

William Archer Revisited

William Archer was a British drama critic and playwright whose book *Play-Making* was published in 1912. Archer was a friend of playwright George Bernard Shaw. He had met GBS in the reading room of the British Museum and, explaining to Shaw that he felt he was quite good at inventing plots, admitted that he lacked talent in writing dialogue. Shaw, already with an established reputation for debate, was supremely confident in his skill for lively dialogue, and suggested they collaborate. Thus it was that William Archer supplied the skeleton of the dramatic structure of Shaw's first play. Though Shaw went on to write many plays, while Archer produced on his own a series of deservedly forgotten melodramas, the two remained close friends all their lives. To speak personally, Archer's book on dramatic structure is the best text I know on the subject of dramatic construction.

Having said that, I do understand why some people find *Play-Making* hard going. The examples Archer uses to illustrate his ideas are from playwrights of the late nineteenth century. While he does also cite Wilde, Shaw and Ibsen, Archer generally deals with writers who seem very dated today. In addition to this, students argue that because the book is so old, Archer's theories must be out of date. Dramatic style has changed a great deal since 1912, not only in content, but also in form. One relevant question, then, is whether Archer's commentary applies, for instance, to more modern forms of theatrical writing (the plays of Beckett and Ionesco, for example), and, of course, to cinema, a medium that was in its absolute infancy when Archer wrote his book.

It is perhaps understandable that a film student of today finds it hard to translate the concepts to cinematic equivalents when Archer is giving examples from playwrights seldom read or performed today, for example Pinero, Galsworthy and Somerset Maugham. (Worth noting is that John Howard Lawson, writing in the 1940s, picked up a great deal from Archer and expanded his ideas as they apply to cinema.) Linked to this is the fact that there is, among contemporary students, something of a reaction against the notion of 'rules' when it comes to dramatic writing in both cinema and theater.

But style (fashion) in any medium of expression is constantly developing. New forms are invariably organically rooted in earlier forms, even when there is an obvious rejection of past formulas that have become too rigid, too stereotypical, and too stale to have fresh meaning. A real understanding of the 'progress' of the evolving nature of cultural forms has to be an exploration of the present and possible future as they relate to past forms from which they have developed, and continue to develop. As such, many of Archer's comments seem to me common sense and easily translatable to contemporary writing, and it should not be too difficult for any reasonably intelligent film student to find a modern film that can be used to illustrate almost every point that Archer is making. All it takes is a little effort. (After all, the challenge of any textbook is to provoke the student into this kind of study that has relevance to his or her own experience and work.) With these notes, therefore, I have tried to supplement the examples that Archer uses with some instances of contemporary films.

On the question of 'rules' of dramatic construction, Archer himself warns:

There are no rules for writing a play. It is easy, indeed, to lay down negative recommendations – to instruct the beginner how *not* to do it. But most of these “don'ts” are rather obvious; and those which are not obvious are apt to be questionable... There are no absolute rules, in fact, except such as are dictated by the plainest common sense. Aristotle himself did not so much dogmatize as analyse, classify and generalize from, the practise of Attic dramatists. He said, “you had better” rather than “you must.”

The furthest Archer will go is claiming that

One thing is certain, and must be emphasized from the outset: namely, that if any part of the dramatist's art can be taught, it is only a comparatively mechanical and formal part – the art of structure. One may learn how to tell a story in good dramatic form: how to develop and marshal it in such a way as best to seize and retain the interest of a theatrical audience. But no teaching or study can enable a man to choose or invent a good story, and much less to do that which alone lends dignity to dramatic story-telling – to observe and portray human character.

To be honest, I'm not sure even this isn't overstating the case. I would rather say that it is possible to examine how certain dramatists have constructed material in a way that at times has seized the interest of the audience. If they have also succeeded in seizing and retaining *your* interest, you should take a closer look at just *how* they did this. Though drama cannot be taught as such, it can most definitely be learned the way most skills are learned: by examination of others whose work you admire.

