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PRIMER FOR
Playwrights

BY
EDWARD LEWIS

FOREWORD BY
GEOFFREY WHITWORTH

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FOREWORD

DURING the past few years there have been published many books on the Technique of Playwriting, and most of them have contained elements of good advice. But this book of Mr. Lewis's seems to me unique, at any rate in one respect. It is less a book of advice than a clear and decisive statement of what are the minimum requirements in the mental and technical equipment of the dramatist. The result is, for any sensitive reader, a challenge which may well divert him from all hope of becoming a playwright. May be this is just as well. But those who feel themselves able to take up the challenge need not be discouraged. They will be helped on their way.

Mr. Lewis is always concrete and definite, and in his brilliant analysis of passage after passage from Mr. Shaw's *Saint Joan* he is able to get very near to the root of the matter, and to show explicitly what constitutes the difference between good dialogue and bad, between character-drawing which is dramatic and that which is merely literary.

Far from being inopportune, the publication of this book in the first weeks of war seems to me wonderfully appropriate. There are worse forms of mental solace than the writing of a play. Moreover, in these days when the basic texture of human effort is so tragically uncovered, for those who can withdraw themselves even a little from

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the stress of battle there may well be found a peculiar source of inspiration for the making of great drama. Mr. Lewis would be the last person to suggest that the reading of his book will guarantee such a result. But it may well release the creativeness of a mind not hitherto aware of its potential impulse to write for the stage.

GEOFFREY WHITWORTH

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INTRODUCTION

IT is sometimes said that the dramatist, like the poet, is "born, not made."

The same might be said of engineers or inventors.

It is frequently said of a woman that she is a "born mother."

The only point in this rather stupid observation is that every trade requires a peculiar gift, if one is going to succeed in it. There may be born hotel-keepers, and born criminals..

The fact that you may be a born hotel-keeper does not dispense with the necessity of your learning the trade technique; though, if you turn out to be a genius, you may develop a technique of your own which may pay you handsomely. Even a born story-teller has to acquire a technique.

Two persons may tell the same story; with one it is a hit, with the other a dud; the material is the same in both cases; the difference between success and failure lies in technique. One man has a good technique, the other has not; that is all.

The dramatist is a story-teller.

The special point about his story-telling is that the story has to be told through speaking characters on the stage of a theatre before an audience.

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His technique, therefore, is more complicated than that, say, of the man who tells an anecdote or a history in the smoking-room, or of a novelist who writes a book to be read by a solitary reader in the quietness of the fireside.)

TECHNIQUE

(Technique is essential.) Even a genius cannot dispense with it. Paderewski had to learn five-finger exercises, scales, and arpeggios.

(The reason for this is that the artist is a craftsman. He works with a tool. He expresses himself through a medium.) Paderewski with his piano, Raphael with his brush, Pheidias with his chisel, Shakespeare with language.

The artist must be master of his tool, of his medium.

Because, if he isn't master of it, some hesitancy and hindrance will come between the idea and the expression of it. The idea, therefore, to some extent will be clumsily or falsely expressed.

(The discipline of technique looks towards the freedom of the creative spirit.)

· Technique is a midwife.

It is learned to be forgotten. It is practised until it becomes part of the subconscious.

The good footballer has a technique which may have taken him years to acquire; but, when he is actually playing in a game, he isn't thinking about technique at all. If he were, he would play less well.

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He plays by inspiration; but the technique is there in the subconscious.

The critical observer can point out details of brilliant technique, but the player is not aware of them at the moment.

It is possible to be ineffectively inspired, as well as to be beautifully inspired; and the difference between them is the technique in the subconscious mind.

Similarly the dramatist is not aware of technique when actually writing his play. It is automatic. And possibly this is the reason why so many people believe that a dramatist is "born, not made."

He is no more aware of it than we are aware of the technique of breathing; though doubtless there was a time in our ancestral history, when we were passing from a water-life to a land-life, at which a good deal of attention had to be devoted to the technique of breathing.

But it is there; and the dramatic student, analysing a scene, can discover it in action without difficulty. If it were not there, the play would not succeed; just as, conversely, a play would not succeed if the technique were all there, but the full inspiration were lacking.

In the case of genius, the creative gift may be so strong as to find a technique of its own, breaking all the rules.

But where talent is something short of genius, the observance of the ordinary rules of the game is essential to success. And the purpose of this book is to give as clear an account as may be of the elements of general dramatic technique.

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THE THREE PARTNERS

(The technique of play-writing is more complicated than that of any other literary art for the obvious reason that the writer of the play is not working "on his own.")

Many amateur writers forget this; and imagine that a play has simply to be written, like a novel, as it best pleases them.

(But a play is not really a play until it is performed on a stage before an audience.

(The writer is one of three partners; the players (including the producer), and the audience, being the other two.)

Nobody would dream of sitting down to play Bridge with a partner without going to some trouble to find out what precisely were the "conventions" he used; for, in play, the Bridge hand is really two hands played as one.

A high proportion of amateur plays fail for the quite elementary reason that the author imagines that he is playing a lone hand, and has never thought it necessary to get to know anything about stagecraft (in its widest sense) on the one hand, or about audience-psychology on the other.

To take a simple example. The best line is not that which looks best on paper, but that which is best speakable in the mouth of an actor on the stage.

The best scene is not that which reads best, but that

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which is actable with the highest effect under theatre conditions.

Hundreds of plays must be turned down each year by the readers who serve the theatrical managements because, although they may be quite good as stories, or as literary work, they would not, to the eye which looks at them simply from the theatre point of view, "play."

The crowd-reaction, again, to such a thing for instance as humour is tricky, and must be studied. An author may write lines which he thinks are very amusing; he may even, if he is very young, tell anecdotes in the course of a scene, anecdotes which tickle him to death; but the point about humour in a play is not whether the author finds it funny, but whether a crowd in the theatre will find it funny.

He may make a joke, and fail to get a laugh.

He may on occasions get that even more fatal thing, a laugh where none was intended; which means that his theatre sense, and his knowledge of crowd psychology, are weak.

(Play-writing is a partnership.) The actual writing is only one moment in the whole business of play-making. It is therefore up to the author to get to know something about his partners.

Books innumerable have been written about both these partners, and they can be studied there; but an ounce of experience is worth a ton of book-reading.

The author must be an assiduous theatregoer. He must learn crowd-reactions by being one of a crowd, but keeping his wits about him. He must study stage effects

by their effectiveness upon him as a member of the audience; and, to this end, it would be good to go several times to see a good play, so that, emotion being dulled by use, he could observe and reflect and learn better.

If by grace or guile he could find the backstairs way to the stage itself, to a rehearsal for example, where the mechanics of the whole business from the stage point of view are analysed and laid bare, he would find that he would learn more in a week of hours this way than in a decade of days of book-reading.

But, in any case, study his partners he must.

This book, therefore, divides itself naturally into three parts: first the Author; then the Author and the Players; and then the Author and the Audience.

The reader will in this way get a general idea of the complete technique.

This will not, unless he has the gift, make him a dramatist; but, if he has the gift, it may prevent him from wasting too much time in misguided efforts, and help him towards that mastery in the use of it which will be his greatest pleasure.

Has he the gift?

What is the dramatic gift?

We will proceed at once to answer these questions.

THE AUTHOR

THE GIFT

IF you ever wish to ski, and want to know whether there is the making of a ski-er in you, your instructor will ask you to stand on one leg, now on one and now on the other. If you can do this with firm and easy balance, he will say, "Ganz gut!" "All right!"

If you wish to write plays, and want to know whether you have the making of a dramatist in you, the critical question is, "Have you sympathetic imagination?"

To be able to balance yourself on one leg, and shift your balance smoothly, will not in itself put the Kandahar Cup in your pocket. You may still get lots of amusement on the snow; but a fine ski-er must have other gifts too.

Nor will sympathetic imagination by itself make you a good dramatist. You must have other gifts; such as a sense of words and the rhythm of words, the theatre sense, and so on. But the sympathetic imagination is the *sine qua non*; and, if you have not it, you might as well, as far as play-writing is concerned, go into the garden and plant the proverbial cabbages.

It will encourage you to know that the chances are all in favour of your having it.

Most children are born story-tellers, play-actors, play-makers. The number of born dramatists is almost equal to the number of born children; and no problem, to judge by the number of people nowadays who write plays, of a falling birth rate.

It is possible that modern methods of child training and education, which give so much scope to the dramatic instinct and play-making, may account for the increasing multitude of would-be playwrights.

These original gifts, however, can be lost either by frustration or non-use; and it is necessary to assure yourself that the sympathetic imagination remains active and strong in you.

What is sympathetic imagination?

It is the ability to put yourself inside an imagined situation, or inside the skin of an imagined character and become emotionally alive there.

To be inside, or outside, that is the question.

Many plays are written by authors who are obviously outside their work.

They are sitting at a chessboard on which they have complicated a problem; and they are moving their characters here and there, like pawns and pieces in the game.

There are plays, it is true, of the mechanical type, in which everything and everybody is artificial and contrived, and in which therefore this chessboard method may at least partially succeed.

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But not in the best plays; not in plays which bear any positive relation to life.

The relation between a dramatist and the characters (which also means the situations) he creates is that he puts them on like a cloak. He is inside them. His emotional power fills them according to need, and is constrained by their shape and pattern.

Ultimately, and in the last resort, he is the life that is in them.

At no moment, for example, does he ever need to *think* what his characters *might* say or do, because he *feels* in himself what they *must* say and do.

Hence that inevitability which is characteristic of both speech and action in all good plays.

That this is so must be fairly obvious. Drama is an art as well as a craft. All fine art is creative. And all creation is in greater or less degree self-incarnation.

An artist's work, in whatever medium, is himself "made flesh."

This is true of the dramatist; and is proved by the fact that, as a rule, if you take the body of work done by any modern dramatist of consideration, Shaw, for instance, or Galsworthy, or Barrie, you get from it a quite clear impression of the author's mind and spirit.

It is the gift of sympathetic imagination which enables you in this way to get inside a situation and realise it as a living experience of your own; and to get inside the skin of a character, living his life as if it were your own.

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Admittedly there must be control. You are alive inside a situation, but you are also controlling it in the direction your story requires. You are alive inside a character, but you are not allowing him to gallop away with you.

But control is secondary.

The matter of first importance is that there should be life, in both situation and character, to control. And, at bottom, that life must be your own life, your own emotional experience.

THE THEME

Having assured yourself that you have the essential gift, the next question is—What sort of a play shall it be? Melodrama, farce, tragedy, comedy, the historical play, the problem play?

The wideness of the choice is delusive, because common sense suggests that your choice must be determined by what interests you.

If, for example, such problems as occupied the minds of Ibsen, or Shaw, or Galsworthy, don't interest you deeply, if you know little about them, and care little, it would be absurd of you to try to write a play on such themes. If historical plays are in fashion, and you have an idea that you would like to catch the moment on the wing, to win fame and fortune, it would be an entire waste of time if you're not particularly interested in history, if you have little historical sense, if your ignorance of any and every historical period is vast, and if you are

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not willing to go to much trouble to read up a period
con amore.

Your personal interest must decide. In that sense, you have no choice. You will write the sort of play you want to write, the sort you can be most readily and happily alive in. Anything else is to court failure. You may not succeed on this line; but you will never succeed on any other.

If you are inventive of situations, you will naturally choose a type of play which depends for its effect chiefly upon situation; melodrama, or farce. If you are mainly interested in human nature, in the "labyrinthine heart," you will choose a type of play which depends chiefly on faithful character-drawing—tragedy, or comedy.

One might draw a line through melodrama, the ordinary story drama, to tragedy; or another line through farce, low comedy, high comedy; and say, in a general way, that in each of these lines the emphasis passes from situational importance to character importance. In melodrama and farce, character-drawing does not matter quite so much; the situations are everything; in tragedy and high comedy, character-drawing is the be-all and end-all.

For this reason the most enduring plays are found at the latter end of these lines. Mechanics pass; Nature abides.

One is sometimes asked: Which are the easier sorts of plays to write and succeed with? The answer is that

there are no easy plays. It is just as hard to write a good farce as it is to write good tragedy; just as hard to write a good kitchen comedy as a good romance or fantasy.

To *write* them; but there is ground for saying that it is easier to *succeed* with tragedy than with comedy.

That is to say, it is easier to "get away with" a faulty tragedy than with a weak comedy.

The reason is that, when the emotions are stirred, the critical faculty is not awake, not wide awake. An emotionally moved audience is never a critical audience.

On the other hand, a laughing audience is a critical audience. Laughter is of the mind rather than of the solar plexus. Laughter itself (as Bergson says) is a kind of criticism.

The standard of success therefore is higher in comedy than in tragedy. It is easier to make people cry in the theatre than to laugh.

So that, if you are looking for easiness, so far as the conquest of an audience is concerned, beware of comedy! And it is amusing how many amateur authors rush airily into comedy, imagining it to be the bee-line to their goal!

PROPAGANDA ✓

Can you use the stage as a platform?

Most young people, if they are at all of a serious mind, are reformers. They have their solutions for practically

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all the difficulties which complicate life for us. They want to tell the world. They wish to mould it to their heart's desire.

This is a common, and a very powerful, interest among youth; and no wonder that many young playwrights are inclined to regard the theatre as a convenient, and in some respects a highly advantageous, platform for the announcement of their ideas and solutions.

The theatre (they say) should not only be a social amenity, but a function in social reform.

Is this legitimate?

The purist would say No. He objects to any underlying purpose in Art. Art should be purposeless. If any art is practised with a purpose in view, it is, by so much, less art for that.

Art is joy, freedom, non-attachment.

To listen to the *Ninth Symphony* may solace and encourage you, but Beethoven did not write it with that in view.

You will not pay too much heed to the purist; and you will be right. You may admit that what he says is true of the highest forms of art; but "art for art's sake" is an obsolete slogan.

The name and dignity of artist, in the complete sense, will not be denied to the man who designs a house or a chair with an eye, not only to such things as harmony and proportion, but also to the practical purposes to which his work may be put, namely, that appreciative

persons may have a beautiful house to live in, or a beautiful chair to sit in.

The alliance between Art and Use and Purpose is in no way derogatory or debasing to the first member.

An artist is not something less than an artist when he designs a railway poster for the entirely commendable purpose of persuading you to spend a holiday in Cornwall. There is no reason why a railway poster should not be, of its own kind, as genuine a work of art as a Botticelli.

Many Russian films are sheer propaganda, but some of them are fine works of art for all that.

Galsworthy's *Strife* is an excellent specimen of dramatic art, although it is propagandist.

There is therefore no reason, if your enthusiasm inclines you that way, why you should not write propagandist plays. But you must observe the rules of the game.

They are as follows:

- ✓ (a) Both sides must be stated fairly.
- (b) The protagonists on each side must be represented by characters of equal *weight*.

It would be fatal to represent one side (the side with which you yourself are in sympathy) by a character in heroic mould, and the other side by some ridiculous poor fool. Fatal alike to the dramatic, and the propagandist, quality of the play.

- (c) The author must be in the background; indeed out of it altogether. Anything like direct preach-

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ment or tub-thumping as between author and audience would be an unforgivable offence. So would any crude pointing of the moral.

Moralising is a sin in the theatre. In any case, it is ineffective, except that it may, by disgust, effect the opposite of the author's intention. The audience must be allowed to draw its own moral. An audience must never be allowed to feel that it is being "got at."

- (d) If, as he doubtless will, the author wishes to express his views, through the lips of one of the characters, care must be taken that they are in keeping with the character chosen. A propagandist play is inevitably on the plane of realism; and therefore it must not show (say) a crossing-sweeper speaking with the knowledge and the idiom of a professor of economics.

THE STORY

The main kind of theme, the type of play, having been decided upon, the next question which arises is—Where shall you find the story which will illustrate the theme?

How are plays conceived? You are perfectly willing to be the mother, and go through all the travail, but where does the father come from?

The child may be given you fully formed; left on your doorstep, as it were, by providence. You may, for example, be staying at the inn of some remote Tyrolean

village. The landlord, the comic servant, and the visitors who happen to be there with you, may supply you with a perfect set of characters; and the events which happen as between them during your stay, tragic or comedic or romantic, may provide you with a story ready made. All you have to do is to transfer that inn, those characters, and those actual events, to the stage.

That would be lucky. Providence is rarely so kind to the dramatist as that. "The time, the place, and the story altogether," as Browning might have said.

Or you may follow the Shakespearean method, and take over stories which have been told and dramatised by others before you.

This is legitimate. There need be no guilty plagiarism. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to invent a new story. One may say that, on main lines, there are no new stories. And the old ones are few. Coleridge allowed that there were—thirty-eight, was it?

But if the story is old, you yourself at least are new. The treatment of it therefore, being your own, will be new. Your personal angle, looking at it, will be new. Your style, which is your personality, will be new.

This is your originality; and, if you apply it, it is quite enough to justify your borrowing.

The Eternal Triangle can take an infinite number of shapes because it may be regarded from an infinite number of points of view.

Or you may dive into past history, nearer or more

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remote, for a story, as a diver for a pearl. You will probably avoid the well-fished grounds, such as those, say, of Plutarch or the eighth Henry; but if you should browse, for example, among the many volumes of Lenôtre, you would doubtless find a story or two to your liking.

A point arises here which is worth attention. The use of period language-idiom in the dialogue.

