

CRAFTING YOUR PLAY
By Steve Burch

copyright sdburch 1994, 2006

Contents:

Illustration

A Playwright's Glossary

1. Nature of Drama
2. Drama is Action
3. What Are the Stakes?
4. Exposition
5. Language
6. Building a Story
7. Stereotypes
8. Your Story
9. Selected Readings (Steve's List)

THE NATURE OF DRAMA

“Define it as the passion to create, which is all we know of God.”

Tennessee Williams

“When I gave up digging ditches and began writing plays, I merely traded one form of hard labor for another.”

Sean O’Casey

“The play’s the thing....”

William Shakespeare

* * *

Playwriting is a unique form of story-telling. In fact, it doesn’t *tell* a story, it *shows* it. Unlike fiction which depends on a structured narrative form, drama’s structure is geared to viscerally received visuals and swiftly heard dialogue which frame a series of information/ideas that can be absorbed in a short period of time.

When you sit down and read a book, you can take as much time as you have to receive the information. You can put the book down, reflect on what you’ve read, look up words that are unfamiliar, re-read passages for their content or the beauty of the language. In short, it’s a leisurely process (no matter how much you’re cramming to read for a course). Because of its leisurely process, the traditional narrative form of story-telling can utilize extensive background material. It can use specific detailed descriptions - of character, setting, time - and in those descriptions, it has a point of view. Whether it’s being told in the first-person, second-person, or even the omnipotent third-person, the reader is always aware that someone, be it the author or one of the characters, is telling us the story and telling it from their point of view. Finally, this form of story-telling is always done in the past tense - even when present tense verbs are used, the story has already happened and we are being told it.

Drama usually has no point of view (excepting those that use Narrators to guide the audience, e.g., *Our Town*, *The Glass Menagerie*, etc.). Generally speaking, all the audience has to guide them are the characters. There is no description of events from a point of view, except that of the characters. What they say must bear upon their circumstances, their objectives, and the conflicts they encounter to those objectives. We are engaged primarily by their struggle, be it comedic, tragic, or otherwise.

A drama never takes place in the past tense. *Never*. It must *always* occur (or seem to) as the audience is watching it. There is no way one can leisurely put it down and go back over it. As we are watching it happen in front of us, we cannot reflect and deepen our response to it. If we stop, it doesn't and we're momentarily lost.

The essence of drama is dramatic action. By action, I do not mean physical activity. But a character's immediate and passionate intent. Their *objective* in a scene. Passionate because they must have their objective or it is perceived (by them and/or us) that they will suffer severe consequences. And in drama, the action must be immediate for we (the audience) need to be engaged quickly. An excellent example is provided in the opening fourteen lines of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

Elsinore

A platform before the castle. FRANCISCO at his post. Enter to him BARNARDO.

BARNARDO: Who's there?
FRANCISCO: Nay, answer me; stand, and unfold yourself.
BARNARDO: Long live the king!
FRANCISCO: Barnardo?
BARNARDO: He.
FRANCISCO: You come most carefully upon your hour.
BARNARDO: 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed Francisco.
FRANCISCO: For this relief much thanks; 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.
BARNARDO: Have you had quiet guard?
FRANCISCO: Not a mouse stirring.

BARNARDO: Well, good night.
If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.
FRANCISCO: I think I hear them. Stand ho! Who is there...

Before we even meet any of the major characters, before we even learn what any of the major conflicts are going to be, Shakespeare plunges us immediately into a scene of tension between two guards at their post. It is late at night and it is cold, both conditions being very visual and both conditions underscoring the fear and tension between the two men. In fourteen lines, we are being set up to receive a visitation from a ghost which will set the entire play in motion. But we are not told of this, through a narrative voice. We are shown. Where a novelist may take several paragraphs to describe the men and the conditions, Shakespeare achieves this in only the first three words! We watch as characters live in our present tense and react according to their objectives (in the case of Barnardo and Francisco, their objectives are the same: to get through the night without incident, from person or ghost; only until they recognize each other, each does not know whether the other's objective imperils their own safety).¹

Alright then, a play is not a novel. Nor is it a political position or an essay. What is it? Let's begin with a story centered around a conflict. How to define Conflict? In dramatic terms, a Conflict (either major or minor) can be described as the result of a character's objective (their specific goal at that particular moment in the play-a goal that must be attained by them for a particular and compelling reason) that is opposed by an obstacle and presented in a visual form, frequently and most strongly through a visual metaphor. The strongest conflicts are when two or more characters in the play or even in

¹William Packard. *The Art of the Playwright: Creating the Magic of Theatre*. New York. Paragon House. 1987. 9-10.

a single scene have opposing objectives, though a character can be compellingly in opposition with themselves.

