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Hey, Kids, Let's Put on a Reading!



Josh Haner/The New York Times

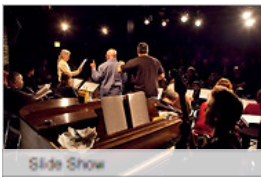
From left: Aaron Tveit, Josh Charles, T. R. Knight, Bobby Cannavale, Tobias Segal and I. N. Sierros reading "Suicide, Incorporated," a play by Andrew Hinderaker. [More Photos »](#)

By [ERIK PIEPENBURG](#)

Published: January 20, 2011

NEW Yorkers love nothing more than to boast, "I was there first," whether it's getting a reservation at a buzzworthy restaurant, snatching up the latest handbag or seeing a new film before the rest of the country.

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Josh Haner/The New York Times

The playwright Andrew Hinderaker, left, with the director Doug Hughes. [More Photos »](#)

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Richard Termine for The New York Times

David Zayas, standing left, and James Evans at a LAByrinth reading of a Stephen Adly Guirgis play. [More Photos »](#)

That same quest extends to the theater. Seeing a show before it hits the big time is the stuff of legend (or of tales told by people who weren't actually there). Anyone who was at the first performance of "A Chorus Line" or "Rent" — to name just two shows that started small and ended up conquering Broadway — has real bragging rights.

One way to catch the next potential It play or musical is to attend a reading. Before a show gets a full-fledged production, it has to start somewhere; a reading is a work in progress needing feedback. The format can be simple (a group of actors with scripts on music stands) or more elaborate (a workshop with choreographed numbers and musicians). Many readings are free and open to the public, though reservations are often required, and some are open only to theater subscribers.

"Readings have become a major piece of the theatrical landscape," said Mandy Hackett, the associate artistic director of the [Public Theater](#).

That's because they allow playwrights, directors and troupes to put a work in front of an audience and gauge the reaction with little expense and relatively few risks. (Critics aren't invited to weigh in.)

So if a line doesn't get a laugh, it might be cut. If a song soars, it stays. If a viewer nods off, it might be time for an overhaul. That's where the audience comes in, especially in opinionated New York.

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The readings scene is particularly vibrant here, said Adam Greenfield, the director of new play development at [Playwrights Horizons](#). “I could very easily be overwhelmed by the number of readings in the city,” he said. “In other cities I’d probably go once every three or four weeks. Here I’m going to several a week.” For good reason, as Mr. Greenfield explained. “There’s a higher density of playwrights here,” he said, “and you have more access to theater companies and actors.”

Though most Playwrights Horizons’ readings aren’t open to the public, there are many ways to see free readings across the city almost any time of year. The best way is to get on the e-mail lists of the companies known for making readings an institutional priority. LAByrinth, MCC Theater, Primary Stages, [Manhattan Theater Club](#), the Lark and New Dramatists are just a few that actively invite the public to see works in gestation.

In general, readings sponsored by nonprofit theaters are much easier to get into than those for commercial Broadway productions, which tend to be closed-door events for potential investors.

“The nice thing that nonprofits do is that they know readings aren’t always for tryouts,” said Jocelyn Florence, artistic coordinator at Ars Nova. “The big industry reading often feels like a backers’ audition. It’s a different vibe. We’re not trying to sell a play.”

Although readings don’t promise quality, in some cases they guarantee star sightings. The actor [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#) and the playwright [Stephen Adly Guirgis](#) were both in the audience last month at the LAByrinth Theater Company’s reading of Mr. Guirgis’s new work, directed by Mr. Hoffman. (His play “The _____ With the Hat” is scheduled to open on Broadway this spring.) The tiny Cherry Pit theater in the West Village was standing-room-only on a frigid winter night for the play’s two readings, which included an onstage band.

“People like to see the mistakes we make,” said David Zayas, a LAByrinth company member who was in the reading. “That’s exciting to them. They relate to it, like, ‘Look, that guy messed up his lines.’ Then they’ll want to see the play once it’s polished.”

The actors [Bobby Cannavale](#), [T. R. Knight](#), Josh Charles and Aaron Tveit were among the cast in a reading of [Andrew Hinderaker](#)’s play “Suicide, Incorporated,” presented last month during a weeklong series of readings sponsored by a production company, the Araca Group. Mr. Hinderaker, whose play [has been produced in Chicago](#), said readings give him a chance to see his own words with fresh eyes. “Part of what you’re looking for is the audience response,” he said. “I’ll probably tweak things a little bit to some degree. What’s great about a reading is that it’s an opportunity to really hear your work again and focus on any changes.”

Robert Blecker, a playwright and professor at New York Law School who attended Mr. Hinderaker’s reading, said he enjoyed watching a production being built from the ground up. “There’s something exciting about catching things in their infant state,” he said. “The critics aren’t here. It’s a vehicle, a laboratory for playwrights and actors to explore a play before an audience without worrying about the play’s future.”

Readings aren’t universally popular. An often-heard complaint from some in the theater world is that readings [don’t guarantee a show’s afterlife](#). “A reading can achieve nothing but going in circles and doesn’t always move the play forward,” said Daria Davis, a friend of Mr. Hinderaker’s who is studying directing at the [University of Texas](#), Austin, and who attended the reading.

Still, many theater companies find programming value in a reading series. The Public Theater’s readings of Diana Son’s “Satellites,” [Tracey Scott Wilson](#)’s play “The Good Negro” and the Civilians’ “Paris Commune” all eventually led to productions. Ars Nova accepts submissions from the public for its monthly Out Loud series, which spotlights unknown authors.

“Our hope is to discover new writers, someone you’ve never heard of before,” Ms. Florence

said.

Mandy Greenfield, Manhattan Theater Club's artistic producer, said readings were especially appealing to people eager to see how theater is made.

"There's a real appetite in our audience for getting closer to the process," she said. "People are excited by the intimacy of looking at theatrical collaboration." All that's asked of the audiences is an open mind and a willingness to overlook the occasional flubbed line.

Josh Charles, an actor in the reading of Mr. Hinderaker's play, asks for one more thing: politeness.

"It's a reading," he said. "Be gentle."

Where to Go if You Want to Be the First on Your Block to See It

ARS NOVA arsnovanyc.com.

LABYRINTH THEATER COMPANY labtheater.org.

THE LARK PLAY DEVELOPMENT CENTER larktheatre.org.

MANHATTAN THEATER CLUB mtc-nyc.org.

MCC mctheater.org.

NEW DRAMATISTS newdramatists.org.

PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS playwrightshorizons.org.

PRIMARY STAGES primarystages.org.

THE PUBLIC THEATER publictheater.org.

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