

A PERFECT MATCH:

Actors Theatre and the Ten-Minute Play

What makes a great play? The list might include a juicy plot, memorable or empathetic characters, an intriguing conflict, humor, pathos. The possibilities are endless. Now, imagine squeezing several such elements into a mere ten pages. Not an easy feat, right?

Yet, this is the challenge that over a thousand American playwrights take on every year when entering Actors Theatre's National Ten-Minute Play Contest. Founded in 1989 by then-Literary Manager Michael Bigelow Dixon, the contest features an open-door policy that allows any U.S. citizen to submit a ten-page script on any subject s/he pleases—no prior playwriting experience needed, no literary agent required.

"In the early years, people accused us of falling prey to the mentality of sound bytes and short attention spans," recalls Dixon, who returns to direct *Match Games*. "But with time, the attractions of the ten-minute play became evident to all." Artistically, ten-minute plays are a treat. As Dixon explains, "Because everything happens at once—exposition, relationship, conflict—a good ten-minute play is an incredibly layered event. They also allow for the wildest fling of the imagination, outrageous ideas that delight in the moment and don't need to make sense in act two. Their brevity exemplifies the soul of dramatic wit, and what more amusing and enthralling evening could an audience ask for?"

The appeal of the National Ten-Minute Play Contest is strategic as well as artistic. Indeed, the contest has come to hold an important position within Actors Theatre's rich history of new play development and advocacy for the American playwright. In its twenty years, the contest has seen the submission of an astounding number of scripts—more than 25,000—allowing the Literary Department to get acquainted and stay in touch with hundreds of American playwrights, some of whom have gone on to see their full-length work produced during the Humana Festival of New American Plays and beyond.

The contest has not only brought attention to new writers, but has also thrust the ten-minute play into the limelight. Since the contest's inception, Actors has fully produced ten-minute plays both in the Humana Festival and in an annual showcase performed by the theatre's Apprentice Company of early-career actors. Through these productions, Actors Theatre has introduced professionals across the nation to the form and all the theatrical potential it possesses.

Actors has also collaborated with publishers in the creation and distribution of ten anthologies devoted solely to plays from the national contest. These anthologies have found a home in the collegiate theatre world—the ten-minute play being the perfect length for a student taking her first plunge into directing, or for a professor introducing students to playwriting techniques—as well as a place on the bookshelves of artistic directors, actors and other thespians. The anthologies, Dixon notes, have also "bolstered the reputation of Actors as the theatre with the largest publishing program in America."

Now, twenty years after Actors held its first contest, the ten-minute play is a strong presence in American theatre. Festivals devoted to the form have sprung up throughout the nation. Requests for rights to perform ten-minute plays published in our anthologies continue to pour into the Actors Theatre Literary Office. The National Ten-Minute Play Contest—now co-sponsored with Miami's City Theatre—still thrives, with over 1,300 scripts submitted for the 2008 competition. This year, with *Match Games*, which features a number of plays from the contest, Actors Theatre takes the next step. Artistic Director Marc Masterson recalls that when planning the 2008-2009 Season, "we realized that we sat on a treasure trove of wonderful plays and had a unique opportunity to bring some of our favorites together for an evening of fun." And so, for the first time in Actors Theatre history, the ten-minute play will take front and center to delight audiences during our mainstage season.

—Rachel Lerner-Ley

Interested in writing a ten-minute play? Check out our website for guidelines: www.actorstheatre.org/humana_contest.htm Submissions are due November 1, 2009.



Illustrations from past National Ten-Minute Play Contest brochures