or for a specific exhibit at a gallery. However, I was specifically looking for work written by a writer for the stage, at the request of a commissioning theater. Devised theatrical pieces have the most similar characteristics, but they are generally performed in a community setting, even at schools, not necessarily performed at professional theatres in a formal manner.

Having struggled to find information specific to theatre for young audiences' commissions, I focused the majority of my research on gathering interviews with artists involved in commissioning. Through artist interviews, I hoped to gain a broad idea of characteristics that are typical of any commissioned theatrical play, for all audiences or young audiences. The artists I chose to interview include people I have met along the way throughout my educational career and at conferences throughout the country. By simply asking them to answer questions about their process, I found the artists willing and open to discussing what makes their new play process unique to themselves or similar to others.

After conducting these interviews and comparing those findings with my observations of commissioning practices at The Potomac Playhouse and with *Turning Ten*, I began to draw some conclusions about my guiding question.

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

The Potomac Playhouse: Commissioning Process

The Potomac Playhouse participates in a unique process to gather their commissioned pieces for young audiences, and they have several methods for commissioning a new work. Many of these observations are based on my time within the department which promoted firsthand experience with these types of commissions and allowed to have conversations surrounding the process. One of their methods, the “Group Commission,” includes the entire department of theatre for young audiences staff. As a staff, they gather routinely to discuss ideas for commissions from books to which they reacted strongly, including children’s books or books for older audiences. The staff then writes up these ideas in a document format, which includes both artistic ideas for possible creative team members, but also ideas around curriculum connections and ages for a possible target audience for the script.

While I was an intern, I was invited to be a part of these conversations which became a highlight of my time at The Potomac Playhouse. I noted, “we’re discussing one of my favorite picture books at the moment and I really, really hope this project moves forward. They could choose from one of the pair of books, or as the manager of the department suggested, have a production that combines characters the author wrote into several of his books” (Personal Observation). Part of my job as an intern was

collecting the commissioning ideas and formulating cohesive documents that the decision-makers could choose from. This seemed to be an exciting way for multiple members of the staff to become invested in different projects, something that doesn't always happen. If one person is excited by one project that someone else thinks is a bad idea, this was a great way to gather information and ideas from everyone, so that each person felt their ideas were being heard.

After ideas are chosen from the large list of ideas, they move to the next step. The producing director or a theatre for young audiences staff member researches the rights or availability of the book for a stage adaptation by contacting the publisher or the writer's agent. If the rights are available, then The Potomac Playhouse staff member discusses with the agent or publisher the staff's interest in the book and whether or not they can contact the writer directly. Either way, discussions are the major format for pushing this type of project forward. The Potomac Playhouse staff prefers talking directly with a writer about commissioning possibilities, but oftentimes discussions with the writer only come into play after the project has gone into the phase of asking for a script. The producing director usually writes a letter to the writer, via the agent, and waits for a response. If the writer agrees to the project, he/she might submit a script or an idea for a script; the playwright might take anywhere from a month to several months to come back to The Potomac Playhouse with something substantial.

Once the script is submitted, the department organizes a rehearsed reading. The department casts actors and directors for the script from local talent and the piece is given a reading with an audience of various department staff and others from The

Potomac Playhouse, as well as the writer, and other guests invited by the artists involved. These developmental readings are usually rehearsed in the morning with the playwright and director, performed in the afternoon, and producing director provides feedback verbally and in writing to the playwright within about two weeks after the reading (Personal Observation).

As an alternative to the “Group Commission,” The Potomac Playhouse sometimes starts a commission by pitching an idea to multiple writers for a specific type of script. In the “Pitched Commission,” a script could be targeted for a particular type of community or audience, and this process allows the theatre to target playwrights with interest and/or experience in the particular topic or community at hand.

In fact, the day before my internship started I attended a rehearsed reading of a play that The Potomac Playhouse was considering for the following season. This script grew out of a “Pitched Commission” that asked writers to submit something based on a prompt about Hispanic stories for young people on stage. After attending the reading, I noted, “This show had beautiful moments, fantasy and imagery, collaged together, causing me to reflect on memories from my very personal non-Hispanic childhood. It seemed like it wasn’t meant for a specific audience, but could speak to everyone in a unique way causing them to have an experience in the theatre, instead of watching people on stage that had no correlation to their own lives” (Personal Observation).

A “Pitched Commission” involves multiple writers in that various people are asked to submit their ideas for a script to The Potomac Playhouse through a written treatment. The producing director then decides on roughly ten proposals that seem to rise above the group as a whole, possibly because of the type of writing submitted, a playwright’s reputation, and/or an engaging script idea.

Next, the producing director, either alone or with a group of people, further narrows the number of project proposals that move forward to the next step (usually around five are chosen from the group). In the next step, the theatre talks to the writers who submitted the top five ideas and commissions them to send in an additional writing sample that fleshes out their treatment in more detail. This does not mean developing an entire script, but instead, asks for more information about the idea. This could mean various things from different writers. Some respond with images or research for their writing. Other writers submit further explanation on their original submission with possible ideas for a production. After these five or so projects come back to The Potomac Playhouse, the producing director, usually with a group of people, chooses which projects move forward to the next step. This group of people tends to include the manager and artistic associate of theatre for young audiences, as well as the head of the education department.

