

Dramatis Personae: Arvin Donner, The Drama Foundry

Theatre Vault proudly continues Dramatis Personae, a series of essays written by and about local theatre artists. In this essay, Arvin Donner, creative force behind The Drama Foundry, a central Ohio arts non-profit, dedicated to providing opportunities for dramatic writers to hone their craft and forge new work. The first meeting will be held on Saturday, July 11 from 5-7 pm at the Junctionview Studios in Grandview. Learn more about the group and the meeting by visiting [The Drama Foundry website](#).

What makes a great writers' group? I thought I had been doing a really good job in my attempts to avoid answering this nagging question for the past two weeks. That is until Theatre Vault asked me to answer the question for this blog series. The timing is uncanny...

You see, on Saturday July 11, 2009 from 5-7 pm I will be standing in front of a group of like-minded people proselytizing as a witness to the good news of cross-disciplinary collaboration. To put that another way, I am the guy who is starting The Drama Foundry, an arts non-profit for dramatic writers at the art collective, Junctionview Studios. My intentions are to bring writers and actors together to develop new work, and to create a "new work" incubator to be produced by local theaters, filmmakers, and other dramatic artists. After careful thought and some teeth gnashing, here is a list of what I think makes a great dramatic writing group.

1. Be dignified

Promote and value an environment where your members know they have the dignity to fail, find their own way, learn, and experiment.

2. Don't hog the earth as it orbits around you

Be accessible. This includes everything from having a timekeeper to manage the feedback sessions so everyone has an equal opportunity to share as well as making sure everyone has an equal opportunity to submit work to be read.

3. Know whom you are ultimately serving

You can not please everyone. At the end of the day, when the chips are down, there needs to be a group consensus on how the group is going to best serve the writers. When people make suggestions on how the group can be improved, always ask the question, "How is this new idea going to serve the writer?"

4. Have ground rules

Have structure -just not too much structure. Ground rules are a jumping off point not meant to be a straight jacket. Ground rules are there to create a space so people will feel safe and respected when presenting their work and getting feedback. Rules build trust in the group by allowing everyone to know there is common ground shared among the participants that will foster dignity. Ground rules also help to manage focus.

5. Communicate

Have an email list, social media presence, phone list, and use them. Be sure to remind people when the next meeting is. If your dog used your only copy of your next submission as a piece of toilet paper, well... that may be a sign from the gods that your play wasn't very good. If you take it as a sign, then notify the group to let them know you won't be reading at the next meeting and find someone to take your spot.

6. Be flexible

The Buddha said stuff is impermanent. The group's needs change. Individuals' needs change. Well-intentioned ideas thought up by guys like me don't work, and need to change. Have a regular group conscious to develop a framework for discussing possible ways to address new issues that arise and make changes accordingly.

7. Be predictable

A great dramatic writing group meets at the same place every week with the same format as consistently as possible.

8. Meet anyway

Meet anyway, even if the members don't have anything to read and critique. Not having any submitted material to read provides a good opportunity to do improvisational exercises on new story ideas and to work on all those exercises in those screenplay and playwriting books that are collecting dust next to your toilet.

9. Have Kibble

A great dramatic writing group has the writers being critiqued bring some food to feed the actors who are being very kind and generous with their time to come and read the writers' "brilliant-yet-stilted-and-unfocused" first draft.

10. The writer chooses the focus of the critique

A great dramatic writing group puts the focus of the critique in the hands of the writers. Do you want to talk about a particular character, beat, or event in the story? The writer can even choose to not have the piece critiqued, and instead, may just want to observe what the organic responses are to their work.

11. Focus on the process and not the outcome

Focuses on the process of writing and the development of stories. If the writing is solid, the agents will come, the cinematographers and directors will find you, and the productions will happen. Though, it is nice to have a community of like-minded people to share the contact information of a good entertainment lawyer or two.

12. Have some fun

Fun is the most important thing, right? If you are not having fun, what's the point? My hope is that with these ideals and some luck, The Drama Foundry will run smoothly and help forge the development of new work in Ohio, and avoid leaving too many blood stains on the carpet.