

SCRIPTWRITING

The challenges of the scriptwriter are markedly different from those of the poet, fiction writer, and essayist. Playwriting is one of the oldest forms of creative writing, while screenwriting is among the newest, yet both the playwright and the screenwriter collaborate in a much larger process: control of the final product is out of their hands. Unlike a poem, story, or essay, which can be said to exist once its author has completed writing it, plays and screenplays in their printed form are merely suggestions of what they might become. While it is true that book versions of plays are studied in literature classes and screenplays are studied in screenwriting classes, both plays and screenplays are written with the idea that they will be performed. The “author-function” (to use Foucault’s term) of the scriptwriter is clearly constructed and reconstructed by a number of factors outside the writer’s command.

Because a scriptwriter depends so much on the cooperation and munificence of others, she must be something of a salesperson. Poets, fiction writers, and essayists may network and schmooze at writers’ conferences, but for the most part they simply mail their work off to editors and wait to hear whether it will be accepted or rejected. Scriptwriters, however, and especially screenwriters, are always actively marketing their work, pitching ideas to agents, producers, directors, and other writers. Michael Lent notes that networking is essential in Hollywood because of the “interactive nature” of filmmaking: “There is a logarithmic progression of number of people involved as a movie travels down the development path. The benefits of building a creative community, or at least a marauding hoard of like-minded individuals, are immeasurable” (2004, 157–158).

Scriptwriters must frequently meet face-to-face with their collaborators so their home address is significant. Screen and television writers are expected to live in or around Los Angeles, which is not only a practical advantage, it is viewed as a symbol of a writer’s commitment to his profession. “You can write in other places,” screenwriter Max Adams admits. “Nobody has to be here to write. And half the time it is better and cheaper to be somewhere else, just to get the writing done.” However, she ultimately believes that “the business and personal sides are myriad. And it is very easy in this town to slip out of sight. And in this town, out of sight is, in most cases, out of work. Literally” (2001, 293).

Playwrights, too, benefit from living within driving distance of a thriving community of theater artists. New York, with its three tiers of playhouses (Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway), is the center of American playwriting, and serious playwrights move there not just to attend rehearsals of their plays but also to participate in staged readings and workshops of drafts that aren't yet ready for full productions. For those unable (or unwilling) to live in New York, there are also lively regional theater scenes in Los Angeles and Chicago and, to a lesser extent, in the San Francisco Bay area, San Diego, Seattle, Minneapolis–St. Paul, Boston, and Washington, D.C.

One of the manifestations of this emphasis on playwright involvement and professionalism is that writers are expected to have mastered the basics of their craft before approaching an agent or producer. A talented beginning poet may find that one of the first few poems he writes is published by a small literary magazine. A new scriptwriter probably won't be so lucky. Screenwriters are expected to have at least two completed projects in hand (preferably more) before they begin shopping their work around. A television writer would probably have five or six ideas for series episodes other than the one she originally submits to producers. In addition, scripts are expected to be presented in a very specific format with regard to font, spacing, and so on (nearly every book on scriptwriting has examples). A poet who transgresses against conventions of typography and lineation may well be applauded for her inventiveness. A scriptwriter who does these things will not be taken seriously.

PLAYWRITING

While the initial part of the playwriting process may be solitary, everything afterward is collaborative (see “Collaboration”). The playwright must consider the perspective of (most importantly) the director, the producer, the actors, even the stage manager. Typically, playwrights revise dialogue and action based on what happens in rehearsals. They may even continue revising after the play goes into production. Like a poetry reading, a play inspires a response among those who witness it. However, where poets have the luxury of believing in their work even when their readers are baffled or put off by it, playwrights live or die by the reactions of their audiences—and, unfortunately, that reaction is only partially in their control. As Tom Stoppard notes, “the text is only one aspect of an evening at the theater; often the most memorable moments have little to do with the words uttered. It is the totality . . . which is being judged” (1988, 287).

