



How did I get here?

Fin Kennedy: How not to disappear

Fin is a graduate of the MA Playwriting programme at Goldsmiths' College. His first play *Protection* was produced at Soho Theatre in 2003, where he was also Pearson writer-in-residence. His second play *How To Disappear Completely & Never Be Found* won the Arts Council John Whiting Playwriting Award and was produced at Sheffield Theatres in 2007. Fin's first play for teenagers, *Locked In*, a hip-hop musical about pirate radio, was produced by Half Moon Young People's Theatre in 2006 and toured nationally. His second play for Half Moon, *We Are Shadows*, was subsequently commissioned and toured during autumn 2007. Along with Matt Peover and Mark Bell of Liquid Theatre, Fin was recently the recipient of an Arts Council England grant to develop a modern Jacobean revenge tragedy for the 20th Century. A reading of this ambitious new play will take place in early 2008. Fin also teaches playwriting in schools and youth clubs in inner city London, and is a visiting lecturer at Goldsmiths College, Brunel University and Boston University. During 2007 he was writer-in-residence at Mulberry School in Tower Hamlets where he developed *Mehndi Night*, a new play for their students to take to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Such was the success of this project that an in-school theatre company, Mulberry Theatre Company, was formed and plans are afoot to develop it into a Bengali women's theatre company in the heart of Tower Hamlets.

'Playwrighting' not 'playwriting'

I've been working as a professional playwright for the past three years, though it hasn't been without its blips. My first professional play *Protection* was produced at Soho Theatre in 2003, where I was also Pearson writer-in-residence. Since then I have taught playwrighting in schools, colleges and universities. My most recent commission has been a play for teenagers called *Locked In* for Half Moon Theatre. My play *How To Disappear Completely & Never Be Found* has just won the

Arts Council England's John Whiting Award for new theatre writing, but it remains unproduced. (Update: It was subsequently commissioned by Sam West for Sheffield Theatres and produced in 2007 to critical acclaim.)

It all started when I joined a youth theatre aged 11 and began acting. This led on to GCSE Drama and A-level Performing Arts. By the time I finished my A-levels I was pretty sure that I didn't want to act any more, though I'm glad I had that experience. Playwrighting is a living breathing craft, and writers are creating a blueprint for actors. For me that's why it's 'playwrighting' and not 'playwriting' – it's not about writing words but shaping and arranging dramatic events.

I was going to be a playwright

I took a year out and went to Australia and then enrolled on the BA Drama and English degree at Manchester University. I have to say, I didn't enjoy it very much. It was a very academic course and spent a lot of time looking at theatre history which I found dull. Most of my attention was taken up instead by a part-time job I got at the Royal Exchange Theatre. It started as just ushering at first but I soon became known as an odd-job man available for any bits and pieces of work. During my three years there I worked in most departments, from marketing to stage management. Looking back, it was really at the Royal Exchange that I did my drama degree – getting to know a living breathing theatre company from the inside.

It was during this time I wrote my first full-length play *Mercury* which to my surprise and excitement won a small runners-up prize in a Royal Court competition. A ten minute section of the play was read as part of a showcase evening at the New Ambassadors Theatre, plus I got to spend a weekend with Royal Court directors in a West End theatre. The excitement was almost too much. I was going to be a playwright and that was that.

Making it happen

I moved to London to try and make it happen, and got a job as receptionist for a literary agency. I hated it, but it paid the rent while I tried to write. I applied for some funding from the Peggy Ramsay Foundation, an extraordinary benevolent trust fund for playwrights. I'd been approached by a friend who was doing an assistant director apprenticeship at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and had been offered the chance to do his own fringe show for the RSC Newcastle season. To my surprise, the money was forthcoming and I quit my receptionist job to go off to Newcastle for the

summer to research a new play, the first time I had ever been paid to do so.

The resulting play, *To Be Someone*, went on at Newcastle's Live Theatre and was later revived at The Gate in London. However, things did go a bit sour because a disagreement arose between the director and me over who owned the play. Although the script was all my words, we had come up with the storyline together, and this proved a sticking point. It's a cautionary tale to get a written agreement for even amateur productions. Because we didn't have anything like this, I had no means of recourse and ended up losing out on a subsequent fee, as well as losing a director contact through bitterness.