This begins to describe a play. To present it as a formula, **Drama = conflict.**
Conflict=opposing objectives (actions), visually presented in the present tense.
And, most importantly, a drama is also the imparting of information, speedily, that can be absorbed in a single sitting by an audience that won't have the time to reflect and build on that information during the performance.

DRAMA IS ACTION

“The trouble was...my thoughts...had become very slow...I couldn’t think at all...I couldn’t...get...my thoughts...together...uuuhh...I could ...never quite get it...together.”

from *The Caretaker*
by Harold Pinter

“Suite the action to the word, and the word to the action.”

from *Hamlet*
by William Shakespeare

* * *

Frequently, the essential word for playwrights, directors, and actors - **action** - is misunderstood as activity, even furious activity. It is not. A dramatic action is an active objective but it needn’t be accompanied by an activity. In Pinter’s classic, quoted above, Aston describes how he was forcibly given electric shock treatment in a hospital. He cannot find the words, the phrasing to describe the effect, but his effort, even though accompanied by a complete physical stillness as he remains seated, is so active that we, the audience, sit in total silence, completely absorbed by his objective.

Action is what a character - any character - must have at that moment. It is not an objective for tomorrow or even later on in the day. It is not an objective that, if failed to reach, can be shrugged off. It must be immediate and it must be essential to that character. In Albee’s *Zoo Story*, Jerry has two objectives: he must goad Peter into taking up Jerry’s knife and he (Jerry) must die. If he fails in the first action, he will also fail in the second. If there was a single moment when we felt that if the first failed, and Jerry would continue walking until he found someone else, then we would lose all compulsion to watch this particular struggle with Peter. It wouldn’t matter. Jerry may be interesting because of his second action, but Peter isn’t. It must be Peter who does it.

Why it must be Peter, Albee doesn't really answer. Except that we feel that Jerry may lose his nerve or possibly find another form of suicide, one that will have no effect on any other person. If the first happens, he will be trapped in a life of excruciating misery. If the second happens, who will have known about him? About his pain?

Since Jerry's action propels the play and it is his action that we are tracking throughout (even though we are in the dark about it until the end), Jerry is the play's **protagonist**. The play's action (about a suicidal man who forces a stranger to kill him) is Jerry's. Peter, then, is our **antagonist**. He's the antagonist because his action (to remain undisturbed) threatens Jerry's. Peter's objective is in direct contrast to Jerry's and Jerry must overcome Peter's action to attain his own. The more Peter resists Jerry, the greater the struggle for Jerry and the more he has to lose. This is the play's **conflict**.

It is any play's conflict. Two opposing objectives clashing at a given moment. Two wants (needs) in opposition. And we sit and watch, fascinated, until the outcome gives us the victor.

We don't need to root for the protagonist. Sometimes the protagonist is mistakenly called the play's hero. In certain stories, that may be true but it is not a rule. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the protagonist is Iago, not Othello (who ultimately is Iago's victim). It is his action (to destroy Othello) that we track throughout. Protagonists are the characters whose action drives the play. Hedda Gabler, Macheath, Willy Loman, Tartuffe, Blanche Dubois, and Medea are not heroes. We don't cheer them on their paths of destruction, crime, and mental breakdown. But their needs, their wants, their immediate goals mark them as the owners of their stories.

Nor does the antagonist need to be personified. There is no character who opposes Hedda Gabler with the force she possesses. But society is her antagonist. Mother Courages' antagonist is the Thirty Years' War. Saint Joan's is superstition, intolerance, and The Church. The forces of antagonism can be a storm or an injury or a state of being (watch Charlie Chaplin versus extreme hunger on film in *The Gold Rush*). Whatever the antagonist to the protagonist's action, it must, at least, threaten to be the equal if not the stronger of the two. Then there is a struggle worthy of our attention.

Remember: character is action

every character is defined by their action, their objective

WHAT ARE THE STAKES?

“All art is the human heart in conflict with itself.”

William Faulkner

“When I think I’ve raised the stakes high enough, then I’ll do another draft just to see if I can raise them any higher.”

Patrick Meyers

* * * *

Alright, Drama is action. Character is action. And Conflict is made up of an obstacle to the action, whether in the form of an opposing objective or an outside force, whether in the form of another character or of an opposition within the protagonist. But are the objectives crucial enough?

