

In a recent post on a Facebook Playwrights page the number of characters in a play or musical was discussed.

Now: Number of characters does not necessarily mean the number of actors needed to play them. Double-casting, or multiple casting, is usually a directors choice, but sometimes a playwright may choose the device of one, or all, of his/her performers, playing multiple characters, including opposite gender casting. It is wonderfully theatrical!

My collaborator and I are working on a musical that is looking like 8 characters will be portrayed by 8 actors. Our previous musical ended up having 8 characters needing 8 actors to tell the story. Anyone see a pattern developing?

If you are expecting professional and regional theatres to produce your play, the cast numbers (not necessarily character numbers) must be lower (musicals can get away with a few more bodies onstage than plays can).

But if you are writing for the school or community market -- and most plays end up there anyway through licensing -- then you can be a bit more generous in involving characters to tell your story. Even if the roles could be doubled, some/most schools and community groups have the numbers of performers to fill the cast.

I am not saying that you should write for a market, but it does not hurt to keep a market in mind. After all, a play is not meant to be read, but performed. If your piece is too unwieldy because of an overly large cast, it might satisfy artistically, but may never be produced. Remember: Sophocles and Shakespeare wrote to be produced, not read later and appreciated throughout time. Write what your piece demands. Listen to the muse, even though sometimes you may have to put a muzzle on him or her.

Serve the show, first. Then look at the markets. See how many of them your show covers (as far as number of performers is concerned -- you may be surprised), then get your play or musical produced.

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