

Thirty ways to understand a play

By Michael Bigelow Dixon

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Have you ever been in a conversation—or worse, a “classroom discussion”—where other people who saw or read the same play that you saw or read sounded like Einstein when they talked about it? And you sound like, well, not Einstein? Oh, I hate that! Where’d they get that insight, how’d they learn to think those thoughts? And why am I sitting here hoping that no one calls on me?

Yeah, been there, felt that way. And the truth is, it’s not that the people who sound so smart are really all that original or brilliant. It’s just they have a method to their madness, a way of organizing their response to a play.

So, partly in self-defense, I’ve come up with thirty different ways to look at and think about a play, so that a normal person—you, me, and the other 99 percent of the world—can participate in an enriching conversation about dramatic literature and theatre productions without feeling like an idiot. By the way, a side benefit to reduced embarrassment in class has been an improvement in my work as a director and dramaturg on professional productions, and I suspect the same would be true for actors and designers. Once you get the right tools, your insights have a stronger foundation and stand out more clearly in the gallery of public opinion. So see what you think. How many of these methods are you already employing and how many can you add to your collection of analytical tools?

1. Inside/Outside

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe gave critics this rubric for critiquing a play from the viewer’s “outside” perspective: What is the playwright trying to do? How well has he or she done it? And is it worth doing? But to work Inside/Outside (illustration by Chris McNay) collaboratively on a play, it’s useful also to understand the inside mechanisms of a play, the engine and values that drive and sustain it: How is it built? What is it made of? How does it function? And what might it mean, and to whom? By combining the inside and outside perspectives, you can bring your own judgments to bear, based on a fuller understanding of *what the play is* for your time and place.



2. Dramatic action

What is the overall action of the play? What is the central conflict, what do the characters want, what do they do to get it and at what cost? When expressed, the dramatic action (e.g., to be happy, to exact revenge, to find freedom) needs to encompass all the characters' pursuits in order to be useful. (Note: this is another way of saying: "The play is about people who...")

3. Thematic focus

What might the play mean? It's useful to consider many meanings before focusing on a central and orbiting themes. The theme and the dramatic action should interrelate—they are two ways of thinking about the same thing. Dramatic action describes characters in conflict; thematic focus describes the meaning extracted from that action and its results. (Note: this is another way of saying: "This is a play about...[fill in the noun, but don't use "people"].")

4. Character journey

Drama is about characters who change. Sometimes characters are driven by a desire for change, other times change is forced upon them. Either way, an effective way to understand a play is to ask, "How, where, and why are the main characters changed from the beginning to the end of the play?"

5. Relationship

Theatre is about human experience and relationship, but on stage, relationship is the best way to measure change, impact, and meaning in a play. If relationships don't change, does anything happen, has anything been affected? Whether you're looking at Shakespeare or Beckett or Suzan-Lori Parks, relationship is the yardstick of drama.



6. Structure

A French scene chart is invaluable in mapping the rhythm and progression of a play. The chart is based on character entrances and exits, and includes the page length of each scene, the names of the characters who inhabit it, a note on the physical location/setting, and a scene title (of your own devising) that summarizes the action. By looking at a French scene chart without knowing the play, it's possible to understand major scenes and central characters, as well as analyze the sequence and duration of scenes that comprise the overall rhythm of the play.



(Southern Illinois University Press, 1983, available from Amazon).

7. Theatrical virtues

What keeps the audience interested on a moment-to-moment basis? Is it plot, humor, character revelation, storytelling, suspense, violence, romance, scenic elements, or something else? No matter what the theme and dramatic action might be, it's vital to understand what a play is made of if one hopes to bring it successfully to life.

8. Backwards and forwards

To be effective and maximize impact, plays are written to prepare for big moments, to complete conflicts and to pay off character journeys. To understand the dramatic relation between scenes in the beginning, middle, and end of the play, it's useful to read a play backwards as well as forward. For more on this, read David Ball's *Backwards and Forwards*

9. Language

In the theatre, language is one of the primary means of conveying vital information about character, through exposition and delivery: social class, region, culture, age, and more. On the page, language is also the exclusive medium, so it's essential to pay particularly close attention to the power and purpose of verse, images, motifs and the colorations of accent, dialect, and mannerisms such as malapropisms. These are part of the theatrical virtues of a work, but thanks to Aristotle, deserve their own mention.

10. The playwright's intentions

How does the playwright understand his or her own play? What has the writer said or written about it? Does the author's intention inform your understanding and analysis of the work? Are there aspects of the author's life or canon or worldview that illuminate the work?

11. First impressions

Take notes when you read a play for the first time: what you do and don't understand and what makes the greatest impression when the play is new to you are crucial. If you work on the script, you'll never have those first reading experiences again, but the audience will, every performance.

