

Fin Kennedy's speech at the launch of Adopt a Playwright (25 March 2008)

Thank you all for coming tonight, it's great to see so many supporters of such an innovative scheme. And big thanks to Sofie for organising such an enjoyable evening.

I'm a full-time playwright and teacher of playwriting. As well as writing my own plays I do a lot of work with aspiring young writers near here, in a school on Commercial Road. Sofie has flattered me into saying a few words tonight by telling me that the seeds for the Adopt-a-playwright scheme were sown during a conversation she had with me last year.

It was part of some research Sofie was doing for an article for *The Stage*, in which she looked at the biggest barriers facing beginner playwrights. I told her that the biggest of these was overwhelmingly finding the time and headspace to devote to a sustained period of playwriting, in order to get a script into a decent enough state to be taken seriously by theatres.

Why is this something that should be subsidised? The answer is simple: the system as it stands is discriminatory. To be fair, this is through neglect rather than design, but the fact remains that the outcome is that the British theatre establishment is still overwhelmingly dominated by white middle-class male graduates – and mostly from south-east England. Now these people can of course produce great plays, and I speak as one of them. But I'm eager to broaden the backgrounds of our playwrights in particular because as storytellers, we hold a unique position. Everything starts with us. We decide which stories are worth putting a frame around. Whose lives are worth putting on stage. If the people who hold this responsibility are from a narrow and broadly similar background then so is their raw material for drama - the life experience on which they draw.

One of the reasons I spend so much time working with communities in inner city London is to get round this problem. I get to meet people completely unlike me, and to whom I would never otherwise gain access. I try my best to immerse myself in their worlds, to absorb their language, hopes and dreams, fears and longings, and to do them justice in the stories I create. But I always worry that the end result will by definition come through my own cultural filter, and be less than satisfactory as a depiction of their truth. I would rather these communities were able to represent themselves.

Whether they're a single mum from Peckham or a minicab driver from Tower Hamlets, there is one common reason why the system works against them: it places the onus of responsibility on the beginner writer to invest in their own play. They have to write unpaid, for some considerable amount of time, effectively on a speculative basis, in the hope that their efforts might be rewarded further down the line. Alongside a full-time job and all the other responsibilities of life, this is not a

good system for producing great plays. It also means that only certain people can afford to write plays: those who can afford to.

I'm not from a family with money. I'm middle class in the sense of having had cultural capital and the encouragement to pursue my creative ambitions, but the financial side of things was always up to me. The greatest gift my mother passed on to me was resourcefulness; it got me a scholarship to study playwriting at Goldsmiths, and later won me a writing residency. But despite that even I almost didn't make it. Only three years ago I had given up on ever being able to make a living in theatre; my second play had been turned down by almost every theatre in London and I had run out of money. I went off to re-train as a teacher. The same play then won one of the biggest awards in the UK. It was only that award, not dissimilar to the one you're all here to support tonight, that rescued my career. This is why awards are important: they don't have to worry about box office. They can invest in plays which make theatres nervous. But once a play or playwright is the recipient of an award, the risk for theatres is lessened. All of a sudden they have an award-winning product to sell.

Sometimes I wonder for every one of me, how many equally talented and deserving young playwrights fell by the wayside. It bothers me when some of the young writers I teach get excited about the possibility of doing this for a living. I think to myself 'Can I honestly recommend this to you as a path to follow?' And the answer is I can't. But is it really fair that only the wealthy or the lucky get to write plays?

As an audience member too, I want to see work from as broad a range of voices as possible, to reflect the world I live in as representatively as possible, and from previously unheard perspectives. At the moment the system (such as one exists at all) is geared up to ensure only a very narrow range makes it through. For me, theatre in a civilised society is an organ of democracy. It's one of the few areas of collective self-examination which we have left. And like democracy, it isn't good for theatre when access to taking part in it is restricted, however unintentionally.

Sofie said earlier that this isn't about box-ticking, and she's right, it isn't. It's about fairness. We all support the subsidised theatre sector through our taxes so we should all have an equal stake in it. But more importantly it's about representation of people and communities whose voices we hear too seldom. Apart from anything else, they are an untapped source of new and exciting stories for us all.

Sofie Mason's Adopt-a-Playwright scheme is imaginative in its structure, elegant in its simplicity, and timely in its appearance. It's an idea that feels like it has legs, and if successful, could go on to become a model for similar schemes up and down the country.

I recommend it to you without reservation.