

Writing the Ten-Minute Play

Before you enrolled in this class, you almost certainly wrote a number of essays and possibly also tried your hand at writing a poem and a story or two (or three or four). However, few students in an introductory creative writing course have ever written a play.

The very idea sounds daunting to many creative writers. How do you work in a form you know nothing about? And by the way, wasn't Shakespeare – the greatest writer of all time, in the opinion of many people – himself a playwright? Who could ever compete with him?

Fortunately, students often find that they have a surprising knack for playwriting. That's partly because we live in such an oral culture. We *hear* people talking all the time – whether it's in person, on television, in the movies, or on cell phones. We will discuss ways of crafting dialogue later in the chapter, but for now you should feel some comfort knowing that you probably have an untapped gift for mimicking other people's speech.

Indeed, Marsha Norman believes that playwriting is particularly suited to young adults:

There is a kind of inherent struggle in the form that is echoed by the struggle in the lives of young people to say, "Here's who I am, here's what I'm gonna do, and watch out. Here are the things that scare me, here are the things that seem unfair." It's almost a kind of petulance of form: "I insist on telling you this. I'm gonna interrupt your life to tell you this."

Another natural advantage you have as a budding playwright is that you constantly watch people interact. We all do. Even if we don't know the people involved, we can usually tell when someone doesn't mean what he says through tone of voice and gestures, or when someone is furious even though she hasn't

said a word. People are born actors, and one aspect of playwriting is simply the process of putting down on paper the things we already know about human nature.

Getting involved in the world of theater can be all-encompassing, and many playwrights believe that their chosen genre is, in the words of Oscar Wilde, “the greatest of all art forms” because it provides “the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.” George Bernard Shaw, no slouch when it came to making big statements, said that the task of “the great dramatist” is “to interpret life.” That’s a tall order, yet we hear an echo of this grand claim in John Guare’s decision to move from fiction to playwriting: “I felt I was betraying a higher calling by writing mere short stories or novels. I believed plays to be on a higher and rarer plane. I still do. Novelists were only a couple hundred years old. Playwrights were thousands of years old. If I was going to be a writer, it had to be plays.”

Tina Howe, whose short play *The Divine Fallacy* is reprinted in this chapter, describes a less ethereal, more pragmatic process in becoming a playwright. Howe originally enrolled in a fiction writing workshop in college, but she felt she was “clearly the worst in the class, and my stories were pretty much of an embarrassment.” Almost accidentally, she began writing a one-act play, which, to her genuine surprise, turned out to be a hit. Howe attributes her own success as a playwright in part to the fact that “I’d finally found a form where I could practice my imagination but not be bogged down by all those damn words.”

Like poetry, playwriting is a genre that makes maximum use of few words. When students discover that a ten-minute play is generally ten pages long, they tend to panic—until they learn that a standard playscript looks much different in manuscript form than it does in a book. In general, one page of script—a hundred to a few hundred words—equals one minute of stage time. (See the section “Playscript Format: A Model” for an example of a Samuel French-style playscript.)

A few words on etymology: A person who engages in *playwriting* is called a *playwright*, not a “playwrite” or a “playwriter.” A wright is a worker skilled in the manufacture of objects, such as a wheelwright or a shipwright. From this perspective, the author of a play is a craftsman, someone who covers the basics. A wheel won’t roll if it’s not round; a ship will sink if it’s not built soundly. Similarly, a play that doesn’t incorporate the essentials—conflict, character, dialogue, and stagecraft—will likely falter.

While we’re on the subject of words associated with plays, let’s look at two more: “drama” and “theater.” The word “drama” comes from *dran*, a Greek word meaning “to do or act.” By definition, drama is action. It does not consist of people simply standing onstage saying lines. Throughout this chapter, we will be talking about the necessity of creating conflict between your characters, and that’s because the clash between opposing actions and forces is so integral

to the nature of playmaking. When we tell someone, “You’re so dramatic!” we mean that the person is larger than life, that they seem to feel emotions more deeply than most of us. Characters in a play tend to take things very personally. Whatever happens to them, it really, really *happens*.

We might also describe a dramatic person as being very “theatrical,” meaning that his or her behavior is “marked by extravagant display or exhibitionism.” Being on exhibit is part of what plays are all about. The word “theater” is derived from the Greek *thea*, “to see,” and is related to the word *thauma*, meaning “miracle.”

Because Greek plays are the earliest surviving complete works of drama we have, playwrights continue to look in their direction for inspiration, but theater has changed a great deal since the days of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. All the actors were men, and they all wore versions of the smiling- and sad-face masks we now associate with comedy and tragedy, respectively. The real action—the murders, the battles, and so forth—took place offstage. Mostly the actors recounted things that had happened to the gods or to themselves and the people they knew. Singing and dancing were part of the pageantry. It was a rather static spectacle, perhaps similar to something you might see in a modern church, and this makes sense because the subject of Greek plays was usually the immortals and their relationship to heroes. Greek plays, in short, reenacted the old familiar miracles.

A discussion of the history of theater is outside the scope of this book, but it is worth mentioning a few important developments in drama after the Greeks. Let’s fast-forward to the plays of Shakespeare, produced in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare admired the Greek plays—or at least the *idea* of the Greeks—and the characters in his plays do spend a great deal of time making speeches. However, Shakespeare’s plays incorporate considerably more action onstage than do the Greek plays, and his many fans will say that no one else has ever quite approached his ability to depict the range and essence of humanity.

Of course, comparing yourself with Shakespeare is a fruitless exercise. In any case, he’s not an especially good model for us because, as far as we know, he never wrote a ten-minute play. There is also something otherworldly about his work that no one has ever been able to emulate. You would be hard-pressed to mistake a Shakespeare play for real life, and in the nineteenth century, writers such as Émile Zola began championing what they called “naturalism,” which we tend to think of as “realism.” According to Zola, although novelists had managed to master **verisimilitude**—realistic portrayals of people and their environments—playwrights were lagging far behind:

I am waiting for everyone to throw out the tricks of the trade, the contrived formulas, the tears and superficial laughs. I am waiting for a dramatic work void of declamations, majestic speech, and noble sentiments, to have the

unimpeachable morality of truth and to teach us the frightening lesson of sincere investigation. I am waiting, finally, until the . . . playwrights return to the source of science and modern arts, to the study of nature, to the anatomy of man, to the painting of life in an exact reproduction more original and powerful than anyone has so far dared to risk on the boards.

Zola's ideas certainly influenced two of the nineteenth century's greatest playwrights, the Russian Anton Chekhov and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, and I quote Zola at length because many contemporary playwrights still aspire to the sort of theater he celebrated. They avoid formulaic plots and grandiose speechmaking and try to show people as they truly are, not as the playwrights wish them to be.

Today we might share Zola's distaste for long, pretentious speeches, but in the first half of the twentieth century, realism, naturalism, and the "well-made play" were themselves under attack. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, scoffed at "the so-called 'realistic theater' because 'realism' has always offered plays made up of stories of defeat, laissez-faire, and drifting: it has always preferred to show how external forces batter a man to pieces, destroy him bit by bit, and ultimately make of him a weathervane with every change of wind." During the same period, Bertolt Brecht developed a new sort of over-the-top theatricality that he called "epic theater." The actors made no attempt to pretend that they weren't actors. In order to emphasize the fact that it was a play, not real life, being performed before an audience, actors used cast-off clothing and cheap **props**. (Props, short for "properties," include everything from the furniture the actors sit on to the objects they handle.)

Other playwrights took the crusade against realism even further. In plays such as *The Spurt of Blood*, Antonin Artaud's characters, who clearly represent types (a priest, a knight, a judge, and so on), declaim crazy poetry that borders on gibberish and run around the stage like hyperactive children. In his essay "No More Masterpieces," Artaud advocates for a "theater of cruelty." This type of theater thumbs its nose at conventional plots and characters. Instead, it is full of spectacle, with constant noises and sounds, unexpected lighting, and bizarre onstage behavior: "Here the theater, far from copying life, puts itself whenever possible in communication with pure forces."

The "theater of the absurd" has led to great plays such as those by Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. The hallmark of this theater, according to critic Martin Esslin, "is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions." Esslin wrote this in 1969, yet in many ways the world of doubt and uncertainty he describes is still our own.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, even using a script became passé. Bert Cardullo describes "happenings" in which "each spectator, in becoming the partial creator

of a piece, derived any meaning that might be desired from the experience, thus downplaying the artist's intention or even existence." Cardullo points out that in this type of theater "all production elements speak their own language rather than being mere supports for words, and a text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production — indeed, a text is not even necessary, and therefore there may be none. In other words, fidelity to the text, that sacred tenet which has so long governed performance, has become irrelevant."

Most creative writing instructors will probably be a bit skeptical if you try to stage a "happening" for your ten-minute play; nevertheless, this brief overview should suggest what a smorgasbord of approaches is available to playwrights. Our model plays are closer to Zola's naturalism than to the theater of cruelty or the theater of the absurd, but they, like most other ten-minute plays, have not only a basis in realism but also a hint of something strange and surreal.

Whatever your own biases as a playwright turn out to be, there is nothing like seeing a play — any play, good or bad, amateur or professional — to help you understand the demands of the theater. If your school has a theater department, it will probably produce a play this academic term. Go see it. If possible, talk to the student actors and directors about what a good play requires. The more you immerse yourself in the world of theater, even if it's only by joining an audience, the clearer will be your sense of how to write your own play.

After seeing just a few plays, you will probably agree with playwrighting professor David Rush that a play is *not* "a screenplay or a conversation or a rant or an essay." Most playwrighting instructors would concur with Rush, so let's look at his admonishments one at a time:

- ▶ **A Play Is Not a Screenplay** Most people go to movies far more often than to plays, so it makes sense that beginning playwrights, especially if they have never attended a play before, will turn to the big screen for models. "Being a playwright is good training for film school," says Stephen Peace, but watching movies isn't necessarily good training for playwrights. A screenplay has many short scenes, often with minimal or no dialogue. In a play, however, scenes tend to be considerably longer, with greater emphasis on the characters' verbal exchanges. Moreover, movie scenes are shot again and again; when the camera is rolling and someone flubs a line, the actors just start over. A play, on the other hand, is *live*. When an actor forgets a line, there are no second takes. A play production has a sense of excitement, tension, and immediacy that is generally missing from the other creative writing genres.
- ▶ **A Play Is Not a Conversation** A good conversation may be stimulating, but most conversations meander and falter and never reach heightened intensity. In contrast, dialogue in a play is always driven by the central conflict between the characters.

- ▶ **A Play Is Not a Rant** Although it is sometimes entertaining to listen to someone yell and rave, you can do that onstage for only a short while before it gets boring. Plays do have lots of talking—and often some shouting—but *all* of it matters.
- ▶ **A Play Is Not an Essay** An essay, as Rush refers to it here, is a document meant to explain things. Its main purpose is to convince an audience that a particular point of view is correct. Plays, in contrast, value ambiguity. Even though plays often address relevant contemporary and universal issues, and even though some characters may be *more right* than others, good playwrights always try to see the world from the perspective of all of their characters.

J. M. Synge said that “drama is made serious . . . not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not easy to define, on which our imaginations live. We should go to the theatre . . . as we go to a dinner, where food we need is taken with pleasure and excitement.” Indeed, once you begin writing and rehearsing your ten-minute play, you may well be surprised by how much “pleasure and excitement” are involved in the process.

The elements of playwriting ▶

The sections in this chapter are organized as follows:

- ▶ **“Structuring the Ten-Minute Play”** More than any other genre of creative writing, plays need structure to succeed. This section discusses how to create an immediate conflict, how to complicate and reverse the audience’s initial expectations, and how to end your play.
- ▶ **“Creating Believable Characters”** As is the case for writers of fiction, characterization and character development are primary concerns for playwrights. You will learn how to decide who should be in your play as well as how to avoid creating characters that come across as two-dimensional **stereotypes**—people with one or two easily recognizable traits or characteristics.
- ▶ **“Writing Convincing Dialogue”** Poets, fiction writers, and essayists can give us background information without resorting to dialogue. They describe scenes and tell us what we need to know. In contrast, playwrights have only dialogue to tell us who the relevant people are, where they have been, and where they are going. This section shows you how to use dialogue to develop believable characters, introduce backstory in a credible fashion, and heighten and develop your conflict.
- ▶ **“Crafting a Theme”** Besides being arenas for gripping conflict, satisfying character development, and convincing dialogue, plays are places to

discuss ideas. The themes of your play should arise naturally from the play itself, and this section discusses ways to highlight and clarify the topics you address.

- ▶ **“Onstage: The Elements of Production”** Big Broadway productions can afford elaborate props and costumes and spectacular lighting and effects. Unfortunately, you probably can’t, so this section presents a few ways that you can use basic production elements and provides an overview of the people and things involved in putting on a play with limited resources.

The ten-minute play: Three models ▶

A one-act play—that is, a play without an intermission—can range in length from a couple of minutes to more than an hour; the ten-minute play is a type of one-act play. Ten minutes is an arbitrary slice of time, but right now it is a popular length for plays. If creative nonfiction is the hot genre in creative writing, then the ten-minute play is what’s currently hot in playwriting. Eduardo Machado, of New York University’s playwriting program, calls the ten-minute play “a great learning tool. . . . It’s so well-suited to the immediacy of the young playwright’s experience.” Marc Masterson lauds the “tremendous potential of ten-minute plays,” which he says are “capable of packing a punch with a deft stroke.” And Ellen Lauren says that they “provide as rich a challenge, demand as articulate a portrayal, and contain possibilities as limitless as any full-length text.” In short, according to Gary Garrison, the ten-minute play brings “an audience through the same cathartic/entertainment experience that a good one-act or full-length play accomplishes—i.e., sympathetic characters with recognizable needs encompassed within a resolvable dramatic conflict.”

Ten-minute plays generally are produced as a group. Although grouping the plays dilutes the attention focused on each individual playwright, it does have a number of benefits. An evening of eight ten-minute plays not only generates opportunities for eight playwrights and directors and as many as twenty or more actors but also increases the likelihood of an audience. Attracting an audience is often the most demanding aspect of a production, but if you can draw on the friends and family of thirty people, suddenly a theater begins to fill up.

We will talk more about structure in the next section, but it’s worth emphasizing that a ten-minute play is not a **skit**—a short comedy sketch—masquerading as a play. Unlike a comedic play, a skit is something done quickly for cheap laughs. A number of jokes and gestures are bundled together under a single broad topic, but the parts of a skit don’t necessarily connect: we usually just get the beginning, middle, or end of a scenario. The characters are stereotypes, and

nothing much is at stake; therefore, nothing of any consequence is resolved. A play, in contrast, gives us “resolvable dramatic conflict,” and even if it’s hilarious, it points to deeper truths about the human condition.

All three of our model plays are interested in who we are as humans and what we want from life, although each playwright uses a different combination of humor and gravity to explore these issues. On the surface, David Ives’s *Sure Thing* is pure fun, a farce about a man trying to pick up a woman; however, when we dig deeper, we find that the play also has some serious commentary about how difficult it is for two people to get together. Tina Howe’s *The Divine Fallacy* begins as a comedy about a brilliant yet painfully shy author and ends as a meditation on the nature of personal, and possibly celestial, revelations. A. Rey Pamatmat’s *Some Other Kid*, which alludes to the murder of Trayvon Martin, addresses serious issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, among others, although Pamatmat, too, occasionally uses humor to investigate the various ways we categorize ourselves and others.

“By shortening a play you can lengthen it,” wrote the German critic Friedrich Hebbel, and our model plays confirm that apparent paradox. When we squeeze an entire world, an entire dramatic action—from beginning to end—into ten minutes, we insist that audience members increase their attention, that they grant this little slip of time the same authority they would give to a full-length play. As you begin to generate ideas for your ten-minute play, try to think of conflicts and characters that are funny enough to keep us laughing the entire time, or that have the weight and heft and consequence necessary to keep us on the edge of our seats.

David Ives

Sure Thing

David Ives is a graduate of the Yale School of Drama and a widely produced playwright. He is best known for his full-length play *Venus in Fur* and for *All in the Timing*, a collection of six one-act comedies, which includes *Sure Thing*. *All in the Timing* received the 1993 Outer Critics Circle Playwriting Award, as well as a number of other honors, and it continues to be produced around the country. Ives has taught at Columbia University and the Tisch School for the Arts and has worked in musical theater in various capacities (he adapted David Copperfield’s magic show *Dreams and Nightmares* for Broadway). He has also written for *The New Yorker* and *Spy* magazine, and he is the author of the children’s book *Monsieur Eek*.

The charm of *Sure Thing* is certainly all in the timing. Not only does the rapid back-and-forth repartee between Bill and Betty require precise timing on

the part of the actors, but the stop-and-start structure of the play itself also suggests that getting together with a romantic partner depends on meeting that special someone at just the right moment and saying just the right things. Performed well, *Sure Thing* is hilarious. The play demonstrates just how much you can do with funny, well-crafted lines and the simplest production elements: two chairs, a table, and a bell.

Characters

BILL and BETTY, both in their late 20s

Setting

A café table, with a couple of chairs

Important Note

The bell is not visible, is not onstage, is not on the table or anywhere else in sight. It is rung from the wings and neither Bill nor Betty ever acknowledges the sound of the bell.

