

Extracts from
The Art of Dramatic Writing
by Lajos Egri

We have based our theory on the eternally changing “character” who forever reacts, almost violently, to constantly changing internal and external stimuli.

We know there are rules for eating, walking, and breathing; we know there are rules for painting, music, dancing, flying, and bridge building; we know there are rules for every manifestation of life and nature – why, then, should writing be the sole exception? Obviously, it is not.

Premise

Everything has a purpose, or premise. Every second of our life has its own premise, whether or not we are conscious of it at the time. That premise may be as simple as breathing or as complex as a vital emotional decision, but it is always there...

[Men of the theater] have had different words for the same thing: theme, thesis, root idea, central idea, goal, aim, driving force, subject, purpose, plan, plot, basic emotion.

For our own use we choose the word “premise” because it contains all the elements the other words try to express and because it is less subject to misinterpretation.

Ferdinand Brunetiere demands a “goal” in the play to start with. This is premise.

John Howard Lawson: “The root-idea is the beginning of the process.” He means premise.

Professor Brander Matthews: “A play needs to have a theme.” It must be the premise.

Professor George Pierce Baker, quoting Dumas the Younger: “How can you tell what road to take unless you know where you are going?” The premise will show you the road.

They all mean one thing: you must have a premise for your play.

Romeo and Juliet: “Great love defies even death.”

King Lear: “Blind trust leads to destruction.”

Macbeth: “Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction.”

Othello: “Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its love.”

Ghosts: “The sins of the fathers are visited on the children.”

Tartuffe: “He who digs a pit for others falls into it himself.”

Every good play must have a well-formulated premise...

Playwrights usually get an idea, or are struck by an unusual situation, and decide to write a play around it.

The question is whether that idea, or that situation, provides sufficient basis for a play. Our answer is no, although we are aware that out of a thousand playwrights, nine hundred and ninety-nine start this way.

No idea, and no situation, was ever strong enough to carry you through to its logical conclusion *without a clear-cut premise*.

If you have no such premise, you may modify, elaborate, vary your original idea or situation, or even lead yourself into another situation, but you will not know where you are going. You will flounder, rack your brain to invent further situations to round out your play. You may find these situations – and you will still be without a play.

You must have a premise – a premise which will lead you unmistakably to the goal your play hopes to reach.

No emotion ever made, or ever will make, a good play if we do not know *what kind of forces* set emotion going... It may be that an emotion does find itself a goal and surprises even the author. But this is an accident and far too uncertain to offer the young playwright as a method. Our aim is to eliminate chance and accident. Our aim is to point a road on which anyone who can write may travel and eventually find himself with a sure approach to drama. So, the very first thing you must have is a premise. And it must be a premise worded so that anyone can understand it as the author intended it to be understood. An unclear premise is as bad as no premise at all.

A good premise is a thumbnail of your play. Here are a few other premises:

Bitterness leads to false gaiety.
Foolish generosity leads to poverty.
Honesty defeats duplicity.
Heedlessness destroys friendship.
Ill-temper leads to isolation.
Materialism conquers mysticism.
Prudishness leads to frustration.
Bragging leads to humiliation.
Confusion leads to frustration.
Craftiness digs its own grave.
Dishonesty leads to exposure.
Dissipation leads to self-destruction.
Egotism leads to loss of friends.
Extravagance leads to destitution.
Fickleness leads to loss of self-esteem.

Although these are only flat statements, they contain all that is required of a well-constructed premise: character, conflict, and conclusion. What is wrong, then? What is missing?

The author's conviction is missing. Until he takes sides, there is no play. Only when he champions one side of the issue does the premise spring to life.

QUESTION: Is it possible to write one play on two premises?

ANSWER: It is possible, but it will not be a good play. Can you go in two different directions at the same time? The dramatist has a big enough job on his hands to prove one premise, let alone two or three. A play with more than one premise is necessarily confused.