On Choosing a Theme

The theme of a story is usually established only in the final climax during the obligatory scene where the confrontations dramatise the point of the narrative. This is the part of the story the audience has been waiting for and that the author is obliged to deliver. It is also where character, plot and theme are most clearly integrated. This confrontation is likely to be a high point in the mechanics of the action, where principal characters are placed in situations designed to reveal their most significant qualities, their moral weaknesses or strengths, their sympathetic or unsympathetic traits, their true feelings about others. Such showdowns also to demonstrate the author's underlying pre-occupations, those themes that give unity and meaning to the story. Without characters, a theme is an abstract and generalised statement of conflict or tension – it describes rather than dramatizes. What the student needs to learn, therefore, is how to convey the theme of his story through the creation of characters who interact within the scenes he creates, and not just imbue a single character (the protagonist) with that theme. Archer writes:

“Theme” may mean either of two things: either the subject of a play, or its story. The former is, perhaps, its proper and most convenient sense.

Archer suggests that a conscious and deliberate decision about theme is seldom fruitful as a starting point. If you set out to devise a story in order to illustrate some moral or political issue, the chances are you will find the resulting situations and characters two-dimensional, and the plotting contrived and predictable. You will end up creating puppets who have no real vitality and that you will be forced to manipulate yourself, rather than leaving them to the forces that arise from interactions with other characters. As Archer writes:

[O]ught a theme, in its abstract form, be the first germ of a play? Ought the dramatist to say “Go to, I will write a play on temperance or woman’s suffrage, or on capital and labour,” and then cast about for a story to illustrate his theme? This is a possible, but not a promising method of procedure. A story made to the order of a moral concept is always apt to advertise its origin, to the detriment of its illusive quality.

I think Archer is right in suggesting that theme is an abstraction of the story, its moral, social, political message in a generalised form.

For many writers, one of the basic functions of dramatic writing is to present to the world those ideas, attitudes and emotions that express his or her concerns, even if they are heavily masked, dressed up in new costumes and with names changed to protect the innocent. As you start to devise a story, there is often a strong urge to create both plot and characters that represent a theme that interests you. The best way of doing this is to personify elements of that theme by splitting your soul and creating different characters from these little pieces. Students are often urged to write about things drawn from their own experience (it has been said that invention is often memory in disguise). This means a story’s protagonist is inevitably an element of the author’s personality, a result of the splitting of the writer’s psyche so he can – in his mind and on the page – play more than one role.

In fact, it should be understood that every character in a story, being creations of their inventor, are to some extent the author speaking in disguise. It is not only the hero but the entire complex of active interrelated figures who are projections of his or her mind. The writer plays God, taking up a position not of one single point of view but rather a rapidly shifting point of view that looks at different characters at different moments, until finally he and his audience see everything from all points of view with a God-like objectivity. Dramatic invention is apt to be a game of psychodrama of this kind, the challenge of which can be severe: it requires the writer to step outside of his more comfortable identity and see himself as others do, requiring a certain psychological maturity that may not come easily to the young and inexperienced.

The theme of everything you write (even, in many cases, of something you are doing only for the money) is tied to your own point of view, your attitude to life and sex and religion, your personal social, ethical and political outlook. A theme

is so integrally part of a writer's temperament that it will automatically color his approach to the whole world. In effect, the work of a conscious and competent writer will inevitably be constructed upon certain meaningful ideas and beliefs. If the writer feels strongly about something, it will be yelling at him from his dreams. A good story is not one that a writer contrives – it takes on a kind of energy of its own that has the writer in its grip and forces him to come to certain previously unforeseen conclusions.

For this reason, I advise students not to worry about looking for a theme. In a sense, theme is something that chooses you, and (it is pointed out by many critics) is seldom consciously recognised by an author who finds expression for it (something many critics are unable to do with their own beliefs, thoughts, 'themes,' however strong and meaningful). Indeed, if the author does know in advance 'what he really means to say,' he might not say it so well. Connected to this is the idea that the 'message' (whether it be political, social or otherwise) of a story does not necessarily have to be explicit at any point. Sometimes it is (for example in *On the Waterfront*, when Terry is talking to his brother in the taxi cab), but much more frequently a theme is something left to the audience to *feel* at an intuitive and emotional level. A good writer will let his audience pick and choose their own themes and 'messages' from the story he is telling.

