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Introduction: A Good Play and a Good Class

I like plays that get to the point. They may luxuriate in language and poetry, dwell on nuanced aspects of character, or revel in moments of intense beauty, pain, desire, or other aspects of the human condition, but they should not bore or be self-indulgent (perhaps the worst crimes a dramatist can commit against her audience). A play should also provoke, compel, and inspire. If it is unable to do any of those things, the playwright has failed. A play is not a history or an ethics lesson. If audiences wanted that, they would stay home and watch the History Channel or, God forbid, read a book.

All of this is easy to say. The real goal is to find a way to put these concepts together in an organic and fully realized way. This chapter is an attempt to engage, compel, and inspire you, the aspiring dramatist, to write an intelligent, entertaining play.

I have participated as a student in numerous playwriting and screenwriting workshops over a twelve-year period spanning high school, college, graduate school, and beyond. I probably learned something worthwhile from every one of those classroom experiences, but only two or three instructors have had any real and lasting impact on my own writing. These instructors instilled in me the value of craft and structure. Under their tutelage I learned how to develop a solid premise and to dramatize conflict. They helped me to consider different choices and to create compelling characters with a clear dramatic action. In short, they showed me how to tell a story that feels like it needs to be told.

Most importantly, however, their courses taught me to appreciate how difficult it is to write a good play—and the discipline that it takes to do it. Great plays don't appear out of thin air. Someone has to will them into existence. Over time, I have learned the purpose of revision and editing—and I have come to terms with the amount of work required to create numerous drafts. Writing a good play requires a relentless drive toward greater and greater clarity. You must sort the productive from the nonconstructive to make the play as fully realized on paper as it is in your mind's eye.

One of the many reasons to pursue an MFA in playwriting is that a graduate program can be a good place to learn the tools of the trade. There are many playwrights working in the theater who learned their craft the old-fashioned way: They read plays and saw plays, wrote their own, and found ways to get them produced without the aid of a graduate school education. However, a

quick look at the top playwrights working in the United States over the past several years reveals that an increasing number attended MFA programs. What these playwrights have in common is a close association with a theater company, producing organization, or influential person who helped to bring their works to the public eye. An MFA program puts you directly and instantaneously in the midst of a community of peers and mentors all working toward the same goal as you are. A good program will also expose you to a variety of writing styles, methods, and approaches to mastering the craft of playwriting. Some instructors may be more experimental or language-based, others will have a more traditional take on story, character, and structure.

Making contacts and developing professional relationships are the best reasons for going to graduate school for your MFA. Connections help you to get your foot in the door, and then to stay in the room once you've managed to get in. But all the connections in the world won't help you in the long run if you aren't able to deliver the proverbial goods. Conversely, all the talent in the world won't take you anywhere without the necessary contacts. Some people have the ability to make connections anywhere they go. Other people can be at the right place at the right time and still come away empty-handed. The important thing is to realize that it is very difficult to accomplish your goals all alone. If you want to be a playwright, it helps to live somewhere with a lively local theater scene and to immerse yourself in that scene any way you can. The goal is to meet talented people with whom you want to work and who want to work with you.

Unfortunately, there are many MFA programs that do not foster such a collegial atmosphere: Political infighting between faculty members can often trickle down to the students. Also, there are some universities (I won't name names) in which MFA students in acting, directing, design, and playwriting have little or no interaction with each other. It seems against reason for these departments to be so balkanized as to deprive their students of the opportunity to form valuable artistic collaborations, but it happens far too often.

Whether you attend an MFA program, form your own theater company, or find a sugar daddy to produce your plays, openness to collaboration and input from others can help make your work better. Participating in some form of a playwriting workshop can help you to realize the play you've struggled with unsuccessfully on your own. Some playwrights thrive in the classroom because they feel creatively stimulated by feedback, appreciate having deadlines, and find themselves motivated by exposure to the work of their peers. The best programs

provide a collegial and supportive environment in which the intelligent insight of others emboldens you to take chances and to grow as a writer.