The next step is commissioning the writer for a script of the initial project idea. Based on these scripts, the department of theatre for young audiences decides between two or three pieces that seem to fit with The Potomac Playhouse’s future seasons, or could be exciting to see in a developmental reading. The Potomac Playhouse has a

unique position as a large performing arts center and oftentimes scripts are chosen for their connection to projects being produced by the larger institution such as an international festival or celebration crossing the various departments and performing arts areas (Personal Observation).

The developmental readings for “Pitch Commissions” take the same shape as the rehearsed readings used in the “Group Commission” process. The department casts actors and directors, and after a day of rehearsal, they perform a staged reading. After hearing the plays performed aloud, the producing director and the department staff of the theatre for young audiences department, decide which project will be fully produced within a future season at The Potomac Playhouse.

The project I was so excited about actually went to production. After seeing the reading, everyone seemed to see the promise of a great new production. It was even slated to go on tour in a consecutive season. When this happens, even promotional materials begin to promote the national tour of the piece. Unfortunately, the excitement around the reading did not continue after the production was produced in The Potomac Playhouse’s season and the eventual tour was cancelled. I asked the producing director to highlight what was involved in this decision. They had this to say, “Our decision to not tour the show came fairly quickly after the show opened...the major factor was probably the director’s strongly felt decision to treat each of the short stories as individual pieces, without a unifying stylistic thread.” They also commented that the title of the play was too long and seemed to promote a Latino theme that was not apparent in the show. There was fear they would not be able to sell a national tour

(Personal Observation). Throughout our conversation, the producing director also commented that some of the short pieces within the larger production were “FAR better than others, leading to an inconsistency.”

After watching this unfold within the department, I thought perhaps the solution was much simpler. The show was running around 75 minutes during the in-house production, and The Potomac Playhouse prefers to send shows on the road that run no more than 65 minutes. I wanted to suggest taking out one of the longer segments, perhaps one that did not quite fit with the rest, rework some of the transitions, and then everyone might have been excited about it once again. This was not such an easy suggestion, as the decision not to tour the production came quickly within two weeks of opening. At that point, The Potomac Playhouse would move forward with two other tours slated to go out in the same year, one being *Turning Ten*. The producing director added simply, “perhaps we should have anticipated better, but somehow it did not pull together as we had hoped.”

Contracting becomes an important element that can distinguish various commissioning processes. Interestingly, The Potomac Playhouse’s “Pitch Commission” process provides writers with a legal right, if it’s not chosen, to take their work to another theatre and/or to develop it further on their own, should the piece not be chosen for a full production. If The Potomac Playhouse chooses not to pursue a particular treatment, they forfeit legal rights to the project. This also means that as The Potomac Playhouse considers ideas and scripts, the writers of these projects cannot legally have another theatre or entity considering the same project. These parameters are outlined in a

contract that is signed and approved by the playwright and The Potomac Playhouse (Producing Director, The Potomac Playhouse). I have included in my reference section an example of an edited contract for the purposes of this research. With the example mentioned about, the play which was produced, but chosen not to tour, then becomes the property of the writer sooner than expected. The money they received from The Potomac Playhouse was given to them for the in-house production (with no further money for continuing the project).

Other Commissioning Processes

Through online research and interviews with artists, I was able to look at variations to the process of commissioning, as well as other ways a commissioning process might develop. Another possible start to a new commission piece is to look at a specific issue, which for this thesis will be called “Issue Commission.” We know of many issue-based works that tour to schools, and these plays can often be considered a commission if the theatre hires a specific person to write the piece. Producing Director B had the following to say, “We can’t just start touring all of a sudden because our audiences in the theatre fell in love with our version of a bullying play that had a heart to it.” These are the types of questions that came up in our conversation about touring “Issue Commissions.” Who would market it? Is it local/regional/national touring? Who’s going to manage it? Who’s going to book the tours? When and how long would it be on the road? Producing Director B then went on to question, “How can

we convince people our version is the one to see? If we're already suffering for budget and staff support, how do we add this additional aspect?"

Then this "Issue Commission" becomes slightly harder to produce fully because of the touring factor and the commissioning theatre's ability and resources for touring. If they have toured before, there is a system to follow, if they have not, theatres are often worried about commissioning an issue based work because touring can be an expensive and time consuming aspect of programming for staff members as well as the artists they hire (Producing Director B). However, if a theatre has a strong relationship with schools in the community and can work together to create something that is produced at the theatre, there is often a more solid structure there.

Another type of commissioning bases the script on workshops with young people as part of the play development process, which for this thesis will be referred to as a "Workshop Commission." In the theatre for young audiences field, workshop commissions can be extremely important and have a way of giving respect to our audience. The producing director of a notable international theatre for young audiences company, which for the purposes of this thesis will be called Visible Voices, claims, "For those in the theatre for young audiences field, that our new theatre pieces should be all about our audiences. Work shopping and getting the response of our audiences is one of the ways theatres know how students respond to the work." The suggestion even came up in our discussion to bring young people in early and often, even during the rehearsal and production aspect of a commission. Visible Voices Producing Director emphasized the general notion of theatre for young audiences being about the young

people the performances are for, asking, “Isn’t that who the work is for? Don’t we want it to be successful? Don’t we want our young audiences to have a strong experience with our theatre?”

Taking the time to include young audiences in the commissioning process can be difficult for many theatres that often lack sufficient resources, including time, money, and staff support. However, Visible Voices Producing Director suggested that it was relatively easy to incorporate youth by forming a relationship with local groups, students, or schools, and asking them to take part. They further explained, “After they take part in your process, let them come see the final production for free and have a stake in the production, then won’t they want to talk about it and discuss what they’ve seen and helped with, and isn’t that giving young people investment in the theatre and perhaps creating more avid theatergoers for the future” (Producing Director, Visible Voices)?

