Writing the TEN-MINUTE Play

A Book for Playwrights and Actors Who Want to Write Plays

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At the beginning of writing a new play, you, the writer, are opening a door for yourself. From the very first lines you write, you are taking yourself somewhere, although you may not be quite sure where yet. The more spontaneous you can allow yourself to be, the more personal and original your work will be. In this way, both the actor and the writer begin at the same place. It's a place of unknowing. It can be a frightening moment or an exciting one, like the moment just before you board a roller coaster. Trust yourself and let the ride surprise you!

Chapter 4

Playwriting Basics

As you write your ten-minute play, you will find it useful to know certain basic points of playwriting. I believe that the information in this chapter will be especially helpful to those who have never written a play before, although experienced playwrights may find it informative, too. What follows are some rules that apply to all plays, long and short.

- Conflict—Conflict is the essence of a play. The stronger the conflict, the more engaging your play will be. Character one wants something. Character two will do everything in his or her power to block character one from getting it. When that happens, we have conflict. Weak conflicts make for boring plays. Make the stakes high and you have a good chance of creating an engaging play.
- Character—Characters are the people who populate your play. Their personalities, their history, and their desires are expressed in the dialogue; i.e., what the characters say to each other. Your characters want something; in acting terms that's called "intention." Actors are taught that by discovering what the character needs you'll discover how you might play the character. The way the characters speak, what their lives are like, their family, and most importantly what they want, should all be taken into account when making playing choices.
- The Protagonist—This is the main character we will be following in your play, the one who wants something and runs into a conflict in attempting to get it. As in life, not all protagonists get what they want. Sometimes they discover that that pot of gold they've desperately been seeking is not at all what they thought it would be. It's how the character evolves in the play that is most interesting, the journey, so to speak. The character should be different at the end of

the play than at the beginning. The knowledge the protagonist gains during the play changes him or her. The challenges, the obstacles that the protagonist overcomes (or doesn't) help to determine how he or she will change. Self-awareness comes from overcoming or attempting to overcome the challenges and obstacles.

- The Antagonist—To create conflict you must have an antagonist, or opposing force: something or someone must get in the way of the protagonist, blocking his or her path toward the goal. The antagonist can be another character in the play, an event, or an obstacle confronting the protagonist. The two forces going up against each other create the conflict in the play. The stronger the conflict of these two opposing forces, the more interesting your play will be.
- Stage Directions—These are the instructions a playwright includes in the script to let the actors and the director know what action is occurring during the scene. The best advice I can give is to use them as little as possible. Just include specific actions that must be addressed to make the play work efficiently. Some playwrights include way too many stage directions; save that for your screenplays.
- Setting—This is where and when your play takes place. It may include the furniture you must have in the scene or a doorway or window if needed. The setting may also be an indicator of the style of the play you're writing. Remember that this is theater, and try to keep it simple. Don't create scenes or sets that are not stage worthy. Some beginning writers create elaborate sets and scenes that might work better in film than on the stage. Again, with the ten-minute play, less is more. If your play is part of a ten-minute play festival, having too much furniture will impede moving on to the next play after yours is over. On some occasions plays have not been selected, or are eliminated from ten-minute play festivals, because of their set requirements.

Aristotle's *Poetics*

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) wrote two books on aesthetics: *The Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. *The Poetics* is the earliest work of dramatic theory and originally addressed both comedy and tragedy, though the book on comedy has been lost. The surviving book deals with tragedy, which Aristotle felt was the "most refined version of poetry dealing with lofty ideals."

While the following information on dramatic theory is highly condensed, it may serve as a starting point for those who wish to read further; and I believe some of this information may be of use in creating your ten-minute play.

Aristotle believed tragedy should be mimetic (a good imitation), serious, and a good length; that it should contain rhythm and harmony; and that the rhythm and harmony should appear in various combinations as the story evolved. He believed that tragedy was meant to be performed, not narrated, and that through catharsis it should purge feelings of pity and fear that had been aroused earlier in the telling of the story.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle said that unified plot structure is formed like a triangle. It begins with the *protasis*, or the introduction, in the lower left-hand corner of the triangle. The highest point of the triangle is called the *epitasis*, or middle, which is the crisis, and in the lower right-hand corner of the triangle is the resolution of the conflict, which he called the *catastrophe*.