Despite what I gained from all of the classes and workshops I've attended, I have always learned the most in the theater—from actors, directors, designers, producers, and other playwrights. Plays are not academic exercises: They are meant to be performed. In my experience, playwrights discover more about their work when a play is read out loud or performed in front of an audience for the first time than from any classroom experience or reader's comments. The audience is either rapt with attention or not. The jokes are funny or not. The drama is crackling with tension or not. The action moves the story along, or it doesn't. The characters are specific and believable, or they're not. Once you know these things about your play, you can begin the process of revision and focus more clearly on your objectives.

In the years that I've been writing plays and teaching playwriting workshops, I have also read numerous books on the playwright's craft. Almost all of these instruction manuals are helpful in one way or another. Many of them also tend to be wordy, repetitive, theoretical, dry, and just plain unengaging—ironically, not all that different from many bad plays.

In this chapter, I have tried to buck this trend by creating a simple, informative guide to writing plays. I have found that whether I'm teaching junior high school students or a graduate-level seminar, the same basic elements of drama apply. A good instructor—and a good playwriting guide—helps the playwright to identify her subject matter and guides her through the process that takes her from an undeveloped idea to a fully realized play. I've dedicated the following pages to providing the reader with just such assistance. After some general remarks about content and process, you'll find a step-by-step explanation of the different components that make up a good play, along with writing exercises and samples from students I've worked with over the years. I hope that you find them to be fun, engaging, and helpful.

Why Write a Play?

Before you write a word, it's important for you to consider why you would like to become a playwright. One reason to write a play is to change the world. Another reason is to make a million dollars. Probably the best reason

is that you have a burning desire that absolutely no one can talk you out of to write a work for the theater. Sure, I would like to change the world and make a million dollars, but those are not the primary goals that inspire me. My goal when I sit down to write a play is to create a world with consistent rules of its own. This world must be inhabited by compelling characters and tell a good story that expresses my thoughts, feelings, insights, and opinions in a coherent and complete way. I want to create a provocative, entertaining, informative work of art that makes the audience laugh, cry, and contemplate the meaning of their own existence—no small task. While this journey can at times be thrilling, it is often frustrating and difficult. Having said all that, it's best not to think too much about it. Just roll up your sleeves and write.

For me, the theater at its best remains our most supreme art form and our greatest interactive medium. Precisely because it is flesh and blood, it lives and breathes. It gives us a sense that life begins and ends—that we are living it now, not alone, but in a world shared with others. Theater incorporates all the arts—poetry, dance, music, and design—and it has become the only place where texts can be presented to a live audience without electronic media or corporate sponsorship (though this is becoming rarer and rarer).

Some of the best plays I have witnessed or heard about were not performed in professional theaters. Instead, they took place in inner-city public school classrooms and community centers. Sometimes you can have a theatrical experience just walking down the street. One playwright I know taught a workshop to a group of disinterested prison inmates who leapt into action when he spontaneously suggested that they improvise breaking into a car. Once he had hit upon a subject that these students knew about and had a passion for, the experience immediately became collaborative, thrilling, and dangerous—like all good theater.

I have also discovered that plays are often well received when audiences have intimate knowledge of the subject at hand. This is why skits performed on the last night of summer camp almost always go over tremendously well, no matter how weak the material. The performers and the viewers relate to the shared frame of reference. Conventional plays should aspire to replicate this experience in the theater. The playwright must be able to relate not only to her characters, but also to the audience that watches the dramatic action unfold. Try to keep this in mind as you come up with a concept for your play.

The Subject

Unfortunately, it is impossible to teach content. The instructor can only make suggestions to help students make stock characters more dimensional, identify predictable setups, invent ways to reverse expectations, and avoid tired clichés. A play can be about anything, even a peanut butter sandwich, as long as that sandwich is highly personalized, imbued with a sense of urgency, and made more relevant than any other peanut butter sandwich previously known to man. So how does the aspiring playwright do all of that?