However, even though this seems like an extra task that may not directly reap many rewards in the beginning, the act of inviting young people into the process of commissioning is rewarding to the field, for years to come. Providing young audiences the opportunity to respond to the work in its developmental stage also lends a great service to the playwright, allowing them to see what parts of their script young audiences respond to the most (Producing Director, Visible Voices). This producing director became even more passionate towards the end of our interview, exclaiming, “I must say this is crucial, bring young people in. This isn’t done enough, it should be. It’s not difficult. Don’t not do it just because you’re scared and you’ve never done it before. It WILL pay off, bring them in” (Producing Director, Visible Voices)! I believe this

remains one of the reasons I responded so strongly to new play festivals, those that have this response as part of the experience.

Being a witness to multiple types of commissioning while observing the process of *Turning Ten*, I noticed The Potomac Playhouse does not typically bring in young people to be part of the commissioning process. Although, after talking with the Visible Voices Producing Director, it seems like an exciting addition to commissioning.

Turning Ten's Commissioning Process

For *Turning Ten*, The Potomac Playhouse utilized the issue commission process described above. *Turning Ten* was a co-commission with another organization, a practice fairly common with The Potomac Playhouse. However, the commission still worked along the same parameters as outlined earlier. *Turning Ten* dealt with the issue of accessibility in the arts. This particular project partnered The Potomac Playhouse with an organization, which for the purposes of this thesis will be called Specialized Arts, which deals with accessibility in the arts as their main mission. Specialized Arts approached The Potomac Playhouse with the book they wanted to commission and they already had a writer in mind, the co-author of the original book. The producing director of The Potomac Playhouse decided on the remaining members of the artistic team, including but not limited to, a composer and director (Producing Director, The Potomac Playhouse).

As the core of the artistic team was defined, the group, which included the producing director of The Potomac Playhouse, met in California to discuss the project. They chose California because the book's two authors, the composer and director all live there. At this meeting, they decided on a time for the developmental reading, about ten months prior to the premiere of the production at The Potomac Playhouse. According to the producing director, the developmental reading would provide the team with an opportunity to hear the piece and make adjustments. At the reading, which used local Washington, D.C. actors, the writer was able to hear the script and adapt the piece, taking into consideration the reactions and responses from guests in the room (Producing Director, The Potomac Playhouse).

The playwright had this to say about the developmental reading for *Turning Ten*, "I had listened to fourth grade girls and their friends to see how they talked, but I still needed to see if what I came up with worked with people moving around and acting like fourth graders." After the developmental reading, the Producing Director realized something may have been missing and gives an example of how things can change by the one opportunity of a developmental reading. When asked about the developmental process, the Producing Director responded, "It wasn't even supposed to be a musical to begin with. We thought there might be music, similar to a play with music, because a musical about a young deaf girl didn't seem to jump off the page." The project was fleshed out further after the introduction to a composer The Potomac Playhouse works with frequently; the creative team then decided a musical was the direction the show needed to take. The Producing Director followed with, "Once the musical idea came

about, we weren't even sure what was needed to make it work, but we wanted to try everything we could to make sure it did." The developmental reading became a crucial step in the process of the entire production.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMMISSIONING ISSUES

Communication

Throughout my observations and discussions, communication arose as both a concern and a necessity during the commissioning process. Specific to *Turning Ten*, communication became a key component with the entire artistic team's mission to create a successful piece of theatre. *Turning Ten* is about a young person, who happens to have a disability, throwing a birthday party and inviting the popular person in school to attend. Since dealing with the specific disabled community, the deaf and hard of hearing community, communication with the audience, actors on stage, and the artistic team became a mission of the entire production. Working with the deaf and hard of hearing community also relates to the larger mission of Specialized Arts. Since this disability is central to the plot of the play, and language and communication became integral to the entire process of this particular production.

There were also many outside forces that had the opportunity to contribute to the creation of this production. For example, the Director of Accessibility at The Potomac Playhouse, whose main job is make sure all the arts are accessible to every arts patron, was able to come in to the discussions early enough that accessibility and communication were integrated into every aspect of moving forward with the production.

Even in rehearsals, accessibility became key. Sign language interpreters were a part of the process from the very beginning. Not having experience with the deaf and hard of hearing community before, I learned a great deal about the simple things a production and production team could do in order to make multiple aspects of the process accessible. For example, in rehearsals, I noted in my journal that “the production team writes notes on large post-its for choreography” which helped both the sign language interpreters as well as the cast members (Personal Observation). Multiple sign language interpreters were used every day, just as there are rotating interpreters at a sign-interpreted performance, their hands become tired and sore if they continually interpret (Personal Observation). This became important to the overall cost of the production, since additional members in the room will add their weekly salaries and housing, if applicable, to the overall cost.

In the rehearsal room, the stage manager needed wireless technology, which is not always easy to obtain in such a large performing arts center. This became an accessibility issue since the main actress, who is deaf, uses her cellular telephone with e-mail and instant messaging for her main source of communication to those around her. Therefore, instead of convenience for the stage manager, it became something needing to be reexamined in order have full communication with those company members in the room, on call, or away from the building.

