

David Mamet on Dramatic Construction

*I don't find writing screenplays any more freeing
or any more constrictive than writing plays.
They each have their own strictures.
The wisdom of how to understand those
strictures fascinates me.*

David Mamet

(Topel)

Interview extracts

The most important thing I learned at the Neighborhood Playhouse was the idea of a through-line, which was Aristotle filtered through Stanislavski and Boleslavsky. That idea is a couple of thousand years old. Also the idea from Stanislavski of the subjugation of all aspects of the production – not just the script but the acting and the plastic elements – to the through-line of the play. That has stood me in very, very good stead in film directing.

1988 interview (p.74)

Theoretically, perfectly, what one wants to do is put the protagonist and the audience in exactly the same position. The main question in drama, the way I was taught, is always: What does the protagonist want? That's what drama is. It comes down to that. It's not about theme, it's not about idea, it's not about setting but what the protagonist wants. What gives rise to the drama, what is the precipitating event, and how, at the end of the play, do we see that event culminated? Do we see the protagonist's wishes fulfilled or absolutely frustrated? That's the structure of drama. You break it down into three acts.

Does this explain why your plays have so little exposition?

Yes. People only speak to get something. If I say, "Let me tell you a few things about myself," already your defenses go up; you go, "Look, I wonder what he wants from me," because no one ever speaks except to obtain an objective. That's the only reason anyone ever opens their mouth, on stage or off stage. They may use a language that *seems* revealing, but, if so, it's just coincidence, because what they're trying to do is accomplish an objective. "Well, well, if it isn't my younger brother, just returned from Australia... have a good break?" The question is, where does the *dramatist* have to lead you? Answer: the place where he or she thinks the audience needs to be led. But what does the *character* think? Does the character need to convey that information? If the answer is no, then you'd better cut it out, because you aren't putting the audience in the same position with the protagonist. You're saying, in effect, "Let's stop the play." That's what the narration is doing: stopping the play.

Now, there's a certain amount of *essential* information, without which the play does not make sense...

And how do you fit that information in?

As obliquely as possible. You want to give the people information before they know it's been given to them.

So, to you a character is...

It's action, as Aristotle said. That's all that it is: exactly what the person does. It's not what they "think," because we don't know what they think. It's not what they say. It's what they do, what they're physically trying to accomplish on the stage. Which is exactly the same way we understand a person's character in life: not by what they say but by what they do.

1997 interview (pp.110 – 1)

[I]f I'm not writing for the audience, if I'm not writing to make it easier for *them*, then who the hell am I doing it for? And the way you make it easier is by following those tenets: cutting, building to a climax, leaving out exposition, and always progressing toward the single goal of the protagonist. They're very stringent rules, but they are, in my estimation and experience, what makes it easier for the audience.

1997 interview (pp.111 – 2)

Have you considered putting stage directions in your screenplays?

No, because if you're writing a drama, to get involved in it is kind of nonsense. It's like, you read a screenplay, and it says, "BRENDA comes into the room. She's beautiful, she's sassy, she's smart, she's twenty-five, she's built like a brick shithouse: this is the kind of girl you'll leave your wife for. When you see those deep blue eyes..." I mean, you're going to cast an actress, and she's going to look like something, right? Some idiot script reader from Yale is going to get a kick out of what you've thrown in, but it has nothing to do with making the movie, because you're going to cast an actress who will have qualities that are going to have nothing to do with what you made up. When you write stage directions, unless they're absolutely essential for the understanding of the action of the play ("He leaves," "She shoots him"), something else is going to happen when the actors and directors get them on the stage.

1997 interview (pp.120 – 1)

Get into the scene late, get out of the scene early.

1997 interview (p.112)

Part of the art of the play is to introduce information in such a way, and at such a time, that the people in the audience don't realize they have been given information. They accept it as a matter of course, but they aren't really aware of it so that, later on, the information pays off. It has been consciously planted by the author... Now, in a bad play, the author will introduce the information frontally. You actually tell the audience that you are about to give them some information and that it is important to what happens later in the play. In a good play the information is delivered almost as an aside.

1995 interview (p.127)

[I]f you've got a play with two characters on stage and one is a man and one is a woman... they must be antagonists or else the play's no good.

1994 interview (p.144)

I think it is absolutely essential that every beat in a play put forward the action, that every word in a play put forward the action. And any word of a play that does not put forward the action must be excised from the play... Those points at which the attention of the audience will lag, where the audience will in effect nap, those points, no matter how brilliant the dialogue is, no matter how exciting the stage action is, those points that are not essential to the action of the play – to what happens next – must be corrected.

1977 interview (p.24)

All interview extracts from *David Mamet in Conversation* (2001) (ed. Leslie Kane)

I went to a very famous theater school in New York for a year called the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theater. I didn't understand anything they were talking about. One reason was that it was a school for actors, and I didn't have any talent as an actor, so nothing they said struck any responsive chord in me. But I learned so much from watching the other actors perform, when it was their turn. When it was my turn to do the scene, I learned nothing, except that I'm terrified and I have no talent. When I watched them, I tried to understand what was happening between them, and what I saw was it was the same thing that [Harold] Pinter was talking about. If you could write a scene where you took away everything except your understanding of the two people's objective, the audience would follow. You didn't have to tell the audience anything.

If you think maybe you should cut, [then] cut. What are you waiting for? The way you learn to write drama is by writing for an audience. Write drama for an audience, and when you see that audience nod off, you want to cut your throat. Jesus! That was my favourite, favourite scene – but it puts the audience to sleep. So what good is it? When the lights go down, you’ve got their attention. It’s yours to lose. Can you keep their attention moment to moment? Because if not, the play’s over. Anybody who ever says, “Oh, you should have stayed – the movie gets better in the second half.” I always say, “Then they should have put the second half first.” [...] The best way that I know to see if your story works: Tell it somebody else. “I’ve got this great idea.” Watch at which point their eyes glaze over. That means you don’t know what you’re doing, or you have to re-think it. So you’ll find, as you tell this story to someone else, that you have to tell it concisely... The more and more that you tell the story, the simpler the story gets, and the simpler the story gets, the better the movie you’re going to make, because you’re not going to say, “And then things happen that I can’t really explain.”

[...] We write the script and say, “This is great! This is the best thing anyone’s ever written!” So you give it your director, your friends, and they say, “Yeah, but I don’t understand the thing about...” “Oh! You don’t understand it? How about never speaking to me again. How about cutting your throat not to recognise my genius.” Then you think about it for a while and say, “Oh yeah, that’s superfluous. I’ll cut it out.” So the process of moving towards filmmaking is to cut it out until you’re just left with the story. A story you can tell over a class of beer in ten lines and keep somebody’s attention. If you can do that, you can make a movie. If you can’t do that, you can’t make a good movie.

If you make a movie and you have a scene and don’t know where it goes, it doesn’t belong in the movie.

From “Masterclass with David Mamet” (Israel, 2016)

You cannot learn how to write drama without writing plays, putting them on in front of an audience, and getting humiliated.

My great friend and teacher [editor] Barbara Tulliver has cut... twelve or so feature of mine and a million hours of TV. I have learned so much from her. Every project she calls up in the middle and says, “You’re going to kill me.” I say, “Why?” She says, “I gotta tell you something... You know scene 12?” I say, “Yeah, scene 12, my favourite scene.” She says, “Yeah. I cut it out. The film’s a thousand per cent better for it.” Time after time. And of course she’s right. The audience don’t care [that] it’s my favorite scene. It gets in the way of the progression, [so] throw it away.

I'm not trying to make a point. I'm just trying to get the voices in my head to shut up... I'm not sure what "themes" are. I know [that] English departments care about "themes." It's possible to look at my work and infer a "theme" but it's not something which concerns me. I'm interested in telling a story. It's as pointless as talking about the "theme" of a joke. The joke is there to make you laugh. Drama is there to keep you interested for an hour and a half.