First of all, it's not really a play about a peanut butter sandwich—or about jelly, or about any other subject you write about, whether familiar or arcane. The sandwich play, like all plays, has to be about people—people whose struggles we can all relate to. Perhaps your characters haven't eaten in weeks, or are profoundly moved by the sensation of eating well. What would happen if you limited the availability of peanut butter? Perhaps there is only one sandwich, and everybody wants it. You might imagine multiple, competing interests creating obstacles to the attainment of this sandwich.

This is obviously a silly example, but it helps to illustrate how to set up an objective and an obstacle, thereby creating dramatic conflict—the primary ingredient of any good play. Now you can heighten this conflict by raising the stakes, pushing the conflict to its furthest believable extreme. You can also sustain tension and increase the stakes by making your characters' hopes and fears manifest in every scene. In the case of the sandwich, as obtaining it becomes more urgent, the consequences of losing it turn increasingly dire—thus making the stakes more and more personal. If the characters cannot attain this urgently pursued objective, their failure should have resounding psychic and emotional implications and, by extension, universal ramifications. Along the way there must be a few reversals and revelations. Someone has a deadly food allergy; someone else doesn't want the sandwich after all because she really wanted something else; a third person wants to use it to kill the person with the food allergy. Through these plot twists, the dramatic tension builds until you get to the unpredictable, climactic ending that, in hindsight, was inevitable from the start. Voilà! You have a recipe for a play about a peanut butter sandwich—or anything else for that matter.

The Premise

Once you've determined what your subject will be, ask yourself a series of questions to help develop this idea into a viable premise. What do your characters want? What are the obstacles preventing them from getting it? What are they willing to do to get it? When you think about your premise, you also need to consider why you are showing us these particular characters on this particular day. Why can't your play start a day earlier or a day later? The play should start on the day that something extraordinary or unusual happens in the lives of your characters.

Something compelling has to occur at the beginning of your play—something that activates your characters and sets up the ensuing actions and conflicts. This inciting event actively propels your protagonists toward what they urgently want or need. You must make sure that this objective (this urgent need or desire) is tangible, obtainable, and grounded in some reality. It must also be an objective fraught with obstacles that your characters confront and, possibly, overcome. Once you have set up this clear and simple premise, you have the basis of your play.

Topical subject matter often does not translate well into theatrical situations (with some notable exceptions, such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*). So-called issue plays tend to feel removed and didactic—or to have a superficial, generic, TV-movie quality about them—and are quickly dated. It's always preferable to write about personal stories that may have larger, more universal reverberations.

This is not to say that plays cannot be political: Some of the best political plays deal with intensely personal relationships that are microcosms or metaphors for larger social concerns. The plays of South African playwright Athol Fugard, for example, deal with race, culture, and politics while functioning on a very simple level that can be boiled down to familiar interpersonal dynamics—thus allowing audiences in New York, London, or anywhere else to understand what it was like to live under apartheid.

Theatricality

What makes a play theatrical and specific to the stage? Unlike film and television, which tend to be literal, theater remains a genre in which the well-placed suggestion has the potential to fuel the imagination. In the theater, change and transformation can occur right before our eyes without any tricks or

pyrotechnics. How can you use theater's limits—the fact that everything happens live, within the "four walls" of the stage—as an advantage?

I first experienced the kind of theatricality specific to live performance at the off-Broadway premiere of Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*, which went on to become a huge Broadway hit, as well as a movie starring John Hurt. In an early scene of the play, Dr. Frederick Treves lectures to an audience of physicians about John Merrick, a man with severe deformities, while Merrick stands beside him, on display. The actor playing Merrick was not deformed at all, but was instead quite handsome. Treves speaks in detail about Merrick's "enormous head," "the huge bony mass like a loaf" projecting from his brow, which "rendered the face utterly incapable of the expression of any emotion whatsoever." As he did so, the actor playing Merrick slowly twists and contorts his body until he begins to take on the characteristics of this unspeakably grotesque and pitiful character. By the end of the monologue, the perfectly healthy, handsome actor transforms himself into the Elephant Man before our eyes—a brilliant device that made this monologue profoundly theatrical. This process influences our sympathy and identification with Merrick. It takes the authority away from Treves's seemingly factual description of him and forces the viewer to take the hideous Elephant Man's humanity into account. Later in the play, even when the Elephant Man appeares repulsive, the memory of this opening transformation continues to remind us of his fragile humanity (as well as our own).

