The Collaborative Playwright
Practical Advice for Getting Your Play Written

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Portsmouth, NH
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QUICK, THINK OF YOUR FAVORITE PLAY. AND NO, CATS IS NOT A PLAY. I’M talking about good old, dull, straight plays. No chandeliers falling, no storm- ing the Bastille.

Now think about your favorite movie. What is it you remember most about each? Chances are, in the movie it’s the special effects or the action. In a play it’s more likely to be the characters. Movies are story-driven. Plays are character-driven.

A DRAMATURGICAL INTERJECTION
I know that in the last chapter, I contradicted this statement. I think I even quoted Isaac Newton (which, trust me, I will do again). I believe that both statements can be true because characters must have objectives. An objective, says Mr. Stanislavsky, is an action.

LET’S RESUME
Because of the theatre’s limited resources, your characters will probably be- come your greatest asset. If your characters are rich enough, plot and scenery take a back seat. Case in point: Albee’s The Zoo Story. Two characters, a set consisting of a park bench and—and except for the final moments—no dis- cernible action. And yet for almost sixty minutes Mr. Albee holds his audi- ence because his characters, Peter and Jerry, are so fascinating.

Just about every character I’ve ever written has come from some place in my own background. On the rare occasions I’ve strayed from that, I had to immerse myself in research. And even then—as stated above with the first bike/Coyote on a Fence story—my own life sneaks back in.
Be warned though; there’s nothing more boring than just writing about yourself. If you don’t believe me, go see any Woody Allen film from the last few years. And as much as I may like many of Mr. Allen’s early movies, they suffered from the author’s own voice being interjected into all his characters. Don’t believe me? Check out the dialogue in *Sleeper* or *Love and Death* and try to tell the difference between the voice of Woody and Diane Keaton. There is no difference.

Allen started as a stand-up comedian writing material for himself, and therefore was comfortable with his own voice. There is nothing wrong with that. When starting out, stay with what’s comfortable, or as many others have said, “Write about what you know.” To Mr. Allen’s credit, however, he later learned to write non-Woody dialogue for other characters.

Let’s talk about “voice”—a word we’ll be using a lot in this chapter. I’m not talking about what comes from the larynx. I’m not talking about pitch, timber, volume, or singing ability. The voice is the thing unique to your character. A character’s voice brings his entire life. His background, education, religion, age, sexual preference, geographic background, intelligence, personal taste, political bent, you name it. Every voice has a specific music.

Compare the character of Starbuck in *The Rainmaker* to Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Both are salesmen (albeit, Starbuck more of a con man) but they speak in a completely different rhythm. The words flow out of Starbuck; they come in fits and starts from Willy.

For starters, however, let’s stick with your voice. What is it about the way you speak that makes you unique from the rest of us? If you don’t know, you better start paying more attention. When Socrates (or the Oracle of Delphi) said, “Know thyself” he might as well have been talking about playwrights.

Listen to yourself. Do you speak in complete thoughts or fragments? Are you concise, or do you wander through your entire brain to make a point? Do you indulge in what I call “verbal hiccups”—those annoying little expressions that help us gather our thoughts: “like,” “you know,” “ummm,” “know what I mean?” Do you have a regional accent? (Being from Philadelphia neither of us do, but the rest of you people sure have one.)

Creating the voice of the character goes hand-in-hand with the character’s biography. This is a common acting technique but seems lacking when it comes to playwriting. An actor takes what the playwright gives him, and then fills in the blanks. If there’s nothing about the character’s childhood in the text, the smart actor makes it up, making inferences from what is in the text.
It's even more important that the playwright adopt this technique. The big rule when creating a character: Always remember that the character had a life before making an entrance.

In *The Champagne Charlie Stakes*, I had a character in his eighties. That means when Charlie enters he brings with him eight decades of history, all of which will affect what he says and does and how he relates to other characters.

Now is when you freak out and say, "Yo, I'm only a kid, how can I do something like this?" Well, hint number one: if you're really young and don't know any eighty-year-olds, don't write that character!

Wasn't that easy? I was in my thirties when I wrote that play, but I had a distinct edge: I knew the real Charlie for twenty years. Knew his family background, education, job history, musical taste, clothing taste, religion, what he did on Friday nights, favorite foods, commonly used expressions and other personality things. I was also well versed in his family relationships, which was what the play was all about.