The same point arises in connection with plays based on Biblical stories.

Many amateur writers, tackling a period play, feel that they must use period speech idiom.

This is a snare.

It may, of course, happen that you are perfectly familiar with the period, and may have read so much of its literature that the language-idiom has become second nature to you, and you would just as soon say "By my halidom!" as "By Jove!" or "By George!"

What usually happens, however, is that the writer attempting the period idiom, finds himself thinking in one language (his own) and writing in another. He is really translating all the time.

The effect is that there is a gap between what he is thinking in his mind and the words he is putting down on paper; and through that gap a good deal of the life in the play is apt to slip away.

Nor is it easy to draw a character effectively, however much you may get inside his skin, if there is a certain hesitancy and hampering between what you think and

the way he puts it, between what you feel and the words in which he expresses it.

It is true that the use of period idiom may help to create the period atmosphere; but you can get that in other ways; and the best way to write the dialogue of such plays is to use the simplest modern English you can lay pen to.

In this, Shaw's *St. Joan* may be taken as a model.

The most frequent, the normal, way in which a story comes to a dramatist is this.

There is his mind, full of all sorts of information, full of his knowledge of the world and of human nature—acquired by observation, experience, study—and alive with the interests which please and occupy him.

Then something happens in the outside world. An event reported in the newspaper; something seen; a snatch of overheard conversation. And this falls like a “nucleus” into the solution of his mind, and something begins to crystallise there.

If you read such a book, say, as Tchekov's *Notebook*, you will find many of these nuclei there, which, when they came to him, he had the good sense to jot down; germs of stories, germs of character.

It is said that Galsworthy's *Strife* began to take shape in his mind from a conversation which he happened to overhear between the two men who afterwards became the Anthony and the Roberts in the play.

Coming down through Scotland in the railway train

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one morning, with half a gale blowing outside, a man was sitting in one corner of the carriage, by the window on the lee side of the train, reading correspondence which he took from an attaché case. A woman in the opposite corner opened her window. A blast of air through the compartment tore the letter out of the man's hand, and sent it flying out of the window on to the moor. His consternation was obvious.

What was in the letter? Who would find it? What might happen?

A chance incident of that kind might easily become a nucleus in the dramatic mind.

The same nucleus falling into different minds would give rise to different play-stories. Comedy, tragedy, romance, crookery, according to the "solution" into which it fell.

It would be an amusing pastime to imagine what sort of a play Shaw would have made out of it, if he had overheard the conversation between Anthony and Roberts. Or Barrie. Or Somerset Maugham. They would have been, in each case, entirely different plays. Which goes to prove once more that all plays are created out of the substance of the dramatist's own mind and spirit.

ADAPTING A NOVEL

It may occur to you to turn a novel into a play. This is usually considered to be second-hand work; the sort of thing a dramatist might turn his hand to in

a moment when his own creative inspiration was on holiday.

It need not be so. It should not be so.

There are two ways of adapting a novel to the form of a play.

One may be called the "Scissors-and-Paste" method. You cut the novel up into pieces, some of which you fasten together again in the form of acts and scenes.

✓ The play, therefore, is the novel shortened, condensed. It is the novel in miniature.

A play arrived at by such a method may legitimately be called second-hand work. The playwright's part of the business is entirely mechanical. Scissors and paste.

Such adaptations can rarely be successful, for the fairly obvious reason that the novelist's medium is quite different from the playwright's medium, and the mechanical transference of a story from the one to the other is not possible with good credit.

✓ A play is not a novel either in conception or in plan; so that a play which is merely a shortened novel cannot really be a good play.

The other way is the right one.

You go to the novel for a story, just as you might go to Plutarch or Lenôtre. Not for the complete story as the novelist has worked it out in detail, but for the "bare bones" of the story; for the main situation.

You are obliged to the novelist for the story. You are under obligation to him to preserve the psychological

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integrity of the chief characters in the story, also its general mood and atmosphere.

An adaptation of Miss Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent*, for example, which is comedy, could not be conceived and worked out as tragedy; and it would not be an adaptation unless the characters of Lady Slane and Mr. Bucktrout, their atmosphere and personal rhythm, were given in the play faithfully to their conception in the book.

But there your obligation ends.

You can omit characters; you can take a free hand with minor characters, altering their lineaments, their reactions; you need not strictly observe the time-order in the book; you may take an incident which occurs at the end of the novel and put it at the beginning of the play, if by so doing you can get "better theatre"; you can do pretty well what you like provided that you convey into the new medium the essence of the situation and of the chief characters.

A perfectly sound adaptation of Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, for instance, might be made with the whole of the latter half of that great novel omitted, ending the play with Ernest's rejection of his parents after his release from prison; for the essential situation would be there, and the essential characters of Theobald and Christina and Alethea and Overton would be there.

The whole point being that, even in an adaptation, the play is your own; a new thing; a different thing.

There are Goyas and Goyescas. The Goyas are painted pictures, the Goyescas are pieces of music. The Spanish composer who wrote the Goyescas had the idea of expressing in musical terms the themes which Goya expressed in some of his pictures. Each Goyesca is a musical interpretation of the corresponding Goya.

The relation between a novel and an adaptation of it in the form of a stage play is similar to the relation between a Goya and a Goyesca.

The theme is the same; the medium is different; and the result is different.

An adaptation should never be made with the novel at one's elbow.

You should read the novel as many times as may be necessary until the story in its main outline is a living experience inside you; its sweep, its rhythm, its pattern; and then throw the book away. Alternatively, you should get someone who knows the story well, and loves it, to tell it to you.

You then re-mint it in your dramatic mind, making a play out of it.

This, contrary to common opinion, is neither easy nor second-hand work.

Particularly must you be chary of novelist's dialogue. It is a common practice, in adapting a novel, to take whole passages of novelist's dialogue and transfer them straight as they are into the play. This is extremely risky.

The reason is that the novelist can occupy pages and pages of descriptive prose in drawing a character in

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minute detail, exploring it to the depths. He then inserts a bit of dialogue. The reader, carrying in his mind the descriptions which he has already read of the characters who now break into speech, thinks, as he reads the dialogue, how apt it all is.

But the actual words of the novelist's dialogue need not in themselves be apt. They usually are not. The feeling of aptness is due to the carrying over of previous description in the reader's mind. He reads the character into the words of the dialogue; but the character may not be in the words, only in his memory of previous description.

Transfer the words, without the descriptive passages, into a play, and they are dead.

All the character which the novelist conveys in the descriptive passages has to be conveyed by the dramatist in the words of the dialogue itself. This is one of the most difficult parts of his craft, this writing of characterising dialogue; and an adaptation does not help him to escape from it.

He must write his own dialogue; and no passage in the novel-dialogue will be of any use to him, unless he has already established the character of the speaker in the mind of the audience.

Clearly, therefore, adaptation, if done properly, is neither easy nor second-hand. The easier the playwright tries to make it for himself, by the use of scissors and paste, or by copying out long passages of book-dialogue, the less likely is it to succeed

THE PLOT

Having now got the story, you proceed to make the Plot. The plot is the story expressed in theatre terms.

It is when he comes to the plotting that the dramatist, on account of the restrictions under which he works, may begin to envy the novelist. He has to exercise the strictest economy, both of time and of means.

He has to tell in, perhaps, 15,000 words a story for which the novelist can have 100,000 if he likes.

The novelist can use a canvas as large as pleases him; can crowd it with characters innumerable, to none of whom he has to pay a salary. The stage upon which his story is played out exists only in the reader's mind, so that he can change the scene from China to Peru, from North Cape to the Horn, stopping at all sorts of places in between, without any need to consider stage-mechanics, or settings, or costumes, or properties; he can at his pleasure, or his whim, make all kinds of digressions from the main line of the story, including personal comments and reflections, which may increase the atmospheric quality and the depth, the solidity, of the tale he has to tell.

Compared with this freedom and range, the dramatist may feel that he works in a straitjacket.

He has, of course, compensating allies: the speaking voice; the living presence; the appeal to ear and eye; the colour and movement on the stage; the sense of immediacy, actuality; the whole theatre illusion; the partner-

ship of the audience; the sounding-board of the crowd. And these, if he knows how to use them, go far to outweigh the restrictions under which he works.

But economy, insistent and implacable, stands at his elbow from the first moment to the last. The novelist can elaborate as much as he will; the dramatist must always be thinking of how little he can manage with. He aims at a complete effect, with the most sparing use of means.

There are those who say that, because of this restriction, it is impossible for the dramatist to tell a story as vividly as the novelist, to draw a character as solidly, or, in general, to be as "true to life."

Robert Louis Stevenson, who tried his hand at writing plays without much success, spoke of dramatics as a "falsification of life." Professor Allardyce Nicoll thinks that a stage character can never be a completely individualised character, must always be nearer to the "type" than to the individual man.

This can easily be exaggerated.

Think of the photographer and the painter. The analogy can only be true to a certain extent, but the relation between these two is comparable with the distinction between the novelist and the dramatist.

The photographer and the painter may both make a picture of a certain landscape. Everything that is visible will be in the photographer's shot. He is an artist, and, by choosing a certain position for his camera, he may be said to compose his picture artistically; but the rest is

with the camera, which faithfully records the natural multiplicity of detail down to the last ripple on the river or the last leaf on the tree.

The painter sets to work differently. He also chooses a position; but, afterwards, he neither puts down on his canvas all he sees, nor necessarily places his details in the same position on his canvas as they are in the visible scene.

He simplifies.

He selects; choosing out of innumerable details the few which will give him the effect he wants; choosing naturally such details as are most characteristic and significant of the scene before him.

He arranges, patterns. He may take a tree which is away to the right of the scene, and place it in the centre of his picture.

But though the photographer has taken everything within sight of the camera's eye, and though the painter has worked by simplification, selection, and artistic patterning, would anybody be justified in calling the painted picture a "falsification" of the scene, or in suggesting that the photographer was more "true to life"?

It is conceivable that a painted picture of landscape, by Corot for example, or Constable, is really truer to the life of the scene, visible and invisible, than any camerist work.

The analogy may not be pressed. The novelist is not a photographer, although Proust in one place takes some thirty pages to describe a church steeple. But, compared

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with the dramatist, he has little need to simplify and select.

On the other hand, in the opening of one of his short stories (in which, of course, economy is essential), Tchekov wishes to describe the scene on the edge of a forest on a moonlit night. For this purpose, Proust might have taken a whole volume, and nobody would have grudged it him; but Tchekov takes six lines. In those six lines he describes a piece of broken bottle lying in a wet rut on the road that runs through the forest; and in describing that bit of glass, glinting under the moon, he brings the whole scene to life.

But, then, Tchekov was a dramatist also.

One of the great gifts of the dramatist is the power to discover the bottle which will mirror the whole forest.

The dramatist is much nearer to the painter. His story is the landscape; his plot is the picture which he makes out of it, to be presented on the stage to the audience.

And in making his plot his tools, like the painter's are—

- (a) Simplification.
- (b) Selection.
- (c) Patterning.

As the story moves in his mind, it may contain a lot of characters. He must examine these, and ask whether he really needs them all for his play. Not on account of the possible expense in employing players to represent

them; nor on account of the physical difficulties of successfully handling a lot of people on the small stage of a theatre, for modern stagecraft can do almost anything, including miracles; but for the sake of the compactness of his plot.

If he finds, for instance, in this survey of possible and probable characters, that the "work" done by one of them in the story could equally well be done by another, he will, in plotting his play, dismiss one of these characters; retaining the more essential of the two.

The things to avoid are—

- (a) Passengers; that is to say, characters which add so little to the play's movement and sum that they can hardly be said to pay their footing in it.
- (b) Redundances; that is to say, characters which make a similar contribution to the play's action, or share the work which might quite easily be done by one of them.

Likewise, in the story there may be many incidents, not all of which can be included in the brief time allowed to an ordinary play; and from which therefore a selection must be made.

The right selection of incidents is very largely a matter of flair; but, broadly speaking, incidents which lie (as it were) on the margin of the main action will be more readily dismissed than those which lie nearer the highway; and incidents which throw but little light on the

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chief characters in the story can be better omitted than those which spot-light them strongly.

Incidents vary in content. One may be quite superficial, a passing moment, naturally related to the story, but, although interesting in itself, of little moment; another may have deep underneath significance as interpreting the play's main movement, or illuminating one of the characters.

In this fashion the incidents must be weighed, and the selection made accordingly.

You may find, however, that even after you have made careful selection on these lines, it may have to be revised because of a further consideration. The patterning of the play.

This patterning corresponds to the composition of the painter's picture, in which he requires high lights and low lights, the balancing of masses over against each other, colour contrasts and gradations and echoes, and so forth.

It is important, from the point of view of the patterning of the play, that there should be contrasted characters. You may find therefore that, having on the grounds of economy dismissed a character from your play and given his work to another, this other does not give you so good a character-contrast as the rejected one would have done. And you will have to consider them again in the light of this further requirement.

It is important, too, that there should be change and variety of mood in a play; and when you come to

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consider your selected incidents, you may find that they do not give you as much variety of mood and atmosphere as you feel you ought to have; and you will therefore reconsider some of the rejected incidents from this point of view.

Indeed, it is possible to over-simplify your plot. It is possible to select so small a number of characters as to make it extremely difficult to pattern your play properly, because of the few opportunities you get of character contrast, or of varying the half empty stage with a fully occupied one.

It is possible to select so small a number of incidents that, in exploring them, and unless you are extremely clever, you wear them threadbare and bore your audience; or give yourself so few chances of varying the mood and atmosphere of the story as you tell it.

You must simplify, and select; but a limit to these operations must always be set by the need to compose and pattern your play so as to make it not only a complete, but a living, whole.

EMOTION

The reader will have observed that, so far, our imagined play-writer has got nowhere near to anything like pen and paper. He has been thinking about his play; and, if he has taken into consideration all of the things written here, he has had plenty to think about.

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But all the while something else has been happening; and it is important to see what that is.

The story has been sinking down from the thinking apparatus to the feeling apparatus; from the brain to the solar plexus. Instead of being an object of thought, it has gradually been becoming a subject of experience. The pattern in the mind has become a rhythm in the feeling.

So long as you are merely thinking about a story, working on it with the intellectual tools of simplification, selection, patterning, you are outside it. The moment it begins to take shape in your feeling, as a living experience, you begin to get inside it.

That is where you want to be.

When you begin to think about a story for a play, intellect is primary and emotion is secondary; and you go on thinking and thinking about it, while the inner experience of it grows broader and deeper, until the situation is reversed; emotion becomes primary and intellect is secondary.

No wise dramatist will think of putting pen to paper until this transference has been made, and his emotional experience of the story is the strongest thing in him.

In all matters concerning the theatre, emotion is the chief thing.

Emotion bears the same relation to the written and spoken words of a play as the Hertzian wave bears to a wireless broadcast.

Emotion is the carrier-wave.

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If you have written a problem play, or a propagandist play, in which naturally there will be a good deal of discussion of ideas, that discussion will never get across the footlights unless you put it on the carrier-wave of emotion. This is what is meant by dramatising a problem; expressing it not simply in terms of intellectual pros and cons, but in terms of character, character relation, character reaction.

The order, therefore, of all good play-making is—

- (1) Think.
- (2) Feel.
- (3) Write.

As soon as a story is emotionally alive in you, you can begin to write; but not before. No good plays are ever written merely by thinking, but by feeling.

And if it should happen, as often it may, that when you are writing a play a scene does not feel right somehow, although you are writing it according to the plan in your mind, and although there it may seem to you to be perfectly logical and unexceptionable, always correct and re-plan it according to your feeling.

Life first, not logic. When in doubt, let feeling decide.

OVER-WRITING

If you write in cold blood, the chances are that your dramatic work will meet with a cold reception. But if

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you write in warm blood, to say nothing of hot blood, your tendency will be to over-write; since the mind is more easily schooled than the emotions.

To over-write—to make it too hot, too highly coloured, too forced, too over-drawn—is just as much a sin as to under-write; but it is the more pardonable sin of the two.

It is better for the beginner to over-write than to under-write, just as it is better for the young tennis player to hit hard and go on hitting hard although five out of every six of his shots may go into the net or out of the court.

It is better to come down to your mark, the line of accuracy, the making of winners (whether plays or shots), *bringing your strength with you*, than work up to the mark, *bringing your weakness with you*.

Pat-ball is no way to learn good tennis; nor is timid writing, self-conscious writing, anxious writing, a good way to learn the craft of the dramatist.

Control will come with practice and experience.

And in any case it is much easier to prune the florid extravagances, to key down the over-statements, to dilute the rather gaudy palette of over-written scripts than it is to put anything like life into under-written stuff which totters and pants and whispers.

The author now realises—

- (1) That he is not alone in this game of play-making, but has two partners.
- (2) That he must choose a theme which really

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interests him, because it provides him with a channel of self-expression.

- (3) That he must spare himself no trouble in reading, inquiring, thinking about the story he has chosen, until every detail in it is accurate and familiar.
- (4) That he must not begin to write until the story has become alive as an emotional experience of his own; and
- (5) That he must write always out of that emotion.

He is now ready. His pen in his hand. The game is afoot. He sits down, and finds himself opposite to the first of his two partners—the Player.

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and
the Players

THE two points in an author's work which bring him into close relation with his player-partner are—

- (1) the dialogue,
- (2) the character-drawing,

for the player has to speak the words and act the character.