Betty is reading at the table. An empty chair opposite her. Bill enters.

BILL: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

BETTY: Excuse me?

BILL: Is this taken?

BETTY: Yes it is.

BILL: Oh. Sorry.

BETTY: Sure thing. *(A bell rings softly.)*

BILL: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

BETTY: Excuse me?

BILL: Is this taken?

BETTY: No, but I'm expecting somebody in a minute.

BILL: Oh. Thanks anyway.

BETTY: Sure thing. *(A bell rings softly.)*

BILL: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

BETTY: No, but I'm expecting somebody very shortly.

BILL: Would you mind if I sit here till he or she or it comes?

BETTY: *(Glances at her watch.)* They do seem to be pretty late. . . .

BILL: You never know who you might be turning down.

BETTY: Sorry. Nice try, though.

BILL: Sure thing. *(Bell.)* Is this seat taken?

BETTY: No it's not.

BILL: Would you mind if I sit here?

BETTY: Yes I would.

BILL: Oh. (*Bell.*) Is this chair taken?
BETTY: No it's not.
BILL: Would you mind if I sit here?
BETTY: No. Go ahead.
BILL: Thanks. (*He sits. She continues reading.*) Every place else seems to be taken.
BETTY: Mm-hm.
BILL: Great place.
BETTY: Mm-hm.
BILL: What's the book?
BETTY: I just wanted to read in quiet, if you don't mind.
BILL: No. Sure thing. (*Bell.*) Every place else seems to be taken.
BETTY: Mm-hm.
BILL: Great place for reading.
BETTY: Yes, I like it.
BILL: What's the book?
BETTY: *The Sound and the Fury*.
BILL: Oh. Hemingway. (*Bell.*) What's the book?
BETTY: *The Sound and the Fury*.
BILL: Oh. Faulkner.
BETTY: Have you read it?
BILL: Not . . . actually. I've sure read *about* it, though. It's supposed to be great.
BETTY: It is great.
BILL: I hear it's great. (*Small pause.*) Waiter? (*Bell.*) What's the book?
BETTY: *The Sound and the Fury*.
BILL: Oh. Faulkner.
BETTY: Have you read it?
BILL: I'm a Mets fan, myself. (*Bell.*)
BETTY: Have you read it?
BILL: Yeah, I read it in college.
BETTY: Where was college?
BILL: I went to Oral Roberts University. (*Bell.*)
BETTY: Where was college?
BILL: I was lying. I never really went to college. I just like to party. (*Bell.*)
BETTY: Where was college?
BILL: Harvard.
BETTY: Do you like Faulkner?
BILL: I love Faulkner. I spent a whole winter reading him once.
BETTY: I've just started.
BILL: I was so excited after ten pages that I went out and bought everything else he wrote. One of the greatest reading experiences of my life. I mean, all that incredible psychological understanding. Page after page of gorgeous prose. His profound grasp of the mystery of time and human existence. The smells of the earth. . . . What do you think?

- BETTY: I think it's pretty boring. *(Bell.)*
- BILL: What's the book?
- BETTY: *The Sound and the Fury.*
- BILL: Oh! Faulkner!
- BETTY: Do you like Faulkner?
- BILL: I love Faulkner.
- BETTY: He's incredible.
- BILL: I spent a whole winter reading him once.
- BETTY: I was so excited after ten pages that I went out and bought everything else he wrote.
- BILL: All that incredible psychological understanding.
- BETTY: And the prose is so gorgeous.
- BILL: And the way he's grasped the mystery of time—
- BETTY: —and human existence. I can't believe I've waited this long to read him.
- BILL: You never know. You might not have liked him before.
- BETTY: That's true.
- BILL: You might not have been ready for him. You have to hit these things at the right moment or it's no good.
- BETTY: That's happened to me.
- BILL: It's all in the timing. *(Small pause.)* My name's Bill, by the way.
- BETTY: I'm Betty.
- BILL: Hi.
- BETTY: Hi. *(Small pause.)*
- BILL: Yes I thought reading Faulkner was . . . a great experience.
- BETTY: Yes. *(Small pause.)*
- BILL: *The Sound and the Fury* . . . *(Another small pause.)*
- BETTY: Well. Onwards and upwards. *(She goes back to her book.)*
- BILL: Waiter—? *(Bell.)* You have to hit these things at the right moment or it's no good.
- BETTY: That's happened to me.
- BILL: It's all in the timing. My name's Bill, by the way.
- BETTY: I'm Betty.
- BILL: Hi.
- BETTY: Hi.
- BILL: Do you come in here a lot?
- BETTY: Actually I'm just in town for two days from Pakistan.
- BILL: Oh. Pakistan. *(Bell.)* My name's Bill, by the way.
- BETTY: I'm Betty.
- BILL: Hi.
- BETTY: Hi.
- BILL: Do you come in here a lot?
- BETTY: Every once in a while. Do you?

BILL: Not so much anymore. Not as much as I used to. Before my nervous breakdown. (*Bell.*) Do you come in here a lot?

BETTY: Why are you asking?

BILL: Just interested.

BETTY: Are you really interested, or do you just want to pick me up?

BILL: No, I'm really interested.

BETTY: Why would you be interested in whether I come in here a lot?

BILL: Just . . . getting acquainted.

BETTY: Maybe you're only interested for the sake of making small talk long enough to ask me back to your place to listen to some music, or because you've just rented some great tape for your VCR, or because you've got some terrific unknown Django Reinhardt record, only all you really want to do is fuck — which you won't do very well — after which you'll go into the bathroom and pee very loudly, then pad into the kitchen and get yourself a beer from the refrigerator without asking me whether I'd like anything, and then you'll proceed to lie back down beside me and confess that you've got a girlfriend named Stephanie who's away at medical school in Belgium for a year, and that you've been involved with her — *off and on* — in what you'll call a very "intricate" relationship, for about *seven YEARS*. None of which *interests* me, mister!

BILL: Okay. (*Bell.*) Do you come in here a lot?

BETTY: Every other day, I think.

BILL: I come in here quite a lot and I don't remember seeing you.

BETTY: I guess we must be on different schedules.

BILL: Missed connections.

BETTY: Yes. Different time zones.

BILL: Amazing how you can live right next door to somebody in this town and never even know it.

BETTY: I know.

BILL: City life.

BETTY: It's crazy.

BILL: We probably pass each other in the street every day. Right in front of this place, probably.

BETTY: Yep.

BILL: (*Looks around.*) Well the waiters here sure seem to be in some different time zone. I can't seem to locate one anywhere. . . . Waiter! (*He looks back.*)

So what do you — (*He sees that she's gone back to her book.*)

BETTY: I beg pardon?

BILL: Nothing. Sorry. (*Bell.*)

BETTY: I guess we must be on different schedules.

BILL: Missed connections.

BETTY: Yes. Different time zones.

BILL: Amazing how you can live right next door to somebody in this town and never even know it.

BETTY: I know.

BILL: City life.

BETTY: It's crazy.

BILL: You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

BETTY: Actually I was.

BILL: Oh. Boyfriend?

BETTY: Sort of.

BILL: What's a sort-of boyfriend?

BETTY: My husband.

BILL: Ah-ha. *(Bell.)* You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

BETTY: Actually I was.

BILL: Oh. Boyfriend?

BETTY: Sort of.

BILL: What's a sort-of boyfriend?

BETTY: We were meeting here to break up.

BILL: Mm-hm . . . *(Bell.)* What's a sort-of boyfriend?

BETTY: My lover. Here she comes right now! *(Bell.)*

BILL: You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

BETTY: No, just reading.

BILL: Sort of a sad occupation for a Friday night, isn't it? Reading here, all by yourself?

BETTY: Do you think so?

BILL: Well sure. I mean, what's a good-looking woman like you doing out alone on a Friday night?

BETTY: Trying to keep away from lines like that.

BILL: No, listen—*(Bell.)* You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

BETTY: No, just reading.

BILL: Sort of a sad occupation for a Friday night, isn't it? Reading here all by yourself?

BETTY: I guess it is, in a way.

BILL: What's a good-looking woman like you doing out alone on a Friday night anyway? No offense, but . . .

BETTY: I'm out alone on a Friday night for the first time in a very long time.

BILL: Oh.

BETTY: You see, I just recently ended a relationship.

BILL: Oh.

BETTY: Of rather long standing.

BILL: I'm sorry. *(Small pause.)* Well listen, since reading by yourself *is* such a sad occupation for a Friday night, would you like to go elsewhere?

BETTY: No . . .

BILL: Do something else?

BETTY: No thanks.

BILL: I was headed out to the movies in a while anyway.

BETTY: I don't think so.

BILL: Big chance to let Faulkner catch his breath. All those long sentences get him pretty tired.

BETTY: Thanks anyway.

BILL: Okay.

BETTY: I appreciate the invitation.

BILL: Sure thing. (*Bell.*) You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

BETTY: No, just reading.

BILL: Sort of a sad occupation for a Friday night, isn't it? Reading here all by yourself?

BETTY: I guess I was trying to think of it as existentially romantic. You know—cappuccino, great literature, rainy night . . .

BILL: That only works in Paris. We *could* hop the late plane to Paris. Get on a Concorde. Find a café . . .

BETTY: I'm a little short on plane fare tonight.

BILL: Darn it, so am I.

BETTY: To tell you the truth, I was headed to the movies after I finished this section. Would you like to come along? Since you can't locate a waiter?

BILL: That's a very nice offer, but . . .

BETTY: Uh-huh. Girlfriend?

BILL: Two, actually. One of them's pregnant, and Stephanie—(*Bell.*)

BETTY: Girlfriend?

BILL: No, I don't have a girlfriend. Not if you mean the castrating bitch I dumped last night. (*Bell.*)

BETTY: Girlfriend?

BILL: Sort of. Sort of.

BETTY: What's a sort-of girlfriend?

BILL: My mother. (*Bell.*) I just ended a relationship, actually.

BETTY: Oh.

BILL: Of rather long standing.

BETTY: I'm sorry to hear it.

BILL: This is my first night out alone in a long time. I feel a little bit at sea, to tell you the truth.

BETTY: So you didn't stop to talk because you're a Moonie, or you have some weird political affiliation—?

BILL: Nope. Straight-down-the-ticket Republican. (*Bell.*) Straight-down-the-ticket Democrat. (*Bell.*) Can I tell you something about politics? (*Bell.*) I like to think of myself as a citizen of the universe. (*Bell.*) I'm unaffiliated.

- BETTY: That's a relief. So am I.
- BILL: I vote my beliefs.
- BETTY: Labels are not important.
- BILL: Labels are not important, exactly. Take me, for example. I mean, what does it matter if I had a two-point at – *(Bell.)* – three-point at – *(Bell.)* – four-point at college? Or if I did come from Pittsburgh – *(Bell.)* – Cleveland – *(Bell.)* – Westchester County?
- BETTY: Sure.
- BILL: I believe that a man is what he is. *(Bell.)* A person is what he is. *(Bell.)* A person is . . . what they are.
- BETTY: I think so too.
- BILL: So what if I admire Trotsky? *(Bell.)* So what if I once had a total-body liposuction? *(Bell.)* So what if I don't have a penis? *(Bell.)* So what if I once spent a year in the Peace Corps? I was acting on my convictions.
- BETTY: Sure.
- BILL: You can't just hang a sign on a person.
- BETTY: Absolutely. I'll bet you're a Scorpio. *(Many bells ring)* Listen, I was headed to the movies after I finished this section. Would you like to come along?
- BILL: That sounds like fun. What's playing?
- BETTY: A couple of the really early Woody Allen movies.
- BILL: Oh.
- BETTY: You don't like Woody Allen?
- BILL: Sure. I like Woody Allen.
- BETTY: But you're not crazy about Woody Allen.
- BILL: Those early ones kind of get on my nerves.
- BETTY: Uh-huh. *(Bell.)*
- BILL: *(Simultaneously.)* Y'know I was headed to the –
- BETTY: *(Simultaneously.)* I was thinking about –
- BILL: I'm sorry.
- BETTY: No, go ahead.
- BILL: I was going to say that I was headed to the movies in a little while, and . . .
- BETTY: So was I.
- BILL: The Woody Allen festival?
- BETTY: Just up the street.
- BILL: Do you like the early ones?
- BETTY: I think anybody who doesn't ought to be run off the planet.
- BILL: How many times have you seen *Bananas*?
- BETTY: Eight times.
- BILL: Twelve. So are you still interested? *(Long pause.)*
- BETTY: Do you like Entenmann's crumb cake . . . ?
- BILL: Last night I went out at two in the morning to get one. *(Small pause.)* Did you have an Etch-a-Sketch as a child?

BETTY: Yes! And do you like Brussels sprouts? (*Small pause.*)
 BILL: No, I think they're disgusting.
 BETTY: They *are* disgusting!
 BILL: Do you still believe in marriage in spite of current sentiments
 against it?
 BETTY: Yes.
 BILL: And children?
 BETTY: Three of them.
 BILL: Two girls and a boy.
 BETTY: Harvard, Vassar and Brown.
 BILL: And will you love me?
 BETTY: Yes.
 BILL: And cherish me forever?
 BETTY: Yes.
 BILL: Do you still want to go to the movies?
 BETTY: Sure thing.
 BILL AND BETTY: (*Together.*) Waiter! ◀

BLACKOUT

Tina Howe

The Divine Fallacy

Tina Howe's best-known full-length works include *The Art of Dining*, *Painting Churches*, and *Approaching Zanzibar*. She is the winner of an Obie Award for Distinguished Playwriting, an Outer Critics Circle Award, an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature, and a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1987, her play *Coastal Disturbances* received a Tony nomination for Best Play. *Pride's Crossing* was selected as a finalist for the 1997 Pulitzer Prize and was awarded the 1998 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play. In 2005, Howe received the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theater, and in 2015 she was given the PEN/Laura Pels Award as a "grand master" of American drama.

The Divine Fallacy premiered at the Humana Festival in 1999. The play focuses on the brief interaction between two characters, fashion photographer Victor Hugo (the great-great-grandson of the famous French novelist) and Dorothy Kiss, a writer and the sister of a famous model. Victor is supposed to take Dorothy's picture, but despite the fact that she has come to his studio, she goes to great lengths to avoid being photographed. By the end of the play,

however, we learn that even though Dorothy is not nearly as physically attractive as her sister, there is something about her that is beautiful, possibly even "divine."

Characters

VICTOR HUGO: A photographer, late thirties.

DOROTHY KISS: A writer, mid-twenties.

Setting

Victor's studio in downtown Manhattan. It's a freezing day in late February.

Victor's studio in downtown Manhattan. It looks like a surreal garden blooming with white umbrellas and reflective silver screens. As the lights rise we hear the joyful bass-soprano duet, "Mit unser Macht ist nichts getan," from Bach's chorale, Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott, BWV 80. It's a freezing day in late February. Victor, dressed in black, has been waiting for Dorothy for over an hour. There's a tentative knock at his door.

VICTOR: Finally! (*Rushing to answer it.*) Dorothy Kiss?

(Dorothy steps in, glasses fogged over and very out of breath. She's a mousy woman dressed in layers of mismatched clothes. An enormous coat covers a bulky sweater which covers a gauzy white dress. A tangle of woolen scarves is wrapped around her neck.)

DOROTHY: (*Rooted to the spot.*) Victor Hugo?

VICTOR: At last.

DOROTHY: I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I got lost.

VICTOR: Come in, come in.

DOROTHY: I reversed the numbers of your address.

VICTOR: We don't have much time.

DOROTHY: (*With a shrill laugh.*) I went to 22 West 17th instead of 17 West 22nd!

VICTOR: I have to leave for Paris in an hour.

DOROTHY: The minute I got there, I knew something was wrong.

VICTOR: (*Looking at his watch.*) No, make that forty-five minutes.

DOROTHY: There were all these naked people milling around. (*Pause.*) With pigeons.

VICTOR: The spring collections open tomorrow.

DOROTHY: They were so beautiful.

VICTOR: It's going to be a mad house . . . Come in, please . . .

(He strides back into the studio and starts setting up his equipment.)

DOROTHY: I didn't realize they came in so many colors.

DOROTHY: Red, green, yellow, purple . . .
I think they'd been dyed.
(Pause.)

VICTOR: A tidal wave of photographers and fashion editors is descending from all over the world.

VICTOR: I swore last year would be my last, but a man's got to make a living, right? *(Turning to look for her.)* Hey, where did you go?
(Dorothy waves at him from the door.)

VICTOR: Miss Kiss . . . we've got to hurry if you want me to do this.
(Dorothy makes a strangled sound.)

VICTOR: *(Guiding her into the room.)* Come in, come in . . . I won't bite.
DOROTHY: *(With a shrill laugh.)* My glasses are fogged over! I can't see a thing!
(She takes them off and wipes them with the end of one of her scarves.)

VICTOR: Here, let me help you off with your coat.
(They go through a lurching dance as he tries to unwrap all her scarves, making her spin like a top.)

VICTOR: Hold still . . . easy does it . . .
atta girl . . .

DOROTHY: Whoops, I was just . . . sorry, sorry,
sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry . . .
(He finally succeeds. They look at each other and smile, breathing heavily.)