And, pardon me for sounding abstract and "sixties" but I knew what Charlie’s dream would be. By “dream” I don’t mean what happens when you sleep. I mean, "If Charlie could've achieved anything in the world what would it be" dream.

You should always know what your character’s dream is. Blanche DuBois wants to be swept away by a man (Mitch, the invisible Shep Huntleigh). Willy Loman’s is to have his sons thrive in the business world, validating his role as father. Felix Unger, in *The Odd Couple*, wants to get back with his wife and return to his nice, neat apartment. Salieri’s is to have the genius that comes so easily to Mozart.

In the above examples, the dream is an important part of the character. However, even when the dream is not vital to the play, you still have to know what it is. Our unfulfilled wishes are one of the things that drive us and characters in plays—at least the smart ones.

Charlie’s dream was—for once in his life—to be a big shot at the race-track. This was a case of the character’s dream driving the play. Without that, no story. So make sure your character’s dream is true to the character. A character without an organic, honest, and focused dream does not make any sense to an audience. How many times have you turned to a friend while watching a play and whispered, "Why doesn’t she just leave him?" I contend that that is because the playwright did not do an adequate job of making us, the audience, keenly aware of what the character wants. I like to use the
example from *My Fair Lady*: “All I want is a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air.” Simple, direct, and instantly recognizable.

We now return to the creation of the character. What happens when you don’t know anyone to inspire the character? Must you fall back on imagination? Not necessarily. In *Minor Demons* there is a character named Vince, a small-town police chief. Since I didn’t know any small-town police chiefs, I did some research. I interviewed a couple of cops, observed people who were police officers, and learned the technical aspects of the job.

Now I can concentrate on the rest of his character. I wanted a guy with a chip on his shoulder; a guy who felt a little inferior. I thought back to a friend of mine in college who was the only Italian kid in a small coal town, much like the one in the play, and some of the prejudice he had to deal with. Having grown up just the opposite, in a predominantly Italian neighborhood with a lot of Italian friends, I latched onto this. I felt comfortable with the rhythms of the character because I had a whole street full of buddies to fall back on.

**AN EXERCISE ON CHARACTER: PREWRITING AND THE MONOLOGUE**

Again, prewriting as a warm-up is a great idea when trying to find your character’s voice. Often I will write a monologue that I have no intention of using. This way there’s no pressure; it’s between me and my notebook. I don’t have to worry about keeping the audience’s interest. Often it’s just mundane ramblings, but in the midst of this the voice begins to emerge: his education, background, worldview, verbal hiccups.

Monologue writing is also a great way to experiment with how you tell a character’s story. In monologues, one can find a way to articulate one’s worldview (Think about Forrest Gump: his worldview is easily identified as “Life is like a box of chocolates.”) or to reveal or discover something new (think about Nora at the end of *A Doll’s House* and her revelation that she was, in fact, the skylark and the doll).

**A DRAMATURGICAL INTERJECTION**

I could make a case that there are three types of monologues:

1. A person telling an exciting story
2. A person discovering something *in that moment*
3. A person who has discovered something and is sharing it with another (or us, the audience)
Each one of these kinds of monologues will reveal a great deal of information about how a particular character might behave within the context of the play. Write one (or all!) of these monologues for each of your characters, thinking about the following questions:

1. Where do you begin?
2. Where do you wind up?
3. Who is the character talking to, and, more importantly, why?
4. How does this character talk?
5. How does this character move through ideas?

**BACK TO BRUCE**

On one occasion I wrote an entire one-act play as a warm-up. *Next Week, Spencer Tracy* was written while I was playing around with the idea of *Burkie*. Knowing I wasn’t ready to tackle a full-length play at the time I fell back on the one-act, a form with which I was much more comfortable. *Next Week, Spencer Tracy* dealt with six characters who gather once a week to watch free movies in a local park. (At the time I was doing this every Tuesday night. See? Everything is fodder for a play.)