[Y]ou don't have to start your play with a premise. You can start with a character or an incident, or even a simple thought. This thought or incident grows, and the story slowly unfolds itself. You have time to find your premise in the mass of your material later. The important thing is to find it.

A playwright might work on a story for weeks before discovering that he really needs a premise, which will show the destination of his play.

The premise should be a conviction of your own, so that you may prove it wholeheartedly. Perhaps it is a preposterous premise to me – it must not be so to you.

Although you should never mention your premise in the dialogue of your play, the audience must know what the message is. And whatever it is, you must prove it.

We have seen how an idea – the usual preliminary to a play – may come to you at any time. And we have seen why it must be turned into a premise. The process of changing an idea into a premise is not a difficult one. You can start to write your play any way – even haphazardly – if, at the end, all the necessary parts are in place.

It may be that the story is complete in your mind, but you still have no premise. Can you proceed to write your play? You had better not, however finished it seems to you.

It is idiotic to go about hunting for a premise, since, as we have pointed out, it should be a conviction of yours. You know what your own convictions are. Look them over... It is unnecessary to torture your brain, to weary yourself by searching for a premise, when there are so many ready to hand. Anyone who has a few strong convictions is a mine of premises.

Suppose you do find a premise on your wanderings. At best it is alien to you. It did not grow from you; it is not part of you. A good premise represents the author.

You can arrive at your premise in any one of a great many ways. You may start with an idea which you at once convert to a premise, or you may develop a situation first and see that it has potentialities which need only the right premise to give them meaning and suggest an end.

The premise is the conception, the beginning of a play. The premise is a seed and it grows into a plant that was contained in the original seed; nothing more, nothing less. The premise should not stand out like a sore thumb, turning the characters into puppets and the conflicting forces into a mechanical set-up. In a well-constructed play or story, it is impossible to denote just where premise ends and story or character begins.

Character

Regardless of the medium in which you are working, you must know your characters thoroughly. And you must know them not only as they are today, but as they will be tomorrow or years from now.

A character stands revealed through conflict; conflict begins with a decision; a decision is made because of the premise of your play. The character's decision necessarily sets in motion another decision, from his adversary. And it is these decisions, one resulting from the other, which propel the play to its ultimate destination: the proving of the premise.

No man ever lived who could remain the same through a series of conflicts which affected his way of living. Of necessary he must change, and alter his attitude toward life.

Even a corpse is in a state of change: disintegration. And while a man is arguing with you, attempting to prove his changelessness, he is changing: growing old.

So we can safely say that any character, in any type of literature, which does not undergo a basic change, is a badly drawn character. We can go further and say that if a character cannot change, any situation in which he is placed will be an unreal situation.

If you plant an acorn, you reasonably expect an oak sapling, and eventually an oak tree. Human character is the same. A certain type of character will develop on his own line to fruition. Only in bad writing does a man change without regard to his characteristics. When we plant an acorn we would be justified in expecting an oak tree and shocked (at the very least) if it turned out to be an apple tree.

Every character a dramatist presents must have within it the seeds of its future development. There must be the seed, or possibility, of crime in the boy who is going to turn criminal at the end of the play.

A weak character cannot carry the burden of protracted conflict in a play. He cannot support a play. We are forced, then, to discard such a character as a protagonist. There is no sport if there is no competition; there is no play if there is no conflict... The dramatist needs not only characters who are willing to put up a fight for their convictions. He needs characters who have the strength, the stamina, to carry this fight to its logical conclusion.

We may start with a weak man who gathers strength as he goes along; we may start with a strong man who weakens through conflict, but even as he weakens he must have the stamina to bear his humiliation.

Who, then, are the weak characters as opposed to the strong ones? They are those who have no power to put up a fight.

The truly weak character is the person who will not fight because the pressure is not strong enough.

Take Hamlet. He is persistent and with bulldog tenacity proves the facts of his father's death. He has weaknesses, else he would not have had to hide behind assumed insanity. His sensitivity is a drawback in his fight, yet he kills Polonius who he thinks is spying on him. Hamlet is a complete character, hence he is ideal material for a play... Contradiction is the essence of conflict, and when a character can overcome his internal contradictions to win his goal, he is strong.