Another aspect of both communication and accessibility that became central to the production early on was the idea of open captioning for every show. This meant that the entire script was captioned with a captioning screen so that all

audiences, whether deaf or hard of hearing, could read everything that the actors were performing on stage. The captioning screen held up to three lines of text at a time, and the text could roll, flash, or pop on the screen. There was a captioning designer involved in this aspect of the process, this person decided that it would flow better for this musical for the text to roll onto the screen (Personal Observation). The captioning also became difficult when the director wanted to have one particular scene that was not captioned. The Director of Accessibility for The Potomac Playhouse had an issue with this, particularly since the hard of hearing population would have an understanding of the entire show except for this scene. The director also wished to have one of the actors speak their lines instead of both sign and speak. From my notes, it seems the director wanted at least every part of the audience population to have a difficult time understanding the communication during this scene. It was an intense moment between the main character and her brother during the scene when the main actress realizes she needs to change her actions.

Then, the captioning designer became worried that the moments in the show would not be fluid if we break the dialogue. I noted “they seem worried that the audience might think the captioning screen isn’t working instead of focusing on the action of the play.” The producing director decided to let it be an artistic decision, and the director also compromised. The scene ended up being a combination of two of the three elements, with the end of the scene being restored to full communication with speaking, singing, signing, and captioning. In other words, parts of the scene were both

signed and captioned, as well as spoken and captioned, but never everything all at the same time, similar to the rest of the production.

Since the captioning screen was going to be a part of the production, the set designer for *Turning Ten* was able to design the screen for captioning into the set. The designer created the set piece as a cart painted to match the rest of the scenery and became part of the moving pieces helping to form the scenes. On top of the cart were props and extra pieces that helped give an indication of where the characters were at any given time. There was also a standalone captioning screen so that in case someone is moving the cart or standing in front of it, the text will always be seen. I noted when I saw the screen, “The cart is one of my favorite things in the production. The ease with which it brings the written language to different parts of the stage with a hamster cage and toys above it adds a nice addition to each scene” (Personal Observation). Therefore, because communication and accessibility was important to the production from the beginning, it also apparent from the moment the audiences walked into the theatre to see the production.

Various Versions of the Script

For any theatrical production, a playwright may go through countless drafts at various stages of development. The responsibility to respond and help shape the writing falls to the producing director if the communication remains open. This can

be difficult at times, especially when the producing director imagines the writing going in one direction and the playwright heads in another direction (Personal Observation).

Since the act of commissioning can take many months or several years, the producing director could see as few as two or three drafts or as many as the playwright is comfortable sharing. The producing director may choose to share early drafts with the staff at the theatre or colleagues in the field in order to gain more perspective (Producing Director, The Potomac Playhouse). It is my impression that the playwrights who are most responsive to receiving comments are the ones that have the best relationship with the producing theatre. These comments and responses to the writing can be shared in person, electronically or by paper comments on the script that is mailed back and forth. It is not unusual for the creative team to be in different cities across the country or internationally, so the electronic sharing of comments and various stages of planning has been made considerably faster by the convenience of modern technology (Producing Director, The Potomac Playhouse).

At The Potomac Playhouse, many rewrites and various versions of the script can come from the process. There are designer rewrites for staging purposes or working within the given theatre. These are typically based on the design that the playwright may love, but no longer fits into the latest development of the script. Often the playwright is in the room adjusting the script as they see things in rehearsal. The stage manager reports from rehearsals feed information to the administration of The Potomac Playhouse so that everyone is aware of the process (Personal Observation).

The various versions of the script prove the idea that the original productions can truly shape what a play becomes. Then, after multiple productions, it might change completely again. The people brought into the process need to be careful of this aspect as well. I noted, “Directors and actors have to be mindful they are helping shape this new script, and not take advantage or walk all over what the writer’s bringing to the table. Hopefully the rehearsals will be set up in a way that everyone is protected, open, creative, and useful, but protected.” This does not necessarily seem ideal and will not happen every time. Recently, while discussing this notion of outside influence to a new play with another playwright, they commented, “This happened recently at rehearsals for one of my new plays. At the workshop, the actors began giving suggestions and commenting, both positively and negatively, about the rewrites every day. It was difficult and once this began happening, the script had little growth” (Playwright B).

Working With a Timeline

A commissioned piece of writing’s timeline can also change throughout the process. This could be due to other productions or commissions both the producing theatre has going on as well as the creative team and the various projects in their separate worlds. A clearer timeline follows once the production is announced with marketing during the usual season announcement for the producing theatre.

However, in those initial stages of meetings and various drafts of the script, the timeline can be continually adjusted for when the script will be produced. If a theatre is focused on commissioning, like The Potomac Playhouse, there can be many commissioning projects in development at any given time. Some make it through and some start out as strong possibilities, and through the process of meetings and script drafts, can fall off the list of continuing projects. For instance, The Potomac Playhouse is currently in the process of commissioning a technology-based piece of theatre for an upcoming technology festival. Since they went back and forth about having multiple writers respond to a prompt versus hiring one writer for the entire project, this project was put on hold for future possibilities. I noted they struggled with “asking for books or stories to be told in really interesting and fascinating ways using technology or supplying the information about a piece of technology that then is the basis for the story.” These small decisions can mean larger consequences of something happening or not (Personal Observation). If a project is completely taken out of the mix, no longer a possibility at all, the producing theatre could use a similar model as The Potomac Playhouse in that the rights of the production and the script will return to the playwright to choose whether to continue the project with another theatre or on their own, or not at all.

