

Sign of Relief: Apprentice Shipment

There are various theatrical fields that will launch your careers. And riding the waves of apprenticeships makes reaching these areas easier. But often, these apprenticeships are docked at inaccessible big cities with costly housing and an increasingly crowded demographic of established citizens. Times have changed during the twenty-first century, especially 2020. Besides an influx of package and food delivery, there is a surge in online learning. Industry trade, such as dramaturgy and writing, should be virtually accessible. You cannot spell “apprenticeship” without “ship.”

I recently completed the New Play Development and Dramaturgy apprenticeship under [Working Title Playwrights](#), the best play incubator in the Southeast. No handshakes or long waits in an office occurred. All the happenings were through the internet. I participated in this entire program from the Midwest. I never physically met any community members, mind you. I am also mindful of the weight that the title carries, especially being the second in the program’s history.

Our era is the liminal stage between new and emergence. The areas where its limited space no longer brings new ideas or emerging artists can either virtually open their doors to outsiders or find themselves in endless societal liminality. Big-city theatres can make a virtual space to teach aspiring creatives, especially when the theatres cannot physically grow or even find a physical place.

Online apprenticeships provide small-town theatremakers the insights, skills, and connections to move on to the bigger world and to build their world at home. I came out of Working Title Playwrights with a fresh perspective and a sense of community. Here, I detail my voyage between the Midwest and the Southeast.

Preceding the Order

I love the theatre space and space in general since I was a child. Eventually, I attained an astrophysics degree and a minor in theatre. The virtual world has always been familiar due to the constant web conferencing with astronomers around the world.

When my opera picked up festive steam in New York City, I believed that its reach could be further. I signed up for WTP’s newsletter. I was long aware of this theatre community as the theatre department at Michigan State University had several Atlantans. Eventually, the pandemic forced me out of any crowded city. I returned home to Wyoming, Michigan.

In April 2020, the window opened to apply for WTP’s Rosalind-Ayres Williams Memorial Scholarship. This meaningful scholarship would help cover the courses taught under WTP. I knew this was a rare chance to learn what it means to be a playwright. And you would think that I would know after countless rejections, which included this scholarship. However, WTP’s town hall and Monday Night Critique Sessions accepted me. And Amber Bradshaw, the Managing Artistic Director of Working Title Playwrights, still guided me to any opportunity, such as the volunteer work for LMDA.

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Receiving the Order

On August 9, 2020, Amber Bradshaw sent a life-changing email. It reads: "Hello there! Although you were not selected for the Scholarship, I'd like to offer you an apprenticeship instead. It appears the world is going to be virtual for quite awhile, so the fact that you are out of state shouldn't make too much difference!" What a sigh of relief.

The subsequent phone call detailed my dramaturgical ambitions and musical dreams. The Managing Artistic Director shaped the program to fit my needs. I was mainly familiar with STEM internships. I had little idea of the capabilities that theatre apprenticeships had.

Processing the Order

The goal of this yearlong apprenticeship is to deepen the engagement the artist has with Working Title Playwrights and train them in all aspects of new development. This is not a trade for work or services. The entire process had no strings attached. And unlike college, knowledge and friends are provided for free!

Biweekly, I can expect to be with a few dozen of our fellow members during the Monday Night Development Workshops, where three of their pieces are read by the acting ensemble. When we needed to find these frequent writers' gatherings, we would have to use our vehicular and bodily fuel to network. Personally, it was always a high risk to progressively integrate with any community. My collegiate peers advised that it was easier to move to these big cities, only to state that they have relatives there. The small family that I have is in the suburbs of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Like many second-generation immigrants, the best connections were virtually made. When a Zoom meeting ends, it officially ends it for everyone. Then you immediately return to your lives in your homes. For me, there are less lingering thoughts that I must stay those extra minutes to talk to a wise theatremaker and risk returning home in the dead of night.

All five masterclasses during this apprenticeship were virtually done. Before, out-of-state instructors would have had to be flown in. We were able to be instructed by a psychodramaturg from Washington and the risk theatremaker from British Columbia. The students also felt at home with Atlanta-based instructors. Amber Bradshaw created the Dramaturgy Master Intensive, a monthly yearlong class with a purpose to expand the knowledge and practice in professional new development dramaturgy. I remain a student under this intensive until October 2021.

Working Title Playwrights partners with [Theatrical Outfit](#) for annual The Graham Martin Unexpected Play Festival. I had the first-time experience of curation for any theatre festival. Alongside the TO apprentices, we selected plays for the virtual stage. There was less of an incentive to physically meet in a space and to unnecessarily print pages of each submitted script. We marked our findings in Airtable and met to discuss them on Zoom.

Updating the Order

The major entity to look forward to is the apprentice project. My project is [ELLIPSES](#), the science musical about family. ELLIPSES was conceived for the first class. As the second project in the program's history, it was a supermassive undertaking.

WTP developed new plays for decades, but generally they do not concentrate on musical development. Regardless, they never dictated the box that our work needed to fit in. Working Title Playwrights backed ELLIPSES. They made me a professional by teaching me how to draft contracts and fundraise. They took a risk with an emerging musical writer who barely made ends meet.

So, our Universe began and expanded through four Monday Night Development Workshops in October, December, February, and May. Each Zoom meeting, readers read fifteen-minute excerpts of our musical with fifteen minutes of feedback from the few dozen viewers. Five of the total fifteen readers went on to be a part of the official team. Our cosmic music is recorded by the acting ensemble members. Our fabric of spacetime is threaded by WTP's stage manager, dramaturg, and director, who is the Rosalind-Ayres Williams Memorial Scholarship recipient. This all culminated into the virtual concert reading of ELLIPSES on July 15, 2021.

Keep in mind, this full-length stage musical was virtually created and developed. In the spirit of "working title" as a placeholder, Working Title Playwrights is a space holder.

Fulfilling the Order

The natural order of life seems bright. I am now more certain of my future than I ever was. The only thing that I wished was packaged with this apprenticeship is one group photo. The screenshots are pretty fulfilling. Evidently, there is an inclination to make my moves to the bustling city of Atlanta. When the time comes, I know that there are familiar people there, despite no one familial. For now, I have the industry knowledge and tools to make new play development happen in Wyoming, Michigan. Technically, the world we have lived in is not over. My virtual development is still happening.

During this pandemic, we have observed traditional barriers to participation getting toppled just by virtue of how we must reimagine what theatre can look like. It is an expression that Working Title Playwrights inspires. We certainly hope for other theatre communities to add, adopt, or adapt their apprenticeship models. What a sign of relief.