



The Elements of Playwriting

HOW TO WRITE STAGEWORTHY PLAYS,
DEVELOP YOUR THEATRE SENSE, CREATE
THEATRICAL CHARACTERS, SHAPE PLOT AND
DIALOGUE, AND FIND THE RESOURCES
TO GET YOUR PLAY PRODUCED

Louis E. Catron

THE ELEMENTS OF PLAYWRITING

Louis E. Catron

MACMILLAN • USA

To my mother

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Macmillan General Reference
A Simon & Schuster Macmillan Company
1633 Broadway
New York, NY 10019-6785

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Catron, Louis E.

The elements of playwriting / Louis E. Catron.—1st Collier Books ed.

p. cm.

Originally published: New York : Macmillan, 1993.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-02-069291-9

1. Playwriting. I. Title.

[PN1661.C367 1994]

93-31653

CIP

808.2—dc20

Special Sales Director
Macmillan General Reference
A Simon & Schuster Macmillan Company
1633 Broadway
New York, NY 10019-6785

10 9 8 7 6

Printed in the United States of America

THE ELEMENTS OF PLAYWRITING

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Writing, Producing, and Selling Your Play

*The Director's Vision: Play Direction from
Analysis to Production*

Playwriting

*Overcoming Directorial Mental Blocks about
Blocking*

Writers at Work

(Part One)

STAN: *My head is tightening up. I'm all constricted inside. I just can't think.* (He thinks, then looks at EUGENE.) *This is hard, Gene. Really hard.*

EUGENE: *I know.*

STAN: *I won't give up if you don't give up.*

EUGENE: *I won't give up.*

STAN: *I love being a writer.*

EUGENE: *Me, too.*

STAN: *It's just the writing that's hard. . . . You know what I mean?*

EUGENE: *Yeah.*

NEIL SIMON
Broadway Bound

Acknowledgments

Special thanks are due to Michael Sullivan, a good friend and a literate gentleman, for his suggestions and encouragement that started this book.

I am indebted to those who reviewed the manuscript and made excellent critical suggestions. Although any errors remain mine, this book's contents reflect their expert insights into the art, craft, and business of playwriting.

In particular I appreciate the generous suggestions and comments from William Talbot, senior editor at Samuel French, Inc.; Robert A. Freedman of the Robert A. Freedman Dramatic Agency, Inc., and an officer of the Association of Authors' Representatives; Gillian Richards, literary coordinator for the Theatre Communications Group; Dana S. Singer, director of business affairs for the Dramatists Guild, Inc.; Mollie Ann Meserve, president of Feedback Theatrebooks; and Steve Soderberg, head, Information Office, and other information specialists in the Copyright Office at the Library of Congress.

Richard Palmer, my colleague at the College of William and Mary, was constantly available to read chapters in progress, make insightful recommendations, and discuss the art and mysteries of theatre.

Beth C. Mills, at the office of the William and Mary Department of Theatre and Speech, deserves special thanks for her patient and thorough proofreading of the manuscript.

Natalie Chapman, senior editor at Macmillan, was especially helpful with her thoughtful questions and recommendations, always directly on target, always supportive and encouraging.

Finally, I am most grateful to the William and Mary students with whom I've worked in classes and theatrical productions. Over the years their probing questions, earnest discussions, and eagerness to create good theatre have continually educated me.

Introduction

I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being. The supremacy of the theatre derives from the fact that it is always "now" on the stage.

THORNTON WILDER

A creative writer is a spelunker of ideas who enjoys poking through uncharted caves, using the bright light of curiosity to illuminate unfamiliar caverns and bypasses, following twisting thoughts simply to discover where they lead. Your expedition may uncover brilliant new treasures, sparkling gems that create a powerful story with fascinating characters. Or it may end at cul-de-sacs that go nowhere, making you grope back to the beginning to start again, yet wiser and enriched for the search.

Is there a map that guarantees you'll discover the right passage to writing your play?

No.

