
Chapter Title: Writing for the Stage: A blueprint, a suggestive text, a thrown gauntlet for aspiring, stalled, and practising playwrights

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Writing for the Stage

A blueprint, a suggestive text, a thrown gauntlet
for aspiring, stalled, and practising playwrights

Brighde Mullins

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The word playwright is in the same etymological family as that of a shipwright, a cartwright, a wheelwright. The words shipwright, cartwright, wheelwright are descriptive: they summon up a craftsperson making a useful object – a ship, a cart, a wheel. A playwright is the maker of a script for the stage, a useful text. The second half of the word play-wright, then, emphasises the craft aspect of writing for the stage. Not that there isn't a good deal of artfulness, and a wealth of aesthetic complexity involved in playwrighting. But these elements are yoked to the psyche of the maker, so much so that they are idiosyncratic and unteachable. Exercises that can increase craft and make a playwright aware of existing models and practical techniques are highly teachable, and they are what will be focused on in this chapter.

Writing for the stage implies that you are writing words that will be spoken by actors and heard by an audience. If you are writing for actors, then actors are your vehicles, your instruments. This is the most important distinction between writing for the stage and writing for another genre. Poems and prose occur in a private space between the reader and the writer. The play, however, like a composer's score or an architect's blueprint, exists as a written text as a stop along the way. The play fully exists only in production, and therefore the single most vital element that a playwright has to shaping her craft is access to a theatre.

The most important information that a playwright can have is an arsenal of experiences in the theatre. By experiences I don't mean that you have to have worked on plays – although that is of course extremely useful. Indeed, one playwright I know (Paul Selig) has said that his best insights and ideas have come to him when he worked on running crew backstage and sat waiting for a cue light. There are some things that only proximity to stagecraft can transmit. If you cannot work in or on a production, the next best thing is to read and then to see plays in performance. If you live near a large city, such as London or New York or Paris, you are in luck on this count.

You should seek out as much theatre as possible, whatever productions you can find. I was raised in Las Vegas, Nevada, which may seem cosmopolitan, but at the time that I grew up (in the late seventies) was really a small town in the Mojave Desert, and the first theatrical productions that I saw were musicals on the Strip. But it was enough to whet

my appetite, and as a teenager I started going to the Shakespeare Festival in nearby Cedar City, Utah. If you live in the provinces, or in the desert, then it is necessary to make pilgrimages every now and then to see plays in production. You may live in a city that has an 'underground' theatre scene: Austin, Texas; Los Angeles; Providence; Rochester; many places around the US have theatre scenes that happen in small spaces that are just off the radar of the official theatre culture. You should seek out these venues.

If you do have theatres in your area that are doing plays from the canon, that is also useful: ideally, you should read the script and then go to see the actual production. That is the most practical way to begin to understand the relationship between the page and the stage. A production is a somatic event, an experience that engages all of the senses. There is no substitute for witnessing live theatre. It is the necessary background. The full-immersion of a production is what any play is written towards. And so, seeing a play in production after reading it can help you to fill in the gaps. You can start to see and then to articulate the contributions that designers, actors and directors make in embodying the play. You start to be able to imagine your own writing as being breathed into a space where it can be met and taken up by a collaborator.

Many playwrights also have acting experience. Shakespeare, Molière, Sam Shepard, Athol Fugard and Christopher Durang, Erin Cressida Wilson, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, to name a few. But acting is by no means a prerequisite. Some of our finest living playwrights are essentially very shy people, who would never dream of setting foot onstage. I am thinking of Caryl Churchill and Richard Greenberg. But facets of temperament aside, it is important that you are able to locate the sources of your connection to the theatre, and to read and see as many plays as you can before you start writing for the stage.

The primary thing, then, is to acquaint yourself with practical models, plays that you can read and then go to see in production. In this way, you can see the way that theatre works on the level of the pores: as a physical embodiment, a collaboration with actors and designers, and of course that other unstable but necessary element, an audience.

This chapter will include some writing exercises that I've developed in my ten years of teaching playwrighting at both the graduate and the undergraduate level. Many of these exercises were developed with playwright and film-maker Madeleine Olnek, who is one of the co-writers of the much-used acting textbook *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, and trained by David Mamet at The Atlantic Theatre Company in NY. My background is also as a poet: and so this methodology brings together a very pragmatic approach toward practice (Mamet's work is heavily method-based) as well as my own more experimental, poetic foundation. It will also discuss ways to focus your writing through the lens of your own obsessions and themes. Writing for the stage starts with writing for the page. Your personal connection to your material, as in all genres, is paramount. Your private obsessions, ideas, ideals, recurring dreams, fondest hopes, greatest fears will be tapped if you are writing, as they say, from the heart and from the gut. All of this sounds abstract, but there is a real skill in being able to translate these areas into a story onstage.