Ownership of the Work

Rights can be a tricky and sensitive issue for all involved and something I was especially curious about when beginning the research for this thesis was what

happened to the scripts after they were first produced. The rights of the script are negotiated in the contract stage for the producing theatre. This can vary depending on the producing theatre's goals for the script and what they want to be part of after the production is complete. Based on various discussions with producing directors, usually the producing theatre has exclusive rights for three to five years starting immediately after the production is complete, meaning any further production of the script within that time frame has to be approved by the original producing theatre. This includes the right to have the script published (Producing Director, The Potomac Playhouse). Playwright A also had this to say when asked about ownership, "I've worked with people who were just horrible and you don't want to give over your script to this team you don't have respect for. On the other hand, you have your ego to keep in check and you're putting your name on this too so you want to make it as good as you can from your point of view." The communication that is so vital throughout the process continues to remain important when considering what the rights will be and should be after the production is complete (Playwright A).

Marketing a Commissioned Production

Marketing a commissioned piece of theatre for young audiences can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Producing Director B had an interesting point about one of their marketing tools, explaining, "We had to create a good title, because we wanted to write a new piece of work that would sell like a classic name would." The title

shows that remain popular and bring in large ticket sales are more favorable to most theatres when considering whether or not to commission new pieces of theatre. basing the script on a popular book with a notable writer becomes a more favorable method. For instance, *Turning Ten* was based on a book by the same name and directly impacted, in a positive way, the marketing and sales for the production. When potential audiences do not recognize the title, the marketing needs to bring them into the theatre in a creative way, such as engaging artwork as the graphic image for the production (Personal Observation).

At The Potomac Playhouse, there is a Press Department, as well as a Marketing Department, which means potentially more people devoted to the success of the production. On the other hand, because these departments are part of a larger performing arts institution, their services are not solely directed to the commissioned piece or only the works for young audiences.

Most theatre for young audiences staff members at various institutions across the country juggle multiple jobs. There might be one Marketing person who takes care of the design of the artwork and the implementation of the press materials. Most commissions appear in the season announcement for the theatre as a world premiere production. This can be a very exciting way to credit the commission as a viable part of the season planning for the theatre (Producing Director, Visible Voices). Producing Director of The Potomac Playhouse also added, "Saying things appear as a world premier commissions, sounds like a huge thing, and it should be. This is the first time

anyone is going to see this writing on stage. Make it sound big, it is, and use that to your advantage.”

Interviews with the artists involved can be a strong way to engage potential audience members, specifically if any members of the artistic team are well known. Another possibility is to market the commission a good deal of time before the production will be completed. For example, in many cities and communities, there are arts festivals open to everyone. These festivals can have arts and crafts, activities for families, and specifically performances for the attendees. With these types of festivals, if possible, the creative team can put together a reading or scenes from the play to start gaining interest in a production that is to come. Another option could be to create a promotional DVD from scenes and interviews with the creative team. This can be shared as part of television segments or sent to schools to get them interested in the production (Personal Observation).

An additional example that can be sent to community members who may be interested in the production quickly, at a relatively small price, is to create a website based on the production. The website could include the performance study guide for teachers and students pertaining to the student matinees the theatre might offer with the public performances. There could also be interactive activities for the production as well as interviews with the artists, clips from rehearsals, images from the designers about the set and costumes. Related to *Turning Ten*, a website was created in the manner of an invitation to a birthday party and the related activities were individual parts of the invitation. This website was welcomed by the local audiences and schools and helped

to spread the word about the production but also helped to engage visitors to the website so that more people became invested in the production before it premiered on the stage (Personal Observation).

Further marketing strategies were then required for *Turning Ten* after the in-house production. The decision was made to send *Turning Ten* out on the road for a national tour in a subsequent season. When marketing the national tour of *Turning Ten*, the website became a crucial link for possible presenters of the performance. The website included the invitation and activities as well as interviews and rehearsal segments recorded before production. Since The Potomac Playhouse, based on their Actors Equity agreement, could not send a video or portions of the actual production to those interested, the website became a useful way to market the tour and give those around the country a glimpse into The Potomac Playhouse's production. The Potomac Playhouse received a great amount of feedback from possible presenters that the website was helpful in also convincing others in their respective communities to support the production (Personal Observation).

Producing Director B commented about the creation of websites, "This is a whole lot easier if there's a technology department or person in-house to pull from. If you have to send out that information, it may take longer to reach potential audiences." They followed this comment with information about knowing your target audience and how that will help market a production. "After a while, you're going to know which schools and audiences are willing to take that risk with you and which one's aren't. Prove to them you are bringing them the quality and material they are used to with your theatre,

and they are part of this new venture and how great it is they are the first people to see this show, ever” (Producing Director B)?

Another marketing tool used specifically for the *Turning Ten* tour was the cast album created by the original company. The cast album was decided on about two months after the production had closed and began recording several months after that. Possible presenters for the tour of *Turning Ten* were then able to hear every song from the production and get a much better sense of the overall show, more so than just reading about the production in a press kit. The marketing press kit for *Turning Ten* included the performance study guide for students and teachers, which was the purple birthday party invitation, production photos, notes from the playwright, bios from the creative team, and information about the touring program (Personal Observation). All of these items helped give possible presenters something to have in their hands and read. However, I noticed an immediate resurgence of interest in the tour once the cast album began to be distributed to those presenters across the country interested in bringing the tour of *Turning Ten* to their respective communities.

