

Reveals the secrets and strategies of successful playwriting for dinner theatre.

**Just Write for Dinner: Planning, Producing, and Presenting Dinner Theatre**

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Producing, and Presenting Dinner Theatre**

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**Just Write for Dinner: Planning,  
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By

Rickey E. Pittman

## About the Author

Rickey E. Pittman, Grand Prize Winner of the 1998 Ernest Hemingway Short Story Competition, is originally from Dallas, Texas. He earned a BA in New Testament Greek and an MA in English from Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. After moving to Monroe, Louisiana, Pittman was added to the Louisiana Roster of Artists in 1998. Working closely with regional art councils, he was commissioned to write historical plays for Franklin (1997) and Madison (1998) parishes. In addition to freelance journalism, editing, and nonfiction writing, he has published short stories, poetry, and a novel, *Red River Fever*. Since 1994 Pittman has taught freshman English at high schools and universities in Louisiana and Texas and currently teaches freshman English at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. He has worked with dinner theatre, not only as a playwright, but also as a stage manager and actor.

Web Sites: <http://www.rickeypittman.com>  
<http://www.booklocker.com/books/461.html>  
[rickeyp@bayou.com](mailto:rickeyp@bayou.com)

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## **An Introduction to Dinner Theatre**

### **What is Dinner Theatre?**

Dinner theatre runs in our veins. It began long ago, at the campfire celebrations of our most distant and savage ancestors, who after a good meal celebrated the successful hunt or battle dramatically. Medieval kings and courts have long banqueted while enjoying entertainment provided by nameless troupes long lost to history. Dinner theatre is an art form that has refused to die. Now, dinner theatre is thriving like never before, and people from every social station and walk of life are able to enjoy it.

Dinner theatre is a means of preserving theatre. Dinner theatre brings excellent drama to a public who otherwise would have no exposure to this finest of the fine arts.

Dinner theatre is a proven means of increasing public and community involvement and interest in theatre. Many have their first acting experience working with a dinner theatre troupe. Audience members, who are often participants in the evening's performance, learn to appreciate theatre, and as is frequently true with art, learn more than they intended. In these troubled times, affordable, quality entertainment closer to home takes on a greater importance.

A great dinner theatre experience could well be the spark that drives people to enjoy other forms of theatre. Dinner



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theatre can be so effective that audience members leave with memories that will remain with them for years. When an author provides an audience with a good play, he is performing a beneficial service.

Dinner theatre is a syncretic art, blending comedy, intense drama, music, and dance. Dinner theatre can be a one-time event, or a run of plays that can last for a season. The plays used in dinner theatre can be bawdy, burlesque farces or prim and proper showcases of the actors' exceptional talents.

More significantly for the writer, dinner theatre can also be profitable. This ebook is designed to provide authors with the information they need to write and market plays for dinner theatre. *Just Write for Dinner* can also assist any aggressive, determined writers to plan, to produce, and to present their own dinner theatre.

### **Who Goes to Dinner Theatre Anyway?**

The dynamics of dinner theatre are so powerful that it works with folks from all walks of life. At a performance, one can find doctors, lawyers, politicians, nurses, teachers, small business owners, mechanics, farmers, retirees, and employees from nearly every profession one could imagine.

They attend dinner theatre for a variety of reasons. Some just want to do something different from their usual routine. Others are there because of friends. Some received the tickets as a gift. Sometimes businesses buy blocks of tickets for employees or clients. Many go simply because

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somewhere along the way, they got hooked on the dinner theatre experience and want more.

Remember that these audience members are people with money! An evening of dinner theatre is really a good deal when you think of it. The patron receives a quality meal, quality entertainment, and social interaction and visibility—at a bargain price.

Authors know that the ideal customer for their writing is someone with money, especially if he or she is willing to spend it. As Samuel Johnson is reported to have said, “Only a blockhead writes for anything but money.” While Johnson may be overstating his point, it is still a good thought for a writer to remember. Don’t be a blockhead! Learn how your writing can make you money.

Also there will be a few in the audience by your special invitation. A few comps can be given to these, but remember that the money for their meals will still have to come out of your pocket! Make sure the comp ticket is a good investment! I would be willing to invest a comp ticket for the sake of a good review or to recruit a particular actor I wanted.

Who shouldn’t be in your audience? Sometimes age must be a factor. Some theatres welcome children five and above, but do not allow babies in theatres. Can you imagine the damage a colicky, screaming baby could do to a play? Other theatres advertise the plays as adult entertainment and have even stricter age requirements. However, I can see how dinner theatre could be valuable to young teens as a grownup experience, almost as a rite of passage.

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Of course, in the end, it is up to you what ages you target in your marketing, but you and your performers will have to live with your decision.

You can plan your dress code according to the occasion and setting of the play. Most people have enough culture and common sense in them to know that theatre is a special experience and that they should dress appropriately. However, I have lived long enough to know that one should never assume he knows what people will do. If you want people to dress nicely, then you need to communicate that in some way.

During introductory remarks before the performance, theatre protocol must be addressed. Patrons should be reminded to turn off their cell phones and beepers. (I remember one performance when a cell phone filled the room with the tune of "Dixie.") Nor should members use cameras or video-cams during a performance.

### **Some Model Dinner Theatre Companies**

Successful people often speak of how they study the success of others. If an author studies other writers who successfully market their writing, he or she can garner lucrative ideas and inspiration. A casual search on the web will reveal successful dinner theatres in many metropolitan areas. Here, I've listed some sites that should give you plenty of inspiration and ideas.

