The founding charter of the Play Service, back in 1936, called for the Board to be split evenly between playwrights (all members of the Dramatists Guild) and agents. Back then, the star playwrights included Howard Lindsay, George Abbott, and Sidney Howard. Today our stars are Donald Margulies, Polly Pen, Lynn Nottage, and John Patrick Shanley, who have been members of the board ranging from five years (Nottage) to over 20 (Shanley). I asked three of them some questions recently about their experience serving on the Board. (Donald Margulies was away promoting his new movie at the Sundance Festival.)

What do you see as your role as a playwright member of the Board?

Polly Pen: I hope to be a voice for my fellow writers and colleagues at the Dramatists Guild. I particularly try to bring the perspective of a musical theatre writer whose work lives mostly Off-Broadway and in repertory theatres.

Lynn Nottage: [My role is] to ensure that the playwright’s voice is an active and engaged part of the publishing conversation. As a woman of color, I also see my role as one of advocacy; I want to make sure that there’s a diversity of voices being published by DPS.

As time has gone by, have you seen your position as a playwright member change?

John Patrick Shanley: When I first served on the Board, I was skeptical and challenging and, frankly, young. But over time I morphed from opponent to colleague.

PP: Ways of thinking about how theatrical work is best accessed are changing rapidly. I’ve found myself increasingly invigorated by my fellow Board members’ pleas to try to stay ahead of things rather than playing catch-up.

Do you think that the agent members of the Board have a different agenda than the playwrights?

PP: I’ve always felt that the Board has a unified agenda — but it has often taken a binary approach to realize goals, with agents and playwrights taking turns looking through both telescope and microscope.

From Time to Time:...
THE INVISIBLE HAND examines the power behind global capitalism to create, manipulate, and destroy societies. Nick Bright, an American Citibank employee working for the corporation’s Pakistan arm, is kidnapped by Islamic militants and held for ransom. What seems like a straightforward hostage situation is actually a veritable, utterly theatrical experience. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY remains a classic for the timeless, nuanced dialogue that connects us all, and the appeal of Austen’s novel resides more than two centuries later.
Do you have a play which you are particularly happy is published by the Play Service?

PP: I remember a play that DPS published my musical EMBARRASSMENTS. This work, written with Lawrence Keenan, tells the story of the novelist Henry James’s disastrous and humiliating experience as a playwright. The play has only managed to produce one production, but it's a deep favorite of mine, and there it sits in the Catalogue, waiting for someone to discover it.

LN: I must say that I was happy when DPS decided to publish my more obscure works such as LAS MENINAS and ONE MORE RIVER TO GROSS. Hopefully, those plays will have a life beyond the page.

JPB: The first play of mine which DPS published was DANNY AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA, back in 1964. It's a big day in a playwright’s life when his first play is published. I had a baby with the Play Service back then, and I was told that I should take the book jacket to be blue, since the word “blue” was in the title. I said yes, and the jacket has always remained blue. I'm proud to serve this organization.

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SENSE AND SENSIBILITY adapted by Kate Hamill, based on the novel by Jane Austen

Bedlam Company is renowned for taking classic standards and transforming them into a visceral, utterly theatrical experience. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, Jane Austen’s Georgian comedy of manners, breathes new life in this invigorating adaptation. Kate Hamill takes Austen’s razor social commentary from 1811 and endows her adaptation with a contemporary feminist, spawning energy, and athletic momentum. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY remains a classic for a reason, and Hamill’s fresh adaptation encapsulates what makes Austen’s novel resonate more than two centuries later.

PUNK ROCK by Simon Stephens

With his smash Broadway hit, PUNK ROCK, Simon Stephens is currently in the dog in the night-time. Simon Stephens proved adept at narrating the complex inner life of adolescence, and his next play, inspired by Stephens’ time as a secondary-school teacher, similarly explores the minds of teenagers — to the ultimate, nightmarish and high-school level: for the teens inside, like a hermetically-sealed ecosystem, in which private dramas fueled by academic pressure, social absence or overbearance, and erotic desire can skew daily life into the surreal. The commonplace bullying play is subverted in PUNK ROCK, where power dynamics are constantly shifting and every moment is endowed with tense, terrifying potential as to which of these teens will snap first.

Dramatists Play Service is proud to announce that we will be publishing two volumes of previously unpublished short plays by iconic American playwright William Inge: THE APARTMENT COMPLEX and SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA. Here is an excerpt from editor Craig Pospisil’s introduction to the upcoming collections.

In the fall of 2013, I was looking for plays to include in a second volume of Dramatists’ Outstanding Short Plays. The agent for the William Inge estate sent me a short play by the late author called THE LOVE DEATH and mentioned that he had more. “Can you send me all of them?” I asked. And soon nine more arrived.

Ten unpublished, largely unknown short plays by one of the pillars of 20th century American theater were definitely something exciting to discover, and I became more excited as I read the plays. These are raw works, and I mean that both in terms of the tone of the writing and in terms of the roughness of the plays. But what they may lack in polish, they make up for with the rawness and emotion inge brings to the page.

To be completely honest, I wasn’t overly familiar with William Inge’s plays. I’d seen the more verbose version of BUS STOP many years ago, a sort of Broadway revival of PICNIC, but I only had a passing familiarity with much of his work. To move forward with editing an anthology of his work, I needed to learn a lot more about Inge and his work. I dipped into the library here at Dramatists Play Service, read through his plays, got a copy of Ralph V. Figaro’s biography A Life of William Inge: The Years of Triumph, and gained much greater appreciation for the man and his writing.

Any widely successful artist has a period of time when their work is not well received or popular, but when they seem to tap into something in the zeitgeist so their work transcends the “merely” good and becomes something more. In the 1950s and 1960s, Tennessee Williams, and William Inge had each clearly accomplished that in their own ways. Inge’s successes in this time were enormous. He only really started writing his raw works, and I mean that both in terms of the tone of the writing and in terms of the roughness of the plays. But what they may lack in polish, they make up for with the rawness and emotion inge brings to the page.

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WILLIAM INGE: REDISCOVERED

by Craig Pospisil

William Inge: The Invisible Hand

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History makes great drama, and the stage is the perfect place to revive history. These new DPS titles present true (or mostly true …) stories in fascinating, theatrical, and sometimes irreverent ways. If you read them, you just might learn something new, or reconsider what you thought you knew about historical moments and momentous historical figures.

These plays are stories about the rulers of the world — kings and queens of England, presidents of the United States — and about people who changed arts and culture completely — Isaac Newton, Louis Armstrong, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, Moss Hart.

But they also focus on people you’ve never heard of. History is made by citizens striving for change as much as by heads of state; a member of the KKK and a black civil rights activist can find common ground and change a Southern town’s experience of race. Three schoolgirls in Africa can have a vision of beauty and of bloodbath that enraptures the world. Slaves telling their stories in their own words lends a voice to American history long absent from textbooks.

Each of these plays is a new perspective on triumphant, violent, chaotic, joyous moments in history, the ultimate celebration of humanity’s progress.