

# Playwriting

in

# Process

Thinking and Working Theatrically

2nd edition

Michael Wright

# **Playwriting in Process**

Thinking and Working Theatrically

*2nd Edition*

**Michael Wright**

For Ben Herman, John and Toby Wright, Judy Dieckman, Eli and  
Hannah Wright, and all whom I love.

Thanks to Nicole McMahan, Ellie Finlay, Chenrezig  
and the eternal Buddha.

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# Preface to the Second Edition

## Ch-Ch-Changes...

Second editions, second chances, second nature. Somehow it's so un-American to go around saying "We're number two, we're number two!" and yet I can't imagine anything more wonderful.

For those who know the original book you will find much that has not changed. After twelve years of using the etudes myself and hearing back from people literally around the globe about etudes that have worked for them, it seems sensible to avoid chucking out the baby with the bath water.

So what's new? A number of etudes have been added. Some are exercises that I came up with in a class and have continued to use. Some are based on things I've learned from other people--who are acknowledged and thanked.

In addition, I've taken the opportunity to rewrite segments that were unclear or that needed to be augmented and/or updated. As you can well imagine, a book written in 1997 could not have anticipated the explosion of the Internet, and its myriad possibilities for writers. The Internet is a great place for finding source ideas for etudes, of course, but it is also full of additional kinds of information through blogs, websites and e-newsletters. One I would recommend is the brainchild of my friend Gary Garrison: "The Loop," found at [www.thelooponline.net](http://www.thelooponline.net). If you're a playwright looking for exercises, submission opportunities, and various viewpoints on writing and the business of theatre "The Loop" is your catnip.

Also new is an appendix for teachers, students, and workshop members on how to structure a work approach based on the book, and the end-of-chapter "Call Out" exercises.

Over the dozen years of this book's first life I have been contacted by people wanting advice on how to use the etudes for class work. I've always responded with ideas for their use. When the opportunity to write this

new edition was presented, Focus publisher Ron Pullins suggested that the book include more awareness of potential use in workshops and the classroom. I agreed, obviously, but I wanted to find a way to do it so that it wouldn't be the sort of stuff I've seen in too many textbooks, where the tone is condescending, the ideas superficial, and the end-of-chapter questions dismaying in their failure to elicit insight. I firmly believe we teachers of theatre and playwriting are smarter and more intuitively creative than that. What I have provided is a description of my own approach, with lots of exhortations to personalize your own path through this sort of process. After all, I don't know you or your students, so why would I attempt to tell you "how" to teach your class? That violates the spirit of this book as the "anti-how-to" text it was created to be.

The end-of-chapter Call Outs are a way of pushing the reader toward other options beyond the etudes in the book and into exercises of personal discovery. Many of the Call Outs are rooted in moving outside the monkish solitude of the writer's typical mode, to explore possibilities for inspiration through various kinds of interchange and work. As someone once said, it's not necessarily "write what you know," but "write what you can own." I've always taken that to mean that our job is to thoroughly investigate what we haven't directly experienced, so that the voice and the work are authentic. I believe this is true for the writer as a person as well, perhaps as an inversion: "own and know what you can write." You and your work are one, but how often do you re-examine your process and viewpoints? I know I wouldn't be the writer I am without workshops to provide feedback on my work, but even more crucially to provide an environment where I can observe other writers in their processes. Their struggles teach me vastly more than my own at times, as they remind me of how difficult it is to get what we really want to write down on the page. The Call Outs are an etude-based way of getting into the mix of life and art, a shove out the door to get you to roll up your sleeves and go at it.

So, that's it in a nutshell. I hope you will find much of value in this book. I love hearing from people, so feel free to look me up on Facebook: Michael Play Wright (I know it's corny; but my name's almost as common as John Smith...), or mmichaelwright@gmail.com (and yes, it's double "m").

