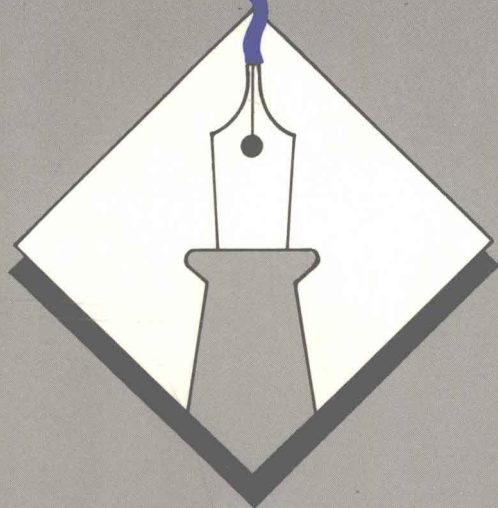


◆ THE ART OF THE ◆
PLAYWRIGHT



CREATING THE
MAGIC OF THEATRE

WILLIAM PACKARD

Foreword by Jose Ferrer
Preface by Gene Frankel

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THE ART OF THE PLAYWRIGHT

This book is dedicated to S. Barnitz Williams,
who taught me Senior English at Hebron Academy
in Maine and who encouraged me to write every
day of my life.

FOREWORD

William Packard says that this book “tries to speak to both the serious playwright and the serious playgoer.”

To the serious playwright who is young, still serving his apprenticeship and learning his craft, *The Art of The Playwright* will outline the bones of technique over which he can drape the flesh of his art.

And if the seasoned and experienced (and therefore very serious) playwright is anything like the rest of us, he will never cease to learn, to rediscover the things he has known all along, and Mr. Packard may remind him of some of them.

When it comes to serious playgoers, I suspect that most of them enjoy the theatre in the way that most of us enjoy music: we are basically ignorant about the very thing we are enjoying. The delight I derive from music is tempered by the knowledge that my gratification would be greater if I could listen with an informed and subtle ear.

Similarly, although your average playgoer (and for the purposes of this little homily let us pretend that such an “average” creature exists) is neither insensitive nor unaware, he nevertheless comes away from a dramatic performance not thinking (saying) anything much more substantial than “I had a really good time” or “I found it very moving (amusing)” or the vague equivalent thereof. I submit therefore that the enjoyment of any work of art is increased by familiarity with the technical processes of creation, and William Packard’s book surely will be an exciting guide to anyone who wishes more fully to participate in the theatrical experience.

Alfred Hitchcock liked to refer to actors as “just children” (despite his inability to practice his profession without them). And in theatre circles it is common knowledge that more than one playwright has wished his plays could be performed without actors. Similarly, actors have been heard to mutter that they prefer to perform the works of playwrights who are either dead or at least somewhere else at the time of the performance.

Given this uncomfortable symbiosis (Webster: “the relationship of two or more organisms in a close association that may be but is not necessarily of benefit to each”), I am not unaware of the incongruity of an actor writing an introduction to a work on playwriting. My justification for performing this implausible task is that from the first time I stepped on the stage I perceived that I was an interpreter and not a creator, that without me the play went on, whereas without the playwright I could not go on. If *Hamlet* had never been performed it would still exist as a play, but no actor can act who has not been given words to speak. First comes the play, and only then comes the actor. It is in this spirit of unaccustomed humility that I pay tribute to *The Art of The Playwright*, a book which clearly and usefully explains the mechanics of creating something that makes it possible for me to earn a living.

José Ferrer

One of the most versatile actors ever to work in the American theatre, José Ferrer won an Academy Award for his performance in Cyrano de Bergerac, and is also known for his performance as Toulouse-Lautrec in Moulin Rouge, and his direction and starring role as Dreyfus. Equally at home on television, film, and stage, Mr. Ferrer scored an early triumph in his interpretation of Iago to Paul Robeson’s Othello, also starring Uta Hagen as Desdemona.

PREFACE

From Neil Simon's advice to himself, ". . . Write slow but tear up fast," to George S. Kaufman's injunction to Moss Hart (*Act One*), "Just think about the bare bones baby," to Walter Kerr's instruction to everybody, "How Not to Write a Play," people have been telling people about playwriting.

