Playwriting; Everyone has a story.

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Everyone has a story. But not everyone can write a play.

There are guidelines and suggestions that address basic playwriting that even the most seasoned playwrights adhere to. Keeping these elements in mind before putting pen to paper can save the playwright from rejection or major rewrites. (Let me here admit that there are exceptions to most of what follows. I can cite instances when these guidelines have been breached…successfully.)

You may ask, “What about my art?” “What about creativity?” There are numerous elements to consider before, during, and after you create your masterpiece.

You will first want to make sure that your play says something worthy of all of the time, cost and artists who are in the creative end. Play production, even at the most rudimentary level, is very expensive both in time and money. Yes, the “art” of your play should be primary and of paramount importance. “Go forth and create!”

But first for the “work” part of playwriting. If you hope to see your play produced and in the hands of directors, actors and the endless crew and production staff, you might want to keep in mind some of the nuts and bolts that will keep your play production-friendly as you create.

One of the first things playwrights seem to focus on is their play’s title. Once selected, it seems to be set in stone. It is that thing that will alert and lure your audience. Think of the potential audience member, the one you will want to draw in or might be predisposed to your play, and select a title which works toward this.

“Anna and the King of Siam” is pretty clear on who the characters are. “Driving Miss Daisy” uses one of the character names and some of the action. “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf” is descriptive (and long – shortened by everyone as “For Colored Girls” even though most people knew the entire title).

Try to avoid a title that will be hard to sell and, worse, difficult to want to buy tickets for. We all know of plays which have had bad titles or titles that haven’t worked for the play. If you are going for the unusual title, it should attract an audience in spite of or because of an enigmatic title. My guess is that the marketing people for “Copenhagen” and “Oh, Calcutta” did more than a little head scratching. Not a bad idea to go for the safe bet of a title which will signal its theme or subject matter.

Ask a friend or colleague; “What do you think this play is about?” “Is this a play you would want to go see?”

Is it a comedy (“The Goodbye Girl”) or a drama (“To Kill A Mockingbird”) or musical (“Cabaret”). Think about it. Would a serious drama be called “Little Shop of Horrors”? So the title is important.

The first question to be asked is: "What one thing do you want to say about the human condition?" This may (or may not) seem a very obvious requirement. You should be able to answer this question throughout the development of your play. It should be kept in mind and referred back to as the play unfolds on the page.

Your play should be told through the voice of one character: your lead character. This is usually the hero (Atticus Finch in “To Kill A Mockingbird”), sometimes an observer (the Stage Manager in “Our Town”), and even occasionally the anti-hero or villain (Richard III).

On what one character quality or flaw are you focusing? (Love, envy, jealousy, greed.) How does this initiate the action of the play? How does this change during the course of the play? How does the character change? It cannot be over-stressed that keeping the action of the play moving forward through this character will help keep you on track.

Your major character does not have to be on the stage at all times. In fact, it might be possible for the major character never to be on stage. Unlikely; difficult; you’d have to have a very good reason; this dramatic tool should never be done as a novelty. (Alert me if you think or find one. Coward’s “Blythe Spirit” doesn’t count.)

That said, every scene that does not include the main character should be examined and analyzed to make sure that it reflects back to this character, his/her character flaw and its progression or action. And every character that is included should be a “tool” for the author’s use to move the action forward and keep it focused on the theme.

Characters, dialogue, and action should be realistic within the context of the world that has been created by the playwright. (Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee) Having a Medea character in an *Our Town* kind of play probably will not work. (Not impossible but that’s a different play altogether.) Or be believed by the audience.

Another frequent trap; people don’t converse in long speeches; monologues and soliloquies aside. This is especially true in the early part of the play or exposition. Longer speeches, if used, are found more in the revelations of the climax.

Your audience will want to see themselves or people that they know in your characters. You should want your audience to care about to your characters and what happens to him/her. Making Richard III a sympathetic character might seem a stretch but, upon close examination, the director, actor and audience should find a glimmer of humanity; he is, after all, a product of his environment; childhood and relationship in the family.