As discussed previously, captioning the production was originally a great way to bring accessibility to more audience members. The decision was made that a captioning system would also go on the road for the tour. The Potomac Playhouse’s Director of Accessibility once again became part of the conversation. They explained, “This will be the first show ever to go on the road with live real-time captioning. What a wonderful...opportunity to model accessibility that will be new to many of the venues where *Turning Ten* will be performing.” This was used as a marketing strategy, the first

tour for any audience, to travel with an open captioning system. Sometimes the hook is the most important thing to get people interesting in bringing in a tour, and this was a great one (Personal Observation).

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Since the commissioning process usually takes years to produce a completed project, thinking about issues that will be relevant to your community could help to get the hypothetical commissioning ball rolling. Bringing any project to fruition depends upon every person involved and relies heavily on the personalities in the room. For example, something that resonated throughout all of my conversations for this research is how much communication plays a role in every commissioning process.

Co-commissioning with another local organization or institution can be an exciting way to begin that assists in the financial aspect of creating new work as well as forming strong relationships in the theatre's community. Actually, half of The Potomac Playhouse's 2007-2008 season was co-commissioned with another organization (Personal Observation). Working towards a common goal or objective is important as well as a team of artists who enjoy working together; those two things show the promise of what could be really successful. After all the work is complete, the audience is still witnessing a new piece of theatre.

When looking into writing about commissioning for the thesis process, I found some interesting information. Playwright C commented about bringing new work to the stage, "Sure we love watching new plays in workshops, and we love supporting them, but then who does anything with them?" This was one of my concerns, what happens to these works after so many people for several years put a great deal of time, effort,

and money into bringing them to life. When looking through submissions given to The Potomac Playhouse, I began to think about my experiences in the theatre and what I would want to see from a new play, for example a play that does not belittle what our audiences bring to the table.

As a researcher, realizing there are not existing documents or resources available discussing this topic, I came to recognize that new work makes me feel like there are constant contributions to the canon of literature for young people. In my opinion, this has the opportunity to give the field as a whole more respectable and engaging literature. It seems some of the same plays are produced over and over again because there are so few scripts that have a vast amount of respect and enjoyment that bring in large amounts of tickets sales as well.

Broadening the scripts available will hopefully give more theatres scripts that make them eager artistically as well as excited as they plan their programming. Since I had the opportunity to observe the process at The Potomac Playhouse for an extended amount of time, I recognize not every script will be unique and wonderful and add to the field, simply because it was a commissioned piece of literature. Something may sound better as an idea than when it becomes a reality. There still needs to be strong writing dealing with subjects we want to see on stage with engaging characters we connect to. Each person will have a unique connection or lack of connection to a piece of theatre, although it is very exciting to witness so many playwrights wanting to write for young people (Personal Observation).

Since I was unaware of the process to start a commission, and I was really looking for information about how to make a commission successful, the conversations that occurred and the observations of processes that took place gave me a strong basis for much of the information included in this thesis. However, looking back at the process, I struggled with the lack of information, literature and continuity surrounding the commissioning process, and for me it was a negative aspect of my project. Every single commissioning project is unique with the process it goes through. I believe my perspective now has shifted and I will look more at the parts individually of each commissioning process, instead of or alongside the whole, based on my thesis process.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY

The answer to the perfect commissioning project is truthfully that it does not exist. Making something successful may or may not have relevance to the process it took to get to production. The process I observed and talked about with artists and producers always depended on many factors, communication, end product being different than intended, or where ideas for new scripts come from. I realized that the progression of new works, as many as possible, is a positive aspect for the field of theatre for young audiences. The producing director, the driving force of the commissions at The Potomac Playhouse promotes many projects throughout the year, and advocates the important thing is to simply start the process and see what happens. I want to encourage theatres to find some money, not necessary loads of money, and start the process.

When beginning this thesis, it became important to think of what the specific questions were to ask, what I wanted to know, and where to find the information. One of my reasons for asking questions to begin with was to look into why more theatres are not commissioning new plays for young audiences. What is keeping theatrical teams from participating in this aspect of theatre for young audiences? How does money affect the decision to commission? What are the time constraints on any given project? How do theatres choose who is involved in the project? What are some of the rights or copyright issues? What about the difficulty of tickets not selling to a show that doesn't

have the Cinderella effect and box office success that so many theatres need to have in order to keep their doors open? Based on this curiosity, I was eager to start talking to artists in the field participating in commissioning work for the stage.

I feel lucky I was able to learn about commissioning for theatre for young audiences while at the University of Central Florida, through research and my internship in Washington, D.C. However, there are still unanswered questions and issues that seem important even after the completion of the thesis.

Something that arose I had not considered before writing about commissioning was the idea of published scripts. After completing this thesis I still question why more new scripts, after the entire commissioning process is complete, are not published? Who makes the publishing decision and who, if anyone, engages in that conversation? Is it agreed to before the process begins? If the playwright has an opinion, how might that influence the decision one-way or the other? In the beginning, one of my curiosities about commissioning came from the idea of adding more scripts into our canon of plays for young audiences. It seems the reasons may be varied for theatres participating in commissioning new works and then nothing happens with them after their productions are over, and I think it would be interesting to look into that aspect as well.

Throughout the thesis process, I became less eager to see what makes something successful after learning the amount of variables that go into each commission and more interested in the process the script goes through, from idea to production, specifically at a producing theatre that continually commissions new plays

such as The Potomac Playhouse. Several people brought up money as an obstacle to commissioning new work; it remains difficult for money not to be an issue. However, producing directors also discussed lack of staff support to start new initiatives such as commissioning. My impression is that this is more of a reason than money that theatres choose not to commission new plays for young audiences; they simply do not have the staff to do so. Every person at each theatre is working tirelessly to make the current programming work. If producing new plays is not part of the mission of the theatre, it seems difficult for them to justify the resources of staff or money. I am still passionate that other theatres will eventually begin commissioning pieces every once in a while.

