WRITING THE ONE-ACT PLAY

A MANUAL FOR BEGINNERS

BY

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"Le théâtre est, avant tout, chose de fantaisie; je ne comprends donc pas qu'on l'emprisonne dans un système."

ALEXANDER DUMAS.

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FOREWORD

In adding another to the books on dramatic technique already in print, I feel that I owe the public an explanation, if not an actual apology. Less than two years ago Mr. Percival Wilde, author of several volumes of short plays, published his *Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play,* dealing, in a far more exhaustive way, with the same subject that is dealt with here. What need, then, of more of the same thing?

Just this, that Mr. Wilde, like Mr. William Archer in his *Playmaking* and Mr. George Pierce Baker in his *Dramatic Technique,* tells too much—too much, that is, for the beginner. All three books are splendid sources of reference, but as such they are for the advanced student. Writing even the simplest play is a task so complex and puzzling to those who undertake it for the first time, that they should be burdened, it seems to me, with as few details of theory as possible. Give them the main outlines of their problem and let them work out the exceptions, variant methods, and such fine points for themselves—that is the principle I go on. That, moreover, is the principle for which I have written this book, keeping as well as I could to what I consider the really big problems and letting everything else go. I have tried to write a book that the veriest amateur may use in building his first—and

even his second—play. After that he will no doubt be ready for more theory, and he should then go to Wilde.

Another difference between my book and the three I have mentioned is that, whereas they are written for the critic, mine is written for the dramatist. I mean that I have written more than they with an eye to the problems which confront the quite inexperienced young person who thinks he would like to try his hand at writing a play. Much of the material, and most of the ideas, contained in the following pages come from my own students. In the belief that their difficulties and experiences are typical of the difficulties and experiences of all beginners, I have based a considerable part of my illustrations on their own work, thereby giving the discussion a practical turn which will make up, I trust, for the homely flavor that much of it has. There is a difference between critical theory organized compendiously for the general reader, and critical theory organized selectively for the apprentice craftsman. Upon this difference I have based my book. The method I follow is the method I have used, with fair success, in my own classes.

As regards technical treatises on playwriting, they all follow one another in dealing mainly with the traditional type of play and ignoring fantasies, symbolic and expressionistic plays, and other departures from the norm. The reason is that the problems of such plays are too diverse to be treated *en masse*. Each problem must be studied for itself. Furthermore, ar-

tistic caprice is so free in such plays that it would be useless pedantry to reduce them to rule. But the normal or traditional type is based on agreed methods of procedure, so that reduction to principle, however much it may annoy certain liberal souls, is neither useless nor pedantic.

That playwriting can be taught—up to a certain point—I have no doubt. On the whole I agree with Mr. St. John Ervine, who has said somewhere that the main use of books of technique—or of instructors—is to tell what *not* to do. But then there is so much which one ought not to do in writing a play that this service is by no means small. Beginners need more guidance there than in any other form of literature; at least I judge so from the way in which students who have ambled easily through courses in poetry, essay, and short story stumble and flounder when they come to me. Usually the help I can give them puts them on their feet so that they do, ultimately, very decent work. Occasionally they do surprising work, creditable to any youngster, but really surprising as coming from people who do not set foot in a theater so often as half a dozen times a year. But then I know that it is not I who have taught them, nor any of the excellent books by Mr. Wilde and Mr. Baker and Mr. Archer that I make them read. In truth, they have passed beyond the mark at which teaching ceases; and how they have managed to do what they have done is one of the mysteries that not even the artist knows much about.

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CHAPTER I

THEME OR IDEA

1. *Short Story and Short Play.*

Most writers who deal with the one-act play compare it with the short story, pointing out that as the short story is to the novel, so the short play is to the full-length play. The validity of this algebraic equation as regards mere size is undeniable, but at the same time a closer and more questionable parallel is usually implied; that is to say, the artistic principles of the short story are similar to those of the short play, and although the narrative mode is different, the same considerations govern the selection of the theme and its development. It is true that in certain well known instances an exchange of influence has taken place between the two forms; Strindberg, for example, was guided in the development of certain of his dramatic theories by Poe's famous assertion of short-story unity. Yet the similarity between short story and short play is apparent rather than real. The test of intimacy would be the easy conversion of story into play, but as a matter of fact very few stories are thus easily convertible. They are as likely to lend themselves to treatment in three acts as in one,—witness the recently successful

Rain, and *Alias Jimmy Valentine* of an older generation, developed respectively from short stories by Somerset Maugham and O. Henry. In fact, the more one compares short stories and short plays, the more clearly one sees that the only resemblances are those of length and unity of effect, whereas in regard to themes and their development the differences are fundamental; and because an understanding of these differences should be of use in defining what a dramatic theme is, I shall try to make clear wherein they consist.