Now Mr. Packard has written a new book on "The Art of the Playwright." I immediately suggested he retitled the book. I don't think it's modesty on my part to assert that there is no such thing as the Art of the Playwright, just as there is no such thing as the Art of the Director. Playwrights have skills as do directors but all of these skills relate to the creation of the theatre event. The art we all serve is the art of the theatre and it is a composite art. Authors, actors, directors, designers are all its practitioners.

Despite its title, I liked Mr. Packard's book because it was good to be reminded that we who practice theatre art have to practice it pragmatically. The most often asked question in our rehearsal halls

is: “does it work or doesn’t it work” and, of course, if it works, don’t fix it. I at first was reluctant to say such an obvious thing, but after some thought decided it is fun to say an old thing, marred though the fun is by the knowledge that the message has already been delivered.

What one needs in this situation is the reassurance that we have freshly-eyed, poked and prodded it and come up with something usable. Mr. Packard has done this. Then by all means let’s state it. State it with august gratification. Roll it off the tongue. Announce it in the manner it deserves. Mr. Packard says it just right and Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary supports him.

“WRIGHT (rit), n. [ME wrighte, from AS. *wyrhia*, a worker, workman, maker, creator, from *wyrca*n, to work.] One who makes or constructs; a workman; as in shipwright, wheelwright, etc.” The distance from playwrite to playwright is much more than the spelling of a word.

Truman Capote once made a sharp distinction between people who write and people who typewrite. We of the theatre, actors and directors alike, must constantly remind ourselves that we must make distinctions between writing for the page and writing for the stage.

Mr. Packard does more than this; he makes us remember what the Greek orators never forgot—that the key to eloquence is action, always action.

So, from Neil Simon’s neat nifty that playwrighting is not writing but rewriting, to George Kaufman’s urging us to get “them X-ray eyes,” or Walter Kerr’s elbowing us to “see around corners,” we now have Mr. William Packard’s book, which is not about writing or playwrighting but about play creation. I welcome it.

Gene Frankel

Gene Frankel has left his mark on all areas of the American theatre—Broadway, off-Broadway, regional theatre and television. His major directing credits on Broadway include Indians with Stacey Keach, and Maxwell Anderson’s Lost in the Stars. A three time Obie winner, Mr. Frankel teaches his own theatre workshops.

PROLOGUE

WHY WRITE PLAYS?

Imagine sitting in a theatre—the house lights are bright, there is an excited awareness in the air, then a sudden hush as the lights die down and there is darkness and silence before the front curtain begins to rise and the stage lights come up on the set. And for an instant it feels as if one is about to enter into a dream state where anything can take place, because this theatre is an arena that seems to be more real than one's own everyday world.

This is the beginning of magic in the theatre, where the stage becomes a sacred place and one approaches it with awe as one approaches anything that opens out onto the unknown. It is an art form that can take ordinary appearances and transform them into extraordinary realities, through the invisible craft of dramatic action. It is an experience of the illimitable possibilities of the shapes and faces of life, as Eugene O'Neill describes it:

I mean the one true theatre, the age-old theatre, the theatre of the Greeks and the Elizabethans, a theatre that could dare to boast—without committing a farcical sacrilege—that it is a legitimate descendant of the first theatre that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysos. I mean a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among the masks of the living!¹

And throughout history, this one true theatre has existed wherever there have been true playwrights who were capable of imparting their own imaginative interpretation of life to the audiences who came to see their plays. For the Greek theatre of Epidaurus, it was Aeschylus and Sophocles; for the Globe Theatre in England, it was Shakespeare; for the Comédie-Française in Paris, it was Molière; for the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia, it was Chekhov; and for the Berliner Ensemble in Germany, it was Bertolt Brecht.

Unfortunately for us, in our modern commercial Broadway theatre, it is too often the producers and the directors and the star actors—to say nothing of the set designers and the choreographers and the lighting technicians, as well as their respective unions—who substitute for the playwright and his vital role in the theatrical process. Or in our regional theatres, too often it is the millions of dollars which are initially invested in a lot of fancy new theatre complexes which may then stand idle for long periods of time, or else are converted into swanky dinner-theatres where a desperate management throws together a few classy revivals of sure-fire old standards to make ends meet. We don't ever seem to have had the faith in the central place of the playwright in this country which is needed to create a truly contemporary American theatre.

