

PLAYWRITING WORKSHOP

Spring 2013, OLLI - DC

Instructor – Joe Oppenheimer

PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS: SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2023

COURSE OBJECTIVES

To set up a ‘writers’ workshop’ in which we learn and use the basic elements of playwriting to facilitate everyone’s writing of a successful scene or short play. As in other writers’ workshops, helpful but frank encouragement, praise and criticism by everyone is expected to be the single most important element in the success of the workshop.

BASIC STRUCTURE

There will be written assignments to be shared with class members. In the first half of the course, sessions will be made up of writing exercises and discussion. The second half will be made up of ‘readings,’ or ‘workshops’ and discussion of drafts of your work.

For each workshop after the introduction you will be ‘paired’ with another writer or two. You will be expected to help each other by reading and talking through problems with the written assignments. Although all written work is to be expected to be shared with everyone, one’s responsibilities will be toward the writers you are assigned to for the week.

REQUIRED of all participants:

TEXTS:

1. The Playwright's Workbook (Applause Books) by Jean-Claude Van Italie [Paperback available new for about \$17 on Amazon, etc.]
2. The Playwright's Guidebook: An Insightful Primer on the Art of Dramatic Writing Paperback – by Stuart Spencer [available new for about \$18.50]

3. PDF PACKETS SENT TO ALL INCLUDE:

- a. Joe A. Oppenheimer, “The Writers’ Group.” Scarlet Leaf Review, August 19, 2017.
 - b. Joe A. Oppenheimer, Some Thoughts About Criticizing
 - c. Interview w Amin Ahmad in back of This Isn’t Your Country
 - d. Samuel Beckett’s Rockaby
 - e. Lizzie Harris. “Law of the Body.” New Yorker, 12/5/2022. Poem
 - f. Glenn Alterman Writing the 10-Minute Play: Limelight Editions, Milwaukee WI 2013. (pp. 22-25, 27-28 , 35, 44-5)
4. A small notebook, along with a pen or pencil, you can easily carry with you in a pocket and bring to class.

SKILLS:

1. Use of Word (Useful, but not ‘needed,’ additional skill: How to ‘mark up’ or ‘edit’ a shared

manuscript – I will send a handout to all giving instructions,).

2. Ability to save and read PDF files which I will send from time to time.
3. Willingness to engage with others about their and your own writing.

1. **MARCH 2 – CLASS ONE: Introduction** - GROUP DYNAMICS: SUPPORT AND CRITICISM & THE STUFF OF PLAYS: CHARACTERS, CONVERSATION, ACTION

A. READING: (To Be Done Before Class)

- a. Joe A. Oppenheimer PIECE ON CRITICISM
- b. Joe A. Oppenheimer The Writers' Group (<https://www.scarletleafreview.com/play>).
- c. Samuel Beckett Rockaby
- d. Glenn **Alterman** on criticism (p. 44-5)

B. In Class:

We learn to criticize each other's work: So criticize (nicely, but mercilessly) the character development, dramatic arc, conversational tones, movement, set instructions of the play. We do an exercise to write dialogue about a 2-person conflictual situation.

Receive first partnership assignment!

2. **MARCH 9 - CLASS TWO: Playwriting Basics I** CHARACTERS & CONFLICT: the Muscle of Plays

A. READING:

- a. Alterman 35
- b. **Workshop Two**, pp. 29-35
- c. Spencer 170 - 202 (Chap 10 - on character), Spencer p. 58 - 69 (on conflict), 73-83 (Chap. 5 - On High Stakes)
- d. Work sent by at least your 'partner' and the next alphabetical person of your classmates.

B. WRITING: (MAX ONE PAGE) Picking some of **the characters** for your play: [the who] (their desires/needs), and, perhaps using Spencer's guide, tell me how their qualities lead to action, and conflict in some scene.

- a. Swap your quick sketch with partner, give criticism, rewrite yours and send to everyone.
- READING:**
- b. **Workshop 2** who, what, where
 - c. **Workshop 4** "Telling a Story"

- d. Handout pp. 22-25 from Alterman

C. In Class:

We discuss aspects of character development. We focus on character wants and needs and then look at how this effects story telling on stage: where everything is presented to an audience, and hence 'processed in the present.' We struggle with how to use talk and action for problem presentation, and the conflict in searching for solutions; resolution.

Receive next partnership assignment!

3. MARCH 16 - CLASS THREE: Playwriting Basics II: TALK, CONVERSATION AND DRAMATIC ARC: the Stuff of Plays

A. THINK ABOUT: the difference between dialogue and conversations

B. WRITING: (1 or 2 paragraphs: 1 page **max**)

- a. **Especially** Pick some of **the characters** for your play: [the who] (their desires/needs), the situation, the dramatic arc (problem, path to resolution, resolution).
- b. If you can, also choose
 - 1) the where 'or scene'
 - 2) Also try to define a topic for your scene (the **what!**). This is not the struggle but the dominant theme - the sort of topic or truth you hope the audience will 'think about' because of the story you tell.
- c. Swap your quick sketch with partner, give criticism, rewrite yours and send to everyone.

C. READING:

- a. **Workshop 1:** pp. 26-27 (top half), Workshop 6: (p. 73, 75-78 to get a sense of "Razor Blades" and "I Love It", Workshop 7 - consider: can use the lesson of "Driving"?)
 - 1) **DO** assignment #1, **Overheard Voices** in Workshop 1 ASSIGNMENTS, p. 27
- b. Spencer 249-264 (on talk)
- c. **Workshop 4** "Telling a Story"
- d. On Formatting: Alterman pp. 27-28 for cover pages, and Spencer (p. 297-300)

D. In Class: We discuss the differences between 2 person conversations and multi person conversations, and the increased number of roles that individuals could assume.

4. MARCH 23 - CLASS FOUR: Playwriting Basics II – PLOT! & SUBTEXT

A. WRITING: IN YOUR PLAY: Tell us (4 short paragraphs; no longer than 1 ½ pages.)

- a. the basic plot -
- b. Swap your quick sketch with partner, give criticism, rewrite yours and send to everyone.

B. READING:

- a. **Workshop 3**
 - b. On subtext: Spencer (Chapter 11 on Plot) 207-219 & p. 50-6 (on subtext and motivation), and poem by Harris
 - C. In Class:** We will discuss the importance of subtext and its relations to motives. We will further deal with any problems we find with the idea subtext We'll do an exercise to illustrate subtext.
- 5. MARCH 30 - CLASS FIVE: Playwriting Basics IV – THE WHAT! THE WHERE! AND THE JOURNEY TO RESOLUTION**
- A. READINGS:**
 - a. Interview w Amin Ahmad
 - b. Alterman (p. 22-25) re *Poetics*
 - c. **Workshop 3** (p. 45-52)
 - d. Spencer (p. 96-110) *on beats*
 - B. WRITING:** Flesh out the scene you are writing so you can 'see' the resolution of the conflict and the basic role of what/where/who in achieving it.
 - a. Swap your quick sketch with partner, give criticism, rewrite yours and send to everyone.
 - C. In Class:**

We'll discuss the ideas of Aristotle and others on 'good' play structure. We'll do an exercise to develop natural sounding dialogue involving beats

Receive next partnership assignment!

WEEKS 6 - 9: Performance

Read: the plays you are in and suggest conversational shifts in the scripts.

In Class: Workshop Performance & discussion

WEEK 10: Final Celebration - Picking the Best Moments in Everyone's Work!

Read: All final versions.

the plays you are in - try to get into the parts

In Class: Performance, discussion and assessment