

How Not to Write a Ten-Page Play

Over the course of five years and some 900 submissions for the Boston Theater Marathon, certain patterns have emerged in the styles of plays that are being written, particularly among those plays that have not been selected for inclusion. What follows is one judge's rough guide, based on five years of reading, to the kinds of plays that have not made the final list, along with some suggestions of the reasons why. Below that, there are some thoughts on the qualities of those plays that have survived the submission process, and hopes for future success. This list of dos and don'ts is astoundingly subjective. It needs to be stressed that art is always in the business of escaping definition and of defying the rules. For every "don't" listed below, there will be a play that succeeds wildly despite -- or even because of --- the alleged limitation .

Many of the plays submitted that have not been selected fall into one or more of the following categories, presented in no particular order:

1. The God and/or the Devil Play

It's not that it can't be done. *Faust* was good. *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. *Scratch*. *Damn Yankees*. But these are all full-fledged theatrical journeys. What is often submitted to the Marathon is a bare sketch --- some twist to the Biblical characters is provided as the play's only reason for being. God has issues; or the Devil gets a girlfriend; or God's nephew is a punk rocker. These often have a couple of good jokes in them, and any one of these ideas might make a viable play. The trick is to make the play about something more than the gag and surprise of "heaven looks just like Fenway Park."

2. The They Are Dead But They Don't Know It Play

Certainly death is one of the great themes of all art, but here, it can be reduced to a theatrical gimmick. A relative of number one, the They Are Dead But They Don't Know It Play has roots at least as old as Ambrose Bierce and *The Twilight Zone*. In this play, the protagonist struggles to understand the bizarre encounter he/she is having with a mysterious figure who turns out to be Death, or in a common variation, the intake angel at the pearly gates. Again, the entry of this type that gets turned down tends to play the situation for easy laughs, or one chilling moment, and seems to have little purpose other than the single conceit. Having listed this type as a negative, two wonderful plays immediately come to mind that were great successes at the Marathon, one by Robert Brstein and one by Tug Yourgrau. In both those plays, however, the writers were concerned not so much with the surprise of their premise but with other deeper issues at hand: memory, responsibility, pride, fear, and loss.

3. The Not Credible Brilliant Child Play

There have been several successful plays performed at the Marathon featuring children. There have been many more submitted that have been turned down. Often in this latter group, a child actor is called upon to deliver an amazing performance, in which his/her vocabulary, worldly knowledge, and abstract reasoning skills push their character beyond precocious and into not credible. In these plays, The Not Credible Brilliant Child may counsel an adult on how to live, or ease an adult's pain. The Child may be friends with another Brilliant Child, and the two discuss lighter or darker sides of life with clarity, and again, age-inappropriate reasoning skills. In these plays, the child's voice stands out as the voice not of the character, but of the writer.

Another kind of child play reflects upon a traumatic experience the child character either undergoes or recounts. These plays walk a dangerous and delicate line, and sometimes can risk creating the perception that a version of the trauma decryed by the play is being visited upon the child actor playing the role.

4. The Whole World Is Irritating Except for Me Play

In this play, all characters, institutions, and viewpoints are presented as incompetent, annoying, and unavoidable for our hero, who seems quite a bit brighter, more sane, more normal (as defined by the play) than anyone else in the world, and who only wants to get some peace. Now, this is the stuff of great comedy, from Charlie Chaplin to Jerry Seinfeld, and of many successful plays, such as Simon Gray's 1970s hit, *Otherwise Engaged*. What distinguishes the unsuccessful versions of this idea, though, is the way that the hero seems to do little to justify his/her position as the wise and sensible one. And, since, unlike Charlie Chaplin and Jerry Seinfeld, these heroes present themselves as flawless, they do not seem to be particularly human. It's difficult to get involved with a character like that.

5. The Extremely One-Sided Stacked Deck Play

Polemics have their place. No one wants an even-handed lukewarm evening in the theater where "all sides are heard", and quietism reigns. Would the marathon reject Kafka because the lawyers in *The Trial* were made to appear aggressive? Let's hope not. Would it reject *Twelfth Night* because Malvolio's Puritanism was turned into buffoonery? Might as well ban all villains and close the theatre. Bring the pain. But remember that plays thrive on conflict and worthy rivals. A stacked deck reduces suspense, as

we know what's coming. The extra inning thriller is a far better drama than the 13-0 shutout. (Unless it's Sox beating the Yankees.) We want to beat the other side at their best (Unless it's the Sox against the Yankees, and then we just don't care, as long as we win). These unsuccessful plays have several variations:

5A: The Extremely One-Sided Political Play

This kind of play can be searing, brilliant and effective. Amiri Baraka's plays stacked the deck as a corrective measure in the 1960s. Entries in this category, though, sometimes contain obvious errors of fact that hurt the argument rather than help it; and often provide no persuasive reason why the other side is being demonized.