After talking with practitioners in the field, from producers and artists to directors and administrators, and working day to day on multiple commissions, I have found the wide variety of models for commissioning new work encouraging when talking to other theatres about the commissioning process. If you have someone pushing the project forward, it is possible something will come out of that commitment.

In my opinion, the field of theatre for young audiences needs to continue to push forward in its own endeavors with new scripts. After researching and writing during the thesis process, I can relate more to the reasons others do not participate in commissioning, specifically the lack of time and staff support to make such productions happen, especially when the model is not already set up at the specific theatre. The passion I had in the beginning of the process has not changed, and I remain fascinated and eager to continue to see progress in the field of theatre for young audiences with commissioning.

In general, I believe artists, educators, practitioners, and administrators in the field are trying to broaden and open our audiences to a new experience, perspective, and opportunity. This belief comes from the conversations I was a part of and the observations from my time in Washington, D.C. I have the upmost appreciation for the practitioners, in every part of the field, who give and require respect for work for young audiences. They are aware theatre for young audiences markets a younger age bracket than other productions, but good theatre is good theatre no matter the age of audience. My hope is that new plays can enable change in our field by putting new literature into our canon of plays. Instead of all the classics, it is exciting to give voice to new playwrights and new voices in the field. While our audiences are changing experiences and perceptions, it is vital we as a field change along with them.

I would like to continue having the opportunity to work in an environment which values and contributes to commissioning new work for young audiences. The overall process has so many variables, which to me is uplifting. The process is not set in stone, so others can participate, and assist playwrights in their contribution to literature for young audiences.

APPENDIX: IRB APPROVAL



Office of Research & Commercialization

April 3, 2008

TO: Rebecca Podsednik

Dear Ms. Posednik,

RE: Theatre Master's Thesis, "What Characteristics Make a Successful Commission of a New Play for Young Audiences"

Thank you for submitting the information regarding your Master's thesis, as requested by the IRB office. As you know, the IRB cannot approve your research because it was already completed prior to IRB review.

However, Dr. Tracy Dietz, IRB Chair, reviewed the material and determined that if this proposal had been submitted to the IRB prior to conducting the research, it would have met the criteria for expedited review and likely would have been approved.

If you have questions, please phone the IRB office at 407-823-2901.

Cordially,


Joanne Muratori
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Copy: IRB files – student permission

APPENDIX: SAMPLE CONTRACT

[REDACTED]
COMMISSION AND LICENSING AGREEMENT

Agreement made and entered into this XX day of XXXX, by and between [REDACTED] (hereinafter referred to as the "Theatre"), whose address is [REDACTED] and XXXX, (hereinafter referred to as the "Composer/Lyricist").

Whereas the Theatre desires to commission and license a stage adaptation/original play (hereinafter referred to as the "Play"), and the Playwright is agreeable thereto, the Theatre and Composer/Lyricist hereto agree as follows:

1. The Theatre hereby commissions the Composer/Lyricist to compose the music and lyrics for the Play- XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX and to provide the orchestrations, both written for a live band and pre-recorded tracks. The Composer/Lyricist hereby accepts the commission and, subject to the terms and conditions hereof, grants to the Theatre the exclusive right to produce and present a professional production of the Play on the speaking stage.
2. The Theatre agrees to pay the Composer/Lyricist a non-returnable fee of (a) \$XXXXX or (b) XX% of gross box office receipts, whichever is greater for Playwright's services as playwright of the Play payable as follows:
 - a. _____ \$XXXX dollars payable upon the signing of this Agreement; and
 - b. _____ \$XXXX dollars payable upon Opening Night of the Play.
 - c. _____ The remainder seven (7) businesses days after Closing of the Play in order to afford time to fully reconcile the box office.
3. The Composer/Lyricist agrees to write the first draft of the Play and to deliver the first draft on or before [January 20XX] and a second draft of the Play on or before [June 20XX].
4. It is intended that the Theatre's Producing Artistic Director will read all drafts of the Play, will offer notes to the Composer/Lyricist, and will approve the manuscript before it goes into production. The music and lyrics of the Play as submitted by the Composer/Lyricist on the dates outlined hereinabove may be added to, cut or otherwise altered in the rehearsal process, and all such changes shall be approved in writing by the Playwright.
5. The Composer/Lyricist hereby warrants and represents and agrees that:
 - a. he will be the sole Composer/Lyricist and co-owner of the Play (with librettist, XXXXX) and in accordance to the agreement with publisher - as written by him and the Play (except to the extent that will be based on the source material, and may contain material that is in the public domain), will be wholly original with

the Composer/Lyricist and will not be copied in whole or in part from any other work; and

