PLAY SUBMISSIONS HELPER

“The Play’s the Thing….”

Participant Notes

Podcast Six: Old and New World Order/ The Play’s First Ten Minutes

The PSH Podcast Series: The Play's the Thing

Introduction

Welcome

This podcast is the sixth 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 of the learning topics. The handouts list key points and make it easier to follow along with the podcast, particularly if you are a 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 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 podcast includes some follow-up assignments which are designed to deepen your understanding of the topic. Those assignments are also written down at the end of the handout.

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

Play Submissions Helper (Series Sponsor)

PSH is a community of more than 1700 playwrights. Its goal is to help playwrights realize their dream of getting a play produced by saving them hours of time searching for theaters to which work can be submitted. For just $6.99/month, PSH provides a compendium of hundreds of theaters and organizations 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 www.playsubmissionshelper.com!

Introduction (Continued)

Podcast Six Agenda

- Welcome/Start-Up’s
- The Handout
- Who Am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)

- Teaching Examples Used in this Podcast
- Old and New World Order: What and Why?
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  - Protagonal Point of View
  - Old World Order as the Template for New World Order
  - Alternative Forms: Absurdist Structure
  - Various Plots and the New World Order
- The First Ten Minutes
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Teaching Examples

One of the challenges of teaching playwriting is that it is helpful to use examples from great plays. However, not all playwrights have read all plays. I would suggest that aspiring playwrights do need to familiarize themselves with the great works and if need be, seek them out.

This podcast will use five well-known plays/stories as its teaching examples: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun*, Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (movie version, 1939*)*, Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House,* and Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man.*

Old and New World Order: What and Why?

What Is Old World Order?

Sometimes called “stasis,” the Old World Order defines the world of the play before the occurrence of the intrusion or inciting incident. (The *intrusion* is an event which upsets the applecart or destroys the peace of mind of the protagonist and will be the subject of a later podcast).

The Old World Order is important because it serves as a benchmark against which the audience can measure and, to an extent, understand the events which take place in the rest of the play. In most plays, the protagonist undergoes a journey. With a few exceptions, the protagonist is not the same at the end of the journey as he / she was when the journey began.

The theme of the play is often revealed by the character’s journey, and audiences frequently are looking for clues to determine what the theme or message of the story is. These first clues to what the play is all about are found in the settings and dialogue of the Old World Order.

The Protagonal Point of View

The world of the play is seen through the eyes of the protagonist. The Old World Order defines the world of the play from that perspective and helps the audience understand who the protagonist is and how he / she understands the world that he / she is part of, and by extension how the audience understands that world.

It is usually important to understand he state of mind and the essential temperament and attributes of the protagonist at the start or "top" of the play to understand the overall journey or character arc. The state of mind or essential character of the hero is revealed as part of the Old World Order.

The word "revealed" is used here to describe a process of deduction by which the audience comes to understand who the protagonist is and what their world is all about. Audiences love to figure things out on their own, and typically the identity of the hero/heroine and facts about the world around that individual are shown or indicated and not described directly or overtly.

Another function of the Old World Order is that it often helps the audience understand the leading character's relationship to the theme of the play, which is something that often changes as the play proceeds to its conclusion.

Old World Order as the Template for New World Order

This New World Order essentially defines the world of the play once the Major Dramatic Question (MDQ) has been resolved. As with the Old World Order, the New World Order is seen through the eyes of the protagonist. The structure and content of the New World Order tell the audience about the hero's journey through the play and allow them to come to their own conclusions about the meaning of the play.

The Old World Order can serve as a template for the New World Order by creating parallel structures which allow the audience to develop this understanding of the play's meaning. If the protagonist was poor and unhappy in the Old Word, she might become rich and happy in the New World (or maybe poor and happy, depending on what the play is trying to say, such as "money can't buy happiness"). If information was hidden from sight in the Old World Order, it might be brought to light in the New World Order. If someone was stubborn in the Old World Order, that person might become flexible in the New World. If a dark spell hung over the kingdom in the Old World, the darkness may have been dispelled in the New. Supporting characters may or may not have gone through transformations over the course of the play as well.

