

Playwriting: A Focus on Dialogue and Character

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This is a transcript of a presentation given on September 24–26, 2020, at the annual conference of the Latter-day Saint Publishing and Media Association (LDSPMA). You may not reproduce or publish this material without prior written consent from LDSPMA.

Hello, I'm Tony and Leslie. Hi, and today we're talking about playwriting the art of character and dialogue. Thanks for joining us.

So before we get started with our presentation. We wanted to just make a few points that are maybe coming on, but we want to make sure we're aware of.

First of all the things we talked about aren't necessarily hard and fast rules that you have to follow the idea here is to give you a bunch of techniques that can be helpful, but feel free to experiment and find your own things that work.

Also, the best way to become a better writer and specifically we're talking about character and dialogue and those things are included. Is just in writing, taking the time writing getting feedback and revising, this is the best way to learn writing skills.

Yes. And with that in mind, oftentimes, the approach you take is going to change based on whatever kind of genre, you're working with. So if you're writing a tragedy.

It's going to be very different than if you write like a farce. And it's the same you're doing a Western it's going to be different than a sci fi Perhaps if you do a sci fi Western all of these things are going to call for a different approach. So the things we talked about, even within your own methodology may have a change based on whatever genre, you're working with.

And finally, these last two rules are basically about the medium that we're talking about today playwriting A lot of you may be Novel Writers short story writers all different Styles and mediums specifically we're dealing with a medium where you put in the details that you feel like you need to communicate to the people who will then take your story and present it to an audience.

So what that means is you either want to put a lot of information into full proof your text so that it is performed exactly the way you want it.

Or you can leave it open for some interpretation. The benefit there. Is that a person can approach your text in a new and exciting way.

And it gives the opportunity for several different styles and presentations of the same text. So it depends on what you're going for.

Specifically theatre has some of its own traits which we'll talk about a little bit later and different ways you might approach something but being be aware of what the medium has to offer and how you can use it to write them the strongest play possible So that being said, those are basic playwriting rules and as you can see they're not really hard and fast rules. They're just there for you to be aware of.

And so we're going to transition a little bit. I am going to start us off by talking about character for you notice we are using some visuals here for you as well to talk a little bit about some of the processes we've used some tools to get us thinking So character development in play, writing, the most important thing and this comes directly from Aristotle, because so much of talking about theater does Aristotle talked about in the Poetics how plot is first, right? It's the most important.

But he also mentioned character as a secondary thing. The reason for that is character is revealed through plot and through a couple of other areas as well. So without a plot you don't have characters, basically. So we start with the story first we want to talk about the way that the story helps us build and shape the characters within that world.

So once you know your storyline, then we start thinking about the characters and the pieces that we're moving within that storyline.

And this is how we develop character, so, that second point there how character is developed and revealed through plot interaction with other characters and dialogue.

I sort of like to think of that as like how you think of a braid. You have three pieces and they're woven together so plot, character, and dialogue.

They form a pattern when they're used together. If you just have one of those sections. They don't really show anything too interesting. But weave those three things together and then you have an interesting pattern that can be looked at and reviewed.

That's our second point here. The third point, avoiding character sheets. This again is not a hard and fast rule both Tony and I agree. We're not crazy about character sheets for a couple of reasons.

For me, one of the main reasons is they're very generic, they just give you generic information. What it looks like their age, their job, that sort of thing.

And these may not suit the needs of the character and the type of story you're writing. Now, character sheets can be really useful when you're thinking about a character in the middle of a revision. For example, if you feel like a character is not strong enough that you've written you can go back and use a character sheet. And like I said, know yourself as a writer is the best option for this.

But sometimes you want to think about your character in a completely different way. You want to have details that go beyond some of the regular details that you might find on a character sheet. So just be aware of that, they can be used if you feel like they've helped you.

They just haven't they haven't ever given me what I've wanted. I think Tony agrees with that. So, do be aware of that.

We have very typical almost archetypes in writing, not just playwriting any kind of writing, where you have a very traditional protagonist and antagonist.