## Some Thanks

I would be remiss if I didn't thank people beyond the dedication page. This book is the product of so many teachers, but if I try to name them, I'll leave someone out, so I'm going to put my thanks into various baskets. Thanks to the people who taught me and worked with me at Essex Community College, Towson University, Tulane University and the People Playhouse; to actors, directors, producers I worked with and/or had a beer with in New York at places like Ensemble Studio Theatre, SoHo Rep, the Vineyard Theatre, New Dramatists, Circle in the Square, and the Actors Studio; to theatres outside of New York: Orlando Players Little Theatre, Playwrights Theatre of Washington, Baltimore Playwrights Festival, Berkshire Theatre Festival, Dorset Theatre Festival, and Actors Theatre of Louisville; to students and faculty at St. Francis, St. John's, UTEP and especially The University of Tulsa; to every generous playwright and theatre artist I was able to work with in developing my other books, *Playwriting Master Class* and *Playwriting at Work and Play*, especially at the various incarnations of Sundance and WordBRIDGE; to international programs like World Interplay in Australia, Interplay Europe, the Necessary Stage in Singapore, and Atelier-Teatern in Sweden; to the writing workshops The New York Writers Bloc, PlayWorks and the Fictional Characters, and to the people who have loved me and been kind to me, in spite of it all.

Metta,

Michael Wright

# Introduction

The urge that led to this book came from the frustrations many of my colleagues around the country share with playwriting books that aren't generally very useful in the classroom. I decided I wanted a broad compendium of exercises that could be assigned to students with varying needs and levels, something students would carry with them beyond the classroom in much the same way that directing students hang on to Viola Spolin's monumentally important *Improvisation for the Theatre*. I wanted something with more of a workshop sensibility, so that students would have a foundation in process.

The intent of my book is to reach beyond the needs of the student playwright, however. The exercises can be done on a rudimentary or sophisticated level and can be put together in a virtually infinite number of combinations to explore craft and ideas in any direction a playwright wishes.

*Playwriting in Process* is intended to act as a resource, a craft reminder and reinforcer, a stimulus, a self-teaching mechanism, and a reference work. As a result, this book does not follow any kind of formulaic approach to the making of a play. It's my belief that formulas impose an inhibitive sense of style and limited theatrical thinking on a writer. My suggestion to all who express a sincere interest in pursuing the craft has always been to "read a million plays, and see twice that many."

This suggestion may sound a bit flip, but there is no longer any meaningful single definition of a play that applies across the spectrum of what's being created around the world, beyond saying that a play is a (largely) live event that takes place in a space that all involved have agreed is a "stage." In the first two chapters, the basic concept or perspective of what makes a play a play is examined through the terms "thinking theatrically" and "working theatrically." This perspective underlies all the exercises that follow in the book.

There are some who insist that any book that attempts to discuss playwriting must be chock-full of definitions and passages from famous

plays. I think material from famous plays tend to frustrate beginning playwrights and annoy experienced ones. It is my contention that playwrights make their own definitions from trial and error. Playwriting is an *art* even though we refer to it as a craft; the latter implies that playwrights simply become apprenticed and five years later have achieved playwright status. Almost anyone can learn the rudiments, but learning how to release (if not unchain) the spirits for a unique work of art only comes from making plays over and over again.

Watching accomplished playwrights struggle with their latest plays can be a great training ground. This concept was taken up in my book *Playwriting Master Class: The Personality of Process and the Art of Rewriting*. In that book, we learn by watching how they make decisions about plot, which structure to place the plot in, how late to get into the action of the play, and how much needs to be known about their characters. Since the chance to watch such processes is extremely limited beyond my book, the alternative is to watch yourself in the same struggles. One of the guiding principles of *Playwriting in Process* is for writers to become their own masters. In doing these exercises, you can provide yourself with examples of what will and what won't work according to individual taste and the play being worked on at the time.

Which brings me back to my argument about providing examples from famous plays. Reading work that already exists is dealing only with a product and not a process; furthermore, simply reading one example from a whole piece is the equivalent of seeing just the highlights of a sporting event. If you are to learn from and understand the importance of the home run, field goal, or slam dunk, you must understand its context. My choice of a wonderful example of dialogue is based on my view of dialogue as I have developed it over the years--I'd much rather that students find their own examples of great dialogue or, better yet, create their own examples. There are a number of suggestions in the book of plays to read to form a reference point to a given topic of discussion but these suggestions should encourage readers to consider the whole context of a work they choose.

