

# SCRIPTING A PLAY

By Kithaka wa Mberia

## 1. DEFINITION

A play is a work of art that has a current and counter-current (or counter-currents) and uses dialogue and action and is intended for presentation on stage. As an artistic form, the play has a number of constituent elements that a playwright needs to understand and to carefully construct while scripting. Some of these elements are more familiar than others. In this presentation, I point out and occasionally exemplify the elements. I also look at certain notions and practices that I consider important in scripting.

## 2. SUBJECT MATTER OR THEME(S) OF A PLAY

An issue may suggest itself to be the subject or theme of a play. This may come about without any conscious effort on the part of the playwright. Other times, an external stimulus such as the need to come up with a script, for instance, for the drama festival may push the playwright to look for a subject on which to write. Irrespective on how one arrives at the probable subject for a play, one needs to reflect on the subject. To aid this mental activity, one may ask questions such as the following:

- a) Will exploring this issue in a play be of value in helping society better understand itself, understand human nature, or understand relations between human beings or groups of human beings such as ethnic communities, faiths, nations or generations?
- b) If I write a play on the issue, will the play be a seasonal work of art or will it appeal to people long after it has been written?
- c) Will the play have the potential to speak not only to the immediate audience but also to audiences in far-flung places?
- d) Will the play be demeaning or offensive to any individual, community, faith or race?

## 3. DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

### a) **Over-all Structure**

Most good plays share a common structure. The structure consists of three parts, namely:

- a) Exposition
- b) Complication
- c) Resolution

Exposition refers to disturbance or unsettling of an equilibrium, that is, a situation sets in and disrupts an existing order be it peace of mind, a relationship between individuals or a harmonious family.

Complication refers to the stage in the play when characters try to restore order or the former status quo. As disorder sets in, forces of order intervene to try and restore the formally existing order and harmony. This is the longest part a play.

Resolution, the final stage in a play, refers to the bringing to an end the push and pull, the tension and the disorder of the complication stage. Tensions come to an end marking a return to normalcy.

It is important to note that “resolution” as here used does not necessarily mean resolving the issue or issues contested in the complication stage. Resolution simply means cessation of the confrontation between forces of order and disorder.

### **Illustration 1:**

**Exposition:** A Standard One child (Child A) has taken away the pencil of another child (Child B) and has refused to surrender it to the owner.

**Complication:** Child B tries to persuade Child A to return the pencil to him but Child A does not agree to surrender the pen. Child B threatens to tell his mother about the pen. Child A still refuses to return the pen to Child B. Child B threatens to go physical with Child A. Child A, being the bully he is, is willing to fight rather than surrender the pen. Other children try to intervene in different ways but Child A still retains Child B’s pencil. Child A rushes out to go and report the matter to their class teacher.

**Resolution:** The class teacher, who had walked out briefly, comes back and orders Child A to return the pencil to child B. Child A promptly does what the teacher has told him to do. After getting back the pen, Child B goes back to his desk. After getting back the pen, Child B goes back to his desk. Other children, who had stood up in agitation go back to their desks. Normalcy has returned to the class. Equilibrium has been re-established. We have reached the LOGICAL END of the

play.

### **Illustration 2:**

**Exposition:** Gangsters take a rich man hostage and demand for money so as to set him free. Normalcy is shattered. Equilibrium is no more.

### **Complication:**

Scene 1: The gangsters call the family of the hostage and demand for a certain amount of money as ransom. There is a heated discussion within the family with some members strongly advocating for payment and others vehemently opposed that the suggestion. It is decided that the matter be reported to the police.

Scene 2: The family reports the matter to the police. Police officers, posing as Members of the family, call the gangsters and tell them that the family is willing to pay the ransom but the amount of the money should be reduced. There is discussion between the police and the gangsters. They fail to agree on the amount to be paid. The gangsters are requested to think about the matter and then call back.

Scene 3: The gangsters deliberate among themselves on whether or not to reduce the the ransom . They decide to stick to the original amount. Before they can get back to the family, they are called by the gang leader for an update. On reporting the impasse, they are instructed to lower the ransom money. The family is informed of the decision. With the consultation between the police and the family, the family purports to agree to pay the new amount. The family even sends a small amount and asks to give be given a day to raise the rest of the money.

Scene 4: In the meantime, using communication technology, the police have been trying to locate the hid-out of the gangsters. They finally succeed and start putting in place a strategy to free the hostage.

Scene 5: The gangsters leader visits the hid-out and confronts the gangsters on the delay in receiving the ransom. The gangsters depend themselves and assure the leader that the ransom will be paid.

