

WLT Play Selection Guide for Directors

Thank you for your interest in Directing at Williamstown Little Theatre.

WLT is one of Melbourne's leading non-professional theatre companies. Melbourne has a thriving theatre community with professional, semi-professional, fringe and over 20 non-professional companies providing audiences with a wide range of theatrical experiences.

About the Theatre

WLT is located in the inner-western bayside suburb of Williamstown. The company was formed in 1946, and moved to its current location at 2 Albert St, Williamstown, in 1969. The building was originally a bakery, and was transformed to a theatre by company members. The building and grounds are owned by the company, and as such WLT has exclusive use of the theatre.

WLT currently performs five shows a year (Feb, Apr/May, Jun/Jul, Sep, Nov/Dec). Productions typically rehearse for around 7 weeks in the theatre, with a three-week season (usually 16 performances). Auditions are usually held 2 weeks before the start of rehearsals.

The theatre seats 69 patrons, and has a limited performance area - there is no fly space above, and limited room in either wing. This needs to be taken into account when considering plays for performance, as larger-scale shows may not be suitable.

For further information about the company, please see <http://www.wlt.org.au/>

Play Selection Process

The WLT Play Selection Committee (PSC) is responsible for appointing directors and selection of plays for each season. The process starts more than a year in advance - it can take quite a long time. As a rough idea of the timeline we work to (this can vary quite a lot year-to-year):

1. July. PSC will poll potential directors for interest and availability to direct.
2. August. Directors to complete Nomination Form to provide detail on availability.
3. September. PSC will meet to consider nominations and availability for each season, and select the five directors.
4. Oct-Nov. Directors to nominate plays via play submission form
 - a. Please fill in this form once for each play submitted
 - b. The PSC would prefer to see a list of 3-5 plays to choose from

5. Dec-Jan. PSC to read and review nominated plays.
6. Feb. PSC will meet to discuss submissions and select preferred options. In some cases, it may be necessary to re-engage directors for other options.
7. Mar. Company Secretary will send selected plays to rights holders for permission to produce.
8. Apr-Jun. If rights not available, PSC may need to contact director for other options, and repeat process above.
9. September. All plays need to be confirmed by end of September for publication in Season Brochure.

Deadlines for directors:

August 31 - Submit WLT Nomination Form

November 30 - Submit plays (3-5) via WLT Play Submission Form

What to expect after your play has been confirmed?

The WLT Committee will appoint a Production Co-ordinator to work with you on all aspects of the production. Initial expectations will include a blurb for the Season Brochure, and input into the Poster Design, which both need to be completed before year end. Note, for Season 1, auditions will be in November.

Play Selection Guidelines

The PSC is often queried as to why a particular play is rejected; it can be both frustrating and disappointing, especially if the selection process is drawn out.

Primarily, the PSC will look at the following criteria:

- can the play be staged with WLT's resources and staging restrictions?
- will the play be suitable for our audiences?
- will a production of this play uphold or enhance the company's reputation?
- does this play provide a balance with other plays under consideration for the year?

There is a considerable amount of subjectivity within this rather broad set of criteria. Plays that appeal to some audience members may not appeal to others. How one person rates the quality of a particular play may differ from others. The key is the word 'balance'. And here we ask directors to understand that whilst we discuss their particular submissions with them, we're also considering the season as a whole. Quite often, this might mean that a perfectly acceptable play is passed over - and perhaps can be considered again in a different year.

When we talk of balance, there are many aspects to consider:

- balance of plays across the season is paramount
- a mix of lighter plays with more dramatic
- audience pleasing plays with plays that challenge our audiences, directors and actors
- "classics" and modern plays
- smaller and larger cast plays
- plays with a range of cast members - female and male roles; younger and older roles
- plays that set a challenge for our technical teams - set design, costume design, sound/lighting.
- plays from different regions of the world
- locally written plays
- plays that explore particular themes
- small musicals
- possibly other criteria!