I'd also argue that I couldn't just show one selection of dialogue because there are literally hundreds of choices that will show various points, whose importance depends on context. If I show how Marsha Norman brilliantly reveals a husband and wife's garbled communication in her play *Trudy Blue* during a conversation about going out for dinner, I'd have to show how Arthur Miller does the same thing in *All My Sons* when Kate Keller forgets to keep the lie going (in just one word) and sets the play

sliding irrevocably toward its end. I'd have to show how one word can be a play's fulcrum, while one exchange may not have major dramatic results but can set the stakes for later events. Then I'd want to show numerous examples of what dialogue can do. But when I was done I would have still not covered the possibilities that students would discover on their own both from "reading a million plays" and through the actual hands-on work of doing the exercises.

Another approach in playwriting books is to show samples of "successful" exercises. Again, this creates an imposition that tends to inhibit creativity. Human nature is to copy what we don't know how to do, and so a student ends up putting together a simulacrum of what the sample looks like. But where does the student go from there? The point of these exercises is to have the experience of doing, not duplicating.

So much for what the book is not and what you won't find in it. What you will encounter in this book is a series of exercises, all grouped by their application to certain aspects of playwriting such as character and plot. In each exercise there is a discussion of what I intend to help the writer discover and some additional discussion on theatrical thinking and working. Each exercise allows the student to try a certain aspect of writing for the stage while helping to focus the process of that writing and its impact on the stage. Most exercises are cross-referenced to other exercises in the book that will encourage you to look at another angle on the same process.

As we progress into the new century, millennium, and beyond, there is little reason to believe that theatre will retreat to the well-made play or to some rigid Aristotelian framework. Theatre is far more likely to continue its expansion of form, subject matter, language, use of space, and so on. In fact, it will continue to embrace its eclectic heritage from the experimenters of the twentieth century. *Playwriting in Process* attempts to address this expansion by defining the essentials of theatrical thinking and working, and presents exercises for playwrights at any level to fashion their own definitions, processes, and choices.

Playwriting is a difficult, often lonely proposition. The collaborative workshop or production environments can be full of much humor and affection, even when the process is complex or even daunting. There is often great joy in the work, in the act of playing together to make theatre. The exercises provided in this book are intended to bring that spirit of play into the solitary realm of the playwright, both to help open out your sense of craft and to remind you to take pleasure in your singular ability to create what has never existed before.

# CHAPTER 1

## Thinking Theatrically

One of the most interesting teaching challenges I've experienced is dealing with a student population that does not innately think "theatrically." I find that most of my students tend to think in terms of film, television, or fiction writing—which makes sense since those varieties are their biggest influences. However much I may understand these influences, it doesn't resolve the dilemma. When a student writes a one-act play that calls for twenty different realistically rendered locations with a cast of a hundred and/or has every character self-narrate their exposition, motivation, and actions, I know that this student understands neither the realities nor the potential of the stage.

Even worse, when I evaluate scripts by "professionals" and find the same basic lack of understanding, I realize we have a problem that may be of epidemic proportions. So how do we fix this problem?

A traditional solution is to have the students read more plays, but that has not been entirely satisfactory. The students tend to do what all artists do at first and mirror their influences. In other words, when I taught Tennessee Williams, I got dark, poetic dramas back from my students. Most recently, I've opted for students to read contemporary, original 10-minute plays, which has been helpful, though some mimicking still occurs. While I don't see this as necessarily bad, I am concerned that the students usually have no idea of the dramaturgical basis for the style they're aping—we can look at the product, but there's virtually no way to understand how the playwright arrived at that product.

One response is to have the students write as much as possible, so that they encounter firsthand the struggles endemic to making a play. Such writing encourages them to focus on their own experiences, values, and voices—to encourage absolutely original work. In this instance, they often find solutions to stage problems that are unique and highly imaginative.

But even in the best situations, another layer of this problem remains: rewriting. How do they go about correcting what's wrong with their plays? In my classes, we do detailed oral and written critiques of the pieces as they are developing, whether students are working on five-minute "get-in-late, get-out-early" pieces or one-act plays. When we say to one student that her plot is working reasonably well but we have no idea what the main character is all about, how should she go about creatively responding to that observation? How do you make a character more "real" or more complex or explore the range of reactions to a given situation to find the best solution?

