

"The Play's The Thing....."

with Andrew Black



Participant Notes

Podcast Ten: The Writing (and Rewriting) Process

“The Play’s The Thing.....”



The PSH Podcast Series: The Play’s the Thing

Introduction

Welcome

This podcast is the tenth 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.

The handout lists key points and makes it easier to follow along with the podcast, particularly if you are a visual learner. You may wish to print out the handout, especially if you are going to be listening to the podcast in a location which allows you to follow along. The podcast can be followed 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 found 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

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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 Ten Agenda

- Welcome/Start-Up’s
- The Handout
- Who Am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)
- Getting Started
 - Getting the Idea and Developing It
 - Developing Ideas Before You Begin Writing
 - Workshops and Classes/Writers Groups
 - Outlines: Pro’s and Con’s/Formats for Outlines
 - Networks
- The First Draft
 - The First Ten Pages
 - Getting the First Draft Done
- Table Reads
 - Setting Table Reads Up
 - Debriefing the Reading
 - Principles for Rewriting
- Staged Readings

Getting Started

Background/Getting the Idea

Earlier podcasts presented the concepts of basic narrative construction and seven Key Elements of Narrative. This podcast will review these ideas but from the linear perspective of building a play, one step at a time--the process of writing (and re-writing) the play.

Playwrights/Storytellers usually start with an idea.

It has been noted elsewhere that one tool playwrights can use is a journal.

Typically, some ideas will have more energy for the playwright than others. It is useful for the story teller to take advantage of unconstructed time to ruminate on the various ideas noted and see where they lead.

These processes help the writer winnow or sort various ideas that lead the writer to the place where he/she says “this is the idea”.

Everyone develops ideas differently. In my graduate program, the first question we would be asked when we “pitched” an idea for a full-length was “who is the protagonist?” There is more information in Podcast Number Four about the Protagonist.

In classic story telling, the protagonist is incomplete or lacking in some significant way at the beginning of the story. The play becomes the tale of what the protagonist discovers about that emptiness or sense of lack.

So then: Identifying a protagonist who is incomplete in some way starts the process. Something happens to introduce chaos or disorder in this character’s world, and a journey of some kind begins towards a goal. If you as a writer have some sense of these key structural elements as you begin the work, they will help anchor you during the process.

Developing Ideas Before You Begin Writing

One risk for writers is that they frequently move to the page too quickly.

Further, it is fairly well-known that the brain has two hemispheres, right and left. Less well known is the role these two halves of the brain play in the creative process.

In playwriting, both sides work together. The right brain comes up with creative ideas, and the left brain figures out how to incorporate those ideas into a story that makes sense.

Talking through your ideas with someone else before beginning to write can be a very helpful intermediate step toward organizing your creative ideas in a way that allows you to begin writing “Act One, Scene One” (which is very “left brain”).

Workshops and Classes/Writers Groups

So how is one to develop these ideas by talking about them? Where does one go? Sympathetic friends or spouses/partners may offer help and support. And if one has an enthusiastic and supportive artistic community, one can draw down on those resources.

However, some people may not have that option and even the most sympathetic spouses may tire of this process by the time the writer gets to outline number 14. The solution can be playwriting workshops and classes.

Do a web search and see if there are playwriting classes in your community you can take which will provide this opportunity.

If classes for playwriting are not available, there are many creative writing groups. Find one and see if it would consider adding a playwright to the mix.

Outlines: Pro’s and Con’s

My experience suggests that there are two kinds of writers: those who like to outline and those who don’t.

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The advantage of NOT outlining and just starting in to see what happens is that the feeling of creativity and excitement can be very exhilarating.

On the other hand, starting without knowing exactly where you are going can make for an experience of diminishing returns.

The disadvantages of outlining are that it feels inherently anti-creative. It is linear and very left brain. It requires a bit of artistic discipline, some skill, and a methodology that which doesn't feel like it is taking the fun out of everything.

A simple outline can lay out some of the key “facts” of the play. The table below provides some ideas:

| | |
|--|----------------------------|
| Protagonist: Who is he/she and in what way is he/she incomplete or lacking. | Fill in your content here |
| Inciting Incident: What happens to upset the protagonist’s current state of affairs? (It could be something traumatic or an unexpected opportunity of some kind.) | Fill in your content here |
| Goal: What does the protagonist need to accomplish or achieve to capitalize on the opportunity or minimize the trauma? (Bonus points if you can clearly define what the protagonist achieving the goal would look like on the stage) | Fill in your content here |
| Does the protagonist achieve the goal? (yes or no, sort of) | Fill in your content here |
| Resolution: How is the sense of lack that existed in the protagonist at the top of the play dealt with? | Fill in your content here |
| Plot: What are the sequential steps or activities that the protagonist probably must take to get to the goal? | Fill in your content here |
| Plot/Characters: Who are the allies/adversaries the protagonist must leverage or deal with over the course of the story? | Fill in your content here. |

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When I outline, I like working with flip charts and post-it notes. Sometimes these job aids are called “mind maps”.

When complete, the writer can use the mind map to explain the idea to someone else (the willing spouse or friend steps in) and the process of using the map to explain the idea clarifies different elements of the play.

One last tool the playwright can use to organize thinking is the “meta-plot”. There are many schemas which outline basic recurring plots in narrative. My favorite is *The Seven Basic Plots* by Christopher Booker.

Networks

More so than perhaps any other art form, theater exists in community. One thing that an enterprising playwright will do is seek out community.

Invest early on in a network of theater artists with whom you can form community.

The internet and social media make it easy to reach out to and find others for community. Look particularly for writers, directors and actors; they are the class of artists you will need the most help from.

Being around creative people can stimulate your creativity and keep you moving forward on a project.

