WRITING

for the stage

with

ANTON BONNICI

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The Fundamentals

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Writing for the Stage

with Anton Bonnici

Author's Welcome

I think of teaching as a special kind of sharing. When one is teaching, they are opening up to others through what they have learned, what they have experienced and what knowledge they have gathered from their experiments and studies. Everything that informs the teacher's world becomes an opportunity to enrich this encounter as their students—their audience—is given access. And I truly believe that giving is a key aspect of teaching. I love teaching because it keeps you connected to others in an intrinsically generous way, a practice I've been lucky enough to be employed in, at the time of this writing, for the past twenty years—a lifetime really. And now, this book has become the result of a very specific side of my teaching life, a side I'm particularly passionate about as it joins together two primary passions of mine: theatre and creative writing. Hence this is the part where I get to teach *writing for the stage*.

Over the past few years, I've been developing classes with an ever-growing group of rewarding participants, and these classes have grown into a full programme that

has started taking a shape I wasn't fully expecting. Primarily, I wanted to teach beginners how to write a play. I met so many people that had unfinished writing projects or great ideas that never made it to the page and as a playwright I was increasingly starting to encounter the question, 'How do you do it?'. So, I decided to start sharing with those interested in how I did it what I found important enough to put on the page and how to make it effective. But further along the journey, I also started asking questions that did not stop at craft. Questions like: why write a play when you can be writing something else? Could there be topics or subjects to write about that are more important than others? As writers, do we have a purpose beyond telling the story that we want to tell? And most importantly of all, what makes a great play? Eventually, my thoughts seeped into my teaching, and my classes went beyond the storytelling techniques that I started from, veering into theory and discussions on the works of twenty-first century dramatists. Yet my own personal quest remained; how does

one define, in a practical yet rich enough way, what makes a strong work of drama?

These books are both a synthesis and a continuation of that process, companion texts for my workshops, but also an opportunity for further thought and elaboration. Here, you will find my own conclusions about what makes a great work of drama for today's world and audiences, and also a guide on how to write such a play. Thus, this is a manual, of sorts, but you may also think of these books as a manifesto as much as a guide. Yes, I want to teach people how to write plays, but I also want to share my vision of plays with purpose. Plays that go beyond the short, spasmodic moments of titillation or momentary sorrow. Plays that give everyone involved—the writers themselves, the directors and performers staging them and their audiences—an experience that is truly worth having in today's life; joys, threats and all.

So whether you are someone who has never written a play before and would like an introductory guide on how to get yourself going, or a seasoned playwright who is interested in finding out what a fellow

playwright believes to be the most important purposes of our craft, or a fellow creative writing teacher who is always looking for ideas and strategies to teach, these books should give you some food for thought…and hopefully long-lasting inspiration.

Thanks in advance for reading, and my warmest wishes for all your writing intentions.

Yours truly,
Anton

Part One:
The Fundamentals

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An introduction to Performative Complex Realism

If you have gained some experience in a practice and you want to go further to elaborate more on your ideas and methods, I highly suggest you start teaching. The process of teaching something, sharing your skill with others, is a great way to look back at what you have learned and find more efficient ways to define it while also having this knowledge tested and reshaped as you see and hear what others can do with it or have to say about it. This was one of my main motivating reasons for starting to teach creative writing for the stage.

I have been writing plays since my teens, both because my father was a playwright himself, and because I found supportive teachers that encouraged me to put my work on stage at school. These people shaped my earliest writing experiences. Then, over the years, I read and tested a variety of creative writing guidebooks, so the influences and strategies kept accumulating. (Out of all the great writing books out there, I would, like many before me, single out Robert McKee's *Story - Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, a creative writing

cornerstone no one should miss even if they're not writing specifically for film.) I could never fully express how important books were for me when I was growing up. Books changed my whole life, and I know I share this experience with many especially for those, like me, that grew up in a post-colonial place far away from the excitement and cultural influence of big cities. So, I read and I wrote, which was what drove me to teach.

Everything I devoured now resides, in one way or another, in my work and teaching, yet I never felt comfortable or convinced enough to say that I was following someone's method or aiming for a particular style that I was taught. The process has always been a search, and the best way to continue that search was teaching. The workshop experience is an immensely rewarding one for all involved. It means being able to try out different exercises and seeing moments and scenes take shape for you to share with people on the same journey as yours. Although such experiences are enriching, for me, there was always an unanswered question left hanging. It was an obvious question that my participants would

occasionally ask, the question I was trying to answer myself, mainly: what, exactly are you teaching us?

The question is, of course, more nuanced than that. They know I'm teaching creative writing, they know these are fundamental concepts one needs to understand when writing an effective play that would work well on stage, but, beyond this collection of strategies and concepts, is there a vision? What they are really asking is; are you teaching us how to write any play or a *particular kind* of play?

Bear in mind, I'm a firm believer that neutral doesn't exist; everything leans, everything has a weight, nothing ever rests permanently at zero. There is no such thing as a neutral, generic playscript. Whenever a choice is made to focus on one thing and not another or gives priority to one element over another, we are making a decision that will inadvertently influence the style of what kind of play this is or isn't. The same goes for my teaching. What are the elements that I have been telling people to focus on? Why? What are the conscious choices that I was making? But,

also, what unconscious ideas were creeping in? For a long while, I dare say I did not know what I was teaching…until recently. Over these past few months, as I went back to revisit my notes and my choices for the process of writing this book, I started putting together a bigger picture, one that allowed me to give it a name, coin a term. A term I could confidently use to answer the question: what are you teaching us? Here's what I found, and the steps I traced that led me to this understanding.

Character and World

The first thing that I have always emphasized in my courses is a commitment to developing character and world, and to allow this development to guide the playwright on their journey. A constant answer I would use to describe what I'm teaching is 'character driven stories' and, for me, this implies two things. First, that the story is moving forwards from one event to another, through the push of the characters. It is their decisions, their reactions, their motivations that make the story go in one direction or another, and even if coincidental events were to happen, it would be the

characters' reactions that propel the narrative further. Which brings me to the second aspect of what I mean by 'character driven', and this is that the story is happening for the sake of these characters. Whatever we, the writers, say needs to happen in our story we are doing it to push our characters in the directions we want to push them, to make our characters do what we want them to do. So not only is the character driving the story, but the character is also literally driving the writer. The more the writer understands the character and what needs to happen to them, the more the writer understands what they are writing.

This shows how central character is to the methodology I'm teaching, yet characters cannot exist in a vacuum, cannot be real on a blank-white, neutral plain. A character can be seen and recognized and come to life only if they are given a world to come to life in, hence the other pillar, world building. But what do I mean by 'world'?

The most obvious aspect of this element is its material reality, which we usually find in the environment that we place our characters, or that our characters are born out

of. There is a sense of time and place, which also gives rise to an aesthetic, so location becomes an integral part of any play. No character may be thought of in their completeness without knowing where they are and why they are there. This decision is intrinsic to the conceptualization of the character, since it dictates their material reality (and on most occasions, simply designing and populating this location is already a lot of fun and gets our writing going easily…)

Yet these material facets are only a part of what I mean by world since, even more importantly, there is the immaterial aspect, the culture of this world. What makes this world that is populated by these characters a recognizable society? What connects and regulates the relationships in this world? What are the rules, the hierarchies, the norms, the taboos, the values that make this world functional or dysfunctional? And the character you are writing about, the character you are creating, how do they fit in this world with these rules? How do they see it? How do they understand it or not? Because it is in this relationship, the relationship of your character

to their world, that meaning will be found for whatever it is they are going to do or is going to be done to them.

At this point, you might notice how I haven't mentioned a key term so far that most creative writing teachers, including myself, will turn to at every opportunity: *conflict*. Conflict is at the heart of drama, we say. It is the conflict of the characters that will make or break this story. On a superficial level, that is true, but it's not the whole picture. Why? Because we do not want just any conflict. If just any conflict is effective, and audiences are titillated equally with any form of antagonism, then there would be no difference between *Tom and Jerry* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. We know there is a difference. We can all see that one conflict is much more meaningful and impactful than the other. So no, we are not looking for just any *conflict*, and, as playwrights, we are not attempting to write stories with just any conflict; what we are trying to do is create *meaningful* conflict. We are trying to find situations where conflicts between characters arise and these conflicts have weight, have consequence and say

something about what it means to be alive, what it means to be a living person. This can only be achieved if the writer not only thinks of a character but brings this character to life in a world with a culture. And it is those values, those hierarchies, those systems and how the character engages with this whole world that will give the conflict meaning. It is the interaction of the psychological world inside the character with the cultural world outside—and all the tensions that may arise from this interaction—that will make the conflict of a play (or any story, really) a meaningful conflict.

Hence, in the methodology that I shall be explaining in this book, character and world are inseparable and fundamental. This is what orchestrates the realistic dimension of our work. It is not realistic because there is nothing fantastical in it, but because the interactions of the characters are based on rules, psychological and cultural, that we may recognize and find around us in everyday life. By this measure of realism, I may argue that *The Lion King* is psychologically realistic even though it is about talking animals because the grief following the loss of a father is treated with the right gravitas,

and the behaviour of the characters is a behaviour we may empathize with. In contrast, I could never consider the behaviour of Maria and Tony in *West Side Story*, who make love right after Tony kills Maria's brother anything other than fantastical, unrealistic and maybe even psychotic. At least in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare had enough sense to make Tybalt her cousin, giving a modicum of relational distance. Hence, by this measure, *The Lion King* is much more realistic than *West Side Story*.