Graham Greene is a writer who cannot help but bring into everything he produces the themes that haunt him: the struggle between belief and disbelief, guilt and betrayal. Alexander Korda and Carol Reed, producer and director of *The Third Man*, came to Greene with nothing except the proposition that a film be made against the background of Vienna just after World War II, a city occupied by the four Allied Powers, divided into zones and plagued by black market racketeering. But the theme of *The Third Man* is not necessarily found in this historical and geographical point of departure. For that we should look to the fragment of a story situation Greene had jotted down in a notebook long before: the idea of passing in a busy London street an old friend whose funeral had been attended months ago, a scene that is not in the finished film but that, combined with the Vienna setting, furnished the basic plot mechanism.

Let me give you another example, this time from my own experience. Prior to working on *The Man in the White Suit*, I spent considerable time trying to find a story on a theme that quite disturbed me: the political and social responsibility of the scientists who developed nuclear fission without regard for the purposes to which their invention might be put. Perhaps because all my efforts were too specifically directed in one place, and because, quite understandably, my producers thought the topic was too disturbing to be acceptable popular box-office entertainment, I got nowhere with it. Then I read an unproduced play by a cousin of mine. It had a different theme as its central story: it was about the gradually dawning consciousness of the daughter of a manufacturer of textiles under the tutelage of a sardonic and sceptical young man who is in love with her.

A quite secondary character was another young man, an inventor, who had devised a liquid for treating fabric that enormously increased its durability. Transferring my theme of 'the responsibility of the scientist' to the situation that was not much more than a subplot of the original play, I devised a story in which

the original hero was subordinated (and later entirely eliminated) in favor of a new protagonist and a good many new characters. In effect, I borrowed from the play not much more than the situation of a fabric that was on the one hand a boon to the public and consumers, on the other a threat to certain sections of the textile industry. Centring on this situation I found that by analogy I could explore the theme that would have been rather too controversial and tendentious if I had tried to deal with it directly.

Myth, according to anthropologists, is a magical working out of the conflicts felt by a society. Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued that the social purpose of the earliest forms of religion, mythic rituals and magic ceremonials were to provide communities with a means of 'resolving contradictions' within their society. And in a recent article on the decline of the Western, sociologist Will Wright has written that 'All stories are one means by which societies explain themselves to themselves.' According to psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, a 'personal' myth may have a similar function. Like some dreams, it may be an effort by the creative subconscious to send to the author a message (theme) in the form of a parable. What evidence is there to support this? The best that I can offer is another highly personal example related to a film I directed some years ago, one I was intimately involved with from its conception.

The Ladykillers, written by William Rose, was in fact a dream. Bill woke up one night with the idea complete in his head. He had dreamed of a gang of criminals who commit a successful robbery while living in a little house belonging to a sweetly innocent little old lady. Belatedly, she discovers their crime. A highly moral and simple-minded soul, she insists they all go to the police and give themselves up. Gradually the five men realise that they will have to kill her. But villainous as they are, they cannot bring themselves to murder such a benign and helpless figure. So, quarreling over which of them should do the deed, they one by one kill each other, leaving the little old lady with the money. The story amused all of us who worked with Bill at the studio where we were under contract. But it was only several weeks later that I began to realise it could serve as the basis for a film script. I went to Bill and we agreed on the project.

Work on the screenplay involved much argument between the two of us, but curiously enough there was never any departure from the simple basic structure of the idea that had come from Bill Rose's unconscious imagination. The fable remained, though a great deal more invention was necessary to develop the deliberately grotesque figures of the criminals, a quintet of rascally types who were dedicated to villainy but not quite wicked enough to take the inevitable step necessary to avoid their own ruin. Bill once declared that the moral of the story was: 'In the Worst of All Men there is a Little Bit of Good that can Destroy Them.'