Despite fervent and even dictatorial advice you'll often find in playwriting books or hear from other writers, no single exploratory system works for all writers all the time. There are certain guidelines that can help you, however, and *The Elements of Playwriting* shows you specific approaches that will help you bring your play to life while avoiding dead-end paths.

Whether you're a beginning writer starting your first exploration into playwriting or a more experienced playwright seek-

ing new insight into improving plays you've completed, you'll find that *The Elements of Playwriting* gives you practical guidelines, insightful quotations from writers and directors, numerous examples from classical and modern plays, and exercises that will help you be a playwright. Direct references to what producers, directors, and actors look for in plays will help you write for specific theatrical needs, aiding you to become a *produced* playwright.

This book explores what being a playwright means—expressing your personal point of view, bringing your vision to life, developing dimensional characters, structuring your play's action, creating effective dialogue, and finding producers, directors, and actors to bring your work to life. The book's goal is to help you create powerful theatrical excitement through writing monodramas, one-acts, and full-length plays.

Being a playwright means understanding that writing is the route to learning—about playwriting, of course, but also about yourself and your world. Being a playwright means writing, searching for your ideas. *Writing leads to writing*. Never feel discouraged if your play doesn't jump full-blown into existence. Plays seldom do. If you don't have a precise grasp of what to write, write to discover what you want to write.

This book contains numerous exercises to help you make those discoveries about yourself as well as about the art of writing plays. The exercises guide you through the writing process so you can, as playwright Thornton Wilder says, use theatre to share with another what it is to be a human being. Do the exercises carefully, please, because they are constructed with progressive steps to lead you through the maze of playwriting.

Be patient with your progress. Years of training and study are necessary to become a brain surgeon or a lawyer. Playwriting is no less challenging or demanding, and you should expect to learn your craft through constant writing, experimentation, and study.

This book will help you learn the playwright's art and craft, appreciate the similarities and differences between playwriting and other forms of creative writing, respect the work of your theatrical colleagues who give of themselves to bring your play to life, and (in keeping with Thornton Wilder's quotation that begins this preface) honor the theatre as humanity's most significant art.

You'll also find answers to questions playwrights frequently ask, tips about writing techniques, and suggestions to help you avoid pitfalls.

The Elements of Playwriting is based on the premise that anyone, regardless of age or education, can learn techniques of playwriting, providing you bring convictions about your world, motivation and perseverance, a love of theatre, a deep desire to learn and improve while remaining patient with your learning process, and a driving hunger to express your ideas in theatrical form. You also must want to learn playwriting's basic rules and guidelines that help you become a master storyteller.

Paradoxically, playwriting is a creative art that defies rules, yet it is an exacting craft that must follow theatre's basic (and, all things considered, valuable) restrictions. Any text on playwriting must choose between a prescriptive approach that states "here's the only way to write your play" and a freewheeling approach that tells the writer to "just do your own thing" but gives little or no concrete help. This book suggests a sensible compromise between the extremes of rigidity and freewheeling.

Start by learning the rules and guidelines. Understand why they exist. Accept the fact that they help you create stageworthy plays. Then feel free to violate them according to the demands of your play and the theatre's requirements, but not simply to follow fads or to be different for the sake of difference.

It is certainly easier to tell you that there are no principles, no rules, no guidelines, no discipline in the art and craft of playwriting. Some theorists tell you that modern writing is freewheeling, that the concept of "action" is out of date, and that the works of some modern writers prove that great plays can be written without dramatic tension, conflict, or action.

Those opinions are—let's be blunt—products of muddled, wrong-headed thinking. One suspects that such theorists have never gotten into actually writing or staging plays (or if they did, they did it poorly). Perhaps they look at plays as if they are "literature." But plays are not literature, except in secondary ways. Plays are written for the stage, and one test of any script is simple: Is it stageworthy? The various rules, guidelines, and disciplines exist for one reason: to help playwrights construct stageworthy plays.

I bring to this book years of experience as a theatrical director and playwriting and acting teacher. I've directed over 150 plays and musicals and supervised productions of perhaps half again that number, including original plays, and I've written books on playwriting and play direction as well as articles in national writers' magazines. That experience teaches me that playwriting, acting, and directing, often viewed as separate disciplines, share so many similarities that knowledge of one feeds knowledge of the others. These pages reflect those years of stage experience.

