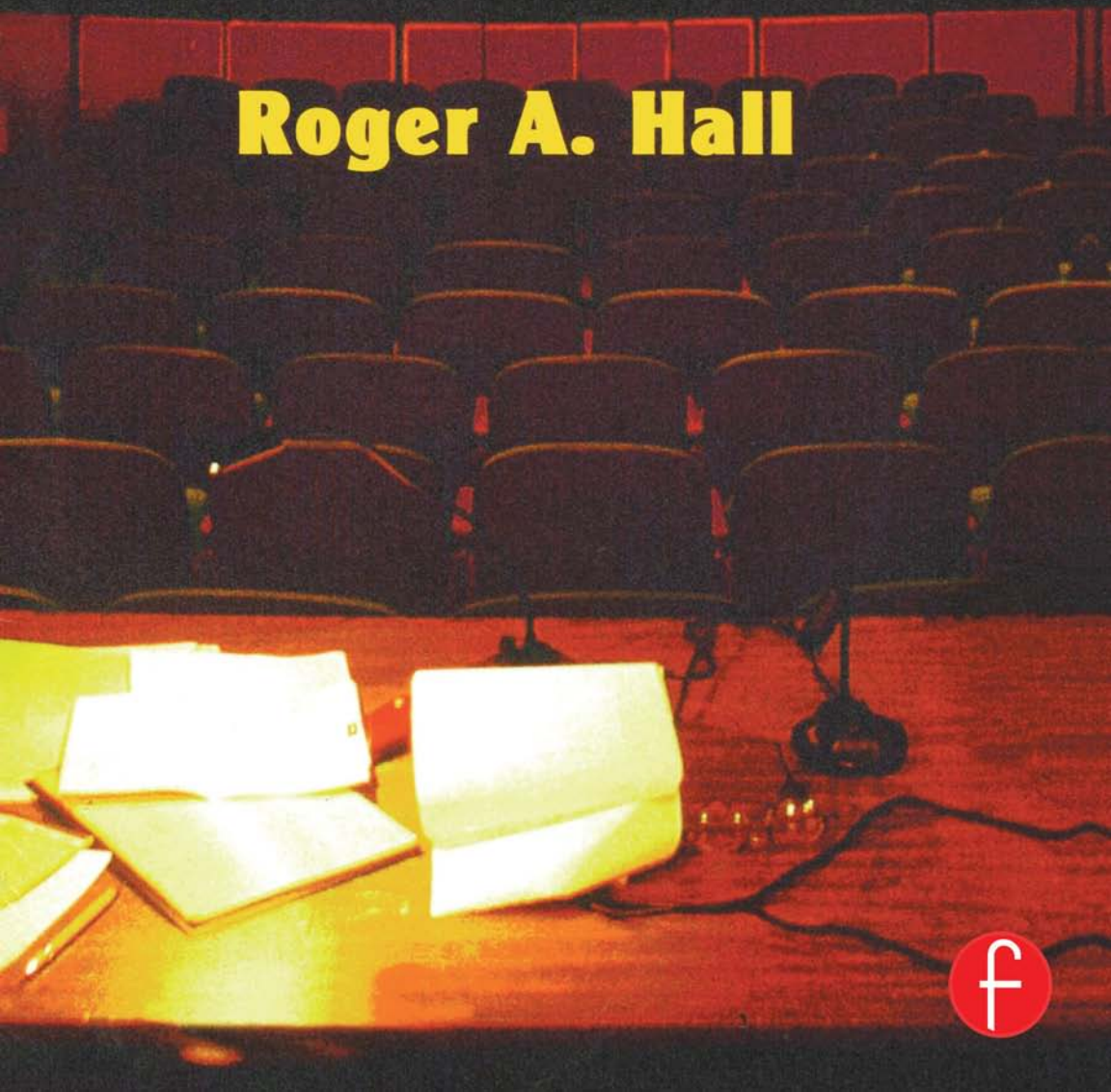
Writing Your First Play

SECOND EDITION

Roger A. Hall



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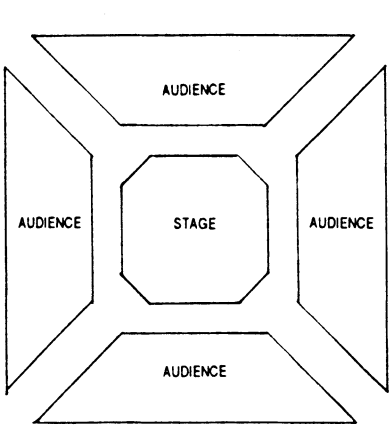

