What to Look For When Choosing an Affordable Play for Your Next Production

Start With a Clear Picture of Your Resources

Every production begins with a script, but the script you choose shapes everything that follows - casting, rehearsal time, set design, costumes, and the budget for performance rights. For community theatres, school drama departments, and small professional companies, the difference between a smooth season and a stressful one often comes down to picking a play that fits the resources available. Before you browse catalogues or read sample pages, take stock of what you have: the number of actors you can reliably cast, the size of your performance space, the technical capacity of your venue, and the amount of money you can spend on licensing and production.

Many groups skip this step and fall in love with a script that demands a large cast, complex lighting cues, or a period setting with expensive costumes. By the time they realise the mismatch, they have already committed to the play or spent time they cannot get back. A quick checklist - reviewed before you read a single line of dialogue - can save you from that kind of trouble.



Check the Cast Size and Composition

Cast size is often the first practical constraint. A play that calls for fifteen actors may be impossible for a company that can only count on ten. But the number alone does not tell the whole story. Look at how many roles are written for men versus women, how many children appear, and whether the script demands actors who can sing, dance, or play an instrument. Some plays have a large cast on paper but let you double-cast parts - one actor plays two or more roles. Other plays require every character to appear on stage at once, which rules out doubling. Read the cast breakdown carefully and ask your director or producer whether doubling is feasible given the rehearsal time available.

A related point is the age range and physical demands of the roles. A play with a lead character who never leaves the stage for the entire first act will need an actor with stamina. Plays that require accents, stage combat, or rapid costume changes also place demands on your company's skill level. Choose a script that your actors can handle with confidence, not one that will stretch them past breaking point.

Estimate the Production Budget Early

Performance rights are only one part of the budget. A play set in a single room with minimal props costs far less to produce than a play that moves between a forest, a castle, and a spaceship. Look at the setting and the number of scene changes. A script that calls for five different locations may require a turntable, flown pieces, or quick-change sets that push up costs for materials and labour. Similarly, lighting plots with many cues and special effects - strobes, haze, projections - add to the technical budget. Costumes can also become expensive if the play is set in a historical period or requires elaborate fantasy wear.



To keep the budget manageable, look for plays that use a single set or a simple unit set that can represent multiple locations with minor adjustments. Plays with contemporary settings

usually need costumes that actors already own or that can be bought cheaply at thrift stores. If your group has a strong costume stock or a skilled designer, you can take on more ambitious period pieces. The key is to match the play's requirements to what your team can supply without spending beyond your means.

Consider the Run Time and Audience Appeal

Run time matters more than many groups realise. A two-hour play with an interval works well for an adult audience expecting an evening out. A one-act play that runs seventy minutes can be a great fit for a festival, a school matinee, or a slot in a rep season. But the same seventy-minute play might feel too short for a subscription audience that has paid for a full evening. Check the licensing material for the approximate run time and decide whether it suits your audience's expectations.

Audience appeal is a bigger question. Not every play suits every crowd. A dark comedy about a dysfunctional family can be a hit with an adult theatregoing audience but may not work for a family-friendly season. A children's play that relies on slapstick might charm young kids but bore older siblings and parents. Think about who your regular audience is and what they come to see. If your theatre usually draws mixed-age groups, a play with broad appeal - something funny, warm, or adventurous - will keep them coming back. If your audience leans toward serious drama, a light farce might feel out of place. The playwright Deb Meyer, whose work appears on Ink to Stage, writes across genres including dark comedies, thrillers, children's plays, and family-friendly fantasy scripts. That range shows that a single writer can serve different audiences; the trick is to pick the right play for your specific crowd.

Look at the Rights and Licensing Terms

Performance rights are not all priced the same. Some plays have a flat fee for a set number of performances; others charge per performance, per seat, or as a percentage of box office revenue. Always check the licensing agreement before you commit. Some rights holders restrict where and when you can perform, require approval of cuts or changes to the text, or demand that you use their official materials. If your group likes to adapt scripts heavily or insert local references, a play with strict no-alteration rules may cause friction.

Also check the availability of the rights. A popular play may already be licensed to another company in your area for the same season. Most licensing houses let you check online whether the rights are free in your region. Do this early in your selection process. There is no point designing sets and casting a show that you cannot get permission to produce.



Evaluate the Script's Track Record

A play that has been produced many times by other companies is not necessarily the best choice, but it does offer some reassurance. The script has been tested in front of real audiences, and the licensing house can tell you how many productions have taken place and in what kinds of theatres. If a play has been done mostly by high schools and you are a community theatre, the tone and complexity may be different from what you expect. If it has been produced by professional companies and large regional theatres, it may demand a level of polish that your group cannot achieve in four weeks of rehearsal.

Reading reviews from other productions can help, but treat them as one piece of information among many. A play that critics loved may still be a poor fit for your audience. A play that

critics disliked may have become a local favourite in communities where it was performed well. The best guide is your own reading of the script and your honest assessment of whether it will work for your actors, your crew, and your audience.

Think About the Genre and Tone

Genre is not just a label on the front cover. Two plays labelled "comedy" can feel completely different: one might be a farce with slamming doors and mistaken identities, while the other is a quiet character comedy with dry wit. Read the first few pages to get a sense of the tone. If the dialogue feels stiff, the jokes fall flat, or the emotional beats seem forced, that will not improve in rehearsal. A well-written script carries its own rhythm and charm. Trust your instinct about whether the material connects with you.

The genre also affects the audience's expectations. A thriller that keeps people on the edge of their seats can fill a house, but it needs tight pacing and a strong lead performance. A children's play needs energy, colour, and a clear story that young minds can follow. A fantasy play requires imaginative set and costume solutions that your team can realistically deliver. Match the genre to your company's strengths. If your group excels at physical comedy, pick a play that lets them show that skill. If you have a strong design team, a fantasy or period piece can be a showcase for their work.

Curses!

A Fractured Fairies' Tale





Rehearsal Time and Technical Complexity

Some plays are technically simple but demand long rehearsal hours for dialogue and character work. Others are technically heavy but straightforward to act. A play with a lot of offstage sound cues, quick lighting changes, or complex props will eat up tech rehearsal time. If your venue has limited technical capacity or your crew is small, a simpler show is safer. Conversely, a play that requires a large cast to rehearse for eight weeks may be impossible if your actors have day jobs and can only commit to three evenings a week. Look at the rehearsal demands in the same way you look at the budget. If the play requires more than you have, it will cause stress and may lead to a weak final product.

In the end, the best affordable play is the one that fits your resources, challenges your company just enough, and gives your audience a satisfying experience. Keep this checklist handy when you read scripts. It will help you make a decision that everyone involved can stand behind.