The New World Order can therefore (by design) provide a thoughtful contrast to the Old World Order. Elements/Objects/Actions/Storylines that are introduced at the play's beginning are resolved or completed in the New World Order. Old and New World Order work hand in hand. (More on wrapping up story lines later.)

Alternative Forms / Basic Plots

The Old World Order / New World Order model is usually found in the well-made play which uses the basic concepts of narrative. It is worth noting that the absurdist structure is a structure in which the Old and New World Order are identical. Absurdist plays which are written by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett reflect the world view that life is random and chaotic and that nothing makes sense. Nothing we do matters, and so there can be no change. By definition, then, the end of the story is essentially the same as the beginning of the story.

There are a few basic plots which recur in plays. Christopher Booker illustrated some of these in his book *The Seven Basic Plots*. Each basic plot has a formula for the new world order, which typically involves the lesson the hero must learn. If the basic plot is "Overcoming the Monster", the monster is, of course, overcome. The hero is frequently innocent in some way must mature and then at the end of the story become fully a man (or woman). If the story is "The Quest", usually, the hero/heroine achieves the quest (though not always) and in the process, learns something about him or herself. In a tragedy, the hero usually dies as the result of his poor choice making and the lesson is learned: don't fool around with the moral order; it won't turn out well. If a play follows one of these basic plots, the old and new world order often follow a formula or set of rules which the writer can tweak or infuse with his or her own voice to bring the stories to life while following some time-honored storytelling traditions.

The First Ten Minutes

A related topic to that of Old World Order is that of starting the play. The Old World Order is typically established during the play's opening, and it is worthwhile to take time to look at what a playwright might need to do to set the play up for success in the opening. (It is assumed that the writer is writing a full-length play which might run 90-100 pages in length. Therefore, the first ten pages would be the first 10% of the play. A ten-minute or ten-page play would need to accomplish these things in one page; a one act might need to get them out of the way in five pages.) It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the first ten pages of a full-length play.

Typically, a story is an exercise in setting things up and then paying them off, opening boxes and then closing them. In a full-length play, many of the things that will pay off later in the play are set up in the first ten minutes. Stories are told which later prove to be lies. Riddles are posed which later will be answered. Hints about problems are dropped which will later burst into full-fledged into full-scale riots on stage. The Old World Order is established.

A play's first ten minutes help set up facts/exposition, protagonist point of view, storylines/key images, and tone/rules.

Facts / Exposition

To understand what is happening in the world of the play, the audience needs to understand the facts of the world they are experiencing. The play is taking place in a specific location, at a particular point in time, and particular people are on the stage with particular purposes and points of view. The first ten minutes can establish all these facts of the narrative. The audience is willing to tolerate some ambiguity at the beginning of a play, but if there is too much that is unclear, the audience will begin to get restless (some members more than others). In the teaching examples I referred to earlier, the audience learns a lot about the facts of the play right away, which anchors the audience in the theatrical reality of the narrative. Some of these facts can be hidden away and revealed later; the more that is hidden, typically, the more uncomfortable the audience becomes.

Protagonist Point of View

By the end of the first ten pages, the audience should usually have a pretty good idea of whose story they will be tracking. Generally, an audience should be able to hear the first ten pages of the play and tell the playwright who the protagonist is. If they are unable to do that, or if the playwright gets different answers from different audience members, the writer should have a very good justification for that, or else, he or she is not really in control of the story or the point of view. Not only should the audience be able to identify the protagonist, but the audience should already have started the process of cathecting or identifying with that character. The character's circumstances or situation or choices should be such that the audience already begins to feel empathy with him/her.

Storylines / Key Images

The first ten pages begin to introduce key story lines and images. A story line is a plot element that recurs over the course of the play. It may involve a specific character, an object or an outside force. As the protagonist pursues his or her goal, there are typically elements in the environment that support or block his ability to achieve the goal. Often these elements are storylines in and of themselves.