A necessary step

A primary text, a tried and true, both railed against and derided, but always seminal, always indispensable text is Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is both a how-to book and a cook-book. It is also a very practical book to have in that it articulates the tools that a playwright needs to create a playable text. The *Poetics* introduces a vocabulary that is the foundation for thinking and conversing about plays. Whether a playwright misinterprets, over-interprets or attacks the

Poetics, Aristotle is always on some level being referenced. Beyond the fact that he is in our collective bone-marrow then, there is also the practicality of knowing his terms.

What are the ingredients of a play? Aristotle was interested in parsing how a play affects an audience. He was trained as a scientist, so his method was empirical. He was interested in the way that a story, shaped into a plot, was presented to the group-mind of the audience using all of the tools at the playwright's disposal. Aristotle names and describes six ingredients that he noticed as occurring in the plays. These ingredients may be emphasised or de-emphasised, but they are still the template of the dynamic of any play. The choices that the playwright makes in the script as far as emphasising or describing these ingredients are what will guide the production, both in terms of design interpretation, actors' and directors' understanding.

The first three, the most important elements, are the non-perishable elements. These are in the DNA of the script, they are written into the play by the writer. The second three are the elements that are more perishable, and, in Aristotle's understanding, are related to the interpretation or to a particular production. But there is a way to use these elements as well in our writing of plays, and I will emphasise my interpretation of these elements.

Aristotle's elements in a nutshell

1. Plot

Every play must have a beginning, a middle and an ending. This sounds disingenuous, but it isn't. A plot is not a story. Story is not as sculpted as plot. Plot contains elements of causality and consequence; this brings up necessity and inevitability.

2. Character

These are the agents that will enact your story. Aristotle divides characters into tragic and comic, flat and round.

3. Thought

Something is proved or disproved through the writing of the play, through the exploration of the material. We often write to effect a change upon ourselves or upon others.

4. Diction

Diction refers to the spoken rhythms of the language, according to Aristotle. Also, for a writer's purposes, the storehouse of words themselves that a character has at their disposal to describe, to change, to think about their predicament. Since language is a distinguishing feature of the contemporary theatre (film and television can do images so much better) it is worthwhile for a playwright to pay attention to this chapter of the *Poetics*.

5. Music

Again, Aristotle is thinking of production-specific effects, but again, this is not just a phenomenological situation. A play may be structured on musical lines: it can yearn toward a fugue-like structure.

6. Spectacle

Props and scenic design are probably the most perishable elements of all, according to Aristotle. But, again, for our purposes, which are generative, props and scenery can be suggestive. If you consider, for instance, Beckett's situational elements that entail writing

from a place onstage, such as the urns in *Play* or the mound of dirt in *Happy Days*, you see that these elements of place can help to dictate the action of the play.

Aristotle presents a wealth of useful ways of thinking about what it is to write a play. For instance, he emphasises action over narration; and the pleasure of imitation or mimicry. These are still baseline elements of a play, even in the most experimental work. Even the work of Sarah Kane, Mac Wellman and Chuck Mee capitulate to these ways of realising the form.

You can certainly proceed with the exercises in the rest of the chapter without reading the *Poetics*, but I suggest that you go get a copy of it if you don't already own one. I recommend Francis Fergusson's translation. And then, as an antidote and a corollary, read Bertolt Brecht's 'Short Organum for the Theatre'.

Approaches and temperament

There are various ways that playwrights approach writing a play: some work from subject (indeed, Aristotle says that 'the only thing is to have a subject'). The subject of the play is the material from which the play is formed. In psychological terms, the subject is 'one whose actions are studied', which blends into about how we think about the character as carrying the subject into the body of the play. In musical terms, the subject is the principal theme or phrase of a melodic composition.

In philosophical terms, the subject is perceived reality; and since the laws of human perception are our most valuable tools as playwrights, the modes of perceived reality are valuable to contemplate. These are useful distinctions, although at this point they may be a bit abstract-sounding. Some of your preparation for writing your play, for dwelling in the material and the ideas that you are exploring in the play itself, will be to steep yourself in what the play is 'about'.

Some of the play's about-ness has to do with why you are writing the play: perhaps you want to expose the conditions of the working class; perhaps you want to exorcise a personal demon; perhaps you simply want to tell a good story. No matter. The vital thing is that you have the originating impulse.

The writing exercises that follow are improvisatory, in the way that actors sometimes create movement and gesture in rehearsal or as warm ups.

Preliminary exercises

Exercise 1.