The collaborative process is even more central among theater companies that create their own plays in house. For these groups, the playwright function is distributed across the entire cast, with everyone involved in devising a scenario, creating characters, writing dialogue. In this situation, there is no “playwright” at all, but simply a group of actors intent on generating a stage-worthy event. Toronto’s Upstart Crow Theatre Group “believes in and uses the Ensemble Method, whereby we try to foster positive communal interaction amongst a family of Artists and our audiences, and each Artist contributes their talent and energy to all aspects of the production” (2003). Philadelphia’s Pig Iron Theatre Company’s mission is to “create original performance works which test the boundaries of dance, drama, clown, puppetry, music and text; to experiment with form while staying accessible; to develop a physical, theatrical performance technique that draws from many performance traditions” (n.d.). New Zealand’s the clinic produces “multi-media theatre that delves deep into the human psyche and succeeds in blending the real and hyper-real, the familiar and the dreamlike, the magic and the everyday” (n.d.). In all these instances, the piece that is performed onstage would not exist without the efforts of many “writers.”

Companies like Upstart Crow and Pig Iron are avant-garde in orientation. In the more traditional realms of the theater, a playwright’s most valued talent is the ability to write convincing dialogue. Even plays that convey a great deal of meaning through silence and gesture—such as those by Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett—ultimately depend on dialogue for their success. And playwrights don’t just give characters good lines to say, they must also introduce background and expository material in a fashion that keeps their audiences interested. Playwrights uncover the conflict in a conversation; they make action happen in a small black box. Granted, large commercial theaters have a great deal of technical stagecraft at their command—elaborate costumes, pyrotechnics, impressive lighting effects. Musicals like *The Lion King* are as much about spectacle as they are about story. But most plays are performed in theaters with ninety-nine seats or fewer (theaters with fewer than one hundred seats may perform less expensive non-Equity productions). Properties are modest, and changes of scenery are typically suggested rather than shown. (Anyone who has seen a Shakespeare play performed well knows how seamlessly these imaginative leaps in time and place can be accomplished.)

Because producing all but the most extravagant plays is less expensive than making a movie, playwrights generally find it easier to see their

work reach its final phase than do screenwriters. It is far easier to find an artistic director or literary manager of a theater company who will read an unsolicited script than to find a film producer or director who will read an unsought screenplay. (Warning: theater companies usually take longer to respond to a submission than do literary magazines; six months to a year is not uncommon.) Granted, more people will see a small-scale, independent film than even a long-running play. In this respect, the screenwriter's audience is much larger. Yet playwrights are accorded a respect not given to screenwriters. The playwright is generally awarded equal (if not higher) billing with the director and stars of his play. We associate plays with those who wrote them, while we associate films with their directors. And perhaps more than other types of creative writer, the playwright is truly part of a community of like-minded artists. (See the Dramatists Guild of America Web site—www.dramaguild.com—for information about this community.)

Finally, it should be noted that while the ability to write good dialogue is a playwright's chief asset, not all good writers of dialogue become superior dramatists. Charles Dickens was said to be an excellent dramatic reader of his novels, but he never wrote for the theater (although several of his novels have been successfully adapted for the stage in last twenty years). Henry James did write plays, but his theatrical work is judged to be far inferior to his novels. Contemporary creative writers working on their first plays often have difficulty envisioning the differences between a movie screen—where almost anything can happen—and a theater stage. One remedy for this problem is academic study. Earlier playwrights learned their craft by working as apprentices for established companies or by starting their own. That tradition continues, but developing playwrights may also receive undergraduate and graduate training, although there are far fewer graduate programs offering degrees in playwriting than those specializing in fiction and poetry writing. Programs that do offer playwriting MFAs tend, not surprisingly, to be associated with universities that have strong theater programs. Among the best are Yale, New York University, Columbia, and UCLA.

SCREENWRITING

Screenwriting is one of the few activities that offer creative writers the hope of earning a substantial sum of money. The highest-paid screenwriters earn more than a million dollars per script, though normally earnings are much lower. Even when a screenplay is not produced, it may still make

its author some money. Many screenplays are “optioned”—a production company pays to have the exclusive option of deciding whether or not to make the film. The majority of these optioned screenplays will never make it to the screen, but screenwriters take consolation in the fact that they have been paid anyway.

