

THE ART OF WRITING FOR THE THEATRE

An Introduction to Script Analysis,
Criticism, and Playwriting



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RESOURCES



Luke Yankee

INTRODUCTIONS
TO THEATRE

The Art of Writing for the Theatre



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INTRODUCTIONS TO THEATRE

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backgrounds makes it all the more applicable to everyone in a personal manner. I am an actor, director, writer, teacher, and devout audience member. This book will be by my side as a guideline in the future in each of those endeavors. Any student or teacher, or for that matter, anyone interested in the theatre in its most elemental form will benefit from this book. Get it and keep it on your shelf. I would be willing to bet that you will refer to it many times in the future.”

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“This essential book sits squarely in the ‘required reading’ section for any university theatre course or for anyone who wants to understand the theatrical medium better. It begins with clear, inspiring lessons and tips that guide the writer from conception to fruition while including priceless wisdom from masters in our field. The text provides the reader with invaluable, user-friendly prompts that both allow the writer to be more understanding and critical of their own work, but also to view others’ works with a clearer eye. I simply found this book a pleasure to read and was enlightened and inspired about my own creative process as well as viewing all dramatic works with new insights. A must-read!”

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“Luke Yankee offers insightful discussions on the development of character, dramatic structure, and script analysis—all amply supported by interviews with distinguished contemporary theatre artists. Calling on his extensive career as actor, director, and writer, Yankee’s practical approach is an invaluable resource for anyone wishing to hone their skills in writing for the theatre.”

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**Jon Lawrence Rivera, Artistic Director,
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The Art of Writing for the Theatre

*An Introduction to Script
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Playwriting*

Luke Yankee

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*For my students—past, present, and future—
who teach me so much.*

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Note on the Text



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Introduction

The theatre is a strange beast that seems to get stranger all the time. Ironically, the stranger it gets, the more familiar it becomes. People far more eloquent than I have written about the cavemen sitting around the campfire telling stories of the hunt and how this was the first form of theatre. Pundits have been predicting its demise ever since, and yet, it still remains. Why is that? What is that desperate need we all have to tell our stories? It's as primal an instinct as breathing. We all want some record that we were here, that we mattered, and that our lives meant something.

I have grown up in the theatre. I went to my first Broadway opening when I was nine years old, in a tiny, rented tuxedo with a bow tie that seemed nearly as big as I was. I remember that night as if it were yesterday. There was such a sense of anticipation, excitement, and wonder. The play was a totally forgettable, dark comedy that opened and closed on the same night. Nonetheless, I sat there as transfixed as if I were watching *Death of a Salesman*. Regardless of the play, something happened to me that night. I experienced for the first time the magic of sitting in the dark with a room full of strangers watching a story being told. It was a palpable and formative moment for me. It was the night I knew there was no turning back. The theatre would be my life.

After acting and directing for many years, once I started writing plays, I realized I could create my own tempest in a teacup. I could escape into whatever world I chose. It wasn't chosen by the director or the other actors; it was *my* creation. The exhilaration and freedom of that choice are as daunting as the dread of the responsibility. What if I create my own world and no one likes it? The act of creation itself has to be enough.

This book is geared toward anyone wanting to learn the craft of writing for the theatre. It is for aspiring playwrights, critics, theatre teachers, and really anyone who wants to better understand the intricacies of the craft. While it is primarily focused on those starting out, there is valuable information for writers at all levels. Whether you are taking your first script analysis class, delving into your twentieth play, or asking yourself why you like a musical so you can write about it, this book is for you. Most importantly, while there are many brilliant books on script analysis, playwriting, and criticism, this book is

intended as a way to combine them all. It's "one-stop shopping" for the theatre writer. These are the high points of each of these forms, peppered with specific anecdotes and lessons from a life lived toiling in the vineyards of dramatic writing.

