Participant Notes

Podcast Eight: The Plot

"The Play's The Thing……"

Introduction

Welcome

This podcast is the eighth 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.

Each podcast has its own handout. 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 print out the handout, particularly if you are going to be listening to the podcast in a location which allows you to follow along. The podcast will 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 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

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!

"The Play's The Thing……"

Introduction (Continued)

Podcast Eight Agenda

- o Welcome/Start-Up's
- o The Handout
- o Who Am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)
- Plot: What and Why?
   - o What Is a Plot?
- o Why Is It Important?
- Principles of Plotting
   - o The Plot in Relationship to the Major Dramatic Question/Protagonist's Goal
   - o Process Plots
   - o Escalation / Causality / The Clock
   - o Supporting / Disconfirming Evidence / Sub-Plots
   - o The Architecture of a Scene / Negotiations
   - o Sub-Text
- The Seven Basic Plots / Basic Plot Lines
- In Summary

"The Play's The Thing……"
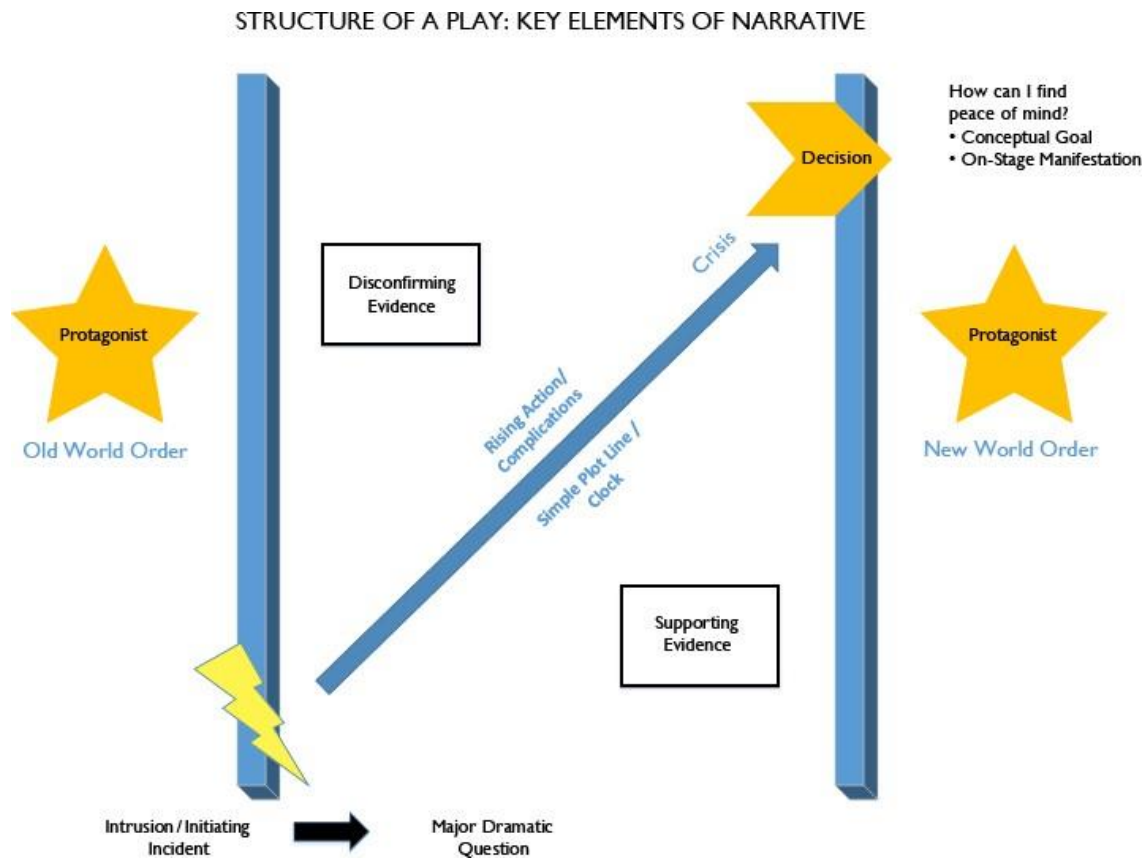
Teaching Examples