Before we go into the matter of dialogue, there is a general statement to be made about words in a play. It is a generalisation, and must therefore be taken with the usual reservations.

Words are of secondary importance.

Emotion is, and from the beginning to the end of this play business must always remain, primary.

If an author is thinking too much about his words, the choice and the patterning of them, he will not as a rule write very good dialogue; because he cannot think carefully and feel deeply at one and the same time.

His writing will tend to become literary and bookish, which, in all ordinary plays, that is to say, (plays written on the plane of naturalism and realism, is wrong.)

In literary work, word-patterns may count for much; in dramatic work it is the emotion-patterns which count, and word-patterns matter little.

There is no need to worry over-much about your words, if your emotion is strong and firmly directed; for then there will be no need for you to *think* what your characters *might* say—which is where the trouble comes in, since the alternatives are many—because you will instinctively *feel* what they *must* say—in which case there are no alternatives.

The patness of good dramatic dialogue does not arise from dictionary knowledge and cleverness, but from emotional certainty.

✓ Take care of your emotion, and (within reason) the words may take care of themselves.

The tendency among beginners is to write too many words. A moment's consideration should show the weakness of this.

What is happening during the performance of a play is that an emotional stream, originating on the stage, is quickening an emotional stream in the audience. Emotion answers emotion. } That is the fundamental thing.

This can be done without the use of any words at all, as in a mime—which in itself is enough to prove that words are secondary.

The use of words, therefore, can only be to create this emotional stream, to reveal its depth and colour, and to keep it moving in the direction which the author desires.

(Words are like straws dropped on the surface of the stream, to reveal its significance, and to indicate its direction.)

If you use many more words than are necessary for these purposes, you are not only committing the artistic mistake of overdoing it, but you are threatening yourself with disaster; for, in such a tumble of words, how can the audience be clear in which direction the stream is moving? You frustrate it in them. You may even clog it up altogether. There is a kind of dialogue which is so thick with verbiage that no emotion can possibly come through.

Besides, there is your Player.

He has gone to a great deal of trouble to acquire a technique in acting. He is there, with his trained voice, capable of infinite intonations; with his trained body, immensely capable of face-play, body-play, gesture, look, movement; his bag full of tricks; ready and anxious to serve you.

And all you do is to fill his mouth with words!

The more you give him to do in the way of acting, the better a partner is he likely to be. He can express more in a gesture, a twist in his face, a shrug of the shoulders, a turn of his heel, than you can put into words.

And you must let him.

What he can do by acting, just as well and perhaps

better than you can do in words, you must give him a full chance to do. But you spoil that chance if you clutter him up with much speaking.

For these reasons it should be plain that economy is the first essential of good dialogue. The good play-writer never uses two words where one will do; and never uses one word, having the Player as a partner, where none would do.

It follows from this that, having so few words to work with, the author must see to it that all his words work.

Perhaps the best way of establishing this vital point is to take a scene written by a master of dialogue, and analyse it a little.

THE FIRST SCENE OF "ST. JOAN"

When the curtain rises, two men are on the stage, and one of them is saying to the other, "No eggs! No eggs! Thousand thunders, man, what do you mean by no eggs?"

Why does Shaw open his play in that way? It is certainly amusing, but there is much more in it than that.

There are several reasons for beginning the play with eggs, apart from the fact that an egg is the beginning of most things. The two most important are—

1 (1) It suggests that the time is probably in the

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morning, when such household details would be on the carpet, and

- ✓ (2) that the relation between these two men is probably that of master and servant.

Already, you see, the words have begun to work. The other man answers, "Sir; it is not my fault. It is the act of God."

The first phrase confirms the master-and-servant relation. The second strikes the keynote of the whole play, suggests its period as being a time when people really believed in "acts of God," and definitely fixes the spiritual background and atmosphere of the play.

The words are working, doing something, adding something all the time.

The first man is evidently angry, but who is he?

"Indeed! Now listen to me, you."

"Yes, sir."

"What am I?"

"What are you, sir?"

"Yes, what am I? Am I Robert, squire of Baudricourt and captain of this castle of Vaucouleurs; or am I a cowboy?"

Now we know who he is, and where he is; that he is a "captain" and that this is a "castle," and therefore that probably there is some sort of a military situation in the background.

"Oh, sir, you know that you are a greater man here than the king himself."

"Precisely; and now, do you know who you are?"

"I am nobody, sir, except that I have the honour to be your steward."

"You have not only the honour of being my steward, but the privilege of being the worst, most incompetent, drivelling, snivelling, jibbering jabbering idiot of a steward in France."

Which tells us that the Castle of Vaucouleurs is in France (for you can depend upon the quick emotion of the audience, but not upon its knowledge of geography); and that this Robert of Baudricourt is a bully. For Shaw is too good a writer simply to be content with giving us these necessary pieces of information; he is drawing the man's character all the while.

"The milk was short yesterday, too; don't forget that."

"I know, sir. I know only too well. There is no milk; there are no eggs; to-morrow there will be nothing."

"Nothing! You'll steal the lot, eh?"

"No, sir; nobody will steal anything. But there is a spell on us; we are bewitched."

Shaw is making a spotlight in words, focusing the light down on to something or somebody. He began a moment ago with, "It is the act of God," a broad fact; now the divine operation is narrowed down to a particular form of it—"We are bewitched." Now notice.

"That story is not good enough for me. Robert de Baudricourt burns witches"—the end of the play is here in the beginning; this is usually called foreshadowing—"and hangs thieves. Go. Bring me four dozen eggs and

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two gallons of milk here in this room before noon, or Heaven have mercy on your bones!"

"Sir; I tell you there are no eggs. There will be none—not if you were to kill me for it—as long as the Maid is at the door."

The spotlight is complete. "An act of God"—"we are bewitched"—"the Maid." The general fact; the narrower application of it; the individual who is to represent it.

The spotlight is there waiting for Joan's entry; but she will not come in for a moment or two; because Shaw wishes to tell us something about her first, particularly about her character.

"The Maid! What maid?"

"The girl from Lorraine, sir. From Domremy."

"Thirty thousand thunders! Fifty thousand devils! Do you mean to say that that girl, who had the impudence to ask to see me two days ago, and whom I told you to send back to her father with my orders that he was to give her a good hiding, is still here?"

"I have told her to go, sir. She won't."

"I did not tell you to tell her to go; I told you to throw her out. . . . Are they afraid of her?"

"She is so positive, sir."

"You parcel of curs; you are afraid of her."

"No, sir; we are afraid of you; but she puts courage into us. She really doesn't seem to be afraid of anything. Perhaps you could frighten her, sir."

"Perhaps. Where is she now?"

“Down in the courtyard, sir, talking to the soldiers as usual. She is always talking to the soldiers except when she is praying.”

Here in these few lines we have been given the main outline of Joan’s character—

- (1) She is so positive.
- (2) She puts courage into us.
- (3) She does not seem to be afraid of anything.
- (4) She talks with soldiers.
- (5) Except when she is praying.

Note the order in which these traits are given; moving from the abstract to the concrete. And note that, as soon as Joan comes on to the stage, Shaw will take care that each of the characteristics mentioned beforehand by the Steward will be made good in her own speech and action. That is an essential point in technique.

“Praying! Ha! You believe she prays, you idiot. I know the sort of girl that is always talking to soldiers. She shall talk to me a bit. . . . Hallo, you there!”

A girl’s voice from the courtyard asks, “Is it me, sir?”

“Yes, you.”

“Be you captain?”

That is a lovely entrance line; so full of character, of atmosphere; so fresh, countrified, strong, fearless, good-humoured; so expectant, and so almost triumphant. The whole of Joan is there, revealed in three words!

We may now take the rest of the scene more briefly,

indicating in brackets as we go along the work that is being done by the words.

Joan comes in, bobbing a curtsey. She tells Robert that she wants a horse and a few men, and says, "Those are the orders from my Lord" (*Characterisation and atmosphere*). "What do you want horse and men for?" "To go to the Dauphin at Chinon (*placing the next scene*), that he may let me lead his troops and raise the siege of Orleans" (*Foreshadowing of play's action*). "Polly and Jack . . ." says Joan. "Polly! do you dare to call squire Bertrand de Poulengey Polly to my face?" (*Identification of Character before appearance*).

The Captain sends the Steward for Poulengey, and tells Joan to wait in the courtyard. "Right, squire!" she says as she goes out (*Characterising exit*).

Poulengey comes in, and the two men talk together about Joan, her people, her character (*Previous History and Characterisation*). Robert suspects Poulengey of amorous intentions. Polly replies, "I would as soon think of the Blessed Virgin herself in that way as of this girl" (*Characterisation both of the speaker and of Joan*).

They discuss the military situation (*Exposition*). Poulengey says, "Nothing can save our side now but a miracle" (*Foreshadowing*). Polly thinks that Joan herself is something of a miracle, and backs his faith in her by offering to pay for her horse.

Robert cannot make up his mind what to do (*Characterisation of the bully in difficulties*.) He thinks he ought to have another talk with Joan. She comes in again, having

been busy in the interval—"Jack will go halves for the horse!" (*Characterisation at entrance*).

A conversation follows between Joan and Robert, in the course of which she tells him about her "voices," and her commission from God to drive the English out of France (*Emphasis by Repetition*). Robert tries to stifle her enthusiasm by his scepticism as to her voices, by showing her the impossibility of the task, and by frightening her with tales about the English soldiery; but she has her answer every time (*Exposition and Characterisation both of the bully and the saint*). Her enthusiasm rises.

"The goddams will take Orleans," says Robert, "and you cannot stop them, nor ten thousand like you."

Joan replies, "Ten like me can stop them with God on our side" (*Characterisation and atmosphere*).

Finally Robert, throwing the responsibility on to Poulengy's shoulders (*characterising the bully*), gives way and sends her off. "Come, Polly!" she cries as she dashes out (*Characterising exit*). Poulengy follows her.

The Steward comes in with a basket of eggs. "The hens are laying like mad, sir!" Robert staggers at the miracle. "Christ in Heaven! She did come from God!" The scene returns to where it began, though the content is now entirely different; and, in no more than twenty words after the main action of the scene is ended, the curtain is down; and the horses are galloping on the road to Chinon.

The point of all this is the way in which Shaw makes his words work. At every moment of the scene the words are active, doing something, adding something,

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making the situation clearer, giving the people in it character and individuality, leading the action firmly and with increasing speed on to the end of the scene.

By way of contrast, here is part of the opening of a scene written by a quite inexperienced author. Two young married people are talking to each other.

The man says, "Why should the finding of a four-leaved clover be reputed to be lucky?"

"Because, my dear, it means that you are keeping your eyes open in the present, and are not always dreaming of the future. I remember once being down in Sussex among the heather in Ashdown Forest, and I thought what a fine thing it would be to find a bunch of white heather to take home with me. So I started looking, and at the end of half an hour, feeling tired after a fruitless search, I was preparing to lie in the heather and be lazy, when, looking down, I found what I was looking for at my feet."

"But, still, that was only because you overlooked it in the distance. You might . . ."

"That's just my point. I was looking so far ahead, I didn't see anything."

"Do you really think one shouldn't look ahead?"

"Well, it's a good thing for you I look ahead sometimes."

"Why?"

"Because if I didn't look ahead sufficiently to shop and order meals for you, you wouldn't get anything to eat, for one thing."

"One always manages to have all one wants."

“I wish I had all I wanted!”

“I express myself badly. I should have said one always has what one needs. I can see by the expression in your eye that you are going to tell me you want a new dress, and I am going to answer that you certainly don't need it, and therefore I shall not give it you.”

The reason why that is so bad a piece of dialogue is because not one of these words is doing any work; they are streaming up lazily and vanishing into thin air. There are too many of them; and all are idle. No emotion comes through; and the whole thing is dull and lifeless.

Economy of words; and all working; that is the fundamental secret of good dramatic dialogue.

Let us look a little more closely at words.

DIALOGUE ✓

What exactly is the work that dialogue has to do, its functions? There are three—

- (1) To convey information to the audience.
- (2) To carry on the action of the play.
- (3) To characterise the people who are in it.

If the words have to convey information, obviously the simpler and the clearer they are the better. If they are going to carry on the action of the play, equally

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obviously they must be active words, with a certain tautness and muscularity about them. And if they are going to express the character of the person speaking them, they must come suitably from his lips.

Corresponding, therefore, to the three functions of dialogue, there are three qualities which are essential in the words of all good dramatic dialogue. They must be—

- (1) Clear.
- (2) Active.
- (3) Apt.

Let us take a speech and analyse it a little from the point of view of the words used. In the first scene of *St. Joan*, Robert de Baudricourt has been trying to frighten Joan by describing the brutality of the English soldiers; and Joan says:

✓ “God will be merciful to them; and they will act like His good children when they go back to the country He made for them, and made them for. I have heard the tales of the Black Prince. The moment he touched the soil of our country the devil entered into him and made him a black fiend. But at home, in the place made for him by God, he was good. It is always so. If I went into England against the will of God to conquer England, and tried to live there and speak its language, the devil would enter into me; and when I was old I should shudder to remember the wickednesses I did.”

The first thing you will probably notice about that speech is how entirely *apt* it is, in its directness, its simplicity, its assurance, its faith, to the speaker. As you read them, you feel that Joan is giving you not only her mind, but her heart; not only her thoughts but herself. She is answering Robert, but she puts her ideas on the carrier-wave of her personality.

But let us look at the words themselves. There are 118 of them.

- (a) Out of the 118, there are 22 verbs, 19 nouns, 6 adjectives, 2 adverbs.

Now, verbs and nouns are *active* words. Dynamic words. With verbs this is fairly obvious. The muscular activity of such words as "go," "enter," "touch," "conquer," "shudder," is obvious.

Nouns, too, particularly concrete nouns, are active. They create images in the mind. You cannot pronounce such words as "child," "country," "fiend," "home," without immediately having images in the mind.

And not only images; associations also. The image comes into the mind with a background of associated ideas.

When you are listening to a speech in which there is a high proportion of these active words, your mind is working all the time; the words are working in your mind; creating movement, pictures, colour.

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On the other hand, adjectives and adverbs are limiting words. The adjective limits the activity of a noun, narrows its range, reduces the number of possible associations. An adverb limits the activity of a verb, scotches it, grooves it.

✓ Say "house." Then say "old house," and you have limited the reference to a particular kind of house. Say "tumbled down old house," and you have limited it twice.

✓ Say "go." Then say "go carefully," and you grooved it to a particular kind of going. Then say "go extremely carefully," and you have narrowed the groove still further.

Joan says, "I have heard the tales of the Black Prince." She might have said, "I have heard the horrible tales"; she might have said, "I have heard the foul, cruel, dastardly, horrible tales." Each of these adjectives weakens the original active strength of the word "tales." They do not add, they take away.

She said, "The devil entered into him"; she might have said, "The devil entered surreptitiously into him." That would have been weaker, not stronger.

In a piece of dramatic writing, therefore, in which, more than in any other kind of writing, the words have to work, give your active words, the verbs and the nouns, all the room you can.

Do not hamper them, and clutter them up with adjectives and adverbs.

The proportion in this particular speech of Joan's is 6 adjectives in 118 words; say 5 per cent. Two adverbs in 118 words; say 2 per cent. And when you are looking over a page of your dialogue, try to reduce with the blue pencil these limiting words to something like that proportion.

(Remember, however, that this is a general rule, and not to be taken too strictly *au pied de la lettre*. You may have a character, a garrulous old lady perhaps, or a bright young thing, or a politician, in whose speaking, because of the clutteredness of their minds, a much higher proportion of adjectives and adverbs will be needed.)

(b) Out of 19 nouns, 18 are concrete.

Abstract nouns are always weak in dramatic writing, because they are lazy words, often vague in their reference, and with very little emotional quality.

Compare, for example, "posterity" with "children." The two words mean more or less the same thing; but "posterity" creates no image in the mind, suggests no background, and is an emotionally uninteresting word. One can be warmed and excited by the word "children,"

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or by such a phrase as Nietzsche's "your children's land shall ye love," but not by "posterity."

Again, "Your King and Country need you!" is much more effective, as the poster people who understand their business know, than talk about "patriotism."

Take the sentence, "The moment he touched the soil of our country, the devil entered into him, and he became a black fiend"—all concrete nouns; three separate images for the three phrases—and translate it into abstract speech, and say, "Simultaneously with his arrival on these shores, a sinister spirit seemed to take possession of him, and he developed a homicidal complex!"

The life has gone, the colour has gone, the emotion has gone; the bright stream has become a muddy ooze, the "ring of words" has become jabber; and nothing but the general sense of the words remains.

Abstract nouns are necessary, but they should be used as sparingly as possible, and an effort should always be made to find, if possible, the concrete equivalent for them.

- (c) Ninety-six out of the 118 words are words of one syllable.

Nobody pretends that such a proportion as

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this could be maintained. In this particular speech it just happens so. But it is an excellent example of the effectiveness of perfectly simple writing.

Simplicity should be the constant aim of the dramatist; and not only because he can thereby, in nine cases out of ten, be clearer and emotionally stronger in what he wants to say; nor simply because simplicity in itself has a desirable artistic quality; but also because these simple, direct, and, as it were, gritty words are so much more easy for the player to speak with effect.