Aristotle broke down tragedy into six elements: plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle.

- **Plot.** The plot should have a beginning that isn't a consequence of any previous action, a middle that grows logically from the beginning, and an end that logically flows from the middle and from which "no further action should necessarily follow." All the scenes in a play should be linked together by "probability and necessity."
- **Character.** The character supports the plot; in other words, the characters' personal motivation will impact the cause and effect chain of action. These events should create "pity and fear in the audience." The protagonist, who Aristotle felt should be well respected and wealthy, changes due to "a great error" or "a frailty in his character." Each character in a play should have a distinct personality, age, appearance, beliefs, socioeconomic background, and language.
- **Thought.** While Aristotle doesn't explain what he means by this term, he does say that "speeches should reveal character."
- **Diction** is "the expression of the meaning in words" that are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. Here Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy, particularly metaphor. The ability to use metaphors, he believed, implied "an eye for resemblance" that was crucial in dramatic art.
- **Melody.** Aristotle saw the chorus as an actor in the play that should be fully integrated into the story.
- **Spectacle** is everything that is seen and heard during the play: costumes, scenery, and even special effects. Aristotle felt however, that

it was the job of the playwright, and not the stage machinist, to move the audience to emotion.

Freytag's Pyramid

Gustav Freytag (1816–1895), a German critic and novelist, modified Aristotle's triangle, adding two additional elements. The first was the *complication*, which is a rising action, ascending from the lower left-hand corner to the higher middle of the triangle. The *falling action* he placed descending from the highest middle to the lowest right-hand corner of the triangle. He used all five elements to analyze the structure of drama, calling them *dramatic arcs*. Freytag's pyramid can be useful as a guide while when you're working on any plays of any length.

Freytag's Five Dramatic Arcs

- **Introduction (or Exposition)**—This is when we first meet the characters of the play. It's when the protagonist and antagonist are introduced and the play's conflict begins to reveal itself. We see where the play takes place, and the time and mood of the piece. During this initial arc we get some sense of how the characters interconnect in the play.
- **Rising Action**—During this arc things start to perk. The conflict becomes more apparent, and at this point we should be feeling the tension. Obstacles may appear, further blocking the protagonist from his goal.
- **Climax**—This is the point in the play where things dramatically change. Depending on the play you've written, they can get better or worse. This is the highest point in the pyramid.
- **Falling Action**—A resolution begins to appear in the conflict between our protagonist and antagonist. Generally the protagonist will either win or lose to his or her foe in this dramatic arc. It is here that we see that the climax or the main action is over and the story of the play starts to come to its conclusion.
- **Conclusion**—Sometimes called the catastrophe, this arc is the end of the play's story. In some plays the protagonist achieves his or her goal, as so often happens in comedies. When this doesn't happen, then quite often what we have is a tragedy. The conflict that we set up should now be resolved.

Chapter 5

Script Format

Up to this point in the book we've been looking at exercises to stimulate ideas and touched on classic playwriting structure theory. As the following chapters take you through the actual writing of your ten-minute play, it will be helpful to know the preferred format for theatrical scripts.

Below is the proper format for your ten-minute play. Some playwrights use the format they see in play anthology books. This is not the correct format for your plays.

- Your title page should be formatted correctly (see sample page). Make sure the title of your play is centered and all in caps. Beneath that you want to identify it as a ten-minute play (not in caps). Your name should be below that (unless you are submitting to a competition that requests that you leave your name off the script and place it instead on a separate information page).
- The dialogue in your play begins 1.5 inches from the left side of your page.
- Character names are always in caps.
- Any stage actions are indented 3 inches from the left and should be enclosed in parentheses.
- The dialogue of your play should be single-spaced.
- Use capital letters to bring the reader's attention to special design effects, such as sound and lights. For example: LIGHTS: Bright sunlight shines through the kitchen window.
- Directions for actors—i.e., specific instructions you'd like the actor playing the role to follow—should be placed directly below the character's name, in parenthesis. For instance, *(Crying)* or *(Loudly)*.
- If a character's speech begins at the end of one page with just one line and continues onto the next page, it's best to move the entire

speech to the next page. If there is more than one line on the first page of the speech, you simply write out on the next page the character's name again, and write "continued," in parentheses. This will look like JOHN *(continued).*