This podcast will rely less on teaching examples from well-known plays than the previous podcasts. Examples from the works of students I have taught will be given as we go to provide some quick easy-to-understand examples on specific teaching points. The primary text I will use is *The Wizard of Oz*, which is best known to audiences in its 1939 film incarnation from the MGM motion picture studio, a film starring Judy Garland as Dorothy Gale. This narrative is extremely strong (as are most stories for children), and it is well known to a wide range of audiences which makes it a great teaching example. Though a movie not a play, the principles of narrative are quite clearly delineated. As a matter of note, the movie been turned into a stage musical, and it works very well in that format, largely because the narrative is so strong.

Plot: What and Why?

What Is Plot? Why Is It Important?

The *plot,* for the purposes of this podcast, is the series of events in a play which begin once A) the initiating incident has taken place and B) the major dramatic question is introduced. The events constituting plot continue until the major dramatic question has been answered. Those events which happen before the MDQ is introduced constitute Old World Order; anything that happens after the question is answered is considered New World Order. In the diagram below, plot is the diagonal blue arrow between the vertical blue lines, which stretches from the lightning bolt to the yellow arrowhead.

"The Play's The Thing……"

STRUCTURE OF A PLAY: KEY ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE

How can I find
peace of mind?
• Conceptual Goal
• On-Stage Manifestation

Decision

Crisis

Disconfirming Evidence

Protagonist

Old World Order

Rising Action/ Complications

Simple Plot Line / Clock

Protagonist

New World Order

Supporting Evidence

Intrusion / Initiating Incident

Major Dramatic Question

Some theorists distinguish between "story" and "plot": The "story" being everything that is contained in the narrative (including exposition and back story). The "plot", then, consists of things that happens on the stage.

The plot is the audience's roadmap through the play; it charts the journey of the audience from the beginning of the theatrical narrative to its end. Ideally, it is logical, makes sense, escalates in tension and provides a few unexpected twists and turns along the way.

Principles of Plotting: The Plot in Relationship to the Major Dramatic Question/Protagonist's Goal

All of the key elements of narrative come together in the plot. If the playwright has clearly identified a protagonist, something that has disturbed the protagonist's peace of mind (inciting incident), and something that the protagonist has decided he/she needs to restore his peace of mind (a goal), then the plot becomes the story of the protagonist's attempts to achieve that goal. In

The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy is the protagonist and the tornado which has taken her to Oz is the thing which has disturbed her peace of mind. The MDQ is "Will Dorothy get back to Kansas?" and the plot consists of the actions Dorothy takes to try to get back to Kansas:

1. She goes to the Emerald City to see the wizard.

2. She kills the wicked witch and bring her broomstick back to the wizard.

3. She has to deal with the revelation that the wizard is a humbug.

4. She deals with the crisis when the newly developed escape plot (a balloon) falls through.

5. She makes a decision to follow through on her plan to return to Kansas when she learns the ruby slippers will take her there. Given the fact that her new friends in Oz really love her, this decision is a tough one.

The MDQ is answered: Yes. Dorothy gets back to Kansas. The plot moves the story forward and unifies the key elements of the narrative. So too can any playwright's well-constructed plot if few simple principles are followed.

Principles of Plotting: Process Plots

One place to start in plotting is to develop a process plot. A process plot is based on the idea that there might be an easily mapped out sequence of events or a process that could lead the protagonist from where he/she starts to the thing that he/she thinks will result in peace of mind. The playwright need to determine what the logical steps might be which would get the protagonist through that process. To an extent, creating a process plot is like following a recipe.

I do believe that it is important for the playwright to work out these "steps" in the plotting process before writing begins. The playwright can "discover" things about the story as he/she writes and change things around, but having an overall destination keeps the writer from getting lost as the story is being written or from getting discouraged and giving up when things get difficult as a result of a lack of preplanning.