Plot is all that there is. The perfect example is the joke. There's nothing in the joke that does not tend towards the punchline.

There's an old theatrical phrase that anybody can write a good first act. I think there's some truth to it because you're setting up an interesting problem. The question is how you figure your way out of it.

[Characters] don't speak to get or to give information. They speak to get a result.

When you can write the plot in fifteen lines on one sheet of paper, then you can write the movie or the play.

Why do people speak in real life? They speak to get something from each other. It might seem that they speak to express themselves, but as I understand it, that's not true... [People] don't speak to get or give information. They speak to get a result.

Education is the worst thing to happen since kale.

Drama has nothing to do with information. Drama is storytelling that assembles the clan... It's not my job to be informative. It's my job to be interesting. I've got a special way of being interesting that pays my rent. It's called writing drama... That's what I do for a living.

If they get it, you don't want to say it twice... What can do you without? That's the question. Not: what can you put in?

As painful as it is to cut, it's more painful to be shamed by the audience going to sleep.

Billy Wilder... said the audience, individual, they're idiots. Collectively, they're a genius... Collectively, you cannot fool them... I've never met a dumb audience.

Every play needs to have a beginning, middle and an end. Jean-Luc Godard said, "Not necessarily in that order." And that's why French movies are so fucking boring.

From www.masterclass.com (2017)

Essay extracts

Dramatic structure is... an exercise of a naturally occurring need or disposition to structure the world as thesis/antithesis/synthesis.

Three Uses of the Knife (p.66)

Dramatic structure is not an arbitrary – or even a conscious – invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, two, three.

Three Uses of the Knife (p.73)

The rule in question here is Aristotle's notion of unity of action: in effect, that the play should be about one thing, and that thing should be *what the hero is trying to get*. Unstinting application of this rule makes great plays because the only thing we, as audience, care about in the theater is WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

“A Playwright in Hollywood”

Screening is a craft based on logic. It consists of the assiduous application of several very basic questions: What does the hero want? What hinders him from getting it? What happens if he does not get it?

On Directing Film (p. xv)

I decided that I was going to plan out the whole movie, shot by shot, according to my understanding of the theories of Sergei Eisenstein. I found Eisenstein's theories particularly refreshing, as they didn't seem to call for any visual talent. The shot, he said, not only *need* not, but *must* not be evocative. The shot should stand as one unemotional term of a sequence, the totality of which should create in the mind of the audience a new idea, e.g. rather than the shot of a distraught woman crying, or the same woman describing to her friend over the telephone how she found out her husband was cheating on her, Eisenstein would suggest the following: (1) shot of woman reading a note; (2) shot of the note which reads, “Honey, I'll be home late tonight. Going bowling, I love you”; (3) shot of woman putting down the note, looking down at something on the floor; (4) her point of view, shot of the bowling ball in the bowling ball bag. In [this example] each of the shots is uninflected and

unemotional and so the shots could be determined by someone without visual “talent,” but who knew the “meaning” of the sequence, i.e. a woman discovers her husband is cheating on her. So I thought, Well, that’s for me; I’m not going to be John Ford or Akira Kurosawa, but I *do* know the meaning of each of the sequences, having written them, and if I can reduce the meaning of each of sequences to a series of shots, each of them clean and uninflected (i.e., not necessitating further narration), then the... audience will understand the story through the medium of pictures.

Some Freaks (pp.118 – 9)

There is a wonderful book called *The Profession of a Stage Director*, by Georgi Tovstonogov, who writes that a director may fall into one of the deepest pits by rushing immediately to visual or pictorial solutions. This statement influenced and aided me greatly in my career as a stage director; and, subsequently, in my work as a screenwriter. If one understands *what the scene means*, and stages *that*, Mr. Tovstonogov was saying, one will be doing one’s job for both the author and the viewer. If one rushes, first, into a pretty, or pictorial, or even descriptive staging, one may be hard-pressed to integrate that staging into the logical progression of the play.

On Directing Film (p. xiv)

Eisenstein suggested [a movie should be made through] *a succession of images juxtaposed so that the contrast between these images moves the story forward in the mind of the audience...* You always want to tell the story in cuts. Which is to say, through a juxtaposition of images that are basically uninflected. Mr. Eisenstein tells us that the best image is an uninflected image. A shot of a teacup. A shot of a spoon. A shot of a fork. A shot of a door. Let the cut tell the story. Because otherwise you have not got dramatic action, you have narrative. If you slip into narration, you are saying, “you’ll never guess why what I just told you is important to the story.” It’s unimportant that the audience should guess why it’s important to the story. It’s important simply to *tell* the story. Let the audience be surprised. [...]

Documentaries take basically unrelated footage and juxtapose it in order to give the viewer the idea the filmmaker wants to convey. They take footage of birds snapping a twig. They take footage of a fawn raising his head. The two shots have nothing to do with each other. They were shot days or years, and miles, apart. And the filmmaker juxtaposes the images to give the viewer the idea of *great alertness*. The shots have nothing to do with each other. They are not a record of what the protagonist did. They are not a record of how the deer reacted to the bird. They’re basically uninflected images. But they give the viewer the idea of *alertness to danger* when they are juxtaposed. That’s good filmmaking. Now, directors should want to

do the same thing. We should all want to be documentary filmmakers. And we will have this advantage: we can go out and stage and film exactly those uninflected images we require for our story. And then juxtapose them. In the editing room, one is constantly thinking, “I wish I had a shot of...” Well, you’ve got all the time in the world before the film is shot: you can determine what shot you are going to require later, and go out and shoot it.

On Directing Film (pp.2 – 4)

I have a great deal of pride and, I suppose, a large admixture of arrogant pride. I, in my generally losing contest with... self-styled “producers,” many times console myself by thinking that after society falls apart, I will be able to eke out at least my meals and shelter by putting on plays that may make people laugh; but that these “producers” would have to wait until I and those like me went to work before they could eat.

Yes, that is how I see “producers.” They are “let me take that cow to the fair for you, son.”

On Directing Film (p.49)

Things are called into motion that did not heretofore exist and that demand some form of resolution. Something is called into existence that did not heretofore exist, and then the unrest that this new thing creates has to be resolved, and when it’s resolved... the play is done. That’s how you know when it’s time to go home.

On Directing Film (pp.63 – 4)

The audience knows when its desires are met even though it cannot *say* what those desires were or are.

Theatre (p.120).

[The plot] begins with a premise: the hero wants something. His desire begins with the *beginning of the film*. That is, he cannot *just* desire something. For the screenplay to be coherent and compelling, his desire must be awakened by a new circumstance. That circumstance is the film... Now write each scene such that it is essential to the hero’s progress toward the goal of [each] act.

Bambi vs. Godzilla (p.59)

The dramatist begins with a theme, or *quest*, and endeavors to describe its progression in ostensibly unconnected actions and images that will, at the quest's conclusion, be revealed as unified, and that revealed unity will simply state the theme, which revelation will... restore order.

Bambi vs. Godzilla (pp.64 – 5)

[T]he story should come to life before our eyes – brought into being by a unique event, as opposed to an ‘on-going process’ (e.g., the hero should want to raise the plague on Thebes, rather than discover the cause of evil in the world). [This is the idea of action, of things actually happening that drive the story.] This story should take place within the space of three days, in one place, and should consist *solely* of the attempt of the hero to solve the problem whose appearance gave rise to the play.

Bambi vs. Godzilla (pp.61 – 2)

Almost any film can be improved by throwing out the first ten minutes. That exposition, which assuaged the script reader, the coverage writer, and studio exec, the star and her handlers puts the audience to *sleep sleep sleep*. Get right into the action, and the audience will figure it out.

