Plays
2

> The dramatic critic must regard a script in terms of its performance potential. This means it cannot be treated as existing outside space and time . . . but rather as being embedded in them, as carrying spatial and temporal implications in its very fabric.
>
> Richard Hornby, *Script into Performance*

In my hand I am holding a playscript. It is a brand new paperback copy of Pam Gems's play, *Stanley*. The covers are smooth and unmarked, the pages densely packed with all the corners intact. I look inside the back cover and notice that this playscript is 88 pages long. Inside the front cover I find six unnumbered pages, which contain: (1) a brief biographical sketch of playwright, Pam Gems; (2) a list of other playscripts from the publisher; (3) a title page; (4) the copyright and cautions page; (5) a list of the cast and artistic staff of the original production, which opened on February 1, 1996; and (6) a list of the characters in the play. Page 1 (implied because the first actual number to appear is a '2' on the following page) gets off to a familiar start: ACT 1, SCENE 1. A quick riffle through the still-crisp pages assures me that the words are arranged in a familiar spacial format, and distinguished by three typefaces. The character names, all flush with the left margin, are printed in capital letters. The dialogue, following the character names and continuing in indented blocks, appears in plain, lowercase type with appropriate capitals. The stage directions, sometimes preceding the segment of dialogue to which they refer and sometimes in separate, indented blocks, are all in italics. There is no doubt, I conclude. I am indeed holding a playscript. I may also conclude that I am not holding a novel, a work of nonfiction prose, or a poem. Generally speaking, one can recognize a playscript at first sight.

The differences between plays and other forms of writing are considerably more than skin deep, however. Plays read differently from novels. The strategies for finding reliable information in plays are not the same as those we use, for example, to gather facts from an article on continental drift. Very often, because there may be several characters in a play, each speaking from his or her own personal perspective, the facts the reader gathers are ambiguous and contradictory. It is sometimes more difficult to figure out who is telling the true story in a play than it is to separate truth from lies in speeches delivered by rival political candidates.

I have chosen to begin my exploration of the relationship between theatre designers and scripts by taking a close look at some of the differences between reading plays and reading other forms of writing. Most of these differences are obvious, indeed, they are so obvious that many readers tend to overlook them. Most readers, including those who work and study in the theatre, read far more narrative prose than dramatic writing in their daily lives. Like poetry, dramatic writing has its own forms for arranging words, and devices for communicating feelings and ideas. Reading a playscript requires a particular combination of awareness, attentiveness, and participation on the part of the reader. It is my hope that the following pages will help theatre designers develop this awareness and attentiveness, practice reading playscripts in a focused, active manner, and, in the process, become better collaborative partners. "I want the designers I work with to begin by talking to me about the play," Jon Jory, the producing director at Actors Theatre of Louisville, remarked recently. "I want, and need, to know what they've discovered in the script. Unfortunately, in my experience, most designers don't pay enough attention to the play and only want me to look at their research."

Plays, Prose, and Poetry

As children develop their reading skills in school, their focus is mainly on prose texts, particularly nonfiction prose. Although stories and poems make up the bulk of what is read to children, school-age readers need to learn the skills that make it possible for them to extract specific information from a variety of written materials and, through reading, to learn facts about many subjects. Many programs used to enhance reading skills feature short essays on subjects such as: "What Is Light?," "Are Snakes Slimy?," and "Ben

Franklin Flies a Kite." These reading experiences are followed by multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions to test the young reader's comprehension of what he or she has just read. The child who is able to find correct answers in the words and phrases of informative prose paragraphs will soon be able to tackle a history textbook or an essay on rain forests.

Far too many reading teachers and reading textbooks continue to apply the process of reading for objective facts in nonfiction prose to reading prose fiction. Stories are followed by questions: Who is Jane? Who is Dick? What is the name of Jane and Dick's dog? List the most important things that happen in this story.

There is a constant emphasis, over many school years, on the written word as a simple conduit for factual information. This emphasis is responsible for considerable confusion, frustration, and irritation in older students who, in a high school literature class, suddenly find themselves face to face with a dense piece of imaginative prose fiction, such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which does not lend itself to objective questions or straightforward answers. Prose fiction is often followed in the literature curriculum by poetry. Poems by Keats, Shelley, Yeats, or Eliot may be included, all of which are built on schemes of multiple meanings and ambiguities, rather than the straightforward delivery of information. By its very nature, poetry seems to mock the fact-finding reading skills so diligently acquired by young readers. Plays, which turn up only infrequently in general literature courses, are often the most challenging of all literary forms for the "prose-equals-information"–trained reader. Plays are deceptive. The sentences and paragraphs that appear to be informative prose are actually opinionated bits of dialogue spoken by many different voices. When plays are read for simple meaning, huge chunks appear to have little or no narrative coherence.