Since the characters of Ed and Jon from *Burkie* were percolating in my head I decided to use them. I also used Janie, Ed’s wife, who is not seen in *Burkie*. Ed and Janie stole the show. The loving, sometimes prickly, banter was right out of my parents’ mouths and the audience loved it—especially Ed. This showed me a couple things:

1. Ed was an interesting enough character to carry a play. With some adjustments (mentioned above) I knew Ed’s voice so well that replicating it would be easy.
2. I got a little practice on Jon. Since this character was very loosely based on me I needed to find out what I wanted to keep of my own voice and what I needed to invent. I did this by making Jon—in this play—shy, something I’ve never been accused of. His voice became tentative—a little unsure—some of which ended up in *Burkie*.
3. Although Janie never appears in *Burkie* she does play an important part in the story. And by putting her on stage, albeit in a comedy, I now had a clear picture of who she was.

Granted, writing an entire one-act play as a character warm-up might be a bit extreme but I was unsure whether my family (as characters) would work on
stage. If nothing else, *Next Week*, *Spencer Tracy* gave me the confidence to write *Burkie*. And when you’re starting out you need all the encouragement you can get. (After seeing *Burkie* for the first time my mother confided: “I like *Next Week*, *Spencer Tracy* better. I’m alive in that one.”)

**ANOTHER EXERCISE IN CHARACTER: CHARACTER WANTS**

Take two characters. Let’s call them A and B. A has the objective of trying to get a doctor’s appointment. B has the objective of needing to tell A something important about the past.

Now answer the following questions:

1. What are the things that A needs to do to achieve the want?
2. What are the things that B needs to do to achieve the want?
3. What does each do to prevent the other from achieving their goal?
4. What does each do to allow the other to achieve the goal?

When we talk about a “character want,” we also talk about rising stakes. If A does one thing in order to meet the objective, how does B respond? I’ll ask you the vice versa, too.

The thing to keep track of, in this exercise, has nothing to do with achieving the want, but rather, the things that *this character might do*. What are the parameters of this character’s will? Will A kill B in order to achieve the objective, if need be? Does B know the fine art of manipulation? Or is A a passive-aggressive sulker? Understanding behavior is key to understanding a character.

Pretend you’re an audience member. You’re sitting there, cell phone turned off, watching a play. Since very few theatres have curtains anymore you’ve already seen the set. What is it that captures your attention after that? With luck, it’s the characters.

Every time a new character makes an entrance the entire audience focuses on that specific character. Who is that person? How’s he dressed? What’s he doing? What’s his relationship to the other characters? Have we heard about him or is he a total stranger? Think back on plays with memorable characters. Chances are they had equally memorable entrance moments.

No matter what is happening on stage, the entrance of a new character always diverts the audience for a moment. Therefore, you really have to think about how you want that character to enter. As in life, fairly or unfairly, first
impressions do count. And, also as in life, they do not have to be an accurate barometer of character, but they’re usually pretty close. That’s the first group we’ll look at.

What I call the “true” character introduction is just that: an introduction that gives a truthful reading of the inner life of the character. By no means should it tell you everything you need to know, but it should make an indelible impression.

Take Stanley Kowalski. Please. (I love that joke.) Stanley enters, hollers up to his wife, Stella, then tosses her a blood-tinged package yelling: “Meat!”

Think about it. “Meat!” We the audience immediately realize that Stanley Kowalski is not a subscriber to the ballet. Mr. Williams wants to create a true modern primitive in Stanley, and he manages to achieve this impression within seconds of the audience meeting him.

On the flip side of that, recall the first time we see Blanche. She is dressed entirely in white, carries a suitcase, and is looking for directions. When she meets Eunice, her voice is, according to Tennessee Williams, “delicate and moth-like.” After Eunice lets her into Stella and Stanley’s apartment, we see Blanche find a bottle of whiskey and take a big gulp. This is a woman with a need for a drink.

Willy Loman slumps into his home late at night, exhausted. His first words: “I’m tired to the death.” If that doesn’t give you an indication of where this character’s going may I suggest you take up accounting.

Although I don’t like to cite too many movies, Jaws has one of the greatest introductions of characters ever: Robert Shaw as Quint, the shark hunter. The scene is a volatile town meeting. Suddenly, a SCREEEECH. We see a hand scratching fingernails against a blackboard. The noise causes the entire room to turn in that direction and go silent. Finally, we see Quint. Not only has he done the fingernail bit, he has added a comical chalk rendering of a shark eating a stick figure human. Now that the room is quiet, Quint waits a moment, takes a bite out of cracker, and finally speaks: “Y’all know me.”

