

SO YOU WANT TO BE
A PLAYWRIGHT?

*How to Write a Play
and Get It Produced*

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Contents

Introduction: The Story Only You Know 1

PART ONE GETTING STARTED

Storytelling 9

The good storyteller

Releasing the story only you know

Definitions 10

Character and inner conflict 12

What kind of play do you want to write? 22

The singular original voice

Political theatre

Documentary theatre

Verbatim theatre

Monologues

Historical plays

Alternative theatre

Inspirations 30

Where do you get your ideas from?

How do you know if your idea is any good?

Considerations 32

Who is your play for?

Does your play have something new to say?

Should you know which theatre you are writing for?

Should you limit the size of your cast?

What if you can't write what you want?

Preparations 37

Should you plan your play before you start writing?

How much should you know about your characters?

Where do you find your characters' voices?

Can you learn to write dialogue?

A word of warning

PART TWO
GETTING TO THE END

- Keep your head 47
- Keep on keeping on 48
- Getting stuck 49
- Getting stuck in 49
- Some questions 51
 - How much exposition do you need at the start?
 - Do you have an inciting incident?
 - Do your characters travel on a 'journey abroad'?
 - Are your characters 'coming across'?
- Some vital elements 56
 - Cause and effect
 - Gaps between scenes
 - The first-act climax
 - Complication
 - Escalation
 - The second-act climax
 - Crisis
 - Climax
 - Resolution
- The first draft 62
 - Questions to ask yourself
 - The story
 - The characters
 - The dialogue
- The second draft 70
- The third draft 72
- What next? 75

PART THREE
GETTING IT ON

- Sending out your play 79
 - When?
 - How?
 - Where?
 - Commercial managements

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe	
Literary agencies	
You're on!	84
Getting an agent	85
Getting a publisher	87
Production team	88
Choosing a director	
Choosing a designer	
Choosing the actors	
Publicity	92
Titles	
Leaflet copy	
Programme notes	
Interviews	
Rehearsals	96
First day	
First week	
After the first week	
Final rehearsals	
Performances	102
First preview	
Second preview	
Press night (and reviews)	
The run	
The end of the run	
Your play's future	107
Your future	108
Afterword	111
Appendixes	115
Useful resources	
Key theatres for new writing	
Regional organisations that support playwrights	
Literary agents	
Play publishers	

INTRODUCTION

The Story Only You Know

What is the difference between a writer with a play on stage and a writer who never sees their work produced? Is it talent? Well, perhaps; although I'm sure you have seen plays in which the writer displays no discernible talent whatsoever. Is it luck? Maybe; though I still prefer to believe the theory that you make your own luck. No, the biggest difference between the writer who is produced and goes on to be successful, and the one who isn't, is that they actually *got to the end*. However many hours you devote to the understanding of dramatic structure, however many seminars you attend by story gurus, however accomplished as a playwright you become and however many plays of your own you actually get to see on the stage, the hardest part of writing is actually *getting to the end*.

Throughout most of my career I have only finished plays because I have been frightened by deadlines: seeing the posters being displayed or the production dates listed in theatre brochures, being pressurised by directors, or investing my own money and needing it back. I've always had huge difficulty in writing plays in the abstract sense, without a support network or a clear destination for the end product in my mind. It's no coincidence that many of our most successful and prolific playwrights ran or run their own companies, or have produced and invested in their own work (Shakespeare, Noël Coward, Alan Ayckbourn, John Godber to name just a few).

As someone once said, there is nothing like the fear of imminent execution for concentrating the mind. Left to their own devices, most writers will prevaricate as long as possible and, when they do actually start writing, will delay the point where they show the play to others – the 'Day of Judgement', if you like – as long as possible. How many times have you spent months rewriting the first twenty pages of your work, despite knowing in your heart of hearts that until you reach

INTRODUCTION

the end you will never know whether those first twenty pages matter or are merely the backstory to the main event? How many plays have you begun and then abandoned halfway through? How many times has a good idea drowned in the sea of your self-doubt? And how many times has jealousy eaten you up when you have seen others succeed with a story that you wanted to tell two years before but didn't quite manage to? Well, now say to yourself out loud these words: 'Never again.'

I am going to get you to write that play and no excuses will be accepted. You work full time, you have children to bring up. Tough. If you want it enough, you will find the time and space, and this book will help you. It will take you from the genesis of your idea through to the final production of your play. From deciding whether your idea is worth pursuing to spotting which producer to send your script to, or which director might be the right one to direct your work. I will try and give you ideas, spur you on, ask you the right questions at relevant points, but above all else I will try to *get you to the end* and to *tell the story only you know*.

*

The story only you know is the story that *you* and *only you* could write in this way. It is a story with an emotional landscape that is yours and only yours. It is the story that will not go away and burns inside you. It is a story that you have to tell – not because you think it would make a good part for a particular actor, or sell well in the West End (though that's an obvious bonus) – but because you have to get the damned thing out. It is the story about which you can offer *insight*, not just *opinion*.