- Generally, most playwrights use a 12-point font. Some playwrights like to use Courier New, but most use Times New Roman.
- All pages should be numbered. I like to place numbers at the bottom of the page in the center. The title page should not be numbered. If you must have a separate page for the time, place, and character information, make sure that that page is not numbered, either. With ten-minute play contests, if some play readers see a script that says 12 pages, they won't even open it to see that the title page and info page are part of that number. Begin your page numbers with the first page of dialogue
- If you are a Dramatists Guild member, you can include their logo on the title page on the bottom left-hand side.

TITLE OF YOUR PLAY

A Ten-Minute Play

By Your Name

Your address
Your city and state
Your e-mail address
Your phone number

Represented by:
Agent's Name
Name of Agency
Agency's address
Agency's city and state
Agent's e-mail address
Agent's phone number

Sample Format for Character, Time and Place Page
rom my play *The Danger of Strangers*)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

E—An attractive man in his thirties or early forties. Friendly and utgoing.

HE—An attractive woman in her thirties or early forties. She is friendly nd polite fully seductive.

TIME

he present, a hot August afternoon, lunchtime.

PLACE

he living room of a one-bedroom apartment in the West 50s overlooking inth Avenue in New York City. Bright sunlight is shining in from a indow.

An attractive man and woman are sitting opposite each other, just nishing their coffee. A small coffee table separates them. He's sweating ut trying not to show it. She, on the other hand, doesn't seem to notice ne heat at all.)

HE: More?

E: Hm?

HE: Coffee.

E: No, thanks.

HE: Sure?

E: Yeah?

HE: You sure?

E: Uh-huh.

wink in his voice.

But I am tempted.

SHE: Are you?

HE: *You* are tempting me.

SHE: *(Slightly coy)* Am I?

HE: *(Leaning in a bit)* C'mon, you know you are.

SHE looks down at her coffee cup, lifts it to her lips, takes a sip. He watches her, then smiles.

SHE: What's so funny?

HE: Funny?

SHE: You're smiling.

HE: *(Playing with her)* Am I?

The news can be another source of inspiration for me. I've started plays right after seeing a person on the news speaking about some horrible injustice or predicament. I've written plays on abortion, racial injustice, the economy, etc., based on some news story that moved me. Some of these plays have been ten-minute plays; others needed a larger canvas and became one-acts or even full-lengths. Whatever subject or idea moves you, touches you, makes you angry, or makes you laugh may be the seed for your play. If you need to, let the idea perk until you feel you need to express it. Don't be too concerned about the details of the characters at the beginning—whether they're male or female, their ages, or even what their names are—just write what they have to say. Quite often, I start a play with numbers rather than character names: "1" speaks to "2" or "3." I can always fill in the names when they come to me (generally through their dialogue). Whatever the issue is, allow the characters to discuss, argue, or lament about it as long as they need. Cutting will come later. At the beginning let them be affected by the struggle of the subject.

Go a museum or an art gallery. Allow other artists' paintings or sculptures to inspire you. Stephen Sondheim's brilliant musical *Sunday in the Park with George* was inspired by the painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by George Seurat.

Personal issues, family conflicts, and unresolved real life incidents are quite often fodder for playwrights. The things we wanted to say, wish we had said, regret never saying, are often great starting points for plays. A great ten-minute play by Craig Lucas, called *What I Meant Was*, is one of my favorites. In this satiric play, members of a dysfunctional family say all the things they might have said if there was totally open communication. It's a raw, blisteringly funny play that shows what the truth looks like when there are no filters. It was a winner at the Actors Theatre of Louisville Humana Play Festival in the ten-minute play category and received a production there in 1996.