That can be very helpful if that's what your story is asking for that can be a useful tool for you to distinguish one character from another. But, not every story necessarily needs a protagonist and antagonist, especially in playwriting because playwriting plays with form a lot. So, there are definitely going to be things that maybe not everyone needs an antagonist. Sometimes you can have just a lead character. So for example, I think a lot about—I like to write things more in the family drama type area. I think about something like Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey and tonight*.

Where it's about a family that loves each other, but it's also in a lot of ways at odds with each other. There isn't necessarily a protagonist that is stopping That it wants something and an antagonist that is trying to stop them. This is a family trying to work together to get all different

things and failing in their own ways, and sometimes impeding each other. So, there is some complexity there so you don't always just have to use these tropes where we have the protagonist and the antagonist. That's another thing to be aware of.

The fifth point here, ask yourself, what is the main plot? How does this character fit into it? So you're going to have all different levels of characters. Some of them are going to be leads. Some of them are going to be supporting.

Some of them might just be passing through. You have to decide what level they're at and how much involvement, they need. It is helpful to have a purpose for each character.

Otherwise, you may want to think about why you would need this character. And then finally, knowing the type of character that you have is important. So if we go all the way back to Shakespeare, Shakespeare had very clear types and often use them over and over and plays. You have You know, sometimes the fool. You have the lovers. You have people that they just slip into these already created little character types and they're used in that way.

As playwriting has evolved we've gotten a little more complex. So you don't have to fit characters into this very specific job that they do. You can play with them a little bit. They can be complex.

In a play like Horton foots young man from Atlanta, the lead character is very blustery and loud and used to getting his way. But also he's grieving for the loss of a child.

He has complexity there as does his wife who normally would seem very whimsical and flighty but she's also weighed down by grief. So you have some things that are working there where they start to feel a lot more like real people that you know. So, know the type of character you need and want and play with that complexity.

So, It's not switching There we go. Alright, so this is something that I put together. And again, by no means are these rules that you have to follow. These are just different ways to get you thinking about your characters.

And their different possibilities. And you could probably sit down and write formulas, just like this.

So the first one, having a character that has backstory mixed with the choices they make in the play. This is obviously going to be revealing their motivations in some way. Right. So when we

understand a character's backstory, which may come at any point in the play. Then we can see why they make the choices they do. It gives us a little insight into what's going on with them internally.

A character also needs to have both strengths and flaws. This goes back to what we said about the complexity of a character. A character is not very interesting. If they're just good at everything in my opinion.

They need to have some flaws. Those flaws, to me, are what makes them interesting. Likewise, the most fascinating villainous type characters are the ones that also have strengths.

And that aren't just all flaws. So having that complexity is definitely something that keeps your characters interesting.

The next one needing to have goals and motivations. Motivation is something you hear a lot in theater. You hear actors asking about their motivation. You hear other writers saying what is this character's motivations? Why do they do the things they do? The goal that they're trying to achieve is kind of the ultimate in the plot, but those motivations are what's getting them there. So making sure that your character has something that they're trying to move towards will help make sure that they remain dynamic and interesting.

This also helps with the plot along. So the next is how the character moves the plot, how they interact with other characters and dialogue. So again, this is like that braid we talked about. You need all of those things together in order to create a character that comes alive through the play. This is again the driving force, usually of the story is how these characters move through it. So you definitely want to take a moment, consider that.

Okay. We are going to take just a few minutes to write a few things. So using some of those ideas that we just talked about, think of a maybe a play that you've already thought of the idea for or a plot you've been interested in.

Try to create a character using maybe one of those formulas or several of those formulas, however you like to work.

And try to think of some details that will come out through the world of the play. Ask questions about that character. What kind of other characters, they'll be up against? What kind of obstacles, will they come to? How will they handle them? So pause your video for a moment.

Or maybe have the administrator posit, however, that works and Take a minute to write OK.

So now that you've written something of a character sketch, here are a few other things that I would like you to consider before we start looking at some examples.