12. Theory

This is a tricky category, because plays seldom fit neatly into any theory, even a playwright's own theory. In fact, critics often note that Bertolt Brecht's plays are best when they transcend his theory of alienation—that is, when the audience members lose awareness of themselves and become involved in the drama on stage. A theoretical framework such as feminism or Marxism can illuminate a work, but generally theory is more useful in talking about a play than it is in making theatre.

13. Props and stage directions

This analysis, borrowed from director Jon Jory and separately from scenic designer Kate Sutton-Johnson, requires making lists, which in turn provides inspiration for the physical/scenic production. Jory makes a list of all the things called for in the play, and then he looks at this list to determine what objects are important and may have symbolic or metaphoric value. (They also give actors something to do!) Sutton-Johnson pulls out all the stage directions into one document, and that compilation suggests the real demands and requirements of the physical space.

14. Scenic metaphor

This topic brings meaning to the functional necessity of scenery. Beyond requirements (a door for an entrance or exit, an arras for Polonius to be killed behind) and mood (dark streets for Mr. Hyde to inhabit), scenic metaphor creates meaning with lights, sound, and objects. The best scenic metaphors transform with the action, so that meaning is revealed over time.

15. Whose story is it?

This approach to a text can provide focus for a production as well as providing inspiration for some unique interpretations. I'm reminded of a production of William Inge's *Picnic* that was directed by Anne Bogart at Actors Theatre of Louisville. While the play usually centralizes the crisis of the young lovers Madge and Hal, with a subplot of another proposal and marriage, Bogart chose to focus on the younger sister Millie, who Bogart added to each scene so she could witness all the romantic chaos and carnage.

16. What happens next?

The ghost of Hamlet's father appears and speaks to Hamlet. The moment is dramatic, theatrical, exciting. Then it's over. What happens next? Tom gets his friend, the Gentleman Caller, to visit his sister, Laura. They dance, they kiss. What happens next? No matter how great a scene or moment may be in a play, there's always the question, what happens next. A play where nothing happens next is a play that's gonna lose its audience.

18. The inverse approach

Original plays offer original challenges. If you're attracted to a play, but it seems unlike anything you've seen before, take the inverse approach to analysis: what familiar forms and genres does the play *not* ascribe to? If the play is not clearly a tragedy or melodrama, a character study or

plot-driven, you can begin to eliminate forms that would confuse your understanding and interpretation of what the play actually offers. Ultimately, this process of elimination leads to a place where you can identify what virtues and values the play has (usually a mix), and you can begin to build a universe for the production from those characteristics.

18. Moment to moment

I hesitate to even include this approach, because it leads down a treacherous path that can end in chaos and thematic-theatrical quicksand. Imagine a car trip where you determined at each junction whether to go straight or turn left or right based upon your impulse or intuition at that moment. The trip, the destination, the use of time, the relationship of people in the car would be seriously tested by this approach. And yet, if there's something so attractive and yet ineffable about a play, so poetic and defying of other forms of analysis, then go for it. It's a method of last resort, but so was duct tape for Apollo 13, and that worked out just fine.

19. Historical context

This is a great untapped area of inspiration, primarily because theatre artists tend to concentrate on relevance rather than universality when planning a production. The fear is that we'll build a "museum" production, full of artifacts and references to events that no longer resonate with a contemporary audience. Bad idea. Valid fear. And yet... knowing that Chekhov was a nineteenth-century doctor, owned a dacha that was visited by artists and others from Moscow, that he had recently married an actress and was sick and dying when he wrote *The Cherry Orchard*, can provide insight that prompts inspiration about the play in its time, rather than in our own. "In its time" is the key idea here, and the process works just as well for "contemporary works in context."

20. Production history

There's so much to be learned from those who went before us. How did they understand the play and what did they choose to do? Did they succeed, and what's to be learned from their interpretations and emphases, their casting and designs? Much of this information will come from reviews and critics and it needs to be filtered, but it's interesting to observe two recent productions of *The Glass Menagerie*. Joe Dowling at the Guthrie Theater cast two actors as the younger and older Tom to play the scenes and monologues respectively, while Gordon Edelstein at Long Wharf Theatre set the entire play in the hotel room of the older Tom as he looked back on his younger self. Whether you like these ideas or not, as George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

21. Choices

A play in which characters make no choices isn't much of a play; therefore it's useful to focus on the moment of decision, the choice itself. Find those moments, what leads up to them, and the consequences that follow, and you'll hold your audience's attention all night. By the way, what isn't chosen, what doesn't happen, should be a very present shadow of what is and does. It's how we understand regret.

22. Thought process

Related to choice, thought process is the pathway that leads to that fork in the road where a character agrees or refuses to go along. The moment of decision can be galvanizing, but it can also be meaningless if we haven't followed the character's thought process. "Out damned spot" is a great line, but why does Lady Macbeth say it? "Why" is the question audiences care about most when viewing a production of a classic play, because they already know the text. The audience comes to the theatre for subtext, which is thought process.