Bambi vs. Godzilla (p.113)

Everybody always says the way to make any movie better is burn the first reel, and it's true. All of us have this experience almost every time we go to the movies. Twenty minutes in, we say, “*why*, they should have started the movie *here*.” Get on with it, for the love of Mike. Get into the scene later, get out of the scene early, tell the story in the cut. It's important to remember that it is not the dramatist's task to create confrontation or chaos, but, rather, to create order. *Start* with the disordering event, and let the beat be about the attempt to restore order.

On Directing Film (p.28)

To have the end buried in the beginning is the utmost accomplishment of drama.

Three Uses of the Knife (p.37)

When the film turns narrative rather than dramatic, when it stands in for the viewer's imagination, the viewer's interest is lost.

Bambi vs. Godzilla (p.70)

(1) Once upon a time, (2) And then one day, (3) And just when everything was going so well, (4) When just at the last minute, and (5) And they all lived happily ever after. We may apply the same paradigm to any drama. In some, one section will predominate over another – that is, some sections, case by case, will be lengthy and elaborate, some will be relatively short or simply indicated, but all will be present in each.

Bambi vs. Godzilla (pp.91 – 2)

The film may, perhaps, be likened to a boxer. He is going to have to deal with all the bulk his opponent brings into the ring. Common sense should indicate he had better not bring one extra ounce of flab on him – that all the weight *he* brings into the ring had better be muscle. The extra scene: no film can stand it. When... is a scene superfluous? When it does not advance the progression given at the outset as the film's purpose. What happens during this side trip? The audience's attention wanders. They have been jolted out of participation, and the filmmaker has lost his most important ally: their uncritical, which is to say, engaged, participation.

Bambi vs. Godzilla (p.71)

If you aren't telling a story, moving from one image to another, the images have to be more and more 'interesting' per se. If you *are* telling a story, then the human mind, as it's working along with you, is perceiving your thrust, both consciously and, more importantly, subconsciously. The audience members are going to go along with that story and will require neither inducement, in the form of visual extravagance, nor explanation, in the form of narration... When the film is correctly designed, the subconscious and the conscious are in alignment, and we *need* to hear what happens next. The audience is ordering the events just as the author did, so we are in touch with both his conscious and his unconscious mind. We have become involved in the story.

On Directing Film (pp.61 – 2)

Every character in the play wants something.

True and False (p.74)

When you tell a joke, your choice of what to include and what to exclude relates solely to the *punchline of the joke*. Those things which tend toward the punchline are included; those things which are purely ornamental are excluded. One does this naturally, as one knows the punchline is the essential element. A joke holds our attention because we assume, as audience, that all elements presented to us are essential.

In a well-written play, in a correctly performed play, everything tends also toward a punchline. That punchline, for the actor, is the *objective*, which means “*What do I want?*” If we learn to think solely in terms of the objective, all concerns of *belief, feeling, emotion, character, substitution*, become irrelevant. It is not that we “forget” them, but that something else becomes more important than they.

Take the joke: “A man goes into a whorehouse. A run-down, weatherbeaten building nonetheless possessing a certain charm. Once, when the street was a residential block, the building, no doubt, housed a middle-class family – a family with aspirations, trouble, and desires not unlike our own...” We see that all this, beautiful though it may be, is irrelevant *to the joke*, Nor irrelevant *in general*, not *unbeautiful*, but irrelevant *to the joke*. What we are being presented with may be a magnificent essay, but we know it cannot be a joke, and that the teller is misguided.

True and False (pp.82 – 3)

Anyone can turn on a TV program fifteen minutes into it and know exactly what is going on, and who did what to whom. But television executives insist on including fifteen minutes of narration in the script. Anyone can look at a couple across the lobby of a hotel and tell more or less what they are talking about and how they feel about each other. You don’t need narrative in the writing of a play, you need action.

True and False (p.84)

Performance art, “happenings,” and “mixed media” of the 1960s were a revelation to the artist that the audience would *supply* a plot of its own to the events happening before them between the time the curtain rose and the time it fell, and it was not incumbent on the dramatist/performance artist to do so.

Three Uses of the Knife (p.22)

[Hitchcock] understood that the dramatic goal is *generic*. It need not be more specific than: the Maltese Falcon, the Letters of Transit, the Secret Documents. It is sufficient for the protagonist-author to know the worth of the MacGuffin. The less specific the qualities of the MacGuffin are, the more interested the audience will be. Why? Because a loose abstraction allows audience members to project their own desires onto an essentially featureless goal.

Three Uses of the Knife (p.29)

We all have a myth and we all live by a myth. That's what we live for. Part of the hero journey is that the hero (artist/protagonist) has to change her understanding completely, whether through the force of circumstance (which happens more often in drama) or through the force of will (which happens more often in tragedy). The hero must revamp her thinking about the world. And this revamping can lead to great art.

Three Uses of the Knife (p.38)

I have a list of challenges-for-cause through which I choose the films I watch.

Any film containing any of the disqualificatory elements below loses, at the point the enormity makes itself apparent, any further claim on me:

Any use of Handel's *Messiah*, or *The Four Seasons*, or Pachelbel's *Canon*; any slow-motion sequence of lovers out of doors; any rack-focus from grass, wheat, or other vegetables to a distance object; a list of seven or more persons whose titles contains the word "producer" in any form; any shot of the protagonist twirling slowly with arms spread; a title card reading, "based on a true story;" and that, to me, unfailing diagnostic tool, a present participle in the title.

Now, why this sudden rush of wings? My theory is this: the present participle denotes an ongoing process. The dramatic form demands a process with a distinct beginning and end.

In the getting, looking at, going to films we are brought into a process of long duration, a "state," in effect, which will alter, if at all, only marginally by the end of the film.

Jafsie and John Henry (pp.1 – 2)

The Perfect Ball Game

What do we wish for in the perfect game?

Do we wish for Our Team to take the field and thrash the opposition from the First Moment, rolling up a walkover score at the final gun?

No. We wish for a closely fought match that contains many satisfying reversals, but which can be seen, retroactively, to have always tended toward a satisfying and inevitable conclusion.

We wish, in effect, for a three-act structure.

In act 1 Our Team takes the field and, indeed, prevails over its opponents, and we, its partisans, feel pride. But before that pride can mature into arrogance this new thing occurs: Our Team makes an error, the other side is inspired and pushes forth with previously unsuspected strength and imagination. Our Team weakens and retreats.

In act 2 of this perfect game Our Team, shaken and confused, forgets the rudiments of cohesion and strategy and address that made them strong. They fall deeper and deeper into the slough of despond. All contrary efforts seem for naught; and just when we think the tide may have turned back their way, a penalty or adverse decision is rendered, nullifying their gains. What could be worse?

But wait: just When All Seems Irremediably Lost, help comes (act 3) from an unexpected quarter. A player previously believed second-rate emerges with a block, a run, a throw, that offers a glimmer (a *glimmer*, mind) of the possibility of victory.

Yes, only a glimmer, but it is sufficient to rouse the team to something approaching its best efforts. And the team, indeed, rallies. Our Team brings the score back even and, *mirabile dictu*, makes That Play that would put them ahead.

ONLY TO HAVE IT CALLED BACK, yet again, by fate, or by its lieutenant, a wrongheaded, ignorant, or malicious official.

But see: the Lessons of the Second Act¹ were not lost on Our Team. This or that one might say it is too late, the clock is too far run down, our heroes are Too Tired, yet they rouse themselves for One Last Effort, One Last Try. And do they prevail? Do they triumph, with scant seconds left on the clock?

They all but triumph. As, in the final seconds of the play, the outcome rests on That Lone Warrior, that hero, that champion, that person upon whom, in the Final Moment, all our hopes devolve, that final play, run, pass, penalty kick – Yes.

But wait: that Warrior we would have chosen for the task, that Champion is injured. No one is left on the bench save a neophyte, et cetera, et cetera.

