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Playwriting

The Elements of Playwriting

We have been spending a great deal of time talking about plays. A logical next question would be, “How do you write one?” I am so glad you asked! A play has a form unto itself which is unique from a feature film, a television series, or a novel. (When I say “plays” in this case, I am referring to musicals as well.)

It takes a while to master the formula, but once you do, the possibilities of what you can create are limitless.

“And Then What Happens?”

A play is a series of *actions*, some of which go against one another. If we string together enough actions, spice things up with some conflict, and toss in a few subplots, we have a play. As we discussed in the chapter on script analysis, drama is based on a protagonist who wants something, an antagonist who does not want that person to have it, and the nature of the conflict between them. Will they get it, or won't they? This is the nature of drama.

To use a very simplistic example, let's say John meets Mary for coffee. They hit it off and next week they go to dinner. As things progress, John asks Mary to go to his high school reunion,

where they meet Sarah, who has had suppressed romantic feelings for John for years. When Sarah sees Mary with John at the buffet table, she goes wild. Sarah hurls a glass of sangria at Mary and completely ruins her white blouse. Mary is so incensed, she picks up an ice sculpture and lunges at Sarah, but John intervenes, gets knocked in the head, and passes out cold in the middle of a tray of shrimp cocktail. Another guest mistakes the cocktail sauce for blood and calls the police, and the two women are arrested.

What this rather silly scenario demonstrates is that in all drama, action must lead to conflict. If John and Mary had a happy relationship with no bumps or interference, not only would it not be a real relationship, it also wouldn't be dramatically exciting because there would be no conflict. We need the introduction of Sarah, our antagonist, to create some dramatic tension, thus moving the plot forward.

“When Do We Get To Go Home?”

Marsha Norman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of *Night Mother*, said, “Within the first eight pages of a full-length play, you need to let the audience know when they get to go home.” What does this mean? It means your job, as a playwright, is to cue the audience as to what is about to happen. What is the main conflict or *spine* of the play? For instance, in *Night Mother*, the character of Jessie (a depressed woman in her thirties) states within the first few minutes of the play that she is going to spend a cozy evening visiting with her mother, during which time she will refill the cookie jar and all of her prescription bottles as they reminisce fondly about old times. When they are done, Jessie is going to say, “Night, Mother,” go upstairs, grab her daddy’s pistol, and blow her brains out. That is the spine of the play. We know that when Jessie goes upstairs and says goodnight, we get to go home. (Marsha Norman

was the head of playwriting at the Juilliard School of Drama in New York City for many years. She has countless other gems about the craft of playwriting, many of which are covered in the interview section.)

Since a play is a series of actions, you need to let the audience know which is the main action. This is by no means to imply you should give away the ending of your play. But your job as a dramatist is to let the audience know what sort of journey they will be taking and when it will be over. If you were at an amusement park, the experience of riding the roller coaster is different from the merry-go-round. As you step onto each ride, you know that you will have a certain type of adventure. When the ride ends, you get to either leave the park or go on to the next event. Playwriting is the same way. This is sometimes referred to as cueing the audience. You are outlining the trajectory of where you are headed.

How will this manifest itself in *your* play? What is the series of events that will unfold so that the audience gets to go home? More importantly, what will you do to hold them there with such rapt attention that they have completely forgotten about time and space and want to stay and see how the journey unfolds?