

### 36 ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WRITING PLAYS

Over the years I've had the good fortune to teach writing in a number of schools, from second grade to graduate school. I usually just wing it. But lately I've decided to think about the assumptions I was working under and to write them down. The following is an unscientific, gut-level survey of the assumptions I have about writing plays, in no particular order of importance.

1. Good playwriting is a collaboration between your many selves. The more multiple your personalities, the further, wider, deeper you might be able to go.
2. Theatre is closer to poetry and music than it is to the novel.
3. There's no time limit to writing plays. Think of playwriting as a life-long apprenticeship. Imagine you may have your best ideas on your deathbed.
4. Write plays in order to organize despair and chaos. To live vicariously. To play God. To project an idealized version of



the world. To destroy things you hate in the world and in yourself. To remember and to forget. To lie to yourself. To play. To dance with language. To beautify the landscape. To fight loneliness. To inspire others. To imitate your heroes. To bring back the past and raise the dead. To achieve transcendence of yourself. To fight the powers that be. To sound alarms. To provoke conversation. To engage in the conversation started by great writers in the past. To further evolve the art form. To lose yourself in your fictive world. To make money.

5. Write because you want to show something. To show that the world is shit. To show how fleeting love and happiness are. To show the inner workings of your ego. To show that democracy is in danger. To show how interconnected we are. (Each "To show" is active and must be personal, deeply held, true to you.)
6. Each line of dialogue is like a piece of DNA: potentially containing the entire play and its thesis; potentially telling us the beginning, middle and end of the play.
7. Be prepared to risk your entire reputation every time you write, otherwise it's not worth your audience's time.
8. Embrace your writer's block. It's nature's way of preserving trees and your reputation. Listen to it and try to understand its source. Often writer's block happens because somewhere in your work you've lied to yourself and your subconscious won't let you go any further until you've gone back, erased the lie, stated the truth and started over.
9. Language is a form of entertainment. Beautiful language can be like beautiful music: it can amuse, inspire, mystify, enlighten.

10. Rhythm is key. Use as many sounds and cadences as possible. Think of dialogue as a form of percussive music. You can vary the speed of language, the beats per line, volume, density. You can use silences, fragments, elongated sentences, interruptions, overlapping conversation, physical activity, monologues, nonsense, nonsequiturs, foreign languages.
11. Vary your tone as much as possible. Juxtapose high seriousness with raunchy language with lyrical beauty with violence with dark comedy with awe with eroticism.
12. Action doesn't have to be overt. It can be the steady deepening of the dramatic situation . . . or your characters' steady emotional movements from one emotional/psychological condition to another: ignorance to enlightenment, weakness to strength, illness to wholeness.
13. Invest something truly personal in each of your characters, even if it's something of your worst self.
14. If Realism is as artificial as any other genre, strive to create your own realism. If theatre is a handicraft in which you make one of a kind pieces, then you're in complete control of your fictive universe. What are its physical laws? What's gravity like? What does time do? What are the rules of cause and effect? How do your characters behave in this altered universe?
15. Write from your organs. Write from your eyes, your heart, your liver, your ass—write from your brain last of all.
16. Write from all your senses. Be prepared to design on the page: tell yourself exactly what you see, feel, hear, touch and taste in this world. Never leave design to chance, that includes the design of the cast.

17. Find your tribe. Educate your collaborators. Stick to your people and be faithful to them. Seek aesthetic and emotional compatibility with those you work with. Understand your director's worldview because it will color his/her approach to your work.
18. Strive to be your own genre. Great plays represent the genres created around the author's voice. A Chekhov genre. A Caryl Churchill genre.
19. Strive to create roles that actors you respect would kill to perform.
20. Form follows function. Strive to reflect the content of the play in the form of the play.
21. Use the literalization of metaphor to discuss the inner emotional state of your characters.
22. Don't be afraid to attempt the great themes: death, war, sexuality, identity, fate, God, existence, politics, love.
23. Theatre is the explanation of life to the living. Try to tease apart the conflicting noises of living, and make some kind of pattern and order. It's not so much an explanation of life as it is a recipe for understanding, a blueprint for navigation, a confidante with some answers, enough to guide you and encourage you, but not to dictate to you.
24. Push emotional extremes. Don't be a puritan. Be sexy. Be violent. Be irrational. Be sloppy. Be frightening. Be loud. Be stupid. Be colorful.
25. Ideas may be deeply embedded in the interactions and reactions of your character; they may be in the music and poetry of your form. You have thoughts and you generate ideas constantly. A play ought to embody those thoughts and those thoughts can serve as a unifying energy in your play.

26. A play must be "organized." This is another word for "structure." You organize a meal, your closet, your time—why not your play?
27. Strive to be mysterious, not confusing.
28. Think of information in a play like an IV drip—dispense just enough to keep the body alive, but not too much too soon.
29. Think of writing as a constant battle against the natural inertia of daily language.
30. Write in layers. Have as many things happening in a play in any one moment as possible.
31. Faulkner said the greatest drama is the heart in conflict with itself.
32. Keep your chops up with constant questioning of your own work. React against your work. Be hypercritical. Do in the next work what you aimed for but failed to do in the last work.
33. Listen only to those people who have a vested interest in your future.
34. Character is the embodiment of obsession. A character must be stupendously hungry. There is no rest for those characters until they've satisfied their needs.
35. In all your plays be sure to write at least one impossible thing. And don't let your director talk you out of it.
36. A writer cannot live without an authentic voice—the place where you are the most honest, most lyrical, most complete, most creative and new. That's what you're striving to find. But the authentic voice doesn't know how to write, any more than gasoline knows how to drive. But driving is



impossible without fuel and writing is impossible without the heat and strength of your authentic voice. Learning to write well is the stuff of workshops. Learning good habits and practicing hard. But finding your authentic voice as a writer is your business, your journey—a private, lonely, inexact, painful, slow and frustrating voyage. Teachers and mentors can only bring you closer to that voice. With luck and time you'll get there on your own.