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The Care and Prevention of Playwrights

By Walter Kerr

THOSE of us who teach playwriting sometimes wonder why one of our young student playwrights may spend three or four years with us in the universities without producing anything we can honestly consider stageworthy, and then go out into the wide, uncultivated world and within a year turn out a mature and even commercial work. We were so well equipped to help him, we had all those courses, we gave him so much of our precious personal time, and we offered him an intellectual environment in which a man should have been able to grow. The year after leaving us he spent mostly in bars and on beaches. To our chagrin, the bars and the beaches produced the work of art.

Chagrined but unbowed, we are still determined to help him, and we try to entice him back to our own, and superior, environment. Lately the universities have been offering residences to young playwrights. Come back, we say. Come out of the potholes and into the light, and let us help you write better plays. The chances are about a thousand to one, if the playwright does come back, that he will again embarrass us by producing the unproducible. And the longer he stays, the worse he will get.

I am not suggesting that we cannot be of use to the beginning writer; we can, and we have been. But there are certain limitations to our usefulness, and I think it is wise to face them. It is also necessary to make the playwright face them, so that he does not suffer at the hands of men honestly trying to help, and so that he does not paralyze himself with misapprehensions about his trade.

The fundamental virtue of the university as an aid to playwrights is that it is a repository of historical and technical knowledge about the craft and that, as a result of years of study and synthesis, it can offer a quick resume of traditional structural principle. The neophyte had best be exposed to all this. It will save him time.

The fundamental vice of the university as a home for playwrights is that it is an essentially rational environment, devoted to logic, theory, and the study of principle. The playwright's gift, like that of other artists, is not primarily rational, but intuitive. This means, roughly, that he has an instinctive capacity for sudden and direct contact with reality—flashes of insight which are not the result of rational construction in a vacuum, but come from immediate intimacy with nature itself. What he receives are concrete images, not abstractions or equations, and universities are notorious hotbeds of abstraction and equation.

There is a certain estrangement, and perhaps even a clash, between the rational and intuitive methods of the intellect. F. S. C. Northrop

emphasizes this in *The Meeting of East and West* when he points out that the rationally arrived-at knowledge of the wave-length for blue will do nothing at all to convey to a man born blind the actual experience of blueness. Now the playwright is concerned with blueness—for him, blueness means the living reality of an action—and all the abstract equations he learns for climax, crisis, direct and indirect characterization will not convey to him or to his audience this living reality. The danger he faces in a university, where the search for equations is after all the principal business, is that he will be drawn into the fascination of the formula. He may come to believe that the equation is the living reality or a perfectly good substitute for it. Writing hard, he will produce plays as lifeless as they are mathematically impeccable. Or, sensing his own failure, he will turn into what he is now really equipped to be—a critic.

I suppose all of this sounds a little intangible and overwrought. But those of us who teach playwriting have had it happen repeatedly to us, or to our students, in one way or another. We may have told them, perhaps in a course in drama theory or history, that tragedy is our most profound dramatic form, and that all or virtually all of our great tragedies are in verse. What we said was demonstrably true. But it did not justify the rash of verse tragedies which broke out in playwriting class some short time later. Young writers are an ambitious and elevated lot. Give them a principle about tragedy or about anything else, and they are going to attack their work as though the principle came first. The chance that any one of these plays was inspired by an immediate and tragic intuition of life is, I think, rare. And unless we really do point out that a perfectly sound critical principle is no guide whatever to the personal talent of an individual man, we may condemn that man to five or six years of laboriously perfecting a form for which he has no perceptive capacity.

Or there is my own experience of guiding a student through a series of exercises which were calculated to teach her a good deal about play structure. She seemed to learn the structure all right, but to be without any particular talent. One day when my back was turned, and my glaring formal eye not directed toward her, she forgot about the whole thing and wrote a play. It was so good I had to produce it immediately in the university theatre; it was later optioned for New York. She is still profuse about how much she learned from me, but I learned more from her. I learned that I could teach a lot of principle but that a genuine playwright is a terribly unprincipled person.

Again, a young man comes to us seeking admission, with a dozen assorted manuscripts under his arm. Here, obviously, is a very fertile fellow. At the end of a year with us, we find he has not even put pencil to paper. Is it possible that we have somehow paralyzed him? On several such occasions I have asked the student for an explanation and I have several times been answered as follows: "Oh, I couldn't possibly have wasted my time writing anything. Every lecture you gave taught me so

much that I didn't want to be making mistakes on paper that might be prevented by the very next lecture." Students have been known to go on for years this way. I thought for awhile of remodeling my classroom to include ear-plugs and a bar.

It is not just a matter of wasting time in the classroom, or even of paralyzing a given student for a few years thereafter. Carried to its full extension, the emphasis on theory and principle can destroy the output of an entire culture. Something like this happened in Renaissance Italy. Clearly, there was a fine dramatic and theatrical instinct here, bursting to be heard. It made itself heard with tremendous vitality in the *commedia dell'arte*. But the more talented and literate men who might have given Italy a literary comedy or even a tragic form were caught in the throes of classic theory. Slavishly they adhered to the rules of the academicians, and in the process went creatively sterile. Holding themselves superior to the *commedia*, with its formless and vulgar aping of the common life, they destroyed their intuitive gifts by their determined rationality.

Obviously we have got to teach what we know about theory and mathematical technique. But we have got to teach it for what it is—a kit of small tools, an assembly of shortcuts—and never pretend that it is the heart of the work. The student should know that what he is learning will serve as a sort of handy reference guide, once he has absorbed and then forgotten it. Since no intuitively perceived image will ever come with all its shoelaces perfectly tied, it is wise to know how to tie them up. But there should be no undue emphasis on the act of tying. It should be a casual habit which distracts not at all from the pursuit of the image proper. We must encourage the student to form such habits quickly and never again give them thought, so that his mind may be free to make contact with an unmanipulated reality.

The trouble with his remaining in a university after the habits have been formed is that he continues to give thought to the processes. He thinks, talks, and theorizes process far into the night. Even if he is advanced to the point of recognizing the difference between process and perception, he thinks, talks, and theorizes about that. It is a world of theory, in which one first establishes the formula and then attempts to fill it. For the artist this is putting the cart before the horse and, like all horses caught in the situation, he is brought to a standstill. The case of John Lyly is much to the point: the University Wits, of which he was one, became wits when they left the universities for the life of London. Lyly, clinging to an intellectual environment and disdaining to compete with the bear-baiting pits, chained himself to an everlasting repetition of his first intellectual conceits. Better the bars and the beaches.

Our job in the universities is to teach the traditional short-cuts and to turn them into half-forgotten habits. To make clear to the writer that they are not half so important as his own most casual glance. And to get rid of him as quickly as possible.