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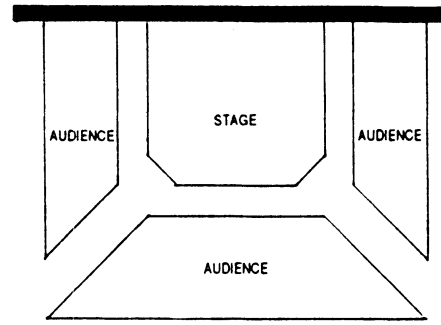

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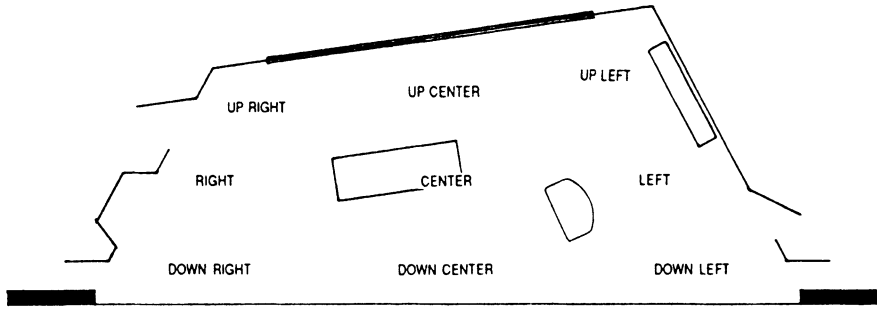

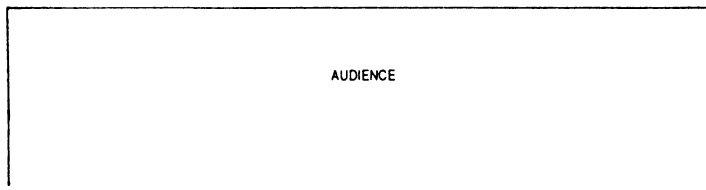

PROSCENIUM STAGE

Writing Your First Play

Second Edition

Roger A. Hall

Focal Press
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 1998

This edition published 2013
by Focal Press
70 Blanchard Road, Suite 402, Burlington, MA 01803

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Focal Press
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Focal Press is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hall, Roger A.
Writing your first play/Roger A. Hall.-2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-240-80290-X (alk. Paper)
1. Playwriting. I Title
PN1661.H28 1998
808.2-dc21 97-31903

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 13: 978-0-240-80290-9 (pbk)

Table of Contents

Foreword *Phoef Sutton* ix

Preface xi

Introduction xvii

1 • Action 1
- Dramatic Action Provokes Questions 3
- Dramatic Action Employs Verbs 5
- Exercise 1.1 7
- Evaluation 8
- Example: *A Man in a Bus Terminal* 9
- Evaluation 10
- Where Ideas Come From 11

2 • Direct Conflict 12
- Obstacles and Conflict 13
- Outcomes 14
- Stage Terminology 15
- Exercise 2.1 17
- Example: *Who's Selling Out Now?* 17
- Example: *Absolutely Nothing* 20
- Evaluation 23

3 • Character 25
- Character vs. Action 25
- Example: *A Woman At Christmas* 29
- Exercise 3.1 31
- Example: *Big Brother* 31
- Example: *Conversation* 34
- Evaluation 36

4 • Dialogue 38
Exposition and "Chunking" 41
Clichés 44
Exercise 4.1 45
Adverb Disease 45
Example: *Good Idea, If It Works* 46
Evaluation 51

5 • Three-Character Conflict 53
Three in a Room 54
Dramatic Irony and Love Triangles 56
Exercise 5.1 58
Example: *Break* 58
Evaluation 63
Example: *Nibbles* 64
Evaluation 68

6 • Writing From Life 70
Emotional Connections and Hazards 71
Exercise 6.1 74
Example: *Cliché* 75
Evaluation 79
Example: *The Donut Shop* 80
Evaluation 87

