

David Edgar, *How Plays Work: A Practical Guide to Playwriting*

(Nick Hern, 2009), pp. 228

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In person David Edgar is an imposing figure, having height, ‘stage’ presence, and an obvious confidence in his knowledge of theatre. It is Edgar who founded the first playwriting studies course at the University of Birmingham in 1989. His plays include *Destiny*, *Maydays*, *Pentecost* and *Playing with Fire*, and an adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* for the RSC. With these credentials it is no surprise that Edgar’s book title *How Plays Work* seems to suggest that he believes in his own hubris, a thought which is immediately dispelled in his “Beginnings” chapter. Edgar cuttingly refers to “the British cult of the crusty amateur; that prejudice which in the theatre, is expressed in the belief that while actors can benefit from training, directors and writers are supposed to acquire their skills telepathically” (xii). He then acknowledges that “there is undoubtedly a danger that books like this will encourage mechanical and formalistic writing” but argues that “playwriting is an activity subject to the constraints of reason” (xv).

Edgar addresses this question of reason by first explaining his belief in parallels between story lines. He suggests, for example, that the stories of King Lear and Cinderella have much in common: “Two sisters are unjustly preferred over a third sister. Despite their efforts, the younger sister marries into royalty and her wicked sisters are confounded” (3). Edgar calls these structures the “skeleton.” Everybody shares a common structure of bones but we all have a very different physical appearance. Without our bones we would be “indistinguishable heaps of blubber on the floor” (5). Edgar suggests that “without this kind of common architecture the uniqueness of the playwright’s vision will be invisible” (5).

Edgar wants his reader to observe that as human beings we automatically look for similarities between narratives, and this leads him on to a discussion of how an audience seeks “plausibility,” “coherence” and to “judge a play by certain conventions” (8). It is important to have awareness that an audience has prior knowledge of how a drama, tragedy or comedy, and all its subgenres work because the playwright can then choose to confound or fulfil their expectations. This leads on to Edgar’s later chapter on film and other media in which he closely describes how knowledge of romantic comedies, thrillers and other modern genres are important to the work of playwrights, simply because the audience already has these models in mind.

In addition to his chapters on “Audience” and “Genre,” there are sections on Actions, Character, Structure, Scenes and Devices. These overlap as Edgar continues his anatomy of how plays work by describing the differences between story and plot, scenes

and format, role and character. He discusses the building blocks of plays and how scenes work. Then he shows how devices – “smaller mechanisms, within scenes or between them – manipulate time and space in order to draw attention to common patterns” (201).

Edgar’s choice of examples are largely from the British theatrical grand narrative, from Shakespeare via the Restoration, Sheridan and Shaw to the flowering of new drama since the Second World War. He also refers to some of the classical Greeks, a lot of Ibsen and Chekhov as well as Brecht and Arthur Miller, texts which generally are well-known in Britain. This helps enormously in understanding the concepts discussed. Edgar employs a wide variety of quotes from George Burns to Oscar Wilde, John Cleese to Max Stafford-Clark; these give the book substance, whilst sometimes offering contradictory insights and some humour. Edgar’s own writing has tremendous pace, assuming, as it does, that the reader has some focused knowledge of the theatre. Very occasionally it slows down to include a metaphor such as ‘feet of clay’ or colloquialism such as ‘come-uppance,’ but it rarely loses its sense of purpose.

Edgar began his book with a kind of apology. By the end of the book he has lost this timidity stating that “plays themselves work within recognisable and predictable structures and patterns, providing expectations which the audience brings with them into the playhouse, whether we like it or not” (202). It is his answer to those who appear to think that rules cannot be applied to great plays of depth and uniqueness. Other authors of books on playwriting have ignored the question of whether playwriting should be taught, and assumed that there is something to be learned but each has his own angle: Paul Castagno’s *New Playwriting Strategies* (2001) has a language based approach to playwriting; Alan Ayckbourn’s *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* (2002) uses only examples from his own work; Tim Fountain’s *So You Want to be a Playwright?* (2007) has a large practical section on agents, theatres and production processes; and Martin Meisel’s book, also entitled *How Plays Work* (2007), places the emphasis on reading plays. For anyone who is concerned about the possibility of Edgar’s book leading to formulaic writing, Edgar proves the point that it is a book to encourage a writer of plays to become a playwright, by acquiring the craft to have mastery over his art.