In certain ways, playscripts have more in common with poems than with prose. Both are constructed from a variety of components, such as line length, rhyme, stanza, sound, act, metaphor. Some of these structures are traditional and some are innovations in the work of a particular writer or group of writers. When we look at them in the most simplistic way possible, these structures are methods for choosing and assembling words in order to achieve a specific effect or meaning. The meaning of a poem or of a playscript is communicated both by the structure, or shape, of the piece, and by the words themselves. A reader receives the meaning of a Shakespearean sonnet, for

example, by knowing what the words mean and by seeing where the words are located in the construct. Likewise, a play reveals its meaning not only through what the characters say but by where, when, why, and to whom they say it. An equation for reading a play, or a poem, might be:

words + structure + reader = meaning

Theatre designers are specialized readers who regularly read plays because they have been hired, or assigned, to create designs for a production and must find all the information (including inspiration) they need to inform their designs. In order to find these pieces of information, however, and to place them properly within the context of the play as a whole, designers have to learn to read playscripts with a clear understanding of exactly what a playscript is, how it is put together, and where and how to look for its most important clues. Because all of us have much more experience in reading novels and short stories than in reading plays, I will spend the next few pages examining some of the most significant differences between the ways prose fiction writers and playwrights tell their stories.

Reading Fiction Versus Reading Plays

Reading a play is very different from reading a novel or a short story. When I plunge into Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* or John Irving's *Son of the Circus*, or into a mystery novel by P. D. James, I enter a fictional universe which is complete within itself. I become a passive receiver of the words and, quite literally, leave the work of driving up to the author. I rely on prose passages to convey me from event to event, to describe scenes and characters, to comment on conversations between characters, and, overtly or subtly, to suggest what conclusions I should reach about the meaning of the novel or story.

Prose fiction writers drive their novels and stories by means of a narrative voice. The narrative voice in works of fiction appears in two main forms: the omniscient narrator and the first-person narrator. The omniscient narrator speaks in the third person and does not actively participate as a character in the action of the novel or story. Most fiction readers assume that the descriptive and expositional sections of such novels are being spoken by the author. The omniscient narrator is, therefore, a voice of considerable authority.

A first person narrator speaks with the voice of a character in the novel or short story. This involved narrator, speaking in the first person, usually participates in the action and narrates the story from the character's perspective. A first person narrator cannot "get into the head" of another character or objectively describe a scene if he or she was not present. First person narrators, therefore, do not have the same degree of authority displayed by omniscient narrators. However, since the author created the first person narrator to be his or her mouthpiece, most readers take it for granted that this character speaks for the author, that the first person narrator is merely an omniscient voice working under an assumed name.

A play, which is composed almost entirely of the direct speech of dramatic characters, each speaking from his or her individual perspective within a singular fictional reality and without the intervention of a narrative voice, presents an entirely different reading experience. In a play, who speaks for the author? Who makes sure all readers are following the same course of action? Who tells us what the characters are really thinking? Who tells us how to think about the characters and how to interpret the action? The simple answer is: no one. No single authoritative narrative voice exists in plays. Furthermore, because no such voice exists, a play reader who remains passive, waiting for an author/driver to describe the scene, point out the action, or illuminate the characters, will inevitably get lost along the way. It is up to the play reader to find, within the words the characters say, the details and the connections that reveal where the play takes place, who the characters are, and what happens. Although the fictional ingredients of a novel and a play are similar—an imagined world, characters, action—the mode of communication in a play demands much more active participation from the reader than a novel, or a short story.

I do not mean to suggest that reading a novel is necessarily easier than reading a play, although many people (including some theatre designers!) believe this to be the case. Many novels are extremely complex, multilayered entities that challenge the reader's knowledge, experience, and imagination. In general, however, a novel is complete within itself (even if it takes a dozen readings to uncover what is there), while a play is a carefully drafted, detailed plan for a complex production: the fully mounted theatrical event, complete with performers and audience. Plans, by nature and by design, require the reader to see and understand the finished product. The differences between reading a novel and reading a play are rather like the differences between

walking around inside an actual building and reading the blueprint of that building. When I visit a friend's new house, I am more apt to appreciate its aesthetic qualities—the richness of its wood floors, the quality of light from its windows, the presence of a fireplace or a handsome stairway—than I am to focus on its underlying structure of struts and beams, or on the human thought processes that brought the house from ideas and images to reality. On the other hand, when I read a blueprint of a house, I have to become thoroughly engaged with the smallest detail of the graphically coded plan in order to see the potential structure it represents. I mentally collect and interpret symbols that tell me the size, shape, and arrangement of rooms, the access between rooms, and the location of doors, windows, and closets. Only after I have gathered a sufficient amount of information am I able to visualize the house from the plan. And, although certain practical skills, such as a knowledge of drafting symbols, measurements, scale, and proportion, are helpful to any reader of a blueprint, it is within my imagination that I ultimately translate the plan into the image of a house.

A play reader goes through a similar process, building the image of a whole fictional construct from the thousands of facts revealed in the dialogue of dramatic characters. When a playwright is particularly skillful at creating the ideas and images for a play and drafting it accurately, the play reader will be able to assimilate pieces of dramatic action and characterization and build a fictional, theatrical construct within his or her imagination. This close association playwrights have with building, constructing, and making is the reason why we name them playwrights rather than playwriters. There is no doubt that playwrights write, but they also build, make, shape, construct, arrange, rearrange, assemble, level, and even restore and renovate. Successful play readers are active participants who read the plan/playscript and imagine the play/production.

