

1

Script Analysis

Why Do We Need Script Analysis?

“Why do we need to study script analysis? What exactly is it? What will it teach us? And why on earth would I need *tools* to read a play, anyway? I’ve seen enough shows on TV to be able to figure out what’s going on and how a good story is told. Isn’t that enough?” I’m afraid the answer would be “no.” If you’re simply reading a play for enjoyment (and frankly, I don’t think very many people do), then maybe just knowing the “who” and the “what” will be enough. But if you are studying a play for performance, production, design, direction, or stage management, you have to know the road upon which you are traveling. You need to have a sense of what the playwright intended—and more importantly, why.

It may sound trite, but you wouldn’t bake a cake without a recipe or build a house without a blueprint. If you are working on a play in whatever capacity, you need to know what the playwright intended. Analyzing the text of a play gives us the “why” so that we can make informed choices as we move forward into rehearsal or production.

When it comes right down to it, script analysis, like acting, is about making choices. But they must be *informed* choices. So, how do we do this?

The American acting teacher Stella Adler was a master at what she called “script interpretation.” Her method was thorough, but not complicated. She would read a play again and again, asking a myriad of questions. She would look to what the playwright had given her and make decisions and assumptions based on that. There is a video clip on YouTube from one of her classes where she is deconstructing a scene from Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. In it, she stops and analyzes every single line. I am paraphrasing Ms. Adler’s remarks, but this will give you a sense of what she did:

Hello, Mrs. Helmer.

Hello, Mr. Krogstaad.

I’ve never met people with those names. Are They German? Scandinavian? They don’t tell me anything Because I have no association with those names.

Someone has forgotten to close the door.

This gives me a sense of being closed in. A small, confined space. Not expansive. Cramped. In my mind, I see row houses with a stoop and steps going up the second floor from the street. I’m still not sure where we are. But I don’t see an elevator. I don’t feel “elevator.”

In essence, Ms. Adler is doing nothing different than what we do every day: using her deductive powers of reasoning to make informed decisions. Let’s say you are channel surfing and you stop in the middle of a television program that holds your attention. Since you haven’t seen it from the beginning, you start piecing things together. “So, that couple is obviously in love. Are they married or just dating? Oh, now I see they’re wearing wedding bands. I don’t think they’re

newlyweds. They're too familiar with each other. Ouch! She just criticized him in a really cold way. They are definitely not in the honeymoon phase. I wonder why she got so mad at him just because he forgot to put out the recycling bin?"

You get the idea. When we analyze a script, this is exactly what we are doing. As human beings, we are constantly making decisions about people and situations based on our instincts. It is the same when we analyze a script.

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