Still, there is a lot to get lost in when thinking in terms of character and world, and one may spend months, if not years, researching and planning and note-taking without putting down a single line of the play on paper. At times, preparing for your play feels like researching for an academic thesis, which is a minefield we all should avoid, since we are not writing an academic paper, but a work of drama. This means we need to be able to distil the moments, the crucial actions and confrontations between people that will actually make this work dramatic. Which brings me to the next fundamental step in my process, one I simply call…

Two People with a Problem in a Place

It is essential that a writer for the stage moves to this phase in their writing as soon as possible. I would suggest it as a very first step. Why? Because we need to ensure that we remove ourselves from all the other modes of writing we are so accustomed to, such as prose writing, and essay writing—all the things that they made us practice at school. (Let's face it, unless you've specifically attended a creative writing course, your teachers have only made you practice writing short stories and essays, except for the rare literature teacher that might have asked you to attempt writing a script…) But here we are writing a dramatic work, meaning that the core themes, the essential ideas and concepts of this work, need to be enacted, put into action, performed, and not simply described or discussed. This is also why I suggest you avoid starting by writing a monologue. A monologue is a slippery slope, it might end up being just another essay about your favourite subject, but from a character's mouth, again, not dramatic.

As soon as you get practical, as soon as you put two people in a place together and they have to deal with a problem, you have to engage with the character and world I talked about above, but in action. How do these two characters engage with the problem? Is one of them causing it? Is one of them antagonising another? Already you have to ask why and how, what hierarchies are at play, what values? What is the place bringing to the moment? Where are they? What are the rules of this place? My intention with this part of the process is to get the writer to discover the character and world they want to explore in practice and not just theory. This is a crucial aspect of writing for the stage, this is what makes a work of drama 'dramatic'.

What we are seeing unfold in front of us is not a thesis or a statement, but an enactment—an incarnation, a bringing into active reality—of the concepts or ideas or experiences that we want to share with the audience. This is what makes the essential difference between reading a paper about poverty and seeing a play about poverty. This is why these two experiences, though they

might be exploring exactly the same subject and focusing on the same people in the same country etc., would still be two completely different experiences. One remains text, the other becomes action. We process these in very different ways, and once something is enacted, brought to life, it is no longer simply about deciphering information as an altogether human response is triggered. One that may reach an understanding that touches us more deeply than anything else. And isn't this what we all want to achieve? Write something that, once performed, will touch people? Will move them? So not only are we writing something dramatic, but we are also writing it in an effective way, we are writing the dramatic moment in a manner that would achieve an effect on our audience. This is where the poetics of drama come in. And not only of drama, but of poetry itself. Thus I want you to write a work of drama, as well as a work of drama that is effective. And not only dramatically effective, but maybe even poetically effective too.

Symbols, devices, genres and structures

As stupid as this sounds, us writers must never forget that we are writing. How could that be? How could we forget that we are writing? We actually do, and that is one of the most regular mistakes I encounter in people who have just started writing. It is easy to get lost in thinking of our characters as real people, and it is also easy to get lost in believing that what we are putting on the page is real life. Especially if our starting point is something from memory or someone we know or has existed. But writing is never real life. Writing is always an artifice, always crafted. It is always, in some way or another, mediated, constructed for others to understand, for others to appreciate, and hopefully delivered in such as manner as to leave an impact on those that encounter the work. And here lies the poetic artistry, the art of the line and the art of the image and the art of the sequence, that we must develop for the sake of an effect, be it beauty, shock, poignancy or whichever lasting mark a writer wants to leave on their audience. But a mark needs to be left. And it needs to be

intentioned, though so many unintentional ones are usually also achieved as well.

This demands an understanding of how an audience perceives the symbolic structures present on stage. Everything is representative and everything will be interpreted. That's how the human brain works. Whether we like it or not, a lot of gaps will be filled in by information that we might not have thought necessary to account for. As soon as an audience sees a woman next to a child, they will immediately ask, is that the mother? It's automatic, even if we know nothing at all about these characters, our brain will immediately try to understand and label. This is the symbolic existence of everything presented to an audience. As writers who are crafting a narrative, we need to be fully aware and in control of this dimension as much as the realistic dimension. As much as character and world building are important, so is this poetic dimension an essential layer to the kind of dramatic work we're talking about here.

This poetry is already available to us, we have already absorbed it through our own rich consumption of literature, theatre, and

film throughout our entire lives. We simply need to identify it and start seeing it in our own work. What makes one image stronger than another? Why should a scene build and end on a climax? When is a sound or a song emotionally resonant? These are the kinds of questions and decisions we need to constantly take as we are constructing our scenes and acts and understanding what we want to show and when to our audiences. Everything needs to be deliberate. Whatever you put in the script needs to be translatable into performance by actors and directors so they may achieve the intended effect on the audience. This way, the audience may think and feel what we intend for them to think and feel, and hopefully open the door for more elaborate reactions.

These are the poetics of drama, the devices and structures and genres that we need to manipulate and control for our work to leave a mark. But we may go deeper, we may also talk about the very beauty of our construction and the way it is going to seduce, hold, and strike our audience with the eloquence of the sequence of the words we are employing, and the power of the images and actions we are

showing. The devices and the structures are not merely technical, but also meaningful in themselves. With all of this put together, we may achieve moments of true poetry. And here is where I may come back to redeem *West Side Story*; I may qualify the moment Maria and Tony make love after Tony kills her brother as unrealistic, but only if I'm using realism as my singular measurement. What we actually have in that moment is poetry; a symbolic, poetic moment of love transcending violence, not a realistic moment, but a moment that resonates on an entirely different, symbolic level. So, I may now say *The Lion King* is more realistic than *West Side Story*, but *West Side Story* might be the more poetic of the two.

Ultimately, we are looking for the possibility of achieving all of it: the realism, the drama, and the poetry. But this is not done in one fell swoop. One cannot just start typing away and have all of this fall into place as if with a magic wand, allowing character, world, drama, and poetry to develop neatly and linearly, one word after another, as soon as you sit at your device and start typing. Never. But it does happen eventually. You will see it take

shape and start to happen as you write in layers and phases and you work through a process that will allow for complexity to emerge.

Excavation, Exploration, and Emergence

Everything I teach in my courses is always in the framework of an ongoing creative process that allows the writer to start at a very humble point. We begin writing without knowing what we're writing. We might have an idea or an impulse, but the full vision of what this project truly is and where it will go or where it will end is completely shrouded in darkness. So how does one move forward?

I do not see the writer as someone who executes ideas and follows formulas. I see the writer as a searcher, as someone who is yearning to understand and express, someone who is ready to discover what their story is and how best to tell it. Hence, my focus is always on process, an ongoing mode of creative thinking and writing that shifts through phases in cycles and spirals. The writer does not simply think of the best moments of their play and write them down, always hoping that today will be the day inspiration strikes, no. The writer creates the

conditions through which these great moments may arise and emerge. So that they can then recognize and focus on these moments. We cannot 'will' complexity into being and hope that it works on paper. Instead, we write in layers, as we dig deeper into our characters and our worlds, process our subjects and explore alternatives and angles to how these could be represented and enacted. And through this continuous process of search and experimentation, sometimes even in conjunction with others, we see what is released, what becomes self-evident.

This is a mode of thinking about creativity which allows us to rise above our own limits. What I want you to write is something stronger, more eloquent, more complex and powerful than what you believe you are able to write. This is what a process that aims for complexity gives us, an opportunity to construct stories and plots in shapes and voices that we can't yet fully imagine. The process, as we work through it layer by layer, will allow us to create the conditions for this to happen. What we aim for is something greater than the whole, the moment where it all comes together:

character, world, drama, poetry, everything in action in that singular moment on the stage. But on paper, we are simply finding the right conditions to make this possible.

This impactful emergent complexity that is born out of a combination of structures and conditions that we may manipulate step by step yields such powerful theatre because it might be at the core of a truth far more essential than any work of art. This process might just be the very mechanism how in our daily life we perform into being subjective reality itself. Millions of people, every day, taking small steps, according to a myriad of beliefs and values, manipulating the structures and conditions at their disposal, only for the result to become the overwhelming subjective experience of an enormous emerging complexity. This emerging complexity that we experience is reality, the very experience we're trying to capture on stage.

Performative Complex Realism

Ultimately, every great play is an attempt at showing others what we believe is our reality. By 'our', we may understand a

variety of things. It could be our personal reality, it could be our shared human reality, it could be our understanding of the reality of others, yet in all of these varieties, the subjective commitment remains constant. The commitment to somehow grasp reality and represent it with the full awareness that our audiences already have their own takes on reality which we might need to challenge or interrogate. The plays I'd like you to write through this methodology are plays built on this complex understanding of what reality is. Reality as both objective and subjective. Reality as both socially constructed and physically present. Reality as experienced by individuals and shared in communities. Reality as a phenomenon we are immersed in, yet we're also constructing. A reality which contains a plurality of realities within itself. A totality that might reach beyond the sum of all its parts with living worlds contained within each other and struggling to maintain their dignities and passions amidst all the tension and conflict that may arise simply due to their coexistence.

I'm calling what I'm attempting to teach here *performative complex realism*. These

are plays that are systemic, multilayered, character-driven, and shaped by the worlds that contain us. Dramatic works that confront the full complexity of being alive among others, situated within vast social, ecological, and ideological forces, everyone moving and clashing within systems we may only partly comprehend. Plays that blend psychological depth with symbolic resonance and formal play, honouring the traditions of psychological realism while expanding them, embracing metaphor, genre, and theatrical artifice within a systemic understanding of human life. In this way, *performative complex realism* seeks not only to mirror life as we know it, but to attempt to think and feel beyond our most traditional or conservative understandings of what it means to exist on this Earth.

I'm using the term *performative* because it captures both the dramatic and poetic aspects of the plays I'd like you to write. The term "performative" is also open enough to stretch beyond the dramatic into post-dramatic forms of theatre which should not be altogether discounted from this process (even though I focus on the dramatic forms in this book). It

also accentuates the fact that the culmination of this writing will always be in action on a stage, and on paper we are orchestrating its conditions. Very much like our reality itself, which we need to perform into being every single day.