Probably some of the greatest advice I ever received about playwriting is "Write what you're afraid to write about." Once you open that door, it's amazing what can come out of you. Yes, it requires a certain amount of bravery, but believe me, the payoff for both you and your audience will be well worth it.

Chapter 7

The Next Steps

Intention, Objective, and Action

Once I start to get some sense of who my characters are, I also begin to get a sense of *what they want*. This is one of the most important moments of discovering what my play is actually about. Ask yourself early on in the writing of your play "What do my lead characters want?"

Actors are taught in acting classes that they must always know what their character wants (the *objective*). They are told to make it personal (the *intention*) and then go for it (the *action*). As writers, we have to supply actors with characters that have strong wants, or they won't have much to play. Simply put, the stronger the wants, the more the actor has to play.

To illustrate this important point: my objective now is to teach you, the reader, how to write a ten-minute play. I'm sitting at my computer trying to figure out the best ways I can communicate the meaning of this particular terminology to you. I am determined to find the right words (intention), and by choosing and writing these words that you're now reading, I hope to get this important aspect of writing a ten-minute play through to you (action).

When working on a ten-minute play you have to be certain that your main character has a strong need. All the other characters (and hopefully there aren't too many others in your ten-minute play), should also have needs that they may or (may not) fulfill. Because this is a ten-minute play, you want to make these character intentions obvious in (hopefully) the first two pages of your play. This is no time to mess around with a lot of exposition. Get to the point ASAP! Sometimes this means that you overwrite during your first draft. Write as much as you need to set the story in motion.

When it's all there, no matter how many pages you have, then cut, cut, cut down to the bone, to the basics of the story you need to tell in ten pages. This is where the play actually begins. The trick is to cut just the fat from your storytelling, not the muscle. You must have a cohesive, strong, clear story from the get-go, with characters motivated by strong needs. As your characters interact, trying to have their needs met, you create the universe of your play and the story reveals itself.

The Setting and Time

Where you set the play will definitely influence the story you're telling. If you set the play in a prison cell, your characters are going to have very different realities than they would if you placed them at a kitchen table.

The time of day, whether it's two in the morning or two in the afternoon, will affect the characters' behavior. There are different rhythms for different times of day or night.

Setting your play on a sweltering hot summer night, or a freezing cold day with little or no heat, will also affect how characters behave.

The Best Way to Tell Your Story: The Play's Structure

Plays take several forms. They can be naturalistic and have a traditional structure (beginning, middle, and end) or they can tell a story in a nontraditional or nonlinear way. The story of your play and the characters' interactions can guide you as to which form fits best. Initially you may want to allow your play to move in any direction (and form) that it wants. As it becomes clearer to you, you'll have a better idea of how you want to tell the story. I have written plays that started off with a traditional structure and eventually called for a major rewrite, switching to a nonlinear structure. With a ten-minute play this isn't too difficult an adjustment. Just make sure the structure of the completed draft is consistent so that your story comes through clearly.

Complications Arise

The story line in a ten-minute play should be more complicated than just the interaction of characters with strong needs. On the other hand, you don't want to create complications in your story that are not resolvable in ten pages. Perhaps a minor character needs conflict with your lead character to increase the drama. Or perhaps you can introduce an event that will alter the path of the story that you've started with. The last thing you want is a play that is predictable, where the audience is ahead of you because your conclusion is so obvious. Of course, the event must be believable and make sense with the facts of your story up to that point. I have seen many short plays in which the playwright seemed to have thrown something in just for "effect," and it didn't seem truthful to the story as a whole.

Realizing and Developing the Story of the Play

For me, there is usually an aha point somewhere along the line, where I "really get" what my play is about. I realize what story I'm trying to tell and who these characters are. Following that realization, I start working to make the story clearer. I've come to know who my main character is and what exactly he or she wants. Generally the other character(s) in the play have to be part of the conflict that the lead character is trying to overcome. (When, say, the two characters in the play are both trying to overcome a major threat to earth, or a plague, or some scenario like that, the obstacle is the unseen.) In either case, I need to know what specifically is in the way of the protagonist getting what he or she wants (the obstacle). These elements are the foundation for the first draft of that ten-minute play.