VICTOR: So you're Daphne's sister?!
DOROTHY: Dorothy Kiss, the *writer* . . .
(Victor struggles to see the resemblance.)

DOROTHY: I know. It's a shocker.
VICTOR: No, no . . .
DOROTHY: She's the top fashion model in the country, and here I am . . . Miss Muskrat!

VICTOR: The more I look at you, the more I see the resemblance.
DOROTHY: You don't have to do that.
VICTOR: No really. There's something about your forehead . . .
DOROTHY: I take after my father. The rodent side of the family . . . Small, non-descript, close to the ground . . . *(She makes disturbing rodent faces and sounds.)*

VICTOR: You're funny.
DOROTHY: I try.
(Silence.)

VICTOR: So . . .
DOROTHY: *(Grabbing her coat and lurching towards the door.)* Goodbye, nice meeting you.

VICTOR: (*Barring her way.*) Hey, hey, just a minute . . .

DOROTHY: I can let myself out.

VICTOR: Daphne said you were coming out with a new novel and needed a photograph for the back cover.

DOROTHY: Another time . . .

VICTOR: It sounded wild.

DOROTHY: Oh God, oh God . . .

VICTOR: Something about a woman whose head keeps falling off.

DOROTHY: This was *her* idea, not mine! I hate having my picture taken!

(*Struggling to get past him.*) I hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it . . .

VICTOR: (*Grabbing her arm.*) She told me you might react like this.

DOROTHY: *Hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it!*

VICTOR: Dorothy, Dorothy . . .

(*Dorothy desperately tries to escape. Victor grabs her in his arms as she continues to fight him, kicking her legs. He finally plunks her down in a chair. They breathe heavily. A silence.*)

DOROTHY: Why can't you set up your camera in my brain? Bore a hole in my skull and let 'er rip. (*She makes lurid sound effects.*) There's no plainness here, but heaving oceans ringed with pearls and ancient cities rising in the mist . . . Grab your tripod and activate your zoom, wonders are at hand . . . Holy men calling the faithful to prayer as women shed their clothes at the river's edge . . . *Click!* Jeweled elephants drink beside them, their trunks shattering the surface like breaking glass. *Click!* Their reflections shiver and merge, woman and elephant becoming one . . . Slender arms dissolving into rippling tusks, loosened hair spreading into shuddering flanks . . . *Click, click, click!* Now you see them, now you don't . . . A breast, a tail, a jeweled eye . . . *Click!* Macaws scream overhead (*Sound effect.*), or is it the laughter of the women as they drift further and further from the shore, their shouts becoming hoarse and strange . . . (*Sound effect.*) *Click!* (*Tapping her temple.*) Aim your camera here, Mr. Hugo. *This is where beauty lies . . . Mysterious, inchoate, and out of sight!*

(*Silence as Victor stares at her.*)

DOROTHY: (*Suddenly depressed.*) I don't know about you, but I could use a drink.

VICTOR: (*As if in a dream.*) Right, right . . .

DOROTHY: VICTOR?! (*Pause.*) I'd like a drink, if you don't mind!

VICTOR: Coming right up. What's your poison?

DOROTHY: Vodka, neat.

VICTOR: You got it! (*He lurches to a cabinet and fetches a bottle of vodka and a glass.*)

DOROTHY: That's alright, I don't need a glass. *(She grabs the bottle and drinks an enormous amount.)* Thanks, I needed that!

VICTOR: Holy shit!

DOROTHY: *(Wiping her mouth.)* Where are my manners? I forgot about you.
(Passing him the bottle.) Sorry, sorry . . .

VICTOR: *(Pours a small amount in a glass and tips it towards her.)* Cheers!
(She raises an imaginary glass.)

DOROTHY: Could I ask you a personal question?

VICTOR: Shoot.

DOROTHY: Are you really related to Victor Hugo?

VICTOR: Strange but true.

DOROTHY: Really, really?

VICTOR: *Really!* He was my great great grandfather! *(Bowing.)* *A votre service.*

DOROTHY: He's my favorite writer! He's all I read . . . Over and over and over again! I can't believe I'm standing in the same room with you!

(She suddenly grabs one of his cameras and starts taking pictures of him.)

VICTOR: Hey, what are you doing? That's a two-thousand-dollar camera you're using!

(He lunges for it. She runs from him, snapping his picture.)

DOROTHY: A direct descendant of Victor Hugo . . .

VICTOR: *(Chasing her.)* Put that down!

DOROTHY: *(Snapping him at crazy angles.)* No one will believe me!

VICTOR: Give it here! *(Finally catching her.)* I SAID: GIVE ME THAT CAMERA!

(They struggle. A torrent of blood gushes from her hand.)

DOROTHY: Ow! Ow!

VICTOR: *(Frozen to the spot.)* Miss Kiss . . . Miss Kiss . . . Oh my God, my God . . .

(Dorothy gulps for air.)

VICTOR: What did I do?

(Her breathing slowly returns to normal.)

VICTOR: Are you alright?

DOROTHY: *(Weakly.)* A tourniquet . . . I need a tourniquet.

VICTOR: On the double! *(He races around looking for one.)*

DOROTHY: Wait, my sock . . . *(She kicks off one of her boots and removes a white sock.)*

VICTOR: *(Running to her side.)* Here, let me help.

DOROTHY: No, I can do it. *(She expertly ties it to stop the flow of blood.)*

VICTOR: How are you feeling?

DOROTHY: Better thanks.

VICTOR: I'm so sorry.

DOROTHY: It's not your fault.

VICTOR: I didn't mean to hurt you.

DOROTHY: I have a stigmata.

VICTOR: *What?*

DOROTHY: I said I have a stigmata. It bleeds when I get wrought up.

VICTOR: *You have a stigmata?*

DOROTHY: Several, actually.

VICTOR: Jesus Christ!

DOROTHY: Jesus Christ, indeed.

VICTOR: *A stigmata? In my studio?*

(Silence.)

DOROTHY: I'm afraid you're going to miss your plane to Paris. I'm sorry.

(A silence. She hands him his camera.) Well, I guess you may as well take my picture.

VICTOR: Right, right . . . your picture.

(She removes her glasses and bulky sweater and looks eerily beautiful in her white gauzy dress.)

DOROTHY: I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be.

(Victor is stunned, unable to move.)

DOROTHY: Yoo hoo . . . Mr. Hugo?

VICTOR: You're so beautiful!

DOROTHY: *(Lowering her eyes.)* Please!

VICTOR: You look so sad . . . Like an early Christian martyr.

(A great light starts to emanate from her. Victor races to get his camera and begins taking her picture.)

VICTOR: *(Breaking down.)* I can't . . . I can't . . . I just . . . can't.

DOROTHY: Victor, Victor, it's alright . . . We all have something . . . You have your eye, Daphne has her beauty and I have this. It's OK. It makes me who I am.

(Victor struggles to control himself.)

DOROTHY: Listen to me . . . Listen . . . When the Navahos weave a blanket, they leave in a hole to let the soul out – the flaw, the fallacy – call it what you will. It's part of the design, the most important part – faith, surrender, a mysterious tendency to bleed . . .

VICTOR: I'm so ashamed.

DOROTHY: You did your job. You took my picture.

VICTOR: But I didn't see you.

DOROTHY: Shh, shh.

VICTOR: I was blind.

DOROTHY: Shhhhhh . . .

VICTOR: (*Breaking down again.*) Blind, blind, blind . . .

(*Dorothy rises and places her hands over his eyes, and then raises them in a gesture of benediction.*)

DOROTHY: There, there, it's alright. It's over.

(*The lights blaze around them and then fade as the closing measures of Bach's duet swell.*) ◀

END OF PLAY

A. Rey Pamatmat

Some Other Kid

A Rey Pamatmat is an MFA graduate of the Yale School of Drama and co-director of the Ma-Yi Writer's Lab. He is a past recipient of the Playwright of New York (PoNY) Fellowship, Princeton's Hodder Fellowship, a Princess Grace Award for Playwriting, a Princess Grace Special Projects Grant, a NYFA Playwriting Fellowship, and a Truman Capote Literary Fellowship. Pamatmat currently teaches at Primary Stages Einhorn School of the Performing Arts in New York City.

Some Other Kid was originally produced in 2013 as part of *Facing Our Truth: 10-Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege* at the Martin Segal Theatre Center in association with The New Black Fest. As Keith Josef Adkins, the company's artistic director, notes, "This country has a very complicated relationship with race and privilege. There's no way around it. It has an impact on whose lives we deem suspect and expendable and whose we do not." While some of the plays in the showcase deal directly with Trayvon Martin and his killer, George Zimmerman, Pamatmat's piece transforms Trayvon into Andre, a kind of "every kid," albeit one who is a brilliant student. Indeed, it is Andre's youth, as well the ordinariness of Andre's suburban life, that makes his death all the more tragic.

Characters

ELISSA: 17, any race (nonwhite), some kid
 ANDRE: 17, African American, some other kid
 OWEN: 17, any race, their friend

Time

Some day at the end of some summer.

Place

Some American suburb.

(ELISSA, *alone*.)

ELISSA: (*to the audience*) I make these on my computer at home.

(*ELISSA produces three large, round, glossy stickers. The art on them looks like something between a corporate logo and graffiti. They're well designed.*)

(*to the audience*) People are always trying to sell you shit. Not me. I'm trying to remind you about something you already have.

I go out and stick these places. Sometimes I stick them on things that are cool, you know, that I like. Like Facebook or something, but in the real world. Like there's this community garden at the Episcopal Church, and I put a dollar in the donation box that had this stuck on it.

(*She holds up a Dream sticker.*)

(*to the audience*) "Dream." This one means dream.

Sometimes I want to say, "This ain't right." Like if there's a violent movie poster, I stick this one on it to remind people that they can have love, too.

(*A Love sticker.*)

(*to the audience*) "Love."

Or if a company says they're selling you freedom, but really they're selling you a shoe, then I stick this one on it to remind you of what you already have.

(*A Power sticker.*)

(*to the audience*) "Power."

I made JPEGs, too.

Sometimes, when something awful has happened like an amazing woman is assassinated or a revolution goes wrong or a neighbor doesn't act neighborly, I tweet a link to a page filled with these pictures. A Power, Dream, or Love bomb to remind everyone that these things are already inside them, waiting to be exercised. Or at least remembered.

Because I don't want to sell you shit. You have everything you need in what you already are.

(*Lights shift to another part of the stage where ANDRE and OWEN play video games together in ANDRE's dad's living room.*)

ANDRE: She's like my sister, Owen. And you grew up with her, too.

OWEN: Not like you did. We weren't close like that.

ANDRE: You want to ask out your sister?

OWEN: No, I want to ask out Elissa who I grew up with but am not related to.

Not my sister. More like a cousin.

ANDRE: First or second?

OWEN: Shut up.

ANDRE: First cousin is still illegal.

OWEN: BUT SHE'S NOT REALLY MY COUSIN OR MY SISTER. Look:

I don't want to ruin shit.

ANDRE: I don't control Elissa.

OWEN: But do you think it would make things weird? Would you be cool?

ANDRE: If you think you have a chance, you don't need my permission.

OWEN: You just said she's like your sister.

ANDRE: But she's not.

OWEN: Jesus fucking — FUCK YOU.

(ANDRE starts cracking up.)

ANDRE: Look, Elissa can take care of herself. Do what you want to do.

OWEN: Our last year has to be epic. Before you leave for your fancy school. I don't want to mess it up.

ANDRE: It's not fancy. And it's only five hours away. I'm not going to New Zealand or something.

(ELISSA moves into their space.)

ELISSA: Who's going to New Zealand?

OWEN: Andre is, when he goes to his fancy school.

ELISSA: I know you didn't do well in geography, but you might want to look at a map.

OWEN: I don't need a map to know I'm not going where Andre's going.

ELISSA: Right? Early admission. Honor student. You may even end up valedictorian, Andre.

ANDRE: Where have you been? Sticking stickers to save the world?

ELISSA: Something like that. I'll save the world, and you'll change it into something worth saving.

ANDRE: I'm not changing shit. I just want everyone to have a little fun.

OWEN: *(out of nowhere)* I might become a vegetarian. You know, like stop eating meat.

ELISSA: What? Why?

ANDRE: You can't be a vegetarian after everything you've done.

OWEN: What does that mean?

ANDRE: Fish baseball.

ELISSA: "Fish baseball?"

(Lights shift as OWEN leaves the scene and speaks to the audience.)

OWEN: *(to the audience)* My cousin Geo is a real prick.

There was this cat once that was, you know, just around. Stray, indoor/outdoor, what have you. I don't think he belonged to anyone, or maybe I just made it like that in my head because of what happened.

Which is this.

My prick cousin stalked this cat, like hunted it, and poked it with sticks and shit. Real mature, right? “Here, kitty, kitty, look at this stick.” And then: poke or whack or smack. And I’d be all, “Leave the cat alone. He didn’t do shit.” And Geo would say, “She don’t belong here. This isn’t her territory.”

The cat’s not stupid, though. My cousin keeps going and going and going after it. Then one day, the cat gets poked, he jumps in the air, runs up the stick like kung fu shit, and slashes Geo across the face.

He’s bleeding. There’s skin hanging off. So my prick cousin hunts the cat down and clubs the shit out of him.

Kills him.

And when people are like, “Dude, you killed a cat?”

Geo goes, “Look what it did to my face! Self defense.”

And all I think is, “Yeah. The cat can say self defense for slashing your face, but all you can say is you’re a stupid prick for hunting a cat who didn’t do shit to anyone.”

(OWEN rejoins the scene.)

ANDRE: Your past will always catch up to you.

OWEN: Especially if your so-called friends keep dragging you back.

ELISSA: Don’t make me Google this shit.

ANDRE: You won’t find it. Our stupidity is beyond even the Internet.

OWEN: Andre, Elissa doesn’t need / to hear — *

ELISSA: Tell me, or I’m going home.

OWEN: Fish baseball is / when you go —

ANDRE: You are too easy.

OWEN: Your mom is.

ANDRE: You sure this is your chance? Fish baseball?

ELISSA: Chance?

(Five seconds.)

ANDRE: Never mind.

ELISSA: Uh-huh.

OWEN: Fish baseball is when you go fishing, and you catch one that’s too small. But instead of throwing it back, you get your friend to pitch it to you, and you hit it with a bat.

ANDRE: And your friend ends up with fish guts all over him.

(Five seconds.)

* A slash mark indicates that the next character begins speaking at that point, before the current speaker has finished. —Eds.

2 Writing the Ten-Minute Play

ELISSA: You are both retarded.

(ANDRE and OWEN crack up.)

They're small, because they're babies. You killed babies.

OWEN: They die anyway.

ELISSA: Everything dies anyway. Is that going to be your excuse when you go on a shooting spree?

OWEN: No, but even if you throw them back. By the time you get the hook out, most times they're already dead.

ELISSA: So you torture them instead?

ANDRE: No, they're doomed. We just put them out of their misery.

OWEN: With a bat.

(ANDRE mimes a pitch; OWEN hits. They crack up again.)

ELISSA: Bye.

OWEN: No, no, no, no, no. We were — I was laughing at what a stupid kid I was. Not at killing babies.

ANDRE: I remember plenty of stupid kid things you did before you decided to save the world.

ELISSA: DO. NOT.

OWEN: This is my point, right? I am more conscious now of . . . of shit. I would never play fish baseball now. So . . . vegetarianism.

ANDRE: You're just tired of throwing out shirts covered in fish guts.

OWEN: Even if I was a stupid kid, now I'm not. I won't grow up to become some prick; I can do shit for the world, too.

(Lights shift as ANDRE leaves the scene and speaks to the audience.)

ANDRE: (to the audience) Everything is stupid. That's what people don't get. No one is a better person. Elissa is good at drawing. Owen is good at swimming and track and baseball. And I'm good at school.

School isn't about knowing the shit they're telling you. It's about playing the game. I'm not a super genius; there's no big secret; I'm just some kid. The game I happen to like playing is school. It's all about what's fun.

And they sell us this bullshit about how special we are, and so we try to be special. But seriously: ninety percent of the world is fuck ups. I don't have a citation for that from the American Journal of Fucked Upedness, but we all know it's true. And yet the world still turns.

I'm not special. The world right now happens to value the game I'm good at playing. Later on, maybe I won't mean shit — nothing I do or have done, maybe none of it will mean shit.

And that's cool, because I already know it, and it's a messed up idea anyway. Believing one person is more special than another leads you down a road where other people aren't special. Are disposable. And no one is disposable.

Those ideas are connected, so we've got to give them both up. One day I'm special. The next day it'll be some other kid. One day some other kid is disposable. The next day . . .

That's fucked up. We're all just trying to live our lives. Our regular lives. No one's life is better or more important than anyone else's.

(ANDRE rejoins the scene.)

When did I ever say you couldn't do shit for the world?

OWEN: You and Elissa are —

ELISSA: Are just the same as you. Why is this even a discussion? Obviously, we are all amazing.

(ELISSA sticks a Power sticker on OWEN's forehead.)

See?

ANDRE: I'm going to the 7-11. Anyone need anything?

OWEN: Just give me my chance. You know what I need.

ANDRE: Well, I'm not a social worker, so you better tell an adult you trust if your mommy's boyfriends are still looking at you in a way that makes you uncomfortable.

OWEN: Why does everything have to become an insult to my mom?