Character voice is essential for believability. It may be a stretch, but in reading the play, you should be able to tell who is talking without having the character names in a left column.

There is an unwritten rule or guideline; try to get all exposition in early, at least in the first half of the play. And all characters should be introduced in the first half. That doesn’t mean that they have to be on stage but that they are referred to as part of the exposition. You don’t want your audience’s attention sidetracked trying to figure out what’s going on. Sometime plays like mysteries are the exception; with great success.

Remember the “gun on the wall”. If the playwright, director, or designer mounts a gun on the wall, it should be used by the end of the play. Your audience will be expecting it. “And Then There Were None” audiences gets used to characters being killed off. But they might be very surprised as the killer is revealed. I think Agatha Christie was counting on this.

Every character and every scene that does not move the plot forward should be eliminated; or, at the least, examined for value. If absolutely essential for plot, you might want to find another way to relay the information or commit the act. Many playwrights have a beloved character or scene or joke that

they cannot seem to part with. This can bring about a deadly reckoning during rewrites or worse, during rehearsal.

Harder to detect is having two characters that do or can serve the same dramatic function. Think of adapting your roster to have one character that can do both “jobs”. It is sometimes difficult to consolidate two characters into one (to completely eliminate a character) especially well into the production. Thinking about how each character serves the plot before you start writing can help you avoid the reworking during rewrites. Think of characters as actors who require salaries and costumes. (For that matter, it is not a bad idea to think of everything in terms of cost.) Yes, that character or scene may have all the funny lines but they should be the tools of the author not the other way around.

Another issue is set; is there any reason why you cannot have all the action take place in one room? It’s more than just the cost of constructing two sets. It’s the time and the hands needed to move them.

Another problem is "repetition and redundancy”. Most first drafts are weighted down with material that would not be missed. How does it move the plot forward? Is it essential information for the reader/audience to have in order to understand what’s going on? Will the play hold up and make sense without it? Remember the concept of “suspended disbelief”.

The opposite can also be problematic. Make sure that what is in your head makes it to the page. This problem will often come up in your table read. Where did the poison come from? Why did the character at 20 years of age have a will? What happened to the remnants of the meal?

There are also those pesky statements of the obvious. If the doorbell rings, the character does not need to say: "Oh, someone’s at the door."

Where does the climax occur? If your central character has his big dramatic crisis at the beginning of the second act, what is happening afterwards? The climax should be the point at which the lead character faces his flaw and deals with it or succumbs to it. The character at the beginning of the play has changed because of the action of the play.

You will want to make sure you have made your play easy to read; for producers, directors, actors. And you will want to be able to look at your play from the perspective of readers; producers, directors, actors and audience.

Do not be a slave to form. The play should dictate the style. Don’t try to make your play fit into a form unsuited to your play. Do you really want to write a musical or a comedy about the mass execution of a group of young school students by terrorists? (That said, there has been a wonderful musical about Sacco and Vanzetti.)

If you find that you are addressing two different social issues, say love and greed, you will want to be very careful that the two relate dramatically to each other in a fairly obvious way. This is a writing ploy that should be tackled by only the very seasoned playwright; and who have a very good reason for doing so. Otherwise you are writing two plays. Only the very brave and veteran, if not foolish, should attempt to cover this terrain. Obviously, Shakespeare had this down pat.

After you’ve written your first draft, set it aside for a short time and then come back to it, reread (aloud) and rewrite. If you can trust someone else with the task…do. You will and should feel it still needs work. Repeat.

At some point you might feel you're getting close to a finished product. This is when it can be very useful to gather a friendly (honest) group of actor/friends to read the play through. The playwright not only can take advantage of hearing the play in the hands of or out of the mouths of actors. It can also, if you are open to the process and can get excellent feedback, be extremely helpful. Actors have a keen sense of what works for the characters and the play. Having a director in the room can be very helpful. He/She can guide the reading and the evaluation process afterward.

