

How Plays Are Made

A guide to the technique of play construction and the basic principles of drama

Stuart Griffiths

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2 Action

Action is drama's most mysterious element. Formidable thinkers on the subject throughout history concur that it is also the most important. Indeed, drama *is* action. The word itself is derived from the ancient Greek word 'to do'. Lessing rightly said that all practitioners of the art and all critics must return to the plumb-line of Aristotle's writings on the drama. Those utterances are oracular, and appropriately cryptic at times. Aristotle defined tragedy as 'an imitation of the Action', and left it to posterity to work out exactly what he meant.

One interpretation could be that the process of a drama, the whole curve of its action, should parallel some fundamental rhythm or movement of nature. The action of a good play has often been compared to a wave making towards the sea shore: small at first, swelling higher and higher, with a steady rising and falling movement, at its highest peak breaking and crashing on the shore, then the sudden final falling away. Breathing; a beating heart; the cycle of the seasons; of a human life; the course of a single day; the act of coitus: they are all valid comparisons. In another art form, the process can be realized in a great symphony.

First thoughts

The action of a good play may be sensed by its author before he has even begun to think in terms of plot detail, characters or dialogue. He may have a vague yet insistent general idea of what he wants the play to be, and its action grows from that.

The rising action, the climactic action, combined possibly with a reversal, where the action veers round to its opposite, then the falling action and resolution, will be mapped out before a word of a play is written. In fact, the actual writing is a minor part of the work for many dramatists. It is done very rapidly. The play may have been gestating for months or even years beforehand. In different ways Ibsen, Noël Coward, Arthur Miller, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourn have all testified to this creative phenomenon.

Similar experiences are to be found in other artistic areas. Chesterton wrote of Dickens's first masterpiece: 'A man knows the style of the book

he wants to write when he knows nothing else about it. The idea of light existed when there was not a single solitary star. Pickwick is the mere mass of light before the creation of the sun or moon.'

Change: Othello

When one talks of a play's 'action', it is not physical action. That is only part of the process. Action must never be confused with mere activity or bustle. A drama can have a great action which carries an audience with it from beginning to end with hardly one burst of physical violence. It is emotional and mental action that counts.

The long temptation scene in *Othello* (Act III, Scene 3) consists mainly of two men talking together. The physical action is minimal. Yet the mental stress and emotional violence of the scene are tremendous. Before our eyes we see a terrible change taking place. As we watch, Othello gradually changes, through Iago's poison, from a state of calm noble stability into one of mad, uncontrollable fury and jealousy. The Moor changes, as it were, from black to green to red.

If that scene had been left out, and Desdemona simply reported to Emilia that her husband had undergone an awful transformation, the audience would have felt cheated. They actually want to see the transformation taking place.

Opposed forces

Equally important for dramatic action is the opposition of evenly-matched forces. If one force has its way too easily from start to finish the audience will lose interest. If it is met by an opposition worthy of it, the contending forces strain against each other, sway this way or that according to whichever has the advantage; there is stress, tension, struggle, a seesaw of fortunes, until the issue is resolved. It may be a conflict of individual wills, of ideas, of moral choices, of a man's purpose with some obstruction or flaw in his own nature. Eric Bentley, the American theatre scholar, has compared a dramatist to a perverse traffic policeman. Instead of keeping the traffic from hitting each other, he beckons and guides them into collision.

Goals and obstacles

The need for 'conflict' in drama can be misunderstood. It is generally better for the dramatist to concentrate on the idea of a man striving to achieve a goal, and meeting resistance from an obstacle or succession of obstacles. The goal may change of course. (Coriolanus first intends to rule Rome, then destroy it.) But it is hard to think of any great play where the principle does not apply. The obstructed will is the closest

one can get to a universal dramatic theme.

The obstruction need not be external, e.g. a villain. Hamlet, Coriolanus and Macbeth are examples of a protagonist whose purpose is frustrated and finally doomed by obstacles within his own nature.

Furthermore, the Shakespearean action is often marked by a striking reversal after the half-way point, e.g. in *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, where the rising movement, carrying the fortunes of the protagonist, is met by a counter-movement, which has nonetheless been built into the ground plan of the action from the start, and which ultimately prevails. This reversal, or revolution, provides the dynamic for the second half of the play.

The play's driver

In many plays the central character striving for his objective is the one who guns the action forward. But this is not always the case, and someone must be there to do it. There is a toy called Action Man, and in a sense every good play has its action man. At each stage, a play needs a driver, a galvanizer, an activator, a doer, a powerful will, someone who makes things happen. This may be the hero or villain, male or female, (Henry V, Richard III, Lady Macbeth), a supremely competent operator (Mr Voysey in Granville Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance*), or a perpetrator of comic disasters (Norman in Ayckbourn's *The Norman Conquests* or, in films, M. Hulot or Harpo Marx).

