



NATIONAL NEW

BY LINDA LESEMAN

In 2003, the National New Play Network (NNPN) needed a guinea pig.

Thomas Gibbons, Playwright in Residence at InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia, was selected—or, rather, his play, *Permanent Collection*, was chosen. The new program, called the Continued Life of New Plays Fund, aimed to change the way new plays initially reach regional theatres and their audiences. InterAct produced *Permanent Collection*, and then four additional productions. The network called this a “rolling premiere.”

Since 2003, *Permanent Collection* has been produced over 30 times throughout the United States. Not one of these productions has been in

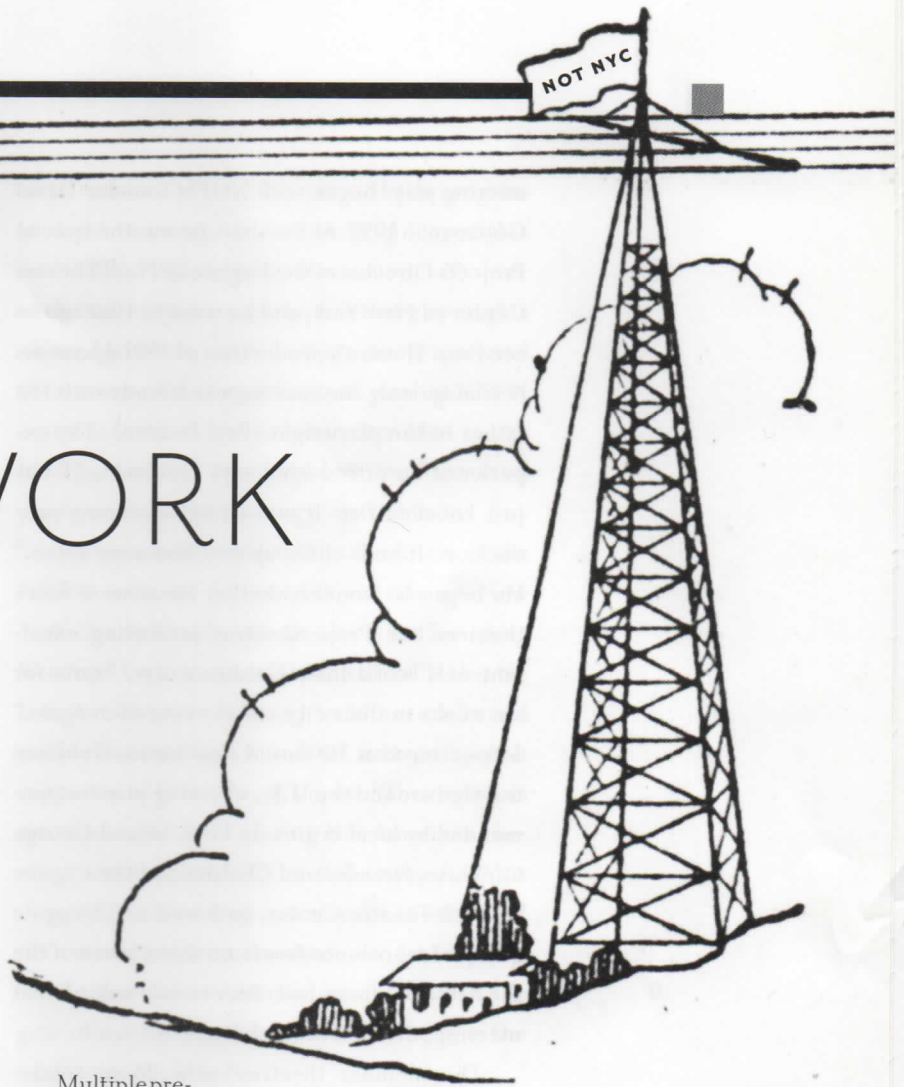
New York. Gibbons, who has clearly prospered from the original rolling premieres and following productions, says he couldn't care less that New York audiences still haven't seen his play. “I'm a big believer in the theatres outside New York and the value of what they're doing—and in many cases the superiority of what they're doing,” says Gibbons. Regarding the Continued Life of New Plays Fund, which afforded his play five inaugural productions and which is now an integral program of the NNPN, he says, “It's the kind of opportunity that really doesn't exist anywhere else in the theatre.”

Jason Loewith became the first Executive Director of the NNPN in March 2009; he considers the organization a solution to major problems with the traditional methods of new play development. “I think we all recognize in this country that the systems for getting new plays on

PLAY NETWORK

the stage are in a pretty bad way," says Loewith. "They are broken." He explains that the network was founded "in a defensive crouch," to combat the typical patterns of new play production that put playwrights at a disadvantage.

More specifically, the network uses the rolling premieres, by which a minimum of three theatres share premiere credit of a new play, to ensure that no single theatre holds exclusive rights to the first production of the work. In addition, the playwright doesn't have to worry that theatres will lose interest in producing the play when it's already premiered somewhere else. Too often, says Loewith, "The playwright is put into an awful bind, having to bet on what single production is most likely to achieve a future continued life for his or her work. We try to avoid that altogether by saying, here's three productions, at least, which will give you three opportunities to help speed the play on its way."



Multiple premieres also give the playwright the chance to see different interpretations of the script. At Victory Gardens Theater (newly inducted into the NNPN) in Chicago, Associate Artistic Director Sandy Shinner points out, "A play is not usually finished until all of the information the playwright gleans during that first production can be processed. A playwright needs second and third productions in order to continue to refine the script." For *Permanent Collection*, Gibbons says that he wrote twelve drafts before he considered it finished and that the rolling premieres were instrumental in that process.