Consider such a sentence as, "But at home, in the place made for him by God, he was good. It is always so." How simple, how clear, how moving, how artistically satisfying such a sentence is! And how easy for the player to speak, to accent, and to shape to the right emotional curve in the speaking of it.

As a rule, if there is a possible choice between two words, one longer and one shorter, choose the shorter.

Natural speech always tends to be monosyllabic.

There is an example in this speech of how a writer may sometimes deliberately choose a longer word instead of a shorter one. The word is "wickednesses."

"Sins" would do equally well. Then why not

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“sins”? Why not “I should shudder to remember the sins I did”? Obviously because “wickednesses” is a much more shuddery word than “sins,” and the author is helping his partner (the player) to play his game.

(d) All but six of these words are of English root.

Saxon English is your best writing idiom for dramatic purposes; latinised English your worst.

✓ A young writer who wishes to become a good dramatic writer should be a devoted student of such books as the Bible, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. . . .

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

“This is a Valley that nobody walks in but those that love a pilgrim's life. And though Christian had the hard hap to meet here with Apollyon, and to enter with him a brisk encounter, yet I must tell you that in former times men have met with angels here, have found pearls here, and have in this place found the words of life.”

And it would pay the beginner (some, too,

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who are by no means beginners) over and over again to take a course in Basic English, and learn that he can say all that he normally wishes to say in some 800 English words, without resort to ten thousand other latinised ones.

All this may be taken as fundamentally sound advice in the use of words; the concrete rather than the abstract; the short rather than the long; the Saxon rather than the Latin; but these choices must always be governed by the master consideration of what is the *right* word in any particular context.

There are no synonyms.

There are no two words which are identical in meaning, so that it could be a matter of entire indifference whether you used the one or the other. They may mean more or less the same, but there will be a shade of difference between them; and the best writing takes notice of these shades.

“Merciful” is not the same as “lenient”; an “invention” is not the same as a discovery.” Two such similar words as “felicity” and “happiness” are not interchangeable; for felicity is static, and belongs to heaven, while happiness is dynamic, and belongs to earth.

In ordinary conversation we do not, as a rule, use words so strictly, though it is always an added pleasure to talk with a man who has a nice appreciation of the shades of meaning; and in dramatic dialogue which artfully represents ordinary conversation it would probably be a mis-

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take to be too precise and pedantic in this matter, because the risk of becoming "literary" in dramatic dialogue should be avoided at all costs. But the joy of the *mot juste* must not be forgotten. The right word in the right place.

There are two words, for example, "plot" and "conspiracy", which are sufficiently near to each other perhaps to cause you to hesitate in choosing between them. You feel that either would do; but having been exhorted to choose the shorter rather than the longer, and the Saxon rather than the Latin, you might plump for "plot." And you might be wrong!

For the "plot" is the scheme on paper, and the "conspiracy" is the people with their heads together making it. So that if you said "The plot was discovered," and you meant that Guy Fawkes and his friends had been surprised by the police in the cellars, the short Saxon word would be wrong, and the long Latin word would be right!

"Innumerable" is a long Latin word, and "many" is a short Saxon word; but "caterpillars innumerable" is right, because of the creepy-crawly value of the sound of the polysyllable; and "many caterpillars" would have been a fine chance missed.

THE RHYTHM OF WORDS

There is another consideration to be borne in mind, namely, the rhythm and music of words.

The importance of this in poetical plays goes without saying; and, as everybody knows, there are many passages in Shakespeare in which the meaning is conveyed almost as much by the rhythm and music of the lines as by the words themselves. But even in ordinary plays this is a matter which ought not to be lost sight of.

A gesture on the stage is all the better for being a graceful gesture, because, in addition to conveying the player's mind and intention, it also then gives pleasure to the audience. And a written passage or speech in a play is all the better if, in addition to being simple and clear, it has also a musical quality in however slight a degree.

A dramatist must have the sense of words; but it is a serious handicap if he has not also the sense of the music and rhythm of words.

This consideration must frequently be allowed to override the more mechanical questions which we have been discussing, the choice of concrete words rather than abstract, short rather than long, Saxon rather than Latin; and you will be perfectly justified in using a long, abstract, latinised word if in that way you can get a better balance in a line, or a better cadence to a speech.

The musical rhythm of Joan's speech, which is our text at the moment, is not difficult to catch, although it is an ordinary conversational speech and very far from being "literary." Indeed, the player must catch and render it if she is going to give its full significance, because while the words express what is in Joan's mind, the rhythm of

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the words helps to express the emotion in her heart; in a sense, it is the emotion that gives the rhythm to the words.

And, apart from any other reason, Shaw is justified in using the long, abstract word "wickednesses" instead of the shorter and more concrete word "sins," because it gives a better cadence to the speech as a whole.

It is worth while noticing also, the persistent use which Shaw makes of what might be called beautiful words, words whose sound is pleasant to the ear. Such words as "merciful," "children," "tales," "home," come beautifully from the lips that speak them, and add to the aesthetic value of the speech. This is a plus value, and not entirely essential to the dramatic value of the speech; but the playwright should always remember that a pleased audience is much more likely to be an alive and co-operative one.

So long, therefore, as the main requirements of good dialogue are observed, economy, simplicity, clearness in the use of words, the more pleasant music you can get into them the better. You will hardly be able to escape doing this if, as you write, the whole thing is definitely an emotional experience of your own; for emotion is life, and life is rhythm.

In every play there are moments when emotion is moving more strongly than at others, very strongly perhaps at the final climax; and at such moments you may, if you wish to, and without great risk, go "all out" for the music and rhythm of words. You may even

multiply words. You may even courageously approach the treacherous frontiers of Literature.

The emotional stream is then so strong that it will be able to carry it.

There is, for example, that famous speech by Lilith at the end of *Back to Methuselah*:

“They have accepted the burden of eternal life. They have taken the agony from birth; and their life does not fail them even in the hour of their destruction. Their breasts are without milk; their bowels are gone; the very shapes of them are only ornaments for their children to admire and caress without understanding. Is this enough; or shall I labour again? Shall I bring forth something that will sweep them away and make an end of them as they have swept away the beasts of the garden, and made an end of the crawling things and the flying things and of all them that refuse to live for ever? . . . Of Life only there is no end; and though of its million starry mansions many are empty and many still unbuilt, and though its vast domain is as yet unbearably desert, my seed shall one day fill it and master its matter to its uttermost confines. And for what may be beyond, the eyesight of Lilith is too short. It is enough that there is a beyond.”

That is “fine writing” which under ordinary circumstances is, and must be, anathema to the dramatist; but the climaxes of good plays are not always ordinary circumstances; the accumulated emotion may be so strong

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that the simple pipe may be thrown aside for the trumpets, for the complete orchestra of wind and reed. Which only shows that there are occasions when all rules may be broken, and success in emotional expression is, of itself, a complete justification.

If you will now return to Joan's speech about the goddams, this discussion of dialogue may be summed up by noting its five outstanding features—

- (1) It is simple.
- (2) It is economical of words.
- (3) It is clear in meaning.
- (4) It can be spoken with a pleasant rhythm and cadence.
- (5) It is apt to the speaker.

Those are the lines on which to write good dialogue; always remembering that it is not first a matter of care and cleverness in the use of words, but of emotional depth and clarity. Get the feeling right, and the right words will offer themselves.

CHARACTER

The second point on which author and player come very close together as partners in this play-making game is character drawing and character portrayal.

The author conceives a character in his mind, the player acts that character on the stage; and it is therefore

of extreme importance that the author should "draw" that character in such a way that the player can make it alive and convincing before the audience.

It is true of any kind of story-telling that the character-quality of the story is of first importance. This is probably due to the fact that, above all other persons and things, we are interested in ourselves; and, next to ourselves, in other persons in whom as in a mirror we see ourselves.

Man may be mankind's "proper study"; certainly he is his chief preoccupation. Human nature interests us as nothing else does.

Even at the level of mere anecdote, one anecdote is better than another because of the character-quality in it. Recall a few of the anecdotes you have heard, and see if this is not so. The mechanical type of anecdote tickles you for a moment, and is easily forgotten.

A curate, with umbrella in one hand and suitcase in the other, is hurrying down the gangway on to the pier at Liverpool to catch the ferry-boat to Birkenhead. He knows he has not much time. As he nears the bottom of the gangway, he catches sight of the boat, and it is on the move. Determined not to miss it, he runs, flings his bag and umbrella over the gunwale, and himself after them, landing in a heap on the deck. An old sailor drags him up by the collar: "You sacred idiot! the boat's coming in!"

A mechanical situation; character-quality practically nil; amusing for the moment.

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One hot July morning a regiment of soldiers is marched over from barracks to Osborne, where Queen Victoria is to confer some decorations. The troops are paraded on the terrace. The Queen, with a sharp nose for smells, comes out, unfortunately on the windward side of the parade. She sniffs the air. "There is a peculiar odour, is there not?" she says to a young Irish colonel in attendance. "Yes, Madam," he at once replies; "it is *esprit de corps*."

A touch of personal character-quality enters here, and of these two chestnuts it is not difficult to decide which is the better story.

It is a long way from the anecdote to drama; but along that way, and with increasing stress, the importance of the character element in the story rises.

A play has been defined as "a story, with some characters." There must be a story; and the story must be expressed in terms of character relations and interactions.

This is true of all kinds of plays.

Some plays are more mechanical than others; the melodrama, the farce, the crook play, and so on; and (as has already been said) the character element is not so important in these plays as it is in tragedy and high comedy; but even in these plays the character element in some form or other, and to some degree or other, is essential.

It is usual to distinguish between "situation" and "character," and to say that in some plays the "situation,"

whether side-splitting or heart-breaking, is everything, while in other plays "character" is everything. But it must never be forgotten that there is no dramatic "situation" of any kind which is not created by the "character" element.

A man, walking on the pavement, slips up over a banana skin and comes a cropper. You may smile, or be alarmed, at the incident; but that is not a dramatic situation.

But supposing that the man was going pompously at the moment of disaster, strutting with head in air; or supposing that instead of looking where he was going, he had his eye on a little piece of fluff on the opposite sidewalk; as soon as these character elements are introduced, the situation has dramatic quality. For that reason.

Galsworthy said, "Situation is Character." If you are ski-ing in the Arlberg and take a header over your ski-tips into the snow, you make what is commonly known as a "grave." You probably make a sad mess of its contours before you get out of it, but, roughly, the shape of the "grave" is your shape. Another man in the same circumstances, the same slope, the same snow, might take a header and make a "grave," but it would be a differently shaped "grave."

The "grave" is the situation; and it is you, your shape, that makes it what it is.

The curtain rises upon two persons who are talking together. There is no dramatic situation as yet. Some

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beginners will let them go on talking for quite a long time before the faintest shadow of a "situation" shows itself. But the moment those two begin to talk in such a way as to reveal their characters, either reacting to each other or both reacting to a set of circumstances being described, then a dramatic situation begins to take shape; and not till then.

A set of circumstances is not a dramatic situation until "character" makes a "grave" in it. The reason why a hundred quite different plays can be written on the theme of the eternal triangle is because the "character" of the three persons at the three angles can vary almost infinitely and the "character" creates the situation, *is*, as Galsworthy said, the situation.

We conclude, therefore, that whatever sort of a play it is going to be, character-drawing of some sort is essential. It is the crux of the dramatist's work.

"Of some sort." For there are different sorts. There is, for example, type-character and individual-character. And we may as well clear up this important point at once.

TYPE AND INDIVIDUAL

It is true that in melodrama or farce situation is more important than character; but you cannot have a melodramatic or a farcical situation without some character element.

This is type-character.

The hero and the villain in melodrama are, as a rule—there are exceptions—types, not individual persons. The hero is all goodness; the villain is all wickedness. They are in the play for that reason, and throughout the play they show themselves nothing but that; the hero keeps on being good in the same way, whether in failure or triumph, and the villain keeps on being wicked in the same way, whether successful or shown up.

They are not persons; they are rather personifications of two contrasted aspects of human character.

There are no human individuals who are either all-heroic or all-villainous.

All the same, the character of the hero, and of the villain, such as it is, creates the melodramatic situation; and such a play would have no dramatic quality were it not for the relations and reactions of these type-characters to the circumstances in which they are placed and to each other.

Even type-character, therefore, is important.

To draw a type-character is not difficult.

A multitude of black-and-white artists are perfectly capable of drawing a typical cabman; but you have to approach the rank of a Phil May before, with a few deft touches, you can turn the typical cabman into the individual cabman who took you to the railway station this morning.

And there are many play-writers who, because it is easier, or perhaps because they do not feel that it is very

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important, are content to draw the minor characters in their play as types; a typical waiter, or butler, or housemaid, or flapper, or policeman, or maiden aunt, as the case may be; and it is only the really conscientious and skilful dramatist who, instead of a typical waiter, will give you Walter Bohun, or instead of a type-bully will give you Robert de Baudricourt, a complete individual.

It is always the aim of the good dramatist to draw individuals, not types; to create and build up a character "in the round"; with facets; not the personification of some aspect or other, but a complete individual in himself, with frontside and backside and profile, solid, alive, and so convincing that you feel you would recognise him if you met him in the street.

The only question is—How can it be done?

This question must be answered by asking another—where does a person's individuality reside? Obviously not in that aspect of his character which he shares with a multitude of other persons, but in those aspects in which he differs from them.

Let us try to reduce this to a scheme.

You have a character in your play; a bully, let us say, or a cynic, or a hard-headed business man, or a dreamer, or a curate, or a man with the artistic temperament, or what not.

You have him in your play for that reason; because he is cynical, or idealist, or crusty, or egoistic, and so on.

We will call this his Primary Characteristic.

Naturally you will draw him as such; but, if you do

nothing more with him, you succeed only in drawing a type, for there are thousands of bullies and cynics and hard-headed business men and egoists. He will be a type-bully, or a type-egoist, not an individual person.

His primary characteristic marks him as belonging to a certain type. His individuality does not reside there. Where, then?

A primary always has Secondary Characteristics associated with it.

Take, for instance, such a type-character as the Door-mat, the person on whom everybody can wipe their boots if they want to. The primary characteristic here may be (let us say) amiability; the associated secondary characteristics may be that he is lethargic, lacking in initiative, weak-willed, self-indulgent.

Or here is a man with the artistic temperament; that is his primary; that classes him with a certain type. His secondaries may be that he is unconventional, pig-headed, indifferent to the opinions of others, uncertain, unsocial, moody, sensual.

It is in these secondaries that the individuality lies. Your individuality never lies in the obvious thing about you, and that is why you can only be known for what you really are by your intimates, although a stranger may be able to class you at once as belonging to a certain type.

Mr. Brown has the artistic temperament, so has Mr. White; but while Mr. Brown may be sensual, Mr. White may be much more ascetic in habit; Mr. Brown may be insensitive to criticism, while Mr. White may get very annoyed about it; the one may be generous in

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appreciation, the other stingy. In fact these secondary characteristics are capable of an infinite number of permutations and combinations.

There are thousands of artists, but there is only one Mr. Brown. And if you have Mr. Brown as a character in your play, you want to draw him not just as a type-artist but as an individual man.

You must, therefore, live with him long enough, in your sympathetic imagination, to know what his secondaries are. You must know him "in the round." He must be a complete individual to you. And you must be alive inside his skin. That is the first thing.

But how will you get this individuality of his into your dialogue?

You will, of course, draw the primary characteristic, for that is what the character is in the play for; he does his main work in the play on that line. And you will probably emphasise it, making it perfectly clear and strong. But it is a mistake, having once suggested the type-character, to go on continually throughout the play drawing your pencil, as it were, over the same line again and again.

If, for example, your character is a Doormat, and every time he appears on the stage somebody or other wipes his boots on him, and he reacts in the same way, that will in the end become very tiresome.

That is the weakness of all type-drawing; and if, in a melodrama, the author were not clever enough to provide us with a succession of exciting situations, the sight of a

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hero who was never anything else but heroic, or of a villain who was never allowed to be anything but villainous, would become excessively boring.

But if you have constructed your play well, there will be moments when the character (whom you are trying to draw as an individual) will be on the stage but not in the main current of the scene's movement; moments when he is somewhat in the background; or moments when the showing of his primary characteristic is not necessary to the main action.

Upon these moments you must seize with all your skill, for they are your chances to touch in the secondary characteristics which will give him the individuality you want.

The other characters in the play will help you, too; for it is in human nature to react differently to different persons. A bully is not a bully to everybody; a saint does not behave as a saint to everybody; even a doormat is not everybody's doormat. And as the particular character about whom we are now chiefly thinking comes into contact, now with one and now with another of the persons in the play, you will have the chance of showing the different facets of his individuality.

A point arises here which should be stressed.

DUOLOGUE AND CHARACTER

Beginners, as a rule, use too much duologue in their

plays. Perhaps they find it easier than a general conversation in which several persons are taking part; and when they have had a long heart-to-heart talk between two characters, they dismiss one, bring another on, and a second long heart-to-heart talk follows.

Too much of this sort of thing is weak theatre. It is weak play construction. And an audience, looking at a stage on which for half an hour or so there are never more than two persons, is apt to weary. Occasionally it may succeed, but only by a sort of *tour de force* in dialogue writing.

But the point to be stressed here is that it is weak in respect for character-drawing.

When *A* is speaking alone with *B*, who may be his manservant, he shows one side of his character. That is one duologue.

