

# **“The Play’s the Thing....”**

## **Participant Notes**

### **Podcast Two:**

**Where Do Playwrights Get Their Ideas?  
How Do They Develop Them?**

# The PSH Podcast Series: The Play's the Thing

## Introduction

### Welcome

This podcast is the second in a series on the key elements of playwriting.

### The Learning Aids

Each podcast has a brief handout that goes with it which will make it easier for you to follow along with the content. This is that handout.

There is a series of handouts, one for each learning topic. These handouts list key points on the topic and might make it easier to follow along with the podcast, particularly for the visual learner. You may wish to download and print out the handout, particularly if you are going to be listening to the podcast in a location which allows you to follow along with some simple notes. The podcast will still be useful without the handout, so if you can't print it out, don't worry about it. Occasional references to specific page numbers will be made in the podcast for clarity. The handouts include some follow-up assignments which are designed to deepen your understanding of the topic. Those assignments will also be discussed in the podcast.

### Who Am I? (Andrew Black, Playwright and Learning Host)

Andrew Black wrote his first play, a romantic comedy, with a collaborator, Patricia Milton, in 2001. That play (a romantic comedy called *Porn Yesterday*) was a finalist in a national playwriting contest in 2002 and was produced for the first time in 2003. *Porn* has now been produced across the country. Andrew and Patricia collaborated on three more plays, and then Andrew began to write on his own. Eventually, he received an MFA in playwriting in 2012, from Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. Now a resident of Indianapolis, he teaches at the Indiana Writers Center there. His plays are produced throughout the United States. Andrew also has a degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. He feels that his background in instructional design and his artistic talent qualify him in a unique way to teach playwriting. For more info, visit [www.andrewblackplaywright.com](http://www.andrewblackplaywright.com)

### Play Submissions Helper (Series Sponsor)



PSH is a community of more than 1700 playwrights. The goal is to help playwrights realize their dream of getting a play produced by saving them hours of time searching for theaters to submit their work to. For just \$6.99/month, PSH provides a compendium of hundreds of theaters that are accepting play submissions. It's the perfect system for a busy playwright who wants to focus on the craft of writing. Sign up now by going to [playsubmissionshelper.com](http://playsubmissionshelper.com)!

## Introduction (Continued)

### Podcast Two Agenda

- Welcome/Start-Up's
- The handout
- Who am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)
- Where might an idea for a play come from?
  - Training Yourself to Look for Ideas
  - The Playwright's Journal
  - Personal History/Your Biography
  - Current Events/Historical Ideas
  - Social Problems
  - The Unconscious and Dreams / Open Time
  - Borrowing from the Collective Unconscious (and from other playwrights)
- What Is Your "Theme"?
  - Establishing a "premise"
  - Identifying a protagonist
  - Pinning down the central idea
  - Identifying your point of view
- Your assignments



## Where Do Playwrights Get Their Ideas?

You may already have an idea. If so, great! Or, you may be looking for one or have one you want to refine further. This section will provide an overview of some of the key places that playwrights get ideas, as well as some pitfalls of each. (And will also look at ways to develop an idea if you have one.)

### *Training Yourself to Look for Ideas*

Jerzy Kosinski (author, *Being There*) said: "I consider myself an artist not because I write books but because of the way I live my life." The true Artist has a point of view on life and is constantly finding things around her/himself that are interesting, stimulating, and/or artistic. A good practice for a playwright would be to identify 5-6 things every day that he/she could conceivably write a play about.

### *The Playwright's Journal*

The journal is an effective tool for training yourself to look for and capture ideas. A small notebook that is easily carried about can serve as the place you record any ideas worth noting. You might note an idea for a full-length play, for a skit, a line of dialogue or interestingly turned phrase, or just a note for a character's wardrobe. Carry around a journal and use it.