This is a great introduction of character. Not only is it theatrical, but within fifteen seconds we know a lot about Quint:

1. He has great intestinal fortitude. How many of us can scratch our nails across a blackboard without shivering?
2. He has a commanding presence in this town. The moment people see him they clam up.
3. He has a rather dark sense of humor. The shark cartoon's a bit dis-tasteful since two folks have already been killed.

4. He is a supremely confident man. He keeps an entire room waiting for him to speak. Even takes a bite of a cracker.

Not bad for a few seconds of film.

"Lead" roles should not be the only ones to have "entrance" material. All of your characters should be given some sort of pizzazz when they step on stage. And sometimes it can happen when they enter not saying anything at all.

In Hecht and McArthur's The Front Page, we hear a lot about the character of Walter Burns all through Act One and ninety percent of Act Two. We even hear his voice barking over the phone, but we never meet him. At the end of Act Two the stage is crazy with action as approximately twenty characters scurry about.

As the act reaches its climax the characters all run off stage, and only now do we see Walter Burns, who immediately leaps into action, locking the others out. During the chaos he has snuck silently onto the stage, which is perfectly in keeping with the character; an amoral guy so intent on scooping the other reporters that he's not above a little chicanery to get ahead of the opposition.

In Belmont Avenue Social Club, I used everything but dialogue to try to establish the characters of Fran and Chickie. The published version of Belmont Avenue Social Club starts with a detailed description of the set. This is rare for me as I usually just give a general description. But I thought the look of the club was important so I spell out some specific things:

(Fran Barelli sits at his desk. There is a picture of Sinatra above it. Fran half-heartedly plays solitaire and mouths the words to the music coming from the tape player. Fran is in his late 50's: a heavy man but not flabby. Though not ostentatious, he looks like someone with money. Chickie Barelli, 40's, is at the pool table. They both wear suits. Fran’s looks solemn; Chickie’s is a few years old and a little flashy. Chickie is busy rolling the pool balls up and down the table, then following them with a videotape camera, attempting to film them. At first he tries just moving the camera, then repeats the procedure by actually walking and following the balls. He keeps alternating this procedure. Fran is facing away from Chickie. He throws down his cards, thinks a moment, makes a note on a small yellow pad, then opens one of the drawers looking for something. Chickie is still walking up and down the table filming the balls.)

Note: Neither character has said a word, but hopefully the audience, through costume and action, have a very basic idea of who they are.
Why no dialogue? I thought it was important to establish the club. Let the audience get acquainted with this room that is such a haven to the characters. Also, I had to take into consideration what happened before the play started. (Remember: your characters had a life before the eight o’clock curtain.) These guys have just come from the funeral of a good friend. People in a situation like this usually try to fill the time doing something mundane or comfortable. Had this been a normal day around the club, I probably would not have started the play this way.

Now I let Fran and Chickie speak. I wanted a quiet start to let the audience get to know these two guys in the first moments of the play.

FRAN: Yo, Chickie, didn’t we have a file on . . .

(He finally turns to the pool table. Chickie is immersed in his filming, actually trotting next to the table.)

What the hell’re you doin’?

CHICKIE: Practicin’.

FRAN: Wha’?

CHICKIE: I’m not real good at followin’ things yet. See, it’s very complicated. I can’t figure out which works better. Followin’ it . . . (He demonstrates) Or just turnin’ it.

(He demonstrates as Fran looks through the desk.)

See, if ya walk with it the picture goes up’n down. But if ya do this—(He pans) Then ya go too fast sometimes and ya miss what you’re tryin’ ta get. Very complicated.

Note: What I’ve tried to do here is introduce two very different characters. Fran is serious and very deep in thought about something. Chickie is not too bright. Their mode of dress is different. Chickie has a verbal hiccup: “Very complicated,” which he uses to refer to very simple things.

FRAN: Didn’t we have a file with pictures of all the guys?

CHICKIE: Wait’ll Doug gets here. He’ll know. (Returning to his shooting) Like at the cemetery this mornin’. I’m tryin’ ta follow the coffin, right? But they get goin’ down this little hill and start walkin’ a lot faster—cause I guess Petey was startin’ ta shift inside the box there—and I lost the whole thing.

FRAN: You really think that was smart?

CHICKIE: Wha’?
FRAN: Takin’ movies of the funeral like that.

CHICKIE: So?