A costume designer contrasts his experiences reading Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes*. The Wharton novel and the Hellman play are set at about the same time and share some similarity of theme:

> "I just got around to reading *The House of Mirth* last year. A friend gave me a copy for Christmas and I spent the whole week between Christmas and New Year's inside that world. The book dragged me in, held me there. I'd start reading and before I knew it two hours had gone by and it was a shock having to come back to family, food, and football games. I felt like I was living

in the book. At about the same time I was reading *The Little Foxes*, which I was going to design in February. I'd never read it before. I loved it. It excited me. I could hear actors speaking the lines. I combed their conversations for facts. I began to "see" what color dress Regina would have chosen, and why. I never "lost" myself; I was always alert. It was fun, sometimes exciting. It was not restful."

What Is Happening?

Prose fiction provides readers with much more information about what is going on in the story, and in many more direct ways, than playscripts. Consider the following examples:

> "First of all Alyosha went to see his father. As he approached the house, he remembered that the day before his father had insisted that he should enter it without being noticed by his brother Ivan. 'Why that?' Alyosha thought suddenly now. 'If father wants to tell something to me alone in secret, then why should I go in secret? I suppose in his excitement yesterday he wanted to say something else, but did not manage to,' he decided. He was nevertheless glad when Marfa, who opened the gate to him (Grigory, it seemed, was lying ill in the cottage), told him in reply to his question that Ivan had gone out two hours before." (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, part 2, chapter 2)

In this passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* , the reader finds out where Alyosha is going and that he went there the day before. We hear him thinking about his father's behavior during yesterday's visit with regard to his brother, Ivan. In the second sentence, Alyosha approaches his destination. We find out who opens the door for him, who does not open the door for him and why, and that his brother is not at home.

Admittedly, this paragraph has more meaning for the reader who has read the entire book up to this point. Nevertheless, it is easy to figure out what is happening on the surface and to pick out the enormous number of facts Dostoyevsky has managed to pack into six sentences. Imagine trying to put all these actions and thoughts into a passage of dialogue!

As a contrast to the excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov*, here is the dialogue from a short scene at the end of act 1 of David Hare's *Racing Demon*:

LIONEL: Tony. Tony.

TONY: It's you, Lionel.

LIONEL: You look like a ghost. I came in. I wanted . . . to ask you to dinner.

TONY: Dinner? That's very kind. But I can't. I've got . . . another invitation.

LIONEL: Really?

TONY: In town.

LIONEL: Oh yes?

TONY: I'm going to see . . . someone else.

LIONEL: Well, then, some other time.

TONY: Some other time, yes. Well, I must be going, or else I'll be late. Good to see you Lionel. I'll see you soon.

LIONEL: What can you do, Lord? You tell me. You show me the way. Go on. You explain why all this hurt has to come. Tell me. You understand everything. Why do the good always fight among themselves?

There is no narration or description in this passage, no narrative voice to tell the story, to reveal the thoughts of the characters, or to give any background for present action. Stage directions provide a few additional clues—the scene takes place in a church; Tony is on his knees throughout most of the scene; Tony exits before Lionel's final speech—but there is no storyteller/author's voice to guide the reader through what is actually happening, or what the characters are thinking during these moments in this fictional world. Outside the larger context of the play, this passage lacks even simple surface meaning. Reading these lines is a bit like being shown a fragment of a building blueprint, perhaps a section showing a small, rectangular space with two windows, a door, and what may be a closet or a pantry or perhaps an entryway to outside. Not only does the fragment tell the reader of the blueprint nothing much about the whole house, it says little or nothing definitive about the room itself.

What Is This Place?

Compare the ease with which a fiction writer is able to come right out and describe the house, the rooms, and the general atmosphere in which

the characters live with the playwright's problem of inserting well-motivated descriptive details into pertinent and believable dialogue.

> As a house, Barton Cottage, though small, was comfortable and compact; but as a cottage it was defective, for the building was regular, the roof was tiled, the window shutters were not painted green, nor were the walls covered with honeysuckles. A narrow passage led directly through the house into the garden behind. On each side of the entrance was a sitting room about sixteen feet square, and beyond them were the offices and the stairs. Four bedrooms and two garrets formed the rest of the house. It had not been built many years and was in good repair. (Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, chapter 6)

This paragraph illustrates another example of a commonplace function of the descriptive narrative voice in novels that is not generally present in dramatic dialogue: the narrator not only presents an authoritative description of the scene, but also guides the reader toward an approved attitude about what is being described: Barton Cottage provides adequate shelter but it does not meet aesthetic expectations, which would have required an irregular floor plan, a tiled roof, green shutters, and a profusion of honeysuckle. Once again, consider the sheer amount of accessible information contained in this paragraph and try to imagine how you would convey it in a dramatic context using character-specific speech and dialogue appropriate to the dramatic situation.