I've read a great number of books on playwriting and screenwriting and most tend to say, "Do it this way," as if there are standard formulas. While I don't wish to denigrate anyone else's approach to playwriting, none of these books has ever succeeded for me. Not one has satisfied the two problems I've identified here: how do we learn to think theatrically, and how do we learn to work theatrically on the problems of writing for the theatre?

## Thinking Theatrically

As playwrights, I believe we need to start by considering the components of the theatrical and end by trying to access and utilize these components in our writing. Consider the theatre place itself: the stage. What is a stage? Taken at its most literal, a stage is usually a somewhat elevated, dusty floor that is somehow bordered by seats. There are usually lights, and sometimes curtains, and/or a proscenium arch. When there's a show on this stage, there's a set of some kind, and actors move around on this floor according to the needs of the play. But, whether there's a show mounted on it or not, a stage is always a physical representation of potential. The stage is a space that contains possibilities, not realities: it is a place for imagining.

For that reason, a blank stage is one of the most interesting things around. I can sit in an empty auditorium and look at a blank stage and conjure the endless possibilities for that space, from *Oedipus* to *Angels in America* and beyond. As a playwriting representative for the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival, I traveled throughout the year and saw exactly such potential realized at the festivals I attended: day after day a given stage was converted from one world to another, going from a matinee of *True West* to an evening production of *All in the Timing* to the next day's offerings of *Amadeus* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

In itself, then, a stage is theatrical. Even empty, it's a kind of show because the imagination is engaged by it. In use, there's no limit to what can happen there, unless the imagination itself is limited.

For instance, if you wanted to use a given stage but had no money for props, costumes, or lights, could you still do a show? Of course: props, costumes, and lights can be borrowed or made from found stuff. But could you still do a show without a stage? Absolutely.

We may be living in an era in which spectacle has taken over much of the commercial theatre, but the realm of the imagination continues all around us. Performance artists, new vaudevillians, and avant-garde theatre practitioners all utilize found spaces and alternative approaches to sets and costumes. And children's theatre, which is the easiest to discuss, has almost always relied on a less-is-more approach.

In good children's theatre, the emphasis is always on encouraging the audience to join in with the work rather than forcing the audience to watch passively. For example, an audience of children is quite happy with the idea of a plain chair representing a car. This same chair can be made to represent a throne, a mountain top, and a spaceship all in one show, and the audience can go along with these permutations quite agreeably. Further, since children's theatre needs to reach its population in a variety of venues, shows are successfully done in auditoriums, gyms, libraries, classrooms, parks, and parking lots—all because children are so willing to activate their imaginations.

Theatre for older children, who are sometimes referred to as adults, can do and already does the same thing, though we just tend not to think about it. After all, when you see a play, some part of you knows that the walls are made of painted fabric and that the actors are people with kids and mortgages just like yourself, but you make a contract with the stage and its event—the play—to ignore all that and put it aside.

This putting aside is usually described by one of the oddest phrases I've ever heard: the "willful suspension of disbelief." The phrase is quite accurate in what it describes but seems needlessly convoluted. I prefer the term "agreement," which just means that everything is in accord. If the play is set in Ireland, the actors learn Irish accents and agree among themselves that they're in a room in an old house in Dublin, and the audience says it will agree to go along with this as long as the actors don't do anything to make it stop, such as displaying a really poor accent. This example is a gross simplification of course, but what it means is that the stage can be anything provided the agreement is there.

Given that, the student I referred to earlier could write his one-act play with twenty locations and a hundred characters and make it work if he knew how to use the imaginative resources of the stage. His play could also be performed by one actor with one chair on a street corner, provided the script and/or production were designed or interpreted to create that agreement. As anyone who has ever seen Fred Kurchak's one-man production of *The Tempest* would attest, anything is possible.

You could argue, of course, that an interpreter—a director or designer—could take the play as originally written and make a simplified, theatricalized version by imposing agreement. But my concern is with the connection made by playwrights to that theatrical concept on their own terms rather than relying on some future interpreter to do the work for the play. My experience has been that some directors guide your work well and some derail it. If you have thought ahead to the most imaginative concepts for your script, your chances of bringing play and audience into agreement are far better. In other words, you start and end by thinking theatrically.

