

Feb. 17, 1958

PLAY - ANALYSIS

(a few pointers from Constructing the Play by
Marion Galloway: Prentice-Hall, N.Y., 1946)

The basis of most good workable plays that get produced and have lived through the centuries is a. the protagonist b. what he wants and c. what prevents him from getting it.

There are three main movements in the course of a good play:

1. the effort of an individual to assert his will - to change his environment - to right an imbalance - to solve a problem -

2. the action or story (with its complications and their resolutions) whereby this is done -

3. the climax: ie. the re-establishment of an equilibrium - the restoration of the broken harmony - the righting of the imbalance - the solution to the problem. All this is accomplished to the intense pleasure of the audience.

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There are 5 foundations to this overall movement:

1. the desiring individual or group (the protagonist)

2. the object desired (the goal)

3. the obstacles in the way (sometimes referred to as "the antagonist" or "antagonists")

4. the ending to the story (the resolution)

5. a clear and logical course leading to this ending.

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There are 5 questions to be asked as you shape your scenario (corresponding to the 5 foundation-stones listed above):

1. whom is the play about?
2. what is his objective?
3. what impedes his getting it?
4. does he get it?
5. how does he succeed or fail?

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From this point of view Marchbanks is the protagonist in Candida; Morell is the antagonist, and Candida is the stake, the objective, or goal (ie. the object to be achieved). Don't let anyone tell you Shaw couldn't construct a well-put-together play when he wanted to for this is one of the best.

From this point of view Laura (Deborah Kerr) is the protagonist of Tea and Sympathy; her husband and the boy's father are the antagonists; Tom and the direction of his future is going to take is the goal (the object to be achieved). Laura determines to help Tom at the beginning of the play; her giving herself to him at the end is the resolution that concludes it.

In Born Yesterday Paul Verrall, the New Republic reporter, is the protagonist of the play; Harry Brock, the junk-man millionaire the antagonist; and Billie Dawn the stake, objective, or goal.

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the protagonist of the play must be volitional and dynamic and usually makes a decision at the end of a first scene and/or act. The protagonist, however, isn't the one necessarily

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who makes the decision at the end: Candida makes the decision at the end of Candida (to stay with Morell); David (the goal) makes the decision at the end of The Silver Cord to go with Cristina, his wife; Miss Moffat, the protagonist, makes the decision at the end of The Corn is Green (to adopt the baby and never to see Morgan again).

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you can wait about one-third of the length of the play (often just before the end of Act One) before the protagonist reveals himself and his purposes clearly: cf. Marchbanks "I'll fight your idess! I'll rescue her from her slavery to them! I'll pit my own ideas against them!"; Miss Moffat's "I am going to start a school from them, next door in the barn, and you are going to help me!" at the end of Scene One; and her "We are going on with the school!" at the end of Act One.

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"the protagonist is the person who causes the play to happen".

John McGovern

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Such an overwhelming number of plays from the Greeks through the Elizabethans and the Renaissance down to the 1950's are built on this scheme, it is no accident. (In spite of occasional "sports that don't conform to the pattern like - The Trojan Women, Troilus and Cressida, The Entertainer, The Chalk Garden, and Member of the Wedding which have been popular and "worked" in the theatre for other reasons than their structure).

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"a unified dramatic action concerns the pursuit of one such objective. And the careful analysis of the objective is one of the most rewarding of the playwright's occupations".

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The people who interest us in plays are the people who make decisions.

Don't forget that you can do a tremendous amount of experimentation within the loose framework of the accepted forms.

Most readers of playscripts for producers judge the plays that they read on the basis of their emotional effect on them.

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a few random remarks on The Silver Cord:
(Sidney Howard)

As beautifully constructed as anything by Lillian Hellman. Written by Howard in the Ibsen tradition - tightly.

The battle-lines are not drawn until the end of Act One: with Cristina then declaring open warfare on Mrs. Phelps, the mother, for David, Cristina's husband and Mrs. Phelps's son, as the goal or pawn.

Your audience will accept any given premise. Hester has fallen in love with Robin before the curtain rises and the audience will accept it even if Robin is weak. That's the playwright's premise and they accept it.

Arthur Miller: "People know so much about Freud nowadays that you don't have to lay it on the line today the way Howard and O'Neill did in the 20's and 30's."

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