There are a few playwrights who deliberately ignore the particulars of place and leave all such decisions to theatre designers. Most, however, work hard to slip descriptive clues into the mouths of their characters. This is a difficult, often frustrating task for the playwright, because descriptions of place in a dramatic dialogue must be appropriate to the action of the scene and to the nature of the character who is speaking. Place descriptions in plays do not come in nicely organized paragraphs; they pop up randomly and in a variety of contexts.

In Shakespeare's plays, stage directions are virtually nonexistent and those that appear in printed texts have often been added by later editors and stage managers. Because these plays were originally produced on an all but bare stage, Shakespeare became a master at inserting place descriptions into his dialogue, and thereby setting the scene. None of them seem arbitrary or extraneous because they invariably allow the character who delivers the lines to reveal a strong attitude about the place and tell the reader something about the character's own nature as well as the nature of the play.

KING [DUNCAN]: This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

BANQUO: This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
By his loved mansionry that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here. No jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle.
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed
The air is delicate.

(*Macbeth*, act I, scene 6)

BOTTOM: Are we all met?

QUINCE: Pat, pat; and here's a marvailes convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring-house, and we will do it in action as we will do it before the Duke.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act III, scene 1)

Twentieth-century playwrights tackle the matter of place descriptions in a variety of ways, in general, using conversational strategies that do not violate action or character. Indeed, most modern playwrights contrive, like Shakespeare, to create dramatic dialogue in which the description of place also advances the action of the play, the development of a character or (and preferably) both.

PETER: Why did you come here? I had to chase all over town looking for you, only to finish up in this dump.

HELEN: Oh shut up! I've got a cold.

PETER: What on earth made you choose such a ghastly district?

HELEN: I can't afford to be so classy.

PETER: Tenements, cemetery, slaughterhouse.

HELEN: Oh we've got the lot here.

PETER: Nobody could live in a place like this.

JO: Only about fifty thousand people.

PETER: And a snotty-nosed daughter.

(Shelagh Delany, *A Taste of Honey*, act 1, scene 1)

VOICEOVER: They are concerned with interior decoration.

JERRY: So I'm tearing out that entire wall. Open all this up.

CATHY: Uh-huh.

JERRY: Then I buy good furniture.

CATHY: Uh-huh.

JERRY: I might take out that wall, too.

CATHY: Don't want to take out too many walls.

JERRY: Well, then, no more—just those two.

CATHY: Uh-huh.

(Constance Congdon, *Tales of the Lost Formicans*, act 1)

ALEX: What is that?

FANNY: Snow. Unless I miss my guess.

ALEX: Cold and wet on the tongue. Melts right off.

FANNY: Snow it is.

ALEX: Like no snow I've known before.

FANNY: A new snow. A strange snow. An unknown snow.

MARY: Lambent. Luminous.

ALEX: Snow from the moon, ladies!

FANNY: Yes!

MARY: Yes! Lunar snow is not annoying.

(Eric Overmyer, *On the Verge*, act 2)

Theatre designer/readers must become particularly adept at recognizing, interpreting, and seeing places through the eyes of characters speaking the dialogue of playscripts. Sometimes, as in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, different characters will describe the play's place differently, each from his or her own perspective. It becomes a fascinating design problem to figure out what the Tyrone summer house in New England is *really* like. Here are a few dialogue "clues":

MARY: His real estate bargains don't work out so well.

*

TYRONE: This house has been a home again.

*

MARY: I've never felt it was my home. It was wrong from the start. Everything was done in the cheapest way. Your father would never spend the money to make it right. It's just as well we haven't any friends here. I'd be ashamed to have them step in the door.

*

MARY: He's even proud of having this shabby place. He loves it here.

*

TYRONE: . . . I'm taxed to death.

*

EDMUND: Yes, on property worth a quarter of a million.

Consider the following questions—and the absence of simple, authoritative answers: What does James Tyrone "love" about his summer home? How shabby is "shabby"? Who are the friends Mary would be "ashamed" to have in the house? With what sort of house is Mary comparing this house? What is the real value of this piece of property? In the absence of a prose narrator to describe the property to us objectively, the reader/designer is forced to see the clues the playwright has drafted into the play's blueprint, to consider them individually and in context, and, eventually, to build the house and furnish it in his or her imagination. Because the clues about the true nature of the Tyrone summer home can be interpreted and assessed in different ways, general readers, and especially theatre designers, will imagine many different versions of the world in which *Long Day's Journey into Night* takes place. It is important to remember that if readers have been equally keen in recognizing and assessing the clues, no one image will be more *right* than any other. (We almost never call a theatre design *right* or *wrong*. A good design *works*; a poor one *doesn't work*. Right and wrong are absolutes and harken back to some authority, whereas working and not working suggest a range of possibilities and an ongoing process.)

Who Are These People?

Without an authorial voice to provide a reader/designer with the inside scoop on the motivations beneath what characters say, theatre designers, particularly

Figure 2–1. *Continued.*

those responsible for creating the spaces in which characters live and the clothes they wear, must figure out ways to get inside the fictional heads of the characters through whose words, stories, descriptions, actions, and conflicts all plays are revealed. I like to think of this process as interviewing, or even having imaginary conversations with characters. But how, you may well ask, do living, breathing human readers manage to have conversations with purely fictional characters who exist only in plays?