## Two Key Axioms

One way of starting this process is by using the incredible advantages of the stage to connect with the imagination of the audience. This means that certain axioms of the theatre hold true, such as “suggest rather than spell out,” and “show, don't tell.”

Before defining those two concepts, let me provide a point of view for thinking about them: I try to encourage my students to think of watching a play as being involved in a mystery no matter what the style or subject matter of the play may be. The audience is there to figure out what's going to happen (in conventional theatre) because they're rooting for a particular character. We want Joe or Jane to fall in love, win the race, or outwit the Urban Slime Monster—but will they? What makes seeing a play fun is this very condition of not knowing what's going to happen while hoping things will go a certain way.

When something is spelled out, or told directly to us, it simply becomes less fun because our participation is denied. Imagine being told just before a game starts that “your team will lose by one point on a missed shot with one second left in the game.”

The concepts “suggest rather than spell out” and “show, don't tell” are about giving the audience the chance to try to figure things out for themselves, of sustaining the audience's agreement by actively engaging

its imagination. To suggest means allowing an audience to draw its own conclusions from hints, especially if the hints are in juxtaposition. If we watch a scene of a marriage ceremony, for example, and see the groom waiting nervously, and watch a very pregnant bride coming down the aisle to him, we naturally infer that the groom is probably the father of the child the bride will eventually deliver. We put the juxtaposed facts together to arrive at a third fact.

The example I just gave also applies to “show, don’t tell,” but we have to go a bit further to clarify this aspect because it’s the one that truly separates theatre from other art forms.

A play is made up of a lot of different components, but two of the most important are the dialogue and the behavior of the characters. Dialogue is a complex thing. It includes what is said, what’s meant by what is said, how it’s said, and also what is not said.

Start with the text “I’m fine.” What can be meant by the text is subtext, the attitude behind the words. For example, I can ask three different people how they are and get three entirely different answers with the same words simply by how they use those words to express their feelings. Joe might grit his teeth, annoyed to distraction by being asked the same stupid question once again, and he will spit the words out in a way that makes “I’m fine” sound more like “Go to hell.” Sara, on the other hand, might be thrilled that someone wants to know how she is and sing the words out happily. James, who is depressed, might just mumble them.

The other option—what’s not said—leads us back up to the notion of suggestion. If character A is called “immature, phony, and short” by character B, and character A responds by saying “I am not short!” we are inclined to understand that she accepts, in some way, the other two qualities. Much can also be “said” by silence or pauses. If one character simply does not respond to a statement, we infer certain things from this; if the same character pauses before responding, we tend to infer somewhat different things. What’s not said has its own kind of subtext that makes the audience work a bit harder. The essence of good dialogue is allowing the fewest words to say or imply the most, or—as with silence or pauses—to allow the audience to infer the most. Which leads us to behavior.

Behavior is activity which reveals inner process. It may be what occurs in a pause or a silence, or it may be what occurs beyond the confines of dialogue. The playwright can show a tremendous amount about the character without having to use language. Virtually all plays contain stage directions such as “X walks to the door, and opens it to admit Y.” This

activity is necessary to the play because Y has knocked and can't get in unless X opens up. But activity alone does not tell us a great deal about a character. If X walks to the door and picks up a cream pie on the way to hit Y in the face, then we have behavior because we can read something in X's actions that tells us about her thoughts. There are also a hundred ways to write the quality of X's actual walk to the door, even without a pie: if she walks heavily, we infer one thing; if she runs to the door on tippytoes, we infer quite another. Behavior is obviously very important to the idea of "show, don't tell." It spares us having to make character X say, "Well, I'll answer this door but I won't do it very gladly because it has got to be Y and I owe him a lot of money." The stage directions, then, create another kind of dialogue through behavior. And behavior is an extremely important aspect of thinking theatrically.

When a playwright uses behavior, he is recognizing a crucial element of theatre: the actions of a human being help define and move the story along. And this is because we must always remember that a play is a human event that is being observed by other humans—it is witnessed, in other words.