ANDRE: That was an insult to your mom's boyfriends.

OWEN: Iced tea. Bitch.

ANDRE: Don't call me bitch. I'm not your mom.

OWEN: Stop it. You know what I need.

(OWEN's eyes point to ELISSA.)

ANDRE: Need anything, Elissa?

ELISSA: Sour Patch Kids. I drove here from school, so my car is in your driveway.

ANDRE: I want to walk.

ELISSA: It's night.

ANDRE: (*hinting to OWEN*) It's ten minutes there and back. I'm walking.

(*back to ELISSA*)

And there's a crazy gate around the entire neighborhood to keep our houses safe as houses.

(ANDRE pulls a hoodie on.)

Iced tea and Sour Patch Kids. Anything else? Last chance.

(*to OWEN*)

If there's something you want, this is your chance.

(OWEN smiles.)

All right. Ten minutes.

(ANDRE goes.)

ELISSA: What are you going to do without him?

OWEN: Same as you, I guess.
 ELISSA: You don't need him to hold your hand.
 OWEN: Then who's going to do it?
 ELISSA: I just mean: I'm not stupid.
 OWEN: I get it. I mean, yeah. I know.
 ELISSA: So then, what are you two talking about?
 OWEN: You.
 ELISSA: Me?
 OWEN: And me.
 ELISSA: Me and you?
 OWEN: Yeah.
 ELISSA: Oh. Me and you.
 OWEN: Maybe.
 ELISSA: What brought this on?
 OWEN: I don't know. You just . . . you always know how to make me feel good.
 I noticed that you always make me feel good.
*(OWEN takes the Power sticker off his forehead, and sticks it on his shirt, over his heart.
 ELISSA smiles.)*
 ELISSA: Are you sure "Power" is the one you got for that? Maybe all you got is "Dream."
 OWEN: Maybe it's the other one. What's the third one? Oh, yeah . . .
*(OWEN leans in to kiss her, just as he does . . .)
 (The sound of a gunshot.)
 (Sirens and flashing lights as lights shift to another part of the stage where ANDRE lays,
 shot to death.)
 (ELISSA and OWEN go to him. OWEN starts to sob.)
 (ELISSA sticks a Love sticker on ANDRE's corpse. She sticks a Dream sticker on her own
 forehead.)
 (ELISSA takes OWEN's hand and they walk toward the audience. She takes out a Power
 sticker and holds it out to the audience. OWEN takes the Power sticker off his shirt and
 holds it out to the audience as well. Perhaps the equivalent of ELISSA's Internet "Power
 Bomb" is set—the stage fills with the Power symbol projected over and over again or
 Power stickers fall from above onto the audience.) ◀*

END OF PLAY

Structuring the ten-minute play ►

When it comes to structuring plays, both playwrights and literary scholars have a habit of turning to Aristotle. His *Poetics* has been the starting point for thinking about drama for more than 2,000 years, and it discusses issues that

are still relevant to us today, including character, language, and theme. Above all, as Jacques Barzun notes, for Aristotle, “The action, the plot, is all-important, not the persons in the conflict. To be effective, this action must be single and straightforward – no subplots.” According to Aristotle, what is most important is not so much the story being told as “the arrangement of the incidents” in the most effective order so that “what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action.”

Today character development is considered at least as important (if not more important) as plot, but plot – or structure – is even more crucial in a play than in the other genres we have discussed. Contemporary full-length plays can successfully juggle several different subplots, but in the ten-minute play, Aristotle’s “single and straightforward” action makes good sense. A ten-minute play is not simply a scene from a larger work. It is, as Aristotle said a full-length play should be, a self-contained whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. For your plot to function effectively in such a short time span, you need to focus on one main action and to make sure that what happens during the play is a result of something significant that happens onstage, or which the characters tell us happened prior to the play.

But what “incidents” should you write about? What should be the plot of your play? “Violence is what happens in plays,” says Suzan-Lori Parks. That may be an exaggeration, but Parks implies a truth about theater: the conflict symbolized by violence is essential to good plays. Right away we need to know that one character wants something very badly, and that another character (or characters) is intent on blocking the first character from achieving his or her goal. The object of the person’s desire may be another person; an idea; an admission; an apology; or, in a comedy, a cup of coffee and a cheese Danish. What’s important is that the protagonist keeps butting heads with one or more antagonists.

The fewer the characters in a play, the more likely it is that each character will play multiple roles. At times, Bill’s quest to date Betty and her refusal to go out with him make Bill seem the protagonist of *Sure Thing*. At other times, Betty’s desire to avoid a bad relationship focuses our interest on her. Similarly, in *Some Other Kid*, Andre, by virtue of his death, appears to be the protagonist, but the **soliloquies** – those moments when characters speak their thoughts aloud on stage in a way that is unnoticed by the other characters – also give Elissa and Owen a turn in the spotlight, highlighting their desires. Only in *The Divine Fallacy* does the richer, more complex character of Dorothy clearly assume the role of protagonist to Victor’s less fully developed antagonist.

However you identify the protagonist or antagonist, a good, strong conflict results in a **dramatic question**, a problem at the core of the play that must be answered by the play’s end. In *Sure Thing*, the dramatic question is whether Bill and Betty will get together. After numerous false starts, the answer – despite all odds – is yes. *The Divine Fallacy* asks, “Will Dorothy allow her picture to be taken

and thereby reveal her inner beauty?" The answer, as she blazes with light at the play's end, is another affirmative. *Some Other Kid*, the most serious of the three plays, might be said to have two dramatic questions. The first, but less pressing, question is whether Owen will muster up the courage to tell Elissa how he feels about her, which he does. On a more abstract level, we wonder if Elissa will succeed in convincing audience members that "you have everything you need in what you already are." Is the audience, in other words, capable of handling the portrayal of Andre's murder and its repercussions? The answer to this question is obviously more ambiguous, and it depends on each audience member's response to Andre's death. And naturally, the answer to whether your characters will achieve their goals is as often no as it is yes; it will be determined by the intensity of the characters' desire and the strength of the obstacles they must overcome.

In his excellent book *Writing and Producing the 10-Minute Play*, Gary Garrison advises playwrights to be very aware of what they do on each page of their script. After reading hundreds of examples of the form, Garrison found that ten-minute plays work best when they follow a fairly consistent structure. (Remember that playscripts have a special format; see "Playscript Format: A Model" for an example. The following page numbers refer to a typed playscript and don't necessarily correspond to how the pages appear in the plays reprinted in this book.)

Pages 1-2: Set up the world we're in, introduce your central character(s), and make sure we understand what they need/want/desire in the journey of the story.

Pages 2-3: Illuminate the central conflict—a dramatic question that will be answered by the play's end.

Pages 3-8: Complicate the story two or three times.

Pages 9-10: Resolve the conflict, even if that creates an unhappy ending.

You may bristle at the idea of having to follow a "formula," but the structure that Garrison outlines works very well, especially for beginning playwrights. Within this design, however, there is a great deal of freedom. Our three model playwrights, for instance, all work inventive variations on this basic configuration.

Sure Thing has an unusual stop-start-replay structure. It compresses some aspects of the traditional form and extends others; nevertheless, it basically follows Garrison's outline. The first section establishes both the world we are in—two strangers meet in a café in the evening—and the central conflict of the play: Bill wants to get together with Betty, but she doesn't seem to be interested. Complications and reversals continue for the next several pages of the script, with Bill and Betty gradually getting more and more compatible, only to be repeatedly foiled in their incipient love affair when one of them says the wrong thing. Toward the end of the play, right after the cue "Many bells ring," the resolution finally occurs, with Bill and Betty turning out to be ridiculously perfect

for each other, right down to their mutual love of Entenmann's crumb cake and their desire to send their children to Harvard, Vassar, and Brown.

The Divine Fallacy begins with Dorothy arriving, discombobulated, at Victor's studio. We quickly learn that she is a writer and that he is a photographer who has agreed to take her picture. Almost as quickly, the central conflict becomes apparent: Dorothy doesn't really want her picture taken because, unlike her beautiful sister, she takes after "the rodent side of the family." Complications ensue as Victor keeps attempting to take her photograph while Dorothy repeatedly resists his attempts. At one point she tries to run away with the camera, he chases her, and suddenly blood spurts from her palms, a disquieting turn of events. Finally, when she sits down for the shooting, "a great light starts to emanate from her." The conflict is resolved as Dorothy relaxes and Victor comes to appreciate her glowing "inner" beauty.

The opening pages of Pamatmat's play introduce us to Elissa and her use of the Love, Dream, and Power stickers she has created. Hers is an idealistic world, and the first reversal comes when the lights fade on Elissa and we meet Andre and Owen, two guys talking smack and playing a video game. During their conversation we learn what we *think* will be the play's central conflict: will Owen find a way to reveal his true feelings for Elissa? This quest for love is complicated by Andre's revelation about "fish baseball," a game sure to turn off the uncompromisingly principled Elissa. Yet another twist comes during the third soliloquy, this one by Andre, in which he tells the audience that despite his academic excellence and acceptance at a "fancy" college, he's pretty much like everyone else: "No one's life is better or more important than anyone else's." And of course the play's conclusion is especially shocking because the previous nine minutes have made us feel that this is just another normal night in suburbia.

The first couple of minutes of each model play provide us with succinct **exposition** – an explanation of the backstory that has led up to the present situation – and then the plays quickly plunge us into the central conflict. In *Sure Thing* and *The Divine Fallacy*, it's easy for the characters to convey meaningful facts about themselves because they are meeting for the first time. (We'll talk more about how dialogue can serve as exposition in the section "Writing Convincing Dialogue.") The setting itself presents significant clues about the world we are entering. Within moments from the time the lights come up in *Sure Thing*, we know that Betty is sitting alone at a table in a café or restaurant and that she does not know Bill. In *The Divine Fallacy*, the "surreal garden" of photography equipment tells us where we are before Victor even speaks a word. And in *Some Other Kid*, once we move past Elissa's opening speech about her stickers, which in itself provides context for the three characters' lives, we encounter the familiar sight of two teen boys ensconced in a living room playing video games.

The energy of your play increases when you move from those opening gestures, which are not unlike the "establishing shots" in a film that tell us where

we are and who is involved, to the central conflict. Jeffrey Hatcher points out that “most flawed plays fail because nothing happens in the middle. The characters run out of goals too quickly. They run out of obstacles. They run out of ideas and strategies. Opportunities don’t arise.” Hatcher is referring to full-length plays—one and a half to three hours’ worth of material—and you might not think that introducing enough obstacles, goals, and ideas would be a problem in the ten-minute play. However, new playwrights do sometimes find their plays ending after five or six minutes rather than ten. You can avoid weak middles in your play by employing the following strategies:

- ▶ **Allow the Onstage Interactions between Characters to Develop at a Believable Pace** People who are meeting for the first time take a while to get to know each other. People who have known each other for a long time are likely to have a complicated history that will take a while to emerge through their dialogue. Don’t rush your characters’ interactions simply to get to the next plot point.
- ▶ **On the Other Hand, Don’t Waste Time** While rushing through character interactions makes us feel as though we’re watching a speeded-up film of the life and death of a flower, it’s equally disconcerting to have characters discussing the weather or what they ate for dinner last night. Every exchange between your characters should tell us something vital about who they are, while also moving the action forward.
- ▶ **Make Sure That There Are at Least Two or Three Significant Complications or Reversals That Keep the Protagonist from Getting What He or She Wants** This is the single most important tactic you will need to learn. Imagine a football player trying to get from one end of the field to the other. There is no straight line down the middle; instead, his opponents come at him from all sides. He dashes this way and then that, backtracks for a moment, then makes one last burst for the end zone. Your play should cut and juke and surprise us even as it moves inevitably from its beginning to its end.

Scene construction is an integral element of the ten-minute play. If you have ever written a screenplay, you know it’s not unusual to spend less than a minute on a single scene. The theater doesn’t work that way. Actors operate in real time, with the ten minutes onstage generally corresponding to ten minutes in real time; ideally, you should be able to fit your conflict and its resolution into a single scene. It looks silly if characters are constantly coming and going and if the scene keeps changing every few minutes. Even two or three scenes in a ten-minute play can feel rushed, and multiple scenes often indicate that the playwright hasn’t yet found the ideal ten minutes in which to set the play. *Some Other Kid* is the only model play with more than one scene, and even then—until the very end, when Andre is shot—the only break in the action comes when the

lights go down on two of the characters, thus allowing for a kind of time-out during which the third character can speak to the audience.

Janet Neipris advises that when we are thinking about the endings of our plays, “we should look to fairytales as models. In the fairytale there is generally a problem that has to be solved. . . . When that problem, or the evil, is confronted, the story can come to its own conclusion, which means a change of circumstances and therefore, closure.” Neipris is not suggesting that plays take the form of fairy tales, but rather that the central conflict in a fairy tale—something is wrong and needs to be made right—is similar to the problem that protagonists in plays face. In a contemporary play, the main character is just as likely to fail as he or she is to succeed, but once we know whether that failure or success has occurred, the play itself (like a fairy tale) is over.

Jeffrey Hatcher suggests that playwrights, when deciding on either an optimistic or a pessimistic ending, look closely at their material and ask, “Was there hope for a happy ending?” Nothing is cornier than two heated antagonists suddenly falling in love, or a pot of gold literally or figuratively dropping from the sky to solve everyone’s problems. Remember, too, that whether the ending is happy or sad, the middle of the play should suggest that the final outcome is always in doubt.

Ultimately, every page of your script must count. There should be no bad pages, no dead moments. “A playwright must be his own audience,” says Terrence Rattigan. “A novelist may lose his readers for a few pages; a playwright never dares lose his for a minute.” If nothing else, think about the poor actors up there onstage. You wouldn’t want to come across as silly or boring or lost if you were in their place, so give them a play to perform that hooks the audience immediately, seems to whiz by before we know it, surprises us with its twists and turns, and finishes with an ending that somehow we both expected and yet never actually saw coming.

CHECKLIST Structuring the ten-minute play

- Does your play have a clear and immediate conflict?** Plays without a conflict quickly sink under the weight of their own tedium. Make sure you have at least one unmistakable confrontation between protagonist and antagonist. And get to that conflict fast: every minute is precious in a ten-minute play.
- Does the middle of your play contain several complications and reversals that upset our expectations?** If your protagonist glides through his or her ten minutes without any impediments, your audience will fall asleep. Create an obstacle course. Consider letting both your protagonist *and* antagonist be blindsided at least once during the play by a disquieting revelation or turn of events.

- Is your ending both surprising and satisfying?** Nothing is worse than an ending the audience can see coming after the first couple of minutes. On the other hand, a last-minute twist that has no relation to the previous nine minutes of action is almost as bad. Finding just the right ending isn't easy, but holding out for something special is often the difference between a passable play and one that is truly outstanding.

Creating believable characters ►

Having a sound structure is essential for a successful play. It's equally crucial for you to create believable characters. Fortunately, developing strong characters is intimately connected with the process of structuring your play. Once you have a clear sense of your structure, you will already know the basic outline of your characters, and vice versa.

If you're still searching for characters and conflicts, here are a few well-tested plot structures and accompanying dramatic questions:

- ▶ A needs something from B, but B doesn't want to part with it. Will A succeed?
- ▶ A wants B to do something that will hurt B. Will A convince B to do it anyway?
- ▶ A wants to be with B, but B doesn't want to be with A. Will A and B get together?
- ▶ A is with B but wants to be with C. Is A successful in getting B out of the picture?
- ▶ A and B are very happy together, but their happiness makes C insanely jealous. Will C destroy A and B's relationship?
- ▶ D is in a position of power over A, B, and C, each of whom wants to replace D. Who will prevail?

There are many variations on these themes. The important thing to remember when deciding on your own combination of character and structure is Aristotle's compelling formula, which has been useful to countless playwrights over the centuries: "Character is action." In his classic book *The Art of the Playwright*, William Packard continually returns to this credo, emphasizing that "every character has to have an action, an objective, something that he wants very much. . . . Action is what makes every character dramatic, because it is each character's entire reason for being there on stage." Packard goes on to argue that even Hamlet, one of the most complex characters in the history of world drama, "is his desire to avenge his murdered father. . . . Hamlet is his action, no more, and no less."

Many literary critics would say that Packard is overstating his point, but the argument is worth considering. Every character in your play *must* have a goal that, from the outset, is clear to him or her. Otherwise you will find yourself with characters who chat or squabble or meander or tell jokes or cry but who never really make us care about what happens to them. If there's nothing at stake for the characters, there will be *less* than nothing at stake for the audience.

"Characters in a drama should be in opposition to the situation," says Janet Nepris. "Don't make it easy for anyone. That's boring. And choose the unexpected: the little man, not the general, leading the troops into battle; the conservative opting for the largest risk; the doctor who is not so humanitarian." Unusual characters make it easier to introduce surprising conflicts, as we see in all three of our model plays.

The three soliloquies in *Some Other Kid* are crucial to presenting another side to the characters. Without their solo moments, Elissa, Owen, and Andre might appear to be nothing more than "some other kids," when, of course, one of the main points of the play is how complex we all are on the inside, despite the sometimes bland exterior we present to others. Elissa, we learn, is not just a by-the-numbers liberal; in fact, she has a fairly elaborate scheme for the appropriate use of her stickers. And while Owen once obliviously participated in "fish baseball," his soliloquy shows how disgusted he was by his cousin Geo's treatment of a stray cat – to the point where Owen is now considering becoming a vegetarian. Above all, Andre's apparent intellectual superiority is revealed, by him, to be no more than a "game" that he is particularly good at playing.

