

WHY WRITE FOR THEATRE?

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In the high school I attended in the 1960's, we had an extraordinary tradition, one that I can't imagine existed anywhere else in this country. My school was an all-boys Catholic seminary set among Chicago's Lithuanian, Irish and Black neighborhoods. Discipline at the school was strong, the syllabus demanding. You had four years of Latin and, if you were good, a year of ancient Greek. We would-be priests in our trim jackets and ties and neat haircuts were groomed for gravitas. And why not? We thought we had a divine calling. A vocation.

The extraordinary school tradition was this: at the end of senior year a boy could take part in creating what was called The Senior Mock, a show that sent up the school's faculty. All the students attended the performance, riotously, and it was considered bad form for a faculty member not to show up and face roasting. The school's hard-nosed rector vetted the script beforehand, but he only deleted obscenities. That made it perfectly acceptable for one boy to imitate an algebra teacher's Elmer-Fudd-like speech pattern. In my year's Senior Mock, I played Mr. Hild, the chain-smoking English teacher who coached the track team *while smoking*. Not only did I get to improvise some Mr. Hild-ish dialogue, I got to smoke onstage. I also wrote a song sending up a particularly free-thinking, hippie-dippie religion teacher, and sang the song, a cappella, in front of a crowd of six hundred boys. It's one of the bravest things I've ever done.

I wrote my first play when I was nine and attended theatre enthusiastically through high school, but The Senior Mock focused my attention on theatre in a new way. It wasn't Ibsen, it was *fun*. I also see now that it gathered up all the threads that have gone into theater since Aeschylus. We pimply adolescents didn't stop to think we were doing the same thing

Aristophanes was doing in 400 B.C. We didn't know that we just wanted – like him and every other playwright – to desperately and joyously mirror a world we'd come to know, to have a say about it, to hint what we'd change about it, and to celebrate what had made us laugh about it before we sailed on.

That same year, my senior year, transformed by seeing Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, I left the path to the priesthood and forked onto the road to playwriting.

If you want to work in the art form that most profoundly sets up a glass to humanity, then the theater is for you. After all, the human world doesn't present itself to us as printed words or sculpted marble, as dancers moving to music, or fixed on canvas or film or pixels, but as bodies moving in space and in real time, talking to each other or us or to themselves, working something out to the music of the human voice. Theater is the ideal imitation of existence because our own lives are a daily imitation of theatre. We occur as human beings through inner monologue and outer dialogue, in scenes of interwoven tension and resolution mixed with comic byplay. As drama. As comedy. Life is a live, local, handmade event. In other words, theatre.

There are a thousand reasons, mundane and magnificent, to write for the theater. Because your spouse keeps telling you that your life as a podiatrist would make for a terrific play. Because you want to commemorate a parent or a sibling or a friend. Because you want to resuscitate a failed relationship and make your one-time partner or lost love speak again. Because you want to send a letter to the dead by way of the living. Because you think Hollywood is going to buy your play and make you rich. Because you saw *The Star-Spangled Girl* at your community theater and you think you can do better. Because you glimpsed two tramps waiting beside a road and you want to imagine out loud what was going on there and who those people were.

Or you write for the theatre because you just have to. It's called a vocation.

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