### **Resolution:**

Scene 6: The police storm the gangsters' hid-out and after a fierce exchange of gunfire the gangsters are arrested the hostage freed unharmed. Normalcy has returned. We have reached the LOGICAL END of the play.

It is worthwhile noting that although Scene 6 is headed "Resolution), part of it is still within the "Complication" stage. "Resolution" sets in when the gangsters are overcome by the police.

### **b) Acts and Scenes**

What goes on in a play is ordinarily organized in sections called "acts" and "scenes". A scene comprises what goes on in one location at a particular time. A scene could, for instance, consist of all activities and the talking taking place in a church compound, in inside a courtroom, in a train wagon, in the plane or at a public park. Action and speech in a different location and usually a different time are allocated to a different scene. When a number of scenes are closely related to each other, they are put within one act. So, in a play that has both acts and scenes, there always fewer acts than scenes because an act comprises a number of scenes.

Works of drama that into acts which are then sub-divided into scenes include plays by Shakespeare such as *Macketh* and *King Lear* as well *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *the House Bernada Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca. (It is, perhaps, important noting that it has been suggested Shakespeare did not divide his plays into acts and scenes as we see them today and that those divisions were added by those who edited his works).

Some plays are organized in acts without scenes. That is the case with Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman* which has two long acts with a short two-and-a half page section titled "Requiem". John Ruganda's *The Burdens* comprise the acts without any sub-divisions into scenes. So are Henrik Ibsen's plays such as *Ghosts*, *A public Enemy* and *When We Dead Awake*. Likewise, divided into acts without sub-division into scenes are Oscar Wilde's plays such as *A Woman of Importance*, *The Importance of Being Earnest: A trivial Comedy for Serious People* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*

There are other playwrights who organize their plays in terms of scenes without reference to acts. Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* has six scenes independent scenes (that is, not within acts) and a final "Epilogue". Likewise, Tennessee Williams' *A Street Car Named Desire* has only scenes. In another work of his, *The Floods*, is divided into "waves", thus, "the first wave", "the second wave" and "the third wave". Finally there are playwrights in whose works sections are not headed by acts or scenes. In Sophocles three Theban plays we only where the play is where the entire play is taking place from stage directions. For instance, at the beginning of both *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, we are informed, through stage directions, "TIME AND SCENE: The royal house of Thebes". At the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, we informed that, "TIME AND SCENE: The grove of the Furies at Colonus looms in the background, while Athens lies in the distance to the right"

#### 4. PLOT

The plot is the overall cause-effect design of a play. It is the logical interconnectedness in a play. Whereas the story is merely the sequence of happenings, the plot answers the question why the events take place, why take where they, why they take place when they do and why they have a particular sequence. In other words, whereas the story is the "what" and the "where" of the happenings in a play, the plot is the "why take place, why there, why then and why before or after X". Besides a play having a plot, it may also have a sub-plot or sub-plots.

#### 5. CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERISATION

Characters are people who do things (including talking) in the make-belief world of a play. They are tools that the playwright uses to pass across the intended message. The most important of characters is the main character, otherwise referred to as the "protagonist" (or the "hero / heroine"). Poised against the intentions, wishes and the actions of the protagonist is the "antagonist" (also called the "villain"). Villains share the traits of being, among others, evil, anti-social or dangerous. They interfere with order and disrupt personal lives, relationships, institutions or even entire society. The hero's / heroine's endeavours are geared towards re-establishing the order that the villain has disrupted.

The protagonist may have like-minded people, associates, sympathisers or admirers who join him or her in fighting the disruptive forces of the antagonist. Likewise, the antagonist may have people who share in their mischievous, selfish, reckless or mean intentions. These other people support the antagonist in resisting the efforts of the protagonist and his / her team.

Given that in a play there are two camps, that is, the camp of the protagonist and that of the antagonist, and that each camp may have only the key member of the camp (the protagonist or the antagonist) but also that the key member in each camp may have one or several associates, it follows that a play has either two or more characters.

The playwright has to consciously and carefully create characters. This is done through:

- a) Their actions;
- b) What they say about themselves;
- c) What others say about them; and
- d) How they do things such as talking, dressing, eating, walking, thinking and even dreaming.

The playwright has to ensure that the characters are credible and convincing. Characters are not credible and convincing if what they do or what they say is in conflict with what we expect of them given our understanding of real life (unless, of course “being unreal” is their intended character!). Examples of unconvincing characters include:

- a) The Senior Principal of a major national secondary who speaks Sheng during the Monday morning school parade;
- b) A Catholic nun or a strict Muslim woman walking in town wearing a mini-skirt; and
- c) A brigadier who has problems holding a gun in the right position.