With all of the above in mind, there are several general guidelines that Directors should bear in mind when submitting plays

- For Season 1, we prefer to see an "audience-friendly" play - be that a comedy, "classic" play, or a drama that isn't too confronting for the audience

- Directors for Season 1 should also bear in mind that the Summer break often limits resources, so a smaller play (4-6 cast members; limited technical requirements) is preferred
- For Season 5, a lighter play is preferred - comedy or small musical
- Consider submitting a range of different plays, this will provide a better opportunity for balance.
- Plays that are older than 20-25 years should be approached with caution - is it a stand-out play of its era? Is it a period piece? Are issues, themes, language, mores of the play still relevant for a modern audience? A run-of-the-mill 40 year old play has less chance of acceptance, even if it was once popular.
- Plays that have been “doing the rounds” of other companies in Melbourne in recent years should also be avoided - perhaps come back to them after a few years have passed without other productions
- Plays with an interval are preferred
- Plays with a single cast member are generally given a less favourable consideration, and we’d limit the number of plays with 2-3 cast members (perhaps no more than one per year)
- Avoid plays we have performed in the past. We have done a few plays more than once over the years, but prefer plays that haven’t been seen on our stage before. Definitely avoid plays that we’ve done in the past 15 years. See Resources section for list of plays.
- Please don’t be upset if we do need to come back to you for further options, it’s often difficult for us to get the right balance!
- These are guidelines only!

Resources

Looking for a good play?

The [Victorian Drama League](#) maintains an extensive library of plays. It's a volunteer organisation, well worth the annual membership, you can drop in and peruse their stock, and borrow at a minimal fee.

The VDL also has an [online catalogue](#) that can be browsed for free.

[Samuel French](#) has a searchable catalogue of plays that they represent. They also produce a very good catalogue for purchase.

Likewise with [Dramatists Play Service](#)

[Amazon](#), [Amazon \(UK\)](#), [AbeBooks](#), [Book Depository](#) all carry a range of plays for purchase.

[Doollee.com](#) is an online resource for playwrights and plays.

Or [internet search](#) for plays by particular authors; genres; plays that have won Tony Awards, Olivier Awards, Pulitzer Prizes. Often this is a good way to find quality plays.

A history of our past plays can be found [here](#), or on our [website](#).

Cues & News Article

The following article appeared in WLT's newsletter, Cues and News in August, 2013. This article provides a Q&A with the Play Selection Committee convenor, Damian Coffey. Note, this article pre-dates this guide, and the associated submission forms, but otherwise, the content remains relevant.

DAMIAN TELLS ALL ABOUT THE PLAY SELECTION COMMITTEE

- ***What does the play selection committee do?*** The **WLT Play Selection Committee** is responsible for well, selecting plays! What this means in practice is: choosing directors for each of our five plays in a season; identifying when each director is available and allocating to an available slot; discussing with the directors the types of plays they'd like to present, and getting submissions from them; reading through the submitted plays; discussing and reaching agreement on a choice for each season; where necessary going back to directors and discussing further options; and, liaising with the **WLT Secretary** to seek rights for the plays selected.
- ***What does the Convenor of the PSC do?*** The Convenor co-ordinates all of the above. It's a role that I've just taken on this year, taking over from **Graeme Cope** who has performed this role admirably for so many years previously. It involves liaising with directors, providing guidance to them where necessary. Organising **PSC** meetings, and in between communicating by email. Liaising with the **WLT Secretary** regarding rights. I've also recently set up a website to assist us with keeping track of the various submissions, and for recording our impressions of each play we read.
- ***How does the play selection process work? (How are directors selected? How do they end up doing a specific play? etc)*** We start by identifying directors. The **PSC** will meet around November-December, and discuss directors that have worked with us in the past, potential new directors, and anyone that may have approached either the company or a **PSC** member expressing an interest in direction. I'll then send out an "expression of interest" letter to a shortlist of maybe 5-8 potential directors to check availability and interest. Whilst we are blessed in many ways with the thriving Community Theatre scene in Melbourne, it does mean that many directors are in high demand, and will work at a range of companies around Melbourne. The reputation that **WLT** has developed as a leading company does give us a boost



though, as many top directors are keen to associate with us, and in turn we are with them. From this process we'll identify a director for each of our five plays, and discuss with each director the style of play they'd like to do, and we'd like to see. The directors will then send us a list of plays they're interested in and the PSC will get busy reading. We don't just consider the merit of each work, but look at issues that we may have with staging (given our limited space); balance of the play with other plays that may be performed during that year; whether the play has been produced elsewhere locally in recent times and other factors. We'll then indicate our choice to the director and the **WLT Secretary**, who will write to the author's agent seeking rights. In some cases, we'll need to liaise further with the directors in order to finalise a selection, either due to lack of rights, or if the plays they've submitted are not suitable for one reason or another. All of this does take considerable time. In fact, by the time the process completes (our real deadline is the start of play 5 each year so the **Playbill** [detailing the new season] for the next year can be ready), it's often time to start the process over again for the next year!