The work is *complex* because we are aiming for an actual complexity within our plays in the manner in which character, world, drama, and poetry shape the entire opus. The methodology is one focused on process instead of end result, allowing for complexity to emerge and take shape layer by layer. This is also a reference for the very complexity found in the way we engage with our subjects, seeing our stories as taking place within complex systems that need to be made evident as we try to shed light on the complexity of our reality itself.

And finally, *realism* because, no matter how fantastic, symbolic or poetic our imagination may be, human reality remains the final scope of our purpose. Whether it is to illuminate the invisible threads in our current realities, the resonance of the realities of our past or to imagine wholly new realities which

might be possible in our future, our plays remain a means for us to share with others what we believe it is be alive amongst others.

None of this is, of course, new. *performative complex realism* is not a new genre or a new form of drama. This is just a perspective, an understanding, by which we may identify, read, and construct drama. Having just read this introduction to this mode of seeing theatre, you may hopefully return to all of your favourite plays and see it already at work in all of them. Playwrights have been attempting to catch reality on stage since time immemorial. They might not have used the words I am using here to define it, but that's what they've been always doing. This terminology is not meant to distance us from what came before, but to be able to return to it and reread it with contemporary eyes. And this would be my final introductory tip before you launch yourself into this process: read!

Reading other plays, seeing how they are constructed and what makes them effective, to improve your understanding of that leap from text to action is essential. Studying as many plays as possible should be

the one practice in the background of all your writing experiments. Start from your favourites and try to understand why these are your favourites and what these playwrights are accomplishing with their work. These will be highly influential on your own writing, both consciously and unconsciously, so do not be afraid to be influenced, since you do not really have a choice, you will be influenced whether you like it or not. But, in the meantime, also write. The time is now. The steps outlined in these books will take you through the journey of writing a first draft and refining it. Whatever your initial ideas or intentions are, you can write a great play that will leave an impact on someone someday. You can do this. You can write what you can't even imagine yet. And you can do this even if, or especially if, you have no clue at all of what you're doing! To start, all you need to know is that you want to write something for the stage.

Chapter One:
A process not a formula

1.1: Trusting the Process

Many people believe that writing is a two-step act: first comes a sudden burst of inspiration, then comes the disciplined execution of that inspired idea. This picture is misleading and, frankly, unfair.

Why? Because inspiration is unreliable. It shows up when it wants to and, when it doesn't, you're left staring at a blank page, wondering what's wrong with you. If your whole writing journey is going to depend only on how brilliant that first jolt of inspiration happened to be, then you're at the mercy of luck. But no one is at fault for believing so much in inspiration, since this is also a natural result of how we usually experience writing—as already finished, brilliant ideas.

When we encounter plays, they appear complete. We read a finished text, or we watch a polished performance and we are impressed by its totality. What we rarely see are the stages of work that led there: the drafts, the false starts, the experiments that didn't survive. This creates the illusion that a play arrives in one piece, as if a genius simply received it and wrote it down. And that illusion is tempting. It

makes us aim for the *finished product* as soon as possible. We open the page expecting brilliance, and when it doesn't come, we freeze. Or even worse, we keep working harder and harder, trying to make an idea work.

In truth, writing is not a lightning strike followed by hard labour. It is a process. A process that unfolds gradually, a process of discovery. Once you stop demanding inspiration to show you the light, you can actually begin since a play cannot appear to you fully grown. It grows step by step, fragment by fragment, through revision and return. Trusting the process means releasing yourself from the demand of instant perfection. You don't write a play, you build it.

Ideas are starting points, not end goals…

When we cling to an idea, we often try to 'fill it in', like colouring inside lines. But good writing doesn't grow from filling in blanks, it grows from allowing an idea to transform as you write and as you go places and meet characters.

Every playwright begins somewhere: a line of dialogue, a striking image, a personal memory. These beginnings are precious because they let you start. And you do have to start from something, so just take the leap and pick. The anxiety induced in us by the blank page does not come from its emptiness, but from its infinite possibilities. We can put literally anything we want on that page, but what shall we start with? And so, we freeze. But we freeze only if we think of these first words as sacred. As if these first words will determine fully the outcome of the rest. This is not true at all. These are merely your first steps which will automatically lead to other steps; these are not the play.

In fact, one of the healthiest things you can do is allow yourself to move away from your initial ideas. Often, the very act of pursuing one idea opens the door to another,

richer one. If you cling too tightly to the first spark, it can hijack your creative journey, trapping you in the shadow of what you *thought* you wanted to write instead of discovering what you actually need to write. Think of ideas as stepping stones. Each one matters, but only because it leads to the next.

What if writing isn't about knowing *what you're doing, but about* finding out *what you're doing?*

Playwriting is not about proving you already have the answers. It is about setting out without a map and discovering what your play wants to be. You begin not by knowing, but by not knowing and your writing will thrive when you allow yourself to 'not know'. To sit in uncertainty and see what emerges. To discover meaning, rather than to insist on it.

As you write, you discover connections you didn't plan. A character suddenly resists the role you gave them. A scene moves in a direction you never imagined. This is not failure, it is the work. Once you allow yourself to discover, you can then develop. Development means selecting what works, shaping it and carrying it forward. Discovery gives you raw material, development gives it form. Discovery means generating fragments, moments, scenes without worrying about where they fit. Development means choosing what is strong—what has potential—and investing in it. These two impulses dance with each other. You discover, then develop. You develop, then discover more.

This is why the writer must trust the process (sounds like a cliché I know, but totally true). You will not see the whole play at once. But if you commit to this process of discovery and development, the work will grow. I even like to think of this process as having two very different modes of writing that must be practiced throughout.

Think of discovery and development not just as concepts, think of them as practices. And each demands a different way of writing.

- **Scripting mode**: This is when you write scenes. Usually on a word processor, where dialogue flows and you allow yourself to write freely without worrying about mistakes.
- **Notebook mode**: This is when you jot down reflections, lists of possible situations, questions about your characters, themes that trouble you. The notebook is for fragments, sketches, half-formed ideas, and, most importantly decisions.

Both modes are vital. If you only script, you risk producing text without reflection. If

you only notebook, you never stage the conflicts in action. The rhythm of a writer's life involves moving between these two. We are all naturally predisposed towards one more than the other. Some have whole stacks of notebooks filled with ideas and character sketches, maybe even drawings and plans but they haven't written a single readable scene. Others have scene after scene of unfinished plays that maybe repeat character beats or always taper off somewhere in the middle, never properly developed—and not a note in sight.

Understanding which kind of writer you are and making sure to give time to both these practices when you are planning your writing time is integral at the start of your project. This will ensure you are allowing yourself the opportunity to discover and develop. But let's go deeper. On paper, I'm scripting and I'm writing notes but, in my head, what is this process really like?

Our writing process is a thought process…

Creativity is a dynamic mental activity and what I'm talking about here can be applied to any creative activity, not just playwriting. Having an understanding of the different modes of thinking about our ideas and our writing helps us to ensure that our creative flow keeps moving and spiralling until it's time to make it more focused and truly targeted.

I like to think of this process in three overlapping phases, three different ways of thinking about the ideas or the material I want to play with—what I call my three 'Es':

- **Excavation**: Digging. This is where you search for raw material (e.g. memories, situations, images, fragments of speech). Anything can be a starting point, including your feelings.
- **Exploration**: Playing. You test fragments, write small scenes, experiment. You see how characters clash, how dialogue moves, how places affect conflict. You don't polish; you play.
- **Emergence**: Shaping. Patterns begin to appear. You see connections, arcs, structures. You start to recognize the story

you are writing and the world it belongs to.

These phases don't come in a neat order. You will move back and forth constantly. One day you dig, the next you play, the next you shape—and then back again. But knowing the phases helps you trust that the mess of the process is not chaos. It is movement. In the next three sections, we shall dive deeper into the aspects of each phase and what can be achieved in it.

Exercise 1: Plan your writing schedule!

At what time of the day, week, month will you be writing? Preferably it's daily of course, but we all know that that is not always possible and doesn't fit with everyone's creative rhythm. What is important is that it is regular and consistent. So, first step: pick the time and day you'll be writing, BUT don't pick just one, pick TWO; a time for **Scripting** and a time for **Notes**.

An important side note to this exercise is to also pick WHERE you will be writing. Our writing environments become part of our ritual, whether you want the silence of your study/home office or you prefer a café with people coming and going is totally up to you. Just ensure you have a place in mind that may become part of your routine. Routine is essential to this entire process and routine takes both planning and effort, it won't happen if we leave it all up to chance.

1.2 Excavation: Digging for Material

On rare, beautiful occasions, you may wake up one day with a fully formed story in your head. You clearly know what you want your characters to do and why, and what's going to happen to them, and everything follows swiftly as you sit at your keyboard and write out the first draft of your play. But that will be either very rare or maybe never. Most times, you will start writing a play with just fragments, bits and pieces. A memory that still bothers you. A line of dialogue overheard on the train. A photo that unsettles you. A headline that makes you furious. A place you cannot forget. And on some occasions, you don't even have these fragments! Or at least, not enough to build a play out of. So, this is the first essential step in the process I'm suggesting; find your fragments, collect the bits and pieces, give yourself materials to play with.

Excavation is the act of digging for such fragments. It is about collecting, noticing, jotting down sparks of possibility. The mistake we often make is to wait for a "big idea." But in truth, plays emerge from the accumulation of small moments, patiently gathered and tested.

Excavation is your way of building a supply of raw material. Without it, you risk staring endlessly at the blank page. With it, you always have something to mold. And you can excavate ANYTHING. Including other works of art and other plays you love!