In *The Divine Fallacy*, camera-shy Dorothy Kiss is "in opposition to the situation" from the moment she appears onstage. Not only is she introverted, awkward, and self-deprecating, she also appears to be an alcoholic who bleeds spontaneously from the palms of her hands. Even for a writer, that is a pretty unexpected combination. And although Victor seems like a typical fashion photographer, his thwarted attempts to take Dorothy's picture lead to his surprising self-assessment at the end of the play that he has been "blind, blind, blind."

While comedy often flirts with stereotypes, the flawless person with perfect teeth is just as boring – and just as unbelievable – in drama as he or she is in fiction. The characters of Bill and Betty are constantly in flux; that's part of the fun of *Sure Thing*. Yet in their whirlwind of metamorphoses, Bill and Betty reveal a number of odd and unexpected details about themselves. One moment Bill is a Mets fan; the next he is a Harvard grad who loves the novels of William Faulkner. One moment Betty prefers the "existentially romantic" pastime of reading alone in a café on a rainy night; a few minutes later she is inviting Bill to a Woody Allen film festival. Again, specificity, as in every other genre of creative writing, creates interest.

Once you have identified your characters, you will want to learn more about them, although that can become an extended process. Henrik Ibsen wrote, “When I am writing I must be alone; if I have eight characters . . . I have society enough; they keep me busy; I must learn to know them.” Ibsen’s experience is a common one: as they begin to take shape, characters often seem real to their creators. August Wilson felt that creating believable characters was the easiest aspect of playwriting because “the characters want to explain, as most people do, their entire history and philosophy, their take on the world and the vagaries of life.” Janet Neipris wants to imagine how her characters walk and talk, where they grew up, and how they felt about their neighborhood: “I always look for roots, because people carry the past on their backs.”

One way to learn about the pasts of fictional characters is to ask questions of them and “listen” to their answers. William Packard uses interrogatory words—“who,” “what,” “where,” “why,” and “when”—to generate a list of six questions that playwrights should be able to answer about their characters:

1. Who am I?
2. What do I want?
3. Where am I right now?
4. Why am I here?
5. When is all this taking place?
6. What is my physical life? What kind of clothes am I wearing? What is in my pocket or purse? and so on.

Take a few minutes to see whether you can answer those questions about your characters. If you know the characters well, you will probably be writing for some time. If you can’t generate much material, however, you will need to go back and rethink your cast. Do you have the right people for the play? Are you writing the play that is best suited to who you are just at this moment?

Once you have decided on your cast, you will want to continue to explore your characters. You can probably imagine many more questions they might ask of themselves:

- ▶ Why is my objective so important to me?
- ▶ Do I have contrasting goals that might get in the way?
- ▶ What are the chances I will achieve my main goal?
- ▶ How do I plan to get there?
- ▶ Who are my allies and my enemies?
- ▶ What am I willing to do to get what I want?

Naturally, every character you write, even if she or he is based on someone you know well, will also contain elements of yourself. Wendy Wasserstein said

that, although “you’re always writing different aspects of yourself into your characters,” you are never simply “writing yourself.” For Wasserstein, putting her own words into the mouths of characters who were very unlike herself seemed “less inhibiting.” Many playwrights share this feeling: it is liberating, if not downright exhilarating, to have a fictional character say the things you are thinking but dare not utter aloud.

In keeping with the “wright” or “maker” metaphor we discussed earlier, Lajos Egri says, “A shipbuilder knows the material he is working with, knows how well it can withstand the ravages of time, how much weight it can carry.” Similarly, Egri argues, “A dramatist should know the material he is working with: his characters. He should know how much weight they can carry, how well they can support his construction: the play.”

How do we know “how much weight” our characters can carry? How do we know who they are, or even if they are the best ones for our play? Edward Albee has a test to see whether the characters he has been thinking about are “ready” to become part of a play: “I’ll improvise and try them out in a situation that I’m fairly sure *won’t* be in the play. And if they behave quite naturally, in this improvisatory situation, and create their own dialogue, and behave according to what I consider their natures, then I suppose I have the play far enough along to sit down and write it.”

You can see from Albee’s remark that part of the experience of creating believable characters is thinking of them not only “outside” your play but also before and after they come onstage for their ten minutes of glory. Knowing the arc of their transformation is crucial because *the conflict of the play must result in the characters becoming different than they were when the play began*. Once again, we can turn to Aristotle as our guide: “The sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.”

We have been discussing some of the deeper issues of character development, but as you create characters, you will also confront more prosaic matters. For instance, how many characters should you include in your play?

One-person plays usually aren’t plays in the sense that we have been discussing but are something closer to **monologues**, long solo speeches. They can be quite entertaining, and celebrities with salacious tales to relate often make a big hit with one-person shows. A real play, however, must somehow bring the conflict with other, absent characters offstage. With no one to interact with onstage, the lone actor too often ends up “monologuing” in the negative sense of that word: droning on and on about her- or himself without much structure or spark. Unless your instructor says otherwise, you should probably avoid one-person plays for this assignment.

Our model plays have only two or three characters, and many playwrights would say that is the ideal range for a ten-minute play. Two characters concentrate

the conflict and allow for maximum development of each character. No one is superfluous, and you, the playwright, are forced to imagine fully each person onstage. Sometimes, however, you will feel that the fireworks could be increased considerably if another person were onstage, and inserting a third character, as in *Some Other Kid*, can allow a fascinating triangle to emerge. If all three characters have clear goals, the conflicts and complications quickly multiply. But be wary of making the third character someone of minimal importance. A waiter or a cashier or a passerby may initially seem vital to your play, but look for ways to make the play happen without that person actually appearing. Too often these characters spend a lot of time either standing around with nothing to do or entering and exiting with such frequency that they become distractions from the central conflict.

Adding a fourth character increases the number of ways that people can team up against and align with one another. Couples can form, and then re-form with different partners. Characters can switch allegiances. But remember your time constraint. And be wary of thin, two-dimensional characters. Providing the beginnings, middles, and endings of four people's stories requires deft work on your part. You need to clarify, and in some fashion resolve, the combination of conflicts you have created—and you have to do this in far less time than it takes most of us to get to work or class.

Inevitably, the more characters you have in your cast, the less each one will be developed and the greater the chance a character will be a stereotype. Some successful ten-minute plays have five or more characters, but as with your short story, you should always look for ways to fold two similar characters into one. Let's say Ronda is battling with her three best friends: Noelle, Anya, and Asha. Noelle feels some sympathy for Ronda, but Anya and Asha are both out to get the protagonist. In fact, Anya and Asha have pretty much the same opinion on everything. Merging them into a single character, Aisha, not only focuses their combined energy but also addresses the practical issue of keeping the number of actors at a reasonable level. We'll talk more about this later, but one of the things that differentiates plays from other forms of creative writing is the need for actual people to be onstage. Although you can employ **doubling**—having one actor play more than one character when those characters aren't onstage at the same time—in general, the more characters you have, the more actors you will need. As you enlarge your cast, you have to coordinate more actors with rehearsal time, and you increase the chance that someone will drop out or something will go wrong. Bad things tend to happen when you overcast a short play.

And what about nonadult or nonhuman characters? For your first ten-minute play, it's probably a good idea to write about characters who are at least teenagers. Why? An old adage from the theater world says, "Never work with children or dogs." Actors feel that children and animals always steal the show,

although you should avoid them for different reasons. Children have bedtimes and temper tantrums and stage fright. On opening night, little Johnny's mother may decide he shouldn't be in a play after all. And it's difficult to get a dog, much less a cat, to do something on cue in a play. Of course, you might try casting an adult actor to play a child, but this nearly always comes across as broadly comic. Similarly, a person acting like an animal is going to get laughs whether he or she wants them or not.

CHECKLIST Creating believable characters

- Do each of your characters have a clear goal that he or she wants badly to attain?** "Character is action": characters *are* what they want. Make sure that every person onstage is always actively pursuing a goal and that every character's goal differs markedly from the goals of the other characters.
- Are your characters distinctive and unusual?** Bland characters make for a bland play. Find ways to make each character unique. Give them unusual interests (a young woman who plasters self-made stickers on places she likes and loathes) and unexpected gifts (a writer who glows when she is photographed). Make your characters worthy of our attention.
- Are your characters believable as human beings?** Characters in a play are often larger than life, but nevertheless they should be recognizable as human beings. Ask questions about their motivations and fears, their backgrounds and idiosyncrasies. Get to know them so that you can make them come alive for your audience. As in all other genres of creative writing, the more specific, detailed, and concrete you are in your character development, the more convincing your characters will be.
- Do you have too many, or too few, characters?** Normally, new playwrights have too many characters in their plays. If you read over the first draft of your script and find that one or more characters are not doing much, consider eliminating them or merging the most crucial aspects of these characters into a single character. On the other hand, if your play feels bogged down, if you don't feel the spark of conflict, it may be that you need to add a character to act as an antagonist.

Writing convincing dialogue ►

You may associate dialogue in plays with the high-flown Elizabethan English of Shakespeare—"We pray you throw to earth / This unprevailing woe," and so on—but for a long time now, playwrights have tended to tone things down so the words coming from the actors' mouths sound much closer to actual speech.

Anton Chekhov, who was a champion of naturalistic dialogue, said that playwrights should “avoid choice diction. The language should be simple and forceful. The lackeys should speak simply, without elegance.” We would no longer use the word “lackeys” — a demeaning word for “servants” — but twentieth- and twenty-first-century playwrights, such as Sam Shepherd, Neil LaBute, David Mamet, August Wilson, Tracy Letts, and Suzan-Lori Parks, have been committed to dialogue that is “simple and forceful” and appropriate to the characters’ station in life.

As we noted at the beginning of the chapter, students tend to have a natural ear for writing dialogue, even if they aren’t yet aware of that talent. Once you have established your conflict and characters, probably the best thing to do is just start writing. Let your characters say what they have to say. If they’re not talking, then you probably don’t know them well enough, or you haven’t placed them in a situation that is sufficiently charged to make them talk. If you are committed to your play, go back and add to your characters’ history, or see if you can put your characters in a different setting.

When you do get on a roll, you may feel, like many playwrights before you, as though you are in a trance, merely writing down — as fast as possible — what you hear your characters saying. If you find yourself in that space, write until you are “written out.” Don’t censor anything. Get it down on the page, and later, after the inspiration has cooled down, look at what you have written with a cold eye and decide what stays and what goes.

When you do go back to revise your dialogue, evaluate it using generally accepted criteria. Different playwrights have different strengths, but most would agree that good dialogue

- ▶ is believable;
- ▶ adds to character development;
- ▶ introduces backstory in a credible way; and
- ▶ heightens conflict and moves the action forward.

Good dialogue is believable. This doesn’t mean that dialogue exactly mimics what you would hear in the real world, but it does mean that you should try to capture the *rhythms* of real speech, the stops and starts, the hesitations, the sudden monologues and quick exchanges.

If you sit in a public place and eavesdrop on conversations, you will quickly realize that most people, even highly educated people, don’t talk very formally. Instead, people in conversation

- ▶ normally use contractions (“isn’t” and “won’t” rather than “is not” and “will not”);
- ▶ frequently use sentence fragments rather than grammatically complete sentences;

- ▶ pause often;
- ▶ interrupt one another;
- ▶ lose their train of thought;
- ▶ contradict themselves; and
- ▶ usually aren't very original.

Playwrights try to capture the essence of speech, but if it was as simple as transcribing conversations verbatim, everyone could become a playwright. That's not the way it happens, unfortunately. As you practice the playwright's habit of listening to conversations, you will notice that the average exchange not only is informal but also is too chaotic, too repetitive, and too *boring* to make for very interesting theatrical dialogue. Here it might be useful to recall Amy Bloom's definition of good dialogue in fiction: "conversation's greatest hits." The best dialogue *sounds* realistic, until we go back and see how perfectly crafted it is. "The essence of good dialogue" in a play, according to Michael Wright, "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." As you write your ten-minute play, one of your primary goals will be to find the fewest words that will say the most.

In *Sure Thing*, David Ives shows himself to be a master of the halting, truncated patterns of contemporary speech. Let's take just one passage, in the middle of the play, as an example:

BETTY: I guess we must be on different schedules.

BILL: Missed connections.

BETTY: Yes. Different time zones.

BILL: Amazing how you can live right next door to somebody in this town and never even know it.

BETTY: I know.

BILL: City life.

BETTY: It's crazy.

BILL: You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

BETTY: Actually I was.

BILL: Oh. Boyfriend?

BETTY: Sort of.

BILL: What's a sort-of boyfriend?

BETTY: My husband.

BILL: Ah-ha.

This exchange reproduces the short sentences and sentence fragments of real speech: "City life." "Sort of." "My husband." The characters also use clichés, which are normally taboo in creative writing. Bill tells Betty that people don't get because of "missed connections," that "you can live right next door to somebody in this town and never even know it," and they both agree that city life is crazy. The conversation is banal, but that's appropriate to the setting. The

characters are making the sort of mindless talk anyone might engage in under the circumstances. What redeems this passage, and all the other passages in the play, is that Ives turns banality on its head and ends each **beat**—that is, each separate movement in the play—with a punch line. “What’s a sort-of boyfriend?” Bill asks. “My husband,” Betty replies.

Another thing real people do in real conversations is curse. In high school courses, profanity is usually frowned on. Although some instructors and institutions may have different policies, in college it is generally acceptable to let your characters swear if the situation requires it. It’s not unusual for the characters onstage, who are often in a heightened state of agitation, to let their language reflect the fact that they are upset, afraid, or outraged. In *Some Other Kid*, we see this agitation in Owen when Andre gives him a hard time about possibly dating Elissa. And in *Sure Thing*, when Betty imagines an unsatisfying sexual rendezvous with Bill, she, too, uses profanity to dismiss her potential partner.

Playwright Terrence McNally, when asked by an interviewer if “we have to have that kind of language” in plays, responded:

Do we have to? I think it implies that, when you come to see a play, I’m not going to do anything that upsets you, or my characters won’t. That traditional notion of theater I . . . reject. I go to the theater to be appalled, to be stimulated, to be upset. I can’t imagine four-letter words today being offensive to anyone. The theater to me is not a sanctuary from the language . . . you hear on the subway and in the streets. . . . I don’t expect the theater to be comfortable.

Whether or not you find four-letter words offensive, you should remember that today’s theater is one of the last strongholds of free speech in America. Even if you choose not to have your characters swear, try not to be upset if your classmates do.

A related issue in theatrical dialogue is the use of **dialect**—nonstandard language associated with a particular group, culture, or region. Most playwrights would say that you don’t have to live in and be part of a culture in order to create characters from that culture. Nevertheless, you should be extremely careful about using dialect if you are not a member of the group that speaks that dialect. Say, for instance, that you are a young white man from the suburbs who feels you have mastered the intricacies of African American speech patterns because of all the gangsta rap you have listened to over the years. Or maybe you live in northern Michigan and have never visited the South, but you are writing southern dialect based on your love of *Dukes of Hazzard* reruns. Obviously, even if you’re writing with respect and admiration for your characters, you are likely to miss the nuances that a real speaker of dialect would recognize. A greater worry for a playwright would be sounding as though you were mocking or

condescending to the characters who speak in dialect. If you do decide to write in dialect, “be moderate,” Raymond Hull wisely advises. “Don’t try to express the full strength of a broad dialect with all its peculiarity of accent and its wealth of uncommon words.” Instead, give us a hint, a suggestion, and let our imaginations do the rest.

The fundamental test of whether your dialogue is believable is to read it aloud. Playwrights tend to say their dialogue to themselves as they write, although you may find, like Lillian Hellman, that until you hear it spoken by others, you won’t know if you have it right or wrong: “I usually know in the first few days of rehearsals what I have made the actors stumble over, and what can or cannot be cured.” Most likely, your play won’t have days of rehearsals; if your class is a big one, you may be lucky to have it read aloud a single time in front of your fellow students. But you can always draft friends and family into the roles of actors and let them do the necessary work for you.

Good dialogue adds to character development. What your characters say tells you who they are. August Wilson believed that the most important thing about writing dialogue is not to censor your characters: “What they are talking about may not seem to have anything to do with what you as a writer are writing about, but it does. Let them talk and it will connect because you as a writer will make it connect.”

Characters often talk “against” one another, as though they are unaware that someone else is even there. The fact that no real communication is taking place is part of the point: often people don’t listen to one another, or they hear only what they want to hear, not what the other person is actually saying. We see this “talking against” at the beginning of *The Divine Fallacy*, after Dorothy has arrived for a photo shoot that neither she nor Victor really wants to do. She talks about getting lost on the way to his studio; he talks about having to catch a plane very soon. At several points, they even talk *over* each other simultaneously, as though they cannot wait to let the other person speak. Similarly, in *Some Other Kid*, the slash marks mid-speech indicate that one character should begin talking before the other is finished:

OWEN: Andre, Elissa doesn’t need / to hear —
 ELISSA: Tell me or I’m going home.
 OWEN: Fish baseball is / when you go —
 ANDRE: You are too easy.