Characters and again this is a personal preference. When a character has volition, they're much more interesting to me. So sometimes we do see things where so much happens to a character that they don't ever seem like they're acting on their own. They seem like things are thrust upon them and then they have to react.

It is always more dynamic to watch someone act than react all the time. Not that there are not going to be things for them to react to. Overall, I want to see somebody who wants something and who does things to get what they want. That's what we mean when we talk about volition.

Diversity, to me, is an important one because when you want your characters to really come alive. What helps with that is having different foils to compare each other to. So for example, in a play like Amadeus. You have Mozart and you have Ciliary The play between these two very different characters helps to bring to life what each of them represents. It helps to develop them in a way that's more compelling than if you just had one of them.

So the play that happens between diverse characters is important. When I say diversity that could be any kind of diversity. It could be diversity of personality, racial diversity to be gender. Could be a lot of things. So there's a lot of ways that you can play with this idea. Identification basically means you want your audience to see and be able to identify themselves or people they know on stage. So this helps somebody to feel more in tune with the characters that you're presenting. If they can recognize a little bit of themselves in it or their moms or somebody they know so that helps The next one exaggerated characteristics versus subtlety. If you are writing for the screen, there is a lot more opportunity to be subtle. You can have subtle details because cameras can zoom in on a specific detail. You do not have that opportunity on stage. In playwriting things are a ways away from the audience. So you may want to exaggerate some of those characteristics, a little, so that they are will be read by the audience.

That will include diction, vocal patterns, mannerisms, clothes all of these aspects. You'll want to at some point, take a moment to consider. So I'm in the time that we had. I wrote a little example of how to how to sort of take some of these tools and write a person; hopefully, a person that's compelling.

So I wrote about a woman named Janice. She's petitioning for a promotion or job as an administrative assistant to a manager position in a law firm.

But her neighbor in the next cubicle who's named Byron is a suck up senior to her and she's worried. He'll get it. So this is just a very basic Low line plot. So we've got her name. We so I thought about what would I want her to look like in order to portray what I'm trying to get across. So I pictured her being short and stocky dark haired. Always wearing pants and a blouse to work, so looking professional. Carries a black pen in her breast pocket.

This one I might play with that detail a little because perhaps on stage, I might think actually a pen in a pocket may not be visible. But what if she's always twirling a pen. Like it's a physical tick. I might change it to that if I feel like the pen in the pocket is not the detail that is reading the way I want it to. So again, you see how there's a lot of play possible in here.

Strengths are, she excels at a job, fast typer or never filed anything improperly, never had a sick day. She's polite, she speaks clearly and affirmatively so she's doing everything that a worker should do at their job. Basically, but here's her weaknesses and to me this is where she gets more interesting. She's obsessive about her filing system.

Often puts chewing gum under Byron's desk. I imagine her doing that, just to annoy him.

Hates when people call her Janet which Byron does all the time. So these things to me make her a little bit more interesting. So then I would take these kind of basic details and move ahead to thinking about, additionally, some background, some more things that are filling her in.

Here's some of the details I came up with. She's part of the space battalion reenactment club that role plays space romance scenarios.

Own several space uniforms. She has a picture of her role playing group on her desk. When people ask her about it, she lies and says it's from Halloween.

She wants the promotion, because it would increase her pay. She has a specific space wench costume she wants to have custom made. This actually sounds like a person I would really like to hang out with, to be honest.

Mostly dislikes Byron, because he once knocked the files off her desk, didn't pick them up, and breezily said sorry over his shoulder before laughing with a hot Secretary.

So you see these details are not just developing who Janice is. Now they're actually moving in and starting to develop your other characters like Byron. Now we know a little something about him.

So you can sort of see how just using a few of these little steps we can start to develop and create a world So just to sum up, remember all of these things are just a place to work from.

Let the characters be fluid. Let them surprise you, sometimes. Even some of the best suspense plays like the mouse trap is based on characters being able to change and surprise you. That's their whole purpose. So while you want to know what motivates a character, it's okay for them to sometimes do things out of character as long as you can make it feel like it works within the world. Okay. Additional characteristics can be added as the plot develops and this characters need relationships to grow. So my character needs Byron, to be able to overcome what she's working on.