C, his woman secretary, comes in, and *B* retires; and in speaking with *C*, *A* shows another side of his character. That is duologue No. 2.

Then *D*, his wife, arrives; *C* is dismissed; and in speaking with his wife, *A* shows another side of his character. Duologue No. 3.

Unexpectedly, *E*, who is the wife's lover, turns up; *A* intelligently excuses himself on a matter of important business with his secretary in another room; and in speaking with *E*, the wife shows herself differently from what she was when alone with *A*. Duologue No. 4.

Finally *A* returns; the wife, late for her shopping, exits hurriedly; *A* and *E* are left together; they are close

friends; and with him *A* reveals still another side of his character. Duologue No. 5.

We have now four aspects of *A*'s character; but they are separate, seen by us separately, and realised by him separately. They are there as the makings of an individual person; but they require to be fused into one. We have seen this facet, and that facet, of the crystal; but as yet we have not yet seen the crystal as a whole.

This fusing, which is essential if *A* is to be drawn as a complete individual, is obtained by scenes in which *A*, *D* (wife), and *E* (lover) are together; in which *A*, *C* (secretary), and *D* (wife), are together; and in which all four of them are together. And the Act should be so constructed as to allow for these "ensemble" passages being interwoven with the duologue passages.

Shall we now take an actual example of character-drawing? And we may as well make use again of *St. Joan*, because it will be a play with which no doubt you are familiar; and it is master-work.

ROBERT DE BAUDRICOURT

Robert is a minor character in the play, and is a good example of the trouble which Shaw, like all good dramatists, takes with his lesser people.

Robert is a bully. That is his primary characteristic, which gives him his type-character.

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- (a) The moment he opens his mouth, at the very rise of the curtain, he fixes his type-character in an irritable and blustering line to his steward: "No eggs! No eggs!! Thousand thunders, man, what do you mean by no eggs?" And for the few moments he is alone with the steward he continues in this brow-beating way: "Go. Bring me four dozen eggs and two gallons of milk here in this room before noon, or Heaven have mercy on your bones! I will teach you to make a fool of me."
- (b) When Joan arrives, he speaks rudely to her, and evidently imagines that it will be as easy to browbeat her as the steward. "It is the will of God that I shall send you back to your father with orders to put you under lock and key and thrash the madness out of you. What have you to say to that?" "You think you will, squire; but you will find it all coming quite different."
- (c) This strong and smiling answer takes a little of the wind out of Robert's sails; he feels that he is not holding his ground; and he brings his fists down on the table and inflates his chest, for the sake of ginger, and "Now listen to me. I am going to assert myself." "Please do, squire," says Joan, and at once begins to tell him, with great enthusiasm, the plans which she has made. "There will be no trouble for you, squire; I have arranged it all; you have only to give the order."
- (d) "Well, I am damned!" says Robert. The balloon is deflated.

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- (e) He wants time to pull himself together. He sends for Poulengy. He has still enough breath left in him to say to Joan, rudely, "Get out; and wait in the yard."
- (f) And, when she has gone, he sends the steward after her: "Go with her, you, you dithering imbecile"—the whole point of that being that it is not the steward, but Robert himself, who is dithering. The steward is probably chuckling in his sleeve.
- (g) When Poulengy comes in, Robert drops the mask of superiority. "It isn't service, Polly. A friendly talk. Sit down." This bully is not an all-round bully. Another facet appears. He shows himself a friendly, pleasant fellow-officer.
- (h) They talk about Joan. In his quiet way, Poulengy is rather keen about Joan. He thinks she is "a bit of a miracle." And the bully begins to hedge. He begins to realise that the strength and force are not on his side. "If you were in my place would you let a girl like that do you out of sixteen francs for a horse?" "If you were in my place . . ." he is already beginning to think about shoving the responsibility on to other shoulders.
- (i) When he finds that Poulengy is willing to pay for the horse, and back Joan up in every way Robert's irresolution shows itself more plainly: "I shall feel like a precious fool," he says. And when Poulengy insists that he must accept responsibility, Robert still shuffles: "You don't see how awkward this is for me."

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- (j) He catches at a straw. He will see Joan again. Poulengey calls her up. There is no browbeating this time. Robert is tamer, and more subtle. He is still determined that she shall not have her way, but he won't bully her out of it, he will frighten her out of it by telling her what sort of men the English soldiers, the goddams are; or he will argue her out of it, by representing the military situation as practically hopeless. The bully has turned tempter and bogeyman.
- (k) When he finds that he can make no headway against her, he gives in, to Joan's great delight. Not with a very good grace, however: "Your orders are . . ." he says, as if the power and authority were still with him.
- (l) "I may have a soldier's dress, mayn't I, squire?" "Have what you please. I wash my hands of it." Still refusing complete personal responsibility. Only for the moment, however.
- (m) For when Joan has gone, and Poulengey is off after her, Robert shakes his hand and says, "Good-bye, old man, I am taking a great chance. Few other men would have done it." Making sure that if any credit is to come out of the business, as in his heart he probably thinks there will, it shall be his!

And so through these swiftly moving scenes Robert is lifted out of his class, the type-bully, and created "in the round" as an individual; and it is done by—

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- (1) Fixing the primary characteristic; and never really losing sight of it all the way through; but
- (2) with swift, deft touches here and there, as occasion serves, touching in the secondary characteristics; the hedging, the irresolution, the refusal of responsibility, the making sure of any credit that may be going.

It must not be imagined that the author is aware of all these details as he writes, or that he worries himself about primaries and secondaries. These are disclosed on analysis. His only concern is to get himself fully alive inside the skin of the character he is creating.

There is probably no great need to get inside in this way if all you intend to do is to draw a type; but you will never draw an "individual" except from inside his skin; and provided you are fully there, and alive, you will never draw any character, major or minor, except as an individual. That is the whole secret.

From this it follows that a dramatist should habitually be a student and observer of character. He should learn as much as he can of the psychological working of the human machine; and whenever he is among people, whether strangers or friends, he should be alert in his watching of the way they behave, and the way in which they reveal themselves in behaviour.

For after all his only tools in character-drawing are speech and action; and a constant observance of the way in which actual people in their speech and action give themselves away will teach him many things.

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EARLY OR DELAYED ENTRANCE

An author may sometimes be in doubt as to whether it would be best to bring his chief character into the play quite early, or to delay his entrance.

There are, of course, no rules.

It probably depends on the kind of play being written.

If, for example, he is writing a play in which action—physical action, movement in the outer world—is the chief thing, an historical play for instance, then it might be wise to delay the entrance of the chief character in order that all the necessary preliminaries of lay-out and exposition may be got out of the way, and, when the chief character arrives, the main action can proceed without any backwash into further explanations.

If, on the other hand, it is a play mainly concerned with the development of ideas—mental action—a play of ideas, such as a problem play, then it might be wise to allow the chief character or characters to appear immediately, even if they are taken off again quite soon, so that the audience may have something concrete, as it were, to hang on to while the problem is being posed.

It depends, too, to some extent, upon the author's skill. A beginner might be well advised to stick to the traditional plan of spending most of the time in the first act on what was called "exposition"; that is to say, a general (but always clear) account of the situation in which the story is to be set; and this is usually done through the lips of minor characters. But, as his skill

increases, and he becomes more and more able to interweave all the "exposition" he wants into the dramatic movement of the play, he will not require this preliminary palaver.

There is no need for dramatists like Ibsen or Shaw to devote the opening passages of their plays to a mechanical lay-out of the main situation, like setting the pieces on a chessboard; they start the action at once, and work in all the necessary "exposition" as they go along, as part of the play's movement.

They dramatise the "exposition", so to speak. But this requires considerable skill.

(Some authors seem to think that, because of the unfortunate habit of many members of an audience arriving late for the play, it is a good thing to have nothing important said or happen in the first five minutes of the opening scene. This is a form of truckling to iniquity which need not concern us here. Five minutes of say-nothingness and do-nothingness at the opening of a play is bad artistry, and that's the end on't.)

The usual reason why an author delays the entrance of his chief character is that he may work up the audience's interest in him by describing him in advance through the lips of those who occupy the stage until his arrival.

And there is a point here which must not be missed. It is perfectly legitimate to describe a character before appearance, and in as much detail as you like; but that advance description is a pledge on your part that you

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will make it good, in terms of the character's own speech and action, when he appears.

Let us turn to *St. Joan* again.

Joan's character is described before her appearance by the steward to Robert de Baudricourt. It is done with admirable economy.

The steward makes five points—

- (1) "She is so positive, sir."
- (2) "She puts courage into us."
- (3) She "doesn't seem to be afraid of anything."
- (4) "Talking to the soldiers as usual."
- (5) And when she is not talking to the soldiers "she is praying."

Notice by the way the *order* in which those characteristics are given, proceeding from the more abstract "she is so positive" to the more concrete—talking to the soldiers, and praying.

The moment Joan enters the play, Shaw begins to make good the steward's description of her in her own speech and action.

For example:

- (1) Her positiveness.

ROBERT: I take no orders except from the king.

JOAN: Yes, squire; that is all right. My Lord is
the King of Heaven.

And a moment later—

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ROBERT: I shall send you back to your father to . . . thrash the madness out of you. What have you to say to that?

JOAN: You think you will, squire; but you will find it all coming quite different.

(2) "She puts courage into us."

JOAN: I have arranged it all; you have only to give the order.

ROBERT: Well, I am damned!

JOAN: No, squire; God is very merciful; and the blessed saints Catherine and Margaret, who speak to me every day [she is always praying] will intercede for you. You will go to Paradise; and your name will be remembered for ever as my first helper.

(3) She "doesn't seem to be afraid of anything."

She shows herself entirely unafraid of Robert. He is unable to frighten her by what he says about the English goddams.

ROBERT: Have you heard no tales of their Black Prince who was blacker than the devil himself?

JOAN: You must not be afraid, Robert. . . .

ROBERT: Damn you, I am not afraid.

Nor is she to be frightened by Robert's reading of the military situation.

ROBERT: That is why the goddams will take Orleans. And you cannot stop them, nor ten thousand like you.

JOAN: One thousand like me can stop them. Ten like me can stop them with God on our side.

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(4) "Talking to the soldiers."

JOAN: They have promised to come with me.
Polly and Jack and . . .

ROBERT: Polly!! You impudent baggage, do
you dare call squire Bertrand de Poulengey
Polly to my face?

JOAN: His friends call him so, squire; I did not
know he had any other name. Jack . . .

Step by step, point by point, the characterisation is made good. This must always be done. If you describe a character before appearance as being "the wittiest man on earth," you pledge yourself to make him that in the words you give him to speak!

REQUIREMENTS IN CHARACTER-DRAWING

A character should be (1) clear. This almost goes without saying; yet many plays are spoiled by confused character-drawing. Clear in outline, in shape; and particularly should his reactions, and the motives which urge him to them, be clear. The secret here is to have the character perfectly clear in your own mind to begin with; the primary characteristic, and the associated secondaries; and to be so well inside the skin that, so to say, you constantly feel the fit of it.

A character should be (2) plausible—"convincing" is perhaps a better word—convincing in the set of circumstances in which you place him.

This is particularly important in the case of plays written on the plane of naturalism and realism, in which an audience will judge a character by the normal standard of ordinary men and women. For if, as the play proceeds, the audience finds that it "simply cannot believe in" your characters, the play is doomed.

The conduct of your character must arise naturally and inevitably out of his nature as you depict it. It must always be the "sort of thing that a man like that would do or say." Outward changes of conduct follow upon inward changes of thought or feeling, as one emotion casts out another, or one motive jockeys another out of position; and you must always make these changes credible, and show how they arise.

This is commonly called the proper "motivation" of a character; a rather horrible word which simply means that there must be a reason for everything a character does, a reason in himself, and that that reason must be clear to the audience, and that the audience should agree that, he being what he is, the reason is credible.

It is important to remember in this connection that the impression which a stage-play makes on an audience is very sharp-edged and vivid. The theatre illusion seems to heighten the tone and colour of everything that happens on the stage.

A novelist might be able to persuade you of the credibility of a character, because you see him (as you read) in the world of imagination; but that same character might seem quite incredible on the stage, because there you see him in terms of flesh and blood.

Beginners sometimes make the mistake of placing a

scene in a setting with which they are entirely unfamiliar, and the plausibility of his characters fails because their behaviour is quite unlike anything that would actually happen in such a *milieu*. If it is necessary for you to have a scene in a Mayfair dining-room, or at a bottle-party in Bloomsbury, or in a police court, it would be just as well, presuming that these occasions are unfamiliar to you, to find out somehow or other what sorts of things happen there, or don't happen as the case may be. It is permissible to make a scene in heaven entirely as a matter of imagination, but not a scene in a Bloomsbury flat.

A character must be (3) consistent with itself. There are Jekylls and Hydes; and it is admitted that human personality is one of the unsolved mysteries; but there is a kind of unity in a character which must be respected, and a certain inherent logic of a character which must not be allowed to break down.

If you draw a man as being a "decent fellow," you cannot put him in a situation and make him act like a cad. Credibility goes to the winds at once, and your play with it.

Sometimes, it is true, a man will seem to contradict himself. The honourable man will be guilty of a gross deception. In such a case you must be careful to show either that the contradiction is apparent only, or that the change of behaviour is due to some element in him which becomes active under the pressure of circumstances or to some outside motive which for the moment masters him.

Nora, for example, in *A Doll's House* has forged a

signature; but Ibsen states the circumstances under which this was done in such a way as to make us believe that she could, and would, have done it although it was against the grain.

Many people criticise the ending of this fine play; the suddenness with which Nora, after having been a "doll" all her married life, turns and leaves her husband. They say that nothing in the drawing of Nora's character has prepared us for so swift a *volte face*.

The point is arguable. Ibsen probably made it harder than usual for himself in this play because here he attempts, what is so rarely attempted, to show the "growth" as distinct from the "development" of a character. The development of a character in a play is normally like the development of the negative of a photograph; the lineaments of the character are slowly brought to light; the character does not change, but is revealed bit by bit. This is not the same as a character's growth, through changes year by year, from immaturity to ripeness; and in such growth the time-factor is important. That is to say, given time, a woman may become something quite different from what she seemed to be to start with; a strong, self-assertive, independent creature instead of a doll; and such a complete change is perfectly credible if it takes years, but hardly credible if it happens in a few days.

Psychologically, even on the point of the suddenness of the change, Ibsen is justified. There are such things as frustrations. To forge a signature is not exactly doll's work; and if Nora subsequently became a doll, the courage and initiative which enabled her to carry through

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a forgery must have remained in her as a frustration, liable in course of time to break out.

Moreover, the modern view is that human personality may be multiple. Rather like the landing in a large house, on which there are several doors. Behind each of which resides a Self. And according to the knock which comes on the street-door, which is the outside stimulus to action, one or other of these selves comes out to answer it.

And because, normally, in the ordinary course of a woman's domestic or social life, the same kinds of stimulus are constantly repeating themselves, one self appears, and acts, very much more often than others. And this regularly appearing self not unnaturally comes to be regarded by her friends and neighbours, even by herself except perhaps in dark vivid flashes of inner awareness, as her real self.

But it need not be so. A self behind one of the other doors on the landing may be the real self; but it requires a different and a special kind of stimulus to bring it into action.

Nora's doll-self may not have been her real self. Her forging-self may have been her real self, and Helmer in the end provided the stimulus necessary to call it out. He may have forgotten that it existed. So may she. But out it came, suddenly, surprisingly; and she left him.

But psychological justification is not quite the same thing as dramatic justification; and if you have a character in a play who is going to switch round and apparently contradict himself, you must take care, in your previous

drawing of him, to show clearly that the sufficient motive was there, and in him as part of his make-up.

A character must be (4) interesting.

This sounds too obvious; but it is odd how many plays one reads in which it is impossible to work up any interest in the leading character or characters.

A character may interest you as the author quite a lot, but your play is in serious jeopardy if he is not, or if you do not make him, interesting to a general audience. For if they are not interested in him, they will care nothing about either what he does or what happens to him.

The interest may be sympathetic; in the case of the leading character it should, as a rule, be sympathetic; or it may be antipathetic; but the lively interest must be there. The audience must either heartily admire him or heartily detest him; it must not be able to ignore him. It may cheer, or hiss, but must not yawn.

To secure this interest is very largely a question of character-drawing. If a character really interests you as the author—and it would be absurd to have anything to do with him if he did not—and if you get well inside his skin, it should not be difficult to make him interesting to others, provided that you are bold and frank and sincere with him.

Probably nine out of every ten uninteresting characters are uninterestingly drawn characters. They would have been interesting if you had drawn them better, more faithfully. Certainly nine out of every ten uninterestingly drawn characters are so because the author was not alive

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in them. He was outside them. They are shapeless, humourless, colourless creatures on the one hand, or forced and distorted out of all human recognition on the other; which they would not, and could not, have been if he had deeply identified himself with them.

The lack of interest may, but rarely, be inherent in the character itself.

There are uninteresting people in the world, and presumably in heaven also where "an angel is nobody in particular." There are nobodies in particular. But if an author, who is out to tell a story, chooses to put such people into his play, all that can be said is that he has missed his calling.

So much, then, for the Author and his partner, the Player, for whom he writes words to be spoken, and creates characters to be given flesh and blood to. Let us now consider his work in relation to his other partner, the Audience.

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The Audience

THE first thing to be said is that the critical part of the author's task is to keep this second partner of his, the Audience, awake and alive.