7 • Writing From a Source 89
Dangers of Fact 90
Exercise 7.1 92
Example: *Abracapocus* 92
Evaluation 98
Example: *Unattainable* 98
Evaluation 102

8 • Expanding Your Skills 104
Spontaneous Composition 104
Exercise 8.1 104
Example: *Get a Life* 105
Problem Solving: People, Places, and Props 105
Exercise 8.2 107
Location, Location, Location! 108
Exercise 8.3 108

Words, Words, Words 109
Exercise 8.4 109
Questions 109
Exercise 8.5 109
Live Theater 110
Exercise 8.6 110
Animals 111
Exercise 8.7 111

9 • Writing Your Play 112
Why Now? 116
Style 117
Exercise 9.1 118
Example: *Cable Man* 118
Evaluation 138

10 • Marketing Your Play 141
Format 141
Productions, Agents, and Contracts 142
Contests 144
Retreats, Residencies, Seminars, and the Web 145
Play-Leasing Companies and Publishers 147
Writing Your *Second* Play 148

Appendix: Classroom Procedures 149

Bibliography 151

Index 155

Foreword

Writing a play is a snap. All you have to do is arrange a bunch of words in order so that when actors say them on stage, they will bring an audience to laughter, tears, or enlightenment. Go to it. I'll catch you later.

OK, so that's an exaggeration, but there are a slew of writing books out nowadays that do deliver the message that the important thing is to *write* the play (or novel or screenplay) and get that sense of accomplishment. Figuring out how to do so will come to you along the way.

The fact that this theory isn't applied to other professions ("The important thing is to *do* the heart/lung transplant. You'll figure it out as you go.") doesn't seem to bother anyone. Plays are emotional things, things from the heart. They aren't something you have to learn how to do.

Or do you? Faith and inspiration might get you a good scene or even a good act, but eventually you'll see that those flashes of inspiration need to be made part of a structure, that a play has to be built. In order to build something, you need to have material and tools. That's what this book provides.

I've been working as a writer for a dozen years in theater, film, and television, and I've only taken one writing course. It was the first one I ever took, and it was taught by Roger Hall. I hadn't written before then. I haven't stopped since.

I remember one exercise in particular (it's in this book) that changed my whole idea of what a play could be. Open a script and the eye clearly sees what a play is—people standing around talking, sometimes sitting around talking. So when Dr. Hall assigned Exercise 1—write a scene with no dialogue—it seemed like a weird, if fun, stunt. As I wrote the scene (as I recall it was about something startlingly original, like people in dorms playing loud music), I saw that it didn't have to be strained, or forced, or twisted to fulfill the requirements. (If it was all three, that wasn't the assignment's fault.) I saw that a scene could be complete and whole without words because a play isn't about words; it's about people doing things, and speaking is only one of the things they do.

It sounds obvious. It's a simple lesson, but of the hundreds of scripts I've read since I became a producer, 99 percent of them have been nothing but people talking.

All of the exercises from Dr. Hall's class, each a giant leap forward in knowledge and experience for me, are in your hand right now. Also in it, and most entertainingly, are my fellow students. One of the most delightful aspects of this book is the writing samples from Dr. Hall's students over the years.

Most writing books, in their section on conflict, ask you to read, say, a scene from *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which leads any sensitive novice writer to give up and go into frozen produce marketing. You won't be able to write like Mamet right off the bat, and forcing a comparison like that is a recipe for writer's block. If you're serious about being a writer, you've read the great and the good plays; you know what to aspire to. Now you're trying to learn your craft.

That's a lonely process, and the other students in this book will keep you company, give you someone to compete with. Someone to make you say, "I can do that" or "I can do better than that." (Though you may be surprised; some of this writing is quite good.)

So do it. Read the book, do the exercises. Have fun, talk back. When you're through, you'll be ready to tackle that heart/lung transplant without fear of losing the audience on the operating table.

Phoef Sutton was executive producer and writer for the classic NBC television series "Cheers!" for which he won a pair of Emmy Awards. He also wrote for and produced two of Bob Newhart's endearing sitcoms. Mr. Sutton has been a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting Fellowship, and he was the winner of the Norman Lear Award for Comedy Playwriting and the Roberts/Shiras Playwriting Award. Most recently, he wrote the screenplays for Mrs. Winterbourne *and* The Fan.