The irony is that we do have the playwrights. Take any twelve outstanding contemporary dramatists you can think of: David Berry, Christopher Durang, John Guare, David Hare, Beth Henley, Israel Horovitz, Arthur Kopit, David Mamet, Marsha Norman, David Rabe, Sam Shepard, and Lanford Wilson—these playwrights have already created a body of work that is impressive in its own right, and which also goes a long way towards restoring the art of playwriting to its rightful place at the heart of the one true theatre.

This book is devoted to the exploration of dramatic techniques

that can create magic in the theatre. It describes the practical craft of how plays are made, how to use actions and onstage visuals, and how to approach the appropriate development of character, dialogue, motifs, plots, and conflicts. The book is also intended for the theatre-lover and playgoer who wants to know more about the principles of dramatic action that playwrights have used through the ages. These dramatic principles are spelled out in any number of books of theory—in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, and in Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*, and in Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art*, *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role*—but these dramatic principles are also to be found in all the great plays that have ever been written and performed in the great world theatres. What we have to do here is try to unite theory and practice, so we can give fresh expression and real relevance to the most important principles of dramatic action.

Incidentally, throughout the course of this book we will be using the masculine pronouns "he" and "his" to stand for the playwright, although this is simply for the sake of grammatical convenience. The theatre today is more open to women playwrights and readers and critics and actresses and audiences than at any time in its history—so when we say "his theatre," we are really saying "his or her theatre."

And one other thing: before we proceed to any discussion of the dynamics of dramatic principles in this book, we had better be very clear as to the motivation behind why people try to write plays in the first place. When there is so much more money to be made in writing almost anything other than plays—for example, novels or short stories or essays or biographies or straight journalism—why do so many playwrights persist in trying to write plays? We've all heard nightmare stories about how maddening it can be to take part in the chaotic collaborative work of the theatre, where so many mistakes can be made from first casting to final directorial interpretation, and where everyone from the actors to the stagehands may insist on having input on the writer's lines. And even if the playwright should manage to get his play produced in any reasonable facsimile of his original intention, that's no guarantee that an audience will receive it without being fickle or recalcitrant or plain cold.

So the question becomes very important for us to settle at the outset: why should any writer in his right mind keep returning to

this particular art form of playwriting, when it's obviously not as lucrative or secure or soul-satisfying as any number of other outlets he could find for his writing?

To answer this question, we have to go back to the origins of drama as the earliest of all art forms. 50,000 years ago, before the first cave man evolved the most primitive spoken or pictorial communication, he had to signal his wants and fears and needs to his fellow cave men through a series of awkward mime gestures and crude dramatic visuals. As in our earliest infancy, the first human impulse has always been to show through pointing and gesturing, with our hands or with whatever other visuals may be immediately available to us. Thus *showing* comes before *telling*, and drama comes before language, and in this way primitive theatre began before the great epic narrative poems or histories or novels or short stories or essays. Drama is, quite simply, the most primitive form of human expression imaginable.

With time, drama grew into something much more than a simple signalling of human needs—in Greece, it developed into a ritual chant and dance and it also took on the drunken frenzy and the wild rhythmic movement we associate with certain contemporary rock stars. In fact the word “tragedy” comes from “tragoidia” or goat-song, and signifies the death and resurrection of Dionysos, the god of fertility and drunkenness. So the first Greek dance-drama Tragedies have all the primal passion of prayer and orgy, and they show the eternal conflict between the cool lucid Apollo logic of consciousness and the dark unconscious sexual poetry of Dionysos. Not that the Greek theatre was always so deadly serious—the Tragedies were invariably accompanied by satyr plays which were phallic romps and bawdy satirical farces which poked fun at the great mythic stories that had just taken place on stage. Even so, those soaring heroic plays like *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus Rex* and *The Trojan Women* depict the human psyche in its truest intuitive rhythms, and they are such exalted statements of our human condition that even today they can still evoke our deepest hopes and fears.