In which conceit we see that not only does the game recapitulate the drama, but each act of the game (the Perfect Game, mind you) recapitulates the game (following the paradigm: “Yes! No! But wait... !”), just as each act of the play

¹ We, caught up in the drama of that moment, did not recognize at the time that the second act had lessons. We watched and understood it as a series of both random and unfortunate happenings. In retrospect we intuit/perceive its operation as part of a whole – i.e., we perceive it as part of a drama.

recapitulates the whole. The ball game, then, is perhaps a model of Eisenstein's Theory of Montage: the idea of a SHOT A is synthesized with the idea of a SHOT B to give us a third idea, which third idea is the irreducible building block upon which the play will be constructed.

The Defense of team A and the Offense of team B are synthesized in THE PLAY, the one play, after which the ball will be found at a different position. And to that new position (a ball in the same position but at a later time is, of course, still in a new position) we, the audience, internalize/intuit/create/assign a philosophical meaning.

For we rationalize, objectify, and personalize the process of the game exactly as we do that of a play, a drama. For, finally, it is a drama, with meaning for our lives. Why else would we watch it?

It is enjoyable, like music, like politics, and like theater, because it exercises, it flatters, and it informs our capacity for rational synthesis – our ability to learn a lesson, which is our survival mechanism.

This Play, which May or not Take Place, but which we perceive (we can find a similar satisfaction, for example, if we're feeling philosophical, in the interplay of clouds) because we must, because it is our nature, can, at one end of its operation, makes us better, make the world better, perhaps, because of what we have perceived. At the other end of its operation, it can soothe (or, for that matter, enrage and debauch) simply by exciting our capacity for synthesis – as the lovely kitten playing with the ball of string is happy because she practices torture, as patriotic groups are similarly happy because they rehearse – in however embryonic a form – war.

It is difficult, finally, not to see our lives as a play with ourselves the hero – and that struggle is the great task of religion, of which drama used to be a part before the Fall.

From Three Uses of the Knife (1998)

Radio Drama

Sunday nights we would go visiting. Coming home we'd play the car radio. It was dark and we'd be rolling through the prairies outside of Chicago. CBS "Suspense" would be on the air, or "Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar – the Man with the Million-Dollar Expense Account." And the trip home always ended too soon; we'd stay in the car until my dad kicked us out – we wanted to hear how the story ended; we wanted the trip to be endless – rolling through the prairies and listening to the intimate voices.

But we went into the house.

It never occurred to us to turn on the radio when we got in. We were the very first television generation. My dad was proud of the television, and we grew up considering the radio *déclassé* – it was used for information or background but not for entertainment.

We grew up with the slogans, overheard from our parents and their friends, enigmatic catchwords of their youth: "Boston Blackie, enemy to those who make him an enemy, friend to those who have no friends." "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow do..." (That wonderful apocryphal transposition.) "Gangbusters...!" "Can a young girl from Ohio find happiness..." Et cetera.

I had written a piece called *The Water Engine*. It was set in 1933 Chicago, during the Century of Progress Exposition, and concerned a young man who invented an engine which ran solely on water.

I wrote it as a short story, and it was rejected by many publications. I wrote it as a movie treatment and it was rejected by various studios. I threw it in the wastebasket and, later that day, someone introduced me to Howard Gelman, who was the producer of Earplay, an outfit which commissions, produces, and distributes radio drama to the National Public Radio network.

Howard knew my playwriting from Chicago. He asked me if I wanted to write for the radio, and I said yes, went home, and got *The Water Engine* out of the wastebasket.

Earplay has since produced other plays of mine: *Reunion*, *A Sermon*, and *Prairie Du Chien*. And writing for radio I learned a lot about playwriting.

Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, writes that the fairy tale (and, similarly, the Drama) has the capacity to calm, to incite, to assuage, finally, to affect, because we listen to it nonjudgmentally – we identify subconsciously (noncritically) with the protagonist.

We are allowed to do this, he tells us, because the protagonist and, indeed, the *situations* are uncharacterized aside from their most essential elements.

When we are told, for example, that a Handsome Prince went into a wood, we realize that *we* are that Handsome Prince. As soon as the prince is characterized, "A Handsome Blond Prince with a twinkle in his eye, and just the hint of a mustache on his upper lip..." and if we lack that color hair, twinkle, and so on, we say, "What an interesting Prince. Of course, he is unlike anyone I know..." and we begin to listen to the story as a *critic* rather than as a *participant*.

The essential task of the drama (as of the fairy tale) is to offer a solution to a problem which is nonsusceptible to reason. To be effective, the drama must induce us to suspend our rational judgment, and to follow the internal logic of the piece, so that our pleasure (our “cure”) is the release at the end of the story. We enjoy the happiness of being a participant in the process of solution, rather than the intellectual achievement of having observed the process of construction.

And the best model for this drama is The Story around the Campfire.

We hear “...a windswept moor” and immediately supply the perfect imaginary moor. And the moor we supply is not perfect “in general,” but perfect according to our subconscious understanding of the significance of the moor *to the story*.

This is why radio is a great training ground for dramatists. More than any other dramatic medium it teaches the writer to concentrate on the essentials, because it throws into immediate relief that to characterize the people or scene is to take time from the story – to weaken the story. Working for radio, I learned the way all great drama works: by leaving the endowment of characters, place, and especially action up to the audience. Only by eschewing the desire to characterize can one begin to understand the model of the perfect play.

The model of the perfect play is the dirty joke.

“Two guys go into a farmhouse. An old woman is stirring a pot of soup.”

What does the woman look like? What state is the farmhouse in? Why is she stirring soup? It is absolutely not important. The dirty-joke teller is tending toward a punch line and we know that he or she is only going to tell us the elements which direct our attention toward that punch line, so we listen attentively and gratefully.

Good drama has no stage directions. It is the interaction of the characters' objectives expressed solely through what they say to each other – not through what the author says about them. The better the play, the better it will fare on the radio. Put *Streetcar*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Long Day's Journey*, *Lear* on the radio, and what do you miss? Nothing.

Our enjoyment is *increased* by the absence of the merely descriptive. (A note here, as long as I have the forum, to beginning playwrights. A lesson from radio: don't write stage directions. If it is not apparent what the character is trying to accomplish by saying the line, telling us *how* the character said it, or whether or not she moved to the couch isn't going to aid the case. We might understand better what the character means but we aren't particularly going to care.)

In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky is asked by a student actor how, faced with all the myriad choices open to an actor onstage, Stanislavsky always manages to make the correct choice, a choice which puts forward the play. He responds that once on a Volga steamer he approached the captain and asked how, when faced with the myriad decisions involved in navigating such a dangerous river, the captain always managed to make the correct choice. The captain, he tells us, replied, “I stick to the channel.” So, Stan tells the student, “Stick to the channel and you cannot be wrong. The choices that you make will not be ‘in general,’ but in aid of the story, and, so, they must be correct.”

Writing for radio forces you and *teaches* you to stick to the channel, which is to say, the story. The *story* is all there is to the theater – the rest is just packaging, and that is the lesson of radio.

Stan Freberg, a fiendishly inventive writer, once did a radio commercial for radio advertising, a dialogue between a television and a radio ad exec. The radio exec says, “Here's my ad: You take Lake Michigan and drain it. Bombers of the Royal Canadian Air Force fly over, laden with whipped cream. They drop the whipped cream in the lake until the lake is full. A huge helicopter circles Chicago carrying a forty-five ton cherry and drops it on the top of the whipped cream, as the tops of the Chicago skyscrapers explode and paint the evening sky with fireworks from horizon to horizon. Do that on TV.”

Broadway theater by no means withstanding, the best production is the *least* production. The best production takes place in the mind of the beholder.