Because of the lure of wealth, and the intense competition for the big payday, screenwriters have legitimate concerns about copyright issues and other legal protections of their work. A poet who puts “Copyright by” on his manuscript looks like an amateur; a screenwriter is just being astute. One convenient way of protecting a script is to register it online with the Writers Guild of America (www.wga.org). Both members and nonmembers may take advantage of this service for a very modest fee. The WGA Web site also contains industry news, interviews with and profiles of successful screenwriters, and a host of links to relevant sources. There is always a buzz in the screenwriting world, and the quest to find out what sort of films producers and directors want to make is constant. Screenwriters attend symposiums, seminars, and conferences, where they meet with agents, script analysts, and other screenwriters. Finding a suitable agent is particularly important in such a cutthroat world, where reputations can be made, and destroyed, overnight.

The stakes are high in film production. Movies cost significantly more to make than they did in the past, and studios are less willing to invest in risky projects that might alienate middle- and low-brow movie audiences. Consequently, screenplays tend to be more formulaic than stage plays. Every film fan can name inventive variations on the standard plots, but screenplays typically fall into recognizable genres: romantic comedies, action adventures, science fiction extravaganzas, and the like. Studio heads do want to see a “hook,” something to grab an audience’s attention, but they also want relatively conventional heroes and heroines and recognizable stories. Moviegoers may not consciously register a screenplay’s archetypal blueprint, but they have watched it in action countless times. The “classic” screenplay is two hours long. The first half hour is devoted to the “setup,” the introduction of the film’s central conflict and subplots. The next hour is devoted to the complication and development of the main confrontation and its accompanying subplots. In the final thirty minutes, the story’s conflicts are resolved.

A playwright normally revises her own play, but many authors may be involved in the completion of a screenplay. Indeed, a screenwriter could find herself working in several different capacities. She might write, or

collaborate on, an original script. She could be involved in adapting a novel, story, or play for film. Some screenwriters work on assignment as staff writers for producers and directors. Others are brought in as “script doctors” to polish rough drafts, or to bring a missing element—such as action or romance—to a script that a production company otherwise finds acceptable. Like playwrights, screenwriters can receive formal training in the various aspects of their jobs. Among the universities offering established programs in screenwriting are UCLA, USC, New York University, and Columbia.

WRITING FOR TELEVISION

If screenwriting is bound by certain conventions, writing for television is even more closely tied to the need for formulaic writing. Television writers enter a highly collaborative world, where no one voice is likely to dominate. As J. Michael Straczynski writes: “You’re required to work with characters created by someone other than yourself, structure your story around commercials and other artificial timing devices, set aside your ego when the producer says, ‘Our character wouldn’t do that,’ and limit yourself in the number of sets and types of situations you can develop into story lines” (1996, 19). Few students enter graduate creative writing programs believing they will end up writing for television. However, the training creative writing graduate students receive is, as Straczynski suggests, applicable to this sort of writing: “the *literati* who turn up their collective noses at the idea of such restrictions on the muse [should remember that] . . . *every* form has its restrictions and its rules. Sonnets, haikus, stage plays . . . you either play by the rules or you don’t get to play.”

Breaking into television is notoriously difficult, but one way for writers to do so is to submit a script for an episode of a show that is already in production. If the producers admire the writing but cannot use that particular episode, they may invite the writer to add his talents to a larger pool of writers. Some shows work with a staff of writers, but many television programs employ freelancers to write their shows. In addition to network comedy and drama series, there are also made-for-television movies, and with the advent of cable television series, more television writers are needed all the time.

One added benefit for television writers is that the writer-director hierarchy is inverted from the motion picture world. In long-running TV programs, with so much of the vision already established, directors are seen more as technicians who simply get the work done. It is the writers,

who must inject original ideas into shopworn characters and situations, who receive the lion's share of the credit, respect, and pay.

OTHER TYPES OF SCRIPTS

Prior to the advent of television, the radio drama had a huge and faithful audience. Now it is all but dead in America, although in Britain it remains a viable format. Public radio occasionally airs such programs, but the work is neither steady nor well paid. Radio and television commercials need scriptwriters, but these people are normally members of an advertising team. Probably the most lucrative and widely available work for freelance writers is scripting educational and corporate videos. Obviously, writers will be working within very specific guidelines, with goals that they do not dictate themselves. Nevertheless, businesses and schools *do* want videos that will entertain as well as instruct their audiences, so there is perhaps more room for creative expression in these areas than most writers might suppose.