As we have already seen with descriptions of place, in the case of James Tyrone's summer cottage, for example, the characters in a play view their world in very different ways. Designers cannot know what to believe about what a character says unless they know as much as possible about the nature of the character who is speaking. Like our interactions with fellow humans in daily life, we cannot begin to know the nature of a character in a play until we have gathered specific information about the character, usually through a combination of direct contact, observation, and other sources. Once we have enough information to feel that we understand the character, the next step is to examine this knowledge in relationship both to the world

of the play, and to the way in which each of us understands human nature and expects human beings, including ourselves, to speak, think, and behave.

I approach the process of getting to know a character in active and personal terms—as a designer *talking to* a character—because this method emphasizes the importance of focusing on a unique entity, a specific fictional creation who is embodied only in the words of the playscript. The reader, whose human consciousness is constantly shifting, can raise a variety of issues and ask many different questions from many different points of view; the character, however, who exists entirely within the play, can respond only with the facts contained in the playscript. (If it occurs to you that confining your direct connection with a dramatic character to the text of the play in which that character appears will limit your design imagination, you can quickly dispel this concern by recalling the scores of text-based settings in which characters such as Hamlet, Volpone, Harlequin, Oedipus, Harpagon, and Medea have continued to come alive through many centuries of reexamination.)

But, you might object, this is character analysis, and is not character analysis the work of actors and directors? Costume designers often tell me that they rely on directors and, particularly in situations where a resident costume designer is working with a resident acting company, on individual actors to interpret the characters as they develop in the rehearsal process. Why should designers, who are already overworked, spend precious time getting to know characters, in a sense duplicating work already being done by others? My answer is simple: I believe a theatre production works best, and is most alive, when every member of the visual and performance team has connected individually and directly with the play's text, and has had his or her own conversations with the dramatic characters *as well as* with each other. In this way the production collaboration benefits from the insights of many attentive, active readers and the images of many imaginations.

In his book *The Dramatic Imagination*, the gifted and articulate theatre designer, Robert Edmond Jones, says, "The designer must learn to sense the atmosphere of the play with unusual clearness and exactness. He must actually live in it for a time, immerse himself in it, be baptized by it," and "the stage costume has an added significance in the theatre in that it is created to enhance the particular quality of a special occasion. It is designed for a particular character in a particular scene in a particular play—not just for a character in a scene in a play, but for *that* character, in *that* scene, in *that* play—and accordingly it is an organic and necessary part of the drama in which is appears."

How do we get to know "*that* character" in "*that* scene" in "*that* play"? Once again it is useful to compare the different ways in which readers get to know and understand characters in prose fiction and in playscripts. The following

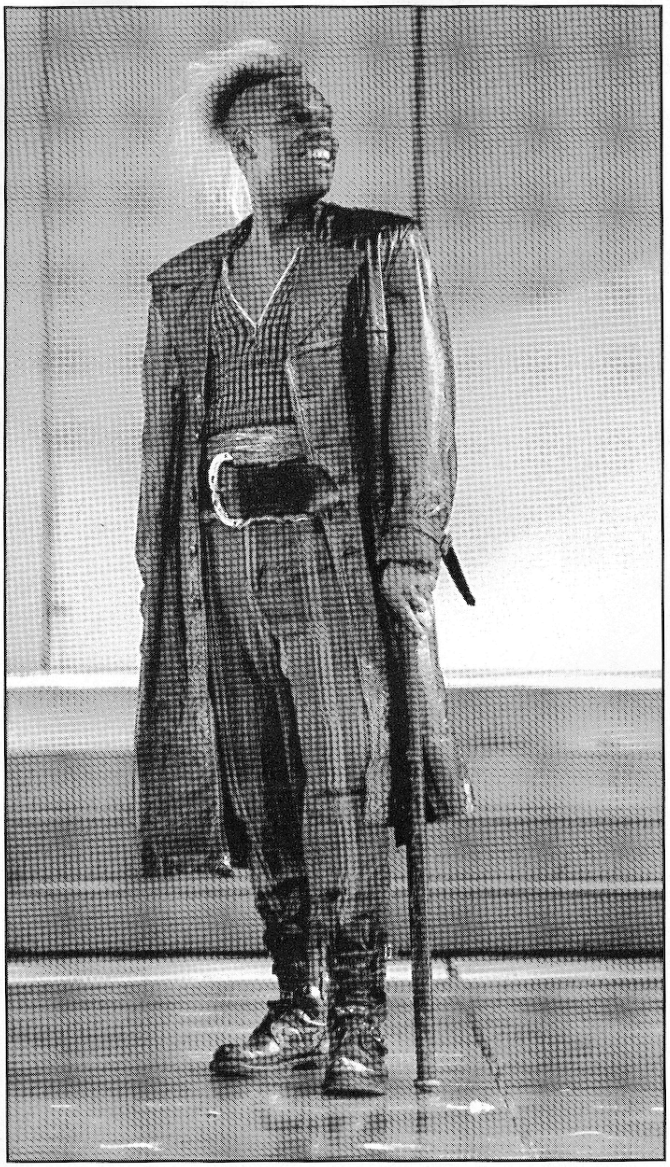

Figure 2–2. *A costume obviously designed in Robert Edmond Jones's words, for "that character, in that scene, in that play." Craig Wallace as Jack Cade in Henry VI at The Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, D.C., adapted and directed by Michael Kahn. Photograph by Carol Rosegg.*