Think of Shakespeare, think of the Greek works, think of local myths and legends and old tales. You don't necessarily have to start from the personal, just something you like, something you feel an attraction to, something you want to get to know deeper or want to reinterpret and add your own voice to it. Fundamentally, at some point, you have to answer the question: what do *I* want to write about? And this better be something you truly care about and want to invest hours of your personal time in. Something that truly gets you excited or keeps you up at night. Answer this question and this will help you gravitate towards the relevant fragments that you need.

Remember, you are not writing an essay!

We often begin with big subjects: love, betrayal, injustice. *I want to write about important, meaningful stuff,* you say. But *subjects* are too broad, any subject. And outside of a practical context, they are abstract or theoretical. To write a play, we can't only have a subject, we must also have a dramatic situation, a practical context through which the subject may be explored in action and the play may come alive.

Instead of thinking about love, think of two people in conflict at a wedding. Instead of thinking about corruption, think of a mayor confronted by a childhood friend about a bribe. Instead of thinking about war, think of a soldier trying to explain his absence to his daughter. A subject can be the *background* of your play, but the dramatic situation is its beating heart. The shift from subject to situation is one of the most important acts of excavation as you look at what you want to write about and find moments and contexts in which it becomes enacted.

The sooner you get practical, the better!

So how do you move from a broad subject to a concrete dramatic situation? Think of it as a funnel, you start by thinking of the subject or broad issue you want to talk about, but then you need to find a real world event that is connected to this issue or that exemplifies in reality this subject, and deeper still, within this real world event, you find your dramatic situation which I simplify as your:

Two people with a problem in a place.

Let's take a look at this with an example I like using in my courses, something many people want to write about (as they should!): climate change.

1. **Subject/Issue**: You start by knowing what your concern is, your broad, maybe abstract, maybe theoretical subject. For example, you want to talk about climate change, but climate change is huge. How do you dramatize climate change? So move in, from broad to more specific. How does climate change manifest itself in the world?

2. **Specific Real-World Event**: Forest fires. Wildfires and forest fires are becoming more common across the globe because of climate change. This is the subject, the issue, manifesting itself in a more practical way, in a real-world event that you may excavate further to find your dramatic situation. Let's go deeper down the funnel: within the context of a forest fire, what dramatic situation may we put on stage?

3. **Dramatic Situation**: A mother and son have been informed that they have to evacuate their home because of an approaching wildfire. They only have a small car. They need to decide what they are going to salvage in the couple of hours they have left before they leave everything behind. And there you have it, that is a dramatic situation you may put on stage to explore climate change.

See how we went from a wide subject down the funnel to what I believe to be the fundamental unit of drama: *two people with a problem in a place*? Step by step. And this can be

done with any subject, anything you want to explore. It may feel simple, but it isn't simplistic. That one situation is the seed from which larger conflicts, acts and even entire plays can grow. Even though your first trials with it might not make the final play! Remember, ideas are just steps, but this is a crucial one. You may only start writing your play once you know who these two people are, what their problem is and where they are. Once you know that you may start writing, you may start experimenting with what they might have to say to each other and why.

Watch out for starting your play by writing a monologue, it might end up just being a rant and not a story at all. Knowing your two people with a problem in a place will help you get into dialogue immediately because they must confront each other, and something has to be done. But if you really have to write a monologue to start with, if you can't avoid it, (imagine you are writing a solo show!) then make sure the monologue is about two people with a problem in a place! You might not have them both in front of you on stage at the moment, but the character does.

The character giving us the monologue will help us imagine the two characters and their problem in that place (they themselves could be one of those characters, of course.)

And this also becomes a good trick for writing strong monologues, which we'll talk about in more detail in the second book of this series. What's important for you to understand right now is how crucial this core dramatic situation is for your project. Why is this so crucial? Because these are the fundamental building blocks of all dramas, and the sooner you start building your story on them, the closer you start getting to writing engaging and effective theatre.

You must build a foundation for complexity.

The dramatic situation is the cornerstone of every aspect of your play. Every scene you write will be built out of these three elements:

- **Characters**: Not types, but individual members of communities with families, roles, memories, contradictions, and needs.
- **Problem/Conflict**: Something they want, resist, fear, or struggle with. Something that needs to be achieved or overcome.
- **Place**: The setting, their physical environment and the world that shapes how they act and speak with its rules and hierarchies and systems.

It is the dynamic triangulation of these three core building blocks that will give rise to all the brilliant moments of your play. As we shall see in more detail in Chapter Two, characters come to life when seen living in a real world we may recognize, and their problems become engaging when they have consequences on other characters and the world around them. Nothing is interesting in a vacuum or on some neutral ground. It is the

dynamic relationship between these three that will give you all the opportunities you need to write a strong work of theatre. So, these are the aspects you need to excavate.

Look for characters and look for worlds where we might see them come to life in. And look for problems, real-life tangible problems with consequences. When you start moving from a subject to a dramatic situation, bring your fragments into play, even if initially unrelated, even if you found them in very disparate contexts: for example, a song you'd like to refer to, a painting that inspired you, a place you've been on holiday, a character you thought of at work, a problem you've read about online—all the things you'd like to use or allow to influence you during the writing of this play, just bring it all on board. No matter where you found what, what's important is that you bring it all as a source of further inspiration to dig deeper into your dramatic situation, but also to keep you personally invested in what you're writing. And here's the other important element to excavate throughout this project: yourself.

But what's in it for you?

This is where excavation goes deeper. It's not just about subjects and situations 'out there' in the world. It's about you. Why do *you* want to write about this? What is at stake for you? Did something in your personal life collide with this issue? Can you recall a moment when you felt it most strongly? But also: how close should you get?

If the material feels too raw, you may need to build distance so you can shape it dramatically rather than confess it directly. If the material feels too far away, you may need to find a personal angle that connects you to it, a question, a doubt, an emotional thread. Excavation is about gathering both fragments from the world around you—events, images, characters, etc.—and fragments of your own feelings, memories, questions. The richest plays come when these two kinds of excavation meet. At the end of the day, you don't only want to write something interesting that engages an audience, but something that you feel strongly about and hopefully truly means a lot to you.

Exercise 2: Excavating a Subject

1. Pick a broad subject that interests or troubles you right now.
2. Write freely for **five minutes** about your personal connection to this subject. Why does it matter to you? Where does it touch your own life?
3. Then, write another **five minutes** from the perspective of someone completely different from you (different age, background, politics, life experience). Why might *they* care about the same issue?
4. Finally, underline anything that feels alive: an image, a situation, a line of thought, a strong word or phrase you used. This is all material worth carrying forward or coming back to.

The process of excavation is not about accuracy or results; it's about giving yourself a little mound of conceptual resources to start looking at. You don't have to be choosy yet, that will come later.

Exercise 3: From Subject to Situation

1. Pick the ISSUE or TOPIC or SUBJECT you are interested in writing about.
2. What kind of real-world EVENTS are a consequence of this issue? Write them down, just name them no need for too much detail.
3. Now think of a DRAMATIC SITUATION, a moment of conflict between two people in a place that might arise in such an event or because of the event and write it down.

Repeat this exercise two to three times, come up with different situations of *two people with a problem in a place* that arise from your issue of interest.

Now, take a leap, choose one and write a scene! Don't worry about where this happens in the play or whether you know how it is going to end or not, just write it out! Start with a short description of what is on stage, be clear and don't get lost in too much detail. Then write out a dialogue between these two people. There, you started writing a play.

Reading Suggestion…

As a follow-up to our focus on the dramatic situation, *two people with a problem in a place,* I suggest you read the following two plays:

The very short play by Bertolt Brecht, *The Jewish Wife,* found in *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich,* and the American classic by Marsha Norman, *Night Mother*. Both of these plays exploit the core dramatic situation to its fullest and offer a great variety of strategies for other playwrights to adopt. Make sure you read them.

1.3 Exploration: Playing with Possibility

By now, you've begun to gather your fragments and narrowed subjects down to situations. Finding your situation is not just an exercise—it is the *kernel of drama*. Almost every play, however complex, is built from this unit.

Exploration begins here. You take this kernel and start stretching and testing it. It is your laboratory. Even if you have no clue yet about what is supposed to happen when or what this play is about, start from writing a scene, or a moment, an interaction between these two people in this place. Not notes or ideas, but start scripting! You do not have to start at the beginning. Many people hold themselves from putting pen to paper because they do not know where to start, and many times they are simply afraid that they do not have the beginning of their play in mind yet. That is not an issue and you shouldn't let it hold you back. Start from writing what you already feel strongly about. If you have an idea for the ending, then write the ending. If you have important lines you feel strongly about, then write the scene where those lines are said.

Just start writing a scene without holding yourself back because of uncertainty.

Make sure you describe the set, how does this look on stage, what are we seeing and where are our characters? And start writing the dialogue: what are they saying to each other? Is this a fight? Is this a request? Get into it and do not judge it. This is very important. Exploration is successful only if we allow it time and suspend our judgement. Yes, most of the stuff you might be writing could be ineffective and badly written, but you need to write the bad stuff out of you anyway before you get to the good stuff. So just write until you feel you can stop, or your characters run out of things to say to each other, or there's a clear climax already stopping the moment. And then you write it again!

Don't just write the scene once and move on. Write it again and again in different ways. The first time you write a scene, you are automatically focusing on one effect or one purpose. But when you rewrite a scene or a moment, you may give yourself new intentions to focus on. For example, the first time you focused more on what one character was

saying and the other character was just reacting so you give yourself a new goal: Let's rewrite it and give the second character more of an agenda. Or you realize that the environment is not being used at all and the scene is just dialogue with no action. So again, you give yourself a new intention and try another rewrite of the scene with more interaction with the environment.