Preface

When Focal Press first wanted to publish *Writing Your First Play,* I was elated. When people I didn't even know began to write me letters saying how much they had benefited from the book, I was even more pleased. I mean, I knew this approach worked within my classroom setting, but I wasn't entirely sure how it would translate to other teachers or to individuals laboring on their own. Apparently, it worked!

When Focal Press then asked me to prepare a second edition, I wondered to myself: What can I put in a second edition that I haven't already put in the first? I knew I could update the references to plays. I knew I could include different scenes and examples with more contemporary material. I also knew I didn't want to alter the basic structure of the book, and I didn't want to change the tone of the writing; I want that to be as personal as possible between you and me. So what difference, *fundamentally,* would a second edition make?

First, I decided to expand on one of things that people liked most about the original edition: the exercises. I've used quite a few more writing exercises with students than I actually included in the book. So for this edition I included an expanded chapter (Chapter 8) with additional exercises that illumine the art of playwriting and get your writing muscles warmed up.

Then I turned to the list of helpful suggestions that people had passed along. Those included a more substantial final play example, a fuller explanation of how to proceed from scenes to a full one-act play, and more information about what to do once the play was completed. I've tried to respond to each of those ideas by enlarging the chapter on Writing Your Play (Chapter 9) and adding a new section on Marketing Your Play (Chapter 10).

The essential core of the book, however, remains—especially the sequential exercises that help a writer learn the fundamentals of playwriting and develop a play at the same time. Just as I tell people to write from their own experience, the basic concept for that arrangement goes back to my own days as a student.

I once took a playwriting class in which the teacher, on the first day, said: "Your first assignment is to write a play. Bring it to class in two weeks, and we'll read and discuss it."

After class that day I turned to the student beside me and asked, "Do you know how to write a play?" "No," she replied, "that's why I

took the class. Do you?" No. I didn't either. I realized intuitively that there had to be a better way to help people write plays. When I began teaching playwriting myself, I put my efforts together with Dr. Ralph Cohen, a colleague in the English Department, who had similar interests.

We wanted to devise an approach that would allow students to work on certain fundamental aspects of playwriting one element at a time. We also wanted to encourage plays to evolve slowly from one idea to another. After some trials and errors, we developed a series of exercises that helped students to understand and use basic elements of drama such as action, conflict, dialogue, and character.

It just so happened that our experiments with playwriting came at a good time, for the last few years have seen a burgeoning interest in playwriting. Playwriting contests have sprung up like wildflowers, sometimes in the most unlikely terrain, and many of them carry substantial financial and artistic rewards. Community theater, secondary school drama programs, and college theater departments have demonstrated a greater willingness than previously to depart from the Broadway-hit syndrome and experiment with original works. The same is true of regional professional theaters, many of which have become prominent in the development of new scripts. In addition, almost every major city has semiprofessional or professional companies that focus their attention, sometimes exclusively, on original drama.

Broadway—the New York commercial theater—which in many ways is still regarded as the pinnacle of American theater, has also responded to this surge of new plays. Because of high costs, most of the productions in the major New York theaters have hued to the economically safer road of revivals or imports of successful British plays. Even in New York, however, such original American plays as *Six Degrees of Separation* and *Three Tall Women* have flourished. In many cases scripts such as *Oleanna*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Angels in America*, which were developed and produced first in other areas of the country, have eventually enjoyed Broadway success. Also, numerous off- and off-off-Broadway theaters in New York have gained a certain amount of notoriety through their production of new material.

This current fascination with the production of original scripts has led to explorations of the best and most effective ways to put a story into dramatic form. That is hardly a new concern. Ever since Aristotle some 2300 years ago tried to label the elements that comprised a superior tragedy, writers and critics have been attempting to tell people how to construct plays. Writers of our own century have not been idle in that enterprise. Dozens of volumes have been printed on playwriting, playwrighting, playmaking, how to write a play, and even how *not* to write a play. They have been written by knowledgeable critics of the drama such as Walter Kerr and Brander Matthews, experienced teachers of playwriting such as George Pierce Baker and Sam Smiley, and successful playwrights such as John Van Druten (author of *I Remember Mama* and *I Am a Camera*) and John Howard Lawson (author of *Processional*).