The King is the initial driver of *Hamlet* and he starts the play long before curtain rise by killing his brother and marrying Gertrude. Goneril and Edmund are the drivers of *King Lear* as well as the King himself. Voysey Senior drives the first part of *The Voysey Inheritance*, then his son Edward takes over (see p.16). These are not passive characters: they thrust the play onwards. They have objectives, and combat resistance. If the play is in danger of running out of steam a new driver can always be introduced. Powerful and colourful characters can be saved for the last act; Shaw does this with General Burgoyne in *The Devil's Disciple*, and Bohun QC in *You Never Can Tell*.

The process

Walter Kerr, the writer and Broadway theatre critic, has summed up the process of a dramatic action: 'There is a beginning stage in any change: a stage at which motivating pressures are beginning to clamour for a response. There is a middle stage: a stage at which the response is given and the inevitable conflict joined. There is an end stage: a stage at which the contest between pressure and response has resulted in a different relationship between these two things, a new state of affairs,

a changed state of affairs. All that is asked of the dramatist is that he show the beginnings of some one particular change, that he trace it through its natural turmoil, and that he bring the contending forces into a different – though not necessarily a perfect – balance. Things were one way; now they are another; we have seen them move.’

Examples

Julius Caesar

The pressure clamouring for a response in *Julius Caesar* is Caesar’s growing dictatorial power. Sedition is rife, embodied in the fiery Cassius (the driving force), who must first persuade the respected moderate Brutus to lead a conspiracy. This is not so easy – the two wills are matched in strength. Cassius’ passion, and the fear that Caesar will shortly be crowned king, eventually sway Brutus, and others. The conspiracy swiftly gathers momentum, its objective Caesar’s murder. The play rises to its formal climax – the assassination – and surpasses that with a great reversal, when Antony’s oratory turns the tables on the conspirators, and starts the counter-movement of the tragedy which will finally destroy them.

Coriolanus

Coriolanus is the patrician hero of Rome whose objective, in the long central section of the drama, is to become Consul – but not at the cost to his ferocious pride (the internal obstacle) of abasing himself before the plebeian electors. Although he will not show them his battle wounds, the puzzled plebeians consent to his election; but the Tribunes (driving the action forward) persuade them to revoke their decision. Coriolanus (his own fatal enemy) blazes up in rage at the Tribunes. The people turn against him and there is a riot. The rising fortunes of Coriolanus thus take a sudden downswing on collision with an opposing force.

His strong mother Volumnia cools his passion and urges policy (one mind swayed by another). For the moment, Coriolanus changes. He returns to the Forum, prepared to be more conciliatory. But the Tribunes (pitching the action forward) accuse him of being a tyrant and traitor. At this, all restraint flies from him, and the play soars to its climax. In a towering fury, Coriolanus curses the Tribunes and the people. On the instant they banish him from Rome. He turns his back on the city with terrible finality. It is a majestic reversal, a ‘peripeteia’, soon after the half-way mark, where the drama does a 180 degree about-turn.

Much is still to come – Coriolanus joins forces with the Volscians, his

former enemies, and marches on Rome. But in this central span of the tragedy there is turbulent movement, great passion, the collision of mighty opposites, and an incessant, drastic alternation of fortunes. It is a splendid dramatic action.

Galileo

In Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, free rational thought challenges authority and dogmatism. Galileo strives to propagate scientific truth, but is opposed by the Catholic Church which denounces his beliefs as heretical. When Galileo persists in disseminating the new Copernican system, proving that the earth is not the centre of the universe, the Church gets tougher: he is summoned before the Inquisition. Eventually he is forced unheroically to recant. (The internal obstacle is his sensual nature and love of comfort.) But the play shows he does not betray science completely.

The Voyage Inheritance

In Harley Granville Barker's play *The Voyage Inheritance*, the head of a noted firm of solicitors shocks his son Edward, the junior partner, when he calmly tells him that he has been swindling his clients for years and has got away with it. He did not begin this: he inherited the corrupt practice from his father before him. Necessity, but also a buccaneering spirit have motivated him. In due course Voyagey Senior dies, and Edward is left in an appalling dilemma. Most of his family are stunned when he tells them. They favour the path of expediency but really leave the decisions to him. Edward embarks on the laborious and highly risky course of attempting to put right the crooked finances of the firm, living constantly under the threat of discovery and imprisonment. Events in the latter half of the play show how dangerous this course is.

Edward thus comes to terms with his inheritance, and the process involves a fundamental dramatic action. Granville Barker depicts a man's struggle with his destiny, his resolve to strive with an almost intolerable burden and overcome severe obstacles, internal and external. Edward changes moreover, with the stress and responsibility, from something of a prig and a weakling in the first act, when his first impulse is to confess or leave the firm, to a grown man, worldly yet moral, dealing his own sense of right and wrong at the play's end. He travels a formidable journey. The play of course has other remarkable qualities and splendid characters, men and women, but this is its central action.