*Places to Find Ideas / Advantages / Pitfalls*

Source	Advantage	Be Careful...
<p>Personal History/Your Biography: People frequently want to write about things that have happened to them personally. Your own personal biography may be the source of a great idea: How you survived your divorce, dealt with your mother's death, or bought your first house.</p>	<p>You may not have to do a lot of research when the story is based on your own biography or is a situation you are very familiar with.</p> <p>People are frequently passionate about ideas from their own lives, which provides a lot of motivation to finish the story.</p> <p>This type of writing can be very therapeutic as you explore your own relationship to the topic.</p>	<p>Our lives are not always as interesting to others as they are to us.</p> <p>It is tempting to try to recount events exactly as they happened. Unfortunately, real life events frequently lack dramatic urgency.</p> <p>The need to tell stories exactly as they happened (especially if they involve others) may get in the way of spinning a good narrative.</p> <p>Being very emotionally close to content makes it hard to be objective about its quality. It can also be very hard on the ego if the work is not well received.</p>
<p>Current Events / Historical Ideas: News articles and magazine features contain great ideas for stories which can be easily adapted or modified for plays. Little known historical events (or even well-known ones) can contain the seeds for a compelling narrative.</p>	<p>Narratives based on "true events" may find producers more easily if the historical or current event value can be leveraged to build an audience.</p> <p>Truth is often stranger than fiction; more outrageous (and entertaining) ideas can often be found in situations that no one could ever "think up".</p> <p>You don't have to "dream up" a premise. Elements of the story are there waiting for you.</p>	<p>Slavish devotion to the accuracy of history or the truth of a specific story may get in the way of fashioning a compelling narrative.</p> <p>Plays based on true life events may run into legal problems if the people involved recognize themselves or do not agree to have life events dramatized.</p> <p>Frequently plays of this type require a lot of research to make them work. While engaging, this type of research can be time consuming and may still not result in an accurate portrayal.</p> <p>Narratives based on real events or history will require a dramatic question or "hook". Simply recounting the events one after the other as they happened is not enough, no matter how famous the person is or</p>

		interesting the events in and of themselves.
<p><b>Social Problems:</b> Exploring social problems on stage can be a fascinating way to get to the heart of a matter.</p>	<p>Relevant social problems can attract producers and audiences.</p> <p>This kind of play can be fun to write and allows the writer to explore the multiple dimensions of a situation.</p> <p>There is typically a lot of “juice” in a social problem type of play: lots of opportunities for conflict.</p>	<p>If the characters in the play are not three dimensional, the play may come across as melodramatic. If you have a strong point of view, it can be challenging to represent all points of view, which is required if the situation is to be truly dramatic.</p> <p>The challenge is to find an interesting “hook” for the play which keeps it from being “simple minded”.</p> <p>Research is probably required to understand fully the complexity of the situation.</p>
<p><b>The Unconscious and Dreams:</b> Your daydreams, wandering mind, and night dreams may provide great sources of ideas for narrative.</p>	<p>Getting into your own unconscious gives you access to a large (and often untapped) source of ideas for images, narratives, connections and even solutions to dramatic problems.</p> <p>There can be therapeutic value here for you as an artist as you explore your own psyche.</p>	<p>Allowing yourself enough down time so that the unconscious mind will get activated and speak can be challenging.</p> <p>Once the idea is there, keeping track of it for later use can also be a challenge (see Playwright’s Journal above).</p>
<p><b>The Collective Unconscious (and other playwrights)</b></p>	<p>Borrowing ideas from other playwrights / stories / narratives can be a great way to get started as a playwright.</p> <p>Formula plays (i.e., romantic comedy, murder mystery, fairy tales) have rules which can make it easier to craft a plot.</p> <p>The ideas you “borrow” may already have the bugs worked out.</p> <p>Working with a “master plot” can afford the playwright some psychological distance from the story.</p>	<p>The changes to the master story should be significant enough that the new version is not simply “stealing” the old version.</p> <p>Changing elements of a familiar story may futz with the wiring of the story in ways that are only evident after you put a lot of time into it.</p>



## How Do Playwrights Develop Their Ideas?



Many suggestions for developing ideas will come in later podcasts. For now, assume that it is good to start looking for the theme of the play right away, as soon as you have your idea. What is the key concept that the audience member will take home with him / her? What will that individual say that the play was “about”? Simply put, what is the moral of the story?

### *Establishing a “premise”*

An effective play is driven by a simple premise: a statement which basically describes the situation at the “top” of the play and provides the listener with a simple understanding of the story. It can be useful at the beginning of the process to determine how you might answer the question: What is the premise?

For instance, the “premise” of the movie *The Wizard of Oz* might be: A young Kansas farm girl who feels misunderstood by her family is transported to the magical kingdom of Oz by a tornado. Upon her arrival in Oz, she determines that she must get home as soon as possible. The story is her adventure as she tries to get home.”