The First Draft

The First Ten Pages

At a certain point, you are ready to start. It can be helpful to set aside a chunk of time to write and get a good head start. Every writer has different ideas about how to structure his/her time to make the writing happen.

At the atomic level, the first ten pages of a full-length play is critical, particularly if you are following the structural model. Typically, the first ten pages introduces

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the protagonist and the old world order, revealing the protagonist as incomplete or unresolved in some critical way. It establishes time, place, setting, tone, conventions and other core elements of the play. It probably introduces some of the supporting characters and some of the key images, themes and objects that will be used throughout the play.

Once the first few pages are complete, it can be helpful to have a reading. I believe that getting the first ten pages correct anchors the writing of the rest of the play.

Depending on your assessment of readiness of the first ten pages, you may elect to continue or go back and do a re-write. Once you feel comfortable that your start is in good shape, keep going.

Getting the First Draft Done

In classes, it is common to bring in ten pages or so at a time on a weekly basis. I think it is realistic for a writer to produce about ten pages a week, even with normal life constraints. Depending on your personality and your life situation, if you can arrange to have ten or so pages read at a time as you write, you would be well off to consider it.

One warning: beware of the temptation to try to make the first draft perfect. Just go. It is easy to get “stuck” if something is not clear.

One of the maxims of writing is that the most important thing about the first draft is that it exist. Rewriting in some ways is easier than creating that first draft from nothing.

Table Reads

Setting Table Reads Up

A table read is an event where the playwright gets to hear the play read all the way through from beginning to end. They are called table reads because they are usually done around a table.

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To set up the table read, simply invite actors (or friends with pizzazz) to come over and read the script.

Actors are usually happy to participate for free. It sharpens their cold reading skills which are useful for auditioning, and it positions them to be cast in the play if it finds its way to production.

At the reading, I usually say a few words about where I am in the developmental process if there are people not familiar with such things. That way, they know what they are listening to. I tell them the discussion questions I will ask before they hear the play so they are better prepared to discuss it.

Debriefing the Reading

Discussing the play after it has been read is tricky. I find it helpful if the playwright does not lead the discussion.

My preference is to keep the debrief questions simple.

One, what did you like about the play?

Two, what was confusing?

Three, what suggestions do people have?

It can be useful to find out who the audience perceived as the protagonist. It can be so clear to the playwright, yet, not so clear to the listener. Asking what people believed was the theme or central idea is also a good question

A few principles for processing the feedback:

- If the feedback seems unduly negative or even mean-spirited, discard it.
- If you have respect for the person who offered the die, take it into account.
- If the note reflects a lack of understanding of the play overall, discard it.
- IF the note makes you (or others in the room) say “ooooh”, take it into account.

Frequently writers like to let the feedback settle before jumping into the feedback

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process. You will have your own “notes” for yourself. You can consider what other people said and how you might use it before diving into a re-write.

Principles for Rewriting

Another maxim of writing is: Writing is Rewriting. Do not be discouraged if your first draft is not perfect. It rarely is. Have fun with the re-write and accept it as part of the process.

A few things to look for in the rewrite:

- Consider how to integrate the feedback.
- Consider how to clarify what was confusing for people.
- Consider how to continue development of your protagonist (make the character more active, more sympathetic, more multi-dimensional)
- Consider how to increase negotiations, particularly between the protagonist and the other characters.
- Consider how to edit it down. Frequently, early drafts are talky or overly explicit. Consider how to streamline dialogue and show rather than telling.
- If you used placeholders, you may by now have ideas about more clever or original plot elements.
- If you have “on-the-nose” dialogue where the character is very self-revealing or saying exactly what he/she means, consider how to make the dialogue more indirect.
- If your first draft is vague, consider how to use more specificity in your language to make your text more interesting and engaging.
- If there are elements that appeared later in the text that could have been introduced earlier in some way (a payoff that is not preceded by a set up), consider how to introduce the element earlier.
- Consider how to make sure the dramatic tension is sustained (often through scene construction)
- Consider how to make the characters more robust and more distinct from one another, each one with a clear point of view.

Once the re-write is complete, then you can consider your next step, which might be another table read. If the second draft is rather significantly different than the first, a second table read might be in order.

The Staged Reading

A staged reading gives the chance to see the play on its feet. Typically, the staged reading adds two elements: actor preparation and blocking.

There are festivals and contests which offer staged readings as the “prize” or part of an overall development process. If you are lucky enough to be picked for one of these opportunities, congratulations. You may not want to wait for that to happen and start the process on your own.

The staged reading then takes place, and the debrief is very similar to a table read.

The staged reading will often illuminate elements that make sense on the page or in the mind of the playwright but are hard to “see” in a table read.

Here again, the rewriting process is similar to the process for rewriting after a table read. The playwright rolls up his/her sleeves and gets to work.

In Summary

In this podcast we’ve talked about getting ideas, developing them, planning the writing process, outlining, writing, table reads, rewriting, and the staged reading.

If all these activities go well, the play will be ready for the next phase of development: Sending it out to a theater, which will be the topic of the next podcast.



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Your Assignments



Food for thought.

This content lends itself less to “homework” than the other podcasts have. The real homework is to start writing a play.

1. If you have an idea, consider how you might anchor it by identifying the protagonist (and how he/she is lacking), the inciting incident, and the goal. Share these ideas with a trusted friend or colleague in the theater and get feedback. See how the “morph” as you describe them.

2. Develop a “mind map” for the play, outlining the series of scenes and key actions in each one. Use colorful post-it’s and flip charts. Then, share it with someone and see how the idea changes as you discuss it.

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3. Write the first ten pages of the play and stop. Have some people over and have them read it. Practice asking someone else to lead the post-reading discussion of the pages.

4. Investigate playwriting classes or writers' groups in your area. Sign up for one (or join one).

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