Causation

E. M. Forster said that a story depends only on time. 'The King died,

and then the Queen died' is a mere succession of events in time. A plot depends on causation. 'The King died, and then the Queen died of grief' is a plot. The principle of causality is essential to drama. It must not be an unrelated succession of incidents or episodes. It may appear so at the beginning – particularly in a fast moving, sharply edited film, or a radio or television drama which moves rapidly between past and present, and from one locale to another. The audience does not knit together the disparate events, the shifts in space and time, until later. But that is simply the delayed emergence of causality.

The action of a good play always points forward. It has a logical chain of cause and effect, with one scene leading on to another, in a sequence which has an organic growth, and which, once the audience's sympathies and passions are engaged, will carry them along in a strong current to the conclusion.

Action and character become indistinguishable. Things happen because a man is what he is and, as the play advances, its events change him. 'Character is destiny'. The drama moves by its own inner necessity. It is driven finally by its own internal logic.

King Lear

The first scene of *King Lear* rolls aside a boulder which has been holding back an avalanche for many years. It starts a process which will not stop until the last line of the tragedy is reached. Lear divides his kingdom. He disinherits his youngest daughter Cordelia because she refuses to make an excessive public declaration of love for him, and banishes the Earl of Kent because he defends her. Given their characters, a clash between Lear and his two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, is now inevitable, and it grows logically. Lear would continue to think he could play the King and not restrain the hundred arrogant knights who attend on him. The fatal quarrel's inception is when Goneril tells her servants to treat Lear with less respect. When this occurs, his rage begins to mount.

Crucial stages intensifying the action are Goneril's dismissal of half her father's knights; and, when he turns to Regan, the placing of his messenger (the disguised Kent) in the stocks. At its height, Lear is beset by his two daughters, both competing to reduce the number of his knights. When Regan finally says 'What need one?', Lear cracks. Since he cannot now banish them, he banishes himself – into the storm. Madness and beggary follow as a natural consequence. But from this ultimate reduction – absolute monarch to less than a beast ('a dog's obeyed in office') – springs self-knowledge, compassion and forgiveness.

The section on Action continues for five more pages.

3 Dramatic tension.

Suspense

Tension

‘A great part of the secret of dramatic architecture’, wrote William Archer, ‘lies in the one word “Tension”. To engender, maintain, suspend, heighten and resolve a state of tension is the main object of the dramatist’s craft.’

What do we mean by tension? It is a condition of mental stress or excitement. The mind is actually stretched. The pulse probably beats faster. It is, of course, an essential element of suspense, which has been called the nerve centre or the mainspring of drama. The two are not strictly synonymous, for there are instances of dramatic tension where the suspense factor does not commonly apply.

Suspense

For immediate practical purposes, however, George Pierce Baker’s definition of suspense is valuable:

Suspense means a straining forward of interest, a compelling desire to know what will happen next. When a hearer is totally at a loss to know what will happen, but is eager to ascertain; when he partly guesses what will take place, but deeply desires to make sure; or he almost holds back so greatly does he dread an anticipated situation, he is in a state of suspense, for, be it willingly or unwillingly on his part, on sweeps his interest.

The Wild Duck

Suspense implies an imminent reversal of fortune. The Sword of Damocles hangs over the head of the protagonist. Or, if you like, a time bomb is ticking. In Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*, Gregers Werle enters Hjalmar Ekdal’s home as a lodger. We know he will wreck the happiness of everyone in it. Hjalmar is blissfully unaware that his wife was once the mistress of Gregers’ father, Haakon Werle, and that his young daughter Hedvig is not his own. Gregers’ perverted idealism is bound to construe it as his duty to tell Hjalmar the truth. But it is a long time before he makes his first move. Ibsen well knows that the audience will be on the edge of their seats by then.

In Ingmar Bergman’s production of the play, Max von Sydow as

Gregers started his long chat with Hedvig at a good distance from her across the stage. As the talk charmingly proceeded, he moved closer and closer to her: a chilling image of danger.

Milking situations: Dogberry in *Much Ado*

The ‘milking’ of situations involves suspense, particularly in comedy, e.g. making a character, previously established as given to verbosity, take a long time to deliver or fail to deliver a vital piece of news: Constable Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* (Act III, Scene 5). The clown has already unwittingly stumbled on the plot to wreck Hero’s wedding, and he goes with Verges to see Hero’s father Leonato, the Governor of the city. But he never gets to the point because he is so swollen with self-importance, verbose, and totally lacking in any sense of priorities. Verges tries to break through his monumental circumlocutions and tell Leonato, but Dogberry shuts him up – he wants to do the talking (‘A good old man, sir, he will be talking; as they say, “when the age is in, the wit is out”’ . . . etc.) Finally Leonato leaves impatiently for the church – where tragedy awaits that could so easily have been prevented.

It is a common fault with beginners to drill away at material which has small dramatic potential. But it is equally wrong to skip over material which could yield far more dramatic mileage. A writer should strive to discover all the possibilities for suspense in a scene, exploit the full temperamental range of his characters, and examine how each might affect all the others.

Sympathy

Suspense requires sympathy with the characters. If we do not care for them, it does not much matter if they do suffer a severe reversal. We will not be kept in alternating states of hope and fear about them.