In drama, the action must happen Now. The objective must be attained Now. It cannot be put off until later. If so, then why isn't it? Essentially, we're all procrastinators and if it doesn't have to be done now, we're usually more than willing to face up to it when he have to. But if a character does that on stage, then what compels us to watch them? Why should we care, especially if their objective isn't so important as to break through the human procrastination? The answer is - we don't and won't. It won't matter at all to us except as a source of irritation that we've expended time and money to see a play in which the objective isn't vital. Because if it doesn't matter to the characters on stage, it won't matter to us. And the playwright has failed to engage us.

Whatever Jerry's motivation in Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*, it is absolutely vital for him to break through to Peter on the bench. So we watch and, even if we resist, we care about what happens. Hamlet must avenge his father, only he has multiple obstacles to overcome first. But when they are overcome, then he can achieve his goal. If it wasn't

of the utmost importance to him, then we'd pick up our coats at the intermission and grumble about wasting our time. It is of the greatest import that Amanda and Elyot in Noel Coward's *Private Lives* get their new spouses to agree to immediately leave the hotel.

These objectives, whether comic, tragic, or dramatic achieve their importance through the perceived consequences if they are not met. If Jerry doesn't break through to Peter, if Hamlet doesn't avenge his father, if Amanda doesn't get Victor out of the hotel - these will produce consequences that our protagonists cannot bear.

All great and good plays are built around the writer asking of the characters' objectives - what are the stakes? And are they high enough? Can they get higher? In Oscar Wilde's classic *The Importance of Being Earnest*, John Worthing's carefully orchestrated world of duplicity and secret identity is about to implode. His entire existence stands to crumble if he's found out. Each act builds on his perception of the consequences to this deception to his fiancée, his ward, and his prospective in-laws. The comedy may be frivolous in the extreme but there are real stakes involved for the protagonist.

Stakes can also change during the play. Look how beautifully Sophocles orchestrates the change in *Oedipus the King*. The stakes, at first, are the health of the kingdom and Oedipus' sense of his own importance, his sense of being his city's salvation. As he progresses into the truth, his sense of self-importance changes to his sense of self-worth which then changes to simply his sense of identity. (Obviously, this is one interpretation of one level of a multi-level classic.)

So how do we raise the stakes? What kinds of questions should we be asking ourselves? Let me try to give a current example. Look at the film *Speed*. It starts with a very simple premise: a bomb is wired to a city bus; when the bus hits 50mph, the bomb is turned on; when the bus falls below 50mph, then the bomb is triggered and explodes. Nothing to shake up the intellect maybe, but it's a serviceable idea. Now, how to raise the stakes on this. First, who is on the bus? If, say, the only person is the bus driver, then we only have that one person to potentially care about. So, let's fill the bus. More potential victims. Higher stakes. When does this take place? Early in the morning? Late at night? No- during rush hour. Now anybody with experience driving in any large city during rush hour will tell you that it is impossible to get a vehicle up to 50mph then. Should, however, a miracle occur and one does in fact get their vehicle to that speed, it will not, cannot possibly last for more than 30 seconds before other traffic, traffic lights, road construction, etc. all contribute singly or together to slow you down to the normal rush hour crawl. So, we now have many lives at risk and at an hour when, once the bomb is set, every second is going to agonizingly count as we wait and hold our breaths for the inevitable to happen. A simple premise has gone through a process of stakes raising and the end result is an audience biting its nails and laughing with exhilaration.

Raising the stakes, upping the ante - poker terms that aptly describe the process of questioning the situations we've put our characters in and increasing the tension and the audience involvement in our stories. The process starts with our asking two questions of our main characters' actions:

1. what will they **gain** once they've attained their objective
2. what will they **lose** if they fail to gain their objective

(If the answer to #2 is only the failure to gain the objective, then you'd better make sure that #1 is so strong *and* important *and* necessary that the failure to achieve it will be a felt loss-indeed, a tragedy even.) Once those two questions have been asked, then begin to look at the obstacles to the action. Are they strong enough to do the job of blocking the action? Are they at least equal to or even greater than the objectives? If the answer is no then the obstacles need to be more fully examined.

This a concept called the **Unity of Opposites**. In a nutshell, it goes like this: the stronger the objective, the stronger its obstacle should be. The stronger the obstacle, the greater the tension and the greater the doubt or fear that the objective will not be attained. In a melodrama, if the obstacle is another character, they and their objective need to truly threaten the protagonist's action with the possibility of failure. Heroes need monsters or monstrous villains to overcome or their victory is essentially hollow. Sherlock Holmes needs Professor Moriarty, Saint George needs the Dragon, John Worthing needs Lady Bracknell. But it's not just for melodrama or comedy. Jerry needs Peter, Oedipus needs first the Sphinx and then Fate (and himself), Hamlet needs Claudius (and, again, himself). The possibility of losing the objective because of the obstacle is one of the ways (and perhaps the strongest) of raising the stakes.