As director I worked daily with Bill and the associate producer, though the screenplay was essentially the work of Bill Rose alone. As a fine writer often does, he used his collaborators only as a kind of sounding board. We were his audience during the long sessions of improvisation during which the story was worked out in considerable detail. But one of my most satisfying discoveries was one I did not make until the film had been completed and exhibited. Bill and I are

both expatriates in Britain. Though we are both American-born, because my family was Scots I was sent to Scotland to be educated, while Bill volunteered to join the Canadian forces during World War II and then, having married an English girl, decided to remain in Britain after the war. With such backgrounds both of us see Britain in a slightly different way than do the British.

The fable of *The Ladykillers* is a comic and ironic joke about the condition of post-war England. After the war, the country was going through a kind of quiet, typically British but nevertheless historically fundamental revolution. Though few people were prepared to face up to it, the great days of the Empire were gone forever. British society was shattered with the same kind of conflicts appearing in many other countries: an impoverished and disillusioned upper class, a brutalized working class, juvenile delinquency among the Mods and Rockers, an influx of foreign and potentially criminal elements, and a collapse of 'intellectual' leadership. All of these threatened the stability of the national character.

Though at no time did Bill Rose or I ever spell this out, look at the characters in the film. The Major (played by Cecil Parker), a conman, is a caricature of the decadent military ruling class. One Round (Danny Green) is the oafish representative of the British masses. Harry (Peter Sellers) is the spiv, the worthless younger generation. Louis (Herbert Lom) is the dangerously unassimilated foreigner. They are a composite cartoon of Britain's corruption. The tiny figure of Mrs Wilberforce (Wilberforce was the name of the nineteenth century idealist who called for the abolition of slavery) is plainly a much diminished Britannia. Her house is in a cul-de-sac. Shabby and cluttered with memories of the days when Britain's navy ruled the world and captains gallantly stayed on the bridge as their ship went down, her house is structurally unsound. Dwarfed by the grim landscape of railway yards and screaming express trains, it is Edwardian England, an anachronism in the contemporary world. Bill Rose's sentimental hope for the country that he and I saw through fond but skeptical eyes was that it might still, against all logic, survive its enemies. A theme, a message of sorts, one that I felt very attached to. But one that it took quite some time for me to consciously recognize and appreciate.

It is worth noting that a theme is often stated as a couple of abstract nouns set in opposition.

The Theme of *Romeo and Juliet* is youthful love crossed by ancestral hate; the theme of *Othello* is jealousy; the theme of *Le Tartuffe* is hypocrisy.

Translate this to some films we know. The theme of *On the Waterfront* is one man's battle for personal ethics, his struggle to stand up for his rights against the corruption of racketeering unions and the moral apathy of fellow dockers. The theme of *The Hustler* is Being a Winner or a Loser. The theme of *Citizen Kane* is What Shall it Profit a Man if He Gain the Whole World But Loses the Innocence of Childhood (Rosebud and the security of parental love). The theme of *Bicycle Thieves* is the Search for Social Justice and the values that a father can teach

his child. The theme of *The Third Man* is Disillusion of Hero-Worship, sentimental boyhood loyalty versus social responsibility.

To Archer's warning against starting with a 'moral concept,' I would add something else. Though it is the aspect of a story that students generally need to think about least when starting a project, it should be remembered that it is the absence of a powerful and reverberating theme that distinguishes forgettable commercial entertainment from something more interesting. A story with a theme that is trivial, unexplored or not clearly identified in the action may be enjoyable while it lasts. But it is not going to linger in your memory very long. The story is not *about* anything that deeply concerns the author, and if the author doesn't care it is unlikely that the audience will either.

Dramatic and Non-dramatic

William Archer is a lot less dogmatic on the subject of the definition of drama than many earlier critics and theorists, though he does spend time debating the propositions of other 'authorities' on the subject. One of these is Ferdinand Brunetière.