Asking questions

Most of all, suspense makes the audience ask questions. The movement of a play is from question to answer, from problem to solution. Will Hamlet kill the King before the King kills him? Will Lady Teazle be discovered behind the screen? If so, what will be her reaction – and that of the others on stage? We sense the imminent doom of Oedipus, but just how, and when, and by whom will this be brought about?

The Man Who Came to Dinner

In the Kaufman and Hart Broadway comedy *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, Sheridan Whiteside, a caustic, larger-than-life literary personal-

ity, breaks his hip and is trapped for weeks with a family in the Midwest. Much of the plot is concerned with Whiteside's efforts to prevent his secretary leaving him to get married. Will playboy Beverly Carlton sabotage Whiteside's plan to stop the marriage? Will the wily Whiteside, who misses nothing, tumble to Carlton's ruse? Amid the flow of hectic talk, Whiteside begins to listen very carefully, putting two and two together; the audience grows increasingly anxious, fearing the gaff will be blown. It is. Again, the suspense depends on our sympathy for the secretary, and our wanting Whiteside to lose.

Rope

In Patrick Hamilton's thriller *Rope*, two young psychopaths murder a fellow student just for the thrill of it. They place his body in a chest, then invite his father and other guests to supper – served off the chest, which is in full view throughout. The suspense of course hinges on the question – will the guests discover the body, and the murderers be brought to justice? Inevitably the audience's sympathies are with one suspicious man who begins to latch on to the truth.

The Parachute

In David Mercer's television play *The Parachute*, Werner von Reger is preparing for a hazardous jump to test a new parachute. Crucial scenes of his life prior to joining the Luftwaffe are intercut with shots of him assembling his equipment . . . climbing the parachute tower . . . reaching the platform. There is a tight framework of suspense for the story based on the questions – Will he jump? If he does, will he be killed?

High Noon

The classic Western *High Noon* combines the tension of waiting with urgent questions. It is less than an hour before the killer's train arrives at noon. Newly pardoned, he is returning to exact revenge on the outgoing Marshal who sentenced him to be hanged. His three henchmen wait at the station. There are shots of the empty railway line stretching into the distance, and the hands of the clock moving closer to noon. Meanwhile, the Marshal scours the town for deputies. Will he find them? One by one they cry off. If he cannot find them, will he run away? Or will he stay and face almost certain death? Again, we must feel sympathy for the Marshal in order to care about the answers. The way he comports himself under stress – and of course the fact that he is played by Gary Cooper – ensures that we do.

Often it is not only What happens next? but What is happening? Why is this happening? What has happened?

*The section on Dramatic Tension and Suspense continues
for eight more pages.*

4 Exposition

Text appears here in the complete book.

This section concludes . . .

Hedda Gabler

In the first act of *Hedda Gabler*, there is much background information Ibsen wishes to convey about Eilert Loevborg. He does it by making Hedda – who, it is hinted, has had some emotional involvement with Loevborg in the past, though we do not know to what degree – worm the facts out of Mrs Elvsted.

Mrs Elvsted is evasive about the real reason for her appearance in town. Hedda gradually forces the truth from her by subtle, persistent interrogation (a will pitted against an obstacle). We are soon just as keen as Hedda to know more about Loevborg. What is Mrs Elvsted hiding? What was Hedda's relationship with Loevborg in the past? And Mrs Elvsted's with him now? The audience is eagerly asking the questions, the answers to which constitute the play's exposition.

More than this, the exposition is action. It becomes clear that Loevborg's arrival could be explosive. We have seen that Hedda is already bored with her marriage to Tesman. If she and Loevborg meet,

it could prove fatal to Mrs Elvsted's happiness. Loevborg, cured of drink, is also a potential threat to Tesman's career. And Loevborg's new way of life and happiness are themselves in danger, because our suspicions are confirmed, at the end of the act, that the woman in his past who tried to shoot him was Hedda herself.

So, as the exposition proceeds, there is change taking place before our eyes. There is growing conflict, the unveiling of character under emotional stress, and a sense of bad trouble looming. In a word, action.

Exposition equals action

Both Ibsen and Sophocles characteristically begin their plays about four-fifths of the way through the story, a short time before the crisis. The unveiling of the past becomes not a mere recital of information but a series of revelations which gun the action forward with an increasing sense of danger. We are offered, as Arthur Miller puts it, 'the marvellous spectacle of life forcing one event out of the jaws of the preceding one.'

Oedipus Rex is the supreme example, where the exposition is held back as long as possible, and released at the moment of maximum dramatic impact. The height of the drama is when the King forces the truth out of the old shepherd about the events surrounding his own birth, at the very beginning of the story. And this precipitates the catastrophe.