Characters often have their own story lines, and frequently, in the first ten pages, many of the key characters are introduced, and their relationships to each other (and some of their history) are explained. Key images that will recur throughout the play or have special meaning to a character may be introduced.


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Tone / Rules

The basic tone of the play is also established in the first ten pages. Is it realistic? Is it fantasy? Is the play serious or comedic? The audience gets a sense of what to expect in the play, and they calibrate those expectations. There is nothing wrong with varying tone; however, a playwright does so at his/her risk. It can be surprisingly difficult to establish a consistent tone in a play. It can seem like a creative or off-beat idea to insert a wildly comic scene or amusing piece of business in an otherwise serious play. Or to vary the language or conventions unexpectedly. There is nothing wrong with playing around with tone and conventions. However, many playwrights who have not mastered the ability to create and maintain a single tone are tempted to experiment. My suggestion for new playwrights is to start simple. Establish a tone and see if you can maintain it consistently for the length of your play. You need to know what "kind" of play you are writing. Once you have mastered the ability to create and sustain a single tone, then feel free to experiment. And the key to establishing tone is to set it in the first ten minutes.

Related to tone are "rules". There are certain conventions that playwrights create. Does the play take place in a post-apocalyptic alternate reality? If so, what are the "rules" of that reality? How does it function? Does a character have superpowers? Can people fly? Again, how do they work, what are the rules that govern them? These norms are frequently established in the first ten pages. The use of other theatrical conventions is often set up in the first ten pages, such as the use of flashbacks or direct address. If these conventions are used late in the play without them having been set up or introduced before, it can throw an audience off balance. At a certain point, the audience gets comfortable with what is being presented, they think they know what to expect and that knowledge frees them to experience the story. While it is certainly possible to introduce a new convention late in the story, the playwright should do so advisedly.

Pitfalls of the First Ten Minutes

There are notable pitfalls to beware of in the opening of the play. The first is that because a lot of exposition needs to be delivered, the opening can become very talky and dull. There are a few ways to solve this problem. One strategy is to give the protagonist a clear dramatic objective that he/she is trying to achieve from the top of the play.

One of my writing mentors used the phrase “stasis in motion” to describe the technique of providing a stasis for the protagonist which is dynamic and therefore more engaging to the audience.

A second pitfall is the use of a narrator or a character speaking direct address to the audience to deliver exposition efficiently. I am not fan of this approach. To me, part of the fun challenges of writing a play is figuring out ways to deliver the exposition so that the audience doesn’t know that it is being told what’s going on. For my money, using a narrator or direct address is the lazy playwright’s way out.

The magic of the theater is that when the lights go down and the curtain goes up, the audience can be transported anywhere, any place, any time. It is an amazing moment of expectation. To waste that moment by having the audience discover that they are in a theater listening to an actor on a stage describing something to them seems a shame. Notwithstanding the fact that some of the great plays use that technique, I find it inherently anti-theatrical. It does the work for the audience and is not nearly as engaging as other means of getting the information across.

I would encourage the new playwright to experiment with ways to get the information across through dialogue and action and let the audience have the fun of figuring out what is going on. Again, there are no rules in the theater. The technique can be used successfully, but in lesser hands than Thornton Wilder, the technique can seem at best uninvolving and at worst didactic.

Getting The First Ten Pages Right

The first ten pages are so critical to the success of the entire play, that a writer may wish to spend extra time crafting these pages. Writing a play is a process of discovery, so at a certain point, you get the first ten pages reasonably close to what you need and then move on to the “second ten pages”. It can, however, be worthwhile to spend extra time crafting those critical first pages before moving on. There might be at least two or three drafts which can be valuable in grounding everything that will come next.

Tying Up Story Lines at the End of the Play

Just as the Old World Order is established in the first ten pages, the New World Order is established in the final pages. Usually, the conclusion of the play is a lot shorter than ten pages.

In the final pages of the play, the playwright must put everything to bed. There will be more on this topic in a later podcast, so a few brief notes will suffice.