Principles of Plotting: Escalation, Causality, The Clock

Other simple but easily understood principles have been referred to already but bear repeating for the sake of completeness. The journey of the protagonist must become successively more difficult as the story progresses. This is called

escalation. The difficulties must get harder to overcome as the plot progresses, culminating in the difficulty that is the most difficult, one that (frequently) represents the biggest challenge to the protagonist's character or identity.

The series of events in the plot have sometimes been likened to a row of dominoes falling. Each event should lead logically and naturally to the next. This concept is called *causality.* Mysteries are often plotted in this manner, where one clue leads naturally to the next. The hero opens an envelope and finds a key. The key opens a box which contains an obituary. The obituary is about a man who lived in an apartment downtown. And so on. One clue leads to the next.
Causality. This technique keeps the audience engrossed and builds a plot logically.

Finally, using a *clock* is a technique that creates a sense of urgency. For example, the musical *Into the Woods* requires its protagonist (The Baker) to collect four items by the time three midnights have come and gone. Here, we have a process plot (the Baker must find four items) combined with a clock. The task must be completed before the chime of midnight in three days' time. A *clock* creates suspense for the audience and helps time stamp the action of the play, helping the audience understand what they are waiting for. In a short play, a clock is especially helpful to creating a sense of urgency: "Your plane leaves in ten minutes; I will do everything I can to get you on it!"

Principles of Plotting: Supporting / Disconfirming Evidence / Sub-Plots

In classic structure, everything in the play points to the core idea, which is typically wrapped around the MDQ. If there are ideas or images or characters or motifs that do not directly relate to the theme of the story, the playwright needs to ask if they really belong in the play.

As the audience watches the story, its attention is focused on whether the protagonist will achieve the goal. As the story progresses, the audience should be keeping score as events unfold. The protagonist should be either getting closer to or further away from achieving the goal. Each element of the play shows up on one side or the other of the audience's mental scoreboard: closer to / further away. These elements serve as either supporting or disconfirming evidence. They either reinforce our belief that the protagonist will achieve the goal, or they disconfirm it.

A way to build the plot is to lay out the elements which will support the protagonist on the journey and the ones that will hinder the protagonist as the

story unfolds. Once the playwright is clear on what those elements are, they can be inserted into the plot, scene by scene as needed. Each scene can consider how that particular plot element might be advanced. All of the plot elements in the Wizard of Oz mentioned earlier has its own story line or arc, and the character or thing is developed scene by scene as needed.

The task, then, is to determine, usually in advance, what these elements of plot (supporting and disconfirming evidence) are and figure out how they will show up in each scene. This area is one where outlining can really help the playwright.

Principles of Plotting: The Architecture of a Scene / Negotiations

Once the process plot has been laid out, a clock has been activated, and supporting and disconfirming elements have been identified, the individual scenes can be written. The architecture of a scene is often as follows

- Someone (probably the protagonist) wants something.

- There is an obstacle to his securing it.

- The protagonist must employ a strategy which is designed to get that thing, which probably involves some kind of conflict or negotiation.

- At the end of the negotiation, the protagonist gets the thing. Or, the protagonist gets part of it and needs to move on and get more. Or, the protagonist doesn't get it but gets something else which moves the story forward. If the exchange involves an object which represents what the protagonist wants, so much the better.

It cannot be overemphasized that negotiations in which the protagonist has to contend with and overcome obstacles should drive the action of almost every scene.

Principles of Plotting: Sub-Text

One last principle of effective playwriting doesn't necessarily belong specifically in this section, but since much of it will be used to forward the action of the story, I will put it here. It has to do with the use of sub-text. Simply put, sub-text is the technique of NOT having the characters say exactly what they mean or asking specifically for what they want.   Dialogue in which the characters say exactly what they mean, such as, "I am so mad at you," or "I am leaving," is static and dramatically uninteresting. This kind of language in a play is frequently referred to as being "on the nose," and generally speaking, it is to be avoided. It takes all

the fun out of it for an audience which likes to figure out things on its own, particularly important things.

A second use of the concept of sub-text has to do with the use of specific stage *actions*. Frequently plays are "talky" which means that the characters do nothing in a scene but talk to each other.