In one such scene, Mrs. Kendal, who has been brought in to help educate Merrick, reveals her nude body to him. As in Treve's monologue, this scene is particularly theatrical because the audience fully accepts the premise that Merrick is physically repulsive—despite the actor playing Merrick not being visibly deformed in any way. This adds to the dramatic and sexual tension in the scene: It allows the audience to more clearly experience both Mrs. Kendal's repulsion and attraction to Merrick.

This complex dynamic was entirely absent from the less successful, film version of *The Elephant Man*. In the movie, Merrick is made up with an absurd-looking, misshapen pumpkin head. In providing this visual reality, the film diminished the viewer's ability to sympathize and imaginatively project himself into Merrick's predicament.

When you are contemplating the writing of a new play, it is imperative to consider what makes it theatrical and specific to the theater. Why must your idea be a play rather than a movie or a television show?

The Process

Assume that a play will require several drafts before you're done with it (and it's done with you). Some people like to just start writing and see what happens next—allowing the play to emerge as it is written. There's nothing wrong with doing that, as long as you are willing at some point to take corrective measures. In all probability, some (even most) of your preconceived notions about the play will change while you are writing it. Sometimes you will go down the wrong path. There's nothing wrong with allowing new ideas to take you in new directions. It is important to write with a sense of urgency, but it is equally important to take the time to let your ideas develop and evolve.

An aspiring playwright once asked George S. Kaufman if he had any advice to improve his play. Without looking at the script, Kaufman replied, "Make it shorter." Like Kaufman, you need to be artistically ruthless. At any point you may be forced to make choices and sacrifices. When you make a choice that doesn't work, you can't be afraid to go back and get it right. It doesn't matter how long it took you to write a specific scene or section of your play, or how much you love a particular monologue or exchange of dialogue. Everything you write should be up for grabs, with nothing being untouchable. As the old adage about playwriting puts it, you have to be willing to kill your babies—willing to make the necessary cuts.

Some plays are easier to write than others. When you are very clear on the story and the characters, a play can take on a life and momentum of its own. Every writer lives for the play, story, or novel that feels like it wrote itself. However, most writers—even the most successful ones—have productive and unproductive writing days. It's also important to remember that everyone is different. Clifford Odets wrote *Waiting For Lefty* in one weekend. Henrik Ibsen would often think about a play for a full year before writing the first words. John Osborne once claimed that he only wrote seven days a year. Whether it takes you two days or ten years to finish the play you want to write, the ultimate goal is to make it the absolute best it can be.

Even for writers whose motto dictates that it should come fast and easy or not at all, it doesn't always work that way. But it's equally true that if you take too long, you can lose your initial impulse and get bogged down in an over-thought quagmire. Sometimes a play-in-progress takes on the weight of too many other peoples' ideas, or gets workshopped to death. Eventually you become aware of diminishing returns on your efforts.

Finishing is one of the most difficult moments facing a playwright. I once asked the playwright Lanford Wilson about this problem when he visited a class I was taking at New York University. At the time, I had stopped writing a play that I had been working on for a while. I was stuck—the play wasn't going anywhere, and I had begun to lose my enthusiasm for it. I asked Wilson if he ever tossed aside plays that he had been working on for a while. He sighed and answered, "Eventually I abandon them all." Sometimes playwrights have the opposite problem: For example, Maria Irene Fornes has been known to revise her plays all the way up until their final performance, and Jean Genet revised *The Balcony* well after it had been produced and published internationally. Usually a play is finished when the playwright tears herself away and moves on.