Actors and directors can catch problems – like a character that the playwright has required a complete and complex costume change during a scene change. Or food that has to be refreshed, eaten every night and cleared. Or any kind of flame; candles, matches, cigarettes, fog. Gunshots. Strobe lights.

It can be very useful for a playwright to stay out of the discussion altogether. Listen. Don't try to defend or explain. Here's a clue; if someone has asks a question, it may mean that you have not made it clear in the text.

Go back and ask the basic structure questions. Who is the central character? What one character flaw do you want to illuminate and examine? Does every character and every scene help move the plot along? And most important, what can be eliminated or clarified?

It is not a bad thing to think about the play on its feet; in production. Think about all of the production values in relation to the cost in money and time that it will add to the production. It will be difficult to find a producer to be interested in a musical with fifty soldiers in WWI uniforms, 25 women in long gowns and 25 child-actors, with three complete and realistic set changes.

Also think of the audience. A play that is 150 pages long will probably have a running time longer than most audiences will be willing to sit through. Plays in one act without act break are more and more the norm. Once you get past the 90 minute mark you may be doomed to a two-act play. Audiences can be lost during this break. You must make sure Act One ends in a way that will lure your audience back for Act 2.

The one place where new playwrights falter is in the inevitable rewrites. New playwrights may believe that it unnecessary. One can pretty much be assured that the "first draft" is not a masterpiece. It is a first draft. (Rumor has it that Tennessee Williams was still rewriting after opening night.) But, like all crafts, once you have mastered it, you will know when and how exceptions are possible.

Read! There is a wealth of good plays to read. Figuring out why they are good can help an author face his own weaknesses. And there are plenty of books on playwriting. Reading can be as important as writing. And every playwright, every writer, should own and read carefully Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style". I have read very few plays that have lacked or misused punctuation. Commas seem to be a real problem. It the actor isn't secure that you have used punctuation correctly, when you add a comma or an ellipse for a very specific dramatic reason, they might not trust the writing.

The physical look of a play, on the page, can often signal a producer that they are reading an unseasoned playwright. This may also make it difficult for actors to read.

Find a theatre company near you. See their productions. Get involved/volunteer in as many of the production aspects as allowed. Eventually you will learn who you can ask for advice. You might find that you've been invited to usher or sit in on table reads or be a reader in auditions or to be on their reading committees.

There are a lot of reasons why plays fail. Sometimes all of the elements of a play look like they should make for a winning combination. The story is riveting. The director arrives with a string of glowing successes and great ideas to stage the play. It was written by an accomplished and established playwright. The cast could be made up of talented and seasoned actors, singers and dancers. It might have the luxury of development and rehearsal time and money. All these jewels can still fail to make an artistic success.

Success is mercurial and elusive. A good solid structure in a well-written play with interesting characters and plot will not guarantee success. But any weakness can spell failure.

Reread your play – out loud. You might be able to catch some errors. Then put it aside for a week and read it again. Look out for misspellings. Look out for lapses. "There, their, they're." "Dam, Damn." "Your, you're, yore." "Further and farther." Use of a capital with mother and father; it's your mother, his father, an uncle. If there is an adjective in front of the word (you, my, his, an), then the first letter is not capitalized, usually. If it's someone's name;"tell Mother that Uncle Jack is…" it needs a capital. Think of it in terms of proper names versus job descriptions.

It doesn't hurt to have a theatre friend whose opinion you respect to read your play. Listen to the advice! You don't have to submit to all, but listen.

Throughout the year, many of the established theatre companies have new play competitions or festivals. (In the United States, Theatre Communication Group publish "Dramatists Sourcebook".) Some companies solicit one-acts, some full-length plays, some strictly musicals. Some have a more specific themes or target-audiences to their festivals.

There are many companies that accept unsolicited scripts throughout the year. Make sure that you go to their website. What is their audience base? Read their mission statement. What kind of plays do they lean toward?