EXPOSITION

Exposition: the act of exposing, revealing, showing. Revealing what? In storytelling, what is revealed is the information the audience (reader) needs to possess in order to fully understand and grasp what the subsequent events of the play will signify.

How much the audience needs to know has been a source of contention among writers, especially in this century. There was a time when it was thought that we needed to know practically everything and at the outset, so we could then settle back and watch the story unfold with all its cards laid out before us. It was the writer's duty to give out all that information and early so that we could then proceed with the various complications that the story contained.

Up until the twentieth century, the classic method of exposition was to open the play with minor characters (servants, soldiers, etc.) talking about the major characters, giving us all we would need to know before these major characters made their initial appearance. Then, they could enter and proceed right into the storyline. No less a great writer than Ibsen does this in two of his greatest plays, *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Wild Duck*. Even Shakespeare, in *King Lear*, has three major supporting characters (Kent, Gloucester, Edmund) begin the play by talking about Lear. It's a time honored way of dealing with the dispensing of essential information.

This is not to say that all information would be dispensed then. In the hands of a good writer, only enough would be told to get the story started and on its feet. Because the problem with exposition is that it's all information that has already happened and plays can only exist in the present, not the past. We need to see what happens, not be told

what has previously happened. Whenever we leave the present tense for the past, we leave the play completely. The action stops dead and nothing less than stasis sets in.

Yet we need to know enough to get the play and what is happening. This is and always has been a major problem for any and all writers. Sometimes Shakespeare integrates his exposition well. In *Hamlet*, he plunges us right into the action with the castle guards and manages to give us some very necessary exposition at the same time. Similarly in *Macbeth*, we are immediately shown the witches and the set-up. In *The Tempest*, however, he stops the play cold in Act One, Scene Two, with an extremely long piece of exposition from Prospero, which, once given, is then dropped so he can get on with one of the greatest plays ever written. (Indeed, one can almost feel a massive irritation from Shakespeare that he needs to do this at all.)

Right from the beginnings of drama, the problem has been how to integrate the action and the information. How to make the information active and keep it in the present tense. But it was not easily solved. Even the best of writers would slip up and have characters telling each other something that they would already know or, at best, would understand without it being spelled out to them. The late James Agee, in one of his film criticisms, loved to relate his all-time favorite piece of unnecessary expository dialogue from the film, *Casablanca*, when Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) says to her husband Victor (Paul Henreid), “Victor, do not go to the underground meeting tonight.”

But how will we know what the characters already know so that we will know what is going on and what’s at stake?

Sometimes the answer can come from a visual source. In the very opening scene of Tennessee William’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley Kowalski enters the stage

carrying his bowling jacket and a red-stained package from the butcher shop. He bellows for Stella, who enters from the first-floor landing, and tosses the package of meat across the stage to her. She catches it. It is like the caveman bringing home the latest kill and we sense some of the crudeness and power that will be a major antagonistic force in the play.

Another way to present exposition is in the form of an immediate conflict, an argument, a furious denial or defense or assertion. In Moliere's *The Misanthrope*, the uncompromising Alceste argues fiercely with his friend Philinte, accusing him of hypocrisy for warmly embracing a man he hates. The argument ranges over several topics, including Alceste's love for the fickle Celimene. Why does he love her, asks Philinte, if he demands total honesty in all human relations? Thus, right at the outset, Moliere has defined the play's essential conflict of character, given us the play's theme, and provided us with enough background knowledge and all in the present tense of the play.

Another possible solution comes from crime fiction and mysteries. In a mystery, we don't know why something is happening. We only see what is going on. Frequently we don't even know who is doing the deed. Essentially, all exposition is kept from us. In a mystery, there is a character-sometimes a cop or a detective or even some innocent bystander-and that character becomes our substitute. They know as much as we do and together, we find out who and what and why. And all in the present tense. In fact, the major action, the objective, is the collection of exposition. In crime fiction, a story can unfold with an absolute minimum of exposition.

One of the monuments of world theatre, *Oedipus the King*, is structured as a whodunnit. It's a mystery play with Oedipus playing detective (the mystery of the former

king's murder). It's a lovely twist that in this classic the detective discovers that *he* did it! In modern drama, several writers have applied this technique in unusual ways. Athol Fugard's plays are all structured as mysteries, even though there is no crime in them. In plays as diverse as *The Blood Knot*, *A Lesson From Aloes*, and *Master Harold and the Boys*, they are structured around the stripping away of lies and duplicities (mysteries) so that the exposition is the action. Harold Pinter's plays derive much of their menace from the fact that his characters actively withhold information from both each other and the audience and in such plays as *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, and *No Man's Land*, we watch as characters play games with each other in order to decipher motive and find out what is happening, to get them to reveal their secrets so that they can gain mastery of them. Again, the mystery structure.