- b. he will not grant, assign, encumber or otherwise dispose of any right, title or interest in or to the Play during the existence of the Theatre's rights hereunder; and
 - c. the use and presentation of the Play and the grant of rights as herein provided will not violate, conflict with or infringe upon any rights of any person, firm or corporation; and
 - d. he has the sole and exclusive right to enter into this agreement and full warrant and authority to grant the rights granted hereby; and
 - e. the Play will be protected by copyright in the United States and in the event of publication copyright for the Play will be secured and maintained by the Composer/Lyricist in all countries adherent to the Berne Union Convention and in all countries adherent to the Universal Copyright Convention; and
 - f. he does not represent or make any warranty with respect to the title of the Play except to represent and warrant that the right to use such title has not been affected by any act or omission on her part and that no claim has been made to the effect that he does not have the right to use or grant the use of the title; and
 - g. he agrees to indemnify and hold harmless the Theatre against any claims, demands, suits, liabilities, losses, and expenses (including reasonable attorney's fees), damages or recoveries by reason of the Composer/Lyricist's breach of any of the Playwright's representations or warranties contained herein.
6. The Theatre agrees that it will indemnify, and hold harmless the Composer/Lyricist for any claims, demands, suits, liabilities, losses, and expenses (including reasonable attorneys' fees), damages or recoveries by reason of the breach by it with respect to all of the warranties and representations provided by the Playwright in this paragraph 5.
 7. It is the intention of the Theatre to produce the Play as part of its [20XX/XX] season with public performances beginning [January 20XX-June 20XX]. Any remount, revival, or subsequent production of the Play by the Theatre will be subject to a new and separate agreement.
 8. Composer/Lyricist shall receive billing in all programs, posters, publications, publicity, advertising related to the Theatre productions of the Play.
 9. The Composer/Lyricist grants the Theatre permission to videotape the production of the Play in its entirety for archival purposes and in part for media/promotional usage. The Theatre agrees that media/promotional usage shall not exceed three minutes in duration and will be used on its website and other media.

10. If the Theatre shall not have produced and presented the Play as provided in paragraph 7, this agreement shall terminate and all rights granted herein shall automatically revert to the Composer/Lyricist.
11. Provided that the Theatre or another performing entity produces the Play as part of its [20XX/XX] season prior to the expiration of this agreement, the Theatre shall be entitled to receive three percent (■%) of the gross box-office receipts derived from the disposition of any of the following listed subsidiary rights in and to the Play during the ■-year period after the initial ■ production: world-wide motion picture rights, and with respect to the United States and Canada only: radio, television, Broadway, Off-Broadway, Regional performances (including touring performances), stock and amateur performances, condensed and tabloid versions, so-called "concert tour versions," audio and video cassettes and discs, and MP3s/digital purchases.
- a. The Theatre shall enter into a separate agreement with each entity that obtains subsidiary rights to the Play.
 - b. The Theatre, under this contract, shall pay the Composer/Lyricist one percent (■%) of the three percent (■%) of the gross box-office receipts paid to the Theatre under any agreement provided for in subsection 11(a).
 - c. In the event the Theatre is entitled to receive a percentage of the gross box-office receipts under an agreement provided for in subsection 11(a), it is specifically understood that such participation shall not include proceeds from any production company in which the Theatre is one of the principals. It is intended that if the Theatre produces the Play beyond the initial production, it will retain the Theatre's profits from any such production.
 - d. It is understood that the Theatre's interest in such gross box-office receipts is only a right to receive money, and that the Composer/Lyricist alone owns and controls the Play and the right to dispose of any and all rights therein in his absolute discretion, subject only to the Theatre's license to present the Play as set forth herein.
 - e. For any subsequent disposition of the rights to the Play, the Composer/Lyricist shall require by contract that the following credit be given to the Theatre on the presentation page in publications of the Play and on the title page of programs of non-profit resident theaters, Broadway, Off-Broadway, and other productions of the Play in the United States and Canada as follows:

Originally commissioned by

■
■ Producing Artistic Director
■ Managing Director

12. All rights in and to the Play not expressly granted to the theatre in this Agreement are reserved to the Composer/Lyricist for his uncontrolled disposition and use.


13. It is understood and agreed that nothing herein contained shall be deemed to render the Author and Composer/Lyricist partners or joint venturers. Transfer of the Theatre production to another venue or production company shall require a new and separate agreement with the Composer/Lyricist.
14. Gross box-office receipts as referred to in this Agreement shall be deemed to be all receipts for admissions directly attributable to the Play and collected by the Theatre less any commissions or fees paid in connection with group sales, telemarketing and sales expense for subscriptions, theatre parties, off-premises box-offices, agency commissions, credit card discounts and fees, and automated/internet ticketing.
15. All pronouns and any variations thereof shall be deemed to refer to the masculine, feminine, neuter, singular or plural as the identity of person(s), firm(s) or corporation(s) may require.
16. All notices to either party hereunder shall be in writing and shall be deemed given when personally delivered or when mailed by first-class mail in the continental United States (postage prepaid), certified or registered with return receipt requested or delivered via email. Notices by mail or email shall be addressed to such party's address as given herein or to such other address as it may hereafter specify by notices duly given.
17. Any and all disputes, claims or controversies arising out of under or in connection with this Agreement or the breach thereof shall be submitted to arbitration in the State of [REDACTED] under the rules and regulations of the American Arbitration Association. Judgment upon the award rendered may be entered in the highest court of the forum, state or federal, having jurisdiction.
18. This Agreement shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of [REDACTED] applicable to contracts made and entirely performed therein regardless of the actual place of execution.
19. This Agreement shall not be changed or terminated orally or except as expressly provided in writing.
20. This Agreement shall be binding on the parties hereto and on their executors, administrators, personal representatives, successors and assigns.

AGREED TO AND ACCEPTED BY THE PARTIES AS OF THE DATE FIRST ENTERED ABOVE WRITTEN.

PLAYWRIGHT: [REDACTED]

By: _____ By: _____

XXXXXXXXXXXX, Composer/Lyricist
Address: _____

 Producing Artistic Director

SSN# _____

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