A play does not come to life in the author's script; nor does it come to life in rehearsal, even (as all players know) in dress rehearsal. A play comes to life at an imaginary line somewhere between the footlights and the stalls, where the emotional stream from the stage meets the emotional stream from the audience, where action and reaction cross each other.

An intelligently awake and an emotionally alive audience is essential.

How does the author help to keep his audience awake and alive?

VARIETY AND CONTRAST

Life is change.

So long as anything has life in it, it will change; when it ceases to change, it is dead. An unchanging level is a

dead level. Death is changelessness, whether on earth or in Nirvana; whether in a man, or in a god.

From the point of view of play-writing this philosophy of change is interpreted as variety; and the principal element in that variety is Contrast. The play-writer must be constantly on the alert for opportunities of making use of contrast.

Here are some examples:

(a) *Contrast in characters.*

In the preliminary selection of characters for a play, this question of contrast should never be lost sight of. Characters should be contrasted with each other as much as possible; particularly such characters as in the course of the play will frequently be together and "opposite" each other.

Good dramatic characters are well-contrasted characters.

If you open your play with two minor characters, a butler and a parlourmaid, for example, you have the sex contrast, but that is not enough; there must also be character contrast; the one bright, the other sombre; or quick, and lethargic; or idealist, and realist; and so on.

Or with two women sitting at tea together, talking for the sake of giving preliminary information to the audience; they must talk in character, and their characters should be contrasted; they should be quite different from each other in their mood, their outlook, their reactions.

It is possible to get dramatic material out of a struggle between two brawny men, but you will get much more

dramatic material out of a struggle between two men, one of whom is brawny, and the other brainy.

You select your characters according to the necessities of your play, but do not forget that variety is one of the necessities.

(b) *Variety in Mood.*

This corresponds to the high lights and the low lights in the composition of a good picture.

A play will always have a dominant mood, tragic or comedic; and this mood must be maintained; but within it there is room for variation.

Nothing could be duller, in the theatre, than a tragedy which is continuously in the tragic key, except it be a comedy which is continuously in the comic key.

No good cook would ever give you for dinner suet dumplings followed by a suet pudding. A *soufflé* is indicated.

Moods are heightened by contrast. The emotion of a tragic moment is deepened if it follows upon a lighter mood; just as the thunder of the sea upon the rocks feels more impressive if you have just been listening to a lark singing above the cliff. Laughter is richer on the verge of tears.

This is the reason for the humorous interludes which you frequently find in tragedies; in Shakespeare's, for instance. They heighten the tragedy.

But it is not the only reason. Your audience requires "relief." If it is kept for too long in one frame of mind, its mind dulls and stiffens. Continuous laughter palls;

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continuous gloom asphyxiates. One can laugh until one is nearly dead, and one can mourn until one is nearly dead; it is change and variety in mood which keeps one alive.

(Take care, however, that you do not introduce "relief" into your play just for the sake of relief. The change of mood must always be within the main movement of the play. The humorous interlude which you may introduce into a tragedy must not be a mere "interlude"; a sort of music-hall turn interjected to give the audience a rest; the Palladium brought over to the Lyceum for a moment. The interlude must be definitely related to the play's movement, and must be made to add somehow or other to the "sum of the play." It must not be patchwork. It must be interwoven.

A play must be all of a piece. The action must not stop during the "relief.")

(c) *Variety in tempo.*

If you watch a producer at work in rehearsal, you will see him constantly trying to get changes of speed in the scene's action. He knows that this is the only way to get life into it.

If you listen to a good actor delivering a long speech, you will find him doing the same thing; varying the speed.

You can make it easier for the producer (who is one of your partners), or on the other hand harder, by the way you write the scene.

If you give him page after page of script in which the dialogue makes heavy going all the way, in which all the characters speak at great length, in "slabs" of talk, you are making it harder for him. He cannot build a palace of delight with these huge, unwieldy blocks of concrete.

Vary the tempo of your writing.

If you have written a passage of crisp, sharp-edged, cut-and-thrust dialogue, with short lines flashing like the rapiers in an exciting moment of a fencing match, or as when in a tennis foursome all four players are up at the net, follow it with a passage in which the speeches are longer.

Vary swift with slow.

Vary staccato with legato.

Your producer will thank you for this.

So will your other partner, the audience. For a scene which races breathlessly along, or continuously pitter-patters along, from start to finish can become just as wearisome to listen to as a scene which drags hopelessly because the characters are floundering along in a bog of words.

You yourself also can take advantage of this variety in tempo.

It will frequently happen in a play that there is something to which you particularly wish to direct the audience's attention; some fact, some idea, some property perhaps, or some indication of an event which is going to happen later; something which it is essential the audience should not miss.

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You wish to emphasise this.

You can get that emphasis, that underlining, in several ways.

You can, for example, repeat the important fact, or call attention to the important property several times. This is risky because it is a mechanical way of emphasising and, unless you are very clever in doing it, the audience will see that you are forcing a card, and will esteem you less.

But you can get all the emphasis you want by making use of a change of tempo in your writing. After a swift, staccato passage, and at the moment when you are about to change into legato, either immediately before or immediately after, place the fact, the idea, or whatever it is that you wish to underline. And your audience will get it.

(d) *Vary duologue with ensemble.*

We have already noted the weakness of duologue from the point of view of character-drawing, and the necessity of ensemble dialogue to fuse together the different aspects of character which the duologues have separately revealed.

We are now thinking about keeping the audience awake and alive and interested.

To sit for a long time at a stretch, half an hour perhaps or more, looking at a stage capable of accommodating twenty persons, but on which as a matter of fact during all that time two persons only are present, can subtly operate upon an audience's attention as a soporific. It becomes boring. It is part of your theatre sense to be

aware of this; and you should try to make full use of the stage as a living picture at which the audience is looking.

When you have had two people on the stage talking together for a long while, do not take one of them off and let another come on, so that you have a further long conversation *à deux*; contrive the telling of your story in such a way that, after a long duologue, and quite naturally, you require to have several characters together for a while.

Do not, if you can help it, close one scene with a duologue and begin the next one with another duologue, even with a different pair. You may not be able to help it; but bear in mind the importance, from the point of view of the audience, of getting variety into the visible scene.

Relieve a half empty stage with a full one. Relieve a full stage with a half empty one. An ordinary audience can probably endure a crowd longer than it can endure a *tête-à-tête*; possibly an extremely intelligent audience can endure a *tête-à-tête* longer than it can endure a crowd; but every audience requires a change, because in the theatre it lives chiefly by its emotions, and, while concentration may keep the mind alive, it is variety that keeps the emotions alive.

(e) Vary "*drama on the surface*" with "*drama under the surface*."

"Drama on the surface" is when everything is in the words, with the gestures and movements that accompany them. "Drama under the surface" is when the words mean much more than they say, and are merely clues

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to the mental and emotional action which is going on behind and beneath.

Physical action is, obviously, on the surface. A good deal of mental action may be on the surface; as when two persons are discussing facts.

DUNOIS: Are you Joan the Maid?

JOAN: Sure.

DUNOIS: Where are your troops?

JOAN: Miles behind. They have cheated me. They have brought me to the wrong side of the river.

DUNOIS: I told them to.

JOAN: Why did you? The English are on the other side?

DUNOIS: The English are on both sides.

JOAN: But Orleans is on the other side. We must fight the English there. How can we cross the river?

DUNOIS: There is a bridge.

JOAN: In God's name, then, let us cross the bridge and fall on them.

All that is "on the surface."

But at the end of that scene, when the wind has changed—

PAGE: The boats have put off. They are ripping upstream like anything.

DUNOIS: Now for the forts. You dared me to follow. Dare you lead?

JOAN: Dunois, dear comrade in arms, help me. My

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eyes are blinded with tears. Set my foot on the ladder, and say "Up, Joan."

DUNOIS: Never mind the tears; make for the flash of the guns.

You observe how, just for a moment, the drama goes under the surface; the interest is not in Joan's words themselves, nor is their complete significance there, but in the struggle which is passing in her heart.

It is not necessary that the drama "on the surface" should pass to "under the surface" for any considerable length of time; it may do so; or, as in this case, it may be momentary; but the point to grasp is the dramatic value, and, from the point of view of the audience, the interest-value of the change from one to the other.

It must not be imagined that the different kinds of variation and contrast of which we have been speaking should be made mechanically. It would be absurd to think of a good dramatist as suddenly pulling himself up, and saying, "I've written a lot of staccato dialogue, I'd better put in a bit of legato now"; or, "We've been on the surface for some time now, what about going under for a little while?"

Any such consciousness of his technique would spoil his work. He writes straightforwardly out of his vivid and profound experience of the story and the characters as a living thing inside him; its sweep and rhythm, its colour and life, are there with him; and his unconscious technique brings it about that he expresses this life in

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terms of variation of mood, of tempo, and so forth, in the writing of the dialogue.

It may sometimes happen that you have written a play which certainly was alive inside you, but which somehow or other does not seem to live so vividly, so convincingly, on the pages you have written. You read the scene over, and it seems to be dull, and to drag.

The material (you feel) is there all right, but it does not quite come off.

In nine cases out of ten the reason for this failure will be in some technique point; perhaps you have not arranged the incidents in the scene in their right emotional order; or you may not have made full use of the idea of variety to which your attention has here been called.

Often a slight alteration will make all the difference; but you need to have some technical expertness to be able to spot the difficulty. Like the expert motor-mechanic who comes to look at your car which, though the tank is full of petrol, you cannot get going; and he touches something here, or makes a slight adjustment there, and the car runs perfectly. You may be able to drive a car just as well as he can; but he knows the technique of the machinery, and you do not.

EXITS AND ENTRANCES

The mind of an audience, if it is awake, will be in a state of vibration throughout the play; but there are

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certain moments when the vibrations will be more rapid, when therefore the mind will be able to receive a clearer and a deeper impression; and of such moments there are two which the amateur play-writer is inclined to miss.

- (a) The entrance of an important character.
- (b) The exit of same.

Because of the greater excitement and alertness in the audience's mind, these are critical moments of which the dramatist should take the fullest possible advantage. It has been said, admittedly with extravagance, but with truth, "Take care of your entrances and exits, and the rest may be left to take care of itself."

At the moment of a character's first entrance, for example, the dramatist can do several things. He can—

- (1) Fix in the audience's mind the character's type;
- (2) fix his atmosphere;
- (3) give the keynote of the scene which is to follow;
- (4) state some fact, or convey some idea, which it is important that the audience should be impressed with;

and he can do these things much more successfully, much more economically, at the entrance moment than at any other in the course of the scene, because of the quickened interest and the concentrated attention of the audience.

One word, at this entrance moment, is worth half a dozen later on; and if the author misses the moment,

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no other in the course of the scene will serve him so well.

In too many amateur plays the chief character enters in some such way as this. John is the chief character, and he enters to *A* and *B* who are sitting together in the room.

JOHN: Hello! And how's everybody?

A: You're wet.

JOHN: Yes; it's raining.

B: English weather!

A: Don't stand there dripping on the carpet.

B: I'll take your coat for you.

JOHN: Thanks.

A: The maid's out.

The moment has gone. No use has been made of it. Neither the weather nor the maid matters. It is wasted time. At no moment in a play can a dramatist afford to waste time; and to waste it at this critical heaven-given moment of entrance is one of the major crimes.

Let us turn again to the first scene of *St. Joan*. The curtain rises; an exciting and impressionable moment for the audience.

Robert says: "No eggs! No eggs!! Thousand thunders, man, what do you mean by no eggs?"

This fixes Robert's type-characteristic.

The steward says: "Sir [this fixes the relationship between the two men], it is not my fault. It is an act of God."

And that fixes the atmosphere of the play, and one of its main rhythms.

Joan enters. Her first lines spoken on the stage are—

“Good morning, captain squire, Captain; you are to give me a horse and armour and some soldiers, and send me to the Dauphin. Those are your orders from my Lord.”

This does three things: (1) It fixes the main line of the scene's action; will Joan get her horse and armour and soldiers, and how? (2) it foreshadows a future scene in the play, when Joan will meet the Dauphin; and (3) the last sentence characterises Joan, fixes her atmosphere, strikes her keynote.

Joan does not stay in the scene for many minutes. Robert feels that he wants some help in tackling her, so he calls for Poulengy, and tells Joan to “get out.”

Her exit line, spoken with a bright smile, is “Right, squire.” Characteristic; so cheerful, eager, confident; so sure that she will be back again soon; so buoyant, because although she seemed a little nervous of Robert when she first came in, she has now, in her quiet way and with her spiritual eye, got his measure.

Poulengy comes in. The interest of the audience is focused on him. He is a minor character; but the good dramatist takes the same trouble with his minor characters as with the others. The first words he speaks will be important.

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He does not speak for some moments, because Robert is one of those men who likes to get his own word in first; and he vaguely hints that Poulengy is taking a more than soldierly interest in Joan, and warns him, "hands off her."

"I would as soon," says Poulengy, "think of the Blessed Virgin herself in that way, as of this girl."

That stamps him at once; stamps him, moreover, as a complete contrast to Robert; slow, quiet, deep, dreamy, religious, obstinate, fervent. It is all there in the entrance line.

The line characterises Joan, too, in a secondary sort of way, and establishes precisely what her relations with the soldiers were like.

After Robert and Poulengy have talked together, Joan is called up again. Mark her entrance line again:

"Jack will go halves for the horse."

She has been busy. She is not one to let grass grow under her feet. She has been pursuing her purpose. It has not worried her in the least, whatever Robert and Poulengy may have been concocting together in the room upstairs; the thing must go forward; the responsibility is on her. It is all in the line; and the audience, in its sharpened alertness at the entrance moment, gets it all.

Joan makes her final exit with "Come, Polly," as she dashes out. She has won. She has bravely taken the first

hurdle, and is in her stride. It is the first step that counts, and she accepts the good omen. God is with her. But her triumph has not altered her simplicity. "Come, Polly!"

This will give you some idea of the virtue of entrance and exit lines. How does one arrive at them? How do they come?

Probably not by burning the midnight oil.

But if you had been writing this scene, and supposing you had been alive inside Joan's skin from the beginning, feeling as she must have been feeling; alive in her when she first left the room with her "Right, squire"; alive in her while she occupied herself during the ten minutes or quarter of an hour that Robert and Poulengy were talking together; alive in her as she came running back up those stairs, radiant, bursting with the good news; then the line, "Jack will go halves for the horse," or something very similar, would have occurred to you, quite naturally, as being precisely the sort of thing she would have said.

Not only are the actual words important but the entrances and exits must be prepared for.

You may have found an excellent entrance line for your chief character, but if you allow him to enter casually, at any odd moment, almost all the dramatic value of the entrance will be lost; and this is bad partner-work on your part with your audience.

It is interesting to watch Shaw at work in this particular.

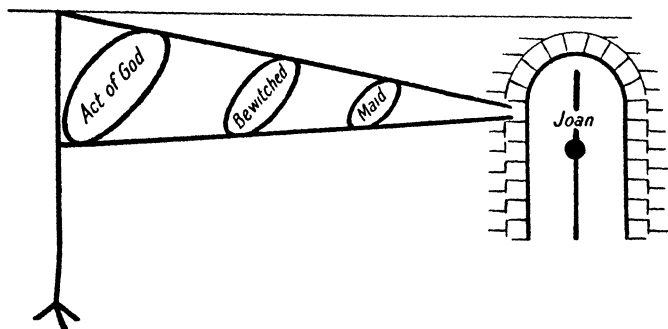
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Notice how he prepares for Joan's first entrance; how he creates what is for all intents and purposes a "verbal spotlight" which he directs on the door through which she is about to come.

How does he make this spotlight?

He starts with a broad fact: the steward says, "It is the act of God." A few moments later, that broad fact is narrowed down to "We are bewitched"; and, the next moment, it is narrowed down still further to "The Maid is at the door."

Draw that on paper, that narrowing down from the broader fact to the narrower, and it looks like this—



There is the spotlight. The order in which the statements are made is important—from the broader to the narrower. If the first reference had been to the "Maid," and then to "bewitchment," and then to "the act of God," there would have been no spotlight.

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Or notice how Joan's second entrance is prepared for.

Robert and Poulengy have been talking together about Joan, about the Dauphin, about the military situation; quietly, seriously, in level tones, at a legato speed. This, of course, for the sake of giving important information to the audience.

Then the tempo begins to quicken.

POULENGY: Nothing can save our side now but a miracle.

ROBERT: Miracles are all right, Polly; only they don't happen nowadays.

POULENGY: There is something about that girl.

ROBERT: You think the girl can work miracles, do you?

POULENGY: I think she herself is a bit of a miracle.

The speed increases.

ROBERT: Look here, Polly. Would you let a girl like that do you out of sixteen francs for a horse?

POULENGY: I will pay for the horse.

ROBERT: You will really gamble. . . .?

POULENGY: It is not a gamble.

ROBERT: What else is it?

POULENGY: It is a certainty. She has put fire into me.

And the next moment Joan's voice is heard outside, "Will he let us go, Polly?" And up she comes.

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The dialogue here is so written and ordered as to create, as it were, a rising wave of emotional interest and excitement, climbing swiftly and steeply to a crest; and on the crest Joan makes her entrance. Poulengey's faith and conviction increase; so does Robert's uncertainty and wobbling; and Joan with her "Jack will go halves for the horse" is the answer to both of them, establishing the one, and utterly deflating the other.