Brainstorming

An early exercise that I use with students who have a desire but no clear story yet is a series of generative exercises. The first of these is a writing warm up. Brainstorm a few ideas after writing down these words 'I want to write a play in which . . .' Anything can follow this jumping off point. The writer may want to see a certain image onstage, explore a complicated psychological situation, make people laugh, make people cry. This is a place to begin. It can help you to identify and start to narrow down what you want to work on.

After you write down the words 'I want to write a play in which . . .' start writing and keep writing for at least fifteen minutes. Some writers set an egg timer. Others listen to music. The point is to write in an uncensored fashion for fifteen minutes to write as much as you can generate. As Virginia Woolf writes: 'what is essential is to write *fast* and not break

the mood' (Woolf 1981: 282). Then re-read what you've written and isolate and choose three ideas that have bubbled up.

Exercise 2.

Origins

Write about your first theatre experience, as either a participant or as an audience member. Again, write for fifteen minutes and generate as much material as you can. This exercise will put you back in touch with your earliest experiences in the theatre: these early emotions are ones that you should still be trying to graft onto your work, to recreate for yourself and for others. They are what initially got you hooked on theatre.

After re-reading and looking over what you've written, you may be able to locate a subject that interests you. If so, if you are going to work from a subject, you are in good company. Many playwrights work from a desire to understand, to investigate, to search out a terrain. This is the playwright as researcher, as hunter and gatherer. This has to do with channelling your obsessions and realms of interest into your work. This is the underneath of the play. A playwright such as Tom Stoppard writes from this methodology, these are plays of 'ideas'. Not that every play doesn't contain ideas, but Stoppard plays do so rather boldly. I am thinking of *Arcadia*, of *The Invention of Love*, of *Jumpers*. Caryl Churchill also has written from this category, plays such as *Mad Forest* and *Top Girls* take an area or topic (Romania, Victorian sexuality) and examine them from a theatrical stance.

Exercise 3.

Childhood map

Samuel Beckett once said, about Dublin: 'I have changed refuge so many times in the course of my route that I now cannot tell the difference between dens and ruins. I know only the city of my childhood' (Beckett 1997: 61–2). This map exercise is one that I learned from one of my first teachers, the novelist John Irsfeld.

1. Draw a map of a place that you lived in your childhood. Include everything that you can remember about this place on this map. It can be a neighbourhood map, of the locale that you frequented as a child. If you moved around a lot, as I did, choose one particularly resonant place that you lived.
2. Circle places where events happened: describe these events in one or two sentences.
3. Pick one event from your childhood map and write it down; describe it in detail. Use all of your senses in describing this event.

Now that you have a handle on the event, take the event and make it either a setting or part of a scene between two characters, A and B.

This scene may be the seed of a longer play, or a character study. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney has said 'I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading' (Covington 1996) and this exercise takes the playwright's earliest memories and dislocations and brings them to the forefront of the writing.

Reading list

Plays to look at in relation to this writing exercise:

Barry, Lynda (1998), *The Good Times are Killing Me*, New York: Samuel French.

- Bowles, Jane (1954), *At the Summer House*, New York: Random House.
 Friel, Brian (1998), *Dancing at Lughnasa*, New York: Dramatists Play Service.
 Kron, Lisa (2005), *Well*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
 McCullers, Carson (1993), *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, New York: Modern Library.
 Rapp, Adam (2002), *Nocturne*, London: Faber and Faber.
 Vogel, Paula (1999), *How I Learned to Drive*, New York: Dramatists Play Service.
 Williams, Tennessee (1998), *The Glass Menagerie*, New York: Dramatists Play Service.

Exercise 4.

Images

1. Collect twenty images. These may come from anywhere: they may be from the newspaper, from magazines, from postcards. Cut them out into manageable sizes and shapes.
2. Look at your twenty pictures; look with an open mind for at least five minutes.
3. Look for some potential relationship among ten of these images.
4. Arrange those ten in some order. Take about five minutes to do this.
5. Write for fifteen minutes about what potential linkage there could be among them.
6. Write three to five lines of text to accompany the images.
7. Now take your pile of discarded images.
 Do the same thing with this pile of images.
 Look at your ten pictures; look with an open mind for at least five minutes.
 Look for some potential relationship between these images.
 Arrange them in some order. Take about five minutes to do this.
 Write for fifteen minutes about what potential linkage there could be among them.
 Write three to five lines of text to accompany the images.
8. Choose one of these scenarios to expand into a scene.