### *Identifying the protagonist*

Another key aspect of the narrative to think about is the identity of the protagonist (more on the protagonist in a future podcast). Who has the most at stake? Whose journey will the audience care most about? (In *The Wizard of Oz*, the protagonist is the Kansas farm girl.) If you were to write a play about the social issue of abortion, whose point of view might you take? There are many to choose from: An activist? A politician? A young single mother, pregnant for a second time? The father of the child? The unborn child him/herself? Knowing the identity of the protagonist will help shape the idea. (And know that as you develop the idea, you may decide to change protagonists.)

### *Pinning down the central idea*

What is it about this subject that attracts or calls to you? There are merits to thinking through the idea and reflecting on it before you begin to outline your play and certainly before you begin to write. If you want to write an updated version of *Romeo and Juliet* about a Muslim and a Jew, why? What is it about star-crossed love that is compelling to you? You want to write a play about Ben Franklin. What is it about that historical character that speaks to you? In *The Wizard of Oz*, the central idea is the search for home or finding the place where we are safe and truly belong.

If you spend some time reflecting on the essence of your idea, you will probably get a better sense of what the core universal value is that speaks to you. It will then be easier to identify the theme that will hold your play together. This “soak time” can be hard for some playwrights as it may involve sitting and staring into space with the Playwright’s Journal in one hand and a pen in the other. If you are extraverted, it may involve finding a thought partner you can talk through the idea with and see what you discover about the idea as you talk.

Find a way to explore your premise or the situation you are interested in. Some value, perspective, belief, or notion you have about life has called you to this subject. The more likely it is that the core value you uncover is (or is not) be held by others, the better. While the central idea or value may actually change as you write (and re-write) the play, it is helpful to have some idea of what your personal stake is from the outset.

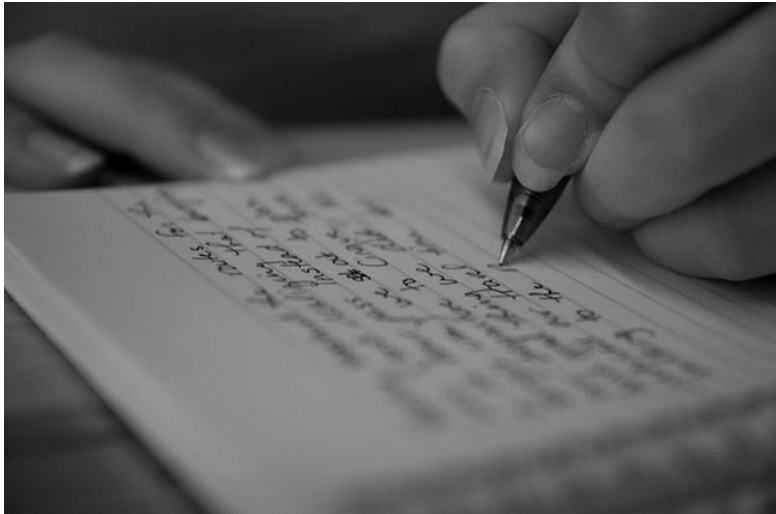
### *Identifying your point of view*

Once you have pinned down your theme, it can be useful to identify your point of view on the topic. Again, if the audience is to walk out with something to chew on, it will be helpful for you to know from the beginning what the key idea is you want to communicate. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the point of view is “There’s no place like home.” Or, more specifically, “If I go looking for my heart’s desire again, I’ll never go looking any further than my own back yard.” That’s the point of view. Happiness is frequently found where we already are, rather than searching for it at a distance.

If you take your idea, turn it into a premise, pin down the central idea and identify your point of view on that idea, you are ready for the next step: Writing an outline.



## Your Assignments



### *Food for thought.*

You may wish to get a “Playwright’s Journal” if you don’t already have one.

1. Over the next week, write down 5-10 ideas that catch your attention (preferably in your journal). Try to scan a variety of sources for ideas. Challenge yourself to pick up a magazine you would not normally read, or watch a documentary on a topic that would seem to be outside your normal interests. See what catches your attention and write down the idea.

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2. Take 2-3 of the ideas you jotted down and see if you can identify a simple premise. And then...who might be the hero of the story?

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## Your Assignments (Continued)

3. Take the ideas above and see if you can identify the central idea or value in the middle of it all. And then (of course), see if you can determine your point of view on that idea. What is it that you might want an audience member to reflect on as he/she exits the theater?



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