So we're going to move over now to Tony who's going to talk about kind of a sister issue, which is dialogue. Thanks, Leslie. Wait, so With dialogues and find that some foundational ideas are that it progresses, the plot.

Reveals aspects of your characters. It also provides like details and nuance and humor. A lot of times if you're watching a show and you're like, I just like that character, it's because their dialogue is fun and happy. They have fun and it's clever and humorous things to say.

I've noticed that trends and playwriting have pushed further and further into representational or realistic style alot. On having a more presentational or it says presentational twice on the theatrical supposed to be with. It says how many more presentational or theatrical approach might be helpful for you depending on your story. So to me, presentational and theatrical are sort of interchangeable. And so you might think to yourself. This is what my portion of this presentation is going to be talking about is the difference between like representational and presentational dialogue.

And trying to figure out what kind of story you're going to tell and what kind of dialogue would best fit that story.

Alright so representational dialogue. It works really hard to sound like the way that people talk.

And so oftentimes if you have seen some examples of this have a few playwrights here. So someone like Yasmina Reza with Gone God of Carnage or Art.

Where you have people in a room arguing. These are basically the plays.

Stephen Carom and the Humans, which is a family at a dinner. So, you have constantly people interrupting each other and talking over each other. Of course there's David Mamet and like he sort of is known for this style of being sort of gritty and are very profane. These people just like talking at a rapid fire pace with lots of lots of overlap. Also if someone like Leslie mentioned who's Who it almost seems to common the things they talk about in the back and forth. Occasionally, it's, it's sort of, it's a sort of poetry, but it is sort of this poetry of every conversation or someone like Lynn Nottage who moved the place sweat is all about like this really intense relationship between friends.

And so all of these things. They're trying to present reality. So if you get sort of swept up in the moment. And you can see yourself being a part of the conversation.

It's also become sort of a fad to have some kind of indicators such as the parentheses to show in one person interrupts the other one.

And so it has this sort of feeling. I don't know about you, I don't interrupt people a whole heck of a lot people. Don't interrupt me Well, my dad does, sometimes, but most people don't interrupt me when I'm talking. I feel as though like that. Is that more realistic. Is that more stagey? I think the idea is it's supposed to make it like more excitement more real more realistic more representational. Okay, so I have. I've written up just a quick like a quick scene that he is an example of rep representational dialogue. We have what I've done is I've written it in representational and presentational form.

And so Les is going to help me. She loves this kind of thing. She loves acting and performing this is her absolute faith. So I'm going to request. She's going to read, Brian. These are unisex or gender neutral names. I tried to use anyway. So we're going to try to speak over each other over the parentheses dialogue. Okay, so we'll see how this goes.

I don't you think that (that's a bad idea?) I'm not sure what... I mean. It's com(plicated). It's clear that she should she shouldn't because, I mean, so nobody That's not fair. No, because no one needs five Labradoodle. I mean, sorry not sorry. No? You're not helping. Okay, so that we did pretty good. We didn't rehearse it all. So, uh, the idea here is with these interruptions and with these ellipses, and people kind of staggering when they talk. It brings some sort of excitement because it's supposed to be like real life. Alright, and so if you find yourself wanting to gain an intention to your scene or just have a flavor of real conversation. Having this notion of ellipses

that give people sort of that there's thinking on the go or parentheses are another way. I know Suzan Lori Parks is a thing where oftentimes, like if it's just a pause. So this list, the characters names back and forth with no dialogue. So there's some sort of interaction happening; but, there is no words being spoken.

This kind of way that people can know that how the characters are supposed to interact. To my mind, this is very trying to capture an aspect of reality or being representational. So if you find yourself writing a story that benefits from sort of connection to reality. Using these kind of techniques may be helpful. In prison there's no value. It's different. It's more poet, poetic. It's more clever or chatty is my flowery and give me thought all of these sorts of attributes can be thought of as being presentation or theatrical While overtly theatrical language may seem passe. I mean, this is If you read something from the 40s or 50s or even, you know, gasps The 20s or 30s were at these box sets and this is a lovely day here on the prairie. We can see the water flying over. Okay, so this is our thing that we can sense as being somewhat passe. All right, but your story may call for some level theatricality, especially if you're writing a period piece.