There were strong conventions that guided the development of this Greek drama. For example, during the performance of every tragedy there was always an altar to Dionysos onstage that was in full view of the audience, so there could be no overt violence performed in the course of the play. Thus Medea kills her children offstage, Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon behind the closed doors of the

palace, and Oedipus tears out his eyes within the walls of his house—and these actions are then reported by messengers who come onstage to describe the violent events. There was also the chorus, which chanted and sang and danced throughout the play, and this gave the playwright an opportunity to create his own very special kind of dramatic language. And the Greek audiences were so attuned to the music of this language that they knew when a chorus went into a complicated verse form strophe, that it was going to be followed by another equally complicated verse form anti-strophe—and heaven help anyone in the chorus who missed a beat in the rhythm, because the audience would know it immediately and might just take that person offstage afterwards and punish him by giving him a good punch in the stomach.

Yet for all the greatness of this early Greek drama, and for all the overwhelming power of these magnificent Tragedies, even so, we can still sense there had always been a subtle distrust of the theatre, beginning with the first playwright, Thespis, around 560 B.C., who started spoken drama by standing on a table and shouting back at the chorus. Solon the law-giver did not approve of this because, as he said, Thespis sounded too much like “a theatrical liar.” And over a hundred years later, Aristotle praised *Oedipus Rex* as the greatest play ever written, although we know that this Sophocles tragedy did not win first prize when it was performed in 425 B.C.—perhaps because the incest and parricide of the play was too much even for Athenian audiences. And as the years went on, this subtle distrust of the theatre grew more and more until it had become a very real persecution and prohibition against all drama. In the fourth century A.D., Augustine condemned the theatre as a thoroughly worthless and corrupt excess of his profligate youth:

Stage-plays also carried me away, full of images of my miseries and of fuel to my fire. Why is it that man desires to be made sad beholding doleful and tragical things, which yet himself would by no means suffer? Yet he desires as a spectator to feel sorrow at them, and this very sorrow is his pleasure. What is this but a miserable madness?²

“A miserable madness”—Augustine was reacting to the cruel and crass and melodramatic Roman theatre which was presented in North Africa during the fourth century A.D. Nevertheless, Augustine’s notion of theatre as “a miserable madness” lived on as an undercurrent attitude through the entire Middle Ages, when theatre

as we know it was expressly forbidden by the Church and only craft guilds were allowed to put on carefully censored miracle and mystery plays which illustrated the medieval Catholicism of that era.

This historical bias against theatre continued into the Renaissance—Shakespeare himself had to write his plays under the watchful eye of the Master of the Revels who was appointed in 1581 to suppress profanity and other outrages in plays before they could be performed in public. Even so, Shakespeare was able to write plays of such vast and passionate scope that they encompassed the endless energy of life itself. Plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Henry V*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Tempest* represent an explosion of language with a vocabulary of over 15,000 words, including words newly coined by Shakespeare, technical terms from the fields of music, astronomy, navigation, warfare, and the court, and street terms that were not usually heard in polite conversation.

But the real genius of Shakespeare lies not just in his mastery of language, magnificent as that language is—it is his use of extraordinarily strong and clear dramatic actions which are almost always embodied in the most remarkable onstage visuals. Shakespeare knew he had various stage levels and technical effects at his disposal in the Globe Theatre, and he shaped his plays accordingly. The Globe stage had balconies, inner and outer rooms, curtains to hide behind, trap doors, and a large forestage for direct address to the audience—so Shakespeare filled his plays with balcony scenes, eavesdropping scenes, plays within plays, sudden appearances and disappearances of ghosts and ghouls and gravediggers, and of course, dramatic soliloquys on the forestage. The result is the most comprehensive theatre that has ever been achieved, a miraculous fusion of language and actions and visuals, which is the height of the art of playwriting.