We, as audience, are much better off with a sign that says A BLASTED HEATH, than with all the brilliant cinematography in the world. To say “brilliant cinematography” is to say, “He made the trains run on time.”

Witness the rather fascistic trend in cinema in the last decade.

Q. How'd you like the movie?

A. Fantastic cinematography.

Yeah, but so what? Hitler had fantastic cinematography. The question we have ceased to ask is, “What was the fantastic or brilliant cinematography in aid of?”

As “fantastic cinematography” has been the death of the American film, “production” has been the death of the American theater.

“Production” or “production values” is code for *forsaking the story*. “Production values” is a term invented by what used to be called “angels” when they were in the theater to meet members of the chorus, and who are now called producers, and God knows why they are in the theater.

Writing for the radio teaches there is no such thing as “production values.” The phrase means “Pour money on it,” and it has been the ruin of television, movies, and the professional stage. It is *The Triumph of the General – The Celebration of Nothing to Say*.

If Mount St. Helens could fit in a theater some producer would suggest teaming it with Anthony Hopkins and doing *Huey*. *That* is “production values.”

But radio drama, God bless it, needs inventive actors, an inventive sound-effects person, and a good script. You can produce it for next to nothing. The writer and the actor can both practice and perfect their trade away from the countervailing influence of producers, critics, and money; and if it doesn't work they can do another one just as simply and cheaply without ruining either their career or a large hunk of risk capital which might have meant an addition to the house in Larchmont.

Martin Esslin helped reinvent the British drama as head of BBC Radio Drama after World War II by commissioning Pinter, Joe Orton, and others. He helped re-create a national theater by *enfranchising creative talent*. In the same way Howard Gelman of Earplay, in commissioning Wendy Wasserstein, Terry Curtis Fox, Romulus Linney, Lanford Wilson, and so on, is supporting the American

theater in the best way: by encouraging freedom of thought – by hiring the writers and letting them be free.

We live in oppressive times. We have, as a nation, become our own thought police; but instead of calling the process by which we limit our expression of dissent and wonder “censorship,” we call it “concern for commercial viability.”

Whatever we call it, it is censorship. It is curtailment of freedom of speech and of imagination, and, as Tolstoy says, this oppression, as usual, is committed in the name of public tranquility.

How different is saying, “It would create public unrest,” from saying, “It’s not going to sell. They aren’t going to buy it?”

It’s hard to find a Great American Play on Broadway. It’s getting too expensive to produce. To mount a three-character, one-set drama costs around \$750,000, and the people with the money aren’t going to put it up to enjoy a *succès d’estime*. They’re putting it up in the hopes it is going to make money, which means they are doing everything in their power to appeal to the widest possible audience, which makes it difficult for a play to be produced that *questions, investigates*, and so, probably, *disturbs*.

Similarly with the movies. They aren’t administered by Miss Dove, but by people interested solely in making a buck on the buck they have put out. And television people who put out a news special on nuns being trampled to death by elephants would turn it into a series if the viewer response were great enough. These media (and we might as well include publishing) have, in an introverted time, become self-censoring – and they refer to the process not as thought policing but as cost accounting.

But radio is inexpensive to produce. God bless it – the essential nature of the form is that it *suffers immediately* from the addition of production values, just as would a dirty joke (when you introduce the Farmer’s Daughter you don’t put your hair in braids to illustrate). Radio drama can be produced by anybody with a microphone and a tape recorder. The time is auspicious for a rebirth of American Theater, and radio would be a good place to look for it to happen.

From Writing in Restaurants (1986)

Notes on The Cherry Orchard

When playing poker it is a good idea to determine what cards your opponents might hold. There are two ways to do this. One involves watching their idiosyncrasies – the way they hold their cards when bluffing as opposed to the way they hold them when they have a strong hand; their unconscious self-revelatory gestures; the way they play with their chips when unsure. This method of gathering information is called looking for “tells.”

The other way to gather information is to analyze your opponent's hand according to what he bets.

These two methods are analogous – in the Theater – to a concern with *characterization*, and a concern with *action*; or, to put it a bit differently: a concern with the *way* a character does something and, on the other hand, the actual thing that he does.

I recently worked on an adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*.

My newfound intimacy with the play led me to look past the quiddities of the characters and examine what it is that they are actually doing. I saw this:

The title is a flag of convenience. Nobody in the play gives a damn about the cherry orchard.

In the first act Lyubov returns. We are informed that her beloved estate is going to be sold unless someone acts quickly to avert this catastrophe.

She is told this by the rich Lopakhin. He then immediately tells her that he has a plan: cut down the cherry orchard, raze the house, and build tract housing for the summer people.

This solution would save (although alter) the estate.

Lopakhin keeps reiterating his offer throughout the play. Lyubov will not accept. Lopakhin finally buys the estate.

“Well,” one might say, “one cannot save one's beloved cherry orchard by cutting it down.” That, of course, is true. But in the text other alternatives are offered.

Reference is made to the rich aunt in Yaroslavl (“who is so very rich”), and who adores Lyubov's daughter, Anya. A flying mendicant mission is proposed but never materializes. The point is not that this mission is viewed as a good bet – it isn't – but that, if the action of the protagonist (supposedly Lyubov) were to save the cherry orchard, she would vehemently pursue and grasp any possibility of help.

The more real hope of salvation is fortuitous marriage. Gaev, Lyubov's brother, enumerates the alternatives: inheriting money, begging from the rich aunt, marrying Anya off to a rich man.

The first is idle wishing, and we've struck off the second, but what about the third alternative?

There's nobody much around for Anya. But what about her stepsister, Varya?

Varya, Lyubov's adopted daughter, is not only nubile, she is in love. With whom is she in love? She is in love with the very wealthy Lopakhin.

Why, hell. If I wanted to save my cherry orchard, and my adopted daughter was in love (and we are told that her affections are by no means abhorrent to their recipient) with the richest man in town, what would I do? What would you do? It's the easy way out, the play ends in a half hour, and everybody gets to go home early.

But Lyubov does not press this point either, though she makes reference to it in every act. She does *not* press on to a happy marriage between Varya and Lopakhin. Nor, curiously, is this match ever mentioned as a solution for the problem of the cherry orchard. The problem of the botched courtship of Varya and Lopakhin exists only as one of a number of supposed subplots. (More of this later.)

In the penultimate scene of the play, Lyubov, who is leaving her now-sold estate to return to Paris, attempts to tie up loose ends. She exhorts Lopakhin to propose to Varya, and he says he will. Left alone, Lopakhin loses his nerve and does not propose. Why does Lyubov, on learning this, not press her case? Why did she not do so sooner?

Even now, at the end of the play, if Lyubov *really* cared about the cherry orchard, she could save it from the ax. She could easily *force* Lopakhin to propose to Varya, and then get the bright idea that all of them could live on the estate as one happy family. And Lopakhin, who reveres her, would not refuse her.

But she does not do so. Is this from lack of inventiveness? No. It is from lack of concern. The cherry orchard is not her concern.

What about Lopakhin? Why *is* he cutting down the cherry orchard? He has been, from his youth, infatuated with Lyubov. She is a goddess to him, her estate is a fairyland to him, and his great desire in the play is to please her. (In fact, if one were to lapse into a psychological overview of the play at this point, one might say that the reason Lopakhin can't propose to Varya is that he is in love with Lyubov.)

Lopakhin buys the estate. For ninety thousand rubles, which means nothing to him. He then proceeds to cut down the trees, which he knows will upset his goddess, Lyubov, and to raze the manor house. His parents were slaves in that house; Lyubov grew up in the house; he doesn't need the money; why is he cutting down the trees? (Yes, yes, yes, we encounter halfhearted addenda in regard to future generations being won back to the land. But it doesn't wash. Why? If Lopakhin wanted to build a summer colony, he could build it anywhere. He could have built it without Lyubov's land and without her permission. If his objective were the building of summer homes and he were faced with two tracts, one where he had to cut down his idol's home, and one where he did not, which would he pick? Well, he has an infinite number of tracts. He can build anywhere he wants. Why cut down the trees and sadden his beloved idol? Having bought the estate he could easily let it sit, and, should the spirit move him subsequently, build his resort elsewhere.)