We can now define a weak character: "A weak character is one who, for any reason, cannot make a decision to act."

But there is no character who would not fight back *under the right circumstances*. If he is weak and unresisting, it is because the author has not found the psychological moment when he is not only ready but eager to fight. The point of attack was miscalculated. Or it might be put this way: a decision must be permitted to mature. The author may catch a character in a period of *transition*, when he is not yet ready to act. Many a character fails because the author forces him into action he is not ready to take, action he will not be ready to take for an hour, or a year, twenty years.

[E]very living creature is capable of doing anything, if the conditions around him are strong enough.

Hamlet is a different man at the end of the play from what he was at the beginning. In fact, he changes on every page – not illogically, but in a steady line of growth. We are all changing with every passing minute, hour, day, week, month, and year. The problem is to find the moment at which it is most advantageous for the playwright to deal with a character. What we call Hamlet's weakness is his delay in taking a step (sometimes fatal) until he has full evidence. But his iron determination, his devotion to his cause, are strong. He makes a decision.

George Bernard Shaw said that he was not governed by principle, but by inspiration. If any man, inspired or not, builds on character, he is going in the right direction and is employing the right principle, consciously or otherwise. The vital thing is not what the playwright says, but what he does. Every great literary work grew from character, even if the author planned the action first. As soon as his characters were created they took precedence, and the action had to be reshaped to suit them.

If we know that a character embodies in himself not only his environment, but his heredity, his likes and dislikes, even the climate of the town where he was born, we do not find it hard to think of situations. *The situations are inherent in the character.*

Character and environment are so closely interrelated that we have to consider them as one. They react upon each other. If one is faulty, it affects the other, just as the disease of one part of the body causes the whole to suffer.

Character was the great factor in Aristotle's time, and no fine play ever was or ever will be written without it.

When the author has a clear-cut premise, it is child's play to find the character who will carry the burden of that premise.

The pivotal character is the protagonist. According to Webster's dictionary, the protagonist is – "one who takes the lead in any movement or cause."

Anyone who opposes the protagonist is an opponent or *antagonist*.

Without a pivotal character there is no play. The pivotal character is the one who creates conflict and makes the play move forward. The pivotal character knows what he wants. Without him the story flounders... in fact, there is no story.

A pivotal character must not merely desire something. He must want it so badly that he will destroy or be destroyed in the effort to attain his goal.

A good pivotal character *must have something very vital at stake.*

Not everyone can be a pivotal character.

A man whose fear is greater than his desire, or a man who has no great, all-consuming passion, or one who has patience and does not oppose, cannot be a pivotal character.

A pivotal character is a driving force, not because he decided to be one. He becomes what he is for the simple reason that some inner or outer necessity forces him to act; there is something at stake for him, honor, health, money, protection, vengeance, or a mighty passion.

As we see, a pivotal character never becomes a pivotal character because he wants to. He is really forced by circumstances within him and outside of him to become what he is.

Anyone who opposes a pivotal character necessarily becomes the opponent or antagonist. The antagonist is the one who holds back the ruthlessly onrushing protagonist. He is the one against whom the ruthless character exerts all his strength, all his cunning, all the resources of his inventive power.

If for any reason the antagonist cannot put up a protracted fight, you might as well look for another character who will.

The antagonist in any play is necessarily as strong and, in time, as ruthless as the pivotal character. A fight is interesting only if the characters are evenly matched.

Let me now repeat it again: the antagonist must be as strong as the protagonist. The wills of conflicting personalities must clash.

If a big brute manhandles a little fellow, we turn against him, but this does not mean that we shall wait with bated breath to see the outcome of this uneven encounter. We know it beforehand.