For these writers, the question "How much does the audience need to know" has been re-worded as "How little does the audience need to know". Of course, it's not a solution for all writers and all stories. One can alienate an audience by keeping them in the dark and many times the audience will be so alienated that they will tune out and not come back. Audiences do need to feel that they understand what is going on. Does this mean we need to spell everything out to them? Some writers will say yes, leave nothing ambiguous, explain everything so that you will know that what you want perceived in your play is gotten by the audience. Eugene O'Neill worked this way and he is, arguably, America's greatest playwright. August Wilson and Marsha Norman are continuing in this form. On the opposite end are such writers as David Mamet, Caryl Churchill, and Sam Shepard.

There is no one answer. It is the problem that will have to be solved with each and every play. What do they (the audience) need to know and how to get that information to them without sacrificing either the play's movement or the characters' believability.

LANGUAGE

Lady Bracknell: Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?
Canon Chausable: (somewhat indignantly) She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.
Lady Bracknell: It is obviously the same person.

Oscar Wilde

Detestable kite, thou liest.

William Shakespeare

Plays are interrupted silence.

Jean-Louis Barrault

* * *

Plays are constructed almost completely from *dialogue*. We do not have the arsenal of literary technique at our disposal. We cannot describe. We cannot change points of view. We cannot, from sentence to sentence, jump around in time or make stylistic shifts or cram our sentences with jumbles of words and word-pictures. Everything we need to do: display characterization, advance the plot, create successive obstacles, develop an emotional, intellectual, or comic conflict from its beginning to its resolution must be done through dialogue.

This is not to conflict with the idea that we must find or create visual metaphors for the situations, characters, or moments. But, ultimately, all the visuals we can come up with won't tell our story, only abet it. We can only tell it through dialogue.

So what does this mean? First, that it is spoken, not read. That means we have two limitations right from the start: what can fit in an actor's mouth and what can be heard and absorbed in an audience's ear. The beautiful convoluted sentences of Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Jane Austen are not meant to

be listened to, nor can they easily be spoken. Sentences of more than one subordinate clause create problems for today's actors and audiences. In plays, we need to hear sentences that are direct and short.

In early theatre, when audiences had nothing to hold them to their seats but the spoken word, language could be exalted and musical. As theatres went indoors and artificial lighting and special effects grew, so language declined. It became less important because it had less to do. Whole worlds and eras could be constructed out of technical means and language became prose and prosaic. But language has never diminished in its primary function.

There are many ways of breaking down dialogue. There is *parallel dialogue*, where two sets of dialogue are proceeding on-stage at the same time, parallel to each other (as when a character has more than one action in a single moment). Then there is *cross dialogue*, where two levels of dialogue intercut one another, sometimes in mid-sentence (as when a character shifts from action to another). There is the *monologue*, ostensibly a character's inner thoughts but in reality, a dialogue with themselves (and in many cases, especially Shakespeare, with the audience as well, fourth wall be damned).

The choice of words is of utmost importance. Obviously. If we have fewer literary tricks at our disposal, we need to make the strongest use of what we have. One of our tricks (and we have it greater than any other form of writing) is *onomatopoeia*: the use of words whose sound suggests the sense. It works through its sound so it works by being heard. My personal favorite is the Shakespeare I've quoted above, from *King Lear*. Say it aloud. Hear the sounds the T's and D's make? Especially as they come into contact with the S's? It's a spitting sound. What does spitting suggest, especially to both actor and

audience? Contempt. Dripping, loathing contempt. The actor almost doesn't have to play it, we hear it, we immediately understand, in full, this particular moment between Lear and his daughter, Goneril. And all through the use of sound.

Juxtaposed meanings are also of great use. In the Wilde quote, from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, note the wonderfully comic use he makes from juxtaposing the words "repellent aspect" with "cultivated...ladies...picture of respectability...the same".

Words can also hide the action of a character. Sub-text is a character's action or feeling, beneath the words, which are expressing something different. Anton Chekhov perfected this use, in *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Yet while the characters may not be truthful about their actions to each other, we are very clear about what they are. In *Cherry Orchard*, two characters who love each other are saying good-bye when all they really want is to confess their love and stay together. Yet they cannot make this admission to each other and their dialogue, concerning the packing of her things, is loaded with meaning beneath the words.