Often dialogue tells us something about a character when he or she says one thing but clearly believes something else. Janet Neipris points out that, even if it is not obvious to the audience or the other characters, there is always a conflict between a character’s exterior dialogue — “the actual words that come out of their mouths” — and the interior dialogue — “what the character is actually

thinking or feeling.” This is what Jeffrey Hatcher calls “dialogue as subtext,” with speech serving as a kind of camouflage for the speaker’s real emotions and desires: “Subtext means, for example, trying to find ways of saying ‘I love you’ without having the words ‘I love you’ at your disposal. The ‘I love you’ is *under* the text—*below* the line.”

In *The Divine Fallacy*, we see an example of a character saying one thing and meaning another when Victor tries, not very successfully, to detect the resemblance between Dorothy and her beautiful sister. “I know. It’s a shocker,” Dorothy says. “No, no . . .,” Victor replies, but apparently he cannot even finish his sentence because Dorothy is so unlike Daphne.

Another method of character development through speech comes when a character delivers a monologue. Monologues in the midst of plays might be compared to flashbacks in movies, with the forward action halting so that we can go back and catch up on important missing information. Filmmakers have the advantage of the visual element to do much of their work for them, but the playwright must conjure up entire scenes with words alone. Monologues may involve characters speaking at greater length than they would in real life, but that is theatrically justifiable because a long speech often provides us far more information about the character than could be elicited through dialogue alone. Such is the case with Dorothy’s extended monologue:

Why can’t you set up your camera in my brain? Bore a hole in my skull and let ’er rip. (*She makes lurid sound effects.*) There’s no plainness here, but heaving oceans ringed with pearls and ancient cities rising in the mist . . . Grab your tripod and activate your zoom, wonders are at hand . . . Holy men calling the faithful to prayer as women shed their clothes at the river’s edge . . . *Click!* Jeweled elephants drink beside them, their trunks shattering the surface like breaking glass. *Click!* Their reflections shiver and merge, woman and elephant becoming one . . . Slender arms dissolving into rippling tusks, loosened hair spreading into shuddering flanks . . . *Click, click, click!* Now you see them, now you don’t . . . A breast, a tail, a jeweled eye . . . *Click!* Macaws scream overhead (*Sound effect.*), or is it the laughter of the women as they drift further and further from the shore, their shouts becoming hoarse and strange . . . (*Sound effect.*) *Click!* (*Tapping her temple.*) Aim your camera here, Mr. Hugo. *This* is where beauty lies . . . Mysterious, inchoate, and out of sight! (*Silence as Victor stares at her.*)

Like soliloquies, monologues stand out, especially when most of the dialogue before and after them is brief, so we in the audience are inclined to pay them extra notice. That attention is repaid here because we learn a great deal about Dorothy: that she is extremely sensitive, that she is imaginative, she is angry, she is drawn to religion, and she is skeptical that anyone will be capable of seeing her real beauty.

As is often the case with this form of dramatic speech, the monologue serves several other functions:

- ▶ **It Sums Up the Main Themes of the Play** Dorothy's monologue demonstrates that our interior life can be far richer than our exteriors might indicate.
- ▶ **It Tells a Story** The story in this monologue is metaphorical, suggesting that beauty can quickly transform and disappear.
- ▶ **It Contains an Element of Poetry** Eloquent speech and concrete imagery are frequently found in monologues, and Dorothy uses both of these poetic devices in phrases such as "slender arms dissolving into rippling tusks, loosened hair spreading into shuddering flanks."

Some plays work well with dialogue alone, but if you feel your characters need a minute to stretch out and become more of who they really are, the monologue, or—if the character's speech should not be overheard by the others on stage—the soliloquy are both worth considering.

Good dialogue introduces backstory in a credible way. William Packard contends that "the best way of approaching the problem of exposition is not to see it so much as 'information' that has to be passed on to an audience, but to see it as a way of introducing the major actions of the play as quickly as possible . . . prior actions, offstage actions, and given circumstances." Offstage actions are likely to be limited in a ten-minute play, but dialogue about prior actions and given circumstances can go a long way toward introducing backstory.

Two of the model plays take advantage of the fact that the characters are meeting each other for the first time as a way to bring in background information. Naturally enough, the people onstage need to explain who they are and what they want from each other, and we in the audience overhear that information. The premise of *Sure Thing* is especially easy to follow because the setting itself is so clear—a woman reading alone at a table is interrupted by a stranger wanting to join her. In *The Divine Fallacy*, Victor reveals his occupation when he tells Dorothy that he needs to go to Paris to photograph "the spring collections." Dorothy announces to the audience her own occupation after Victor marvels at the difference between her and her beautiful sister; she tells him, and us, that she is "Dorothy Kiss, the *writer*."

As *Some Other Kid* demonstrates, not all plays involve strangers meeting for the first time. Pamatmat employs soliloquies, as well as plenty of expository conversation between the characters about their relationships, as when Andre tells Owen, "She's like my sister, Owen. And you grew up with her, too." Owen responds by refining Andre's definition of the relationship: "Not like you did. We weren't close like that."

If you are writing a play in which the characters already know one another, you will need to provide exposition in a way that doesn't call attention to itself. Here is a particularly clumsy and heavy-handed example of exposition:

JACQUES: Wow, June, the last time I saw you was just last night at the Hendersons' party.

JUNE: I know. That was so crazy when my mother, who is your stepmother, told us the story of finding that antique diamond ring in an old trunk. How do you think it got there?

JACQUES: I'm not sure, but it could have happened when my father, who also happens to be your uncle, returned home from his recent voyage to Tanzania.

JUNE: Yes, that trip to Tanzania was an important milestone in our family history. Uncle told us that while he was in Tanzania he learned that . . .

You get the idea. Instead of hitting your audience over the head with explanations of the characters' lives before the play begins, try to introduce exposition in more subtle ways.

- ▶ The central conflict causes characters to reminisce about a significant shared memory: "That morning you left us . . ."
- ▶ Characters argue over competing interpretations of an event or situation: "Dad was only trying to . . .," to which another character responds, "No, it was Mom who . . ."
- ▶ A character who knows more about a significant situation or event explains that knowledge to the other characters: "What you don't realize is . . .," or, "They didn't know I was watching, but I saw . . ."

Revise any awkward passages of exposition so that, instead of coming across as a mini-history lesson, your backstory is an engrossing and important part of your play.

Good dialogue heightens conflict and moves the action forward. "Active and vital dialogue thrusts your play forward as much as active and vital character and plot give the play forward momentum," Louis Catron reminds us. "Passive or inactive dialogue slows the play's pace no less than passive or inactive character and plot." Catron is right to equate dialogue with character and structure. When one of those links is weak, the others suffer, but when all three elements are working well, a synergy develops that is the hallmark of gripping theater.

If you find your characters discussing the weather or similar topics, you need to rewrite their conversation. Redirect the dialogue so that it focuses on who they are and, more important, *what they want*. When one character says something particularly cutting or kind or outrageous to another character, your play will begin to heat up.

This happens in all our model plays; let's take just one example. In *Some Other Kid*, Owen is trying to get Andre's blessing for his plan to ask out Elissa, but Andre is resistant:

ANDRE: She's like my sister, Owen. And you grew up with her, too.
 OWEN: Not like you did. We weren't close like that.
 ANDRE: You want to ask out your sister?
 OWEN: No, I want to ask out Elissa who I grew up with but am not related to. Not my sister. More like a cousin.
 ANDRE: First or second?
 OWEN: Shut up.
 ANDRE: First cousin is still illegal.
 OWEN: BUT SHE'S NOT MY COUSIN OR MY SISTER. Look: I don't want to ruin shit.
 ANDRE: I don't control Elissa.
 OWEN: But do you think it would make things weird? Would you be cool?
 ANDRE: If you think you have a chance, you don't need my permission.
 OWEN: You just said she's like your sister.
 ANDRE: But she's not.
 OWEN: Jesus fucking — FUCK YOU.

Of course the tone of the play, until the very end, is basically gentle and forgiving, so rather than continuing to torment his friend, Andre "cracks up" at this point and says, "Do what you want to do."

Nevertheless, when people are arguing about something that matters a great deal to them, we can't help but listen in and focus on what they are saying. The dialogue here is charged with Owen's indignation and Andre's unwillingness to tell Owen what he wants to hear.

This passage also serves to introduce one of the play's dramatic questions and move the plot forward. Pamatmat needs a way to introduce Owen's infatuation with Elissa and to set up several obstacles to Owen's achieving his goal. We learn that Andre is not entirely behind his friend's pursuit, and when Elissa walks in moments later, we quickly discern from her conversation that her childhood friend isn't exactly the romantic hero of her dreams.

As you work on your dialogue, be open to the possibility that your characters will rewrite your play for you. Arthur Miller once said, "I plan something for weeks or months and suddenly begin writing dialogue which begins in relation to what I had planned and veers off into something I hadn't even thought about."

Ultimately, your characters will call the shots, and if you don't place their desires at the center of everything they say, you may find that they begin talking in ways you never anticipated or, far worse, that they refuse to come alive at all.

CHECKLIST Writing convincing dialogue

- Is your dialogue believable?** Listen to your dialogue as other people read it aloud. Be sure that it resembles real speech, not writing. People speak much less formally than they write. Use contractions and sentence fragments. Have your characters pause and interrupt and talk over one another. When in doubt, rough it up.
- Does your dialogue add to character development?** Dialogue reveals your characters' fears and dreams and goals. It may also suggest what they are thinking but not actually saying. Dialogue allows your characters to tell the stories of who they really are.
- Does your dialogue introduce backstory in a credible way?** Your audience learns important background information about your characters through their dialogue. However, make sure that your exposition sounds natural and is integral to the central conflict of the play. Give us the essentials, but don't tell us more than we need to know. It's only natural if some gaps remain here and there.
- Does your dialogue heighten the conflict and move the action forward?** In good plays, dialogue, character, and structure are intertwined. Use dialogue to introduce necessary plot points and to intensify audience interest in what's taking place onstage. If "character is action," then make sure your characters are talking about the things that really matter to them.

Crafting a theme ►

A good play has a solid structure, believable characters, and convincing dialogue. These elements nearly always result in a discernible **theme**, which Peter Schakel and Jack Ridl define as "the central idea or concept conveyed by a literary work . . . what it is about in the sense of 'what it all adds up to.'" M. H. Abrams defines theme more technically as "an abstract claim, or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader [or viewer]." Your theme, in other words, is the way a set of beliefs or principles manifests itself in your play.

For all their conflict with one another, characters in plays also frequently discuss ideas. It's no coincidence that after a night out at the theater, many audience members love having extended conversations about what they have just witnessed. Good plays energize us intellectually and make us want to explore the subjects that they have raised.

As is the case with most contemporary drama, all three of our model plays are topical, full of ideas and issues. Indeed, plays have always been a particularly

good forum for discussing our views and theories of the world. Even when they were explicitly concerned with heroes and gods, the early Greek plays were still implicitly commenting on the current political scene. And playwrights such as Aristophanes used their plays to remark openly on topics of the day, such as men's irrational propensity for war (*Lysistrata*), the justice system (*The Wasps*), and fraudulent academics (*The Clouds*). Shakespeare, of course, has provided literary critics with a virtual industry of thematic material for centuries. In the nineteenth century, Ibsen's plays took on the issues of women's rights (*Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House*) and various forms of hypocrisy among members of the middle class (*An Enemy of the People*, *Pillars of Society*, and *The Master Builder*). In twentieth-century plays such as *No Exit* and *The Flies* (a reworking of the *Oresteia*, by the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus), the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre discovered ways to make discussions of complex ideas comprehensible, and sometimes even funny, to the average audience member.

Often ideas in plays are political, as in *Some Other Kid*. We hear about the news of the world, about injustice and repression and revolution. Yet the South African playwright Athol Fugard, one of the most insistently political playwrights of the past century, believes that we shouldn't have "instant-coffee" expectations about art's immediate power to change people's actions: "It doesn't work that way. I like that image of art dropping down through the various layers of the individual's psyche, into dreams, stirring around there and resurfacing later in action." Arthur Miller, another frequently political playwright, also warned against maintaining "a schematic point of view." For Miller, this too often led to one of the ultimate sins for a playwright: predictability.

Literary critics look at themes in literature as part of the final product. However, as a playwright, you are likely to find your themes emerging, and changing, as you write your play. A character, for instance, is inspired by the conflict that obsesses her, and she makes a remark. Another character responds. Later, they return to comment on and modify what they have said earlier. Before you know it, you have a theme on your hands.

One main theme of *Sure Thing* seems to be that romantic relationships are far more likely to fail than they are to succeed. The potential for something to go wrong exists every time we learn some new piece of information about our partner. The play's structure reinforces this theme, as does its title. Each time the bell rings, we are reminded that nothing is a "sure thing." In fact, the play seems to argue, it's extraordinarily unlikely that any two people are ever going to connect on all levels. The coincidences listed in the final scene are preposterous. Not only do Bill and Betty share the same political viewpoints and want their children to attend the same three colleges, but they also love early Woody Allen movies and Entenmann's crumb cake, hate brussels sprouts, and had Etch-a-Sketches as children. How likely are any of us to find so many matching traits in those we love?

And here is where the play's more explicit theme blends into those that are more implicit. If the chances of two people sharing every single trait are highly remote, then maybe people involved in relationships should set their sights somewhat lower and be willing to forgive their partners for not being quite what they expected. Maybe it is *difference*, not similarity, that is the true spark for romantic passion.

Branching off still further, we might ask ourselves: If circumstances are always conspiring against successful relationships, does that mean most, or all, human endeavor is also likely to fail? Should we adjust our life expectations so that we assume failure rather than success? These ideas are not actually *stated* in the play; rather, they are triggered by our thinking about what occurs onstage.

The notion that most romances are doomed isn't a very cheerful one, so it's interesting to see how much merriment Ives gets out of his theme. He does this by using an arsenal of funny one-liners to keep his audience entertained: "Where was college?" "I was lying. I never really went to college. I just like to party." Themes emerge from the witty dialogue, but they are always subservient to it. Remember: no matter how brilliant your ideas are, your audience won't pay attention if they are not engaged and entertained by the characters and their conflicts.

Like Ives, Tina Howe makes use of comedy to craft her themes, although to a lesser degree. One central motif of *The Divine Fallacy* is that it is very difficult for us to see other people as they really are, and vice versa. As a fashion photographer, Victor is trained to observe and record external beauty, but he has no training in how to see Dorothy's inner loveliness. Again, the play's title is an important tool in announcing the overall theme. According to the European Society for General Semantics, "The divine fallacy is a species of non sequitur reasoning which explains something one does not understand by conjecturing the existence of some unknown force." Robert Todd Carroll, in *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, calls it "a variation of the alien fallacy: *I can't figure this out, so aliens must have done it.*" Howe's title may suggest that both we, and Victor, ascribe Dorothy's sudden radiance at the end of the play to God — or something supernatural — when in fact that luminescence was inside her all along; we were just incapable of seeing it.

Whatever interpretation we give to the title, religion is clearly an important subject in *The Divine Fallacy*. If our ability to perceive or not to perceive beauty is one theme, another seems to be that faith can be an aid in stripping away "the veil of perception" that keeps us from seeing the truth. In addition to the title's allusion to God, we have Dorothy's monologue about the "holy men calling the faithful to prayer as women shed their clothes at the river's edge," which evokes a world where heavenly mysteries are made evident. Then there is the fact that Dorothy has stigmata, wounds in her hands that bleed the way Jesus's hands did when he was nailed to the cross. This connection is emphasized when Victor sees Dorothy bleeding and yelps, "Jesus Christ!" "Jesus Christ, indeed," she replies. Later she refers to the

holes Navajos leave in their blankets as “part of the design, the most important part—faith, surrender, a mysterious tendency to bleed.” Finally, of course, the lights blazing around her at the end of the play make her seem like a goddess.

In both the beauty and the divinity themes, Howe does not make the connections for us. Instead, to return to the blanket metaphor, the playwright provides us with the materials, but we must weave them into something useful ourselves.

In *Some Other Kid*, the title once more hints at the play’s themes. Too often, we think that bad things are going to happen to “some other kid,” not the one we know and admire and cherish. Yet Pamatmat’s play insists on the fact that bad things can happen to anyone at anytime. Even the playwright’s designation of time (“Some day at the end of some summer”) and place (“Some American suburb”) indicate the action of the play could be located just about anywhere in the United States—and might even be happening at the present moment.

Some Other Kid was initially performed as part of a group of plays about the death of Trayvon Martin, so A. Rey Pamatmat could count on his audience being aware of the basic facts of the case. Like Andre, Trayvon was a 17-year-old African American staying in a gated community who went to the store one night to buy candy. On his way back from the store, Trayvon was confronted by a self-appointed “neighborhood watch” volunteer George Zimmerman. Exactly what happened next remains in dispute, but the end result was that Zimmerman shot and killed Martin. Trayvon was wearing a hoodie, and for a while in 2012 the hoodie itself became a symbol throughout the United States of not only Trayvon himself but also the ways that young African American men are stereotyped.