Exciting as all this was, it had to come to an end and I still had to pay the rent with a more conventional job. I ended up working as Assistant to the Director of Half Moon Young People's Theatre in London's East End. I stayed there for a year and learned a huge amount about how to run a small company. It also meant I was in on a loop of professional producing companies and got to know the lie of the land. As a freelance playwright there's no substitute for being well-informed about the landscape you're negotiating your way around, and I don't just mean about how to submit work. It's about getting to know the personalities who hold the gatekeeper positions, which literary managers work where, and what their tastes and experiences are. It was during my time at Half Moon that I started script reading, and this was another good way to learn about how literary departments work and what they are looking for in new plays.

After a year I knew a lot more about accessing funding and managed to get an AHRB bursary to do the Playwriting MA at Goldsmiths College. This was really the turning point where my semi-professional experience took on a new and sharper professional edge. The course was fantastic, I'd recommend it wholeheartedly. This time round I loved the academic environment, because the Goldsmiths' philosophy of 'practice-based research' sums up what playwrighting

should be about. It was where I began to develop an active research methodology that I've used ever since.

My first 'big break'

I firmly believe that it is the dramatic writer's duty to be investigative. The job of playwright really is concerned with divining and revealing why our species behaves as it does. To this end, the job takes in aspects of journalism, psychology, philosophy and poetry. More than any other kind of writer, playwrights are best placed to interrogate the world around them. This is what I began to do with my play *Protection*, which I developed at Goldsmiths and which went on to become my first professional production. The play is about a team of inner city social workers and I immersed myself in that world. I interviewed social workers, team managers, trainees and social policy lecturers. I read social work training materials and policy documents. I even visited a children's home.

All this gave *Protection* a level of detail rooted in living people's experiences that made it an attractive proposition to a theatre company. Soho Theatre were impressed enough to apply for a Pearson bursary for me to work as writer-in-residence with them for a year while they put it on. Not only did I get to sit in on rehearsals for my play and work with them on rewrites, they also got me teaching playwrighting, and this is something that has stood me in very good stead. When I finished at Soho I left them with a play called *How To Disappear Completely & Never Be Found*.

Teaching playwrighting to teenagers

I naively assumed that having had my first 'big break' (i.e. full production) things would be plain sailing from there on in. Not a bit of it – if anything it was harder. Soho decided not to

proceed with *How To Disappear* and I spent two long years out of work, during which I had to be very resourceful. I found myself developing a specialism as a teacher of playwrighting to teenagers, particularly in designing bespoke play-making courses for groups with very specific needs. So I ended up running an after-school drama club for Bangladeshi girls in the East End, or making short films and performance poems with teenage mums in Finsbury Park, or setting up a mini theatre company for kids in care for Hampshire Social Services.

Although at first this work fell into my lap when I was asked to do a short project for the Almeida, I quickly realised what an opportunity it provided and I've since been very proactive in chasing it. I've forged long-term links with theatre education departments and community arts organisations, often just by writing to them on spec. I've done the same with local schools and colleges, offering my services as a visiting specialist. One job of this kind leads to another, often through word of mouth, and before long I had an impressive CV.

This started off as a means of generating some income whilst waiting for my plays to be read, but it soon became very much the other side of the coin to my writing work. It's very easy for playwrights to work in isolation, cut off from the world we're supposed to be writing about. That makes for bad plays. My teaching work quite soon became a sort of informal research. After spending quite a bit of time in inner city schools I began developing an idea for a play called *Locked In*, a hip hop musical about pirate radio written entirely in verse. I took the idea to Half Moon who helped me develop it. They commissioned it and have since decided to produce it as their autumn tour this year. An idea like that would never have come about if it wasn't for my experiences with London's young people.

Breaking the mould – and paying the price

Meanwhile the rejection letters for *How To Disappear* were pouring in. I had tried to break the mould and do an unusual play and I was paying the price. At the end of 2005 I decided that it couldn't go on like this and that I'd have to re-train to get a permanent part-time income. I started a PGCE teacher training course, thinking that my experiences to date would make it fairly easy. I under-estimated what was involved and ended up having a thoroughly miserable time teaching A-level Drama.