There are more complex forms of conflict, but they all rise on this simple basis: attack and counterattack. We see real, rising conflict when the antagonists are evenly matched. There is no thrill in watching a strong, skillful man fighting a sickly, awkward one. When two people are evenly matched, whether in the prize ring or on the stage, each is forced to utilize all that is in him. Each will reveal how much he knows about generalship; how his mind works in an emergency; what kind of defense he is capable of; how strong he really is; whether he has any reserve to marshal as a defense when he's in danger. Attack, counterattack; conflict.

There is no doubt that conflict grows out of character. The intensity of the conflict will be determined by the strength of will of the three-dimensional individual who is the protagonist.

Characters who cannot make a decision in a play are responsible for static conflict—or, rather, let us blame the dramatist who chooses the characters. You cannot expect a rising conflict from a man who wants nothing or does not know what he wants.

Static means not moving, not exerting force of any kind. Since we intend to go into a detailed analysis of what makes dramatic action static, we must point out right here that even the most static conflict has movement of some kind. Nothing in nature is absolutely static. An inanimate object is full of movement which the naked eye cannot see; a dead scene in a play also contains movement, but so slow that it seems to be standing still.

It is pointless to write about a person who doesn't know what he wants, or wants something only halfheartedly. Even if a person knows what he wants, but has no internal and external necessity to achieve this desire *immediately*, that character will be a liability to your play.

What makes a character start a chain of events which might destroy him or help him to succeed? There is only one answer: *necessity*. There must be something at stake – something pressingly important.

[I]n every work which one can un-blushingly call a play – the curtain rises when at least one character has reached a turning point in his life.

We must start a play at a point of decision, because that is the point at which the conflict starts and the characters are given a chance to expose themselves and the premise.

We think that no character can reveal himself without conflict – and no conflict matters without character.

A play should start with the first line uttered. The characters involved will expose their natures in the course of conflict. It is bad playwriting first to marshal your evidences, drawing in the background, creating an atmosphere, before you begin the conflict. Whatever your premise, whatever the make-up of your characters, the first line spoken should start the conflict and the inevitable drive toward the proving of the premise.

No doubt you have heard the old adage: “Every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end.”

Any writer who has the naiveté to take this advice seriously is bound to run into trouble.

If it is true that every story has to have a beginning, then every story might have started at the conception of the characters and ended with their death.

You may protest that this is a too literal interpretation of Aristotle. Perhaps it is, but many plays met their Waterloo for the very reason that their authors, consciously or otherwise, obeyed this Aristotelian dictum.

Hamlet did not start when the curtain went up. Far from it. A murder had been committed before, and the murdered man's ghost had just come back to demand justice.

This play opens, then, not in the beginning, but in the middle, after a dastardly act had been committed first.

An author must find a character who wants something so desperately that he can't wait any longer. His needs are immediate.

Why? You have your story or play the moment you can answer authoritatively why this man must do something so urgently and immediately.

Whatever it is, the motivation must have grown out of what happened before the story started. In fact, your story is *possible only because it grew out of the very thing that happened before*.

It is imperative that your story starts in the middle, and not under any circumstances, at the beginning.

In every act, crisis, climax, and resolution follow each other as day follows night.

As we see, crisis and climax follow each other, the last one always on a higher plane than the one before.

A single scene contains the exposition of premise for that particular scene, exposition of character, conflict, transition, crisis, climax, and conclusion. This procedure should be repeated as many times as there are scenes in your play, in an ascending scale.

There is no beginning and no end. Everything in nature goes on and on. And so, in a play, the opening is not the beginning of a conflict, but the culmination of one. A decision was made, and the character experienced an inner climax. He acts upon his decision, starting a conflict which rises, changing as it goes, becoming a crisis and a climax.

Obligatory Scene

There is no moment in a play which does not grow from the one before it. Any scene should be supreme in its moment. Only an integrated scene has the vitality to make us eager for the next. The difference between scenes is that the vehemence of each should mount over that of the last.

Each scene contains the same elements as the whole.

The play as a whole will rise continuously, reaching a pitch which will be the culmination of the entire drama.

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