Words today seem to have less power than they once did. Everywhere we go, we hear that today's audiences are visually oriented, that words just lack the force they once possessed. We'll even hear that this is why theatre has lost much of its audience to film and this may be correct. But there's one area that challenges this concept. And that's **Profanity**. We hear it all the time on the screen. And it's sometimes effective, when character and situation come together. But profanity on the screen is different than profanity on the stage. Heard live, profanity can still shock and upset people. As a culture, we have removed power from many words, but not from profanity (which some will

automatically call obscene). When Mamet's *American Buffalo* first played in New York, the jaded, sophisticated audience was shocked by the repeated use of the word *fuck*; it was all people were talking about during the intermission. In Pinter's *No Man's Land*, three fourths of the play was in elegant, precise, poetic dialogue. Suddenly, one of the attendants called another character a "*cunt*", and the effect was like the crack of a rifle shot. We could feel the effect rippling through the audience. It disturbed.

To us writers, this may seem like wonderful news. Words still have power! And their live communication, in the theatre, still beats out the movie screen and television. But some words don't just merely shock. Some words hurt. So, do we avoid them? No. Not if they are relevant to the character or the story. Not if they belong in our play. All words need to be adjudged. All words need to be thought out and chosen because they are the best and strongest words for our play. Because they can be spoken and heard clearly and understood. Because each moment, comic or dramatic, is interdependent on its predecessor and each moment only lives within its words. Because they are all we have and the story must be told.

BUILDING A STORY

“Give the audience what they want, but not the way they expect it.”

William Goldman

Is it a story? Or is it only a sketch? By the end of the 19th century and into the 20th, many vaudeville, burlesque, and music halls were presenting one-act plays, along with sketches. Their audiences enjoyed short stories upon the stage and the proprietors found that drama was just at home there as comedy. And the lines of distinction blurred. A sketch, after all, presents us with characters, a set-up, an obstacle, and a resolution in the form of a climactic moment. Doesn't it? Well, isn't this the definition of a play?

Well, yes. Up to a point. But a sketch both begins and ends here. Set-up, then payoff. Characters generally don't exist outside of the storyline. And a sketch doesn't generally go very deep into the story or develop the obstacles. Because of this, the payoff rarely resonates. A skilled writer will put together a decent payoff, one of laughter or thrills, an O. Henry-like reversal. But it won't stick in the mind. Because it's primarily a set-up/payoff only. There's no room for the audience to take anything with them.

A Play, however, will present characters who will develop, reveal, change, contradict; who will have more than one side to them. Their actions, their objectives will compound, modify, change completely, or grow in complexity. Characters aren't single-sided and they control the story, not vice versa. Because a play is a story. And a story is a journey.

Let's begin, then, with this definition:

Story: one or more actions; more than a single obstacle for each action; several payoffs (minor and major) leading to one exceptional climax. This is the journey, from point A to point B, for every play.

Is this written in stone? Of course not. Are there exceptions? You betcha. But probably not many. A character can have one over-arching objective in the story: Jerry wants the bench, say. But he will have several smaller objectives as, moment to moment, Peter keeps throwing up blockades to the objective (e.g., break down Peter's suspicions; win Peter's laughter; tickle Peter's body; strip Peter of his sense of manhood, etc.). These shifts have the effect of developing Jerry's objective, of forcing him on his journey and taking us with him. Or look at Amanda. Her initial objective: to forget Elyot and wallow in love, must undergo a severe re-thinking. She will hold to the second objective but now it's with Elyot, not Victor. She has to re-think and reverse one of her objectives.

With any good character, there will be changes. No one exists just for one action and as characters adapt, so must the story containing them. In Sean O'Casey's modern classic, *Bedtime Story*, John Jo Mulligan, a rigid, self-denying Catholic, begins by trying furiously to get the hooker, Angela Nightengale, out of his apartment before his roommate comes in. His over-arching objective is to throw up a wall of denial regarding his succumbing to sexual arousal. But as he's busy throwing up that wall, Angela is stealing him blind, and both his roommate and his landlady come to believe that he's lost his sanity and they fear for their physical safety. The objectives of Angela, Dan Halibut, and Miss Mossie all contribute to Mulligan's shift in objectives. As they shift, the story deepens (and gets progressively funnier). A hypocritical man of religion trying to sneak the prostitute out of his room late at night is certainly the stuff for a vaudeville sketch.

But O'Casey doesn't stay on that single track and an obvious sketch becomes a terrifically funny play.

So then, we've a journey. Propelled by objectives that may change and adapt as the obstacles increase and intensify. The set-up, the exposition and the given circumstances, are what sets the story in motion. Stakes need to begin high; increase them as the objectives develop. Allow the characters room to breathe; they'll begin to dictate the action, not the other way around. And the climax, the payoff, will have increased in intensity, either comic or dramatic, and will satisfy the journey.