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Once the major dramatic question has been answered, the play is essentially over. (In some cases, the first dramatic question is answered and is immediately followed by another more compelling MDQ. In these cases of successive MDQ’s, the story is over when the final, most compelling MDQ has been answered yes or no.) Once the MDQ has been answered for the audience, the play and its story lines need to be wrapped up as fast as possible.

In those last few pages, try to tie up all loose ends. Some writers (myself included) have more of a need for closure than others, so how much to wrap up will be a personal choice. You as the playwright can pick the story lines that are important to you and wrap them up. My belief is that the fewer unresolved story lines, the better. Readings can help here. If your initial reading gets a lot of feedback that the ending takes too long, you may be trying to resolve too much. If you get pushback that people want to know what happened to one of your supporting characters, you may not be resolving enough.

It is worth noting is that story lines need to be wrapped up in reverse order of importance. The biggest payoff should come at the end. Typically, the biggest payoff will involve the protagonist. Whatever key image or idea the protagonist was working on is resolved as close to the end as possible.

Finally, the playwright can effectively show how the New World Order is contrasted with the Old World Order. If the plant was dying in the opening scene, it is living the closing scene. If the confirmed bachelor was spurning invitations in the opening scene, he is now accepting one in the closing scene. If the little boy was afraid of water in the opening scene, he is diving into a

shark tank in the closing scene. Balancing the opening and closing images of the play gives the play (and the audience) a sense of coherence and finality.

In Summary

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the concept of Old and New World Order. They are used to communicate theme and character to an audience and they usually help ground plot as well. The Old World Order is a critical component of the play’s opening, the New World Order, of its conclusion.

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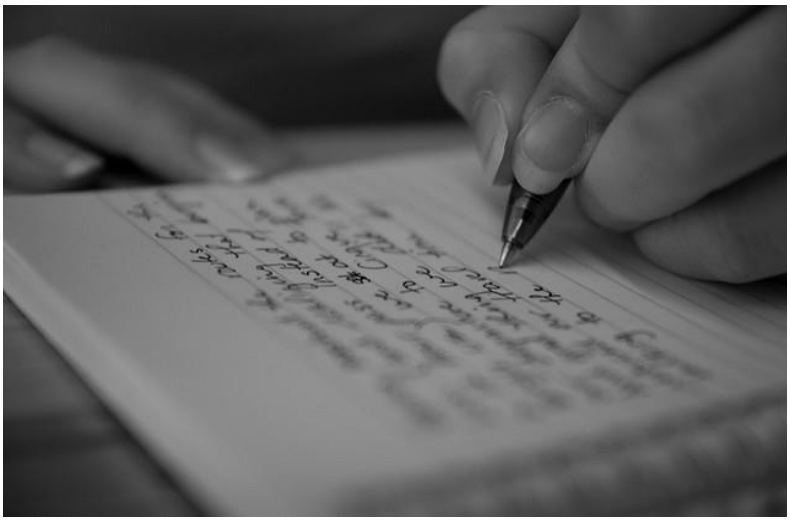
Your Assignments



Food for thought.

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

1. Think about a play, one that you really like. Compare and contrast the Old World Order and the New World Order in that play. How does the world at the top of the play parallel or mirror the world of the play at its conclusion? How do they compare and contrast?

2. Analyze the first ten pages (or the key first scenes) in that play. How much about the overall story does the playwright set up? What do we learn about the world of the play? What key themes, images or storylines are introduced? How does the playwright communicate information other than having characters state directly to the audience what is happening in the play?

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3. For the play you are working on: consider what you need to set up in the Old World Order that might be “contrasted” in the New World Order? What elements might be the same? What elements might be different?

4. For the play you are working on: What facts does the audience need to know to understand the narrative? How will you make it clear who the protagonist is and get the audience to empathize with him/her? What storylines or key images are important to you? How might you introduce them in the opening scene(s)? Are there special rules for your universe? How can you communicate them? How might you describe the “tone” of your play? Can you “set” it in the first ten pages?

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