Of all writers of short stories with whom the average reader is familiar, I dare say that O. Henry is the one most generally regarded as inherently dramatic. His boldly and clearly drawn people, his "dramatic" plots seasoned with coincidence and surprise in a way which recalls certain phases of the theatre, his crisp dialogue full of "mots de caractère" which might often be lifted bodily to the stage—these are some of the reasons why, at first glance, O. Henry's stories seem admirably adapted to dramatization. Furthermore, the author himself is aware of this inclination toward the theatre; he treats his stories as though half dramatized, talks about setting the stage or raising the curtain, and thus nourishes the illusion that his stories are plays which for his own reasons he has chosen to write in narrative form. But it *is* an illusion. Occasionally one comes upon a story, like "Past One at Rooney's," which could be arranged for the stage in a single scene, but the great bulk of them are unadaptable, and for more reasons than one.

First, they are, for the most part, too incredible. Take, for instance, "The Thing's the Play," [1] a story which O. Henry treats throughout in terms of the stage.

A young girl is loved by two men. On the night of her wedding to one of them the rejected suitor forces his way into her room and is discovered by the husband, who promptly renounces his wife and deserts her. Twenty years pass. The wife, still beautiful and still faithful, is keeping a select boarding house. Two of the inmates thereof are in love with her, and both make a strange impression of old times. Sure enough, they are the husband, suffering from aphasia, and the lover.

Well, here is a story that could be arranged for the stage; it would have to be done in two scenes, but it could be done. But what would the stage make of it? Can you not hear the groans of disgust, the whistles and cat-calls that would damn this piece of ancient artifice? "Theatrical in the worst sense—utterly unreal," would be the verdict. Perfectly true; and true also that the strained coincidence which would make the play ridiculous exists as well in the story. But O. Henry, using the resources of his art, can and does throw a misleading glamour over the story that distracts our attention from the artificialities; we are more interested in the narrator's personality than in the story he is telling. On the stage, however, that personality would vanish, and the story would stand out stark,

[1] In *Strictly Business.*

unrelieved, trite, incredible. Obviously, then, in a story there are many things besides action and character, and in a readable story these two may even be nil; but on the stage action and character bear the heavy brunt, and they must be stout enough to support the weight laid on them.

Secondly, O. Henry's themes are for the most part too fragile. They are anecdotal, sufficient for the light, casual stories that he weaves about them, but too flimsy for the stage. It is well to bear in mind that in comparison with any printed story even the airiest stage play involves a quantity of labour—gathering and rehearsing a cast, preparing the stage, and assembling an audience—which demands in compensation that the play shall satisfy with something more than a moment's amusement. The hearer must be left with no irritating after-sense of having been lured into a theatre to be put off with a trifle, something which might have been worth ten minutes by the library lamp but not more. Take, for example, "The Thing's the Play;" aside from its other lets and hindrances, the story would not serve as a play simply because it would seem too inconsequential. In essence it is the history of a wife who loses her husband by accident and recovers him, by accident, twenty years later. It is an anecdote, no more—an anecdote which illustrates nothing, proves nothing, answers no questions except the trivial one: "Isn't it queer how things turn out?" Or take some of O. Henry's most admired stories. "After

Twenty Years" [1] tells of two men who agree to meet twenty years hence on a certain street and compare notes on their success in the battle of life. When they keep their appointment one is a police detective and the other a notorious crook. Thereupon one friend puts the other in jail. Here is dramatic contrast, certainly, and a piquant contrast. But as it stands, the story is too thin; one can see how it might be made the *beginning* of a play, but the main part of the action would have to be invented. Or again, take that delightful farce "A Harlem Tragedy." [2]

Mrs. Cassidy lives happily with Mr. Cassidy, who has an annoying way of blacking her eye occasionally, but who always makes up in princely fashion and thus brings into her life the delicious zest of variety; whereas Mrs. Fink is unhappy with a model husband who never lifts even his voice against her. Finally in desperation she provokes the spineless one with words and blows, hungry for the beating that will make her a happy wife. But when Mrs. Cassidy, hearing the unwonted commotion above, hastens to Mrs. Fink's apartment, she is met at the door by a woman dissolved in hopeless tears. "He—he never touched me, and—he's—oh, Gawd—he's washin' the clothes—he's washin' the clothes!"