The Crucible

A final example from Arthur Miller showing how, in a superb play, action and exposition are indistinguishable. The curtain rises on the first act of *The Crucible* when the action has already begun and is gathering momentum. Witches are suspected in Salem. Fear walks the town. A group of local girls have participated in an obscene diabolic ritual in the woods at night. One of the girls, the daughter of Reverend Parris, has fallen into a mysterious coma. Is she bewitched? The whole act takes place in her bedroom, and she becomes a magnet for most of the important personages in the play. Quarrels flare up among them, fed by envy, greed, lust and hatred. These collisions tell us much about their characters, important events in their past, the social and religious climate of the time, and they prepare for the terror and hysteria to come. It is almost churlish to call Betty Parris's bed, which is the focal point of the action, an expository device. The audience is so caught up in what is happening, no one stops to consider it. And that is as it should be.

Four more sections follow this (see Contents).

9 Characterization

Characterization and dialogue are areas of drama which cannot be taught, any more than medical science can create human life. But there are useful pointers which can be given.

Type character

It is common practice to decry the 'type' character, comparing it unfavourably with the 'individual' well-rounded character, realized in psychological depth.

Baker, Archer, and most commentators, tend to disdain the 'type'. The notable exception is Eric Bentley.

There is much value, and considerable vitality, in the old comedy of 'humours'; in the idea that people are characterized by one ruling passion. The idea has proved richly successful in Molière, the Roman comic dramatists, Ben Jonson – and Shakespeare. Despite the great complexity of Shakespeare's finest creations, there is also a great simplicity, and often a very clear, single, dominant passion. Greek tragedy is full of characters which are, in fact, single dominant passions with human identities. An audience will stand up and applaud 'a passion' delivered with élan.

Humours and obsessions

The ancient tradition that there are only four main humours – choler, melancholy, phlegm and blood – may appear far too simplified but, taking a bold view, and regarding phlegm as 'coldness', can a better description be found for the essential natures of Lear, Hamlet, Iago and Othello?

The protagonists of Molière – Harpagon, M. Jourdain or Arnolphe – are, in fact, personified obsessions. The dominant passion is the *idée fixe*, a mind locked frenziedly in a single track, almost to the point of madness.

Genet, in effect, divides humanity into only two types – the dominant and the subservient.

Farce and melodrama

Many of the stock characters of farce and melodrama have immense

vitality. No one could describe Rufus T. Firefly or Otis B. Driftwood as complex characters probed in psychological depth, yet Groucho Marx's wild, bizarre creations have more voltage than many 'profound' studies of human nature. E.g. in *Monkey Business*:

ANGRY HUSBAND *(suspecting Groucho is after his wife)*: I'm wise.
I'm wise.
GROUCHO: You're wise, eh? Well, what's the capital of
Nebraska? What's the capital of the Chase
National Bank? Give up? Now for an easy one.
How many Frenchmen can't be wrong? . . .

The colourful personages of the Commedia dell' Arte have countless offspring in world drama.

Touring companies in Britain and America always had to include a Soubrette, a Low Comedian, an Adventuress, an Old Man, a Juvenile, an Ingénue and other standard types.

The Pilgrim's Progress

An apprentice playwright is on surer ground if he thinks less about creating complex characters, and more about, say, the single-qualified personages of *The Pilgrim's Progress*; the prototypes in the work of the ancient Greek authors Menander and Theophrastus; Victorian melodrama; the characters of very successful television situation comedy; or even the dwarfs in *Snow White* – the principle is the same.

Even in the psychological realms of Ibsen or the subtleties of Chekhov, there are mistaken assumptions. Chekhov usually has a traditional villain, e.g. Soliony, who brings about a tragic turn of events. And, for all her complexities, Hedda Gabler can be viewed as a traditional villainess. Psychologists themselves type-cast people.

Stereotypes

A warning is needed though. The stock character is justified only on the grounds of its vitality. If it does not spring to life, the result is far worse than a careful observation of an unusual person which does not quite make it as valid characterization. We are left with the boring stereotype, the cipher which inhabits so many bad plays, unoriginal, one-dimensional, based on received ideas of what motivates people.

It is also a good idea to avoid a relentless procession of abstractions marching across the stage: Man; the Human Condition; Fate; Virtue; Guilt; the Future; Wisdom. . . . Invariably, bringing up the rear will be another – Disaster.

The stereotype was condemned by Congreve who said it required little more than a good memory and superficial observation. A very accurate dissection of nature was needed to portray a true Humour which he defined as ‘a singular and unavoidable manner of doing or saying anything, peculiar and natural to one man only; by which his speech and actions are distinguished from those of other men’. Only talent can reproduce this, and talent is unteachable. A would-be writer has that searching insight into human nature, intuitive grasp of truth, X-ray vision, call it what you will – or he does not.

Individualization

Whatever his method, the playwright seeks to individualize his characters, to differentiate them, so that the audience immediately senses two or more minds interacting.

It must always be a character that speaks, asserted Ben Hecht, the American comic dramatist, *not a line born of another line*.