Possessing historical facts about the tragedy adds considerable weight to *Some Other Kid*, particularly its ending. However, even without any knowledge of the parallels between Andre and Trayvon, most viewers of Pamatmat’s play would find his thematic concerns abundantly clear. Elissa introduces Love, Dream, and Power at the very beginning of *Some Other Kid*, and those topics resonate through to the end. Love, the action of the play tells us, is crucial, even if it is not enough to save our lives. We must have dreams, even if they are temporarily crushed by the death of a close friend. And whatever happens, we already have the power inside us to overcome tragedies—that power is “waiting to be exercised. Or at least remembered.”

Above all, Pamatmat’s play seems to be telling us that we are all capable of doing good in the world and that we are all, ultimately, equal. As Andre says in his soliloquy: “Believing one person is more special than another leads you down a road where people aren’t special. And disposable. And no one is disposable.”

No matter how we approach the themes that emerge in our plays, ultimately, as Jeffrey Hatcher tells us, “It is not the quality of the idea that matters most, but rather the quality of the ideas as depicted by the actions of the play.” Plays are *not*

stories or essays or poems. They are meant to be acted out onstage, and dialogue that loses sight of the conflicts and characters that inspired them will quickly bore an audience. However, if you are attentive to your themes as they emerge, if you highlight your ideas without turning them into mere lectures and lesson plans, your play will be stronger as a result.

CHECKLIST Crafting a theme

- Does your play have at least one clear theme?** Dialogue between characters inevitably generates ideas, but those ideas aren't necessarily coherent. As you revise your play, look for ways to underscore the connections between related thoughts and topics.
- Does your theme emerge as a result of the play's conflict and characters?** A play is not a sermon, and plays that "speechify" tend to put audiences to sleep or send them running for the exits. Make sure that the ideas your play raises result from the central conflict between the characters.
- Does your title subtly, but unmistakably, point your audience in the direction of your play's theme?** Too often new playwrights give little thought to the title: it's the last thing they type, if they even remember to title the play at all. Give your play the title it deserves. Audience members will assume that the title encapsulates the play's message in some important way.
- Is your theme likely to inspire further thought and discussion after the performance is over?** Just as an obvious topic sentence ("War is bad," "Family is important") will probably result in an uninteresting expository essay, so themes that are predictable and inarguable will deaden a play. Push yourself, and your characters, to think beyond ideas that are so self-evident they aren't worth exploring. Themes such as "War may be justified at times" or "Families can be crippling" are much more likely to invite the sort of post-performance debate that is integral to the theatergoing experience.

Onstage: The elements of production ►

Throughout our discussion of playwriting, we have been considering how plays differ from other creative writing genres, but everything comes back to one simple fact: no matter how much care playwrights take with their scripts, a play does not truly exist until it is *performed* onstage. "A play is not only paper," Lillian Hellman wrote. "It is there to share with actors, directors, scene designers, electricians." And audiences, she surely would have added.

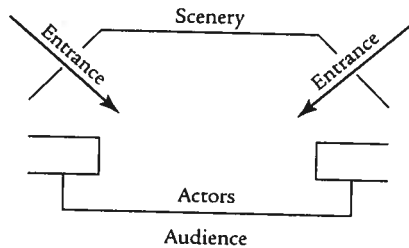
More than any of the other genres discussed in this book, playwriting is a *collaborative* art form. It takes only one person to write a play, but for the play to

come alive, you need, at the very least, actors, some sort of stage, and an audience. Director Elia Kazan echoes Hellman's sentiment: "The theater is not an exclusively literary form. Although the playscript is the essentially important element, after that is finished, actors, designers, directors, technicians 'write' the play together."

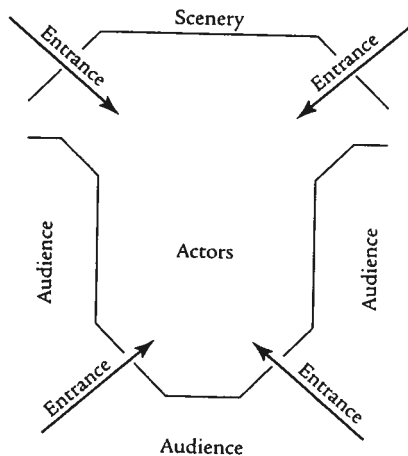
In this section, we cover the most important elements of theatrical performance, issues you aren't likely to think about unless you yourself have been an actor in a play. In a bare-bones production, not all of these elements will be applicable. However, if you continue writing plays, eventually you will come across each of these aspects of the theater.

Stage

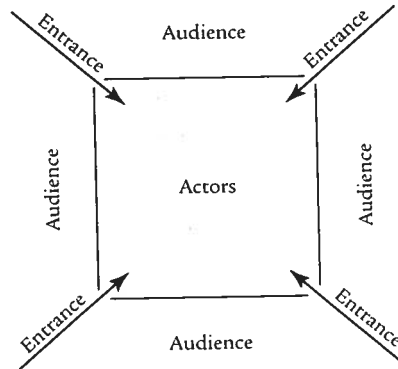
The most common type of stage is the **proscenium**. In ancient Greek theater, the *proskenion* was the front of the building that formed the background for a theatrical performance. (Incidentally, this is where we get the English word "scene.") "Proscenium" has come to mean that part of the stage that is in front of the curtains, sometimes also called the apron. A proscenium stage, which you may recognize from your high school auditorium, looks like this:



A **thrust stage** takes the apron and pushes it farther out into the theater, so that the actors are surrounded on three sides by the audience:

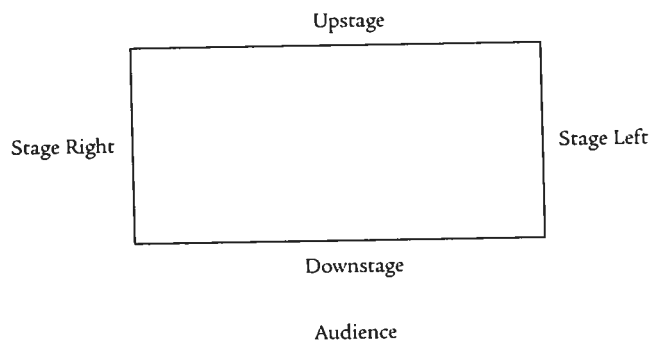


A third type of stage is the **arena theater**, which is also called **theater in the round** or theater in the square. In this variation, the audience surrounds the stage, with actors typically making their entrances and exits in diagonals between the seats:



Sometimes, especially if you are a well-known playwright or if you have been asked to do a play by a particular theater company, you will know in advance what the stage is going to look like. If so, it helps to visualize the placement of any scenery or props and the movement of your actors on- and offstage.

Most often, however, you won't know what the stage will look like, so it's probably best to write with a simple rectangle in mind. Normally, you merely indicate "Enter" or "Exit" in your script when you want the actors to arrive or depart, but if it's important for some reason to give your actors directions on how to move around the stage, remember that these directions are given from the perspective of the *actors* — the people performing the play — not the audience watching it. Thus, reverse the way you normally think of left and right, and up and down, like this:



Even if you can't predict the exact look of your play or the space in which it will be performed, you should nevertheless imagine the movement of the actors onstage. If you have Larry cowering on one side of the stage, and the next

moment he is punching Lorenzo, who happens to be on the opposite side, you have a problem. Some playwrights make rough sketches of the action as they imagine it. Others move around toy figures, just to see who is where at any given point in the play. One playwright uses coins—a quarter for one character, a dime for another, a nickel for a third—to help him visualize his characters. This positioning of the actors is called **blocking**, an essential element of theatrical performance.

As you write, be sure to think about blocking, but don't give excessive directions in your script. Directors and actors usually prefer to work out stage movement themselves.

Sets

The stage is the empty space on which your play is performed; the **set** (short for "setting") can refer to anything from an elaborately reproduced house or building or even an entire street or town to the doors and windows and walls of those buildings, to nothing more than a painted backdrop. The set designer is responsible for creating the play's environment. Something of an architect and an interior decorator, the set designer is integral to the overall look of a play.

Even a very low-budget full-length film is likely to have a set designer and to spend tens of thousands of dollars for the set's production, but the theater has different conventions than do movies. The imagination's ability to transform and to people empty space has allowed many small theaters with skeletal sets to produce powerful plays. Compared to small theaters, regional theaters spend more time and money on sets, but the focus normally remains on the acting and the script. Even multimillion-dollar Broadway spectacles—the closest thing to movies that theater can offer—don't have film's ability to quick-cut from one breathtaking scene to the next. Plays necessarily happen in real time, during which props must be moved and actors must make their way on and off the stage. As Harold Pinter notes, in television or a film, "if you get tired of a scene you just drop it and go on to another one," but in a play, characters are "stuck on the stage, [and] you've got to live with them and deal with them." Playwrights know this, so they shift scenes with care. Every time a new scene is required, they are acutely aware that a certain amount of energy, time, and ingenuity is needed to relocate not just the actors and their props but also the action and momentum of the play.

The presence of a set designer indicates that some money is involved in a production. Major theaters keep set designers on staff or hire them for individual productions, but if you are a beginning playwright, set design is probably going to fall to you or your director. Most ten-minute plays are presented in an evening of short works. Several playwrights are involved in the production, so settings need to be assembled and taken down in the few minute intervals between plays.

Therefore, when it comes to sets for your ten-minute play, think simple. You can't expect a small theater company to build an airplane interior, for instance. You will probably have to settle for a few chairs and lots of audience imagination.

Props, costumes, and effects

Props are part of the setting and can include everything from furniture (set props), like the table and two chairs in *Sure Thing*, to props actually handled by the actors (hand props), such as Elissa's stickers in *Some Other Kid*. In fact, props include everything the actors need to act out the play. If a character needs to write a note, for instance, someone needs to be sure that the actor has a pencil and a piece of paper. As you craft your play, remember that specialty items will need to be made or purchased. A full production of *Some Other Kid*, for instance, could require either printing expertise or a financial outlay to provide the Power stickers that at the end of the play "fall from above onto the audience."

The model play with the most elaborate props and set is *The Divine Fallacy*. According to the stage directions, Victor's studio "looks like a surreal garden blooming with white umbrellas and reflective silver screens." Tina Howe is a famous playwright, so theaters that produce her plays have the resources to borrow or rent the extensive (and expensive) props necessary to re-create a photographer's studio.

The props for your play, however, are likely to be your own possessions or items borrowed from friends and family. Fortunately, in the words of William Packard, "One good onstage visual is worth a thousand oratorical speeches." Packard believes that "a playwright must train himself to present things that are seen, things that can be looked at, things that will show what is happening onstage." As you write your play, try to incorporate at least one object that is representative of the characters' major conflict. A single prop (a wilted rose, an empty bottle, a letter torn in half) can do a lot of work. Props like these are free or inexpensive and easy to obtain. Indeed, one of the most famous scenes in twentieth-century drama is centered on such a prop: the tiny glass unicorn with the broken horn that symbolizes Laura Wingfield's stunted emotional growth in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*.

One important rule of props: Don't bring anything onstage that you don't plan to use. Chekhov famously wrote, "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there." Your actors will have enough to think about without having to worry about handling a prop that is never actually mentioned in your script. And your audience will assume that a skilled playwright wouldn't clutter up the set with unnecessary props.

In a working theater, the stage manager usually handles props, while costumes are under the supervision of the costume mistress or master. When you are writing your script, costumes probably won't be at the forefront of your mind, but they can be a crucial element in your play. That's the case in *The*

Divine Fallacy: Dorothy, we are told, is “dressed in layers of mismatched clothes. An enormous coat covers a bulky sweater which covers a gauzy white dress. A tangle of woolen scarves is wrapped around her neck.” Costuming emphasizes Dorothy’s basic insecurity. She believes herself to be unattractive, so she hides from the world beneath heaps of clothing. The process of unwrapping herself at the end represents how incandescent she is beneath her protective covering.

Established theaters working on a show with a large cast may spend tens of thousands of dollars on costumes and have an entire staff working on them. Costume fittings for actors in these shows often take days. In contrast, if your play receives a staged reading in class, chances are that the actors will wear their street clothes. Even so, you may want to bring in some piece of costuming—an odd-looking hat or a T-shirt with a specific logo on it—to emphasize a particular aspect of your characters’ personalities.

Once your play is produced onstage, costuming will become a significant issue for the director and the actors. If your play is set in the present, it will probably be easy enough for the actors to acquire the clothes they need. But if your play is set in Ye Olde England or on a spaceship in the twenty-ninth century, watch out. Unless you have the resources to borrow or rent appropriate costumes, your actors may end up looking silly wearing your little sister’s Burger King crown or a space suit made out of tinfoil.

As viewers of films and television shows, we are accustomed to seeing professional sets, props, and costumes as well as first-rate special effects. In the ten minutes between commercials on a TV police drama, for example, we might see a murder, a car crash, and an explosion. We hardly even register how different that is from our actual daily experience because we are so accustomed to the conventions of TV shows, which allow—or require—so many special effects.

Such effects are rare in serious drama. The only notable effects in our three model plays are the Power stickers raining down from the ceiling in *Some Other Kid* and Dorothy’s stigmata in *The Divine Fallacy*, which causes “a torrent of blood [to gush] from her hand.” In a large theater, these effects might be handled by a technician or a makeup artist. In a small production, it would probably be the stage manager’s responsibility to figure something out. As the author of a limited-budget ten-minute play, you probably should avoid effects like these unless you know someone who can do them well. A box of cheap stickers dumped unceremoniously on the audience’s heads, or an amateurish gushing of dyed water or ketchup from Dorothy’s palms, could easily turn silly, reversing the impact that the effect was supposed to make.

Lights

Good onstage visuals can include not just sets and props but also lighting. In the words of Tennessee Williams, “Sometimes it would take page after tedious page of exposition to put across an idea that can be said with . . . the lighted stage.”

If your play is being produced indoors, or outdoors at night, you will probably have at your service at least some of the wonders of modern theatrical lighting. Contemporary theaters have complex digital lighting boards that, in the hands of expert lighting designers, create true magic. These designers can quickly turn day into gloomy night; they can create storms and fires and glowing sunsets. Gels and stencils can produce everything from the shadows of trees to the outlines of cathedral windows.

However, ten-minute plays tend to have limited lighting cues because they are usually produced in a group and on a limited budget. In *Sure Thing*, for example, the lights come up at the beginning of the play, and they go off at the end. The cue “**Blackout**” at the end of Ives’s script is a common one and means that all the lights go off at once.

The effect of a blackout, which is quick and immediate, is quite different from a slow fade, which is what we get in *The Divine Fallacy*. Without lighting, the conclusion of this play would be considerably diminished because the “great light” that emanates from Dorothy is necessary to emphasize her sudden metamorphosis from mousy neurotic to radiant goddess. Fortunately, this effect can easily be created by an experienced lighting operator.

The lighting cues in *Some Other Kid* are relatively simple yet also important in establishing mood. Each time a character moves in and out of the demi-world of her or his soliloquy, the “Lights shift” away from or back toward the main scene. At the end, after Andre is shot, “Sirens and flashing lights . . . shift to another part of the stage” to show us Andre’s lifeless body. Shortly afterward, the stage directions indicate that either Power stickers fall from the rafters or a computer projector is used so that “the stage fills with the Power symbol projected over and over again.”

Sounds

Each of our model plays includes important sound cues. Just as Elissa and Owen are about to kiss, bringing their budding romance to life, there is “the sound of a gunshot” and everything changes for them. The music cue in *The Divine Fallacy* is quite specific. At the beginning and at the very end of the play, “we hear the joyful bass-soprano duet, ‘Mit unser Macht ist nichts getan,’ from Bach’s chorale, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, BWV 80.”

Howe has a very specific piece of music in mind, and you too may know the perfect song that will accent the mood of your play in just the right way. Be practical, though. Don’t insist that the script use music you can’t provide. Copyright issues can be a problem in larger theaters, and many directors and producers like to have some leeway in this area. They would probably prefer general musical directions, such as “surf music” or “country tune,” rather than a specific song and artist.

Sounds can include more than just music, of course. The bell ringing in *Some Other Kid* is part of the comedy, and the person in charge of ringing it (or playing the recording) needs to pay careful attention to the script. As with the other technical production elements, be wary of relying too much on sound effects. One gunshot will make a big impact. A thirty-second offstage machine-gun battle will probably end up sounding ridiculous.

Actors

We have been talking about actors throughout this chapter, and as long as you are a playwright, you will want to *keep* talking about and to and with them. Playwrights who don't consider the human dimension of their plays don't last very long in the theater: without actors, there is no play. You may write for yourself, but you must also write for an audience, and the only way to reach that audience is through your actors.

We have seen that “character is action,” and of course it is equally true that “actors are action.” To act doesn't just mean “to mimic, impersonate, or pretend”; it also means “to do.” Actors do things. They cry; they yell; they get in each other's faces; they fling themselves around; and they stalk off the stage, slamming the door behind them. They pick up objects and put them down. Sometimes they throw things. They talk to each other and sometimes to the audience and sometimes to themselves. Everything onstage happens to and for them.

Students who have only read plays and have never seen them are often astonished by the impact that even a classroom performance can bring to a script. For example, consider the scene in *The Divine Fallacy* when Victor is chasing Dorothy around his studio as she “makes disturbing rodent faces and sounds.” On the page, the play may not read like a romp, but in performance it has almost as many funny, manic, physical antics as a Marx Brothers movie.