Or creating a world where everyone is just a little bit more witty than they are in real life. And, to my mind, the Gilmore Girls is a fabulous example where everyone is just a little bit more witty than they would be in real life. I know a lot of people love the Gilmore Girls. Because of this, they've always to my ear, the Gilmore Girls are. It's hard for me to listen because that just like this isn't how people talk, but they have this huge following. They've been very popular. So that works really well. So if you find yourself writing characters and you want the language be flowery or more funny or more charming, that's fine. I say go for it and try to make sure that the rest of your play fits that style. I'd wager that most plays tip into presentational style, so look into dialogue.

I think about like August Wilson, who has a very representational world, but his language really really fits more is more theatrical and presentational.

Someone like Tennessee Williams. Obviously, if you think about Blanche DuBois. You think about her long monologues about woe is me. It's very, very poetic. You think about some Suzan Lori Parks. It uses language and she uses repetition and revision in a way that like chews on itself over and over again until it changes. Then that changes the meaning of the whole play.

Isn't like Arthur Miller. I have a quote here. All the matter we think about is tragedy of the common man. This is somebody who's trying to write about everyday people. Yet you have a

line when Willy says from Death of a Salesman. You can't eat the orange and throw away the peel. A man is not a piece of fruit.

That doesn't sound like something somebody would ever say. It's too good that the symbolism is too strong. Yet it's really helpful in that moment to bring about the way he's feeling and so don't necessarily lean away from presentational dialogue.

You'll be you might think, well, I don't know how someone's going to say that. Then you get a good performer and they make it work. Okay, so we have the same kind of conversation issues with someone having to me elaborate doodles in more of a presentational style.

So I'm going to play Chris again. Less is going to come in play, Ryan, again. Here we go. All right, listen, I get it. I love Labradoodle too! I mean they don't look at all like a normal dog had a baby with an Ewok. I mean, at all.

I'm just saying, if she can find the volition or motivation to clean that Everest of dishes in her sink, or venture to her mailbox once a fortnight, how can she managed that many small mammals? This is from the dude whose Mom still does his laundry? Hey, leave Mom out of this! Okay, so you see the I think that was this great fabulous dialogue. perhaps not. But was it to show this point.

That you can present the same story. It has a very different feel based on if you're trying to mirror reality or if you're trying to create sort of a more heightened or poetic more weighty reality. Depending on the story that you're telling, perhaps your motivation or your technique will change, oKay? So what we have now.

Okay, so this notion of finding balance and I think, I would venture to say that most dialogue in plays ventures into the presentational realm. That's totally fine. Unless you are really set on it being gritty in real life. And I feel like allowing yourself some theatrical balances is a really good idea. but have this idea of this of this balance the spectrum. Am I being too representational Is it being too theatrical and finding sort of where you fit on that spectrum.

And what you're trying to achieve is really a good goal to have. Get feedback from people if you feel like it's getting too corny, or if it's getting too hard to follow. If you're stuck a really good exercise is just to overhear people. Like listen to the way people talk. Because there is sort of a knack of writing dialogue.

Whether, even if it's more theatrical whether it's more representational that some people use Find yourself a knack of being able to recreate a conversation. It seems when people read it, it sounds really captivating. That's sort of something that can be developed, but some people just have to have that natural ability So now I have. I'm just going to give a few moments. I'm the administrator can maybe just pause the video for a second.

Here is an exercise. Take a second write down the dialogue. So it's Chris and Ryan.

We won't even act it out. You can just read it over. Write down the dialogue and finish it. Take maybe somewhere between two to three—somewhere between two to five minutes to continue this conversation. Experiment with, do I want to do something more presentational or representational All right, that is everything that we have planned and now the the real live versions of us will take your questions and would love to chat with you more about playwriting. Thanks a lot. Thank you for joining us.