What's important here is that your rewrites are not without direction, but intentional. You rewrite this moment trying out different things and giving yourself different intentions each time to start discovering what these characters could do and how. This is the purpose of exploration. And then, from one moment you may start exploring other moments: the before and the after and the consequences of this moment. Ask yourself:

- What happened to these people *before* they arrived here? Did they fight yesterday? Have they been avoiding each other for years?

- What will happen *after* this scene ends? Do they part ways? Does one storm out? Do they meet again tomorrow?
- Who else might they talk to about this problem? A friend? A parent? A stranger? How would that conversation change things?

When you explore, you are sketching, not sculpting. Don't aim for polish or accuracy. Don't aim for 'good writing' since 'good writing' needs layers and complexity—things you cannot have or even see yet. Aim for discovery.

Think of a painter making many quick sketches of a subject before committing to a larger canvas. Each sketch tests composition, line, movement. In the same way, each scene you write tests character, conflict, rhythm. Some sketches will be messy. Some will be lifeless. But a few will reveal something alive. Those are the ones you'll want to develop further.

Every variation you write opens a new possibility. You begin to see the possible routes your plot might take, and you will also notice

how these characters are not static puppets but living people with histories and futures. Thus your focus needs to be on bringing them more to life.

Take one moment, see the branches coming out of it and build a world around it…

Characters don't exist in isolation or on a neutral white background like painted cutouts. They carry relationships, memories, loyalties, wounds; they have already been shaped by the world they live in. As you explore your two characters in their place, imagine:

- Who else is significant in their lives? Parents, children, colleagues, rivals?
- What communities are they a part of? A workplace, a school, a town, a political movement?
- What roles do they hold? Do they have power? Do they have privilege? Are they oppressed?

By writing short scenes that involve these other presences, you expand the world of your play. You also discover contrasts: how a character behaves in front of a lover may be very different from how they behave with a parent, or a boss. These contrasts give depth and complexity. You will also start discovering the role of the 'place' in this situation or more specifically, the forces present in the

environment your characters are alive in. Remember: the 'place' in your situation is not neutral and is not merely decorative. It shapes the action with its own rules and expectations. An argument between siblings is different in a hospital waiting room, a noisy bar, or their childhood kitchen. Each location presses on the characters differently, shaping what can be said and what must remain unsaid.

Exploration also means trying out different environments for the same conflict. See what changes when the place changes. Sometimes the shift unlocks the true energy of the scene. One of the things we will be talking more about later in these books is tension. Tension is the energy of your play, the shifts in power dynamics between the characters, and between the characters and their environment, is a great source of tension. So, while you're exploring these characters and their relationships, also think about power. Who holds authority in the scene? Who resists it? How does power shift from one to the other? How does the environment give power? How does the environment give privilege and to whom?

If you are writing an argument between your two people in a place, try writing the same argument twice: once with Character A holding the upper hand, then with Character B suddenly seizing it. Notice how this changes not just the dialogue, but the tone and outcome. You will also have to start thinking in more consequential ways about what your characters are saying and doing.

Drama thrives on power shifts. Playing with them in small scenes teaches you how to create energy and escalation, an essential aspect of good writing. But this exploration phase will also give rise to something even more rudimentary. As you play with characters and place and their conflicts and power dynamics, you will start seeing connections. Characters start taking actions that have consequences, decisions that affect each other and their environment, or saying things that can never be taken back. These moments that you are discovering are the shape of your story and fragments that start to form a plot. You are witnessing the start of emergence.

Exercise 4: Expanding the Kernel

Take one of your *two people with a problem in a place* moments from Exercise 3 and expand it through exploration:

1. **Write the scene as it stands.** Keep it short, no more than one page.
2. **Before:** Write a short sketch of what happened *just before* the scene began. Where were the characters? What mood are they carrying into the problem?
3. **After:** Write a short sketch of what happens *immediately after* the scene ends. How do they part? Does the problem grow worse?
4. **Other voices:** Write a third sketch in which one of the characters talks to someone else about this problem. A parent, a friend, a stranger. What new light does this conversation shed?
5. **Place shift:** Write the same scene in a new location. How does the change in place shift the action?

6. **Power shift:** Rewrite with the opposite character holding the upper hand. What new dynamics emerge?

When you finish, you'll have a set of six small sketches, all orbiting around the same kernel. Together, they form a constellation of possibilities. Somewhere in this mini collection lies the shape of your play, but before you can start seeing it, you might need to dig deeper and explore further.

Excavation and exploration are not a linear process but a circular and spiralling one. You excavate fragments and explore them in a variety of possibilities, and the exploration yields new fragments, new moments for you to excavate again. This back and forth movement should give you not only an increasingly detailed understanding of what your characters may or may not do—but also more characters, and more moments in time, as you explore the before and the after and find new consequences to everything your characters do or say. Once you have enough material, connections are bound to be made.

1.4 Emergence: Recognizing the Story

It doesn't happen with a single stroke of genius. It happens gradually, as you notice patterns. A character you thought was minor keeps reappearing in your moments. A conflict you tested in different variations begins to escalate. A line of dialogue you wrote two weeks ago suddenly resonates with a new sketch.

This is emergence: when the material itself begins to suggest a shape. You are not yet 'plotting', you are listening, recognising, gathering what already wants to grow. The task at this stage is to notice: *what is alive? What has energy? What wants to be carried forward?* The more you draft moments and scenes the more you need to stop, take a look at what you are writing and start identifying patterns, conflicts, and journeys. The key signs of story emerging are:

- **Patterns**: Themes or situations repeat in different forms. Repetition is inevitable because we write what we like and what we are interested in, and these elements

will keep coming up even when we do not plan them.

- **Conflicts**: Tensions intensify and characters collide more directly. But conflict is not only necessarily direct confrontation it might also creep up in your writing through contradicting elements and character differences that you were not focusing on while drafting.
- **Journeys**: You sense someone is moving, changing, resisting change or failing to. The moments you write for a character will start showing you where that character is going or failing to go. Realizing that a character is stuck is as important as understanding their final goal.

These are not always things you impose. Sometimes you do sit with the intention of writing a fight between two characters, but a lot of things will appear in your writing unconsciously. You need to pause and look at your writing as if it were somebody else's to see these things. These are things you recognise but you need to be in the right mind frame to

do so. Rereading your work to observe what is happening in it requires a different approach from when you are writing. Ask yourself questions when you read your scenes and try to find answers. Read with intent.

For example, focus on one character and read your scenes to see where this character is at in every moment. What is the character's state at the start of the scene? What is it at the end? Is the state the same in every scene? Are there gradual or sudden changes? Similar questions can be asked about the themes of your play, how are these showing up in your drafts? Are these obvious, too obvious or not at all? Are we learning more about this place? What is every scene you have drafted saying about where and how these people live? What more needs to be said? As you reread the work you're developing through excavation and exploration and answer more questions you will start to identify these patterns. Your writing is starting to show you that a story, a story that could be a play, is hiding inside the fragments.

What you ARE *writing is not always what you* WANT *to write. Understanding this difference is crucial to selecting the correct moments to develop.*

Not every fragment belongs. Some sketches will prove lifeless; others will contradict the direction your play wants to take. Shaping begins here:

- Choose which fragments have energy, movement, add pressure and tension or revelation. Moments where decisive actions happen.
- Keep moments where characters reveal themselves. Moments that give us a deeper understanding of who these characters are and why they behave the way they do.
- Set aside the ones that don't serve any character, that just relay information or add nothing to the world and the story.
- Notice which characters or conflicts demand more space and could be developed further. Which moments are are giving you new opportunities?

Shaping is not yet architecture. It's not 'three acts' or 'five acts'. It's the first step of curation: keeping what's alive, discarding what's dead. Every single moment in your play

needs to add something to your characters. In every moment, they need to act or decide or react, and even if it's subtle, there needs to be change or some form of movement on the page.

We will get into all this later when we discuss structure, but you will start seeing the pieces, the fragments or moments coming together into scenes. From scenes you may start seeing sequences of scenes and finally full acts. You will find this the more you understand what needs to happen to your characters, what they need to do and where they are going. This is how plays acquire structure—not imposed from above, but discovered from within the material you've been writing. This is emergence. The moment something bigger, something larger, starts to take shape from the smaller fragments and experimental drafts. This is when you may truly start describing what your play is about.

And only then may you start thinking about structure intentionally, which also implies thinking about plot intentionally. That is, if you have figured out exactly what your story is. Always keep in mind the difference between story and plot:

- **Story** is what happens to your protagonist, the main sequence of events that reveals the central struggle of your play. Example: *Oedipus Rex* is the story of a prince, that unbeknownst to him, was abandoned at birth and adopted. When he grew older, he was given a prophecy that he shall one day kill his father and sleep with his mother. So, to avoid the prophecy, he runs away from home, but unwittingly ends up fulfilling the prophecy nonetheless through his encounters with his real father and mother.

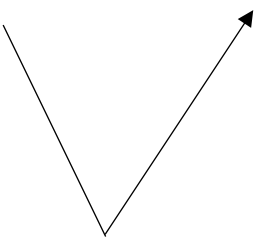
- **Plot** is the way this sequence of events is revealed to us to see the story unfold in a meaningful and impactful way. Example: The story of *Oedipus Rex* is revealed to us through a detective story plot, of sorts, where all the main events have already happened, Oedipus is already king and has unintentionally and unknowingly already fulfilled his prophecy, and the characters are piecing together what actually transpired in the past to understand their current calamity.

Right now, you are glimpsing the story—the journey that your characters are beginning to make—and selecting the moments that matter, while discarding some that don't. The crafting of plot will come later, when you decide how best to reveal that journey to an audience. But the basic shape of your story should be coming into view. You will start to see who is/are your protagonist/s, and what needs to happen to them in order for them to do what they ultimately must do.