Contrasted characters

Contrasted characters have already been mentioned as a dramatic device. It is a favourite technique of dramatists. Why is this? Human nature is full of contradictions. They are to be found in everyone, but they are especially marked in the case of the dramatist. Within himself he may find doubt and certainty, cruelty and compassion, commitment to a political philosophy and rebellion against any form of commitment, romantic love and cynical lechery, masculine and feminine elements. He often strives to resolve his internal conflicts and reach the truth in dramatic form. Embodying two extremes in contrasting characters is one way of doing this. Ibsen was both Gregers Werle and Hjalmar Ekdal; Chekhov was both Trigorin and Konstantin; Shakespeare was both Othello and Iago.

But the practical reason, in terms of technique, is that the action of the play is strikingly braced by contrasted characters. It becomes more clear-cut and decisive. And the audience is not put into a fog of confusion about who is doing what and why.

Examples: *Hamlet*

Hamlet is contrasted with conventional men of action – Fortinbras and Laertes – and also with his best friend. The Prince’s wild exultant delight at the success of his play is countered by a laconic Horatio who sees that his manic mood is dangerous. Hamlet improvises a few lines of doggerel to prove he would make a player:

HORATIO: You might have rhymed.
 HAMLET: O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?
 HORATIO: Very well, my lord.
 HAMLET: Upon the talk of the poisoning -
 HORATIO: I did very well note him.

Othello

Two very different women in *Othello* are defined by their contrasting attitudes to sex. Desdemona can hardly credit that some wives are unfaithful to their husbands.

DESDEMONA: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
 EMILIA: Why, would not you?
 DESDEMONA: No, by this heavenly light!
 EMILIA: Nor I neither by this heavenly light:
 I might do't as well i' th' dark.

Endless combinations

None of the foregoing denies the immense range of human character and temperament, and the endless combinations of its component powers and defects, inclinations and aversions which individualize men, nor how an individual can be torn by contending emotions.

No man or woman's character is fixed and immutable, which is antagonistic to the nature of drama. As we have seen, a character can change a good deal from act to act, and indeed before our very eyes. A good play is alive from minute to minute, it is in a constant state of flux. It cannot stand still, nor the characters in it. The tension of ambiguity will operate in addition. Two contradictory elements can exist in the same character and be held together at one instant. Turn the prism and he is a different person.

A National Theatre production note on the paradox of *The Misanthrope*: A Radical says Alceste is a satirist; a Conservative says Alceste is the subject of Molière's satire.

The section on Characterization continues for thirteen more pages.

Characterization concludes . . .

Text appears here in the complete book.

Obstacles to love

It is worth noting that the most memorable love relationships in plays are not those of mutual adoration (which translates dully to the stage) but sexual antagonism: Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*; Mirabell and Millamant in *The Way of the World*; Célimène and Alceste in *The Misanthrope*; John Tanner and Ann Whitefield in Shaw's *Man and Superman*; Elyot and Amanda in Coward's *Private Lives*; George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; films such as *The Owl and the Pussycat* and *A Touch of Class*.

The attraction expresses itself through hostility. The obstacles do not need to come from outside. They are grounded in the personalities of the protagonists. As a result, their dialogue has more wit, sprightliness and entertainment value than the cooing of two love birds. 'I love you': 'I love you too' is not very promising dialogue. The parties are too much in agreement.

In order to make a traditional romance work in drama, there must be an obstacle. In fact, the more in tune the partners are, the greater the external obstacle needs to be. Romeo and Juliet are star-crossed. Even their most famous love scene contains an obstacle – the balcony. Barrett is the obstacle to Elizabeth and Robert Browning's happiness. A gulf of two centuries separates the lovers in the time play *Berkeley Square*. In the classic weepie, *Random Harvest*, the obstacle is the hero's amnesia.

As far as drama is concerned, the course must indeed never run smooth. The audience must ask – Will love conquer all? Will boy get girl?

Waste

The operation of suspense line by line in a love scene is well illustrated in Granville Barker's *Waste*, written in 1906, but very modern in its attitudes. The question is: will Henry Trebell and Mrs Amy O'Connell, who are both guests at a weekend house party, go to bed together? They tease and manoeuvre, but neither really knows the answer. They are attracted, but Amy's fears and Trebell's cold-blooded approach are the obstacles.

AMY: I don't want to tempt you. Yes, I do. But you don't look one bit . . . even now . . . as if you were in love with me. Yes, you do . . . yes, you do. But you've not said you love me. Why don't you say so?

TREBELL: I'll say whatever's necessary.

AMY: Don't gibe! I hate you when you gibe. Not even asked me if I love you!

TREBELL: Don't you? Do you? Don't you?

AMY: We don't mean the same thing by it, I'm afraid.

TREBELL: It comes to the same thing.

AMY: Henry . . . you have a coarse mind! No . . . I'll have nothing to do with you.

TREBELL: Very well.

AMY: I won't be played with . . .

10 Dialogue

The primary purpose of good dramatic dialogue is to state clearly the facts which advance the action of the play. Its basic form is to be found in the Latin mass or catechism – a simple statement and response, or a question and answer technique.