It was against this background that the news that *How To Disappear* had won the Arts Council England's John Whiting Award came as such a surprise. I had submitted the play myself after Soho turned it down, and didn't really expect it to get anywhere. It was the first time in the award's history that an unproduced play had won, and the time of writing it still isn't clear if anyone is going to put it on. What I'll probably end up doing is applying to the Arts Council's Grants for The Arts scheme to put it on myself at the Arcola Theatre, who are so far the only ones to take an interest in it, though they have very limited funds.

If I'd known then ...

What has all this taught me? Well, I suppose first of all the harsh reality is that you can count on one hand the people in this country who make a living from playwrighting alone. If it's something that you seriously want to do, you're going to need another source of income, and you're going to need to be very resourceful and proactive in creating your own writing projects. You're also going to have to get used to living very cheaply, and get an understanding spouse to see you through the tough times.

If I knew two years ago what I know now, I'd have taken the initiative in approaching

companies with play ideas I wanted to develop, and asked them to back me in a bid to the Arts Council to raise some research and development money. I've since found out that if theatres know and like your work then they're actually quite open to these sorts of approaches – so long as you take the lead and fill in all the forms. The easier you can make it for them to work with you, the more likely you are to end up doing so.

You should also consider getting out of London. For a start it's cheaper to live, but regional theatres also run much more writer-friendly attachment schemes and can keep you on for longer because there are fewer writers than in London and so they're under less pressure to give everyone a go. They're also much more in touch with their local communities than London theatres and can get you involved in all sorts of interesting projects via their Education and Community departments. Read widely, get to know your local community and local history. Get out there and get involved in things – it might generate a bit of short-term income, plus there's more than likely to be a new play idea in there for you.

For someone just starting out, I'd advise getting to know how theatres work from the inside – even if that's just ushering. You'll be in on a much bigger loop and will learn a lot. Use what support is out there. Subscribe to writernet and *The Stage*, use the script reading services of Soho and others to get feedback, and apply for every playwrighting competition that comes up!

And finally: don't fixate on the big new writing venues in London. The most exciting work is actually happening in the regions and among the smaller companies. They'll be much more approachable and welcoming, and far more prepared to take risks. And God knows, we all need a bit more of that in this business.

Good luck!

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Useful links

Fin Kennedy

www.finkennedy.co.uk

AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) Funding for postgraduate study in the arts and humanities. There are three award schemes including the Professional Preparation Master's Scheme which provides funding for courses that focus on developing high-level skills and competencies for professional practice.

www.ahrb.ac.uk

Arts Council England

The national development agency for the arts in England. Funding for writers and literature professionals is available through the Grants for the arts programme.

www.artscouncil.org.uk

John Whiting Award (now renamed The Peter Wolff Trust Supports the John Whiting Award) Awarded annually to a British or Commonwealth playwrights who, in the opinion of a consortium of UK theatres, shows a new and distinctive development in dramatic writing with particular relevance to contemporary society. From 2007, only plays which have been performed in the subsidised sector are eligible.

www.peterwolfftheatretrust.org

NAWE (The National Association of Writers in Education)

The one organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK. Maintains artscape (www.artscape.org.uk), an online national directory for arts in education.

www.nawe.co.uk

Pearson Playwrights' Scheme

Awards five bursaries to playwrights annually. Applicants must be sponsored by a theatre which then submits the play for consideration by a panel. Each award allows the playwright a twelve-month attachment. Also awards a prize

for the best play of the year to emerge from the previous year's winning writers.

www.pearson.com

Peggy Ramsay Foundation

Awards grants to professionally produced playwrights who need time to write again for the stage.

www.peggyramsayfoundation.org

Royal Court Theatre

Britain's leading national company dedicated to new work by innovative writers from the UK and around the world. Its Young Writers Programme is open to writers under the age of 26.

www.royalcourttheatre.com

Soho Theatre Writers' Centre

Aims to discover and nurture new writers and awards. Services and programmes include script reading service, open access workshops, and Soho Young Writers. Publishes free monthly newsletter.

www.sohotheatre.com

The Stage

The newspaper for the performance arts industry. Information-rich website features listings, reviews, how to guides and more.

www.thestage.co.uk

The Writer's Guild of Great Britain

The trade union for professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books and new media. Guidance for theatre writers on applying for G4A funding is available in the Rates and Agreement section of the WGGB website.

www.writersguild.org.uk

writernet

Provides dramatic writers with the tools they need to build better careers.

www.writernet.org.uk