Principles of Plotting: The Seven Basic Plots

One of my favorite theorists on storytelling is Christopher Booker, who wrote a book called *The Seven Basic Plots.* Booker has done research which suggests that over the millennia, writers have been telling the same stories over and over again. He hypothesizes that these stories are constantly told and retold because they reflect seven essential metaphysical questions that humans ask themselves about life as they live it. These seven basic stories are human beings' attempts to make sense of their existence by telling stories about it. Each of the seven basic plots maps to one of these life questions. Further, each of the seven plots has a basic structural form that characterizes it.

The table below provides an overview of the seven basic plots for consideration by the playwright. More information about the plots can be found in Booker's book.

Plot	Fundamental Question	Examples
Overcoming the Monster	Can I overcome the monster?	Dracula, The Three Musketeers, Sherlock Holmes
Rags to Riches	Can I manifest my inner brilliance?	Cinderella, Aladdin, My Fair Lady, Jane Eyre
The Quest	Can I find what I am looking for?	The Lord of the Rings, Treasure Island, The Odyssey
Voyage and Return	I am lost in unfamiliar circumstances; will I ever be able to find my way back home?	Wizard of Oz, Peter Pan, Gone with the Wind

Comedy	The world is topsy-turvy and out of joint…will it ever be set "right"?	Midsummer Night's Dream, Lysistrata, The Importance of Being Earnest
Tragedy	I want to do something whose ethics are questionable in some way. Can I get away with it?	Hamlet, Macbeth, Carmen, The Picture of Dorian Gray
Rebirth	I am dead inside, in some critical way. Can I ever recover my passion for living?	Christmas Carol, Beauty and the Beast, The Secret Garden

In Summary

In this podcast we've talked about the plot, what it is and why it is important. The plot is the audience's roadmap through the play; it charts the journey of the audience from the beginning of the theatrical narrative to its end.

There are ways to develop a plot, a few key characteristics of effective plots, the typical architecture of a scene within the plot. This podcast also looked at sub- text as a way of developing interesting scenes within the plot.

Finally, the podcast looked at seven basic plots that can be used as a model by the playwright who wants a formula to follow to get started.
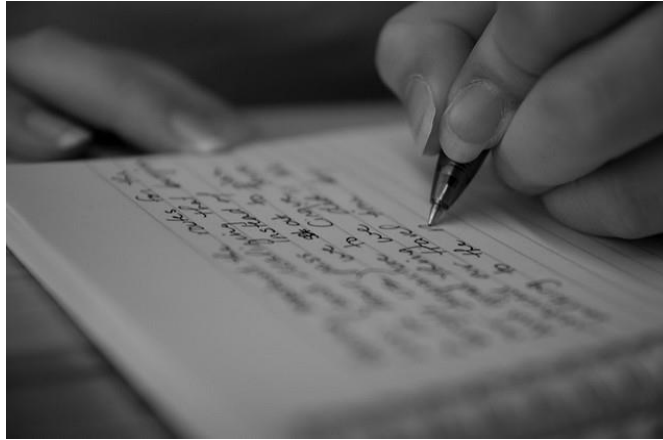
Join us for the next podcast when we will look at the turning point of the plot, the point at which the major dramatic question is answered: Crisis, Climax and Resolution.

"The Play's The Thing……"

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. See if you can identify the plot elements which serve as the spine of the play. What are the events in the play that follow the inciting incident and lead up to the resolution of the MDQ? (Be sure to stay at a high level in your analysis.)

_____

_____

_____

2. Once you have identified the plot, see if you can identify how the plot "escalates". Is there a "clock" in the plot? Does the play utilize a "process plot" or not?

_____

_____

_____

3. For the play you are working on: can you "map out" the plot? What are the elements one after another that will lead your protagonist from the introduction of the goal to its realization (or lack thereof)?

_____

_____

_____

4. For the play you are working on: See if you can map out the supporting evidence and disconfirming evidence (plot elements) that will either support or hinder the protagonist as he/she moves toward the goal.

_____

_____

_____

Brought to you by Play Submissions Helper