STEREOTYPES

“It follows that we can only represent [people] either as better than they actually are, or worse, or exactly as they are . . .”

Poetics, Aristotle

“A clown isn’t funny in the moonlight.”

Lon Chaney

* * *

It’s been argued that the television revolution has changed our relationship to the story. Where once, a story required a certain amount of latitude to be told, yet now we possess much greater information and can process material at a faster rate. Where once we depended upon a greater accumulation of detail to understand a character’s motivation, now we usually pass over all that with impatience. Just get the story told, we don’t need everything spelled out for us the way stories used to be told. We’re more sophisticated today.

Well, yes, to a degree. Certainly we do not need the plodding details of a character’s background to understand their actions. Stories and plays used to be told that way. An author would lay out every tiny detail so that we could gain some insight into the character. Frequently, a religious, philosophical, or psychological theory of behavior would govern the writer’s sense of characterization (i.e., O’Neill’s Freudianism or Shaw’s Fabianian or Brecht’s Marxism or Greene’s Catholicism). If the insights have depth, the play may still have a charge for us. If not, it may seem dated and turgid. But the style is no longer valid.

But what has replaced this? Through the overwhelming influence of the television advertisement and the proliferation of seductive imagery in music videos, characterization

has been replaced with a dramatic and visual shorthand. Characters are painted in broad brush strokes so we can instantly identify them. (Look at any commercial, any situation comedy, any action melodrama.) But that identification comes at a cost. Because that identification is made so that we can slot these characters and not spend any time away from the plot getting to know their quirks, their nuances. Yet a character's quirks are their humanity.

The moment we accept caricature in place of character, shorthand in place of long-hand, we find ourselves relying on the most venal sin in the hack writer's arsenal: the stereotype. The greedy yuppie, the wimpy intellectual, the predatory female executive, and the fanatical Arab, all so prevalent on large and small screens, are not even one step removed from the miserly Jew, the man-hungry spinster, the cowardly black man, the nerdy gay male. Stereotypes are used to slot characters by type and the types used are those that mainstream society finds currently acceptable. Stereotypes are utilized by lazy minds and these images are received, often subliminally, by people who don't question what they are looking at, who are content with having their "buttons pushed" (i.e., their prejudices stroked and accepted).

Characters, at least those who are the main characters of your story, have a right to expect that their individuality will be respected by you. After all, at first, you are the only one who understands what makes them tick. Part of your job is to bring that to life for us. Part of your job is to guide us into these characters. Guide our empathy, our understanding. Sometimes, a stereotype can be used effectively to explode that stereotype. Perhaps the most famous example (and one that still makes some people uncomfortable-and who ever said they were supposed to be comfortable?) is the character

of Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The evil conniving Jew was a recognizable stereotype in Elizabethan drama (look at Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*). As Shylock enters, the audience immediately understands who he is and what he's about. That's the purpose of using a type. The shorthand of an audience's prejudices. Think what it must have been like to sit in that audience, all comfortable in their anti-Semitism, when Shylock/Shakespeare suddenly throws their bigotry right smack in their faces with the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech. Very cunningly has Shakespeare used a stereotype to lull an audience into a moment where he can pull the rug right out from under them and make them truly look at Shylock as a three-dimensional character with justified emotions. It doesn't deny his villainy but it does give him and his villainy some real depth. (Mark Twain pulls off a similar feat in his brilliant *Puddin'head Wilson*.)

If drama is action, and character is action, then how can we short-change one and not short-change the other? Frankly, we can't. Great characters, like real people, are propelled through their story by conflicting emotions, by contradictory acts, by a profusion of weaknesses and strengths. Hamlet, Amanda Winfield, Lady Bracknell, Medea, Oedipus, Stanley Kowalski, Willy Loman, Troy Maxson, Jerry, Elyot and Amanda, all have this complexity. It doesn't matter if it's comedy, tragedy, melodrama- every creator of these characters has respected their creations and allowed them their range and depth.

YOUR STORY

“Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant . . . The Truth
must dazzle gradually or every man be blind.”

Emily Dickenson

“The world of the story must be as small as the writer
can be God in it.”

Robert McKee

* * *

Now it's time to begin to tell your story. Or one of them, at any rate. So, where is it? How to find it? You know the tools you have: exposition; character; action; conflict; visuals; language; given circumstance; inciting incident; stakes; set-up and climax. Now, the story.