sentence, spoken by the novel's omniscient narrator, sums up David, a character in John Fowles's *The Ebony Tower*: "David was a young man who was above all tolerant, fair-minded and inquisitive." How would a playwright convey this information? (No, it is not enough for one character in a play to describe another character as "young, tolerant, fair-minded, and inquisitive." In a play, the opinion of one character is only that—one character's opinion—and carries no more authority than any other character's opinion.) Discovering the truth, or truths, about dramatic characters is very much like developing a general opinion about a new acquaintance, a co-worker, or a political candidate in everyday life. We accumulate information about the person, or character, by observing speech, specific actions, and general behavior. Some of the information we receive first-hand and some is reported to us. Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a modern American Everyman with a multifaceted, often contradictory nature. Here are a few clues to Willy Loman's character a reader can accumulate from the play's dialogue.

LINDA: But you're sixty years old. They can't expect you to keep traveling every week.

*

WILLY: If old man Wagner was alive I'd a been in charge of New York now!

*

WILLY: I'm fat. I'm very—foolish to look at, Linda.

*

LINDA: Willy, darling, you're the handsomest man in the world—

*

LINDA: Few men are idolized by their children the way you are.

*

THE WOMAN: You do make me laugh. It's good for me. And I think you're a wonderful man.

*

BIFF: [to Linda] He always, always wiped the floor with you. Never had an ounce of respect for you.

*

HAPPY: Well, let's face it: he's no hot-shot selling man. Except that sometimes, you have to admit it, he's a sweet personality.

*

CHARLIE: [to Willy] When the hell are you going to grow up?

*

BIFF: [to Willy] You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!

*

LINDA: He was so wonderful with his hands.

*

BIFF: He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong.

*

CHARLIE: Willy was a salesman.

Willy Loman, the character, is all the above and more. In a successful collaboration, each of the dozens of choices theatre designers make as they work on a production of *Death of a Salesman*—Willy's shirts, shoes, and hat; his sample case; the troublesome refrigerator and the chairs in his kitchen; the location of his almost-paid-for house; and the lighting within its rooms—is grounded in everything the designers come to know and feel about Willy Loman through their careful attention to the play's dialogue. In a performance that works, the character's visual world, from the architecture of his house to the way he knots his tie, becomes inseparable from who he is.

Whether we are reading a playscript or getting to know a person in real life, we do not discover all there is to know in a single meeting. Only after many encounters, and considerable reflection, will a play reader be able to make as definite a statement about any character as "David was a young man who was above all tolerant, fair-minded, and inquisitive."

What Happened Before the Action Begins?

Prose fiction writers often begin stories with a version of the familiar "Once upon a time" spoken by an omniscient narrator, which allows them to tell readers simply and straightforwardly the facts they need to know to understand what is about to happen. In plays, background information, sometimes called "past circumstances," is the most difficult kind of material to weave into the dramatic dialogue taking place in the play's present and in real stage time. For the designer, it is important to know how to look for these facts and where, and to pinpoint the devices playwrights use to get this information across.

People who work in the theatre often make jokes about plays that open with a scene between the entirely peripheral maid and butler, who tell the

Figure 2–3. *Who is Willy Loman?* From a production of Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Actors are Eddie Jones, Lenka Peterson, James Eckhouse, and Steve Rankin. Photograph by David S. Talbott.

audience, by way of a highly contrived conversation, that the master of the house is dying; the mistress is behaving strangely; the son has mysteriously disappeared; the daughter has eloped with the estate manager; and this morning a glass containing a mysterious substance was found by the master's physician on the master's bedside table. Although this revelatory tactic is stock-in-trade for mysteries and situation comedies on stage as well as on screen, it is also a time-honored theatrical convention that allows playwrights to insert background information early on with a minimum of fuss.

Shakespeare's opening scenes are often conversations between two or three characters that are chock-full of important facts on which subsequent action is built. In the opening thirty-five lines of act I, scene 1 of *King Lear*, for example, Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund reveal that

- The king is changing his mind about which of his sons-in-law he prefers and about the manner in which he plans to divide his kingdom, and it doesn't look as though he's going to make his choice on obvious grounds
- Gloucester has a "natural" son, Edmund, who, although technically illegitimate, is beloved of his father and appears "proper" to Kent
- Gloucester introduces Edmund to Kent, saying Kent is "my honorable friend"
- Kent expresses interest in Edmund
- Edmund seems to speak with modesty
- Edmund has been away for nine years and plans to leave again soon.

Although at first glance these thirty-five lines appear to contain disjointed, even random facts, each will prove to be an important background piece in the play's overall construct.