- ***What does a balanced season of theatre look like to you?*** This is a good question! Balance can mean many things. We look for a balance in the style of plays produced over a season – comedies, dramas and everything in between (for instance, a comedy might be a “black” comedy, a romantic comedy, a farce, “high” comedy, “low” comedy). We'll look to ensure that we include content from a variety of countries. Whilst much of what we present comes to us from England or USA, we are conscious that we need to present quality Australian works, and we'll continue to look to regularly present local plays. On occasion we've also presented works from elsewhere in the world. Ireland is a rich source of theatre, and we've presented many Irish plays. But also over the years, works from South Africa, New Zealand, France (interpreted) to name a few. We'll look for a balance in plays that present our audience with a “good, fun night out”, with those that will provide challenges – to the company, director and actors, but also to the audience, to make you think, question the world around you, to feel, laugh, cry and experience the full gamut of emotions that make us human. This to me is what sets theatre apart from other forms of entertainment. So, to me a balanced season includes all of this – a couple of lighter plays, a couple heavier/darker. But we'll always try to finish the year off with a good rollicking comedy, or occasionally, a fun, small musical.
- ***What do you think WLT audiences look for in a season of theatre?*** WLT has established a reputation over 67 years of producing high quality community theatre. Each audience member is different in what they might appreciate on any given night, and I can't really speak for everyone, but I'd like to think that an

audience member coming to Williamstown knows they will see a polished performance of a quality play – be it a comedy or a drama.

- ***Why don't we do more comedies?*** I guess this comes back to our question on balance! It's true, we do get feedback on occasion from audience members that would prefer to see more comedy, and don't have as much interest in our dramas. But there are also a good number of audience members that regularly attend to see high quality drama. I do feel strongly that if we were to limit ourselves to a less balanced season (either producing all "bums on seats" comedies or all heavy dramas) it would over time be to the detriment of the company and our audiences. We attract the best directors, actors, backstage staff, committee members because we are prepared to take on challenges, to change this would be to change the quality of the shows we present. Not everyone will like every play to the same extent, we can't expect that, but we do hope that if you don't like a particular play perhaps the next one will be more to your liking because of the balance in plays we provide.
- ***What's the best play you've ever read, that we can't do at WLT?*** Currently, perhaps ***August, Osage County*** a recent play out of America by **Tracy Letts**. The set requirements really preclude us presenting this wonderful play – it really needs a sprawling multi-level old house with several rooms. I can't see how it could work successfully on our limited size stage. There are many good plays that we can't consider. But just as many that our small, intimate space suit so well!
- ***You're an award winning actor and director, and no stranger to the creative process. What do you enjoy about being involved in the PSC?*** I really struggle with the time requirements to perform and direct. It really does take a good 3 months+ of dedicated work. And my current day time job requirements limit me to the occasional on-stage appearance, as much as I do love it! Being a **PSC** member though allows me to continue to contribute in a meaningful way and although it can be time-consuming, the time spent can be spread out over the year. Overall though, for anyone on the **PSC**, the primary requirements are an aptitude and a passion for reading. Reading a play isn't quite the same as reading a book. It might only take an hour or two to read a play, but it requires you to visualise how it might appear on stage (even if the directors vision might be quite different!) And with the volume of plays, and that a number of them may be plays you don't enjoy reading, it needs to be something you enjoy doing. Fortunately, I love it. I also try to get out and see as much new theatre as I can – subscribing to **MTC** and **Red Stitch**, as well as getting around to productions at other Community Theatre companies.
- ***Has any director tried to bribe you to pick a particular play? Did it work?*** No, but I'm open to it! (**Mr. Newling**, take note!)

- **Has any actor tried to bribe you to pick a particular play? *Did it work?*** The trouble with an actor trying to bribe me would be that they'd then have to go and bribe the director as well!
- **Does the PSC always agree and if they don't what is your process?** No, we regularly disagree! And I see that as a good thing. It helps ensure we achieve the balance I spoke about earlier. We try to achieve consensus, but if we can't all agree on a play we all like from a particular director, we may go back to that director to request further submissions. If we still can't reach consensus, we'll look for a "best fit", where perhaps three of the four **PSC** members like a play. We may on occasion ask a director that is passionate about a particular work to convince us of its merits. It can be difficult from a bare reading of a play to understand just what the director sees in it. We might also look at professional reviews of productions of the play to aid in guidance, or opinions from those who may have seen it elsewhere. Which gets me back to what makes a good **PSC** member – a passion for reading plays, and getting out and seeing as many different productions as you can. It's something you have to love!

Damian Coffey

Convenor, Play Selection Committee

Contact

For further information, please contact the WLT Play Selection Committee convenor, [Damian Coffey](#). Or use the Contact form on the [WLT web site](#).