Reading list

- Aristotle (1961), 'Spectacle' in *Poetics*, trans., S.H. Butcher, New York: Hilland Wang.
 Artaud, Antonin (1966), *The Theatre and Its Double*, New York: Grove Press.
 Brook, Peter (1995), *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*, London: Touchstone Press.
 Izuka, Naomi (2003), *36 Views*, New York: Overlook Theatre Press.
 Pirandello, Luigi (1987), *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth*, in *Collected Plays*, New York: Riverrun Press.
 Vogel, Paula (1992), *The Baltimore Waltz*, New York: Dramatists Play Service.

Exercise 5.

Writing from character

1. Write down on a piece of paper a character that you are drawn to: in literature, mythology, film or public life. In one or two sentences describe why you are drawn to this particular character.
2. Now write down a character from your life, someone who intrigues you on the level of behaviour or appearance. This can be a stranger, someone you see in line at the kiosk, a favourite aunt, whomever. Someone who strikes you, although you aren't sure why.
3. Write two five-page scenes that includes these characters, both the characters from category one and from category two.

Reading list

Aristotle, 'Character and Character Types' in *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, New York: Hill and Wang.
 Brecht, Bertolt (1991), *Galileo*, trans. Eric Bentley, New York: Grove Press.
 Churchill, Caryl (1991), *Top Girls*, London: Methuen.
 Greenberg, Richard (2003), *The Dazzle and Everett Beekin*, New York: Faber and Faber.
 Guare, John (2003), *A Few Stout Individuals*, New York: Grove/Atlantic Press.
 Kushner, Tony (1993), *Angels in America*, Theatre Communications Group.
 Olnek, Madeleine, *Wild Nights With Emily*, unpublished.
 Parks, Suzan Lori (2002), *Topdog/Underdog*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
 Stoppard, Tom (1994), *Jumpers*, New York: Grove Press.

*Exercise 6.**Writing from place*

Quidditas as Aquinas called it, is the ability, the desire to write from a landscape. Onstage this will manifest itself as a setting, and this is a vital place to begin. The setting often dictates what can happen, what kind of language can be used. The limitations are also the potential freedoms. 'To know who you are, you have to have a place to come from' Carson McCullers says (quoted in Heaney 1981: 135), and so a place also conjures up a way of speaking, a way of saying.

Write a treatment or *précis*, a prose description of an event that *must* take place in one setting. It can be a bar, a bus station, a coffee shop. But the characters must remain in that place. As research you may want to do a transcription exercise, in which you go to the place that you are using as a setting and you record the activities and language that you overhear as closely as possible.

Reading list

Albee, Edward (1998), *The Zoo Story and The Death of Bessie Smith*, New York: Dramatists Play Service.
 Aristotle (1961), 'The Unities' in *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, New York: Hill and Wang.
 Baraka, Amiri (1971), *Dutchman and the Slave*, New York: Harper Perennial.
 Fugard, Athol (1996), *Valley Song*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
 Gorky, Maxim (2000), *The Lower Depths*, New York: Dover Thrift.
 Stein, Gertrude (1995), 'Plays' in *Last Operas and Plays*, Johns Hopkins University Press.
 Valdez, Luis (1992), *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*, Arte Publico Press.

*Exercise 7.**Writing a playable scene*

This exercise was learned from Madeleine Olnek, and owes its genesis to her own particular brilliance as well as her acting work with David Mamet. It encompasses all of the other exercises, and it also gets to the animating principle of allactable (in psychological terms) dramatic writing: it gets sub-text, action and conflict into a scene.

1. Take a piece of paper and tear it into three sections. Write one place on each slip of paper. Examples of *places* are: a high-rise apartment, a coffee shop, a swimming pool, etc.
2. Take a piece of paper and tear it into three sections. Write one relationship on each slip of paper. Examples of *relationships* are: mother-daughter, cop-perpetrator,

lover–ex-lover, etc. (By relationship what is meant essentially is: what two people mean to each other.)

3. Take a piece of paper and tear it into three sections. Write an object on each slip of paper. Examples of objects are: a bottle of expensive shampoo, a tube of lipstick, a dead seagull, etc.
4. Take a piece of paper and tear it into three sections. Write an action on each slip of paper. Examples of actions are usually written with an infinitive verb and describe an effect that one person wants to create in another. Examples of actions are: to put someone in their place; to open someone's eyes to the truth; to beg someone for forgiveness, etc.

Now take all of your slips of paper, fold them in half and sort them into piles for each of the categories:

Relationships, Objects, Places, Actions. You will be choosing slips of paper blindly, or randomly, from the piles, so it's important to fold them up.

Writing Round 1

Take one slip from the relationship pile and one slip from the place pile. Write a scene with these characters in this place.