23. Stakes

How much does it matter to the characters if they achieve their goals and attain their objectives? Are we talking a matter of life and death, anticipated happiness or despair? Is someone's future at stake—marriage to the villain, loss of the family farm, unrequited love, financial ruin? A play without high stakes is sort of like a walk in the park. Nothing wrong with that, but not very exciting either.

24. Time

Generally there's a direct correlation between an approaching event and heightening dramatic stakes. For example, the locomotive rounds the bend as our heroine struggles with ropes that bind her to tracks. Without a deadline, there is no pressure, and without pressure life proceeds without the necessity of change. Even Chekhov, who advocated "life as it is," needed trains to necessitate the comings and goings that transform daily living into the drama and trauma of human relationship.

25. Motifs

A motif is a recurring element that helps develop and inform a play's major themes. The motif can be anything that recurs in a play: an idea, a visual element, a sound. Motifs often evolve in the course of a play, and the changes in ideas, images, and sound can signify important developments in character, action, and circumstance.

26. Beats

Directors and actors love to carve their scripts into beats, those paragraphs of action that define bite-sized units of want within the super-objectives and theme of the play. Since plays are not written with "beats" in mind, it's so interesting that this approach works. Why? I don't know, but it does... any answers out there?

27. Cuts

A great way to understand why a playwright wrote something is to consider what the play would be like without it. If you read through a script while trying to trim it, your careful consideration of those possible cuts will allow you to see what would go missing (other than time) in terms of the play's theatrical values, plot, or character development, and poetic

structure or thematic argument. It's best to do this with another smart mind in the room, as two heads are far better than one in understanding a script's potential meaning and values.

28. Audience expectation

Here's a fun category to play with. Everyone knows that if you give the audience what they expect, you'll please some and bore most. People want to be surprised. So try to figure out what expectations the play is building, and then delay, subvert, or upend them. However, if the point is to deliver the expected goods, make sure you do so in spades.

29. Genre-specific analysis

There are categories of plays where special rules apply: musicals, solo performance, ten-minute plays, etc. These kinds of plays succeed under the guidance of gods who work differently from Dionysus and his cohorts who oversee the universe of full-length plays. As an example, here are a few tips that are essential for solo performances and monologues.

1. Hook the audience immediately.
2. End with a powerful point, idea or insight.
3. Include surprises and discoveries along the way.
4. Provide an animating situation that propels the character's journey.
5. Make sure the character is driven by or experiences strong passions.
6. Focus on one or two main ideas.
7. Language must be distinctive, colorful and appropriate to character.
8. Second and third characters provide variety in language and point of view.
9. Employ humor generously.
10. Create a strong bond between the performer and the audience.

30. Personal lists

A list is different from a theory because it offers neither interpretation nor directive, it merely advocates ingredients to inspire theatre-makers. The following list, titled "26 Secrets to Making Great Theatre," comes from Brian Jucha, artistic director of Via Theater in New York City. The more time you spend with his list as you read and see plays, the more meaningful it will become, and you'll probably soon want to create a list of your own.

Brian's first item may not be familiar. It refers to a discipline developed and taught by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau that is a pretty much self-contained way of thinking about what can happen on stage. (Great resource: Bogart and Landau's *The Viewpoints Book*, Theatre Communications Group, 2005.)

1. The Viewpoints
2. Broken expectations
3. Surprise entrances
4. Revelation of object
5. Revelation of space
6. Revelation of character
7. Staged accidents
8. Offstage action

9. The Elements: Air, Water, Earth, Fire
10. Use of a small area—makes things look big (and vice versa)
11. Framing and breaking the frame
12. Action expresses emotion
13. Space and time express emotion
14. Recognizable image
15. Visual metaphor
16. Simultaneous action
17. What is seen vs. what is heard—contradiction
18. Frantic action / Abrupt stop—the bottom drops out
19. Music
20. Taking the audience on a Journey
21. Sex
22. Information overload = pattern recognition and/or chaos
23. Audience perception vs. theatrical reality
24. Foreground/background
25. Style:twinkle in the eye, “I’ve got a secret”
26. Toxic Leaks: A toxic leak is that line of dialogue or moment or act in which the character's inner life leaks out from behind his carefully constructed mask, and if we are paying attention, we see who he or she really is.

“The difference between *great* theatre and *brilliant* theatre,” it says at the bottom of Brian’s list, “is *message*.” Now you have thirty tools in your kit to help you respond lucidly to the questions posed by a work of dramatic literature. If you work on mastering just a fraction of these, I guarantee you’ll never sound like an idiot in drama class again. What’s more, whether you are a director, actor, or designer, you will be ready to help put a play on its feet and create a dynamic production that offers a surprising and rewarding experience for its audience.