One more point.

The scene is about to close. Robert has put every difficulty he can think of into Joan's way; and she has triumphantly answered them all. She has won. There is no doubt in her mind now that she will have her way, her horse, her armour, her soldiers; nor is there any doubt in the audience's mind either. She makes that long speech, full of bright and glowing passion, which begins, "One thousand like me can stop them. Ten like me can stop them with God on our side," and the audience is already patting her on the back and wishing her God-speed. She is already on her feet and halfway to the door.

And Robert says: "Now listen to me, you; and don't cut in before I have time to think," and down she plumps again on the stool.

Check!

That check is a trick; but it is a good one to have in your bag.

It is only for a moment; but it is a hold-up.

As sometimes might happen when you are at a big

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railway terminus waiting eagerly for the arrival of a friend whose train is now due at the platform on which you are standing. The train appears in the distance. "Here it is!" and your heart leaps. But the train swerves away at the points and appears to be going to stop at another platform. "It isn't his train after all," and you are disappointed. But, "Oh, yes, it is!" as the train swerves a second time and comes to where you expected it.

The emotion with which you say "Oh, yes, it is!" is at a higher pitch than that with which you first said "Here it is!" because of that momentary check which intervened, "It isn't his train after all."

When the emotion of the audience is sweeping strongly forward to the final exit, and the curtain to the scene, you can sometimes, if you wish, still further heighten it by this device of a brief—it must not be more than brief—delay.

CONSTRUCTION

So far we have only been thinking of the writing of the play, with the audience in mind; let us now look at its construction, the planning of it, the way in which it is built up.

This used to be described as being a matter of a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Of preparation, development, denouement.

If there were three acts, the first would be chiefly devoted to preparation; that is to say, the general lay-out

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of the situation from which the story was to arise, and the assembly of the characters. The second act would develop the story through a series of selected incidents. The third would solve the tangle, and bring everything to an exciting (and usually a happy) conclusion.

In the first act, there were several things that you were to do. You must, for example, make clear to the audience the period and the place of the play. You must fix its mood and atmosphere. You must identify the characters, and make their relations to each other plain. You could not be supposed to draw your characters with any completeness in this first act, but their typical characteristics should be disclosed. The invisible, outside background of the play's action must be sketched in. And you were advised at some point (or points) in the course of the scene to set up what was called a "finger-post," that is to say, to give some hint, some clue, to what might be expected to happen in the following act.

There was a good deal to do; and the main requirement of this first act, you were told, was clarity in exposition. It contained comparatively little movement or emotional excitement. Its main business was to prepare the audience for what was to come.

In the second act it came.

The characteristics of this act were movement and tension; increasing tension. The hunt was up; hounds in full cry. Incident followed incident. You were told to select your incidents carefully, to explore them deeply (this was called "holding a situation"), and to

arrange them in such an order that that with the lowest emotional content came first, and that with the highest last.

Meanwhile your characters developed and became more and more individual, and more clearly destined. This second act was really the centre and crux of the play. It was said that a good second act determined the success of the play. It was usually a long one, and, ending at a point in the story when the plot was thickest and the entanglement deepest, it left the audience impatient for the last act of all.

Dumas laid it down that the last act should be brief. In his view of the scheme of a good play, there should be nothing now left except to unravel the knot, or cut the knot, or tie the knot; and that, since the audience's main interest was now satisfied, all this should be done as swiftly and as economically as possible.

In all of this there is a lot of good advice which should be taken to heart. Although the modern dramatist does not worry himself very much about this formal division of a play into three acts, or that preparation should precede development, and that preparation should cease when development has begun, it still remains true that a story has a beginning, a middle, and an ending, and that there is a rhythmic relation between them.

It still remains true that a dramatist, in the opening of his play, should not assume any knowledge on the part of the audience, and should, in the course of his dialogue,

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and as early as possible, fix the period and the place of the play.

It is still true that he should identify his characters to the audience without delay, and make their relations to each other clear.

It is still true that he should leave his audience in no doubt as to the main details of the outside background of the story.

It is still true that he should arrange his incidents in a progressive order according to their emotional content and quality.

It is still true that he should place "finger-posts" here and there to "foreshadow" subsequent action; which, indeed, he can hardly fail to do if the play is alive inside him as a whole; because it is true of any whole that the end is in the beginning and the whole in each of the parts.

It is still true that he should not jump from exciting moment to exciting moment, keeping his audience on hot coals, but should explore a situation, "holding it" as deeply as he can.

These old, pre-Ibsenite, advices still hold good. But the formal division into acts, and acts into scenes, is an entirely secondary matter.

What really matters in the construction of a scene, or of a play as a whole, is the curve of emotional interest.

This needs explaining; and it is perhaps easier to explain it in reference to a scene than to a complete play.

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THE CURVE OF EMOTIONAL INTEREST

Every dramatic scene can be plotted out in the form of a diagram on paper.

If you take any good scene, you will find that there are in it a few moments of special interest; not many; half a dozen perhaps. Critical moments. Moments when the audience's emotion, whether more superficial or deeper, is peculiarly active. You may call them "peak moments," or "minor crises." The scene, as it were, hangs on them; they hold it up; and they give it shape.

Frequently these moments occur with the entrance or the exit of a character; but this is not necessary.

You should be by this time so familiar with the first scene of *St. Joan* that you can now concentrate entirely on the mechanical, organic, structure of that scene.

It should not be difficult for you to fix the "peak points" in it.

- (a) The first little thrill comes with the steward's remark, "The Maid is at the door."
- (b) A moment later, Joan enters. An exciting moment, definitely a peak point.
- (c) A conversation between Joan and Robert follows, full of interest, at times quite amusing, but at a lower emotional level than the entrance moment; until the baffled Robert calls for Poulengy. The emotional interest rises again here, and with Joan's happy exit on "Right, squire," another peak point is touched.

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- (d) Poulengy comes in; the mood changes; they quietly discuss matters together; they talk of the situation outside, quite unemotionally; the drama goes under the surface, for the struggle at this point is really whether Robert can persuade Poulengy to his point of view, and he finds he cannot. All this is at a lower emotional level—the mind of the audience has been more occupied than the feelings—until Poulengy begins to talk about a miracle being wanted, and that Joan is a “bit of a miracle,” and that he will pay for her horse, and back her; and on this rising emotional wave Joan comes in again. Another peak point, for with her return the issue is finally joined; it is now neck or nothing.
- (e) Once again the emotional interest falls, while Robert tries his best to frighten Joan out of her resolve. He fails. He gives in. Joan leaps to her feet. Then that momentary check, you remember. And at last, with that quiet, triumphant “Come, Polly,” she is off to Chinon.

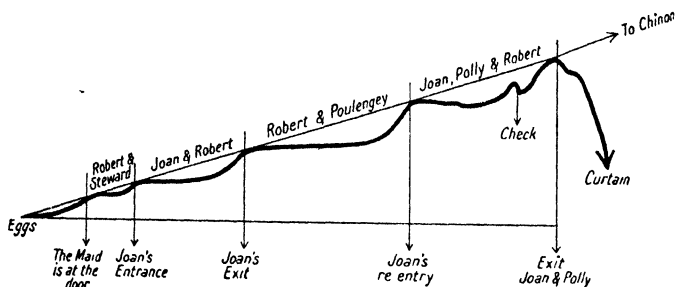
The scene is finished, for the mind of the audience is no longer with those who are left in the Castle of Vaucouleurs, but is galloping with Joan and Jack and Polly on the highway. There is nothing to do except to drop the curtain.

In twenty words more—almost a *tour de force*—it is dropped.

Now all that could be plotted out on paper in the

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form of a curve. It would look something like this—



That is the curve of emotional interest. You are to regard it, not as a path up a hillside, but as the cross-section of a wave rising to a crest and breaking steeply.

Every good dramatic scene, and every good play as a whole, if plotted out in this way, would show such a curve; not the same curve, of course, but a curve of that order; rising, falling a little, but continuously rising as a whole; each peak point being at a higher level than the one before it, with a fuller and deeper emotional content; the "fall" between any pair of peak points never falling below the level of that in between preceding pairs.

Compare with this the following four diagrams which suggest the curves of scenes which must, for that reason, be failures.

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DIAGRAM A

This scene will not be without interest. Nor altogether without life. It does at least ripple along. It ambles quietly between two curtains. It meanders.

It suggests a lot of talk; probably mostly duologue; talk without action.

In the end it oozes away.

It suggests an audience fiddling with the programmes and passing chocolates.

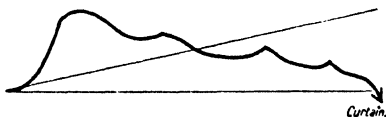


DIAGRAM B

This scene opens with a bang; but the author either cannot or does not keep it up. The opening passages are full of lively interest and excitement, but each succeeding peak point is at a lower emotional level. It is the reverse of the right curve.

It suggests a disappointed audience; a brilliant rocket, and a fizzle out.

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DIAGRAM C

This is an obvious mistake; for by the time you get to the exciting finish, the audience has long been asleep. You may awaken it with a jump, to its regret, for sleep was pleasant. In any case, a "jump" has little or no dramatic value.



DIAGRAM D

This (quite common) type of curve is usually known as a "broken back." Opening strong; ending strong; long drawn out and tiresome middle. In a full-length play it represents the "weak second act," the rock on which so many plays have foundered.

WORKING UP TO A CLIMAX

Climaxes are points of high tension.

This is true of the "minor climaxes"—the successive

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peak points in the course of the scene—as well as of the “major climax” upon which the curtain falls.

Obviously the high tension will not be there unless the author creates it.

Think of a climax as a bomb; a small bomb (minor climax) or a big bomb (major climax). At a certain moment you are going to explode that bomb. You want it to explode with effect. The moment you choose for the explosion will have something to do with the effect; but whether the thing explodes or not depends on how you have been packing it, and what you have been packing it with, until the moment comes.

Clearly, if you have been packing it with “dud” material, it cannot help but be a dud.

The moment the curtain rises, you begin to pack the first small bomb which is going to explode at what we have called the first “peak point” in the scene; let us say, with the first entrance of the chief character.

If, therefore, you allow the characters who are on the stage when the curtain rises to talk about the weather, or about their health, or about how they slept, or what they were doing the previous evening, you are not only wasting precious time, you are packing useless material into your bomb, dud stuff. The climax, when it comes, will be by so much the weaker in its effect because of this.

If in the course of conversation these characters are allowed to recount previous experiences, or to refer to other persons who are not to appear in the play, or to

express their views, however entertainingly, on topics which have nothing to do with the main action of your story, all this is bad packing.

All irrelevant material is dud material. Along with it you may mix inflammable and explosive stuff, but the effect of the climax when it comes will suffer.

In Tchekov's *Notebook* there is the note of an amusing situation—

“A schoolboy treats a lady to dinner in a restaurant. He has only one rouble twenty kopeks. The bill comes to four roubles thirty kopeks. He has no money and begins to cry. The proprietor boxes his ears. He has been talking to the lady about Abyssinia.”

Suppose you were writing that as a dramatic scene. Your first minor climax in the scene will obviously be the boy's discovery that he has “no money.” The curtain rises. You begin immediately to work up to that climax. It does not matter where you start from. Shaw started with “eggs”; Tchekov requires you to start with “Abyssinia”—possibly the boy was anxious to show off a bit to the lady, and this had been his last geography lesson at school. If he were a swanky boy, that opening would be good for his “character.”

But, clearly, if he starts talking about Abyssinia, and goes on talking about it in an aimless pass-the-time sort of way, until the bill comes, there will be

little or no dramatic effect in the discovery of empty pockets. The bomb will fizzle. Because the packing is wrong.

It would be your task as a dramatist to find some line of increasing emotional interest from "Abyssinia" to "empty pockets." Abyssinia is only the point of take-off. To start an argument on dictatorships, for example, or modern war machines, would be entirely irrelevant. The only relevancy is to the climax which is coming.

You might take some such swift line—it would have to be a swift line, written with great economy—as Abyssinia—the Land of Ophir—Gold—Money, and the boy would be talking about money, and would be saying perhaps, "Money is everything; you can't do anything or get anywhere without it," or alternatively, "Money doesn't matter in the least, one can have quite a good time without it"; and *at that moment* the waiter comes with the bill, and the lad finds that he has not the money to pay it.

That would be dramatically effective.

The timing of the moment would be important; but our point just now is the importance of the material which is packed into the climax-bomb.

Revert once more to *St. Joan*.

The curtain has not been up one moment before Shaw begins to set up that "verbal spotlight" on Joan's first entrance—"It is the act of God." He starts immediately to work towards his first minor climax. No waste time; no irrelevancy.

Joan enters. The bomb explodes. The tension is relaxed.

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The curve of emotional interest falls a little. And already Shaw is busy packing the second bomb, the next minor climax when Robert, baffled and deflated by Joan's happy assurance, will call Poulengy to (as he hopes) the rescue.

And so on. "The art of the theatre is the art of Preparation."

You are constantly preparing for the next important moment. Building up the climax. Packing the bomb.

THE QUIET ENDING

The final climax of a scene must always be the moment of highest emotional tension in it.

In pre-Ibsenite days this was usually worked up to and rendered with a good deal of theatricality; and the end of a play was rather like the end of an orchestral piece of music, *prestissimo*, *fortissimo*, with the drums and the trumpets at full blast.

The modern playwright will not despise theatricality. After all, the theatre is the theatre. Its conventions remain and are accepted. There is no reason why he should not be theatrical, in the sense of extravagant mechanical effect, if he wants to.

And if he so desires, if this sort of thing best suits his purpose, the only advice to be given him is that he should go all out for it. He is within his rights. There is no need to be ashamed, as if he were doing something he ought

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not to do. To be half-heartedly theatrical is to court failure.

Nowadays, however, with the increasing tendency towards naturalism and realism in the theatre, an author is inclined to say to himself that "These things never happen in real life."

Hence the vogue of the quiet ending.

Some authors carry their naturalism so far as to say that, since life is "all ragged ends" and it is very rare to find an experience which tidily "rounds itself off," therefore there is no need for a play to have an ending at all; and the curtain may fall on unsolved problems, unfinished experiences, quarries which have not been hunted to a kill. This is probably carrying naturalism too far. A play may be a "piece of life", but it also is, or should be, a work of art. And a work of art should be a complete thing in itself.

It is important to notice that the quiet ending has nothing to do with anti-climax.

Anti-climax happens when the last peak point in your play is at a lower emotional level than the one which preceded it; when, while the action of the play is still alive, the curve of emotional interest is descending; when you add something, a passage of dialogue or an incident, which weakens the effect of the climax you have previously reached.

If you turn back to Diagram B (page 123) you

have the pattern of a scene which is almost all anti-climax.

You may, if you wish, drop your curtain on a scene at the very moment of the climax, while the drums and the trumpets are still sounding. What usually happens, however, is that there is a brief interval between the striking of the climax-point and the fall of the curtain. You allow a little while for the worked-up emotion of the audience to reduce itself towards normal.

And it is here—not on the rising curve of emotional interest, but on the drop to the curtain—that, if you have skill enough, the quiet ending may be very useful.

But it will require all your skill.

The point is, the maximum effect of the scene (or the play) must not be diminished by the quiet ending.

It is a mistake to think that a quiet ending is an easy way out of a difficulty. It was not invented to cover the laziness or the incompetence of an author at one of the most critical moments of his play. And if you choose a quiet rather than a theatrical ending because you imagine it is easier, the only impression you will create is that your scene peters out, fizzles out.

If you read the closing scene of *Man and Superman* which ends with Ann saying to Tanner, "Never mind her, dear; go on talking"; or the scene at Richmond in the *Doctor's Dilemma* which ends on the words, "My bill, waiter"; you will appreciate that a quiet ending is anything but a petering-out.

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Remember, therefore, that a quiet ending must "work," must add to the sum of the play, just as much as an exit line or an entrance line.

It must do one of two things.

- (a) Finally spotlight a character, definitely fix him for good and all.
- (b) Throw a flashlight back over the whole scene (or play) and interpret, perhaps re-interpret, its significance.

To find the line that will do that may well be taken as a critical test of an author's ability and standing.

THE INTEREST OF AN AUDIENCE

We attend to what interests us.

You can only secure an audience's attention, keep it awake and alive, assure yourself of its complete co-operation in the making of a play, by securing its interest.

What are the chief factors in the interest of an audience?

(a) *Sympathy for one thing.*

There is no such thing as an abstract "audience," any more than there is such a thing as an abstract "man in the street."

There are specialised audiences, such, for example, as a village audience which is likely to be sympathetically

interested in plays with a village setting and village characters, for it knows (or thinks it knows) all about them and understands them; or a church audience which is likely to be sympathetically interested in a biblical play. But the ordinary audience of, let us say, a London theatre is composed of men and women with an almost infinite variety of personal interests, political interests, social interests, and class interests.

And this multiplicity has to be unified. This audience, for two or three hours in the theatre, has to be made one.

There is no need to exaggerate the difficulty; but it should warn the author who requires the sympathy of his audience that, both in the theme of his play and in the characters that unfold it, he should keep quite near to what is usually called our "common humanity."