Round 2

Take one slip from the relationship pile and one slip from the action pile. Write a scene with these characters playing this action. NB only one character plays the action.

Round 3

Take one slip from the relationship pile, one from the place pile and one from the action pile. Write a scene incorporating all of these elements.

Round 4

Take one slip from all of the piles: the relationship pile, from the place pile, from the action pile, the object pile. Write a scene incorporating all of these elements.

This exercise can be repeated indefinitely. It can also be done extremely successfully with students, or in a group of writers. Madeleine Olnek and I used to write scenes using this method, and then reading the scenes that we had just written aloud to each other. What is most vital about this exercise, what is solid gold about it, is that it shows you how a scene operates; how place can dictate an action; and how the animating factor of action is at the heart of writing playable text.

Reading list

- Beckett, Samuel (1954), *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, New York: Grove Press.
 Beckett, Samuel (1979), 'Play' in *Collected Shorter Plays*, New York: Grove Press.
 Bond, Edward (2000), *Saved*, London: Methuen Modern Plays.
 Chekhov, Anton (1989), *Uncle Vanya*, New York: Grove Press.
 Churchill, Caryl (1994), *The Skriker*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
 Churchill, Caryl (1997), *Blue Heart*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
 Greenberg, Richard (2004), *Take Me Out*, New York: Dramatists Play Service.
 Lorca, Federico Garcia (1997), *Blood Wedding*, London: Faber and Faber.
 Miller, Arthur (2003), *The Crucible*, New York: Penguin.

- Nagy, Phyllis (1995), *Butterfly Kiss*, London: Consortium Books.
- Pinter, Harold (1979), *Betrayal*, New York: Grove Press.
- Wallace, Naomi (2000), *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, New York: Broadway Play Publishing Services.
- Wellman, Mac (1994), 'The Hyacinth Macaw' in *Two Plays: A Murder of Crows and the Hyacinth Macaw*, Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press.
- Wertenbaker, Timberlake (1998), *Our Country's Good*, London: Dramatists Pub. Co.

Structure

As you continue to write plays, you will become more and more interested in the overall heft and structure of the play. As Samuel Beckett says:

I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin – it is even finer in Latin than in English. 'Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned'. That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters. (Schneider 1967: 34)

Keeping going

The limitations of the stage are also the places where the stage is unique and transcendent: exploring these boundaries is what writing plays is about. You can't explore them alone, though. There are no Emily Dickinsons in the realm of the theatre. You must work with actors, directors, designers and an audience. That is the necessary next step. You can look at *The Dramatist's Sourcebook*, or various other handbooks about how to get your play produced: the most important thing, though, is to find a theatre or a group of actors that you are *simpatico* with, and to find an artistic home. These homes can be found anywhere, not just in metropolitan centres: indeed, grass roots theatre activity is the future of innovative writing in the US, where I am based. There are vital theatre scenes happening in San Diego, California; Providence, Rhode Island; Austin, Texas, to name a few burgeoning theatre cities where cutting-edge work thrives. The advent of online publishing forums such as playscripts.com makes the baptism-by-fire of Broadway and the West End and the canonising powers of the Critics less of a part of what it is to be a produced playwright. There is more and more room for the idiosyncratic and the revolutionary voice. Indeed, the theatre is becoming more and more the antidote to what Brecht termed the 'bourgeois narcotics factory' of mass cultural entertainment. This chapter is meant as an introduction to writing and a smorgasbord of exercises that have proved useful over my years of teaching and writing. The making of plays is a broad church, and there are practitioners whose work is informative and inspiring, but who are less text-based, and so less useful for our purposes in generating texts for the stage. But part of writing is becoming acquainted with your own temperament as a writer. And so the work of the Wooster Group or of Cricot 2 may be what inspires you: the thing is to seek out your 'tribe' and as Emerson says, to be open to collaboration, since 'thought makes everything fit for use' (Emerson 1844).

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- Beckett, Samuel (1984), 'Play' in *The Collected Shorter Plays*, New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, Samuel (1997), 'The Calmative' in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, Grove Press.
- Brecht, Bertolt (1964), 'Short Organum for the Theatre' in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang.
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- Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1844), 'The Poet' in *Essays*, 2nd series, John Chapman. Source: Literature Online.
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- Stoppard, Tom (1994), *Jumpers*, New York: Grove Press.
- Stoppard, Tom (1994), *Arcadia*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Stoppard, Tom (1997), *The Invention of Love*, London: Faber and Faber.
- The Dramatists Sourcebook* (2006), 24th edn, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Woolf, Virginia, and Anne Oliver Bell (1981), *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3: 1925–1930, 'Sunday, 12 January 1930', Harvest/HBJ Book.