### **"Witnessed Present"**

I define a play in production as a "witnessed present." This definition means all kinds of things. First, that any play we watch seems to happen now, whether it was written today or in 504 B.C., because the problems of the characters are being worked out in front of us, right here and now. And since the play needs this "us" in order to exist, it's our present at the same instant, because the problems of the characters reflect on our own lives. We may not have the literal dilemmas that Oedipus struggles with but we all have to deal with issues of morality and personal integrity on a daily basis. However, we can go further, because the entire gestalt of the play is a present event—a play needs real time in which to occur and is put on by real people in front of other real people: humans watching humans.

The moving images on a TV or film screen are reproductions; the people in the film scene we're watching are not doing that scene now. In fact, they may be at home, watching themselves at the same moment we are. But when we watch a play, the people performing in the play are right there; we are aware of them and they of us. And this means that thinking theatrically is also rooted in this awareness of the existence of the other.

We all like to watch people; it's a natural, human quality. We sit in airports, malls, and parks and watch the doings of others. And we

understand far more from this kind of observation than we realize. For example, we know without hearing a word that the couple over there is arguing, or the man sitting to our left is really nervous. We read these things in the behavior of the people, but we also feel these things because we are in the same environment. When I lived in New York, I used the subway often. A crowd of strangers, totally oblivious to one another, would become an electrified and connected group instantly if somebody abnormal or scary got on the train. Without any effort to communicate, we would all know to watch out and be careful: this person is sending out hostile or crazy energy. If that person subsequently left the car, you would immediately feel the flood of relief all around you, and sometimes there would even be eye contact between passengers (usually *verboden* on subways), accompanied by smiles or those ironic head-shakes that make life in New York bearable.

When we're in a theatre, we are focused by a successful show because of the same kind of immediacy one experiences on the subway. There is no filter between you and what's acting on your sensory receptors: we listen, watch, and feel the human struggles on the stage directly.

Thinking theatrically means playwriting with those values in mind. Writing dialogue is not just spinning out a lot of clever words but crafting language that expresses both in text and subtext the deep inner feelings of the characters. Creating revealing behavior allows us to witness the struggle with those feelings. Using the space of the stage in the most imaginative ways possible engages the audience emotionally, intellectually, and viscerally. All of these serve to connect humans to human experiences.

The stage, to return to our starting point, is a place that is a physical representation of potential. It is, in more traditional terms, metaphoric. It can represent not only other places—Thebes, Elsinore, Mars—but other levels of being. This is another aspect of thinking theatrically: a person on a stage is larger than life just because of being on that stage, and so, therefore, is that person's character and humanity.

## Larger-Than-Life Characters

Characters in plays don't just have bad days, they have horrible, overwhelming days. Characters in plays aren't just people, they have personalities equivalent to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloons. Oedipus, Juliet, Blanche DuBois, and Prior Walter are extremely complex people caught up in difficulties most of us never have to face; the characters in well-written ten-minute plays are as complex within the contexts of

their smaller confines as well. While television has become the province of average Americans caught-in-a-terrible-dilemma and film has followed suit and created one-dimensional heroes of impossible qualities, theatre has largely remained the place where the range of genuinely human qualities can be examined in a careful and caring way.

For example, I try to remind my students that our admiration for *Hamlet* is certainly warranted because of Shakespeare's incredible writing abilities, but that we must never forget that the play is the story of a college student caught up in a terrible conflict. Should he take revenge for his father's murder or not? The tabloid version might be that he's a rich kid from a recently broken home who would just like to forget the whole thing, go back to school, and hit the bars with his buddies. But because Shakespeare wrote about a conflicted personality so brilliantly and made his humanity so profound, he is far more than just a schoolboy with problems: he is a young person who has too great a problem to solve alone, who has nowhere to turn for help, who is a walking contradiction—maybe really crazy—and who we must watch in his struggle.

While the struggle is important, what's equally important is our feelings. We are in a room with someone suffering and we can't do anything about it. The stage is a powerful place of humanity, and the "witnessed present" keeps us totally focused on that humanity because it is the characters' humanity and our own, all in the same place and time.

What Shakespeare knew is that the humanity of Hamlet is more important than the story of Hamlet, which is why our young prince is by turns funny, cruel, cunning, savage, and childish. You can analyze the poetry and meaning of the play all you like, but to me the truly enduring quality of the work is the vividness of its main character. Hamlet is larger than life and so frustratingly human—he is theatrical.

