

Report for CWP Playwriting Workshop Mini- Grant from the Connecticut Drama Association

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On May 10, 2008, several teachers and students from across Connecticut met at Stamford High School in two separate locales for playwriting workshops led by teaching artists from Young Playwrights Inc. in New York City. The workshops were funded by the Connecticut Drama Association and a mini grant awarded by CWP. The two YPI representatives came eagerly prepared with a mini selection of their games and improvisational development structures to use with both groups. Lucas, the leader of the teacher workshop, wrote a detailed reflection of the interactions in his group which is included with my own observations since this is where I spent most of my time- with the teachers. The students enjoyed all the same exercises with Janet, their YPI instructor.

We had a selection of teachers from around the state that immediately shared one thing in common. We were all stuck in I-95 traffic, so the workshop got started about a half hour late. Introductions were made discovering that the audience here today already had experience playwriting. People were generally high school teachers who are involved with theater as directors. We had one representative from Hartford Stage who is leading a Playwriting Workshop looking to expand her exercises. She also commissions new work for Hartford Stage. Most had some personal playwriting experience.

The first exercise was called “What's in a Name?”. Most of the name choices group members made were pretty straightforward and literal, but when Max named himself Max Ballzy, Lucas, the teacher, emphasized the importance of looking out for that one student who like Max, selects the outlandish name or does something really abstract or out of left field. He applauds strangeness, because this will in turn encourage others to take risks later.

We discussed the plays we're reading back at home and how names are used to reinforce character traits while giving clues to other aspects of a character. In playwriting, it's important to think about what a character wants and how different characters want different things. Choosing a name might be a segue to that aspect of characterization.

The “One-minute Play”, the second exercise an exercise that works on dialogue versus conversation, is a great icebreaker, although by the time we used it, the ice had already melted. This prompt yielded several different results. Peter did a piece which takes place at a locker, very specific to setting. One student was trying to figure out if another student stole his shoes. We discussed how this conflict made the scene compelling and how to make the scene more dramatic by incorporating different details. We suggested introducing why the

student needed the shoes and how necessary they were at this moment in time.

Max had a stage direction or two in his piece and asked if that was allowed. Lucas said that if students use some stage directions, don't discourage it, and like "strangeness" we should applaud its use ASAP.

Jessica's piece was musical and less plot-driven thus creating mood... "a lonely nighttime mood, talking about the moon". Specific setting elements will conjure images that engage the audience. We brainstormed where the piece might go from there.

Sue was being really shy and had some trouble writing. She was getting caught in her head. Later on Lucas was able to encourage her to let her ideas flow without prejudging them.

The third exercise, "The Dollar Bill" begins with an improvisational exercise which involves raising the stakes to create interest, in which a person drops a bill, seen by another who picks it up. The object of the game is for the first person to convince the second to return the bill to its rightful owner. Max and Peter did a boring version of this one, with repetitive action. We created a need for the money- a bus ticket out of town! We imagined that the person stealing the money was homeless and consequently found our setting- a bus depot.

We were handed one photograph, all the same, to interpret. The name of this exercise is "The Need to Tell". Lucas emphasized to first see what is there in the picture, before making interpretations. Writing is about making choices and it's useful for the writer to know they're making a choice when they make an interpretation. This helps combat the cry of, "I don't have any ideas." The group named the woman Betty, from Ohio, 1950s. She's in her 40's. Then the questions came, "What does she want? What are her dreams? Etc." Then we wrote.

We shared several monologues. Jessica and Max wrote very similar stories but the character of Betty was very different. In both, Betty was talking to her child. In Julie's it was a son. In Max's it was a daughter. In both, the child just walked in and discovered what Betty "really" does for money. In both, Betty was trying explain herself to the child. In both, Betty was trying to get the child to understand why she was living a sordid lifestyle. Max's version however was indignant and aggressive. Max's Betty was going to force the daughter to see things her way. Julie's Betty was wounded. Her Betty was defensive, and apologetic. We talked a little bit about the different tones in the language- different language choices, different rhythms. One was slow, the other, Max's, was fast. One was quiet, the other was loud and brash.