Sometimes the more I plunge into the play, the more I become an active participant. I feel the feelings of the characters as they discover their challenges and try to overcome them. I identify with their conflict and feel their frustrations as they attempt to overcome them.

Perhaps it's the actor in me, but I generally speak the dialogue as I write it, or right after I write it. I'm not sure if other playwrights do that. I know some writers can sit in a coffee shop and silently write their plays. I need to say the lines out loud, see how they feel. Sometimes I need to get up, move around, take the action that's called for.

As I begin to speak and embody the words I write, the play takes off, and a very rough first draft starts to emerge. I'm still trying to get my characters fleshed out, see what their conflicts are, and figure out how they may resolve them. I constantly return to the opening dialogue and follow the trail of the play I've written so far. My mind becomes a bit more analytical as I make small "refinements" along the way; a word here or a line there. Anything that, in the moment, feels right. Sometimes it becomes apparent

Should You Be an Actor in the First Readings of Your Ten-Minute Play?

No. For you to be able to really hear the initial readings of your play and do any necessary rewrites, you must be able to stand back and hear your play objectively—along with any comments that the first listeners make. It's best during these initial readings to sit in the rear of the group, where you can not only hear your play but also watch the audience. Notice any body language that may indicate that they're not into it. Since it is only a ten-minute play, most people shouldn't get restless or move around too much unless there is something wrong with the play and/or reading.

Listening to Feedback and Comments

Learning how to find value in comments can help you in your rewrites. So can knowing how to deal with negative or unhelpful comments. Opinions are like noses; everyone's got one. Try to be as neutral as possible and take the comments about your play with some detachment. I know that this is difficult because this is your baby, and you may feel very vulnerable as others comment on it (sometimes harshly), but the more you can just hear their comments without feeling like your play or your talent is being attacked, the better the reading will serve you.

Do not dispute the comments that are made about your play; just take them in. Don't justify anything that you feel was criticized. Praise should be accepted with appreciation but not given any more weight than the negative, harsher comments. It's always nice to know someone "got" your play and what you were trying to do. But whether a comment is positive or negative, it's likely to be subjective. We all have our own history, which can color our opinions. Try to ascertain where the commenter is coming from. This isn't always easy when folks are tearing your play apart.

Not Allowing Others to Rewrite Your Play

I see this a lot at play readings. People, trying to help, will make suggestions about how to fix this or that moment, or how to end your play, or how to make a character more sympathetic, believable, etc. Hopefully, the

narrator who is running the group will ask them to refrain from those sorts of suggestions.

If someone has a comment that totally baffles you, feel free to ask him or her to rephrase the question. If you still don't understand, ask him or her to please be more specific and if possible to refer to the section of the play that inspired the comment. At what particular moment of your play did the person become lost during the reading? What things didn't make sense or seemed illogical? The more specific the speaker can be, the more helpful their comments will be to you.

If everyone in the group makes the same comment about some aspect of your play, you may want to take a look at what they're saying. If you still feel you don't agree with them, don't change it. Try having the play read in another group. See if that point comes up again. If it does, then take another look at the point both groups have made.

There are sometimes group politics involved when people comment on plays. For instance, comments may reflect the general esteem in which some playwrights are held rather than the merits or flaws of a particular piece.

Some people making comments just like to hear themselves talk and to show everyone how intelligent they are. Take that into consideration when listening.

Again, just listen and take everything in, good and bad. In the end only you will know what actually needs to be addressed.

Back to Rewrites

Sometimes I take a break from working on the play and return to it at a later time. But if I received comments during the reading(s) that clicked for me, or I'm really hot on that particular play and genuinely feel I might be able to fix the problem, I continue on to the rewriting phase of the play, with these points in mind:

- Is this the story you wanted to tell?
- Is the conflict clearer?
- Are the characters better defined?
- Is there a clearer beginning, middle, and end?
- Does the play have a clear arc?
- Were you able to infuse any comments from the readings that you felt were appropriate into this draft?