5B: The Extremely One-Sided Sexual Politics Play

This play goes in many different directions: Men or Women or Straights or Gays take it on the chin. Whatever point of view is favored, those characters are right, right, right. The out of favor characters are wrong, wrong, wrong.

5C: The Extremely One-Sided Cultural Critique Play

Yuppie bashing; suburbanite bashing; parent bashing; doctor bashing; lawyer bashing; psychiatrist bashing; conservative bashing; liberal bashing; radical bashing; artist bashing; business-person bashing; computer person bashing; Anyone left? Bash 'em.

Again, the point is not that "no one's to blame," or that those concerned shouldn't get what's coming to them. If they deserve it, whack 'em. What's a theater for if you can't scream (or simply state) the truth? The more divergent from the comfortable and the self-satisfied your argument, the more it needs to be heard. But if that's your aim, consider the possibility of going after the real deal, not the stereotype. Your play and your audience will be the richer.

6. The Sex Fantasy Play

Sex, like death, is the lifeblood of the theater. Topic A or A1. The more the vast canvas of the subject is honestly explored on our stages, the more powerful our theater will be. In Sex Fantasy Play though, while much is explicit, little beyond the physical is revealed. The plays that get between the sheets but haven't been selected tend to rely on the presentation of elaborate sexual activities in themselves. They read as fantasies rather than plays filled with conflict and character.

7. The Seniors Are People Too Play

Some of the most consistently popular Marathon plays have concerned the lives and loves of our respected elders. But like the sex play, or the God and the Devil play, or perhaps any play, for this genre to work it must move beyond the premise. It is not enough to note the charm, the surprising curse word, the persistence of desire. What is the story with these particular characters -- aside from the accident of age -- that makes us need to pay attention to them now?

8. The Insider's Culture Hero Play

Plays about real-life historical, cultural, literary and political figures have been a main line of theater history from Antigone to Picasso to Neils Bohr. The writer's trap with this sort of play is all that deep research she's done. These plays can be filled with dialog and events that make sense only if the audience member is an expert on the character in question. The result is often a play that turns in on itself, and begins to reflect not the character, but the playwright and his/her research. That devastating one-line critique of late medieval French troubadour tradition in favor of Guinzillian metaphor may be a great joke, but if there are only three people in America who get it, it is going to fall flat. The present writer knows this from personal experience.

It might be possible to construct more of these reductive categories, but by now the point is clear. A premise isn't enough. An audience looks for something more. But what is that something more? What about the plays that do get selected? What holds them up above the rest? The simple and frustrating answer is, no one thing in particular. There's an emotional honesty, or a freshness of attack, or a seriousness of purpose, or a dazzling theatrical invention, or a unique point of view, or a moving human moment, or something that's just so darn silly it passes beyond trivial into sheer delight. One thing worth mentioning is that a vast majority of unsuccessful entries tend to fall under a single, larger grouping. They play like television. One or more scenes of dialog and some action, set in a single location, often a room, all of which could take place in real life, or on TV. What is always attractive and attention-getting is a play that ventures beyond the televisual, to consider a form that is uniquely theatrical; a play that works best, or even only, on the stage. The Rough and Tumble Theater's *Blah*, with their rolling furniture, gibberish dialog, and physical style fits the description, as did the gloriously strange and funny French characters in *La Vie*, by the Pilgrim Theater. David Valdez Greenwood's view of life inside a plastic snowglobe in *Marathon 3* was another bizarre and wonderfully theatrical crowd-pleaser.

It's been said that the theater is really closer to poetry as an art form than it is to movies, television, or the novel. It's a form that relies on artful compression of events into a single small space; that makes strong use of imagery, often spoken, to carry the day. It happens right in front of our eyes, in real time, and the living, breathing audience

is a vital part of its creation. A play performed engages the imagination of actors and audience in a kind of shared dream. Plays that can lift us out of the everyday, out of our expectation of another televisual experience, and transport us to some new poetical, theatrical place are welcomed, desired, and dreamt of. Happy writing.