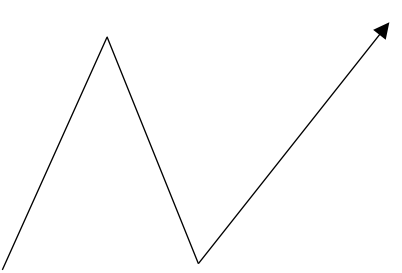
Stories have shapes. It's the line that your characters are drawing…look for the line!

Kurt Vonnegut famously sketched 'story shapes' as simple lines that rose and fell to represent changes in a character's fortune. (Look for the video on *Youtube*, it's lovely to see him explain this!) These are some examples:

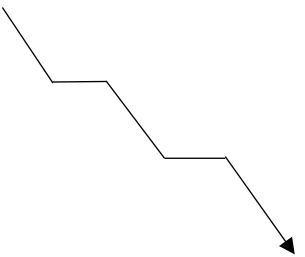
- **Man in Hole:** someone falls into trouble, struggles and climbs out again.



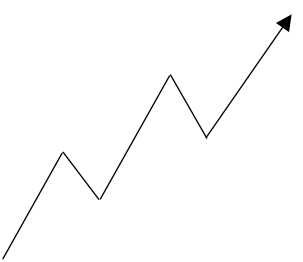
- **Boy Meets Girl**: fortunes rise with love, dip with loss and rise again.



- **From Bad to Worse**: a downward slope, with no recovery. (Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* fits this line perfectly!)



- **Cinderella**: a steady climb from misery to joy, with some more moments of misery thrown in the middle.



These are not templates to copy. They are reminders of rhythm. Audiences respond instinctively to rises and falls, to reversals and resolutions. When you begin to see a shape like this emerging in your own material, it signals that your fragments are not just isolated sketches anymore, they are becoming story. Recognizing these patterns may also help you explore more, and surpass any blocks. If you're not sure what to write next, look at the fortunes and misfortunes of your character and try to see the line. What shape is coming out? Where can you take it next? This will also help you better understand who this story is about, ergo who your protagonists are.

Alongside the shape of story comes the focus of story. Certain figures step forward. They resist being background. Scenes gather around them. They make decisions that move events forward. These are your protagonists; these are the characters that are drawing the line of your story. You may have thought you knew who they were from the beginning, but emergence often surprises you. A side character takes over. A voice you added as contrast suddenly feels central. Whether you

have one protagonist, two or an ensemble, the key question is: *whose fate matters most to us as we watch this play? Who are we following to the very end?* That is the person (or people) your story belongs to.

This is where everything connects. Remember: plays are not built out of themes alone, nor out of clever plots imposed from above. Plays are built from characters confronting each other and making choices. This is what the audience connects with, not just clever lines or smart effects, but real-life struggle. And that must be your consistent focus throughout the play. This is character driven-drama. Understand your characters and everything else will come together eventually.

Exercise 5: Tracing the Shape and the Protagonist

1. Gather the short sketches and variations you wrote in Exercise 4.
2. Choose at least **three** that feel connected. Arrange them in an order that makes sense.
3. Ask yourself: *What changes across these pieces?* Does fortune rise, fall, or both?
4. Draw a simple line showing that change. What story shape does it resemble?
5. Now, look at the characters involved. Who is at the centre of this change? Whose need or decision is driving it?

Finally, write a short paragraph describing your emerging protagonist: Who are they, what do they need and what must happen to them for this play to exist?

Chapter One Recap:

So, what have we really seen in this first chapter? Here's what to keep in mind…

Process over genius

Plays don't land on the page fully formed. Forget the myth of instant inspiration. Writing for the stage is about fragments, experiments, and discoveries that slowly add up to something bigger, trusting that meaning and shape will emerge.

Ideas are starting points

An idea isn't a play. It's a starting point. Sometimes you'll drop it, sometimes it will morph into something else. The point is to follow where it leads, not cling to it as if it's sacred.

Two kinds of writing

You need time for free-flowing *scripting* (drafting scenes on the page) and time for reflective *notebook work* (notes, questions, fragments, lists). Both matter—together, they keep the process alive.

Excavation: Digging into subjects

Excavation takes you from big, abstract issues, like 'power' or 'justice' into specific dramatic situations: *two people with a problem in a place.* Along the way, you ask: what's my personal connection here? Why do I care? That's how you unearth the real building blocks, characters, problems, and places.

Exploration: Testing and playing

Once you've got your situation, you play with it. You rewrite it in different places, with different power dynamics, before and after the meeting, with other characters involved. Exploration means sketching, not polishing. It's where possibilities multiply.

Emergence: Story takes shape

Suddenly, you start to see patterns. Characters return, conflicts deepen, journeys begin. This is where story (what happens) starts to separate from plot (how you tell it). You might even see classic story shapes hiding in your work. And most importantly, your protagonist steps forward. You know who we're following, whose fate matters most.

A Continuous Spiral

Excavation, exploration and emergence are not a linear process, but a recursive spiral that you keep circling through as you write your play. When new elements and shapes emerge from your explorations, these are ripe for further excavation, and the cycle starts again—but deeper!

And now… Chapter Two

Chapter One has been about discovery: fragments, situations, characters, and the beginnings of story. Chapter Two is about building. Now that you know who your play belongs to, it's time to excavate further the core foundations of drama, *character, conflict, and world*, to get closer to the complexity that will make your play richer and deeper.

Chapter Two:
The building blocks of drama

2.1 Characters: More than Archetypes

Chapter One was a general introduction to the process and its modes. It was about trusting the process and letting fragments lead you as you discover what you are writing. Chapter Two is not really a 'next step' in the process, but more of a deeper dive into the aspects that were already introduced in Chapter One. Here, we are going to take the core dramatic situation, *the two people with a problem in a place* and look at it under the microscope. What do we mean by *people*? What do we mean by *problem*? What do we mean by *place*? We'll look at some exercises to help you develop these into the complex foundations that your exciting play needs to emerge from. Our first block is the people you are writing about. Your characters.

Just because you ARE a character, doesn't mean you HAVE character…

Characters are the living, breathing core of any play. But they are more than archetypes, more than 'the mother', 'the lover', or the villain'. They are people with needs, contradictions and depth. The job now is to start excavating them and discover what's going to make your characters unique. When you put two people with a problem in a place, you are not just arranging figures in a box. You are excavating lives. Why *these* two? Why *this* place? What's pressing in on them? What values, histories and secrets do they bring with them into the scene?

Avoid the trap of writing a 'type' that simply serves the story. Instead, build people whose story could only unfold because of who they are. The deeper you go into their contradictions, the richer your drama will become. It's true that characters often enter our imagination through roles or archetypes: the teacher, the soldier, the child, the parent. These are familiar entry points. They help us situate someone quickly. But roles don't equal character. A nurse on stage isn't interesting just because she is a nurse. She becomes interesting because of her motivations, why she is there,

what she wants, what drives her forward or holds her back.

Archetypes are useful starting points, but don't stop there. Push further. Ask: what makes this person specific, unique, alive? How do they act when no one is looking? What contradictions live inside them? Remember: theatre is driven by agency. A character without motivation is just a costume. Another way to think of your characters more as living people is to think of them as situated in time. Every person lives in time: they carry a past, inhabit a present and project a future. Characters are no different. Their history shapes them, their present traps or liberates them and their future—the one they imagine or fear—propels them.

- **Past:** What experiences, traumas, joys or failures haunt them? What baggage do they carry into the play?
- **Present:** What are they dealing with right now? What problem, conflict or situation is demanding their attention?
- **Future:** What do they hope, dread or imagine will come next? How does their

vision of tomorrow influence their choices today?

Good drama lives in the tension between these three layers of time. The past interrupts, comes back to haunt characters or has put complex defences inside of them making their journey a struggle; the present complicates things, throws new obstacles at them, gives them challenges they might not be able to surpass; the future demands they step up or fail miserably—it holds their fate. When your characters live across these dimensions, they feel real. But let's go even deeper, let's think in detail about what moves your characters, what pushes them to say what they say, want what they want, and fight or run when they have to.

Every great play makes the invisible forces shaping our lives visible.

Characters don't act in a vacuum. They respond to stimuli, forces pressing on them from inside and outside.

- **Internal stimuli:** their biology and their physical needs, their psychology, desires, memories, fears, moral codes, emotional wounds.
- **External stimuli:** other people, social systems, cultural forces, nature, politics, money, their physical environment.

Think about what makes your characters who they are, what forces, what pressures they have, what has given them the shape they have and how they are still being driven and carved by these forces. The internal and the external are also connected; these are not entirely separate things, but rather, aspects in relationship. Take, for example, our body, our biology. It is impossible to separate what is happening inside our bodies from the environment we live in. The food available in our environment, whether it is a physically active environment or not, the climate of the place (all of these are outside stimuli) are directly affecting our internal biology, how

much muscle and fat we have, what diseases or health issues we might have, etc. Now this doesn't apply only to physical elements such as our body, but also to our psychology. What a character is thinking and what a character is desiring is directly related to what they see and hear in the world around them. There are obvious stimuli that are very easily visible, but then there are other invisible, more subtle, stimuli that are still influencing your character.

And not only do you need to understand what is shaping your character, but you also need to understand what the character is AWARE of. Is your character conscious of what is shaping them? Is your character aware of the forces that are pushing and pulling them in the directions that they are heading? This is a crucial aspect of writing character. Understanding what they know and what they do not know, even about themselves—actually *most importantly* about themselves—will help you find the trajectory your character needs to go through in your story.

