

BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

by David Ball

Part I: Shape

1. What happens that makes something else happen?

Action occurs when something happens that makes or permits something else to happen.

Focus: An event is anything that happens. When one event causes or permits another event, the two events together comprise an action. Actions are a play's primary building blocks.

2. And what happens next?

The key is adjacent dominoes.

Focus: An action is comprised of two events: a trigger and a heap. Each heap becomes the next action's trigger, so that actions are like dominoes toppling one into the next. Sequential analysis means following the play domino by domino from start to finish.

3. But do it backwards.

Going forwards allows unpredictable possibility.
Going backwards exposes that which is required.

Focus: Sequential analysis of actions is most useful when done backwards: from the end of the play back to the start. It is your best insurance that you understand why everything happens.

4. Stasis and Intrusion

Stasis is motionlessness: a condition of balance among various forces; a standing still; an unchanging stability; a state in which all forces balance each other, resulting in no movement. Stasis comes about at the close of the play when the major forces of the play either get what they want or are forced to stop trying.

Intrusion is a pushing, thrusting, or forcing in.
For a play to begin, there must be an intrusion.
Intrusion usually changes everything that can be changed.

Focus: Stasis is the status quo that has existed in the play's world up through its beginning. Intrusion is something that upsets the status quo, causing or releasing forces that compose the play's conflict and progress. When the forces no longer conflict, new stasis is achieved and the play ends.

5. Obstacle, Conflict

Dramatic conflict is a particular kind of interaction, deeply rooted in and inalienable from real-life behavior - when what someone wants meets the obstacle.

Me against myself

Me against other individuals

Me against society

Me against fate, or the universe, or natural forces, or God, or the gods.

The most important requirement of impersonation is plausibility.
A human being talks in order to get what he or she wants.
An obstacle is any resistance to my having what I want.

You do not really know a play until you see how every word is intended by its speaker to overcome some obstacle to what the speaker wants.

Focus: A character's want is opposed by some hindrance - by some obstacle. A character talks to maneuver another character or character in such a way that the obstacle to the want is removed. To understand a line of dialogue you must know what the speaker want and how the speaker intends the words spoken to overcome the obstacle to what is wanted.

6. Ignorance is bliss

Point by point through the script, know what information had been revealed and what has been withheld.

Focus: Often the core of dramatic tension resides in keeping information from the audience. Don't negate the tension by premature revelation.

7. Things theatrical

Things theatrical are all things that elicit a strong audience response.

Novelty is theatrical.

Change is theatrical.

Focus: Something is theatrical when it garners great audience attention and involvement. Good playwrights put their most important material into their most theatrical moments. Identifying the theatrical elements of a play helps discover what then playwright considers important.

Part II: Methods

8. Expositions

The revelation of necessary information.

1. that which is known to everyone on stage
2. that which known only to certain characters

Assume that exposition is directly relevant to the action.

Focus: Exposition is the revelation of information needed by the audience to understand the play's action. At its best, exposition involves the use of information by one character to propel another into action.

9. Forwards: hungry for next

A forward is anything that arouses an audience's interest in things yet to come.

Forwards focus audience attention where the playwright wants it.

A production that takes no pains to make the audience eager for the confrontation will be boring no matter how fascinating its constituent parts.

Focus: Dramatic tension requires that the audience desire to find out what is coming up. The greater the desire, the greater - and more active - the audience's involvement. Playwrights employ many techniques - forwards - to increase the thirst for what's coming up. Such techniques are also a key to spotting elements the playwright considers important.

10. Missing persons

Play characters are not real.

Scripts contain bones, not people.

What a character does is half the revelation; why is the other half.

Avowed action is not the same as true action.

Actions most truly reveal character.

Characters in plays change as little as people in real life; attitudes may change, methods may change....but more than likely, it is the situation which has changed.

Characterization is partly in the eye of the beholder, because we always judge others in terms of our individual selves.

A character laid out clearly, rationally, and fully explained is not only impossible, but dull and implausible.

Focus: Character is revealed primarily by what a character does; yet even the best of plays presents only a skeleton, because much of what the audience perceives as character has to do with the actor.

Moreover, character is drama's most subjective element, because we each perceive a particular character differently, depending on our own natures. The best reading approach is to discover the skeleton of character as revealed by action.

11. Image

An image is something we already know or can easily be told that is used to describe, illuminate, or expand upon something we don't know or cannot easily be told.

Precision at the expense of totality is for science; totality at the expense of precision is for art.

The simultaneous communication of both understanding and emotional experience is the domain of art.

Images reside in titles. If a title contains an image, know its implications and how they evoke the shape and/or nature of the play.

A successful image evokes different responses from person to person, yet falls within a certain common range for everyone.

Never underestimate the power of the repeating image.

Focus: An image is the use of something we know to tell us about something we don't know. Images evoke and expand, rather than define and limit. They call up associations that are not precisely the same from audience member to audience member, so provide a particularly personal kind of communication.

12. Theme

The theme of a play is an abstract concept which part or all of that play is about.

Focus: A theme is an abstract concept made concrete by a play's action. Theme is not meaning; it is a topic in the play. Theme is a result; it emerges from a script's workings, so examine a play for theme after you are thoroughly familiar with the play's foundation events.