

What I Look for in Assessing a New Play Script

Eight Elements

1. Plot

Is there a narrative storyline to form the basis of the script? In all plays – whether it be high drama or farcical comedy - there should be a sense of conflict which marks out the plot.

2. Themes

Beneath the plot there should be recognisable themes (i.e. What is the play really about? This may cover some of the myriad emotions in the human condition - e.g. love, hate, revenge, guilt, grief, jealousy, sexuality, vulnerability, humour.). *Romeo and Juliet* is not just a love story but is concerned with marital and family distrust, teenage angst, dawning sexuality, the generation gap, conflict, anger, and death.

3. Setting

Has the play a sense of Place and Time? Time was when a play – and especially a one-act play was given a single setting: (e.g. *Lady Audley's* drawing room one morning in Spring). But in recent decades plays can be give multiple settings - moving through various locations using stylised scenery and imaginative lighting and sound to trigger the audience's imagination to accept a change in time or space. If this is accomplished effectively the audience will create each new scene in their mind. However it is achieved, there should be a sense of time and place.

4. Characters

Vital to the success of a play are the characters who should be well-rounded and hold our attention. Each will have a back-story which will be revealed gradually as the plot unfolds. A well-written play will have a subtext and in this area the audience will begin to feel what is under the façade of the characters: their passions, fears and emotions.

Having created the characters the playwright has to develop the relationships between them, to explore the shifting group dynamic as each new person appears. This will determine how the plot unfolds.

5. Dialogue

The language should suit the characters and their situation. Beyond the individual speeches there should be rhythm in the dramatic flow. This might be smooth and poetic or fractured and abrasive depending on the scene of the play. In many ways it is the dialogue which remains the most demanding aspect of play-writing. It is clearly allied to Style.

6. Style

This can refer to such broad genres as tragedy, romance, high drama, or comedy - and within those styles there are many subsections. Take, for example, Comedy: the light comedies of Noel Coward, the black comedies of Joe Orton, the early domestic Alan Ayckbourn plays, the punchy social John Godber comedies, and the pure farce of Feydeau or Michael Frayne's *Noises Off*. Each has its own distinctive style.

7. Shape

Like all creative work plays should have structure. The playwright needs to shape the work so there are shifts in mood, in tone, in character. There should be highs and lows with climaxes and development in the plot. The characters and the narrative should move forward. Without that journey, without shape, the play will be flat and soon lose its appeal.

8. Length

One frequent failing in new playwrights is to over-rewrite. There is a tendency to say the same thing two or three times for fear that the audience will fail to understand. Actually audiences are more intelligent than some new playwrights imagine. My advice is to write the play as you wish first and then go back and re-write and brutally cut out anything which is superfluous.

Those are the main areas I look for in judging a new play which I only see as a script not an onstage

production. I could add a ninth area and that is: -

Originality

Just occasionally we discover the excitement of finding a playwright who finds something entirely original in style, situation, shape, tone or character.

Other positives to a new play might include an arresting opening - and a strong conclusion. It has been said that a great ending can redeem a mediocre play.

Finally and perhaps most importantly I ask myself was I involved with the characters? Did it touch me emotionally? Did it make me laugh or cry or make me think? If a play succeeds in all three in the same play then you may well have a triple success!

Colin Dolley GODA 2016 ©