There is a crucial difference between the two. Most of us have an opinion on many things; let's say America, its people and its politics, but without spending time in the country we cannot offer insight. No newspaper worth its salt would dream of having a foreign correspondent living outside the country they are meant to be reporting from. Of course that doesn't mean that in order to write about a murderer you

INTRODUCTION

need to take to the streets and hack someone to pieces, but it does mean that you have to believe you can understand this person, get inside their heads and, crucially, not simply judge them from the outset. Words like 'bad', 'mad', 'evil' or 'wicked' are of little use to the playwright, since they imply a one-dimensional view of life. It is your job to find the good in the evil and of course the evil in the good.

So before embarking on the long, difficult and often tortuous journey of writing a play ask yourself the fundamental question: 'Do I really know about this subject, these people, this world?' That doesn't mean you have to have met your characters in the flesh or write autobiographically (though the old adage that we write best about that which we know still holds true), but it does mean that plays cannot be written at arm's length. You will have to roll up your sleeves and get stuck in, because your unique way of seeing the world is what the audience craves. However strong your craftsmanship, however deep your understanding of dramatic structure or careful your research or profound your intellect, all of it will count for nothing if your work is inauthentic. An audience wants to hear *your voice*, they want to see your vision of the world, and they want *the story only you know*.

This demand often frightens people. Inside their heads a little voice cries out: 'How can my view of the world, how can my ideas, how can my feelings be of interest to others?' Well, if you are honest, if you tell it like *you* see it (not as you think the audience wants to see it), then you will be of interest to others. But if you fake it, if you lie to yourself, if you mire yourself in endless plot twists and obfuscation, their attention will soon drift away. Another voice that often pops into the writer's mind at the outset of writing is the one that screams: 'I will never be as good a writer as Ibsen or Miller! How can my plays stand up alongside those by Churchill or Stoppard?' To this I would say two things. Firstly, don't forget they were once starting out just like you, and they too had to make the leap of faith in themselves that I am asking you to make; and secondly, for every person who thinks Harold Pinter is a theatrical genius, there will be another who can't bear his 'obscure' work and is waiting to see a play by someone just

INTRODUCTION

like you. Great writers didn't beam down from another planet. They are living, breathing people from our world, who had the willpower and the talent to tell their stories.

PART ONE

Getting Started

Storytelling

The good storyteller

Think about the people you know. Think about the characters in your life that command the most attention, the ones who garner the most laughs when they tell a story. Are they the cleverest people you know? The most highly educated? The most articulate? Perhaps, but more likely they are the ones who are simply the best storytellers, whose stories you believe because they have the hot stink of authenticity.

But why do they have this authenticity? I believe it's because the person doing the telling dares to be himself or herself. This seldom involves self-glorification (except by default because they have entertained others); often the stories told by good storytellers will be *against* themselves. The time they ended up drunk with X, bought a car with no engine from Y, fell in love foolishly with Z. No one wants to hear tales of extraordinary success – unless it was achieved against all odds and with a considerable price paid along the way. Far more appealing to an audience is when the storyteller has the confidence to reveal his or her failings. In doing so, they square with us, they become one of us, they tell us that our vulnerability is shared by them, they speak universally, they confirm we are part of a society, and they make us feel less isolated as human beings.

Releasing the story only you know

Many writers start out writing highly autobiographical plays. So perhaps you should begin by looking at what is closest to you. Look at the stories in your everyday life. Think about the myths handed down through your family. The stories you remember most clearly from your school days. Could you

take the kernel of them and expand it into a play? Perhaps there is a full story there already? Are there missing pieces to the tales that you could fill in to create a play? Is there a character from your past who fascinates you, whose voice you can hear clearly and around whom you could construct a story? Do you have regrets about things you did or didn't do that you wish to examine? Do you sometimes fantasise about leaving your lover? Taking a lover? Giving up your job? How your life would be now had you made a different decision at a crucial crossroads? All of these things may inspire a play.

However, this approach may be too directly autobiographical for some: you may find yourself unable to free yourself from the 'vérité' of your actual life. After all, you must never let the facts get in the way of a good story. If this is the case then you may find the following exercise useful. It is an exercise designed to release a very personal story in a very simple way. But before we look at it we need to define some terms so that when we use them later on they mean the same thing to each of us.

Definitions

CHARACTER *Decision under pressure.* Characters are not what they say they are, but what they *do*, and what they do is prompted by the decisions the narrative and the other characters force them to make. For example, Iago in *Othello* says he's honest; what he does is the exact opposite. Character only emerges through action, and action is decision under pressure.

INNER CONFLICT *Conflict between the person and themselves.* For example, Lear wants to accept what Cordelia says at the beginning of *King Lear* but is too insecure to do so. Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* wants to stop selling but doesn't believe he has achieved enough.