A first-person narrator, although somewhat less authoritative than the omniscient narrator, is potentially more engaging for the novel or short story reader because the voice is immediate and direct. Indeed, first-person exposition in prose fiction often reads a bit like dramatic dialogue. Compare the following to the lines in *King Lear*:

> "I remember drawing my mother. Born and raised in Crown Heights, her family high in the ranks of the Ladover aristocracy, she had gone through

> the Ladover school system for girls, and had married my father one week after her graduation from high school. She was nineteen when I was born and seemed more a sister to me than a mother." (Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev*)

Modern playwrights sometimes create narrator characters who function in much the same way as first-person narrators do in prose fiction. In Athol Fugard's play *Valley Song*, a character named "the Author" "comes down and speaks directly to the audience." This character presents the personal history of another character, Buks, saying in part:

> He's planted a lot of pumpkin seeds in the course of his seventy-six years. And there's nothing haphazard about what he's doing either. When the young plants come up he wants to see them standing shoulder to shoulder in lines as straight as those the Sergeant Major drilled them into on the Sonderwater Parade Ground during the Second World War. Buks was a corporal in that famous old Coloured regiment, the Cape Corps, and was stationed up in the Transvaal guarding Italian Prisoners-of-War. He's in fact thinking about those days as he drops the seeds into the ground.

At the conclusion of this "narration," the Author sings a song, during the course of which "he moves into the character of Buks" and enters a scene with Buks's granddaughter, Veronica. Early in this first scene we learn more about Buks' past military career. Notice how the background information is presented in such a way that it also reveals something about the nature of the relationship between grandfather and granddaughter:

VERONICA: Tell me the truth, Oupa, were you a real soldier?

BUKS: What's a "real" soldier? I was just an ordinary soldier.

VERONICA: You know man, Oupa, like on TV. With a gun and all that.

BUKS: I had a gun. When I went on guard duty I had a real gun with real bullets . . . and all that.

VERONICA: But did you ever shoot anybody with it?

BUKS: No. I've told you before I was guarding Italian prisoners and none of them tried to escape.

VERONICA: Well then, you certainly didn't win the war, did you?

BUKS: No. I certainly didn't.

Sophocles and the other ancient Greek playwrights whose work survives created a kind of collective narrator in the Greek chorus. In Greek plays the chorus presents background facts to the audience, comments on the characters, and suggests ways in which present events might be interpreted in light of what has gone before. Because the chorus sections of Greek plays are often more difficult for modern readers to understand than the dialogue, it is particularly important for theatre designers to pay careful attention: What exactly is being revealed about past events and their effects on present action?

CHORAGOS: Seven captains at seven gates
Yielded their clanging arms to the god
That bends the battle-line and breaks it.
These two only, brothers in blood,
Face to face in matchless rage,
Mirroring each the other's death,
Clashed in long combat.

CHORUS: But now in the beautiful morning of victory
Let Thebes of the many chariots sing for joy!
With hearts for dancing we'll take leave of war:
Our temples shall be sweet with hymns of praise,
And the long night shall echo with our chorus.

CHORAGOS: But now at last our new King is coming:
Creon of Thebes, Menoikeus' son.
In this auspicious dawn of his reign
What are the new complexities
That shifting Fate has woven for him?
What is his counsel? Why has he summoned
The old men to hear him?

(Sophocles, *Antigone*, prologue, act 1)

In these lines the Choragos, or Chorus Leader, evokes a city newly emerged from battle, a battle in which brother fought against brother and each was slain by

the other, "mirroring each other's death." These brothers were bitter enemies and faced each other with "matchless rage," and the battle, which ended in mutual death, was a "long combat." What does all this suggest about the physical state of the city? The Chorus claims that this is "the beautiful morning of victory" and celebration is in the air. Is it, indeed, a beautiful day? Are there signs of festivity, perhaps masking, or partially masking, the signs of war and death? Have the men of the chorus dressed for the occasion in which they will "take leave of war"? Despite the plans for "dancing" and "hymns of praise," there is uncertainty. A new king comes and, although this is "the auspicious dawn of his reign," he still has to contend with "shifting Fate." How will he look when he appears before the "old men" to offer "counsel"? Is this not the kind of careful, reflective playscript reading Robert Edmond Jones challenges us to undertake when he says, "The designer must learn to sense the atmosphere of the play with unusual clearness and exactness"?

Past circumstance and its effect on present action may also be revealed in a dramatic monologue spoken by one or more characters, either as an interior monologue or soliloquy (spoken thought), or as a narrative monologue (a story-within-a story). Hamlet's "To be, or not to be . . ." soliloquy in act 3, scene 1 of *Hamlet* is perhaps the best known example of spoken thought in all dramatic literature. However, Hamlet's interior monologue in act I, scene 2 has my vote as one of the most skillfully written examples in all dramatic literature of personal, intimate, and deeply felt emotion combined with sheer exposition. Indeed, the passage is so boldly informative that the reader must consciously be aware that the exposition comes from a single character and is decidedly biased. The passage begins with the line, "O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt," and goes on to describe events of the recent past within the royal house of Denmark:

- Hamlet's father is not long dead ("But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two").
- Hamlet's father was a good king ("So excellent a king") who loved his wife ("so loving to my mother").
- Hamlet's father is a god compared to his lecher uncle ("Hyperion to a satyr").
- Hamlet's mother loved his father ("Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on") and yet she remarried with embarrassing haste ("within a month— / . . .—A little month").