What, in effect, is going on here?

Nothing that has to do with trees.

The play is a series of scenes about sexuality, and, particularly, frustrated sexuality.

The play was inspired, most probably, by the scene in *Anna Karenina* between Kitty's friend Mlle Varenka and her gentleman companion Koznyeshev.

The two of them, lonely, nice people, are brought together through the office of mutual friends. Each should marry, they are a perfect match. In one of the finest scenes in the book we are told that each knew the time had arrived, that it was Now or Never. They go for a walk, and Mr. Koznyeshev is about to propose when he is distracted by a question about mushrooms. And so the two nice people are doomed to loneliness.

If this description sounds familiar, it should. Chekhov, pregnant of his theme, lifted it shamelessly (and probably unconsciously) from Tolstoy and gave it to Lopakhin and Varya.

Not only do Lopakhin and Varya play out the scene, *everybody in the play plays out the same scene*.

Anya is in love with Pyotr Trofimov, the tutor of her late brother. Trofimov is in love with her, but is too repressed to make the first move. He, in fact, declares that he is above love, while, in a soliloquy, refers to Anya as “My springtime, my dear Morning Sun.”

Yepiliodov, the estate bookkeeper, is in love with Dunyasha, the chambermaid. He keeps trying to propose, but she thinks him a boor and will not hear him out. She is in love with Yasha, Lyubov's footman. Yasha seduces and abandons her, as he is in love with himself.

Lyubov herself is in love. She gave her fortune to her paramour and nursed him through three years of his sickness. He deserted her for a younger woman.

Now, *this* is the reason she has returned to the estate. It is purely coincidental that she returns just prior to the auction of the orchard. *Why* is it coincidental? Because, as we have seen, she doesn't come back to save it. If she wanted to she could. Why does she come back? What is the event that prompts her return? Her jilting. What is the event that prompts her to return again to Paris? The continual telegrams of her lover begging for forgiveness.

Why did Lyubov come home? To lick her wounds, to play for time, to figure out a new course for her life.

None of these is a theatrically compelling action. (The last comes closest, but it could be done in Seclusion and does not require other characters. As, indeed, the role of *Lyubov* is, essentially a monologue – there's nothing she *wants* from anyone on stage.)

If Lyubov is doing nothing but these solitary, reflective acts, why is she the protagonist of the play? *She isn't*.

The play has no protagonist. It has a couple of squad leaders. The reason it has no protagonist is that it has no through-action. It has one scene repeated by various couples.

To continue:

Lyubov's brother is Gaev. He is a perennial bachelor, and is referred to several times in the text as an Old Lady. What does he want? Not much of anything. Yes, he cries at the end when the orchard is cut down. But he appears to be just as happy going to work in the bank and playing caroms as he is lounging around the Morning Room and playing caroms.

The other odd characters are Firs, the ancient butler, who is happy the mistress has returned, and Simeonov-Pishchik, a poor neighbor who is always looking on the bright side.

Pishchik, Firs, and Gaev are local color. They are all celibate and seen as somewhat doddering in different degrees. And they are all happy. Because they are not troubled by Sex. They are not involved in the play's one and oft-repeated action: to consummate, clarify, or rectify an unhappy sexual situation.

The cherry orchard and its imminent destruction is nothing other than an effective dramatic device.

The play is not "If you don't pay the mortgage I'll take your cow." It is "Kiss me quick because I'm dying of cancer."

The obstacle in the play does not grow out of, and does not even refer to, the actions of the characters. The play works because it is a consolidation of brilliant scenes.

I would guess – judging from its similarity to many of his short stories – that Chekhov wrote the scenes between the servant girl Dunyasha and Yepihodov first. That perhaps sparked the idea of a scene between Dunyasha and the man *she* loves, Yasha, a footman just returned from Paris. Who did this fine footman return with? The mistress. *Et ensuite.*

To continue this conceit: What did Chekhov do when he had two hours' worth of scene and thirteen characters running around a country house? He had, as any playwright has, three choices. He could shelve the material as brilliant sketches; he could *examine* the material and attempt to discern any intrinsically dramatic through-action, and extrapolate the play out of *that*. Compare that structure of *The Cherry Orchard* with that of *The Seagull*. In *The Seagull*, the famous actress Arkadina wants to recapture her youth, which causes her to devote herself to a younger man and ignore the needs of her son, whose age is an affront to her pretensions of youth. He struggles to obtain her respect and the respect and love of Nina (another actress), who represents one split-off aspect of Arkadina's personality: her available sexuality. *The Seagull* is structured as a tragedy. At the end of the play the hero, Treplev, undergoes recognition of his state and reversal of his situation – he kills himself. What happens at the end of *The Cherry Orchard*? Everyone goes home – they go back to doing exactly what they were doing before the play began. You might say *The Cherry Orchard* is structured as a *farce*. That is the dramatic form to which it is closest. One might also say that it is close to a series of review sketches with a common theme, and, in fact, it is. The play is most closely related to, and is probably the first example of, the twentieth-century phenomenon of the revue-play... the *theme* plays, for example, *La Ronde*, *Truckline Cafe*, *Men in White*, *Detective Story*, *Waters of the Moon*, etc.

To return: Chekhov has thirteen people stuck in a summer house. He has a lot of brilliant scenes. His third alternative is to come up with a pretext which will keep all thirteen characters in the same place and talking to each other for a while. This is one of the dilemmas of the modern dramatist: "Gosh, this material is fantastic. What can I do to just Keep the People in the House?"

One can have a piece of jewelry stolen. One can have a murder committed. One can have a snowstorm. One can have the car break down. One can have The Olde Estate due to be sold for debts in three weeks unless someone comes up with a good solution.

I picture this pretext occurring to Chekhov, and his saying, “Naaaa, they’ll never go for it.” I picture him watching rehearsals and *wincing* every time Lopakhin says (as he, says frequently): “Just remember, you have only three (two, one) weeks until the cherry orchard is to be sold.” Fine, he must have thought. That’s real playwriting. One doesn’t see Horatio coming out every five minutes and saying, “Don’t forget, Hamlet, your uncle killed your dad and now he’s sleeping with your ma!”

Oh, no, he must have thought, I’ll never get away with it. But he did, and left us a play we cherish,

Why do we cherish the play? Because it is about the struggle between the Old Values of the Russian aristocracy and their loosening grasp on power? I think not. For, finally, a play is about – and is only about – the actions of its characters. We, as audience, understand a play not in terms of the superficial idiosyncrasies or social *states* of its characters (which, finally, *separate* us from the play), but only in terms of the *action* the characters are trying to accomplish. Set Hamlet in Waukegan and it’s still a great play.

The enduring draw of *The Cherry Orchard* is not that it is set in a dying Czarist Russia or that it has rich folks and poor folks. We are drawn to the play because it speaks to our *subconscious* – which is what a play should do. And we subconsciously perceive and enjoy the reiterated action of this reiterated scene: two people at odds – each trying to fulfill his or her frustrated sexuality.

From Writing in Restaurants (1986)

Memo to the writers of The Unit

TO THE WRITERS OF THE UNIT.

GREETINGS.

AS WE LEARN HOW TO WRITE THIS SHOW, A RECURRING PROBLEM BECOMES CLEAR.

THE PROBLEM IS THIS: TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN DRAMA AND NON-DRAMA. LET ME BREAK-IT-DOWN-NOW.