FRAN (Patiently): Some people might not think it’s too, ya know, tasteful.

Note: Here I try to set up early the relationship between the two men. We find out later that they’re cousins and Fran is protective of Chickie—and vice versa. Most people would not be so tactful with a guy that videoed a funeral.

CHICKIE: Ya think?

FRAN: I had Rose hangin’ on my arm the whole time or I woulda’ told ya.

CHICKIE: Don’t worry. I’m gonna give her a copy.

FRAN: What’s she wanta’ copy for?

CHICKIE: ’Case somebody missed it. ’Case somebody wants ta see it again. I don’t know. They do it at weddin’s.

FRAN: Weddings are supposed to be happy, Chick. This was her husband’s funeral. You really think she wants a tape of people cryin’ their eyes out?

CHICKIE: So . . . I shouldn’t give ’er a copy? That’s what you’re sayin’?

FRAN: Yeah.

What does the audience learn from the action? Hopefully, they see that this is Fran’s domain; he is the man in charge. They also catch on to the fact he’s a devoted Sinatra fan. Chickie? Well, Chickie’s just not very bright. Therefore, he is quite content filming pool balls with various techniques.

The whole scene takes about a minute, but in it I try to let the audience know—through set, costume, music, and action—something about these characters and the day they’ve just been through.

A few minutes later I bring in another character, Cholly. Again, wanting to establish character quickly, I have the audience hear Cholly before he even comes on stage.

From offstage we hear:

CHOLLY (O.S.): Jesus Christ, will you turn off that fuckin’ Sinatra?

(Cholly enters and moves directly to Chickie, not seeing Fran.)

CHOLLY: Cut us a fuckin’ break, will ya Chickie?

FRAN: You got somethin’ against Frank?

(Cholly turns, surprised. His tone immediately changes.)
CHOLLY: Hey Fran. Thoutcha’ were still over with Rose.

FRAN: Whatta’ ya got against Frank?

CHOLLY: Hey, Fran—you know me, I hate ta complain, right? It’s just . . . if you’re gonna pipe that out to the bar there can’t ya play somebody different once in awhile?

FRAN: Who?

CHOLLY: I don’t now. Somebody . . . different, ya know . . . maybe some . . . Tony Bennett. (Fran snaps the music off) Hey, don’t turn it off—

FRAN: That’s what ya wanted—

CHOLLY: Nahh, it’s okay—

FRAN: It’s off.

And what’s the first impression of Cholly? He’s foul-mouthed, irritable, and aggressive—with Chickie. When Fran steps into the fray he immediately becomes deferential. Cholly has the personality of a bully. His immediate retreat from Fran shows us this, along with underlining Fran’s power.

Sometimes a character’s lack of action tells us about him. In The Champagne Charlie Stakes I introduce four very verbose characters who are all comfortable with each other: Charlie, Mary Lee, Mary, and Jackie. They are waiting for an outsider to join the group. Mary’s boyfriend Paul, who Mary has already warned us is kind of quiet. Paul is late to the racetrack because he’s been attending his mother’s funeral.

MARY LEE: How much did I win?

JACKIE: Forty, fifty cents.

(Paul enters. He’s in his mid-40’s, a serene looking man in jeans and a tee-shirt. He carries a metal canister and a bottle in a bag. He stands on the edge for a moment, looking unsure.)

Note: It is not in Paul’s nature to barge in on a conversation so I just have him stand there.

CHARLIE: 5-3-9! I don’t believe it! I was gonna’ play that.

(He shows Mary Lee his heavily marked form.)

See it, honey? Got it right down there, 5-3-9. Got it right there.

MARY LEE: Along with about forty others.

CHARLIE: I was gonna’ play it—

PAUL: Hi.
(They all turn. Paul puts his things on the chair as Mary kisses him.)

MARY: How’d it go?
PAUL (A shrug): Okay.
MARY: Are you all right?
PAUL: I’m fine.

Note: Paul, at this point, is almost monosyllabic. This is quite a contrast to the other characters and gives him a very different rhythm.

(Charlie moves to him, shaking hands.)