Keep It Simple, Stupid

Ever since a professor of mine once offered me these four words of wisdom, I've passed them on to my own students. This has occasionally ended up in some mishaps—as when a student in my class told me that he had taken my suggestion and "kept it stupid." *Keep it simple* doesn't mean to keep it simplistic or dumb it down, but to keep the premise urgent, present, and always clear. A good story is easy to tell in a few sentences. A bad story goes on and on, and we quickly lose interest. Complexity emerges out of simplicity and not out of a morass of complications. That is to say, the multilayered nuances of human relationships can be best fleshed out if a clear and simple premise is established. Romeo and Juliet are in love, but their families oppose the union because of a long-standing feud. Nothing could be clearer or more elemental. Emulate Shakespeare: Be smart enough to keep it simple.

Some playwrights say that they can't start writing a play until they know what happens in the end. That way, the entire nature of the exercise becomes something like a road trip. You have to get from here to there, and the important question becomes what route you are going to take and why. Even if you get lost along the way, if you know what the end is going to be, you can keep reorienting yourself and get back on the right track. And just because

you know the end before you start, it doesn't mean you can't change your final destination while you're en route.

A playwright does not have to reinvent the wheel with every new play. My favorite example of this occurred when I used to teach an advanced playwriting workshop for a select group of New York City public high school students as part of a program offered by Young Playwrights Inc. As part of the class, I would wrangle free tickets to take the students to see plays, and I would often ask the playwrights to come to our class afterward and speak about playwriting. In one of these sessions, with the playwright David Henry Hwang, one of the students asked the question that everyone wants to know: "How do you know how all the scenes will fit together so that it all works out in the end?" Hwang unexpectedly responded that he finds another play that has a structure that would work well for his subject. For example, when writing his Tony Award–winning play *M. Butterfly*, he adapted the structure of Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*. The students' mouths dropped open at this stunning revelation. Clearly Hwang is an original and immensely talented writer. There is nothing hackneyed or shopworn about the plays that he writes. But even a great talent like his doesn't start from scratch—we all use basic concepts of dramatic structure to help us construct a play that works.

Once you have a good idea of your characters and a compelling idea for a play, you should do your best to write a first draft as quickly as possible. A lot of people can't write the first draft because they feel like it's not going to be good enough: The characters might sound alike; the story might run out of gas. The point is to push on through to the end and get a first draft down on paper. Writing a play, like most worthwhile endeavors, is a big leap of faith. Know that your first draft is probably going to have some weak spots. Don't let that stop you. You can always fix it later.

The Setting

The set of a stage play should be described in concise detail that best conveys the definitive production that exists in the playwright's mind's eye. Remember that theater is a collaborative art form and the description of the set is the playwright's contribution to what will ultimately reflect the director's and production team's concept for the production. My advice is to keep your description of the setting clear and simple so as not to leave it too open for interpretation.

The choice of a play's setting(s) is an important and often overlooked dramatic decision. Think of choosing the setting as an opportunity to help yourself out by selecting an environment that will introduce conflict and drive the dramatic action. Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie* is about memory—so the walls of the family home materialize and disappear in a way that allows the protagonist, Tom, to step in and out of the action. When he is in the house, it is cramped and claustrophobic. The fire escape and the lights of New Orleans in the distance suggest a waiting and alluring world outside. The photograph of the father, watching over the household, activates the play's drama and infuses it with conflict. While the father, who abandoned the family years before the play starts, never appears in person, the photograph provides Tom and the audience with a constant reminder of Tom's desire to emulate his father and flee the unhappy family. The hovering presence of the absent father thus makes visible the shame and guilt Tom feels when he considers his responsibility and obligation to stay and help his mother and sister. Eventually, the father's picture also provides him with the motivation he needs to leave the family and lead his own life.

