

Testimony of

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Vice-President of the Dramatists Guild of America

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Testimony Submitted for the Record
Marsha Norman
The Playwrights Licensing Antitrust Initiative Act:
Safeguarding the Future of American Live Theater
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
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I am currently Vice-President of the Dramatists Guild of America, and have been on its Council for over twenty years, having been elected after my play 'night, Mother, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983. But it is as a teacher that I write here, on behalf of Christopher Durang, my Co-Chair in the Juilliard program, and the many distinguished playwriting teachers in America including Donald Margulies at Yale, Paula Vogel at Brown, Mark Bly at Harvard, Edward Albee at the University of Houston, and Edwardo Machado at Columbia and Zelda Fichandler at NYU.

What we know as teachers is that Broadway may well be thriving, but we are losing our young writers as fast as we can train them, to television and other unionized venues which pay them in advance and don't quibble over the price. Of the eight fellows in the Juilliard playwriting program this year, four of them are in California today talking to TV show-runners and producers about jobs for next year. Five years ago, we lost at most one writer a year. Now we're losing half before they even graduate. The TV people know that theatre writers are the best. That's why they come to us. "Who've you got?" they'll say. And we try to warn the writers about the dangers of work for hire, but at the moment, the Broadway arena is offering them little reason to stay.

Young writers want to see their plays done, but they don't want to be asked how little they'll take for them, or if they'll wait til the show makes money before they get paid. Young writers have heard that Broadway and off-Broadway contracts can take as much as a year to negotiate, during which time the producers' interest may wane or wander. Young playwrights don't understand why the actors and stagehands are getting paid, and they're being asked to wait. It's easy to see how young playwrights start believing they're better off turning their plays into screenplays or pilots, making some money and then coming back to the theatre later, when they can afford it.

The problem is, once writers leave the theatre, they rarely come back. So in addition to our young writers, we're also losing our mid-career playwrights. Warren Leight ,author of the brilliant play, Sideman, is now on staff at Law and Order. Eric Overmeyer, a lyric playwright of power and fury, is now running NYPD Blue. Teresa Rebeck, a mid career Paula Vogel has just shot her own pilot, and our most illustrious example, Aaron Sorkin , author of A Few Good Men, left the theatre to create Sports Night, and The West Wing . Alan Ball is gone, Howard Korder is gone, Steven Belber lives half his life in TV, Diana Son is gone, and Adam Rapp and Annie Wiseman are nearly gone.

The question is not whether TV is OK or not. It is. And it's getting better as more playwrights take over TV shows, and more theatre audiences stay home to watch them. The question is, what plays will we never see from these artists. No work for hire arena would ever suggest that Edward Albee write Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff. No TV network would ever commission Long Day's Journey into Night, or Streetcar Named Desire, or even Proof, the Pulitzer-Prize winning play by our Juilliard student, David Auburn. So in buying our writers' time, they tear up the paper the great plays would be written on, they channel the passion of a real dramatist into the life of a writer writing for an audience as defined by focus groups and rewritten by production executives. Great writing cannot be bought in advance. Greatness always appears unbidden, but heroes need a field on which to appear. That's what our young writers have lost in New York. Their playing field.

In short, as playwriting teachers we feel like we're standing in the wheelhouse on the Titanic. Everybody's dancing in the ballrooms down below, but there's something bad up ahead. And we're only seeing the tip of it. Without some kind of standard contract to rely on, our young playwrights will never get to mid career, and our mid career artists will never get to be masters, and all because the contract maze is not someplace anybody wants to be.

We would be happy to provide more sad stories or bring a hall full of young writers to tell you what they need, but maybe that isn't necessary. Sometimes we just need to act on behalf of the young ones and never even tell them about it. If we have done our part, they'll just grow up and find a world is waiting for them.

Thank you for listening.

Marsha Norman

Pulitzer Prize, 'night, Mother 1983

Tony Award, The Secret Garden, 1991

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