

The Process of Theatre Writing -- 1

What can I say about playwrighting that can take you from the ideas, to the words, to the page, to the stage? Not a lot in one sitting.

BUT—

I have written the scripts for a dozen or so musicals and written the music and lyrics for more than 30 more. I was commissioned at the age of 18 to write my first musical. At age 19 I finished it, together with some of my closest friends, and the commissioners actually produced it and it was quite successful. That was in 1973. I have won awards, been produced across the world, and have spent more hours inside a theatre in rehearsal, than some people have been alive. I have quite enjoyed the process of writing. I spent years as a professional actor, then a director/choreographer, then a teacher in the public schools. It has all brought me great joy, but writing is my passion.

It must be yours to be good at it.

There is nothing more satisfying than to hear a laugh (in the proper places) at something you have written that was supposed to be funny. There is nothing more awesome than being able to evoke an emotion from an audience, even a tear or a gasp, when they see something that you have created and it touches them in those places that only the a spirit can reach.

Writing is a process. For the Theatre writing is THE process. It begins with a concept, an idea, a story. Don't ever ask, "what story am I going to tell?!" Ask, instead, "whose story am I going to tell?" Each story is added to, refined, reworked. The writing is not done once it is on the page, because a script is not a novel. Living actors must be able to inhabit the characters you write for them. The process is not complete without rehearsal. In rehearsal you learn what does and doesn't work the moment your actors start speaking your words. LISTEN to them. If you keep saying, "They're not getting it," maybe you should consider that it is you who didn't get it. A written script is not even a road map without the actors. It is only a guide book. If you think your script is perfect before the actors get a hold of it, stop writing because you will not be successful.

An open mind is a terrible thing to waste. It is also a major hurdle to have a mind so full that you know everything there is to know. Even Shakespeare did not always get it right.

The process of theatre writing is re-writing. It is listening to what is happening on the stage. It is sometimes more important to listen to what is NOT happening on the stage. Then make sure that what needs to happen is what does happen. The theatre is not made up of words alone, but words that embody action. Nobody wants to go to a play or musical and hear words that lead nowhere. Hyperbole? No!

Active, progressive stories and characters that take us on a journey; that is what you have to create. Every word must contribute to the overall arc of the play. Every character must fit into that arc. Each word moves us forward into some action that is inevitable. This means that you must choose each word very carefully. One word out of place and the story is broken, delayed, unfulfilled. Not shattered, but ineffective. Too many words and the story is clouded, over-burdened. Too few words and there are gaps, chasms, in the through-line.

Characters have wants and needs. Sometimes the plot is as simple as the character going after what he or she thinks they want rather than what the audience comes to understand that they really need. This is one thing that binds an audience to a theatrical piece: they are discovering something before the character does and long to have that character find out what it is. The needs and wants of the characters work on several levels. Each scene has a want and/or a need. Each conversation can be broken down into wants and needs -- these are things that are immediate. Then there are the long term goals, the over-arching wants and needs.

Where does your character want to be at the end of the play? What do they want to achieve? Each character must want something or someone, or has a need to do something or be someone. These must interrelate; must either contribute to or take away from the main character's ability to obtain what he or she wants. Each character is either a help or a hindrance. They are colleagues or enemies, and all the shades that go with that. Sometimes they can be both friend and foe at different times. Ambivalence in a character is acceptable. Ambivalence in an author is not.

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At the end of the play does your central character achieve his or her Objective? Then you may have a comedy, or a serio-comedy, or maybe even just a drama. Do they not get what they want? Then you might have a tragedy, or at least fine drama.

Every bit of dialog is an interaction with a chain of reactions to what is said and/or done. It all must work together for the viewer. The audience members are the reason we are all there in the first place. If you are just writing for yourself -- that is fine -- but send it to a therapist.

Most times we find ourselves as a playwright or a composer locked away in a room. That's what it sometimes takes to create the kernel or the nut of the concept or idea. But it is only through collaboration that the true writing process of the theatre expands your piece into something stageworthy. Sometimes this collaboration works with yourself if you have a really open mind and a propensity that leads you away from schizophrenia. This collaboration can also be in the form of working with actors and directors and designers who all bring something to the table for you to sample. You, as the playwright, must decide on what ingredients work best in your play. It is yours, after all.

I love collaboration, with the actors et.al, but also with another writer. Some of my best work has been sitting in a room with one of my collaborators (or even lately Skyping with them -- not quite as good but it still works) and bouncing ideas off each other and becoming inspired by the comments and contributions of your fellow writers. (This is how TV writers work together in a group. Not that all television writing can be held up to an acceptable standard.) One word or thought can lead to a new lyric or a better-constructed scene. Put lots of words together that lead to action, or reveal character maybe through their inaction, and the play starts becoming a better-constructed play overall.

After all is said and done, you must serve the play. What is best for the play is what you must write. Sometimes you have an idea or a concept that becomes unworkable. You have to be willing, as a writer, to let go of what does not work. Jettison the refuse. Start over if you have to. A friend just talked to me, after the premiere of her new play that I attended, that a show I was in that she wrote many years ago was being conceptualized and a first draft written while she was Assistant Directing another original show (not written by her) that I was performing in. She got a script together. Then read through it. She was so disgusted that as she walked by a trash can she just let the pages fall from her fingers and started over again. She didn't like a word she had written. She told me it was 'awful'. You have to set your ego aside for the betterment of the child you are trying to give birth to. You want a healthy, walking, talking, laughing, crying child. Aunts and Uncles, Grandparents, church leaders, teachers, community members -- all contribute the raising of a child. But it is the parents that eventually filter what the child sees, feels, hears, experiences. The same process works in the theatre except that these 'relations' are replaced by your colleagues; the people you work with. But you must be the parent.

There is also an important concept that lies within working with collaborators, or colleagues: Working with. They don't work for you. The Director is also not your boss. The theatre is nothing more than a collaborative process with each person doing his or her part to contribute to the whole. It is like a built-in society operating under a law of communal living: everyone with their strengths and talents contributing equally; having an equal chance to be heard.

If you want to write, sit down and write. Do it longhand, use a typewriter, use a computer -- speak your notes into your phone! Whatever. Just start the process. Gather your friends around and read it together often! Feedback on what works and what doesn't work, will come from the strangest and most unexpected of places. Have an open mind. Be willing to accept that you don't do everything correctly.

Remember this, that the title of the show we know as Oklahoma! was Away We Go! as it entered Boston on it's tryout tour in 1943. The title song had not even been written yet and it was only two weeks before the New York opening! Remember also that the song Bali H'ai from South Pacific was hurriedly scribbled on the back of

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a restaurant napkin during lunch between the morning and afternoon rehearsals of 'preview week'. Richard Rodgers left the afternoon rehearsal and by dinner time had the song written and arranged and in the show.

Seek inspiration. Then listen to it. Don't always pretend you know better. You don't. There is a guide out there. Call him God, call her Muse, that doesn't matter. Just listen.

Seek information. Don't be afraid to research. Ask questions. Solicit opinions. Change your mind.

Use words that lead to actions. Illicit actions and thoughts from your performers. Watch them. And listen.

Use thoughts that express desires, wants needs. Listen.

It is all part of the writing process for the theatre.

--C. Michael Perry

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