Every one of those dozens of volumes about playwriting contains valuable nuggets of advice—many of them reappear in the chapters of this work—and many of the books are excellent guides for the analysis of plays and the understanding of the playwright's craft. Still, as a teacher of playwriting I thought something was missing.

The development of a play is too often viewed in terms of procedure: Proceed from an idea to a brief scenario to an expanded outline to a rough draft of the play. Sometimes the development of a play is seen in terms of a progression of analytical elements: progress from an inciting incident through a series of minor conflicts or crises to a major crisis (the climax) and thus to the conclusion or denouement. Both of those standard methods seem to assume that the writer has the ability to invent a relatively complete idea for a play and needs only some working procedures or the inclusion of various standard dramatic devices in order to bring the idea to fruition.

My teaching experience suggested otherwise. I saw that young men and women who had never before written a play had much more basic needs. First, they needed some experience in working with the fundamental building blocks that make a play a play—such things as action, conflict, and the interaction of characters. Second, they needed help in generating an idea for a play. The concept of "getting an idea" for a play is a complicated notion. Ideas for plays seldom emerge fully grown in the playwright's mind. More frequently they take root as a seedling. They grow and develop bit by bit, with the introduction of a scene here, a new character there, and an idea or two over there. Eventually the idea progresses and the sapling takes on the stature and the shape of a mature tree with trunk, limbs, and branches. The foliage is brilliant with vivid characters, dramatic action, and snappy dialogue.

Just as it is hard to imagine how a mature tree will grow from a seedling, it is extremely difficult for a beginning writer to envision a fully developed play. It is also almost impossible for an inexperienced writer to manage with any degree of skill the many essentials of a play—from action, conflict, and environment to dialogue and characters—all at one time. It would be as if a music teacher were to tell a young student who was learning composition, "I want you to compose a symphony"—without first instructing the student in harmony, progression, syncopation, and the other necessary musical elements. Complex creations such as symphonies, plays, and trees unfold in stages. And those who are learning to create them need to practice with one or only a few elements at a time before combining them. The approach I suggest allows plays to develop. Through the sequence of exercises I describe, scenes become progressively longer, more complex, and more sophisticated until, like leaves in spring, plays appear.

This book is designed to help the beginning and inexperienced playwright. It presents for students a series of exercises to provide practice in working with the essential ingredients of a play. Because the exercises are sequential, one leads naturally to another, becoming more complete and more complex with each step. The exercises provide an opportunity to

begin with a seedling of an idea and nurture it carefully before asking it to bear the fruit of a mature tree.

This approach has been quite successful with the undergraduate students I teach. In the almost 20 years that I've been working with original scripts, James Madison University has produced over 75 student-written plays including one-acts, full-length pieces, and musicals. Most of those were mounted in our Experimental Theater, but several were a part of our main season of plays. Ten of the plays were recommended for competition by the American College Theater Festival, and five received awards in various writing competitions.

Some of the students who have used these exercises are still writing successfully for the stage, for the screen, and for television. Many have gone into professional theater in other capacities, as managers or performers. Several are writing for newspapers or magazines, and others are teachers, including some who are using these exercises with *their* students.

In addition to the work I've done with my own students, I also shared these exercises with English and drama teachers at the college and high school level, and they have reported using them successfully with their students. The exercises also formed the basis of a playwriting unit for high school students at a young writers' workshop at the University of Virginia.

Of course, for several years now the series of exercises has also been available for writers through the first edition of this book. In fact, one of the most gratifying aspects of the publication of the book turns out to be the letters and responses from writers and teachers who read it, like it, use it, and are kind enough to send along their positive comments.

In this book I make numerous references to a variety of plays and movies—classics and modern—from Sophocles and Shakespeare to Eric Bogosian and *The Sisters Rosensweig*. In many cases, however, I've used hypothetical examples or short scenes written by students. I've done that for several reasons. Although great writers can provide marvelous models, their works are often longer and more complex than I want for the illustration of particular points. Also, they do not reflect what someone using these exercises might actually write.

The student writings, on the other hand, provide concise examples of exactly what the exercises can be expected to produce. They are also relatively short, and they are finished. That is, even if they suggest a continuation, they represent a whole response to an exercise rather than a scene taken from a longer play. For that reason they are simpler to work with than a scene that is part of a more complex project.