The form has been, and is still used to great effect by the *Commedia dell' Arte*, Molière, court-room dramas, detective stories, stand-up comedians.

Dialogue should grow out of a previous speech or action and lead into another. It is like a good scene sequence. Usually there is some momentary point of rest, a way-station that a particular passage of dialogue was making towards. Then it kicks forward again.

Mourning Becomes Electra

The first part of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* has the following passage where townspeople and workers on the Mannon estate see Christine come out on the steps of the house:

- MINNIE: My! She's awful handsome, ain't she?
LOUISA: Too furrin lookin' fur my taste.
MINNIE: Ayeh. There's somethin' queer-lookin' about her face.
AMES: Secret lookin' – 's if it was a mask she'd put on. That's the Mannon look. They all has it. They grow it on their wives. Seth's growed it on too, didn't you notice – from bein' with 'em all his life. They don't want folks to guess their secrets.
- MINNIE: Secrets?
LOUISA: The Mannons got skeletons in their closets same as others! Worse ones. (*whispers to AMES*) Tell Minnie about old Abe Mannon's brother David marryin' that French Canuck nurse girl he'd got into trouble.
- AMES: Sssh! Shut it, can't you? Here's Seth comin'.

The point that O'Neill wants to make is the scandal about the Mannon brother and the French Canadian nurse. Having reached it,

he cuts off suddenly, changes tack in order to whet curiosity. But the passage is still directed naturally, and in character, towards that end, starting with the simple comment that Christine is a handsome woman. The operative words which form an associative chain are ‘handsome’ – ‘foreign-looking’ – ‘queer-looking’ – ‘secret-looking’ – ‘secrets’ – ‘skeletons’ – then the fact about the scandal. One line leads on to another and advances the scene. The expository point advances the action.

The lines of the dialogue should be in character and express the character’s mood. As stressed before, it must always be a person that speaks, not the mere shadow or echo of the preceding line.

You Never Can Tell

Here is an extract from the embarrassing family reunion at lunch in the second act of Shaw’s *You Never Can Tell*.

- DOLLY: Is your son a waiter too, William?
 WAITER (*serving GLORIA with fowl*): Oh no, miss: he’s too impetuous. He’s at the Bar.
 M’COMAS (*patronizingly*): A potman, eh?
 WAITER (*with a touch of melancholy, as if recalling a disappointment softened by time*): No, sir: the other bar. Your profession, sir. A QC, sir.
 M’COMAS (*embarrassed*): I’m sure I beg your pardon.
 WAITER: Not at all, sir. Very natural mistake, I’m sure, sir. I’ve often wished he was a potman, sir. Would have been off my hands ever so much sooner, sir. (*Aside to VALENTINE, who is again in difficulties*) Salt at your elbow, sir. (*Resuming*) Yes, sir: had to support him until he was thirty-seven, sir. But doing well now, sir: very satisfactory indeed, sir. Nothing less than fifty guineas, sir.

It is a characteristic of young Dolly Clandon that she asks pert questions. It is one of the things which brings her to life as a character. It also makes her a natural asset to the play’s exposition. The waiter answers her question, and Dolly does not speak again here. She has served Shaw’s purpose, which is to introduce the subject of the son’s job. There is now a small gear change in the dialogue.

M’Comas, the family solicitor, misinterprets the word ‘Bar’. Shaw engineers this for several reasons. He wants to illustrate M’Comas’s character – jumping to wrong conclusions, the condescension, then the embarrassment. He also wants to illustrate the character of the waiter, who has a notably contrasting set of values, takes no offence whatever,

but is sensitive to M'Comas's embarrassment and skilfully eases it. The mistake also leads to the emphasis of a significant point. The waiter's gentle revelation that his son is a QC is stronger for coming in the form of a contradiction.

The subject might then be closed, but Shaw wants it kept open. M'Comas keeps it open for him by apologizing. The waiter is kind to him – 'I've often wished he was a potman, sir' (true) – but then has to explain why. This leads to further information Shaw wishes to impart about the QC son – who is to become the dominant character of the play's final act. We already know he is 'impetuous'. The fact that the waiter had to support his son until he was thirty-seven (which is almost what Shaw's mother did with Shaw) is amusing but, in the context of the play as a whole, which has some important things to say about parental and filial duties, it does have a serious purpose.

'Salt at your elbow, sir' again illustrates the waiter's character – his antennae are alive to everything going on about him. The sentences of dramatic dialogue do not have to be grammatically complete. There is no 'He' before 'would have been . . .' There is no 'He earns' before 'nothing less . . .' This is the way people talk in life. The speech patterns of the waiter are also characteristics that endow him with life. His way of ending every sentence with 'sir', his fondness for 'very' and 'indeed'. It gives a gentle rhythm to his speech which is uniquely his own.

Emotionalized speech

Dramatic dialogue consists in the main of emotionalized speech. The facts by themselves are generally colourless. Feeling must be present in the writing for it to reach out to the audience and involve them in the action. In the above example from O'Neill, fear and awe can be sensed in the characters' voices.

