

Playwriting Wisdom/Tips Inspired by the teachings of playwright Walt McGough

I. Who is involved in creating a play?

First, a playwright writes a piece. If he or she finds a producer to produce the play, the producer will provide space, funding, and hire designers (set, props, sounds, lights, violence, projections, costumes, etc.), actors, and a director. But the final, and perhaps most important, element of the playmaking process is the *audience*. Without an audience to see and enjoy the play, the production is, well, a failure.

II. Action

Character development + Plot development + "Theatricality" = Action

Action is the exertion of will. In theatre, it is a person exerting will onstage. Plays are driven by action. All you need to create action in a play is:

- A character
- What he or she wants in the moment
- What he or she will do to get that want

A cool template to follow to create action is to develop a character, decide on something that he or she would *never ever ever in a million years* do, and then to write a play about the one thing that would make that character change his or her mind.

III. Character Development

Hungarian theorist and choreographer Rudolf von Laban defined characters by three aspects:

- Speed (is the character fast or slow?)
- Force (is the character strong or soft?)
- Directness (is the character direct or indirect?)

Some rules of thumb in writing characters are that characters may have (and should have) a great deal of subtext and soul inside that only the playwright knows. A character will never outright bear his or her soul unless he or she has a *serious* need to. Instead of having your character explain him or herself outright (that's boring!), let your characters be misunderstood! That's more fun to watch.

IV. Plot

A rule of thumb: The difference between story and plot is that *story* is everything relevant to the depicted event, whereas *plot* is the selective way that the playwright chooses to talk about the event in his or her play. A *story* about a breakup on Earth would need to start with the creation of the Earth because that is technically relevant to the breakup, whereas the plot can focus merely on the breakup itself.

Structured plays follow a specific plot arch:

The play begins with the inciting incident (the first moment when the lights go up.) Thereafter, we see rising action, during which tension and conflict arises. Sometime during the rising action, we reach *the point of no return* during which we delve so far into the conflict that we cannot turn back. After the point of no return, the audience should not discover any new information, new characters, or random acts. Finally, the conflict reaches a tipping point, called the *climax*, which is the “moment we’ve all been waiting for” when all the earlier events of the play centralize around a single event. Even so, the play cannot end with a climax. Instead, the climax is followed by falling action, or *denouement*, during which there is resolution and a reaction to the climax.

David Ball once wrote a book called Backwards and Forwards in which he argues that, in a play with a coherent plot, every event should be directly connected to the one before it.

Plays should also take place on a day that is different from all other days, perhaps the most important day of your lead character’s life. *If it’s not the most important day of his or her life, then why aren’t you writing that play?*

Some amount of exposition, in which we meet the characters and are introduced to the setting of the play, is necessary. Even so, too much exposition is boring, so only share information about your characters and setting that is absolutely necessary, because too much exposition can bore the audience. Challenge yourself to use as few words as possible of exposition to allow most of your ten minutes to focus on your plot/conflict/action.

In the words of Brecht (misquoted, probably): “People in theatre don’t care *what* happens; they care about *how* it happens.”

V. Theatricality

Remember, the world of the stage is not the real world. Therefore, you can set your own rules for the world of your play as long as they are consistent and make sense to support your plot. You want to create a world where animals can talk? Go for it, as long as it is necessary for your plot.

VI. Stage Directions

Stage directions can be used to describe scenery, action, and occasionally emotion, but use them economically. Allow the director and actors the freedom of telling their own story through your words. Don’t dictate every single piece of scenery, or every single move an actor makes, in your stage directions. Trust your director and actors enough to give them some of the reigns. Also, avoid adverbial stage directions as much as possible (the type of stage directions that tell the actors what emotion to convey in a line.) They take away a lot of actors’ freedoms.

VII. Other picky tips

- 1) Avoid sequences of actors making statements about the past. First of all, people don't spend too much time discussing the past as a general rule, and the audience would rather see actors create action than sentiment
- 2) The longer a character talks to another character without being interrupted, the harder it is for the audience to believe.
- 3) Begin your play in the middle of a conversation so stuff can "get real" from the get-go (the beginnings of conversations can read fairly boring onstage.)
- 4) Silence can, if placed correctly, give a character *a lot* of power.
- 5) People only spurt truthful facts about themselves under great duress.
- 6) Keep ten-minute plays to *ten minutes*. It's called a ten-minute play, after all (and plays in the Playwrights' Festival cannot be longer than ten minutes.)
- 7) In a ten-minute play, rarely introduce a character after page 3 or 4.
- 8) Try to write a play with three or more characters, because the Playwrights' Festival is more likely to select a play that gives opportunities to more actors.
- 9) Unfortunately, we do not have a big enough budget or production team to produce plays that make huge messes or involve heavy tech or special effects. Keep that in mind.
- 10) We've seen a lot of plays about death, the apocalypse, teen angst, and #firstworldproblems. Try something new, something you've never seen before.
- 11) Theatre Ink is not comfortable producing plays that may offend many audience members. Therefore, be careful with use of racist/sexist language, disturbingly suggestive content, and extreme violence.
- 12) *Keep in mind: There are exceptions to every single rule in this packet! Write for yourself, not for anyone else; there's plenty of time to edit a play to be commercially doable.***

Happy writing! For more specific help, don't hesitate to contact the Playwrights' Festival directors at playwrightsfestivaldirectors@gmail.com. Happy writing!