Being a playwright means, after all, writing *stageworthy* plays. You must know what actors and directors look for in a play, as well as what makes them reject a script. You write in theatrical form so those theatre artists can transform your play from the page to the stage for an audience.

Writing stageworthy plays is a challenging goal in itself, but it is more difficult because of the influences of television and motion pictures. According to various estimates, the average person has viewed more than nineteen thousand hours of television by the time he or she graduates from high school. Add thousands more hours watching movies. As a result, cinematic writing techniques are implanted in that person's subconscious. It's a powerful form of brainwashing that the playwright must combat. You must want to write for the stage, not TV, although learning playwriting is an excellent approach to screenwriting.

Theatrical agents, producers, directors, play publishers, and contest judges report they are distressed to receive an ever-increasing number of nonstageworthy scripts that ignore the theatre's special strengths and instead are based on cinematic writing techniques. Characteristics of TV-influenced playscripts include narrow and stereotyped characters, incomplete action and fragmentary scenes written to fit around commercial breaks, blandly noncontroversial topics to avoid offending advertisers, rapid and repeated shifts in time and place that film easily achieves but theatre does not, scenes that do not end but seem to need the music that accompanies a TV close-up of a character's face as the screen fades to a blackout, "opening up" the script to encompass panoramic concepts in contrast to theatre's focus on detail, not very funny one-liners that require an artificial laugh-track, and even camera movements and zoom lens effects.

This book stresses avoiding cinematic writing by writing *stage-*

worthy plays. We define the term from several points of view. We stress theatrical needs. We indicate rules and guidelines that help you write for live theatre. Most important, we continually illustrate points with references to the directors and actors who will bring your play to life on stage.

Certain premises underlie this book. We can state them briefly here as a guide to the following chapters.

- Anyone can learn to write a play. Playwriting offers equal opportunity employment, open to all, and blind to sex, race, religion, national origin, occupation, educational background, and age.
- Drama is the art of the showdown. Conflict, in one form or another, is an essential quality for effective playwriting.
- The playwright is first and foremost a storyteller. He or she may be a philosopher, theologian, psychologist, historian, biographer; the playwright may seek to evoke political or social change; or the playwright may want to amuse or anger audiences. Always, though, the playwright is a master storyteller in the tradition of the ancient shaman, using theatrical magic to captivate audiences while illuminating certain mysteries of their world.
- Although books on writing often recommend that you should “write about what you know best,” better advice is to “write about what you believe.” Selecting subjects and characters that are highly important to you will make playwriting easier and more enjoyable. Writing a personal passion will give your play more fire and significance, making it more appealing to producers and audiences.
- Bad writing isn’t protected by calling it experimental. Learn why playwriting’s rules have evolved before venturing into new forms.
- Although playwrights may have heard “show, don’t tell,” a number of times, the advice deserves emphasis through repetition.
- Avoid the “Broadway mentality.” Literally thousands of professional and amateur theatres exist across the country, and your

goal should be *production*, not necessarily Broadway production.

Most important, although playwriting is difficult, you'll find that creating your own world peopled with characters you invent, who are involved in conflict and actions you share, is, simply, *fun*.

Hard work? Certainly.

Frustrating? Often.

Challenging? Very.

But fun nonetheless, even addictive.

Enjoy writing. The act itself is deeply rewarding, and you'll feel remarkably satisfied each time you complete a good scene or develop a rich character or finish your play.

Your rewards go further. Seeing your play come to life onstage is a remarkable experience that you will treasure the rest of your life.

You'll find, I hope, that *The Elements of Playwriting* is a helpful book that marries concepts with practical, concrete suggestions, showing you how to write plays that will bring you that exciting experience.

Looking back, I imagine I was always writing. Twaddle it was, too. But better far write twaddle or anything, anything, than nothing at all.

—Katherine Mansfield

I wanted to get to learn the technique of the theatre so well that I could then forget about it. I always feel it's not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them.

—T. S. Eliot

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