The highest flights of dramatic speech are so charged with emotion that the audience is conscious only of blasts of passion. The actual words become jets of fire.

There are inevitable exceptions. Communication of facts in a dry, unemotional way, e.g. a surgeon spelling out to a man that he has inoperable cancer, can be very dramatic.

It may help towards variety and contrast of mood in play writing to recall the extent and variety of human feeling. Spinoza lists 48 different emotions in his Ethics. Critical gibes like Dorothy Parker's 'She ran the whole gamut of her emotions from A to B' may well not be the fault of the actors at all. The playwright never gave them the chance to show what they could do.

The playwright has to find the buried river of the emotions and then work as an engineer, damming it here, deflecting it there, but always making the fullest use of its natural power. (Eric Bentley.)

Link words

Dramatic dialogue can create a skilful cats-cradle of words which keeps a play in motion. In Congreve's *The Way of the World*, Mirabell and Millamant often pick up each other's words in an easy, graceful exhibition of verbal fencing. At one point in the second act for example, Millamant holds up to scorn, as though with a pair of silver tongs, Mirabell's phrase 'beauty is the lover's gift'.

Othello

Link words can have a devastating dramatic impact in certain contexts, e.g. when Iago plants a vague suspicion about Cassio in Othello's mind (Act III, Scene 3):

IAGO: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.
 OTHELLO: O yes, and went between us very oft.
 IAGO: Indeed!
 OTHELLO: Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that?
 Is he not honest?
 IAGO: Honest, my lord?
 OTHELLO: Honest! Ay, honest.
 IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.
 OTHELLO: What dost thou think?
 IAGO: Think, my lord?
 OTHELLO: Think, my lord! By heaven, he echoes me,
 As if there were some monster in his thought
 Too hideous to be shown . . .

Again, the emotional coloration of the words, the subtle tones and inflections they invite from the actors, the dangerous undercurrents, the action within the silences, illustrate the nature of true dramatic dialogue. Iago's words fall like drops of poison into a clear fluid, precipitating deadly green flakes.

The section on Dialogue continues for ten more pages.

How plays are made

Vision and performance III

SHAKESPEARE'S TORCH-BEARERS

My accounts of six supreme dramatic moments.

EXCERPTS:

Text appears here in the complete book.

Olivier's Richard III

Richard of Gloucester is proclaimed King by the citizens of London in a farce engineered by his cronies, the Duke of Buckingham, Catesby

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and others. A charade is played out in which Richard pretends he does not want the crown, and finally accepts it with seeming great reluctance. He is in a gallery, wrapped in a hypocritical cloak of piety, and flanked by two priests. When the ritual is complete, he knows the throne is his.

In the film, which paralleled his stage performance, Laurence Olivier, as Richard, watched the crowd disperse, then pushed the priests away, swung down the bell rope to the ground – and waited.

The audience now witnessed a sudden transformation from the charade to the brutal realities of power. Buckingham and other henchmen ran towards him eagerly. Richard shot out his arm and pointed to the ground. He was now King: they his subjects. Compelled by the force of his will, they knelt at his feet in homage and Buckingham kissed his hand. Richard was dressed in black; his face, lifted skywards, had a ghastly pallor, and his eyes were bleak and remote; his crooked body weirdly disjointed, he trailed the robber barons like mastiffs on a leash. His tyranny was already a fact. Overhead the bell tolled the death-knell of England's freedom, and the inauguration of a reign of terror.

It was an unforgettable image. There are no stage directions for it in *Richard III*. Shakespeare knew what he was doing, though. He created all the conditions for just such a magnificent stroke by a great actor. It was totally in character for Richard to act thus, and the way is thoroughly paved for it in the text.

Olivier's Othello

Laurence Olivier as Othello was a purple firestorm, and the National Theatre audience reeled under its scorching heat. The climax to the temptation scene was probably its greatest moment. As Hazlitt said of Edmund Kean, Olivier 'filled every part of the stage'. He delivered the speech about the Pontic sea directly outwards, his eyes and hands tracking with mesmeric power its remorseless, compulsive course to the Hellespont.

Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
 Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
 Till that a capable and wide revenge
 Swallow them up. Now, by yond marble heaven,
 In the due reverence of a sacred vow
 I here engage my words.

In this moment, the words were crushed, melted down and extended. 'Ne'er' became 'ne-eee-er'. 'Marble' became a barbaric howl, almost a line on its own: 'ma . . . aaa . . . arble'. Most searing was Othello's in-

ability now to get his tongue round the word 'love'. He stammered 'l-l-l-' for an agonizing yawning gap of time, till he completed the word, then roared on to the end, his voice a lethal jet of flame shooting through the auditorium. He was writhing, possessed, terrible in his murderous resolution, as he ripped his crucifix off his neck and dashed it to the ground. Crouched at last like a panther, the Moor bowed again to his former gods of bloody revenge and human sacrifice.

The specimen pages from How Plays Are Made end here.