This is deft, cheerful comedy, rising to a well contrived climax, with the curtain speech ready at hand. But here again the theme is too slight, at least as O. Henry

[1] In *The Four Million.*
[2] In *The Trimmed Lamp.*

deals with it. He gives most attention to the Cassidys, whereas if the thing were to be done into a play the center of interest would be the Finks, especially the male Fink; and that would be quite another story. Or take "Between Rounds," [1] in which we are told how Mr. and Mrs. McCaskey, who are forever throwing the dishes and bric-a-brac at each other, are melted into a loving mood by the loss of a little neighbor boy, only to renew the battle with greater heat when the boy is found. Or take handfuls of other stories in the dozen or more of his volumes; in nearly every case you will find that the themes are too fragile to bear the weight of stage paraphernalia. There is all the difference in the world between a theme that will serve for a story and a theme that is stout enough for a play.

Thirdly, O. Henry's narrative method is the method of short story, not of play. That is to say, instead of being concentrated and, so to speak, crystallized, it is free, fluid, discursive. Using the privilege of his art, he flits, in these tight little stories, over scores of years, leaps in a twinkling from place to place, changes his point of vantage from one observer to another. But the maker of one-act plays must see his action naturally centered in one place, beginning, culminating, and ending there. Moreover, it must be done wholly in dialogue, without a chance of intervention from the author. What would he do with "The Pendulum"? [2] Here is a story with a good theme, which tells of a young

[1] In *The Four Million.*
[2] In *The Trimmed Lamp.*

husband, John, fallen into the dismal rut of married life. Every evening after a wordless dinner he reaches for his hat and guesses he will "go up to McCloskey's and shoot a game of pool." Then one day he finds a note telling that Kate has been called away suddenly, and in the succeeding days of loneliness, as he goes over his shortcomings, he recognizes and confesses them all. When she comes back, he says, what a different husband he will be! Then she does, suddenly, come back, and after the first surprised greetings John reaches for his hat and guesses he will "go up to McCloskey's and shoot a game of pool." Well, here we have it—a complete bit of ironic comedy. But what can we do with it? How can we show on the stage, with anything like O. Henry's swift and sure economy, the deadly life this pair have lived? Yet we must do it, if the point of the play is to be "put across." Further, what can we do with the lonely days that are passed while John is making heroic resolutions to be an unselfish husband? Possibly we could condense the whole action to half an hour, so word the letter that John would think he had been deserted, and give him a male confidant—one of the "McCloskey" boys—for him to pour out his regrets upon; but in so doing we would wholly destroy the essence of the story, and in its place we should have that useless piece of lumber, a dull play.

Similar difficulties would arise, I venture to say, with nineteen out of twenty short stories, chosen at random. The reader may object that O. Henry's an-

ecdotal romances are not a fair test of this generalization, and that the work of other writers has more body. But the stories of Stevenson, to take an artist of a different calibre, will yield the same results when brought to the same test. Not a few attempts have been made, we are told, to change "The Sire de Maletroit's Door" into a one-act play, and all of them have failed. The reason why they must fail, in spite of the fact that the action passes in a relatively short space of time and in one room, is clear and insurmountable. Stevenson brings two young people together under peculiar circumstances, creates a romantic dilemma in which a natural attraction is counterbalanced by certain niceties of honor, and then solves the dilemma by a long conversation, lasting through the night, treated briefly and vaguely, in a way that could not possibly be handled in the theatre. The writer of romance deals with this scene as one of slight importance—he tells us in a few words that Denis and Blanche adjust their difficulties; but the playwright must *show* them doing so, a thing which he can not manage without a long, low-keyed dialogue at the end of his play, at the very place where emphasis and movement are needed. "Markheim," another tempting story, involves the apparition of a murderer's better self (identical in appearance, of course) and again a long, low-keyed dialogue in the latter half of the play.[1] Thus both of

[1] Cf. Percival Wilde: *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*, p. 206.