CHARLIE: Glad you could make it, Paul. Sorry about your mom.
PAUL: Thank you.
CHARLIE: Didn’t pay ta get in, didja?
PAUL: Yeah, I did.
CHARLIE: Didn’t Mary tell ya ta mention my name? They’d of let ya in.
PAUL: She did, but I felt a little funny. It was only—
CHARLIE: They’d of let ya right in. (Starts to move off) Maybe I can get your money back. Who’s gate ya use?
PAUL: Don’t worry about it, Charlie. (He hands Charlie the bottle) Congratulations on your race.
CHARLIE: Hey, thanks. Yeah, that’s somethin’, isn’t it? See the form? My name, right at the top there.

(He puts on his glasses to inspect the bottle as Paul moves to Mary Lee.)

PAUL: Nice to see you again, Mary Lee.
MARY LEE: I’m so sorry about your mother.
PAUL: Thank you.
MARY LEE: This is our friend Jackie.
JACKIE: Hey, how ya doin’? Sorry ’bout your mom.
PAUL: Thank you.
CHARLIE: Hol-lee cow! Lookit what Paul brought me. Dom Perignon! (To Jackie) What’d I tell ya? This guy’s successful. Whole chain’a bicycle stores.
PAUL: Just three—
MARY: Don’t bother correcting him.
MARY LEE: Charlie multiplies everything. Except his age.
CHARLIE: Boy that’s the truth. I’m the biggest b.s. artist ya ever met. But I’m honest about it.
MARY: Want something to drink?

PAUL: No, actually I was looking for—

CHARLIE: Jeeez, this musta’ cost’a fortune.

Note: Although Paul is the focus of this scene it is everyone else doing the talking. Poor Paul can’t even finish a sentence. On stage, when a character has three other characters talking to him, his attention is pulled back and forth.

CHARLIE: I gotta’ tell ya though, Paul, I wouldn’t know the difference. Too many years of the cheap stuff. I’ll put this on ice, you kids can drink it during my race. (Opens the cooler) How bout some of the cheap stuff? Got a bottle in here with your name on it.

PAUL: No thanks. I really just—

Note: Paul just wants to find a men’s room but he’s too polite to interrupt.

CHARLIE (Noticing the canister): Brought your own, huh? Hey, I like this guy. Lookit the size of his flask. (Shaking the canister) Whatta’ ya got in here, Paul? Some nice gin and tonics or somethin’?

PAUL: Ahhh…that’s my mother.

(Charlie stops shaking it as Mary shoots him a look. There is a brief moment of awkwardness, and then Charlie speaks to the canister.)

CHARLIE: Hiya, honey, how ya doin’? I’m Charlie, this is Mary Lee. Think she’d like a little champagne in there Paul?

(Paul just laughs, shaking his head.)

Notice, Paul has very few lines, but it’s the action swirling around him that tells us about his character. Soft-spoken, a bit shy, he’s overwhelmed by the other characters, yet at the same time seems to enjoy them. Most people might be put out when someone mistakes their mother’s cremation urn for a flask, but Paul finds the humor in it.

Remember, it’s not just how your character acts that tells us about him; it’s also how a character reacts to others. A more aggressive character than Paul would’ve acted very differently in this scene. He waits on the fringe, taking everything in before finally speaking. And even then, unlike the other characters who love to talk, he speaks in short bursts. Paul has a completely different rhythm compared to the other characters.

These are examples of first impressions that give a truthful glimpse of the character. However, this isn’t always the case. The first impression the
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audience gets does not have to hold true for the entire play. I suppose we
could call this the “misleading” introduction.

When we meet Regina in Lillian Hellman’s The Little Foxes she is a charming,
flirtatious hostess to her dinner guest, Mr. Marshall. Once Marshall leaves,
however, the mask comes off and we see the real Regina—a rather treacher-
ous woman. But if Regina is played correctly, we should not see this side of
her until about page twenty. We should be as charmed with her as Marshall
was. In fact, Regina’s charm is one reason she’s so good at being ruthless.
The duplicity is a big part of her character, and for the audience to realize it
they should be taken in, too.

Once again, this slow reveal mirrors life. Ever been stabbed in the back by
a good friend? If you’d known this person had that quality they probably
would’ve never achieved the title of “good friend.” Therefore, you must have
either not been perceptive enough to see this side, or the friend was really
good at hiding it.