Plays should be formatted in one of the two accepted formats. The first is the standard play format; character names on the left with dialogue indented. This structure makes plays easiest to read, especially for actors. Most published plays adhere to this format. Action/description of the character can be inserted in that piece of dialogue, in italics or a visually different font. If it's action/description of another character or multiple characters, it should go on a separate line.

The other accepted format is "final draft" which was the first formatting software created primarily for writing screenplays. There are free software applications offered on the internet. Both styles are easy to create with tabs.

Plays that do not adhere to these formats are sometimes rejected; not because of the formatting itself but that it often signals an amateur. Some competitions will require final draft formatting, so you should be familiar. If not specified, use whichever is easiest for you. The thing to remember is that your play should be easy to read.

Carefully read and follow instructions from theatre companies about submissions. Important: Is there a theme or time constraint (read out loud for timing). Here you need to think about the staging elements; time, theme, number of actors, time period, props, sets, sound and light requirements.

It is important, whether they mention it or not, for you to submit copies "blind". (The first page should be removable. It is the only page that should have all your contact details. This is so that their readers can read copies of the play without any prejudicial information.) Pages should be numbered. Headers that include page numbers can and should have play titles included. Don't use fancy fonts;

use a font that is easy to read. If you email, the unusual font that you have selected may not be in their software; times roman, arial, palatino are fairly standard throughout software programmes. Stage directions should be in parentheses and minimum. ***Absolute minimum***. Let the directors and actors do their work. (Gunshot is heard off.) is essential. (Brad smiles at Janet.) is usually the director's or actor's choice.

Make sure that it is bound as requested. Don't waste your money on binders and folders if staples are sufficient. Remember, readers may be lugging home a multiple scripts at night. And you will have to pay for the extra postage cost.

If you are asked for a cover letter, make sure that you submit one. Provide information as succinctly as possible. If the content of the cover letter is not specified, you will want to provide a very limited bio describing your playwriting history and production information. Make sure that you provide all information required at one time. Remember the readers have limited time, are often volunteers, and read a great number of scripts. (Be patient. You may not hear back for a long time. You may never hear.) Here again let me reiterate; make the physical script easy to read.

For the most part, festivals and competitions are open to new as well as established playwrights. Playwrights should scour the individual websites for each requirements and applications. These are particularly good for new playwrights. Some will get involved in helping rework the play with an eye on possible future productions. Many good and successful playwrights have gone this path.

The requirement most playwrights bristle at is the submission fee. The fee is usually nominal when you think that many readers get paid per script. And sometimes these fees contribute to production costs. (You can think of this as a small contribution to the support of that theatre.) If you cannot afford the fee or object to paying it, don't submit. Some will read one or two with no fee but may ask you to contribute to production cost. Some both. Some will expect you to provide director and cast. Read all the submission information carefully.

You can add a self-addressed stamped post card which will acknowledge that they have received your submission of hard copy. Don't submit paperwork not asked for; like programs, news article, and graphics. At each step in the process, put yourself in their position. More often an application will be on their website with the provision to upload script electronically.

Title page should include: Title, playwright's name and contact details and ©date. Second page: synopsis should be part of your script. (Synopsis is also a way for you to revisit your initial concept.) Bios can be added to cover page. Second pages should have 1) time period, 2) scenes 3) sets any essential set pieces, 4) character names with brief and relevant descriptions like age, gender.

Write. Don't stop. Read, reread and rewrite. Read printed plays and analyze. Public libraries have more plays than you'll ever be able to read. And read about acting and producing and directing and lighting and sound and stage manager. And see lots of plays. Many companies have table reads or previews and invited dress. Colleges and drama schools charge small amounts.

Make yourself an expert. Do your research. Here again are things to consider before during or after: length of play, number of actors, ages of actors, any physical specifics, time period, set(s) and set changes, set pieces, props, costumes and costume changes, unusual requirements (guns, fog, helicopter, sound effects, fire), lighting, accents, colloquials, terminology.

Whatever your "survival" job is, write like it's not a hobby. Be brilliant; I know that you will.