This does not mean that he must always be writing love plays or pursuit plays; but it does mean that if he writes a play about a local gasworks, or the private dispute over a will, or on some subject like unemployment or heredity or euthanasia, he must so handle and present it as to lift it right out of local and specialised interest into the broad sphere of common human interest.

No audience could listen for long to a discussion of the theory of heredity among experts, but will listen with the utmost sympathy to a play like *Ghosts*, in which the scientific problem has become a human problem.

A London audience, no member of which perhaps has ever seen a distressed area or has ever thought of unemployment otherwise than as something which is due to "economic forces" and therefore quite beyond him, can witness with deep sympathetic interest such a play

as *Love on the Dole*, in which a local situation is, as it were, universalised and a specialised problem is shown as part and parcel of the common human problem of the struggle and tragedy of life everywhere.

The secret here probably is to go deep. For just as one cannot go deeper into the nature and character of any individual person without coming upon the matrix of "common humanity" in which we all stand, so one cannot go deeper into any situation, however trivial and local it may on the surface appear to be, without coming upon the common human case in it.

You may write a play which has no relation to reality. The criterion will be different then. You will not be seriously asking for, or expecting sympathy (in the usual sense) from your audience, and you will hold its interest by other lines. But if you are writing tragedy, or comedy, or common or garden drama, you will fail unless you win the sympathy of your audience.

If your characters are outlandish or unrecognisable as human, the audience will have no sympathy with them, and therefore no interest in them. If your story, tragic or comedic as the case may be, is not shown as a facet, an aspect, of the common human tragedy or the common human comedy, so that the audience can see and feel itself in it, you will fail for the same reason.

A character may be unpleasant. That does not matter, provided that he is humanly unpleasant. Likewise the story. But neither the one nor the other should be offensive and tedious.

(b) Pleasure.

This may be a minor factor in the interest of an audience, but it is a very real one.

You should try to please your audience. They have come to the theatre to be entertained; not necessarily amused; but entertained, made to forget themselves, to be taken out of themselves, which, whatever mediates it, laughter or tears, is always enjoyment.

But, apart from the story, there are other ways of pleasing them.

They can, if you give them the chance, get a great deal of pleasure out of the skill with which you contrive a situation, your craftsmanship. Your neat handling of the mechanics of the thing. Your cleverness in the art which conceals art. This is a kind of aesthetic pleasure, and it counts.

So is the pleasure which you give them by the cunning use of words, and your appreciation of the rhythm of words. The happy phrase. The *mot juste*. The music of a long speech. The deft touch. The virtue in the writing.

They will also get a lot of pleasure out of your insight into character; what you see, which never occurred to them until you showed it, and then they realise how true and inevitable it is. The feeling of "I should never have thought of that" is always pleasurable. A new discovery.

In most plays there is what used to be called a "scène à faire," an obligatory scene, a scene which an audience would be desperately disappointed if you did not write. It may be, for example, a heart-to-heart talk between a

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wife and her husband's mistress. Or a scene which, if you are careless or indifferent, you can report as having happened, but which the audience would give its eyes actually to see happening.

Such a scene should always be given.

(c) *Intellectual exercise.*

If the mind of an audience is actively engaged, it will be an interested audience. Up to a point, the more you can give it to think about the better. Some authors rate the intelligence of the average audience very low; and it is probably lower than that of any particular individual in it; but, such as it is, you must give it work to do.

It is a mistake to state everything, and leave nothing to the intellectual imagination of your partner. It is a mistake to explain everything, to wear a topic threadbare, to discuss a situation to the dead bone.

It is a mistake in nine cases out of ten to repeat a fact, or an idea, several times, for the sake of making sure that the audience will not miss it. They will not miss it if you state it clearly and at the right time.

You can never assume knowledge in an audience, but you are justified in assuming sufficient intelligence to make it worth your while giving it something to do.

An active mind keeps lively, a passive mind soon snores.

(d) *Anticipation.*

This is one of the most important factors in the interest of an audience.

You should contrive your telling of the story so that the mind of the audience is always moving just a little ahead of the actual moment.

An audience which is continuously asking itself such questions as, What will he do now? or, What will happen next? or, What is the answer to that? will be an interested audience.

This is the reason for what have technically been called "foreshadowings," "finger-posts." You insert into your dialogue, quite naturally, here and there hints of what is going to happen later in the play.

In that first scene of *St. Joan* there are several examples of this—

- (1) The steward says, "We are bewitched." Robert replies, "Robert de Baudricourt *burns witches.*" The next moment, "The Maid is at the door."

That "burns witches," placed as it is in the verbal spotlight which is already being turned on Joan's entrance, definitely foreshadows the subsequent action of the play.

- (2) "I shall not want many soldiers," says Joan to Robert, "the Dauphin will give me all I want to *raise the siege of Orleans.*" "To raise the siege of Orleans!" "Yes, squire; that is what God is sending me to do."

The future action of the story is here foreshadowed.

- (3) Poulengy says to Robert, "Nothing can save our side now but a miracle." And, a moment later, connects this idea with Joan: "I think the girl herself is a bit of a miracle."

Foreshadowing again.

- (4) "Still," says Robert to Poulengy, "if you feel sure . . ." "I feel sure enough to *take her to Chinon*—unless you stop me."

This "take her to Chinon" is a finger-post to the place of the next scene.

Every well written scene will contain clues and hints of this kind (usually put there quite unconsciously by the author, but because the whole story is so vividly alive in him). They are, as it were, germs of expectancy dropped into the mind of the audience.

Keep your audience "expecting." An expectant audience is an interested audience.

(e) *Surprise.*

To keep an audience expecting is not quite the same thing as to keep it guessing.

It frequently happens that an author has something up his sleeve; and he asks himself whether he ought to keep his secret from the audience or not; and if so, for how long.

The answer to the first question, which may partly depend upon the nature of the "secret," is a matter of his own judgment. He must balance in his mind whether, in this particular case, the audience would prefer to be kept guessing, or whether it would rather be "in the know."

As a rule, probably, an audience would rather be in the know. That omniscient feeling. So far as the persons on the stage are concerned, the secret is of course kept for just so long as the action of the play requires it; but the audience knows all the while; and there is a peculiar satisfaction in watching people move into a trap of which they are unaware, but you see it.

The answer to the second question is simple. An audience can be kept guessing for just so long as it is content and pleased to be kept guessing; but there comes a moment when it begins to weary of tenterhooks, and does not care tuppence whether it is ever told the secret or not. The author must let his cat out of the bag before that moment arrives; just before, perhaps; but always sooner than later.

Clearly, a secret is a dangerous thing.

The secret is special instance of the element of surprise.

Surprise must always savour a little of the mechanical; but it is, used sparingly, an important device in the maintaining of the audience's interest. The surprising entrance of a character who was the last person in the world, at that particular moment, one would have

THE AUTHOR AND THE AUDIENCE

expected to turn up. The surprising entrance of a character at the moment when his fat is in the fire, and we sit up sharply and say, "Good gracious! and what's going to happen now?"

The surprising turn given to events; the unexpected twist which seems to create an entirely new situation, and puts a new complexion upon everything.

The surprising character touch.

Even the surprising phrase.

Obviously this should not be overdone. One does not want, or wish, to keep one's audience on the jump. But these are fillips to alertness.

This analysis of the audience's "interest" will give the author some idea of what he has to play up to, in writing his story. The phrase is not here used in any sense of subservience or cheap-jackery. After all, the author is an artist, or should be, and his artistic integrity will mean more to him than anything else.

Play down to his audience of course he will not. He will not give his play a "happy ending." just because most audiences perhaps prefer a happy ending. He will not be clever, just for the sake of amusing his crowd by cleverness. He will not forget that an artist never puts anything into his work which is not necessary, however good it may be.

But he must not forget the partnership. His audience is necessary to him. His play may be a work of literature, but it is not a play until an audience shares with him in bringing it to life in the theatre. And an uninterested

audience is useless to him. There are no sleeping partners in the play-making business.

A play that fails in the theatre may be a fine work of art, or an excellent piece of literature, or a valuable experiment, but it is not a good play.

If a play is "over the heads of the audience," that is a criticism on the author, not on the audience. He should not write over the heads of his audience; for the audience is his partner.

It is possible to argue that there are potentially good plays which do not, under present conditions, succeed in the theatre because the necessary, and amply available audience cannot afford the charges of admission; but the playwright would be well advised not to comfort himself with that argument.

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THIS little book has covered the ground which it set out to cover, but there are one or two details which can more conveniently be dealt with as a postscript.

THE ONE-ACT PLAY

Many amateur play-writers, with the amateur theatre in view, attempt one-act plays.

Some of them perhaps imagine that this form of play is easier.

That is a mistake. It is probable that success in this form requires a higher degree of technical skill. Indeed, a really good one-act play, such for example as Barrie's *The Will*, is perhaps the best place in which the student can study the technique of the game.

The shortness of the time creates the chief difficulty. All that has previously been said on the general technique of play-writing applies here also; but because of the shortness of the time, everything must be sharper, swifter, more economical.

If you intend to write a one-act play, it will be worth your while to begin with a very carefully thought-out scenario.

This is perhaps not so advisable in the case of a long play, because it imposes a severe restraint on character development and on the flexibility of the play's action as it lives in the writer's mind. An author of a full-length play does not wish to be bound *in the writing of it* by the scheme which he may at first have fixed *in his thinking about it*.

But, in a one-act play, there is neither room nor time to allow a character to develop in unexpected ways or for the story to switch into unexpected channels.

The use of a scenario will help you to pattern the scene accurately; to time the entrances and exits to the best effect; to arrange the incidents carefully according to the rising curve of emotional interest.

The "mechanics" of a one-act play—its mechanical construction—are more important than in the case of a long play, because you have to pack a great deal into a small box. That is the value of the scenario.

It is essential that you get "off the mark" at once. Wasted time, which is a threat to any play, is deadly in the one-acter. The time is so short that not one moment can be spared for an irrelevancy. In a long play you can lay siege to the sympathetic interest of the audience, but in the short play you must take it by storm.

All the necessary preliminaries of exposition, and layout, fixing time and place, identification of characters and so forth, must be done with the greatest possible speed. If you are clever enough, it is better to start the action straightaway, and work in the background as you

go along. Remember, however, that this requires high skill.

Economy is the watchword for the short play.

Economy of means. That is to say, in the number of characters; five or six is the ideal number of characters for a one-act play; a larger number increases your own difficulties, and tends to confusion. And in the number of incidents; you cannot afford to overload a short play, and it is better to explore one or two incidents than to pile a string of them one upon the other.

Economy of words.

Economy in character-drawing. It is useless to attempt complete portraits in a short play. You will try not to be content with mere types; and in order to get individuality into the characters you must try to find individual characteristics (there will only be time for one or two) which will, of themselves, suggest others. The portrait is suggested rather than drawn.

The ending of a one-act play should be sharp; the drop to the curtain, after the closing climax, steep. Many one-act plays, like many short stories, close with a surprise, an unexpected turn or twist. It is a useful trick, and in these plays you will need all your tricks. It might almost be said that craft here is more important than art.

You should, however, be artist enough not to make such a twist simply for the sake of making it. The twist must be organic with, not an excrescence upon, the main action of the scene. Like the quiet ending, it should be

an illuminating, or a re-interpreting twist. Not just a joke. Unless the whole thing is a joke.

THE BIBLICAL PLAY

Recently the Church has sought to revive its traditional connection with drama, and many amateur play-writers attempt to write "religious" plays based, usually, upon some biblical story. Most of them fail, as plays; though possibly they may succeed very well as sermons, or as Sunday school lessons.

The reason why they fail is because the author ignores the fact that the first essential of a biblical play is that *it should be a play*.

No question of reverence, or of good evangelistic intentions, can relieve the author of the necessity to obey the ordinary rules of play-making.

Among the mistakes most commonly made are the following—

- (1) To assume previous knowledge of the story on the part of the audience.
- (2) To assume knowledge of the general background of the story. The author of a play about Moses, or Joseph, should not assume that the audience knows the Egyptian background, but should clearly create it for them in the course of the play itself.
- (3) To assume knowledge of the characters; and consequently to take no trouble to draw the

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character in the dialogue. It is just as necessary to draw the character of St. Paul in speech and action on the stage as it is for Shaw to draw St. Joan.

- (4) To use the biblical idiom in the dialogue. Ordinary simple speech should be used ; though occasionally, in the higher emotional moments of the scene, the actual biblical text might be quoted.
- (5) To refuse, on the ground of reverence perhaps, to tamper with the original story for the sake of making it "good theatre." It might be possible, for instance, to write a play about Joseph and his Brethren; but the lack (in the original story) of anything like "relief," the lack too of feminine interest, would hamper the author in making a good theatre play of it, unless he were bold enough to provide Joseph with a sweetheart or a wife, and to make one or two of the Brethren into humorous characters.
- (6) To turn the stage into a pulpit—and preach.

The biblical play should be a play according to the usual canons. So made, and even from the point of view of reverence and evangelism, it will be effective. Otherwise, it does not deserve to be.

THE RADIO PLAY

There are several forms of dramatic entertainment which have become possible, and popular, since the arrival of wireless.

The "radio version" of a stage play, for example; the

original being "cut" according to the amount of programme time available.

Since it is not possible to transfer a play written for the stage to the radio medium without loss; and since the original play was, as it stood, an artistic whole, and therefore a truncated version of it can be neither artistic nor whole; it would perhaps be better to call this particular form of entertainment an elaborate play-reading than a play.

There is also the "actuality" play, in which some interesting historical event is reconstructed, with as careful regard as possible for the details of the actual scene. The trial of King Charles, for instance.

In these entertainments there is "a story and some characters," so that the ingredients of a play are there; but usually little attempt is made to draw the character, the story is limited to the incomplete incident chosen, the listener's knowledge of the context and background is largely assumed.

It is therefore doubtful whether such a performance can be called a play; and most of us probably regard it gratefully, for it is often quite interesting and very well done, as a case of history made easy, delightfully easy.

The radio play—the play "specially written for the microphone"—is an experiment.

If you are thinking to join in it, it would be wise to try and appreciate the difficulties.

(a) You have an audience it is true; but it is an

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invisible audience; an audience, moreover, which is invisible to itself, consisting as it does of isolated individuals or of groups of two or three listeners scattered over the country.

- (b) You have no stage setting to help you in giving atmosphere to your scene; no costumes; no stage devices; nothing of all that "stage-craft" in the broad sense means.
- (c) Your players are not seen by the audience. This is perhaps the most serious handicap of all; for, when a character is making a speech, the visible reactions of the other characters to what he is saying are extremely important both for the liveliness and the understanding of the moment; and these reactions are not visible. Neither are the gestures and movements of the players which help so much in the interpretation and effect of their words.

An exit which, on the stage, may, by what is seen, be so highly charged with emotional interest, is reduced in the radio play to the sound of a banging door.

The consequence of this is that a much heavier responsibility is thrown upon the author and his dialogue. A radio play is much more a one-man job than a stage play; he still has his partners, the players and the audience, but the latter is blind, and the former have nothing but their voices to help him with.

There are compensations perhaps. Radio, for in-

stance, has obviously a much wider range than the stage.

You are not limited to what is presentable within the frame of the proscenium. You are not hampered by the necessity of changing settings. You can move swiftly and continuously from China to Peru, indeed from earth to heaven, without embarrassment. There are no limits to your scene, or to the changes of it, except the imagination of your invisible audience, and your own power to stimulate it with vivid pictures.

The difficulty of introducing on to the stage the denizens of another world does not exist for radio. A radio-scene can happen in the dark. Anything which can be clearly and vividly imagined may be useful material for the radio play.

In fact, and until television alters the whole circumstances, a play in which the author gives full rein to his creative imagination is probably the best form of radio drama.

The radio play is nearer to the Screen than to the Stage. On the Screen the players and the action are visible; but in the matter of speed, change of scene, continuity over wide areas both of space and time, the "flash back," and so on, the film gives you the cue. It is on the whole better to write a radio play in terms of film rather than of stage and proscenium.

Forget the stage; and think of actual rooms, actual streets, actual scenes.

The following advice is approved as being worth attention—

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- (a) Limit the time of the play to about an hour. The audience, without the relief of the stage and its movement to look at, cannot concentrate and hold its mind on your story for longer than this.

(An hour's playing-time means roughly forty pages of quarto typescript with the usual spacing.)

- (b) Limit your characters to, say, half a dozen. Especially in the opening passages of the play, it is difficult for the audience to distinguish the characters except by their voices; and although the producer will do his best to "cast" the voices of the players so as to help the audience in distinguishing them, it is not always easy to do so. Within reasonable limits, therefore, the fewer the characters the better.

- (c) Never forget for a moment that your dialogue is written for an audience which cannot see what is going on.

Clear, concrete writing is essential; concrete in the sense of conveying vivid images to the mind. Your audience is perpetually trying to form pictures of what is going on in the changing scenes; and you must help them.

All important movements must somehow or other be embodied in the dialogue. Over and above the mental and emotional action of the scene, you must be continually touching in the visible scene, or what would be the visible scene if the play were on the stage.

You have no face-play, no body-play, and no reactions from the other characters, to help you;

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therefore the requirement that your dialogue should be even more clear, sharp-edged, vivid, than if it were being written for the stage, is imperative.

In the absence of the living body of the actor, your character-drawing, depending as it does entirely on the spoken word, must be sharper; and possibly a slight heightening and exaggeration of the character is a good idea.

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