One of the cardinal rules of playwriting is that you must love your charac-
ters. (This is also true for actors.) If a producer called me, offering me big
bucks to write a play about Hitler, the first thing I would do is find out the
positive things in his character. We all know the monster side of him; I would
have to find something else. For one thing, it would make him much more in-
teresting, and therefore a more compelling character to watch. But more im-
portantly, Hitler loved Hitler, so I have to find the side he loved and make that
clear to the audience. Otherwise we have the same old character we’ve seen a
million times.

It’s especially important for the playwright (not necessarily the audience)
to love the characters that are the least lovable, or you’re probably writing a
cardboard stereotype. I’m presently researching a play in which Al Capone is
a character. In my story, however, the gangster is secondary to the opera-
loving guy who opened soup kitchens for the poor and agonized over his
partially deaf son.

I love plays where my loyalties are jerked around by the characters. Take
Glengarry Glen Ross. Fifteen minutes into that play you’re not sure who
you’re supposed to be rooting for. After a while, I just started rooting
against certain characters. My loyalties are constantly shifting. To me, that
means exciting characters.

I’ve used this “misleading” technique a few times in introducing charac-
ters. In other words, I let the audience think one thing about the character,
but as the play moves on we find that first impression wasn’t entirely true.
In class I’ll often ask the question: Whose play is it? By this, I mean what character do we follow to the end? Which journey are we about to embark on? In *Belmont Avenue Social Club* I introduce Fran, Cholly, and Chickie. At this point the audience is wondering whose play it is. Which character are we rooting for? (Both are questions every playwright has to ask before putting pen to paper.)

Then Doug enters. I have Doug enter in the middle of one of Cholly’s tirades. Remember, Cholly is the guy who said, “I hate to complain” but he proceeds to do that very thing throughout most of the play.

(Doug Reardon enters and stands in the doorway a moment, observing Cholly. Doug is in his mid-30’s and dresses like a college professor.)

**CHOLLY:** Hey, you know me, I back the police.

*Note: “You know me” is Cholly’s verbal hiccup.*

But this asshole wastes half my day so he can finish his fuckin’ paperwork. Fuckin’ cops . . .

**DOUG:** Who’s balls ya tryin’ ta bust now, Cholly. Yo, Chick. Hey, Fran.

**FRAN:** How ya doin’, Doug?

**CHOLLY:** Some wiseass cop over onna’ west side. They call me about my truck. I told ya about my truck, right?

**DOUG (Smiling at Fran):** Couple times, yeah.

*Note: I set up earlier that Cholly has told this story a few hundred times. Doug’s smile is a little conspiratorial moment between him and Fran.*

**CHOLLY:** Well, I want somebody’s fuckin’ head, I’ll tell ya. Some nigger rips off my truck and whose balls do the cops bust—mine!

**DOUG:** If you saw the guy stealing your truck why didn’t you stop him?

**CHOLLY:** I didn’t see ‘em.

**DOUG:** Then how’d you know he was black?

The first thing Doug does is bust on Cholly, heretofore the most obnoxious character on stage. Ahh, says the audience collectively: this is the hero! Then he jumps on Cholly’s racism; Doug must be the guy in the white hat. Hooray! Doug the good liberal, friend of the black community, especially Wesley, a possible rival. I even make a point to have Doug dress differently than the rest.
Now the audience settles in smugly, assuming they are one step ahead of the playwright. (This is something very important: the audience is always trying to stay ahead of you by guessing the story. This is why twists and surprises are important.) By the end of the first act, however, they become uneasy. Doug, our good guy, might not be so good after all.

And then, in the final moments of the play and under Fran’s prodding, I pull off his mask completely.

**DOUG:** Don’t stand here and tell me you’re givin’ that seat to Wesley.

**FRAN:** He’s not qualified?

**DOUG:** I didn’t say that—

**FRAN:** I think he’s qualified—

**DOUG:** Fran—

**FRAN:** Hell, you went ta Penn State. Wesley went to Princeton—

**DOUG:** Listen ta me—

**FRAN:** He’s in—you’re out—

**DOUG:** Bullshit—

**FRAN:** Oh yeah?

**DOUG:** You’re not givin’ it to him—

**FRAN:** Why not?

**DOUG:** You can’t—

**FRAN:** Why not?

**DOUG:** You know why—

**FRAN:** You tell me—why not?

**DOUG:** You just wouldn’t—

**FRAN:** Why not?

**DOUG:** You just wouldn’t!

**FRAN:** Why not?!!

**DOUG:** He’s a nigger! And there’s no way in hell you’re givin’ that seat to a nigger so cut the bullshit!

This is very different from the Doug we met earlier; the one who busted on Cholly for his racism. The evil side did not emerge suddenly here; I begin to set the dark side of Doug up at the end of act one. Had Doug been a great
guy through the whole play, only to change in the final two minutes, the audience would never buy it. You have to layer these things in.