The book is broken into five different sections. While you can jump around, they are intended to be read sequentially, as one builds on the other. At the end of each chapter, there are exercises, discussion topics, and ways to enhance your knowledge. Let me say a few words on each section:

"Script Analysis"—the foundation of it all. In this chapter, I define a lot of terms and concepts, setting up the reader for dramatic success. There are examples from a number of plays (both classical and contemporary) illustrating my points and demonstrating how things work.

"Playwriting"—how to actually write a play, including dialogue, formatting, and techniques for creating various types of plays.

"Criticism"—what to look for in a good play, what is lacking in a less-than-good play, how to tell the difference, and how to write about it.

"The Interviews"—excerpts from eighteen different conversations I held expressly for this book with some of the most respected playwrights, critics, librettists, and lyricists working in the theatre today. The "greatest hits" of these interviews have been broken down into various topics to enhance every stage of a writer's work.

"The Brass Tacks"—"I've written something! Now what?" This chapter features a collection of online submission opportunities, websites for further reading, and a list of resources to support you as you continue your journey in writing for the theatre.

After a substantial professional career as a writer, director, producer, and actor, I decided it was time to teach what I've learned. I have taught script analysis, criticism, and all levels of playwriting for a number of years now. I know it sounds cliché, but the more I teach, the more I learn. While I was always a "theatre nerd," in recent years, I have become more of a "word nerd," relishing the beauty of dramatic language. If I am able to convey anything to you through these pages, it would be that love of the language of the theatre. I still have the passion of that nine-year-old in his teeny tux waiting with eager anticipation for the houselights to dim. It's opening night on the next chapter of your life as a writer for the theatre. Break a leg!

—Luke Yankee

1

Script Analysis

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I often feel I'm incredibly lucky to do a job where maybe six, seven, if I'm really lucky, maybe twelve times a year I go and see something that is so astonishing that I can only describe it as being the equivalent of what you feel like when you fall in love. And it is because it's a form of falling in love with theatre for the first time, even though actually it's the 100 thousandth show you've seen.

—Lyn Gardner, theatre critic

Why Do We Need Script Analysis?

“Why do we need to study script analysis? What exactly is it? What will it teach us? And why on earth would I need *tools* to read a play, anyway? I've seen enough shows on TV to be able to figure out what's going on and how a good story is told. Isn't that enough?” I'm afraid the answer would be “no.” If you're simply reading a play for enjoyment (and frankly, I don't think very many people do), then maybe just knowing the “who” and the “what” will be enough. But if you are studying a play for performance, production, design, direction, or stage management, you have to know the road upon which you

are traveling. You need to have a sense of what the playwright intended—and more importantly, why.

It may sound trite, but you wouldn't bake a cake without a recipe or build a house without a blueprint. If you are working on a play in whatever capacity, you need to know what the playwright intended. Analyzing the text of a play gives us the "why" so that we can make informed choices as we move forward into rehearsal or production.

When it comes right down to it, script analysis, like acting, is about making choices. But they must be *informed* choices. So, how do we do this?

The American acting teacher Stella Adler was a master at what she called "script interpretation." Her method was thorough, but not complicated. She would read a play again and again, asking a myriad of questions. She would look to what the playwright had given her and make decisions and assumptions based on that. There is a video clip on YouTube from one of her classes where she is deconstructing a scene from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. In it, she stops and analyzes every single line. I am paraphrasing Ms. Adler's remarks, but this will give you a sense of what she did:¹

Hello, Mrs. Helmer.

Hello, Mr. Krogstaad.

I've never met people with those names. Are they German? Scandinavian? They don't tell me anything because I have no association with those names.

Someone has forgotten to close the door.

This gives me a sense of being closed in. A small, confined space. Not expansive. Cramped. In my mind, I see row houses with a stoop and steps going up to the second floor from the street. I'm still not sure where we are. But I don't see an elevator. I don't feel "elevator."