## **Dynamics of the Stage World**

The question that plagues all playwrights is how do we craft truly theatrical stories and people? How can we use the real potential of the space we call a stage? By understanding its dynamics from as many vantage points as possible. Remember that the playwright is the only creative artist in the naturalistic theatre. All the other artists interpret your work and the more you know about the work of interpretive artists, the better.

For instance, Shakespeare was an actor. He knew what it was like to be on the stage and to contend with an audience. Does this mean that you should have some acting experience? Yes, it really does. Nothing will

give you a quicker fix on the reality of the stage and on the realities of the people who will play your characters than trying it yourself in a class or in a show. (I believe wholeheartedly as well that student actors should try to write plays, student directors should hang lights, and technical students should act; everyone should do it all, especially in their early training.) At bare minimum you should get together with friends and read plays aloud, and act out the roles in your living room—just to get a sense of things, to know the work by doing the work.

What about directing? Staying with our man of the moment, Shakespeare was probably responsible for staging some of his plays (he lived in an era long before there was anyone officially designated as “director”). Does this mean you should do the same? Well, here I have to fudge a little: I would not generally advise directing your own play in a full production unless that play had been thoroughly workshopped and developed first. Most of my experience has been that having the other eye of the director (and in some cases, the additional eye of a dramaturg) can be extremely helpful simply because the playwright can remain focused on the writing problems and leave the solving of stage problems to others.

On the other hand, I have directed my own plays and found these productions to be excellent learning experiences, so I leave it to you to discover your own perspective on this matter. I can recommend directing plays other than your own. Again, even if it’s just in your living room, the issue is that you have to approach a play quite differently as a director than you would as an actor, and all of these experiences will deeply inform your playwriting sensibilities.

If you know how actors, directors or designers work, you will know how to craft your plays with an awareness of their arts that will greatly enhance your own. A writer who knows how other artists work will recognize what their art forms can add to his own. A knowledge of these areas will help you to think theatrically because you will have a deeper awareness of the capabilities of the environment you’re writing for. How much set is really needed? Can a character’s personality be expressed better by one key element of a costume rather than a full head-to-toe treatment?

These kinds of questions (and their solutions) will ultimately give the writer 1000 percent more control of their imaginative product, the script. I wouldn’t say control in the production because that’s another thing altogether, but anything you can do to aim your script at the production you hope for will be helpful. Also, your script choices are metaphorical

choices, and the more you know about using the tools of the physical theatre to enhance your metaphorical range, the better.

By way of example, look at a play by Donald Margulies called *The Model Apartment*. In this play, Margulies wanted to make a point about survivors who have inflicted their sufferings from the Holocaust, including the death of a child, on the next generation. Rather than have the point made on a sheerly verbal level, Margulies chose instead to put the two daughters—the living one called Debbie and the dead one called Deborah—on stage and have them played by the same actress. In order to distinguish between the two and to make a stronger point, Debbie is played in what's known as a "fat suit," which is a padded garment worn under the clothes to create the illusion of being overweight, while Deborah is played in an unpadded costume. Thus, we have the symbol of the survivors wanting the live daughter to be the rebirth of the dead one, plus the symbol of the massive guilt laid upon this living daughter in the form of the physical mass she carries around. This use of costuming—combined with other elements such as the set's real and not-real qualities—elevates the play from what might have been a moderately affecting reality to a powerful theatricality.

Margulies made theatre from a theatrical point of view. Theatre is collaborative by nature, and the more each collaborator knows about the other area, the better the communication and the better the art. The more the playwright knows about the entire range of choices available, the more effective his expression can become.

## Intuition and Imagination

Thinking theatrically has one final, crucial aspect: expressing your imaginative impulses. One of my students wrote a one-act in which two men compete for the same woman. In this script he has a character onstage named Love who walks around wearing a red, heart-shaped suit and who spouts poetry. Another student wrote a very allegorical piece in which characters appear with animal heads. Yet another wrote a short play in which a modern suitor has to pose as Sir Walter Raleigh to ask for permission to marry a woman whose institutionalized father believes he's Henry VIII. All of these plays represent an understanding that the stage is the place where anything is possible and that using highly imaginative situations and characters triggers something magical in our brains.