Craft and Structure

Instructors can't teach content—or talent for that matter—but they can help you to gain a basic understanding of dramatic craft. Like any other skill (say, algebra or crocheting), there are a lot of fundamental rules and concepts that you must extrapolate from and apply to your own work. Every play attempts to put these concepts together in an organic, invisible, and fully realized way, and some turn out better than others. The ultimate goal is to absorb and implement dramatic structure in such a way that it does not feel artificially imposed upon the play you are writing. There are exceptions to every rule, but only after you fully understand dramatic structure can you legitimately transcend or reject it.

There are reasonable arguments against traditional dramatic structure. At its worst, it can seem formulaic and predictable. Sometimes you can almost hear the wheels turning as the structural mechanics creak and sputter. But at

its best, dramatic structure is a skeleton upon which to hang the flesh of the playwright's unique thoughts, feelings, ideas, and insights.

The notion of dramatic structure has a long history: It was first set down by Aristotle in his fourth-century B.C. text *Poetics*. Written more than a century after the great Greek playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides died, Aristotle's *Poetics* set out the philosopher's observations on the elements that make a great tragedy in their works. For Aristotle, the most important component of a play was its plot, which he believed had to progress in a linear fashion in order to function successfully. Plays must, he believed, be whole and unified; they must be universal and comprehensible to all viewers; and they must recognizably imitate life. In order to fulfill these goals, the play must be structured as an evolution, with a clearly identifiable beginning, middle, and end. While Aristotle was not known to have ever written a play, these ideas about dramatic structure set the standard for traditional theatrical form for several centuries.

However, a number of influential twentieth-century dramatists rejected the continuing utility of Aristotelian dramatic structure. Many of these artists challenged traditional concepts of linear narrative with compelling, thought-provoking forms of theater. But traditional Aristotelian ideas remain useful for playwrights—even those who are interested in nonlinear theatrical forms. The success of plays and movies that break all the classic rules of dramatic craft depends upon the writer's knowledge of the rules that are being broken.

Elements of a playwright's craft—dramatic structure, character development, objectives and stake, etc.—are really just mechanisms for making sure that the audience follows the onstage action. Some playwrights today seem to feel that this craft is not worth learning. They view the idea of telling a story as hackneyed—they believe that all stories have been told before, or that character development and dramatic conflict are old hat. They may be right, but far from being innovative or iconoclastic, many of these playwrights simply fail in their task to compel, entertain, and provoke. Even a bad doctor had to go to medical school; anyone can be a bad playwright.

The exercises I provide have proven to be a useful tool to help students begin the play that they want to write and to clarify their plays-in-progress. Some of these exercises (the ones that may be difficult to understand) include sample responses, written by my students, followed by a brief analysis.

The Basic Elements of Dramatic Writing: Objective, Obstacle, Conflict, and Action

The playwright's primary job is to dramatize conflict, so the first step toward writing a play is developing a grasp of the basic elements of drama. Conflict stems from a character's desire to act on an urgent want, need, or desire, which is commonly referred to as the character's objective. This objective may be connected to a larger emotional or abstract idea—a desire for love or a sense of well being, a search for enlightenment. However, in order to clearly define the character's pursuit of his objective, that objective must be made specific and concrete. Once you have established an objective, conflict can emerge when obstacles are placed in your character's way. To put it mathematically, objective + obstacle = conflict. This formula is very simple in theory and can also be simple in practice—provided that you convey the objective with clarity and urgency. Unfolding events compel your characters to actively seek their objective in a journey known as their dramatic action.

Here are some familiar examples of objectives and their corresponding dramtic actions: Hamlet's objective is to avenge his father's death. His dramatic action is the pursuit of this objective by contriving to trick his uncle into revealing himself as the murderer. Romeo and Juliet's objective is to be together. Their dramatic action is the journey they must take in order to achieve this objective. Tom's objective in *The Glass Menagerie* is to find his sister Laura a gentleman caller. He hopes against hope that by achieving this objective he will finally be free of his mother's unreasonable expectations of him. Upon the realization that finding a suitor for Laura was truly impossible all along, Tom determines that the only way to be free of his family is to abandon them. His dramatic action is the journey he must take toward this realization.