EVERYONE IN CREATION IS SCREAMING AT US TO MAKE THE SHOW CLEAR. WE ARE TASKED WITH, IT SEEMS, CRAMMING A SHITLOAD OF INFORMATION INTO A LITTLE BIT OF TIME.

OUR FRIENDS, THE PENGUINS, THINK THAT WE, THEREFORE, ARE EMPLOYED TO COMMUNICATE INFORMATION – AND, SO, AT TIMES, IT SEEMS TO US.

BUT NOTE: THE AUDIENCE WILL NOT TUNE IN TO WATCH INFORMATION. YOU WOULDN'T, I WOULDN'T. NO ONE WOULD OR WILL. THE AUDIENCE WILL ONLY TUNE IN AND STAY TUNED TO WATCH DRAMA.

QUESTION: WHAT IS DRAMA? DRAMA, AGAIN, IS THE QUEST OF THE HERO TO OVERCOME THOSE THINGS WHICH PREVENT HIM FROM ACHIEVING A SPECIFIC, ACUTE GOAL.

SO: WE, THE WRITERS, MUST ASK OURSELVES OF EVERY SCENE THESE THREE QUESTIONS:

- 1) WHO WANTS WHAT?
- 2) WHAT HAPPENS IF HE DOESN'T GET IT?
- 3) WHY NOW?

THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS ARE LITMUS PAPER. APPLY THEM, AND THEIR ANSWER WILL TELL YOU IF THE SCENE IS DRAMATIC OR NOT.

IF THE SCENE IS NOT DRAMATICALLY WRITTEN, IT WILL NOT BE DRAMATICALLY ACTED.

THERE IS NO MAGIC FAIRY DUST WHICH WILL MAKE A BORING, USELESS, REDUNDANT, OR MERELY INFORMATIVE SCENE AFTER IT LEAVES YOUR TYPEWRITER. YOU THE WRITERS, ARE IN CHARGE OF MAKING SURE EVERY SCENE IS DRAMATIC.

THIS MEANS ALL THE “LITTLE” EXPOSITIONAL SCENES OF TWO PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT A THIRD. THIS BUSHWAH (AND WE ALL TEND TO WRITE IT ON THE FIRST DRAFT) IS LESS THAN USELESS, SHOULD IT FINALLY, GOD FORBID, GET FILMED.

IF THE SCENE BORES YOU WHEN YOU READ IT, REST ASSURED IT WILL BORE THE ACTORS, AND WILL, THEN, BORE THE AUDIENCE, AND WE’RE ALL GOING TO BE BACK IN THE BREADLINE.

SOMEONE HAS TO MAKE THE SCENE DRAMATIC. IT IS NOT THE ACTOR’S JOB (THE ACTOR’S JOB IS TO BE TRUTHFUL). IT IS NOT THE DIRECTOR’S JOB. HIS OR HER JOB IS TO FILM IT STRAIGHTFORWARDLY AND REMIND THE ACTORS TO TALK FAST. IT IS YOUR JOB.

EVERY SCENE MUST BE DRAMATIC. THAT MEANS: THE MAIN CHARACTER MUST HAVE A SIMPLE, STRAIGHTFORWARD, PRESSING NEED WHICH IMPELS HIM OR HER TO SHOW UP IN THE SCENE.

THIS NEED IS WHY THEY CAME. IT IS WHAT THE SCENE IS ABOUT. THEIR ATTEMPT TO GET THIS NEED MET WILL LEAD, AT THE END OF THE SCENE, TO FAILURE – THIS IS HOW THE SCENE IS OVER. IT, THIS FAILURE, WILL, THEN, OF NECESSITY, PROPEL US INTO THE NEXT SCENE.

ALL THESE ATTEMPTS, TAKEN TOGETHER, WILL, OVER THE COURSE OF THE EPISODE, CONSTITUTE THE PLOT.

ANY SCENE, THUS, WHICH DOES NOT BOTH ADVANCE THE PLOT, AND STANDALONE (THAT IS, DRAMATICALLY, BY ITSELF, ON ITS OWN MERITS) IS EITHER SUPERFLUOUS, OR INCORRECTLY WRITTEN.

YES BUT YES BUT YES BUT, YOU SAY: WHAT ABOUT THE NECESSITY OF WRITING IN ALL THAT “INFORMATION?”

AND I RESPOND “FIGURE IT OUT.” ANY DICKHEAD WITH A BLUESUIT CAN BE (AND IS) TAUGHT TO SAY “MAKE IT CLEARER” AND “I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HIM.”

WHEN YOU’VE MADE IT SO CLEAR THAT EVEN THIS BLUESUITED PENGUIN IS HAPPY, BOTH YOU AND HE OR SHE WILL BE OUT OF A JOB.

THE JOB OF THE DRAMATIST IS TO MAKE THE AUDIENCE WONDER WHAT HAPPENS NEXT. NOT TO EXPLAIN TO THEM WHAT JUST HAPPENED, OR TO *SUGGEST* TO THEM WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

ANY DICKHEAD, AS ABOVE, CAN WRITE, “BUT, JIM, IF WE DON’T ASSASSINATE THE PRIME MINISTER IN THE NEXT SCENE, ALL EUROPE WILL BE ENGULFED IN FLAMES.”

WE ARE NOT GETTING PAID TO REALIZE THAT THE AUDIENCE NEEDS THIS INFORMATION TO UNDERSTAND THE NEXT SCENE, BUT TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO WRITE THE SCENE BEFORE US SUCH THAT THE AUDIENCE WILL BE INTERESTED IN WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

YES BUT, YES BUT YES BUT YOU REITERATE.

AND I RESPOND: FIGURE IT OUT.

HOW DOES ONE STRIKE THE BALANCE BETWEEN WITHHOLDING AND VOUCHSAFING INFORMATION? THAT IS THE ESSENTIAL TASK OF THE DRAMATIST. AND THE ABILITY TO DO THAT IS WHAT SEPARATES YOU FROM THE LESSER SPECIES IN THEIR BLUE SUITS.

FIGURE IT OUT.

START, EVERY TIME, WITH THIS INVIOLEABLE RULE: THE SCENE MUST BE DRAMATIC. IT MUST START BECAUSE THE HERO HAS A PROBLEM, AND IT MUST CULMINATE WITH THE HERO FINDING HIM OR HERSELF EITHER THWARTED OR EDUCATED THAT ANOTHER WAY EXISTS.

LOOK AT YOUR LOG LINES. ANY LOGLINE READING “BOB AND SUE DISCUSS...” IS NOT DESCRIBING A DRAMATIC SCENE.

PLEASE NOTE THAT OUR OUTLINES ARE, GENERALLY, SPECTACULAR. THE DRAMA FLOWS OUT BETWEEN THE OUTLINE AND THE FIRST DRAFT.

THINK LIKE A FILMMAKER RATHER THAN A FUNCTIONARY, BECAUSE, IN TRUTH, YOU ARE MAKING THE FILM. WHAT YOU WRITE, THEY WILL SHOOT.

HERE ARE THE DANGER SIGNALS.

ANY TIME TWO CHARACTERS ARE TALKING ABOUT A THIRD, THE SCENE IS A CROCK OF SHIT.

ANY TIME ANY CHARACTER IS SAYING TO ANOTHER “AS YOU KNOW,” THAT IS, TELLING ANOTHER CHARACTER WHAT YOU, THE WRITER, NEED THE AUDIENCE TO KNOW, THE SCENE IS A CROCK OF SHIT.

DO NOT WRITE A CROCK OF SHIT. WRITE A RIPPING THREE, FOUR, SEVEN MINUTE SCENE WHICH MOVES THE STORY ALONG, AND YOU CAN, VERY SOON, BUY A HOUSE IN BEL AIR AND HIRE SOMEONE TO LIVE THERE FOR YOU.