In essence, Ms. Adler is doing nothing different than what we do every day: using her deductive powers of reasoning to make informed decisions. Let's say you are channel surfing and you stop in the middle of a television program that holds your attention. Since you haven't seen it from the beginning, you start piecing things together. "So, that couple is obviously in love. Are they married or just dating? Oh, now I see they're wearing wedding bands. I don't think they're newlyweds. They're too familiar with each other. Ouch! She just criticized him in a really cold way. They are definitely not in the honeymoon phase. I wonder why she got so mad at him just because he forgot to put out the recycling bin?"

You get the idea. When we analyze a script, this is exactly what we are doing. As human beings, we are constantly making decisions about people and situations based on our instincts. It is the same when we analyze a script.

Let's look at the scene from one of my plays, *The Man Who Killed the Cure*,² and see how much we can learn about it. This scene is from act 1, scene 2. I have intentionally chosen a scene that is *not* the opening of the play. How much can you figure out just by reading this scene?

Dr. Max Gerson, a man in his thirties, examines some dirt under a microscope. He is focused, driven, and idealistic. **Max** examines the dish of earth as a thirty-something **Rudy** enters carrying an empty valise.

Rudy You haven't started packing?

Max Rudy, you have to see this!

Rudy Max . . .

Max Just look.

Picking his battles, **Rudy** puts down the valise and crosses to the microscope. **Max** is like a little boy with a new toy.

Max Tell me what you see.

Rudy I see a bunch of organisms moving away from the soil.

Max That's because it's one of those new, synthetic fertilizers. They can't stand the chemicals so they move as far away from it as they can. Now, in this one, with real dirt, they stay put . . .

Max reaches for another dish as **Rudy** stops him.

Rudy You *do* realize we're leaving in two hours?

Gretchen, **Max's** pleasant-looking wife, and **Young Charlotte**, **Max's** daughter, enter.

Gretchen You haven't started packing?

Rudy and **Gretchen** exchange a look. **Max** returns to his microscope.

Rudy I'll help him, Gretchen.

Young Charlotte Vati, why are you looking at dirt?

Max stays focused on the microscope. **Rudy** takes **Young Charlotte** and puts her on his lap.

Rudy Because he's trying to grow you a baby brother for your sixth birthday!

Young Charlotte That's not how babies are born, silly!

Rudy No?

Young Charlotte No! You cut the cabbage and the baby pops out!

Rudy Lottie, you're getting so smart!

Rudy *tickles Young Charlotte. She laughs.*

Gretchen Mr. Wienski called. He'll be thirty minutes late.

Rudy *(to Max)* You don't have time to see any more patients!

Max This is the last one.

Rudy What if he's a spy for the SS?

Max He has migraines!

Gretchen Rudy has a point, *liebchen*. We can't trust people the way we used to.

Max I don't know how to act any other way.

Gretchen *kisses Max tenderly.*

Rudy Max, you've got to start packing!

Max I can't touch the office until after I see Mr. Wienski.

Rudy *(sighing)* I'll start with your clothes.

Max Don't forget my tan sweater.

Rudy *(sarcastically)* Yes, dear.

Exercise

Based on what you have just read, how many of these questions can you answer? Even if you don't know conclusively, do you have hunches or suppositions? Take a moment and really *think* about each one, rereading the scene if necessary:

- 1) What is the relationship between Max and Rudy? How do they feel about each other?
- 2) What about Max, Rudy, and Gretchen? Do Gretchen and Max have a good marriage?
- 3) Where and when is this taking place? How did you determine that?
- 4) Who has a better relationship with Young Charlotte? Rudy or her father?

- 5) What can we determine about the personalities of each of these characters?
- 6) What is the mood or tone of the scene?
- 7) Any thoughts about why the family is packing?
- 8) What about the title: *The Man Who Killed the Cure*? Does this scene tell you anything about where the play might be going or what it is about?
- 9) Who might be the leading character?
- 10) What is the style of the play (comedy, drama, tragedy, farce?) What makes you think that?
- 11) Are there any other things that you know for sure? Do you have strong hunches or suppositions about the characters or the play as a whole?