This book was not written strictly for practitioners of naturalistic theatre, although the majority of examples and ideas will be expressed

in that form. In the past few decades, theatre artists have worked hard to blur the lines between theatre and other art forms, both to enhance the expressive capacity of theatre and to challenge the range of the modes they've borrowed from. Experimentation is to the benefit of all the arts and ought to be pursued more. (I see no reason, for example, why painting or sculpture majors don't take stage design or lighting, or even seemingly unrelated classes like acting or playwriting; it would only increase their perspective, and I know theatre people would grow tremendously by studying other art forms.)

Not enough experimentation is encouraged in theatre. Most of the schools I've come in contact with tend to stress realistic values in their main-stage work and relegate anything which is avant-garde or experimental to their studio theatres. Worse, the tendency is to put student-written work in the same backroom venues. I don't see how we can keep theatre vital if this continues to be our practice.

So, in closing this chapter, I would be remiss if I did not stress how compellingly theatrical most experimental work is. It constantly seeks to redefine the stage and the relationship between actor and audience. And it also succeeds or fails at the highest possible level because it is all about risk and the attempt to move another step closer to making the theatrical experience as artistically pure as possible.

I don't know what we can do about institutional thinking, but I know that individuals can open their minds. To that end, I would hope that anyone working from this book would do most or all of the following: First, become more familiar with theatre that is out of the mainstream by reading it, reading about it, seeing it, and becoming involved in it. Second, help out by bringing other people into contact with it. Thirdly and most importantly, seek to create your own vision on the stage, no matter what it takes to realize that vision. After all, unless you are in the theatre strictly for the money—which makes you either completely misguided or one of the most optimistic people on the planet—your work will always be truly original, and innately experimental because it's never been seen before, so why not push the limits?

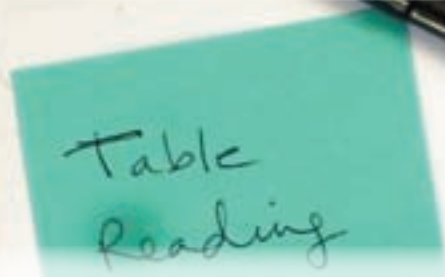
Finally, then, I want to stress my belief that the techniques in this book will work for any kind of theatrical form, whether you want to reinvent the Greek tragedy or write a piece set in a parallel universe. The essence of playwriting is thinking theatrically, and creating plays by working in a theatrical way.

## Call Out

1. Take that class in acting, directing, lighting, scene or costume design. Do it right now.
2. Arrange to visit various theatres when they're dark. Sit in the house and imagine the plays that have been and will be staged there. Imagine your own plays staged there. Stand on the stage and think about the possibilities.
3. Try to find a way to attend a theatre festival, whether at a nearby college or the Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, or any of the myriad Shakespeare or summer stock festivals around the country. Take careful note of the changes to the stage, designs, performances and other elements from production to production.
4. If you live where there's professional theatre, ask if you can observe backstage during a show to watch the set changes, or sit in the light and/or sound booth to see cues being run. You might try to sit in on rehearsals or developmental workshops as well.
5. Volunteer to be an assistant to a director at a university theatre or professional producing organization.
6. It's important to read about playwriting and to read plays, but include all you can about the other art forms in theatre, especially when they touch on the developmental aspects of theatre. *The Production Notebooks* would be a good source, as would Edward M. Cohen's *Working On A New Play*, and my book *Playwriting at Work and Play*, among dozens of others. Biographies and autobiographies can be very helpful as well.

We don't need another how-to playwriting textbook. We need a book of exercises like this one—one that encourages creativity through hands-on writing experiences, one that can be used by playwrights at varying levels to spark ideas, develop techniques, and help break through creative blocks...This is the kind of playwriting text we need.

— David Mark Cohen  
Head of Playwriting, University of Texas at Austin



Peter Hermann, 2004.

**Michael Wright** is the Director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Creative Writing at The University of Tulsa, where he teaches Screenwriting and Playwriting. He is the founder and moderator of the Fictional Characters writers collective and the U.S. Representative to World Interplay in Australia. He is the author of four books on playwriting. Wright's plays, poems, and fiction have appeared in many periodicals and on several websites and his plays and radio plays have been produced by theaters across the country.

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