- This marriage is, if not illegal, clearly immoral ("incestuous") and will not come to good ("It is not, nor it cannot come to good").

The passage ends with the intriguing statement that, no matter how he feels about these past events, Hamlet must remain silent ("But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue").

Where on the stage does Hamlet reveal this information? In stark light or in shadow? Sitting? Standing? On what? Is he dressed in black (his mother appears to indicate black clothing when she refers to his "nighted color," and Hamlet himself speaks of his "inky cloak," in his reply to Gertrude; on the other hand, both of them may be talking about the mood he projects rather than the color of his suit) or in some subtly jarring combination of colors that reflects his inner agitation? Is he disheveled and rumpled? Or scrupulously neat? Designers who listen carefully to what characters say, and ask searching questions of the characters and of themselves, discover visual answers.

Since the mid-twentieth century, playwrights have become increasingly fond of telling about past events in narrative monologues; on occasion, they have written whole acts, even whole plays, consisting entirely of dramatic narratives. Act 2, scene 1 of Nicky Silver's *Free Will and Wanton Lust* is a seven-page monologue by the character, Claire, in which she recounts a specific recent event in her life. In the course of telling that story, she branches out into several stories, which eventually form a network of memories that connects events in acts 1 and 3.

CLAIRE: I have, for a long time, been a person who tries to see the best in others. I have always tried to see the beauty in all things. No matter how grotesque. . . .

This morning I went to the dressmaker, to be fitted for a dress. I walked to the shop. It's not very far and I enjoy what's left of the fresh air. And I enjoy seeing people. Or I did. You see, more and more people seem to feel it alright to behave anyway they choose. For instance, more and more people seem to be—how shall I put this?—spitting. I don't approve of this. Sometimes they walk over to the curb and spit into the street, as if this were so much better than spitting in the middle of the pavement. It's not. It's just the same.

> And apparently not just men, but women too! With "hair-do's" and skirts. Now I want to see the beauty in all this but it's very hard. . . .

How Claire appears, what sort of world she inhabits, which chair she sits in, and what kind of fabric she allows to touch her skin are implicit in the text of this rich narrative monologue. Although no two designers will make precisely the same choices, the most workable and well-integrated choices will be incited by Claire's own words.

In Robert E. Ingham's play *Custer*, past events are present actions, and the narrative monologues, delivered by a Greek choruslike group of actors, are often indistinguishable from what we generally think of as dramatic dialogue.

FIRST MAN: In midafternoon of the 25th of June, 1876, five companies of the 7th Regiment of United States Regular cavalry, some two hundred and twenty men, with Lieutenant Colonel,

FIRST WOMAN: —and Brevet Major General—

FIRST MAN: George Armstrong Custer, found themselves quite suddenly to be surrounded by several thousand hostile Sioux and Cheyenne warriors, among the low hills and gullies East of the Little Big Horn River, in Southeastern Montana.

SECOND WOMAN: There were no survivors, and no one will ever know for sure how General Custer died, or what the nature of his "Last Stand" was.

FIRST WOMAN: He was—

FIRST MAN: —by reputation—

FIRST WOMAN: —the finest soldier on the Plains, and his the finest regiment, by repute.

SECOND WOMAN: And the mystery of his passing haunts us all.

In this poetic and ritualistic play, the reader collects story fragments and assembles them in several ways, each combination influenced by a particular character's point of view. Past events and present, onstage actions merge in a seamless theatrical event. In what sort of theatrical environment does this play exist? Although it is clearly historical, is it also real? How are the chorus char-

acters related to the events they describe, particularly in light of the fact that there is a "mystery" in their story that "haunts us all." The answers, and the visual solutions, are inherent in the words of the play.

Worthy Readers

Robert Johnstone, a Shakespeare professor with a profound love for his subject, used to urge his students to become "worthy readers" of Shakespeare's plays. "Don't measure a great writer by the things that are easy for you to get from the play," he would say, in a conscious parody of the famous phrase from President John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech. "Measure yourselves by what you bring to the work."

All theatre designers have the potential to become worthy readers, not only of the works of Shakespeare but of the works of all serious and skillful playwrights. Designers are among the best equipped of all readers to recognize and understand the work of playwrights because playwrights are the builders of plays. The elements of design and the compositional strategies that inform how these elements combined to create visual coherence are closely related to the devices and strategies playwrights use to build and activate dramatic structures. Theatre designers, who constantly recognize and manipulate line and color, are singularly equipped to imagine the visual constructs inherent in dramatic blueprints and to bring the images in those blueprints to life. When theatre designers connect their special knowledge and experience to the work of reading playscripts, they become truly worthy readers.