We also discussed how the gender of the child really affected the way Betty

behaved. It's more embarrassing for the Betty whose son discovered her, than the Betty whose daughter discovered the truth.

Gabby talked for a while about realizing very suddenly how important it is to clarify to whom you're talking.

Then we tried tying this exercise back to the naming exercise to give Betty a last name that would reflect some aspect of her personality or personal desires. We got Betty Garb. Peter then threw in, depending on which version of the character we were representing, Betty Guard, reflected Betty's defensiveness.

Our next exercise after a lunch break involved music. Lucas decided that he would require that Susan, although quiet and reluctant, should share her writing. After she spoke for a while we realized that she imagines things in terms of movement with highly theatrical settings- lights, sets, and so forth. Lucas encouraged her by saying it was OK to talk out your ideas and understood that some people feel the pressure to be totally organized before writing things down. Sue agreed she was a perfectionist. When Lucas suggested that we convert our favorite settings into two-person scenes, Max said that this would be difficult because his setting was more cinematic than theatrical. Several agreed on this point since we're so invested cinematically these days. We talked. Lucas suggested that we look at the most important elements in the scene. A discussion ensued breaking down Max's story of a man who's been in hiding and finally comes out of hiding to be caught. If the most important aspect of the story is the time he spends hiding then leading up to the decision to come out of hiding, then all that needs to be conveyed is an interior of a cave, which in theory could be no set at all or a spotlight on a man sitting on a mostly dark stage.

We did the same with Sue and her setting, which involved a kid washing a car. In theory, you could even put a car on stage. She said she was interested in the spraying water, which again could potentially be done on stage or simply conveyed with sound.

Lucas pointed out that these types of conversations could be very useful to the students. Take a student's setting and talk about how different setting elements will emphasize different aspects of the story and vice versa. He also recommended bringing in lots of pictures of different stage sets to expand what the students consider stage-worthy.

We wrote for a little bit and then heard a scene from Jessica, which was quite effective. The piece was a very "Southern" piece, think Tennessee Williams. In this case, even the dialect conveyed the setting, perhaps more effectively than any set piece on stage.

"The Letter" was the last exercise, working on voice, which needed to be abbreviated since time was short. We were encouraged to use a character already

generated today.

Lucas suggested writing from one historical character to another to explore voice from another person, otherwise, people had an easy time with this one. We looked at a couple of key phrases that identified the characters and their voices that people used in the group. We discussed formality versus informality of the language. Ironically, Jessica wrote from the Little Mermaid, but, because she had no voice, the letter became a distinct way for her to communicate. In Paul's piece, there was distinction between the flowery language of one character and the more direct practical language of another. Lucas noted that the problem between these two characters arises out of a romantic point of view coming into conflict with a practical point of view.

At this point in the day, we converged with the student group to share pieces of writing. The teachers graciously extended the limited time to mostly students who each read something for the larger group. One teacher, Peter shared his writing. The teachers made simple observations about what worked. Occasionally they went so far as to explain *why* something worked. If not, then Lucas jumped in to second their point and explain why it worked. Not once did any of the teachers say anything negative or give an opinion that wasn't supported by a specific observation about the writing itself. The students in turn, commented on Paul's very effective use of pauses, which indicated where the character (Betty the dancer) was hiding something, or having difficulty admitting to something, or lying, etc.

Janet, the students' teacher, expressed that confidence built throughout the day among the unfamiliar individuals in the group. One boy, the youngest of the group, erased his one-minute play because he thought it was really bad. The biggest leap in the workshop was this same boy, who, for the very next exercise, "Need to Tell", wrote the greatest monologue --which he read, got great feedback on from his peers, and felt great pride. From then on, he wanted to read everything he wrote and seemed to gain a lot of confidence in his own creative ability.

Although we got out a little later than anticipated, everyone left on a high note expressing interest to use the insights gained in this workshop on their own.