Conflict is created by the interaction between a character's dramatic action and the obstacles to his objective. In real life, many of us are conflict averse, choosing to avoid direct confrontation. However, in the theater, playwrights who do not know how to embrace, build, and manipulate conflict—how to dramatize conflict—cannot succeed. The astute dramatist skillfully moves his characters toward a breaking point; and at that point, he reveals new information that makes further conflict unavoidable. This conflict builds to an inevitable final confrontation, which results in a moment of truth in which

the character either attains or fails to attain his objectives, thus resulting in the creation of a new world order.

Dramatic action should not be confused with the physical activities onstage. A play can be chock full of compelling events or actions, but if it lacks dramatic action, eventually it will become stagnant and dull. Aristotle argued that the core of drama is the imitation of an action. He was referring not to a specific physical action, but rather to an internal, psychological need.

HOW NOT TO DRAMATIZE CONFLICT

Here are a few guidelines for what *not* to do when attempting to dramatize conflict. I have come across examples of each of these points in the work of beginning students, experienced playwrights, and even myself.

1. Do not write scenes, either long or short, in which characters convey exposition of past events without engaging an objective and obstacle in the present.
2. Omit scenes and characters that do not further the dramatic action of your play.
3. Stay away from scenes with characters who talk about offstage characters and events that do not relate to the scene currently taking place.
4. Avoid the trap of creating central characters who passively react to events rather than act upon the world around them. You do not want your main character to be a void at the center of your play—or to be surrounded by more interesting minor characters.

Character

How do you create characters that ring true? Often by creating characters who *are* true. Many of the best characters in modern drama are based on real people from the playwright's own life. Characters you know intimately are easiest to write about, for you know what they sound like and you know their behavior—even their irrational actions and speech seem believable and fully motivated. Sometimes it is easier to watch and listen than to invent or imagine. However, a character is rarely based on only one person. Many are composites of various people, or even combinations of real people, fictional

characters, and the playwright herself. Most of the time, a piece of the playwright's psyche makes up some part of each character she creates.

If you want to create a fully dimensional character, it helps if you respect the character—even if this character is hateful. It is easy to dismiss a character you dislike and have already on some level dismissed. These characters tend to be one-dimensional and one-sided, whereas real people are complex and multifaceted. Our own characters are often paradoxical and hypocritical. You might like to think of yourself as good and virtuous, but do you always feel that way? Do you always behave that way? What happens under intense pressure and extenuating circumstances? For example, a man might be gentle and loving to his wife and children but act cruelly toward his enemies. Is this person good or bad? It is best not to stand in judgment of your characters. Instead, try to see them through your own eyes. How would you feel if you were in their situation?

As corny as it might sound, you have to love all of your characters—or at least try to put yourself in their shoes. I like to imagine that I am each character, and that someday I might find myself in a similar situation. Even if a character's feelings, thoughts, fears, and desires are completely abhorrent, the goal is to depict her as fully human. Otherwise, you are simply confirming preconceived notions. It is usually obvious when a playwright has an axe to grind or harbors a grudge against a character. Such one-sided representations are best suited for satire and propaganda, and flat characters are precisely what severely limits these genres. It's best to show a character in her full complexity and let audience members decide for themselves what to think.

Characters perform tasks and speak words to further the plot and to reveal their thoughts and feelings. If they do not serve these purposes, they should not exist in your play. Since drama boils life down to its absolute essence and pushes it to the furthest believable extreme, everything in a play should have a dramatic purpose. Nothing—not even characters—should be extraneous or arbitrary.

This exercise helps you to create believable, complex characters based on people you know by writing a scene that is inspired by an event in your life.

1. Focus on an event in your life that had significant emotional impact on you.