INTER-PERSONAL CONFLICT *Conflict between people and others.* For example, Romeo and Juliet and their parents; Lear and his daughters; Willy Loman and his sons; Shirley Valentine and her (offstage) husband in Willy Russell's play.

DEFINITIONS

EXTRA-PERSONAL CONFLICT *Conflict between people and their world.* For example, a woman in a patriarchal society; a Muslim in an Islamophobic country; Willy Loman and the American Dream.

INCITING INCIDENT *The moment without which the story would not exist. It is often something that destabilises the protagonist and compels them to go into action. It should be at least in part generated by the inner conflict of the protagonist.* For example, Lear banishes Cordelia because she refuses to tell him what he wants to hear, but also because his character will not allow him to accept her public behaviour. Shirley Valentine accepts the invitation from her friend to go on holiday to Greece, but deep down has doubts about whether it's the right thing to do, which affects her behaviour.

SCENE *A unit of action in which something changes.*

ACT CLIMAX *A major change, shift or reversal, the sum total of the scenes that precede it (nothing to do with intervals or curtains coming down!).* For example, C.S. Lewis in William Nicholson's *Shadowlands* acknowledges that he is in love with someone, having always denied he needs love.

CRISIS *A moment of decision forced upon the protagonist by the narrative.* It should not be an easy choice and whichever decision they make should have disadvantages as well as advantages. For example, Nora leaving Torvald in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. She may have found her voice, escaped her unhappy domestic circumstances, but she has also given up her safe life for an unknown one as a single woman in a society not tolerant of such behaviour. It is by no means an easy choice, nor risk-free.

CLIMAX *What happens as a result of the decision taken in the crisis, and a logical outcome of the train of events set in motion by the inciting incident.* For example, Lear banished Cordelia; result: he effectively kills her. Shirley Valentine went on holiday without her husband; result: she is forced to decide between staying in Greece and risk losing him, or going back home and forfeiting all she has gained.

RESOLUTION *When the deeper meaning of the story becomes apparent.* Even though, as Samuel Goldwyn famously said, ‘Pictures are for entertainment, messages should be delivered by Western Union’, the resolution is where the writer’s underlying meaning is most clearly heard. The resolution is the last moment that the audience experience and a strong part of what they take away with them from the story. For example, in *Shadowlands*, C.S. Lewis preaches a sermon to his congregation in which he flatly contradicts what he said to them at the beginning of the story, accepting that even though the only woman he has ever loved has died, it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Shirley Valentine’s husband decides to come to Greece and see his wife on *her* terms.

Definitions out the way, let’s return to our exercise:

Character and inner conflict

- 1 Try and recall a situation in your life – it could be in the distant past or within the last hour – when you did or said something you didn’t mean to. Not because of a slip of the tongue or ignorance or because anyone else compelled you to, but because of your character (you!) *acting under pressure*. You may have wanted to ask a girl or guy out but didn’t. You may have wanted to apologise to someone but didn’t. You may have bullied someone when really you meant to be tender.
- 2 Now ask yourself a deeper question. What was really going on there? Why did I do what I did? The answer to this question cannot be ‘Because they made me do it’ or ‘Because my father kicked the cat when I was twelve’ (though he may well have done and we will return to this later). I want you to find the answer that is ultimately your nature, or your nature which, at that time, was acting under pressure.
- 3 I want you to boil the incident down to two very specific things: your *goal* (what you wanted to do) and the *obstacle* (what stopped you from doing it that was nobody’s fault except your own). For example, the goal:

asking the girl out; the obstacle: your fear of rejection. Of course there are many other reasons you could come up with for why you failed to achieve your goal: 'I didn't feel worthy of her', 'I was too proud to do the asking', 'I was worried about the financial cost', 'I didn't know where to take her' . . . But what you *must* do is come up with the *single* answer that was absolutely true of you at that moment.

Often when I've worked through this exercise in a classroom situation, students feel very exposed and blush when I press them for the real reason they failed to achieve their goal. When we do arrive at the answer, they feel ashamed, as if I have revealed them to be some sort of emotional inadequate. Often they will say, 'But I'm not normally like that' or 'It never happened again' (even if that's not the case and, on closer examination, they repeat this behaviour in many different areas of their lives).

But what is always most fascinating is when I ask the rest of the class if they have ever done the same thing, and made the same 'error' under pressure. Invariably, every hand in the room goes up. Who amongst us has not experienced failing to ask someone out because of the fear of rejection? Answer: no one. Some of us may have spent a lifetime doing it – like a character from one of Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* – or some of us may have only done it once with massive consequences. But by being specific, by revealing a truth about him or herself, the playwright will have tapped into a universal truth. They felt they were revealing some terrible secret about their inner psyche when in fact they were holding a mirror up to the rest of the group, their audience. They dared to be themselves. Thus, they have sown the seeds of a story and, more importantly, created a character with universal appeal. Yet we know nothing of this character aside from his goal and the obstacle which prevented them from following it through. How can this be? The answer lies in character and the nature of character in drama.

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