The idea for creating a new model for pre-

miering plays began with NNPN founder David Goldman in 1997. At the time, he was the Special Projects Director at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in New York, and he went to Chicago to see Prop Theatre's production of *1001 Afternoons in Chicago* only because he was friends with the father of the playwright (Paul Peditto). The experience surprised him; says Goldman, "I was just knocked flat. It was an extraordinary production. It sent chills up and down my spine." He began to wonder whether there were more theatres like Prop—theatres producing excellent new work that, Goldman says, "runs for six weeks in their city and is never seen again." Suspecting that he would find more, Goldman traveled around the U.S., watching plays recommended by local critics. In 1998, he and George C. White, Founder and Chairman of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, gathered in Chicago a group of representatives from about seven of the theatres Goldman had discovered; out of that meeting, the NNPN was born.

The member theatres—now 26 in total—have all benefited from the network—as have the playwrights whose work has been produced through it. Tina Parker, Co-Artistic and Administrative Director at Kitchen Dog Theater, says the network has helped raise national awareness of what her theatre is doing. "What we were finding was, you know, we're in Dallas, Texas, and we've got all this great stuff going on, and nobody is down here to see it," she says. "The NNPN is a great pipeline for us to get the word out about these plays and these playwrights that need national attention, that need productions."

The rolling premieres are only one of the ways the NNPN theatres circulate new plays. Represen-

tatives from each theatre meet in an online chat once a month to share ideas and scripts. Twice a year, they meet in person—once at an annual conference and once at the National Showcase of New Plays. At the latter, eight plays are selected from submissions by member theatres and are presented in staged readings. Different theatres host these events each year; this allows the NNPN members to see their colleagues' theatre spaces and to get a more intimate sense of how the other network theatres operate in their hometowns.

Every opportunity for interaction provides an opportunity for new work to reach a larger audience. In 2003, Kitchen Dog hosted the network's annual conference, an event attended by representatives from all of the NNPN member theatres. The conference included a reading of *Circumference of a Squirrel*, by John Walch. In the audience was Bryan Fonseca, Producing Director at Phoenix Theatre in Indianapolis, who decided to add the play to his next season. "I don't know that I would have even come across it otherwise," says Fonseca. He adds, "We have great discussions immediately following hearing plays being read...If I just got the script and read through it on my own, I would not have the benefit of that greater conversation."

Although Walch's play was not part of the Continued Life Fund, several NNPN theatres have produced it as a result of the reading at the conference. Moreover, a number of non-NNPN theatres also produced the play after it came to their attention via the NNPN productions. Walch says that all of the theatres are ones he would have submitted the script to, but the Kitchen Dog reading presented it to multiple theatres simultaneously. "It's such a more efficient and, I think, better approach to sharing resources and sharing

knowledge of writers," Walch says, "for like-minded theatres to ban together in some fashion."

Another successful program the network has implemented is the Emerging Playwright Residency. The program allows recent M.F.A. graduates to work for a year with a member theatre. The writers are compensated with a stipend of \$8,750. At Florida Stage, playwright Andrew Rosendorf spent a year in residence from 2008-2009 after graduating from The New School. Besides writing and working in the education and literary departments at Florida Stage, Rosendorf mentored local students who were interested in playwriting. At 28 years old, he's had professional opportunities to grow as an artist that many people his age are unable to find. "Every one of the playwrights that graduated with me, they basically have a job to pay the bills," says Rosendorf, "and then they have to find time to write. And I'm really fortunate for this chance to basically have my job be to write." It's an appealing alternative to the starving artist scenario. Nancy Barnett, Managing Director at Florida Stage, agrees. "Rather than going to New York and waiting tables while you write in the middle of the night," she says, "why not come to a community where you can learn how to hone your writing skills while being integrated into an area's theatrical scene?"

Rosendorf has found one surprising advantage to being a playwright in residence: access to a copy machine. He laughs, "I think that has to be one of the biggest expenses for a playwright—the amount of copies that they have to make of their scripts."

Although playwrights like Rosendorf must be no more than eighteen months out of grad school in order to participate in the residence program, Loewith points out that there is no age maximum

or minimum. In fact, the name of the program is about to change from Emerging Playwrights to NNP Playwrights in Residence, says Loewith, "in recognition of the fact that playwrights of any age at any point in their career can avail themselves of the opportunity to work at NNP member theatres. It doesn't matter what age an MFA graduate is." In other words, the focus is on young work, not just young playwrights.

Perhaps most importantly, the focus of the NNP rests on playwrights outside of New York. Sherry Kramer, whose play *When Something Wonderful Ends* premiered both at NNP theatre InterAct Theatre Company in Minneapolis and at the Humana Festival in 2007, is an outspoken supporter of the network's aims. "The regionals are supposed to be feeding the American theatre," she explains. "We're still trapped in this thing where New York is where it's theatre, and it's not really theatre anywhere else."

Goldman is of a similar mind. "Where's the guts of our theatre?" he asks. "Is Broadway the whole country? No."

All members of the NNP recognize that great theatre is not limited to New York City and that regional theatre audiences are equally important. As Kramer puts it, "A person in the seat in New York is no more valuable an audience member than an audience member in Omaha." With its efforts to draw attention to regional productions of new work, the NNP is acknowledging that playwrights all over the country are essential to the preservation of American theatre. "That's the only way we're going to find the next Tennessee Williams or Sam Shepard," says Parker. "You've got to foster new talent. And they're out there." 