"The Theatre in general," said that critic, "is nothing but the place for the development of human will, attacking the obstacles opposed to it by destiny, fortune or circumstances." And again: "Drama is the representation of the will of men in conflict with the mysterious powers or natural forces which limit and belittle us; it is one of us thrown living upon the stage, there to struggle against fatality, against social law, against one of his fellow-mortals, against himself, if need be, against the ambitions, the interests, the prejudices, the folly, the malevolence of those who surround him."

Brunetière's definition seems to work well enough for most stories, but at its simplest is advice to look for conflict in a story, for the kind of struggle that takes place between a hero and the circumstances that sooner or later he has to confront. Archer, however, tries to take a more practical approach for playwrights, and suggests that

[T]he essence of drama is *crisis*. A play is a more or less rapidly-developing crisis in destiny or circumstance, and a dramatic scene is a crisis within a crisis, clearly furthering the ultimate event. The drama may be called the art of crises, as fiction is the art of gradual developments.

But, manifestly, it is not every crisis that is dramatic. A serious illness, a lawsuit, a bankruptcy, even an ordinary prosaic marriage, may be a crisis in a man's life, without being necessarily, or even probably, material for drama. How, then, do we distinguish a dramatic from a non-dramatic crisis? Generally, I think, by the fact that it develops, or can be made naturally to develop, through a series of minor crises, involving more or less emotional excitement, and, if possible, the vivid manifestation of character.

Brunetière, when he is talking about the 'will of man' in conflict, is obviously thinking in terms of Aristotle. Most early drama deals with heroic protagonists, someone who sets the struggle in motion. Implied is that the protagonist is active (after all, the word 'drama' is derived from the Greek work for 'doing').

We live, however, in times that are less 'heroic.' In many contemporary dramas, whether in theater or cinema, the central figure does not have (or does not *seem* to have) much positive will. This does not contradict the principles Archer is discussing, it only inverts the protagonist's relationship with the situation that surrounds him. As the protagonist becomes less active and more passive, less certain of his positive purposes, so it is 'the ambitions, the interests, the prejudices, the folly, the malevolence of those who surround him' that take on a more active character. A common compromise is achieved when the protagonist appears passive, inactive, uncertain and undecided for the first three quarters of the piece. Then, in the final confrontation, he or she is forced into a definitive commitment, a positive action.

We can turn to our usual examples. In *On the Waterfront*, the punch-drunk ex-fighter that Brando plays is torn between his commitment to his brother and the corrupt union racketeers on the one side, and the pressure from the priest and the girl on the other. It takes the murder of his brother to force him into a positive act, testifying against the racketeers and then confronting the dockers and Johnny Friendly. In *The Hustler*, Paul Newman is torn between George C. Scott's view of life and that which he shares with the girl, until her suicide provokes him into the final confrontation with the gambler, and with himself. In *The Third Man*, Holly Martins tries to maintain his loyalty to Harry Lime until the evidence supplied by the British Military Major and the predicament of the girl force him to betray, and finally shoot, his oldest friend.

More complex is the kind of story where the completely passive, undecided, and purposeless central figure does *not* have any final change of heart. There is always a danger that a story with a conclusion that does not seem to resolve anything, and that lacks a *peripety* towards the final crises, will feel unsatisfactory. 'Unsophisticated' audiences often resent this lack of resolution, while *avant-garde* types admire it as innovation because it manages to avoid the obvious. My personal view is that when the inversion of the classic principles do work for me (as they do, for instance, in a film like Antonioni's *L'Avventura* and Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*), it is only because the same old principles that Aristotle and Archer, among others, have debated are rediscovered a fresh and unexpected patterns.