The simple act of witnessing human contact can also be powerful for an audience. In *Some Other Kid*, after Andre is shot, “Elissa sticks a Love sticker on Andre's corpse.” It is a somber and very personal moment, accentuated—or perhaps slightly alleviated—by her next act, placing “a Dream sticker on her own forehead.”

Even when actors aren't moving around the stage, they are still “acting.” A good actor playing Elissa will be able to convey just as much sorrow with her face and posture as she might with words. Director Peter Brook notes that finding the emotion in the language is an actor's job, not a playwright's; therefore, a good playwright, according to Brook, doesn't waste time trying to write emotional cues into his script: “He recognizes that however long his description, it doesn't begin to touch what an actor can make crystal clear in a flash. An actor is all the time entering these infinitesimal gaps between the most compact words.”

Actors in a play have a physical presence as long as they remain onstage. That may sound obvious, but beginning playwrights often forget to think of what every character will be doing all the time—yet another reason to keep your cast size small. When characters in a work of fiction aren't talking or doing something, they basically disappear from view. Actors don't have that luxury. If one actor delivers an extended speech, as happens in each of our model plays, the other actors can listen intently, they can fiddle with a prop, they can move around, or they can even pointedly ignore what the character is saying, but they must do *something*. The actor who is listening to a long monologue may need to engage in some **stage business**—apparently incidental actions done for dramatic effect—when he or she is not the focus of our attention.

As you look over your script, think about all the areas in which actor involvement might affect it. On the positive side, actors can

- ▶ put poetry into ordinary language,
- ▶ bring a dull character to life,
- ▶ make a bad joke funny, or
- ▶ bring tears to the eyes of an audience.

On the negative side, actors can

- ▶ ruin your best speeches,
- ▶ drain the life out of a fascinating character,
- ▶ butcher a hilarious punch line, or
- ▶ turn a tragic moment into low comedy.

You never know what's going to happen onstage. The actor who in rehearsal was wonderful may suddenly freeze before an audience, while the buffoon who missed half the rehearsals is a gamer who suddenly comes alive on opening night. Acting is a craft, but it's also a crapshoot, which is part of the fun of live theater.

Probably the best solution is to attempt to write what William Packard calls an "actor-proof play"—one in which the characters' actions and motivations are so clear that no actor can mistake them for something other than what the playwright intended.

Audience

Actors sometimes refer to the audience as the "fourth wall." This comes from the convention that the three "walls" of the stage are like a room, and the audience is looking in on the play through an invisible fourth wall. "Breaking the fourth wall" means acknowledging that there is an audience out there watching the

play. In “realistic” plays, that is taboo, but in more experimental fare work like *Some Other Kid*, actors sometimes engage the audience directly.

Thornton Wilder said that a play’s need for an audience was more than just “economic necessity” and “the fact that the temperament of actors is proverbially dependent on group attention.” Instead, Wilder believed that “the pretense, the fiction, on the stage would fall to pieces and absurdity without the support accorded to it by a crowd, and the excitement induced by pretending a fragment of life is such that it partakes of ritual and festival, and requires a throng.”

People in crowds—the “throng”—pick up on cues from one another. If your play is a comedy, you’ll want it to be funny early on. Once a couple of people laugh, everyone else will know that it’s okay to laugh, too. Similarly, for a tragic play, once you have established a tone—that it’s *not* okay to laugh—audience members will rarely break the group taboo.

The importance of an audience’s spontaneous reaction to your material is yet another way in which drama differs from the other creative writing genres. You may write a poem that nineteen people don’t like; however, if one intelligent and insightful person loves and understands your poem, you might well count it a success. That success ratio doesn’t work in the theater. If you have an audience of twenty people and nineteen—or even ten or twelve—of them are bored, your play will be a disaster.

Because the response of the crowd is so crucial, playwrights are more likely than other writers to revise their work based on audience response. Plays in the midst of drafting and revision often have audience feedback sessions with the playwright. Audience members offer suggestions and ask questions about the author’s intentions, with the playwright responding and asking questions of her or his own. Your class workshop is likely to serve this role for your play. In this process, be open to change and transformation. “You start out with an idea,” as David Mamet says, “it becomes something else, and part of the wisdom is learning to listen to the material itself.”

CHECKLIST Onstage: The elements of production

- Is your play written so that it can be performed on a theatrical stage and set?** Even though you may not have final say over what your performance space looks like, you can at least think in terms of the *possibilities* of stage and set. Look through your script again, and be sure your play can be acted in a confined area, using a modest and inexpensive set.
- Have you made use of theatrical lighting and sounds, props, costumes, and effects?** Not every ten-minute play will be able to take advantage of elaborate lighting and sound cues. Nevertheless, you can probably count on basic lighting effects such as “fade up,” “fade down,” or “blackout.”

Similarly, low-tech sound effects like the bell in *Sure Thing* require little effort but can make a big impression on an audience. Finally, look for ways to incorporate easily acquired props (a Bible for a religious character, a carpenter's tape for a carpenter) and costumes (a red scarf for a liberated character, a black scarf for one who is in mourning) that will help bring your script to life.

- Does your play always reflect the fact that it will be performed by stage actors?** When your actors talk, give them lines that are meant to be said aloud, and provide them with actions that are motivated by their characters' desires. Superheroes and film actors can perform all sorts of amazing feats, but stage actors are real people working in real time, obeying the laws of physics. Don't ask them to do impossible deeds, and don't have unreasonable expectations of the people who will be performing your play. You may think it's crucial that your lead be a six-foot-tall red-headed woman who can sing opera and do handstands, but your actors will rarely possess all the traits that you envisioned. That's okay: that's why it's called *acting*.
- Have you taken into account your audience's response to the play?** You may be wild about your play, but if you receive a lukewarm or worse response, you should consider revising the script. Of course, you cannot write, or revise, a play by committee, but don't discount the insights of audience members, especially if many of them have similar questions, comments, or critiques.

Getting started writing the ten-minute play ►

In all likelihood, the three model plays, our discussion of them, and the plays in the anthology will provide you with an idea for your own ten-minute play. If they don't, the following kick-starts will help you get going.

As with all other forms of writing, feel free in the early stages of the process to change, to experiment, to give up and start over again. Sometimes, after writing a few pages, new playwrights realize that their play would make a better story or essay or poem. That's fine. One of the advantages of working in all four genres explored in this book is that your ideas have a much broader field in which to germinate.

Once you have settled on an idea for your play, remember that it should make its premise and conflict clear in the first minute or two. It should have several significant reversals and complications, and it should end with a twist that is surprising yet satisfying. And when you have finished your draft, be honest with yourself. As you listen to others read it aloud, try to gauge how you would react if you were an audience member with no particular stake in the play. Would you be bored and confused, or would you be completely absorbed by what was happening onstage?

KICK-STARTS Beginning your play

- ▶ 1. Write a play with two characters who are based on two people you know very well but who have never met each other. These characters should be natural antagonists who are in direct and immediate conflict with each other.
- ▶ 2. Write a play with a protagonist who is about to go over the edge. Introduce another character who is the perfect antagonist to do the pushing.
- ▶ 3. Plays are often topical. Choose a story from the news that has a clear conflict and interesting, compelling characters. Change the names and the circumstances enough so that you feel free to alter the facts of the case for dramatic impact. Then write a play centered around the news item.
- ▶ 4. Fiction writers work extremely hard to “bring their characters to life,” but for you, the playwright, your characters are already alive. Take advantage of the fact that you have people—breathing, moving, talking human beings—on the stage. Write a play that benefits from the proximity of your actors to their audience.
- ▶ 5. Maria Irene Fornes observes, “Work is part of everyone’s life. Except in plays.” Write a play that is set at work or one in which work plays an integral role in the dramatic conflict.
- ▶ 6. Luis Valdez says, “The racial issue [in theater] is always just swept aside. It deserves to be swept aside only after it’s been dealt with. We cannot begin to approach a real solution to our social ills—a solution like integration, for instance, or assimilation—without dealing with all our underlying feelings about each other.” Write a play that deals with a significant issue involving race.
- ▶ 7. Choose an interesting and unusual prop—a shoehorn, a cardboard box of discarded auto parts, a teddy bear with one arm torn off—and write the play that goes with that object.
- ▶ 8. The sound of a bell ringing is a crucial element in David Ives’s *Sure Thing*. Choose another sound effect, for example, the ringing of a cell phone, the shattering of a piece of glass, or a muted cough, and write a play in which that sound features prominently.
- ▶ 9. “I don’t know if the theater would have made such an impression on me if it had all been cast in some gloomy candlelight,” says playwright and actor Wallace Shawn. “There was something thrilling about the electric light.” Write a play in which lighting plays a significant, even “thrilling,” part of the drama.
- ▶ 10. If your play seems too boring or static, ask a couple of actors (they can be friends or relatives) to act out the action of your play silently, without any dialogue at all. If they are just standing around or sitting the entire time, start over with a new play, or rethink your conflict and characters so that the struggle between them is more dynamic, more direct, and more physical.

- ▶ **11.** Playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett may be almost as famous for what their characters *don't* say as what they do say. Write a play in which pauses and silences are crucial elements of the script.
- ▶ **12.** Look back at the stories, essays, and poems you have written in the past, whether they were for this class, another class, or simply for yourself. See if you have written something that might have worked better onstage. Using what you have learned in this section, rethink and rewrite your earlier idea so that it is suitable as a play.
- ▶ **13.** David Rabe says that he begins a play “with an impulse or a situation or sometimes just a fragment of dialogue that begins to expand once [I] work on it. Something sticks in my mind – it could be a real person or a real exchange of dialogue or a fragment that just pops into my head.” Write a play that starts from something that, for whatever reason, “sticks in [your] mind.”
- ▶ **14.** August Wilson would find “quotes, no more than two or three, that I use to keep me focused and inspired” and that he would tape above his desk while writing a play. Find two or three quotes that inspire you, place them someplace prominent in your writing space, and see what sort of play emerges.
- ▶ **15.** Lorraine Hansberry took the title for her play *A Raisin in the Sun* from Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem.” Read through some poetry – the anthology poems in this textbook, for example – and look for a line or phrase that kick-starts an idea for a short play.
- ▶ **16.** Make two columns on a sheet of paper. On the left side, jot down fifteen or twenty interesting first names (if you draw a blank, there are plenty of baby-naming Web sites). On the right side, list interesting last names (again, the Internet is always there to lend a helping hand). Then match the perfect first and last names to create two or three characters who demand to be in the same play with one another.
- ▶ **17.** Write a play that you think will make the audience laugh all the way to the last minute or two, at which point they will suddenly want to cry.
- ▶ **18.** Write a play set on a boat. It could be rubber raft in a pond or a cruise ship in the middle of the ocean, but make sure your audience knows by the end of the first page or two of the script where your characters are and what their conflict is.
- ▶ **19.** Write a play that includes one or more historical figures (living or dead, famous or obscure) that behave in unexpected ways. The play may be set in the past, the present, or the future.
- ▶ **20.** Write a play that combines two or three of the previous kick-starts.
- ▶ **21.** If none of these kick-starts work for you, look at the kick-starts in Chapter 2 and see if any of the short fiction prompts inspire a play. (Alternately, if your play is coming along fine but your story is stalled, maybe the kick-starts in this chapter will inspire a work of short fiction.)

Playscript Format: A Model

HOW TO FORMAT A PLAY
A Play
by
Your Name Here

Your Name
Instructor's Name
Class
The Date

Characters

PROFESSOR MARGUERITE LU, A creative writing instructor in her 30s or 40s

BRYER, A creative writing student in his early 20s

Setting

Her office. The present.

Lights up to reveal MARGUERITE, a creative writing instructor, sitting at her office desk, intently typing a play. Off to one side is a chair.

There is a knock at the door.

MARGUERITE frowns as she looks up from her work.

MARGUERITE

(After a moment) Come in.

(Enter BRYER, her student, with a backpack slung over his shoulder.)

MARGUERITE (CONT.)

Hi, Bryer. Come in. Sit down.

BRYER

Thanks, Professor Lu.

(BRYER sits down, dropping his backpack on the floor with a thud.)

MARGUERITE

How can I help you?

BRYER

(Very frustrated) It's just . . . I don't know. I'm having trouble figuring out how to do the playscript you showed us in class. It's weird.

MARGUERITE

It's different.

BRYER

Like I said: it's weird.

MARGUERITE

Weird isn't necessarily different. Come on now, Bryer.

BRYER

Okay. But if you could just show me how to do it right, I'd really appreciate it.

MARGUERITE

No problem. In fact, I can turn this little scene we're performing right now into a script.

(BRYER pulls his chair closer to her computer.)

BRYER

Cool.

MARGUERITE

Let's start with the title page. You can see that the title of your play is 10 spaces from the top, is centered, and is in all capital letters. Just below that are the words "A play by" and then your name also centered.

BRYER

And the lower right-hand corner is where my name, my instructor's name, the class, and the date go.

MARGUERITE

That's right. If you were sending your play off to a theater company or a potential producer, that's where you'd include your contact information: address, phone, e-mail.

BRYER

Everything's in, like, 12-point Courier font.

MARGUERITE

That's a convention that comes to us from manual typewriters. Some people have started using Times Roman 12-point font, but I prefer Courier. It's generally pretty accurate in translating one page of script into one minute of stage time.

BRYER

What if you have a really long speech—like a full page of somebody just talking?

MARGUERITE

Clearly, that's going to take more than just a minute. In contrast, if you have rapid-fire dialogue where each character only says a few words before the next one starts talking, that page will go more quickly than one minute. Still, on balance, it comes out about right.

BRYER

I see on the next page you have "Characters" and "Setting."

MARGUERITE

Yep. The characters' names are in all caps, wherever they appear in the play.

(BRYER sits back for a moment, looking puzzled.)

BRYER

I don't get it: why is that?

MARGUERITE

That's so the actors can find their parts easily. It helps them know when they have to say or do something in the script.

BRYER

The description you have of them is pretty general.

MARGUERITE

That's intentional. Directors want to have the freedom to cast whoever's right for the part. All we need to know is that the person playing you is a male in his 20s. Why say, for instance, that the actor must be five feet ten inches tall, blond, with blue eyes, when that doesn't really matter to the play? And there's even more latitude in age for the female actor playing me.

BRYER

You said "female actor."

MARGUERITE

We generally don't say "actress" in the theater anymore. It's considered sexist.

BRYER

No comment on that.

(MARGUERITE gives him a look. BRYER pauses for a moment to collect his thoughts.)

BRYER (CONT.)

I see the setting is just as simple.

MARGUERITE

Once again, you don't want to burden the people putting on your play with unnecessary details that may interfere with the production.

BRYER

Fair enough. Could I put the characters and setting on the title page? Just for our class? To save paper, I mean.

MARGUERITE

(Smiling wryly) Anything for the environment.

BRYER

So then we get to the actual script itself. It looks like the scene description is moved over to the right half of the page.

MARGUERITE

Yes. The space between margins on this particular page is six inches total from the left to the right margins, so the stage directions begin three inches to the right of the left margin. This helps distinguish stage directions from the dialogue. As I said, it's all about making it easier for the actors. This helps them distinguish between when they should *do* something and when they need to *speak*.

BRYER

So that's why the characters' names are centered, and their dialogue is left margin justified? But stage directions, movement, and so on, are all on the right half of the page.

MARGUERITE

That's exactly right. Notice, too, that while the dialogue itself is single-spaced, there is an extra space between the dialogue and the name of the character making the next speech. It opens up the page a bit.

BRYER

I see you have parentheses and italics in front of a couple of speeches, like you're telling the actor how to talk.

MARGUERITE

This is a cue for how to say a particular sentence or phrase, when it might be misinterpreted. I've tried to go easy on those instructions, though, because actors tend to resent being told how to deliver their lines.

BRYER

So: characters' names are centered, dialogue goes across the page, and stage directions start on the right half of the page.

MARGUERITE

That's correct. You'll notice, too, that after the scene is established at the very beginning, stage directions are in parentheses.

(BRYER leans over again to take a closer look.)

BRYER

They sure are. A couple of times you've written "(CONT.)." What does that mean?

MARGUERITE

That indicates the character who was speaking earlier "continues" talking, even though some action or cue or a page break in the script interrupted him or her.

(BRYER pushes his chair back to where it was, shoulders his backpack, and gets ready to leave.)

BRYER

Okay. I think I've got it.

MARGUERITE

Take it easy, Bryer.

(BRYER nods and is on his way out when he suddenly thinks of something else.)

BRYER

Is this the way *all* playscripts look? The way you just showed me?

MARGUERITE

Not exactly. Unlike screenwriters, who have one very specific way to lay out *everything* in their screenplays, from dialogue to action, playwrights tend to pick and choose from several formats. For the purposes of your play, you'll want to follow this format as closely as possible. It's not the *only* way, but anyone who sees it will recognize that you're following the major conventions of a playscript, which we've just discussed.

(BRYER gives her a thumbs-up.)

BRYER

Thanks, Professor Lu. I'll see you later.

MARGUERITE

No doubt you will, Bryer. No doubt you will.

(Exit BRYER. Lights fade as MARGUERITE returns to typing her play.)

END OF PLAY.