Why? Because all stories, deep down, are about growth or the lack of it. One might use the word change instead of growth, but I

prefer growth—growth in awareness, growth in understanding. The very core of every story is about a character who understands something that they could not understand before. It is about awareness. What is your character going to become aware of as the story progresses? How is this new awareness going to change them as a person? This is a fundamental question that one must answer to write a character-driven story. And for you to be able to answer this question, you need to first understand what it is that your character is not aware of yet.

The inherent, invisible goal of every single character is epiphany. To understand how they are who they are in this world.

So, if you really want to discover who your character is, where they come from and where they must go, you need to excavate deeper into the relationship between the stimuli that make them, and understand which are the stimuli they are aware of, and which are the ones they're still ignorant about. Take, for example, desire. A very important dimension of every character. What does this character desire? What do they obsess about and want? They might know what their desire is, but are they aware of why they have that very specific desire? Are they aware of what has shaped them into the person that has that obsession? Here's a very simplified example:

- **Known:** Your character wants power and they are aware of this. This is what they think of day and night, and their behaviour and decisions are always geared towards them gaining power over others. They are also aware that, in their childhood, they suffered from both poverty and danger and they felt powerless or witnessed their parents and loved ones being powerless for most of the time, hence their desire for power now.

- **Unknown:** That what they truly lacked was safety and dignity. And gaining power over others is not necessarily a way of having safety and dignity.

A character may be fully aware of what drives them, or blind to it. The most gripping moments of drama come from characters acting out of impulses they don't fully understand, only for the truth to emerge later. But none of this happens by accident. You might see it emerging in your drafts, but at some point you need to intentionally write the moments that will show these aspects of your characters come to fruition on stage.

For you, the writer, the challenge is to hold both: you may know more than your characters, but you must decide how much they are aware of at any given moment. This interplay that you must navigate between your characters and the audience—what your characters know and don't know—and what the audience is starting to figure or is completely blind to is going to be a great source of tension and engagement. Once you know what you want to show about a character, you also need to accurately choose when you want

to show it for its full impact on the audience. Some things are written all over a character from the moment they set foot on stage; other things need to be revealed slowly. But by the end of the play, we should not have any more questions about a character. We should know them with all of their faults…maybe even better then they know themselves.

Exercise 6: Digging into a Character

Take a character you've been working with (or invent a new one). Write down as much as you can under the following headings:

1. **Role/Archetype:** What "label" would the world give them? (e.g. teacher, son, soldier, manager).
2. **Past Stimuli:** What is one major event in their past that shaped them?
3. **Present Stimuli:** What problem are they facing right now?
4. **Future Stimuli:** What do they imagine will happen to them next, dream of or fear?
5. **Internal Stimuli:** What do they want or need that no one else can see?
6. **External Stimuli:** What forces outside of them are shaping their choices (family, money, society, place)?
7. **Known/Unknown:** Which of these are they conscious of? Which are hidden from them?

Finally, write a short monologue in their voice, half a page is enough, where they reveal what they think is driving them. Then, underneath, write one sentence about what you, the writer, know is *actually* driving them, something crucial that they don't yet see.

This gap between what a character believes and what truly drives them is a source of tension you need to use, what may lead you to find their internal conflict and source of inspiration for the trajectory—the journey—your character must take in their story.

2.2 Conflict: The Energy of Theatre

If characters are the heart of a play, then conflict is the pulse. Without conflict, there is no drama. Two people on stage politely agreeing with each other may be real, but it is not theatre. Theatre is born the moment needs clash, desires collide or values are tested. Conflict is what makes us lean forward in our seats, it is the energy that keeps both writer and audience engaged. And the easiest way to define the conflict in your play still remains the simple dichotomy of external and internal conflicts.

As you read this chapter, you might automatically find yourself thinking that it resembles a lot of what we had just been discussing in the previous chapter when we talked about pressures or forces acting on the character. That is totally true. We *are* talking about the same things, just using different words to shift slightly the focus. Character and conflict are intrinsically tied. You cannot create character without understanding the nature of the conflict of that character, and you cannot find a great conflict that is meaningful for your character without understanding what shapes

your character. You will be surprised to find that a lot of these 'understandings' and 'decisions' about your characters and their stories will start to fall in place simultaneously the more you excavate and explore.

So don't be afraid of taking some wrong step or other. Don't beat yourself up over what should come first or second. Allow yourself to play and see; conflicts, forces, characters, etc. And hold on to whatever comes to you first and develop it. For now, we'll be focusing on the nature of conflict and define the myriad ways a character may have tension with everything that is around and inside of them.

Tortured souls make for great drama…

External conflict is the visible, either directly or indirectly, conflict of the character in tension with things or forces outside of their body and mind. Hence, everything found in their environment. Many times, it is the friction we can point to on stage: an argument, a fight, a trial, a protest, a negotiation, a chase. At a very simplified level, we may say that external conflict can take three basic forms. Though, in reality, these are actually more interconnected and complex:

- **People vs. People:** friends, lovers, enemies, colleagues, strangers in opposition.
- **People vs. Nature:** survival in the wilderness, climate disaster, sickness, storms.
- **People vs. Society:** the individual resisting authority, tradition or oppressive systems.

These conflicts are compelling because they are immediately visibly active on stage. We see them unfold in front of us. The central story hooks that draw us in and make us curious about the fate of the characters on stage are always the external conflicts. But we cannot stay on the surface, or else we risk our

characters and story becoming flat or repetitive. For drama to deepen, external conflict must connect to something internal. We must also understand and explore what internal conflicts are driving the characters—many times unbeknownst to them, as they are struggling through their external ones.

Think of internal conflict as the tension that lives within a character. It is the tug-of-war between contradictory needs, values or fears. A soldier who longs to return home, but cannot face his family. A politician torn between personal integrity and ambition. A lover who wants intimacy, but fears rejection. These are the private contradictions that make the decisions our characters need to take so impossible. Internal conflicts are powerful because they humanize your characters. And it is here that your audience will find its empathic connection. We may not all face the same external struggles, so we are not expecting our audience to connect on that level, especially if the external struggle is something extreme or fantastic. But we can always recognise the inner battle; that is where the human reality shines through. Our struggles are difficult, sometimes

even impossible, because we are torn in between unreconcilable opposite poles that attract essential but different aspects of who we are.

Conflict thrives on this polarity. Fear vs. courage. Corruption vs. virtue. Freedom vs. control. Self-interest vs. sacrifice. These polarities are not abstract themes; they are lived out in choices and clashes between people. When building conflict, ask: what is the central opposition here? What is the clearest polarity that will pull my characters apart or force them together? When you heighten the gap between opposites, you heighten the drama. Polarity also works within characters: one person may be torn between courage and fear, or freedom and control. This is what creates depth. A villain who believes they are virtuous. A hero who fears they are corrupt. These contradictions keep us watching because these are contradictions that we ourselves must navigate in our daily lives. These contradictions are also a source of complexity for the reality that we are creating on stage. When every character brings their own internal contradictions or internal polarities to the central external

conflict of the play, you will immediately create conditions for complexity to arise.

This is exactly how some of the richest plays we all love are constructed, with a complex reality arising from an external conflict we can see, and internal conflicts that deepen it. Hamlet hesitates (internal) while Denmark unravels (external). Willy Loman battles self-delusion (internal) while losing his job and family (external). Blanche DuBois clings to illusions (internal) while colliding with Stanley's brutal reality (external). Balancing the two doesn't mean giving them equal time. It means making sure they feed each other.

A balancing act of external and internal conflicts that give rise to an escalating series of chain reactions will drive your story toward its climax.

What the writer needs to navigate is the relationship between these two sets of conflicts, the external and the internal. We always start by putting on stage the most obvious—the external situations—since we want our audience to understand as soon as possible our central drama: the two people with a problem in a place. But then we need to think of this external problem as the trigger or the magnifier for the internal conflict. The internal conflict is revealed, made visible and tangible, by the external conflict. This relationship is essential and becomes the motor of the plot, the source of energy that is pushing the events of the story forwards. The characters enter into an external conflict, which reveals their internal struggles, which, in turn, keep pushing the action forward as the character is trying to resolve the external challenge. The internal conflict spills outward, driving into further complexity the external conflict so what happens on stage grows out of what happens inside these characters.

Conflict is not decoration. It is the engine of your play and at the very heart of all your character development. Without conflict,

scenes stall. With conflict, even a small moment, a shared meal, a silent pause, can pulse with tension. Every choice your characters make should either spark, escalate or attempt to resolve conflict. That is what keeps the drama alive, and what allows the audience to see deeper into the characters.

As the characters struggle with their conflicts, we get to know them more and we get to feel for them more. So when you finish writing a scene and you are rereading it, ask yourself: where is the conflict in this scene? Are we seeing the external conflict or its effects and consequences? How is the internal conflict manifesting itself? If there isn't evidence of both, then the scene is incomplete, and you have a very clear indication of what needs to be developed further. We will look deeper into this when we discuss writing scenes, and we'll also focus more on building escalation when we look at plotting and structure. But now, we need to take a look at the third essential building block: *place*.

Exercise 7: Mapping the Conflict

Choose two characters you've been exploring. Answer these questions:

1. **External Conflict:** What are they openly in conflict about?
2. **Internal Conflict:** What contradictions or fears live inside each of them?
3. **Polar Opposites:** What opposing values or needs define their clash?
4. **Escalation:** How might this conflict grow across three scenes? What new pressure could you add each time?

Finally, sketch one short scene (no more than a page) where both the external and internal conflicts are present. Let the characters argue about one thing on the surface while beneath it, another deeper conflict is quietly pulling the strings. Explore this by playing with alternatives, trying out different characters and experimenting with different combinations of external and internal conflicts.

Reading suggestions…

Two great dramatic examples where we find characters defined through their conflicts are Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Though two very different plays, they both focus on dysfunctional families, and the characters reveal their depths layer by layer as they struggle through their conflicts, external and internal. Consider these as two must-reads for further study of character development through conflict.