Stories can come from a variety of places: from your background (or a friend's or family member's); from your imagination; from your passions. They can be autobiographical. They can be completely fictional. A word of caution about either of these extremes. First, autobiography (or biography): don't get hung up in the facts of the event. The facts aren't theatrical, they're not compressed in scope or character or theme. By trying to stay with the facts, you'll lose sight of the truth of your story, which must remain malleable for you to shape.

A superb example is Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. In real life, his sister Rose was mentally ill. When he recreated her as Laura, he gave her a physical ailment and was freed from facts to be ruthless in his manipulation of the character, to change and refine the character through the process of rewrites, casting, and performance. Later in his life, Williams' beloved Rose underwent a lobotomy. Seething with rage against a medical establishment that would cut into the brain of a young woman,

Williams created a story about a young, idealistic doctor who has just taken over a local sanitarium and is offered an enormous sum of money for his institution on the proviso that he give the benefactor's niece a lobotomy (to shut her up). Adding his own experiences as an open homosexual in a society that cannot tolerate "deviant behavior", he wrote *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Yet another glorious example is O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness*. Here, determining to show everyone that he could write a successful, commercial play for Broadway, O'Neill went back to his youth in New London, Connecticut, the scene for his tragedy, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. What O'Neill then did was to rewrite his family into the family he wished he could have had. He gave himself the great question many writers use when starting out on their stories: **What If?** When he sat down to write *Long Day's Journey*, working more with the facts as he remembered them, he still fictionalized by telescoping the events of a year into a single day.

As for Fiction: don't rely so solely on your imagination that you lose sight of making your world believable. Audiences will always possess facts or experiences that are different than yours. Unless you have the time and/or resources to do research, stick with what you know or what you can easily find out about (through primary or secondary sources).

Stories can often begin with only a mood or a setting. What can fit in with that mood? What kind of characters? What is the time period? Stories can come from having a character and a goal. What can prevent the attaining of that goal? Can it be overcome easily? Or at all? J.M. Synge's *Riders To the Sea* came from just those beginnings.

Eugene O'Neill once claimed that all he needed were two men, a table, and a whiskey bottle on the table. From that he could produce a play.

Stories can start from a set-up: two people meet at a job interview and both are up for the same position. Follow them on their course to disappointment (at least one won't get the job) and satisfaction (provided one of them gets it). Stories can be born from a passion: women's rights, racism, war, poverty, crime, etc. may provide you with an emotional fuel that you want to share with your audience, may urge you to educate them on what you understand about your theme. Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* is a very special, very fine anti-war one-act play. And Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* is a brilliantly theatrical and passionately furious denunciation of a white racist society.

Don't be shy about what demands you may want to make on the physical resources of the theatre. Don't hold back on the number of characters you want to people your play with (provided each one has a specific function that cannot be done by someone else). Any topic, any setting, any style. But tell the story. Move us along with the Protagonist, let the conflicts require adjustments toward the goal and each adjustment raise the stakes a little further.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

Edward Albee	<i>The Zoo Story</i>
Aristotle,	<i>Poetics</i>
Baraka, Amiri	<i>Dutchman</i>
Barrault, Jean-Louis	<i>The Theatre of Jean-Louis Barrault</i>
Brecht, Bertolt	<i>Galileo</i> <i>Good Person of Szechuan</i> <i>Mother Courage</i>
Chekhov, Anton	<i>Uncle Vanya</i> <i>The Three Sisters</i> <i>The Cherry Orchard</i>
Churchill Caryl	<i>Cloud Nine</i>
Coward, Noel	<i>Private Lives</i>
Euripides	<i>Medea</i> <i>Hecuba</i>
Ibsen, Henrik	<i>Hedda Gabler</i>
Mamet, David	<i>American Buffalo</i>
Miller, Arthur	<i>Death of a Salesman</i>
Moliere	<i>The Misanthrope</i> <i>Tartuffe</i>
Norman, Marsha	<i>'Night Mother</i>
O'Neill, Eugene	<i>Ah, Wilderness</i> <i>Long Day's Journey Into Night</i>
Pinter, Harold	<i>No Man's Land</i> <i>The Caretaker</i>
Shakespeare, William	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> <i>The Tragedy of Hamlet</i> <i>The Tragedy of King Lear</i> <i>The Tragedy of Othello the Moor</i>
Shaw, Irwin	<i>Bury the Dead</i>
Sophocles	<i>Oedipus the King</i> <i>Antigone</i>
Synge, John M.	<i>Riders to the Sea</i>
Wilde, Oscar	<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>
Williams, Tennessee	<i>The Glass Menagerie</i> <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> <i>Suddenly, Last Summer</i> <i>Talk to Me Like the Rain</i>
Wilson, August	<i>Fences</i>