REMEMBER YOU ARE WRITING FOR A VISUAL MEDIUM. MOST TELEVISION WRITING, OURS INCLUDED, SOUNDS LIKE RADIO. THE CAMERA CAN DO THE EXPLAINING FOR YOU. LET IT. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERS DOING *LITERALLY* – WHAT ARE THEY HANDLING, WHAT ARE THEY READING. WHAT ARE THEY WATCHING ON TELEVISION, WHAT ARE THEY SEEING.

IF YOU PRETEND THE CHARACTERS CAN'T SPEAK, AND WRITE A SILENT MOVIE, YOU WILL BE WRITING GREAT DRAMA.

IF YOU DEPRIVE YOURSELF OF THE CRUTCH OF NARRATION, EXPOSITION, INDEED, OF SPEECH, YOU WILL BE FORCED TO WORK IN A NEW MEDIUM: TELLING THE STORY IN PICTURES (ALSO KNOWN AS SCREENWRITING).

THIS IS A NEW SKILL. NO ONE DOES IT NATURALLY. YOU CAN TRAIN YOURSELVES TO DO IT, BUT YOU NEED TO START.

I CLOSE WITH THE ONE THOUGHT: LOOK AT THE SCENE AND ASK YOURSELF “IS IT DRAMATIC? IS IT ESSENTIAL? DOES IT ADVANCE THE PLOT?”

ANSWER TRUTHFULLY.

IF THE ANSWER IS “NO” WRITE IT AGAIN OR THROW IT OUT. IF YOU'VE GOT ANY QUESTIONS, CALL ME UP.

LOVE, DAVE MAMET

SANTA MONICA 19 OCTOBER 2005

(IT IS NOT YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KNOW THE ANSWERS, BUT IT IS YOUR, AND MY, RESPONSIBILITY TO KNOW AND TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS OVER AND OVER UNTIL IT BECOMES SECOND NATURE. I BELIEVE THEY ARE LISTED ABOVE.)

Hunting Instincts

Man is a predator. We know this because our eyes are in the front of our heads. The same conclusion may be reached by reading the newspapers.

As predators we close out the day around the campfire with stories of the hunt.

These stories, like the chase itself, engage our most primal instinct of pursuit. The story's hero is in pursuit of his goal – the hiding place of the stag or the cause of the plague on Thebes or the question of Desdemona's chastity or the location of Godot.

In the hunt story, the audience is placed in the same position as the protagonist: The viewer is told what the goal is and, like the hero, works to determine what is the best thing to do next – he wonders what happens next. How may he determine what is the best course toward the goal? Through observation. He, the viewer, watches the behavior of the hero and his antagonists, and guesses what will happen next. This is the essence of the story around the campfire: “And you'll never guess what happened next...”

In this prognostication we engage the same portion of the brain that we use in the hunt: the ability to spontaneously process and act upon information without subjecting the process to verbal (conscious) review.

This is the apparent paradox of dramatic writing. It is not, though it may appear to be, the communication of ideas but rather the inculcation in the audience of the instincts of the hunt. These instincts precede and, in times of stress, supersede the verbal; they are spontaneous and more powerful than the assimilation of an idea.

The mere presentation of an idea is called a lecture. A lecture induces in the listener that ruminative state necessary for comparison and evaluation of ideas. This is the usual state of the civilized being – a dampening of the predatory instincts in order to allow communal cooperation.

This is all well and good, but it is not the stuff of drama, which, by fulfilling a more basic need – to exercise our most primal instincts – has the power not only to please but also, curiously, to unite. For the audience, when moved, it moved on a preverbal level. It is not involved in sharing the ideas of the drama, but rather experiences the thrill of the communal hunt. This suspension of the analytical faculty is also experienced in the falling-in-love portion of mating, in gambling, in combat, in sport.

When we rise from the drama we resume our intellectual pretensions and ascribe our enjoyment to our ability to appreciate its engaging themes and ideas. This (like the societal election of the newspaper critic as censor) is an attempt to regain autonomy.

But we are not actually moved by the ideas in plays, not, primarily, even by the presence of poetry. We appreciate plays in translation, and what do we know of the Russian of Chekhov? And we have argued for four hundred years about the “meaning” of Hamlet.

Certainly a play, being not only a celebration of the hunt but a hunt itself, will benefit from an author's genius as a poet – Shakespeare was the greatest poet in the English language. But the second-greatest was Yeats, and, he couldn't write a play to save his soul. Poetry, is, insufficient; beauty in language itself (see again, Chekhov in translation) is nonessential. What is essential? The plot.

The critical and academic love of issue plays reveals a misunderstanding of drama. It is the civilized man's misunderstanding, which is to say, a misappreciation of the power of his own reason. "We are all here together in this theatre; therefore, let's use our time wisely and listen to a lecture whose meaning may be encapsulated and so taken home with us."

But this lecture has no power to unite. For as much as we hail the correct proclamation of the apparent truth, we, the audience, have had no experience together. We, the audience, were merely stuck at a lecture.

But the drama is, essentially, people stuck in an elevator.

Those of us who have been in similar extremity cherish the experience the rest of our lives, for as trying and inconvenient as it was at the time, we remember the unity of communal endeavor and value this cessation of our mundane worries. It was cleansing to experience that we could put aside the so pressing activities of the day and find that the world went on in any case, while our new, small tribe searched for a solution to its communal problem.

The hours in the elevator, the hours in the theatre, are the communal hunt for a solution. As such, the experiences are indelible, for they engage not the consciousness but also a different order and more effective part of the brain.

The soldier, the gambler, the fighter need to be shown something only once. They do not need to be convinced by explanation. Shown something that will cost or save their lives, they will remember it. Their actual brain waves have been changed, because their life depends on it. They, here, are the predator animal.

But the passivity during the lecture and issue play is the reaction of the prey animal: Sit still and listen while you are told something you already know and are charged for it. Do not fear, for nothing will excite you.

But we use a different part of our brain to actually appreciate drama. We civilized folk use it seldom and we love to exercise it. Go into a theatre and feel the audience enthralled in a play. One can feel it backstage, and with one's eyes closed – a physiologic change is taking place through communal absorption in the hunt.

It is the excitation of the hunting instinct that accounts for the special pleasure we take in drama. (The storyteller around the campfire excites our vicarious participation in the neat miss with the bear, but the viewer is in no actual danger of mauling.)

Let us note that suspension of disbelief does not mean we accept the implausible but rather we suspend the rational process of intellectualization, which is to say, of the comparison of phenomenon to idea, which is a process too slow to be of use in the hunt.

The suspension of disbelief is better characterized as a suspension of reason and, as such, can be seen as an essentially religious action – a surrender in the face of

the gods or Fates, and a confession that our prized reason, and so our humanity, is fundamentally flawed and that we are sinners, torn between evil and good, between consciousness and passion, and deluded in our assessment of our own powers.

In this hunt, our self-confidence is at last revealed as arrogance, our reason as folly, and, by being brought low, we are cleansed – just as in the confessional, or on Yom Kippur, or in any true apology.

This is the story of the hunt, the war story, the story around the campfire. It is always a confession of the powerlessness of man over the intentions of the gods – in these we fail the easiest of tasks and succeed in the most impossible of endeavors, as the Fates will.

As predators we understand our entire life, and each discrete section of it (the day, the week, youth, maturity, age, the new job) as a hunt.

We hunt for security; fame, happiness, compensation, et cetera. Psychiatry is an attempt to bring to the conscious the nature of the hunt and, so, reason backward to the underlying needs of the sufferer – to bring to consciousness the unconscious assumptions and goals whose incompatibility with possibility are making the analysand unhappy.

Drama is not an attempt on the part of the dramatist to clarify but rather to present, in its unfiltered, disturbing form, the hunt of the individual (the protagonist) such that, in its perfect form (tragedy), the end of the play reveals the folly of the hero's (and so the audience's) assumptions about the world and himself.

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