Now, lest you think the misleading intro can only be used for the bad guys, I also use it for two of the nicest characters I’ve ever written: Tommy Krueger and Warren Zimmerman. Tommy’s entrance in *Belmont Avenue Social Club* is less than auspicious. He’s drunk. His eyes are red from crying. His suit is torn and dirty. And he has to take a leak. Naturally, this galls Doug since Tommy is the guy Fran has selected over him. And for a moment the audience agrees with Doug; Doug should get the job, not this old drunk.

However, in the second act we meet a much different Tommy. Tommy’s not a habitual drunk; the reason he was loaded was because he was mourning his best friend, Petey. His suit got dirty in a fall while visiting Petey’s grave. When sober we see that Tommy is a bright, gentle man who would actually make an excellent choice for the councilman’s position. Now the audience isn’t sure. The better Tommy looks, the worse Doug looks—and wasn’t Doug the guy we were rooting for?

Warren Zimmerman in *Moon Over The Brewery* follows a similar course. When Warren is introduced he appears to be a bit of a boob. He stammers and has a funny laugh. He can’t seem to match wits with Amanda, a thirteen-year-old girl. I even make a point to have him look sort of ridiculous; Warren’s a mailman and I put him in the shorts and black knee socks uniform. With apologies to those fine folks at the Postal Service, that outfit makes anybody look a bit clownish.

As the play goes on, though, we find out that Warren’s initial ineptness was caused by his own innate shyness. Warren’s really a much more complex guy than his introduction would indicate. (At least I think so. Warren is one of my favorite characters.)

Introducing your character is a great way to plant—whether “true” or “misleading”—an impression with the audience. Figure out what you feel is the most important aspect of the character, then try to find an action to coincide with his entrance.

There’s a wonderful scene in the film *Sexy Beast*. A married couple, already established as rather rough-edged, wait for another couple. When the other couple arrives it’s clear they’re both very upset. The wife tells the reason for their obvious consternation: “Don Logan called.”

Now everyone at the table seems paralyzed by fear, just at the mention of “Don Logan.” I don’t know about you, but I can’t wait to meet this Don Logan.
This is a great example of setting up a character before the audience even gets to meet him. And it’s one of the oldest tricks in the playwriting book: Have other characters talk about him before he makes his first entrance.

Once again, this has its roots in reality. How many times in life have you heard about a person and then actually met them. Was the picture you formed in your head accurate? Most times, unless the person conveying the story is a complete idiot, it’s pretty much in the same ballpark. The secret is to not make this dialogue sound like what it really is: character exposition.

A DRAMATURGICAL INTERJECTION

Not that Bruce is a complete idiot, but I think, with playwriting, you should also be thinking in terms of contradictions. What happens if the person doing the describing has something against the unseen individual? Why would one character talk badly or ill of another? How is that received by the audience—and when do they know it? If, as is the case in Susan Glaspell’s famous one-act Trifles, one character completely discounts what another character is saying—to their detriment—what happens to our perception of character?

I am a big fan of perception, reversal, and unexpected behavior in characters, so long as you remain clear of what the “rules of the character’s world” are. And that, again, means knowing what behavior this character could potentially display.

Now, you’ve done all you can to set up your character by having other characters discuss her. You’ve given her a memorable entrance. Now that she is on stage, what do you do with her?

This is where your character “want” comes into play. A character needs a reason to come on stage. Yes, you can say, “But she lives here. She’s just coming home.” And that’s fine in real life but pretty boring in theatre. What does she want when she gets home? A drink? To use the bathroom? To be left alone after a rotten day? All of the above?

You must know what your character wants at every moment in the play. Not only does this drive the play or scene, but it drives your character. And characters react differently to situations when they want something.

In class I often use the door example. Some nefarious fiend has locked us in and it is imperative we get out. Being a disparate group each of us takes a different action. One pulls out a cell phone to call for help. Another tries to climb out a window. The third decides to set off the sprinkler system in the
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