Many people contributed to this book. I would like especially to thank Dr. Ralph Alan Cohen of the English department who worked with me to originate this sequential approach to playwriting. I have appreciated the opportunity to try out my ideas at James Madison University, and in particular I want to express my gratitude to my colleagues in the theater program who encouraged the efforts of student playwrights. I would also like to thank the many people who provided commentary on the first

edition, and, in particular, Ramon Delgado of Montclair State University and Barbra Graber of Eastern Mennonite University; Bob Small of the ShenanArts Playwrights Retreat; and playwrights Stephen Gregg and Bill Rough for their positive remarks and helpful suggestions. Finally and most importantly, I want to thank my playwriting students who have consistently amazed, surprised, and entertained me with their work and who generously permitted me to use examples of that work in this book.

Introduction

The direct and primary goal of this book is to enable a person to write a play of at least one act in length. A one-act play is usually, though not always, a piece of continuous action in one setting about 30 to 40 minutes in playing time. That, however, is merely a guideline. Some one-act plays are as short as five or ten minutes. Others use two or more different scenes or units of actions, while still others use locations that shift from one place to another.

The purposes of this book are all relatively simple. If you are interested in writing a play, this book provides a series of exercises designed in sequence to help you do that. You should read the assignment, the explanation, the examples, and the evaluations. Then you should do the assignment. Then compare your writing with the examples and look at it in light of the commentary on those examples. The one important part missing, of course, is someone with an artistic bent to provide an outside opinion. If you are using this guide on your own, you will have to provide your own objectivity.

Another purpose is to enable a teacher to provide a basic course or unit in playwriting. Most teachers of theater have the intelligence and artistic sensibility to provide helpful comments on inexperienced writers' first attempts at playwriting. Many, however, are unsure about what assignments to use in the actual development of a play. The step-by-step orientation of this book is designed to solve that problem.

Not everyone who sets out to write a great play will be successful, but everyone who attempts the exercises here will come away with three very important, indirect benefits. First, a writer experimenting with dramatic formats will gain a greater appreciation of plays, of the ways in which they are constructed, and of the choices the playwright makes. Second, the exposure to working in a dramatic mode will help a writer in other formats; the emphasis on action, character, conflict, and dialogue will affect the way a writer thinks, even the writer who is later working in poetry or prose. Third, the writer will gain a greater awareness of human behavior, of the intricacies of personal relationships, of the reasons why

people do things to each other, and of the ways they react to their environments.

People reacting to their environments: That's one of the drama's primary concerns, and it's one of the reasons why the first section deals with "action."

1

Action

EXERCISE 1 • DESCRIBE AN ACTION
Write a description of an action taking place. Describe only those things that can be seen. Use no dialogue, although you may use other sounds. The scene should take place in one location, but don't worry about stage terminology. Minimum length: 1–2 pages.

Drama is the imitation of an action. Unfortunately, most of us experience plays by reading them rather than by seeing them. It seems hard to believe, but countless individuals have never seen a live play performed. Even for those of us who have seen scores of plays, we've undoubtedly read more than we've seen.

When we read a play, we see characters' names and the lines they speak. Very little of what the characters *do* is described. That's particularly true of classical plays. Shakespeare's plays, for example, which are often an individual's first exposure to drama, have little in the way of stage direction or descriptions of particular actions. Rather, in those plays most of the action must be deduced from the spoken line.

When Macbeth returns from killing King Duncan, only a reading of one line of dialogue three-fourths of the way into the scene informs us that Macbeth has thoughtlessly brought the murder weapons with him instead of leaving them behind. In performance, of course, the action would provide that information immediately. We would see the knives in Macbeth's hands as soon as he entered, and we would continue to see him holding them throughout the scene.

The fact that most of us receive our introduction to plays through print rather than performance has serious consequences for beginning playwrights. Since for the most part we only read the lines spoken by characters, is it any wonder that we come to think of plays as dialogue between characters in which the words are all-important and tell us everything we need to know? And is it any wonder that when beginners sit down to compose a play, what usually develops is a group of characters sitting around talking?

Our first task, then, is to create a different perspective on what constitutes a play. We must find a way to present drama in terms of