Yet for all the genius of Shakespeare, the repression of theatre kept right on during his own lifetime. In Elizabethan England the profession of playwriting was considered a second-rate trade, perhaps a few pegs above bear-baiting and witch-hunting—how else can we explain the virtual anonymity of Shakespeare himself, and the evident disregard of his achievement by practically all his compatriots and contemporaries? And outside his own country, the Kirk of Scotland was so outraged by these shocking new plays, that he tried to prohibit all theatrical productions of them, and when that proved unsuccessful, the Kirk forbade people from attending the

performances. And a few years after the death of Shakespeare, at the time of the Puritan Revolution in 1642, the good men of God couldn't wait to close down the London theatres and end this pesky English drama as quickly as possible. For all the genius of William Shakespeare, the theatre was still considered, as Augustine had perceived it to be, nothing but "a miserable madness."

In our modern world, the subtle distrust of the theatre persists as a curious repression. Stanislavsky, the great Russian director and actor and co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, and the pioneer teacher of modern "method" acting theory, tells us an astonishing thing about himself in his autobiography:

Often I was forced to play in the company of suspicious-looking people. What could I do? There were no other places to act, and I so wanted to act. Among these amateurs there were gamblers and demimondaines. And I, a man of position, a director of the Russian Musical Society, found that it was dangerous for my reputation if I appeared. It was necessary to hide behind some pseudonym. I sought a strange name, thinking that it would hide my early identity. I had known an amateur by the name of Doctor Stanislavsky. He had stopped playing, and I decided to adopt his name, thinking that behind a name as Polish as Stanislavsky no one could ever recognize me.³

Remarkable!—this father of modern acting technique felt so "embarrassed" by the theatrical profession, he felt he had to change his name to protect his family and his reputation from scandal! His real name was Konstantine Sergeyevich Aleyev, yet the name we know him by today—a name which is not at all Russian, but Polish—is his adopted name, "Stanislavsky." What better metaphor for theatre as a kind of "miserable madness," than that its greatest modern teacher and director felt he had to deceive people in order to participate in it!

Stanislavsky's changing his name may remind us of the modern practice of actors changing their names to work in the theatre or in films. During the days of the studio system in Hollywood, it was not unusual for producers to want to shape their actors so they would have absolute appeal for a mass audience, and that usually meant creating new names for them—especially if their given names seemed to be too ethnic or idiosyncratic or plain odd to suit the fancy of the studio personnel. Another reason for changing a name is that both professional unions—Actors Equity and the Screen Actors Guild—have strict rules prohibiting any member from using the

name of a previously established actor. This is for obvious professional reasons, to prevent one actor from drawing on the fame and following of another actor—so the exclusive use of a name by one actor is like copyrighting a commercial property. Some other actors may have changed their names for the same reasons of “personal embarrassment” that Stanislavsky cited. Or there may have been a combination of reasons at work. In any event, here is a list of some well known show business personalities, with their real names and their professional names:

| | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| Isidore Itskowitz | Eddie Cantor |
| Arthur Jefferson | Stan Laurel |
| Douglas Ulman | Douglas Fairbanks |
| W. C. Dukinfield | W. C. Fields |
| Samuel Goldfish | Samuel Goldwyn |
| Gladys Smith | Mary Pickford |
| Sean O’Feeny | John Ford |
| Ehrich Weiss | Harry Houdini |
| Bernie Schwartz | Tony Curtis |
| Marion Morrison | John Wayne |
| Charles Edward Pratt | Boris Karloff |
| Richard Jenkins | Richard Burton |
| Norma Jean Baker | Marilyn Monroe |
| Frances Gumm | Judy Garland |
| Archie Leach | Cary Grant |
| Frank Cooper | Gary Cooper |
| Robert Zimmerman | Bob Dylan |

To be sure, one can think of many other actors who did not change their names upon entering show business—there are the older veteran actors who may already have become known in their original home countries, like Joseph Schildkraut, Vittorio Gassman, Ricardo Montalban, Oscar Homolka, Omar Sharif, George Tobias, and Peter Lorre—and there is also the younger generation of actors who may not feel any strong ethnic or professional or personal reasons for changing their names, like John Cassavetes, John Travolta, Sylvester Stallone, Liza Minelli, Liv Ullman, Sissy Spacek, Robert De Niro, and Maximilian Schell.

There are other examples of a subtle distrust of the theatre in our daily lives. We talk about someone “acting out” his problems, or we tell our children to “stop showing off,” or we remember that in our own childhood we were told not to be “so theatrical”—all of these things being very casual put-downs of an honorable profession. We