2.3 World: Why This Place, Why Now?

If characters are the heart of your play and conflict is its pulse, then place is its body—the container where everything unfolds. Drama doesn't happen in the abstract. It happens *somewhere*. A kitchen. A prison cell. A bus stop at midnight. A field in the rain. The places we choose aren't neutral, they shape the action, the atmosphere and the meaning of a play. Remember the core unit of drama: *two people with a problem in a place.* Place is inseparable from situation. Change the place, and you change the dynamics. When you alter the place, you alter power, urgency, risk and possibility. That is why exploring situation through place is one of the most powerful tools a playwright has. Whenever you choose a setting, ask: *why here, why now?* Place is never random. A family dinner table carries different pressures than a hospital waiting room. A conversation in a bar carries different possibilities than one whispered on a park bench at night.

Time matters, too. 'Now' is not just the present tense of your play, but the moment of urgency. Why must this conflict unfold here

and not anywhere else? Why must it unfold *now* and not at some safer, easier time? Urgency of place and time is what makes drama compelling. And even more so the relationship between place and time. How is this place changing over time? How are these changes affecting the characters? Many plays have acts across seasons, the setting might be the same, but the scene in summer is not the same as the scene in winter. The passage of time and changing of the season also has an effect on the characters and the development of their struggles.

Think of place not just as backdrop, but as an active presence that exerts influence on all your characters, shaping the hierarchies and power dynamics that are integral to the conflicts of the play. A character might have the upper hand in one place, but become more vulnerable in another because characters may take different roles according to where and when they are. A woman might be a mother and a wife at home, but a judge in the courtroom. The courtroom elicits a completely different behaviour for this character compared to, say, the dinner table. Same thing

for a husband at home versus the same person on a battlefield, etc. Place exerts pressure on your characters and dictates how they are going to behave with the rules and the norms that the place brings to the moment. It gives or denies freedom. It silences or amplifies voices.

Place helps us build character and conflict as much as it sets the tone of the whole play. Because a place doesn't only bring a set of rules with it—what can and cannot be done in that place and how—but it also brings mood and atmosphere. All things that a playwright may play with to develop further the themes of the story and give the characters not just a backdrop, but a world to come alive in.

Reality happens in a world of worlds where everyone is living in their own cosmos, yet inhabiting the same time and space.

Every place is part of a larger world, and that larger world is shaped by how the characters understand and believe in it. Even if your play is set in one room, that room belongs to a world of social, cultural and material forces. A single chair can tell us about class, culture or history. A single accent can reveal belonging or exclusion. World-building doesn't mean constructing fantasy realms (though it can). It means being alert to the forces shaping your characters: politics, economics, religion, history, geography.

A play set in a prison cell carries the weight of justice, punishment and power, but a play set in a prison cell in London, 1525 is still very different from a play set in a prison cell in London, 2025. And yet again, the world these two different settings imply is going to be understood and its presence felt entirely differently by the characters within. A Muslim prisoner will not think of that world the same as a Christian prisoner. A female prisoner will not have the same beliefs about that world as a male prisoner.

This is an essential element in crafting a play that an audience will engage and

resonate with. Audiences recognize worlds as much as they recognize character, but they also recognize worlds through the eyes of the characters. Understanding and choosing this is an integral part of building that core situation: *the two people with a problem in a place*. Here, you have to look deeper into your theme and your characters and ask yourself: what is the world that these themes and these characters can truly come to life in? Where do these maybe abstract things I want to talk about become a tangible, visible reality?

Let's also not forget the intrinsic power of revisiting earlier historical eras for both inspiration and exciting settings. Historical precedents can be extremely powerful tools for commenting on contemporary issues. The perfect example for this, though there are many, would be Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. A brilliant representation of the Salem witch trials that took place in 1692 Massachusetts, but a universal commentary on dogma, paranoia and persecution that applied perfectly to Miller's own present time during the American Red Scare of the 1950s under senator McCarthy. Miller wanted to write about the

injustice and horror of his times, but he found the perfect 'other time' to make those horrors visible.

This displacement or juxtaposition is so very effective because, sometimes, it is harder to recognize the forces around us due to their constant familiarity. But once we see these forces in an unfamiliar place, they become conspicuous and reveal themselves to us in their full effect. This is a goal which the playwright should always try to achieve. When you are inviting an audience to see a play you are inviting them to enter a world. The richer the world is, the more they engage. And if it is a particularly effective play, the world of the play will help the audience better understand or explain the very world they themselves live in. This is a virtuous intention that you might truly achieve with your writing.

Exercise 8: Testing the Place

Take a short scene you've already written, just a page or two. Rewrite it three times, each in a different place:

1. A public place (e.g., café, bus, park).
2. A private place (e.g., bedroom, kitchen, office).
3. A charged or symbolic place (e.g., hospital, church, courtroom, border crossing).

After each rewrite, ask: how does this new place change the tone, the stakes and the relationship between the characters? Which version feels most alive? Which place carries the greatest urgency. *Why here, why now?*

Also, keep in mind what opportunities for action this place brings. You do not want your characters to just stand there and talk, you want them to be doing something *as* they talk. Actors need to be given opportunities to animate their scenes. Which place gives you this kind of action to the scene that could be used to heighten tension or develop character?

Think also in terms of what the place is going to bring out of your characters and their conflicts:

- How is this place accentuating the external conflict of your characters?
- How is this place revealing the internal conflicts of your characters?

These questions will help you find the ideal place for your story to unfold.

Practical tip: also remember that a play, unlike a movie, can't afford to change locations and settings on the fly from one scene to the next, so you must think in terms of adaptability and consistency. Which place could hold most of your scenes and characters? (We'll talk more about changes in location when we discuss structuring acts in book two…)

Reading suggestions…

Here's a final list of readings for you to expand on the latest topics discussed. As great examples on the importance of place and world to the development of the central drama, take a look at the Irish classic *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Fiel and the Nigerian, play *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka. Both of these plays are built on the intersection of traditional practices and individual character struggle. They're perfect examples of how great drama cannot be separated from the place it's born in. (And both have brilliant use of music in their plots!)

For examples of impactful historical evocation, I would suggest Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible.* Both plays exploit a historical setting to explore universal human themes and political ideologies. Showing us how, at times, it might not be a matter of where to set your play for full effect, but *when*.

Chapter Two Recap:

So, what have we really built in this chapter? Here are the essentials:

Characters drive everything.

Forget cardboard cutouts. Characters aren't 'types', they're people: messy, contradictory, alive in past, present and future. What they carry, what they fear and what they hope for will push the play forward more than any clever idea ever could.

Motivation is what makes a character real.

Roles and archetypes are only doorways in. A nurse, a lover, a soldier—none of that matters until we know *why* they're here, *what they want*, and *what's in their way*. No motivation = no drama.

Conflict is the engine.

Without conflict, you don't have a play, you have a polite conversation. Conflict comes from needs colliding, from polar opposites sparking against each other, from internal contradictions spilling into external battles. Keep asking: what's the fight here?

Balance the inside and the outside.

The best scenes carry both: the visible clash (money, power, betrayal) and the invisible one (fear, shame, desire). When inner conflict meets outer conflict, the drama deepens.

Place changes everything.

Two people with a problem only becomes theatre when it happens *somewhere*. Place isn't neutral; it adds mood, power, urgency and pressure. Change the place, and you change the play.

Worlds matter as much as people.

Even if your stage is just a kitchen table, that table belongs to a world—social, cultural, political, historical. A play doesn't just create characters; it invites us into a world. The richer and more specific that world, the stronger the play.

Conclusion to Part One

If you have been following the exercises in this first part of the *writing for the stage* journey, by now you should be close to understanding clearly what your dramatic situation is and have a deeper feel for what will make your core building blocks complex. But even if you don't, the trick here is to keep writing!

Excavation, exploration and emergence are an ongoing process, and it is important that we never see this process as some form of paint-by-numbers formula that will always give the same final result. The process might be similar for everyone, but the journey (and what is encountered on that journey) will always be completely unique. There are no time frames or deadlines here. You only need to keep discovering until you find something you truly care for and want to put even more energy into.

I do have one final tip for this part of the journey, and this tip is especially important for those that seem to start many plays and have many ideas but never get to finish them. The tip is:

Do not be afraid to CHOOSE.

From my experience with students, on many occasions, when people feel stuck or they feel that a project is dead, what is truly happening is that they've poured a lot of material on their pages already, either in script form or in notes, and the feeling of being stuck or unable to continue is actually coming from a hesitation to choose, to select, to grab onto one thread of the many that they have already put on the page and follow it to a conclusion.

My suggestion will always be, do not wait for the 'golden egg'. Every bland idea could lead you to a great script with enough work and every amazing idea could be ruined into something pedestrian and unexciting. It is not the initial idea that counts, but the development you will be running it through. So don't be afraid to *choose*. Just grab the dramatic situation that is giving you opportunities to play with and get ready to move onto the next stage: structure. In this part, we explored the fundamentals, the essential building blocks of a dramatic work. In the next part, we'll be looking at the shape of things. We'll be seeing how shape is not only

something that we force onto our work, but also something that we discover as we get to know our characters and their own journeys.

See you soon at *Writing for the Stage with Anton Bonnici*, *part two*, **The Architecture**.

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The *Writing for the Stage with Anton Bonnici* book series is a practical playwriting guide for both beginners and seasoned writers. In Book One, *The Fundamentals*, you'll be introduced to the main concepts of Bonnici's theory and methodology as he highlights the essential foundations of all great works of drama. But as much as it is a guide, this is also a manifesto encouraging all of us to stop being afraid, grasp reality, take a leap and write!

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