Where is the tension in Beckett's work? If it is expectation of the arrival of the mysterious Godot then it is never resolved, as Godot never arrives. But an intuitive audience member sense very quickly that Godot isn't going to appear (actually you only have to consult the cast list). The tension is something quite different. Who is this Godot meant to be, and what does he represent? As one would expect, this 'crisis' is resolved near the very end when the characters come at long last to the moment when they realise that Godot will not be coming. At this moment, the audience is given a strange but somewhat satisfying answer to the main tension of the work: the identity of Godot. Though *L'Avventura* has an

extremely elliptical structure, there is certainly a plot, even if it is left to implication. The story is not really about the search for the girl who has vanished from the island. Rather, the tension centers around the heroine's uncertainty about the character of the man who may, or may not, have been the cause of the strange disappearance. When, in the final scenes, Monica Vitti's character finally has to face the disillusioning truth about the kind of man she has fallen in love with, then – if only indirectly and still ambiguously – the history of his previous mistress comes to a conclusion.

As William Archer suggests, there can be highly dramatic plays (and films, of course) where conflict is *not* so immediately visible. Archer gives *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Othello* as examples.

Even *Oedipus* of Sophocles, though it may at first sight seem a typical instance of a struggle against Destiny, does not really come under the definition. Oedipus, in fact, does not struggle at all. His struggles, in so far as the word can be applied to his misguided efforts to escape the toils of fate, are all things of the past; in the actual course of the tragedy he simply writhes under one revelation after another of bygone error and unwitting crime.

There is no struggle, no conflict between [Othello] and Iago. It is Iago alone who exerts any will; neither Othello nor Desdemona makes the smallest fight. From the moment Iago sets his machinations to work, they are like people sliding down an ice-slope to an inevitable abyss.

In an attempt to define what drama is, Archer arrives at a view so sensible that one wonders why his predecessors missed the point.

A great part of the secret of dramatic architecture lies in the one word "tension." To engender, maintain, suspect, heighten and resolve a tension – that is the main object of the dramatist's craft.

The Obligatory Scene

Archer has a chapter in his book on a term that was invented by Francisque Sarcey: the *scène a faire* or obligatory scene.

An obligatory scene is one which the audience (more or less clearly and consciously) foresees and desires, and the absence of which it may with reason resent.

As a definition, this is not of much value. But in the course of studying Archer, it does seem to help us arrive at the key to the meaning of drama. In a single phrase (one that Archer cites from Sarcey): 'expectation mingled with uncertainty.' This implies that the dramatic conflict inherent in a work may or may not be up there on the stage or screen, just so long as it sets up a tension in *us*, an event between our ears, a stretching forward of the audience's mind in some

as yet unresolved expectation. Obligatory scenes are hard to analyse, if only because the definition is so general it is hardly a definition at all.

As a writer, however, one gets a very strong sense of the feel of such a scene. There is a kind of charge of dramatic energy that is released at such a moment in the story, a sense of having come at last to the point of the whole thing. (In this respect, I should confess to my own quite brutally impatient method of studying screenplays. First, I thumb through the first ten pages. From these, I expect to get an idea of the genre, the environment of the story, as well as an introduction to principal characters, a hint of theme and the hook – the industry's word for the initial fuse of the plot. Next, I turn to the end and then five or ten pages back. Here, I expect to find the obligatory scene, the resolution of the conflicts that were hinted at in the first ten pages. If both of these have intrigued me, then I know the whole script may be worth my time to read.)

Again, to our modern examples. In *On the Waterfront*, look at the scene in the bar following the death of Terry's brother, where the priest persuades him that the only effective way to revenge himself against the racketeers in the crooked union is to testify to the Crime Commission. Another possible obligatory scene is when Terry has done just this, and decides to confront Johnny Friendly in front of the dockers who still regard Terry as a stool pigeon. In *The Hustler*, the final match between Fast Eddie and Minnesota Fats (Jackie Gleason) is really a confrontation between Fast Eddie and Bert Gordon (George C Scott) over Sarah, not pool at all, and is a good example of a *scène à faire*. And finally, in *Bicycle Thieves*, look at the episode when the father sends his son away while he attempts, with pitiful lack of success, to turn thief himself. It is the final act of a desperate man, something we, the audience, have throughout the film suspected he might attempt.