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**Mysteries by Moushey,**

This site showcases the plays of Eileen Moushey. This site is an excellent example of what an aspiring playwright can accomplish. She has managed to build a troupe, and write an extensive number of audience-interactive plays.

<http://mysteriesbymoushey.com/>

**Murder on Us**

This site advertises itself as Rhode Island's premier mystery theatre. After eleven successful seasons, this could hardly be argued with. This site is worthy of an author's attention.

<http://www.murderonus.com/pages/645031/index.htm>

**Chanhassen Dinner Theatre**

A high class example of dinner theatre in Minnesota, in operation since 1968. I believe it is the largest dinner theatre in the nation, employing nearly 300 people and entertaining over 250,000 patrons a year. This company offers impressive customer services.

<http://www.chanhassentheatres.com/>

**Naples Dinner Theatre**

This is an impressive dinner theatre. They even have their own chef!

<http://www.naplesdinnertheatre.com/>

**Pace: Murder Mystery Plays for Community Theatres**

A great example of how an aggressive writer can market his or her murder mystery plays. This site offers visitors a free copy of "The Actor and the Murder Mystery." This article will be of benefit to anyone interested in murder mystery theatre.

<http://www.paceinc.biz/>

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**Thrill Peddlers:** Grand Guignol in San Francisco.

If you think horror can't sell for the stage, you are mistaken!

If you are a writer of horror, you can gain some ideas for an avant-garde type of theatre from this site.

<http://www.thrillpeddlers.com/>

### **The Market Possibilities**

Once you comprehend the simple structure and formula for creating a successful dinner theatre, simple math reveals the tremendous profit potential.

Ticket prices for dinner theatre vary from \$25.00 to \$100.00. For a smaller size town, \$30.00 would probably be a reasonable price for a ticket. If you can get the caterer or restaurant to cut you a deal on the meals served, say at \$10.00 per patron, then even after you pay your actors and other assorted expenses, a decent profit will be made.

Suppose you can seat fifty on a Friday night. That means \$1,500.00 has been made clear for one night's performance. Even if the pay for your actors and expenses comes to \$500.00, there are not many jobs where an individual can make \$1,000.00 for a single night's work. Then Saturday, you can repeat that, and the next weekend, repeat it again. In most towns you can have several performances of the same play without peaking. However, don't run a show too long—variety is the spice of life, and new shows will attract not only new patrons, but past patrons who enjoyed your show will want to return and see what you've been up to. Getting excited yet? Can you see the potential?

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Beginning directors will probably not be able to compete with the “big boys” of the dinner theatre world. However, this should not discourage you. There are plenty of potential customers for anyone who builds a quality dinner theatre. Dream big, but start small and solid. Begin with small casts and minimal expenses and soon the profits will be rolling your way.

In addition to promoting yourself, you can use dinner theatre to help others with fundraising. Dinner theatre has proven to be an excellent fundraiser for teachers, nonprofit organizations, and various causes. What you charge your worthy patron for being a featured attraction depends on your own needs and how many details related to performance they provide. For example, they might be willing to provide the meal, so you could discount your rates considerably. Dinner theatre or interactive theatre works well in high schools, community theatres, and drama clubs, and the play can be adjusted in length and content to meet the needs of the particular organization and custom-fit any program.

### **Why Dinner Theatre Works**

Dinner theatre works primarily because people enjoy the experience. However, there are other reasons why dinner theatre works so effectively.

First of all, dinner theatre can be performed for large or small audiences. Of course, a larger audience will make you more money, but increased audience size increases logistics, setup time, and potential problems. In an extremely large

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dinner setting, even visibility of actors and props can be a problem.

A smaller audience can actually be a plus, especially for beginning directors and troupes that need battle experience. With smaller audiences, few electronic devices are needed, and the actors can interact in some way with every patron. This interaction can be humorous, can be used to provide clues (sometimes misleading ones if the audience is expected to solve a mystery), and can help the audience understand the characters better.

Dinner theatre works because of audience participation. Volunteers are often requested (or selected!) to assist in the play's presentation in some humorous way. This allows the patrons to show off and attract attention. Unless the volunteer is overly victimized and humiliated, he or she appreciates the chance and moment to be in the spotlight and perform with the actors.

Dinner theatre is mobile and portable. A Dinner theatre can be performed almost anywhere for virtually any occasion. You can perform locally or take your show on the road. The simplicity of this type of theatre is wonderful. There is no need to own your own facility, thus no property taxes or property management headaches. Dinner theatre is mobile in its potential. An aggressive producer can take his or her troupe as far as is desired.

Dinner theatre requires minimal props, costumes, and sets. Anything a troupe requires can be rented if it is a specialty item or if storage is a problem.

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Dinner theatre works because its comedy and upbeat nature lifts the human spirit. Generally, dinner theatre is upbeat. People go to other settings for serious, heavy drama and crying times.

Dinner theatre is adaptable to any audience or area. Thus, a director/author can be assured that his or her play will be suitable. Good troupe members know how to improvise, and this appropriate improvisation can give a dramatic presentation additional energy.

Finally, dinner theatre works because actors love it. They love it because you pay them. Actors, unless they are equity actors or work in summer theatres, are not accustomed to being paid for their passion. And when you treat them well, pay them well, and allow them to be part of a fun play the public loves, your dinner theatre is bound to work.



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