Congratulations! You have just analyzed a scene. Of course, there are specific methods and devices that one can use, and we will discuss those in detail in the rest of this chapter. But when you first read a script, you are using your intellect to make suppositions and form opinions. Of course, these will change as you delve deeper into the play, but when you start, all you have to go on are your instincts. They have gotten you through this far in your life, so it's a good idea to trust them. Before we go on, take a moment to acknowledge yourself for how much you were able to determine from this short scene. If you'd like to see how accurate you were, the answers are below. But remember, even if you didn't get them all right, it doesn't really matter. The important thing is that you stretched your muscles of deductive reasoning and started to make decisions. You are learning how to be your very own Sherlock Holmes when it comes to a dramatic text. You just took the first steps to earning your magnifying glass and deerstalker hat!

Answers to Exercise Questions

- 1) **What is the relationship between Max and Rudy? How do they feel about each other?** We can determine a great deal about Max and Rudy's relationship from this scene. From the level of familiarity, we can tell that they are good friends and colleagues. They are very comfortable with each other.

- 2) **What about Max, Rudy, and Gretchen? Do Gretchen and Max have a good marriage?** Max and Gretchen are tender with each other, yet Gretchen also gently scolds him. This would lead us to believe they have been married a long time and that they have a strong bond.
- 3) **Where and when is this taking place? How did you determine that?** Max refers to his wife as *Liebchen*, which is a German expression of endearment. Also, there is a reference to the fact that Max's patient might be a spy for the SS, which tells us we are in Nazi-occupied Germany.
- 4) **Who has a better relationship with Young Charlotte? Rudy or her father?** It is clear that Young Charlotte has a better relationship with Rudy, as he is playful with her. Max doesn't know how to relate to her and doesn't answer her questions, but instead looks to Rudy for help.
- 5) **What can we determine about the personalities of each of these characters?** Max is so focused on his work that he can lose sight of the practicalities of life. Rudy is taking charge of the situation and sees the potential danger if they don't act quickly, as is Gretchen. In some ways, Max acts like more of a child than his daughter, Young Charlotte.
- 6) **What is the mood or tone of the scene?** There is a great sense of urgency from everyone except Max, who is oblivious to time.
- 7) **Any thoughts about why the family is packing?** Most likely, they are running from the Nazis.
- 8) **What about the title: *The Man Who Killed the Cure*? Does this scene tell you anything about where the play might be going or what it is about?** Max is obsessed with his microscope, and this might imply that he is going to find a cure for something. It is unclear at this point who would "kill" it, or why.
- 9) **Who might be the leading character?** Rudy is clearly driving the scene, but Max seems to be the focal point. At this stage, it would be hard to determine between these two.
- 10) **What is the style of the play (comedy, drama, tragedy, farce?) What makes you think that?** While there are comic overtones, it seems very dramatic. The situation is very dire.
- 11) **Are there any other things that you know for sure? Do you have strong hunches or suppositions about the characters or the play as a whole?** I'll leave you to your own devices on this one!

Now that you have tried analyzing a script on your own, let's look at some of the tools available to make it easier and a more precise art.

Definitions and Terms for Script Analysis

There is a lot of terminology one uses when analyzing a script. Once you understand it, you can make informed, intelligent decisions about the play and the playwright's choices. We will use many of these terms throughout this book. Some will be familiar to you, and some will not, so it's important that you take the time to read this section carefully.

Narrative

A narrative is a sequence of connected events, whether real or imaginary. Basically, a narrative is the same as a story. The word "narrative" comes from the Latin word *narrare*, which means "to tell." Narratives can be found in all aspects of human expression, from everyday speech to performances of all types, including plays, television, movies, dances, and even in the visual arts; basically, anything that tells a story. (I'm sure you have heard the expression, "A picture is worth a thousand words.") Let's look at one of my favorite classical speeches. It is from the prologue to act 4 of Shakespeare's *Henry V*:³

Chorus Now entertain conjecture of a time
When creeping murmur and the poring dark
Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night,
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch.
Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
Each battle sees the other's umbered face;
Steed threatens steed in high and boastful neighs