The number of characters in a play should not be arbitrary; it should be as big as the view-points necessary to carry the play from the beginning to the end (except in a play that has crowd scenes whereby individuals are not identified). If the characters are too many and each one is identified by either by name or what they do or they stand for, it becomes a challenge to develop them when they are too many. If the people watching a play do not understand each character’s traits, they will not be able to follow the play effectively on stage. They may even give up watching or reading it. It is not possible to prescribe the number of characters a play should have. The number of characters in specific play will depend on the issues in the play and how the playwright handles them. However, more than fifteen or so characters will be difficult to fully develop. Twenty five or more characters would be virtually impossible develop. I once tried reading a Kiswahili with thirty seven characters. I did not even go half-way through the book; I gave.

It would help the playwright to have not only the names of characters and their roles but also their “personal” traits. Knowing the “personality” of characters makes it easier for the playwright to assign characters not only words and actions or even thoughts and dreams. It is not enough for the playwright to know that one of their characters is “POLICE OFFICER”. The mind, the attitude, the speech and actions, in other words, the behavior of the officer, will depend on their personality. Consequently, it is useful to have not only the list of characters but also their attributes. For instance, in a play pitting “PROFFESSOR” against “BENSON”, who happens to be writing a PhD thesis under the supervision of “PROFESSOR”, it would be useful for the playwright to ask, and to write down the answers, to the following questions regarding “PROFESSOR”: Is he / she very competent and confident or half-backed and insecure? Has the university treated him / her well or very badly? Is he / she married or not married and, if “married”, is he / she in a happy marriage or living in some kind of hell on earth? Does he /she have children and, if so, is he / she a loving parent or embodiment of terror? Once the playwright

has answered such questions and put down the answers, it will be easy to assign “PROFESSOR” not only specific words and the correct tone but also appropriate mood in the execution of specific actions.

## 6. STYLE

Style, in very general terms, is the manner of doing something. When we talk about somebody’s hair style we are simply referring to how someone has won their hair. When we say, “He has a dangerous lifestyle”, we mean that his manner of living is dangerous. In drama, and literature in general, style refers to the manner of using language.

To be effective with regard to style the playwright has, among other things, to use language in a way that is:

- a) Fresh / innovative;
- b) Elegant;
- c) Intense;
- d) Deep (in meaning);
- e) Convincing (with regard to characters); and
- f) Memorable.

A statement from a young man to young woman that, “I love!”, for instance sounds non-innovative but also very shall. Even a half-witted man can say that to a woman. The expression does not require imagination. It is too commonplace. If the man said, for instance,

- a) You are the rose in the garden of my heart; or
- b) You are the brightest star in the sky of my life; or
- c) No words can adequately describe the radiance of you face;

his language would not only be innovative and intense but also memorable. Any of those utterances is the kind of expression that a theatre goer or a play reader will remember for many years after visiting a theatre or reading a play respectively.

To be able to use language in an artistically effective way, the playwright must learn how to creatively manipulate language. Achieving that goal calls for the understanding of figurative language and strategies of weaving it. The playwright has to learn the workings of figures of speech such as:

- a) Metaphor
- b) Simile
- c) Personification
- d) Metonymy
- e) Hyperbole
- f) Rhetorical question

- g) Synecdoche
- h) Paradox
- i) Anti-thesis
- j) Oxymoron
- k) Symbol
- l) Irony (verbal, dramatic, situational)
- m) Imagery
- n) Euphemism

Of late in Kenya, there has been a lot of mixing of Kiswahili and English in Kiswahili plays. Arguably, the practice was borrowed from Ebrahim Hussein's Mashetani and used in the popular soap opera called Tausi. From Tausi it spread to other works. Today, it looks as though mixing the two languages is a requirement in Kiswahili plays. The practice is ill-conceived. In Mashetani, it was used as a credible and convincing method of characterisation. Unlike characters such as Baba Juma, Mama Juma and Mfaume who do not have modern education, Juma and Kitaru throw in English words into their Kiswahili to signify that they are students at the University of Dar es Salaam. In other words, the playwright puts English words into their Kiswahili consciously and deliberately as strategy of characterization. The use of English words in later day Kiswahili drama both in books and on television is non-functional, unmotivated and ridiculous.

## 7. SETTING

The action and dialogue in a play have a setting. They take place in a specific place or places otherwise referred to locale or locales respectively. The playwright has to think carefully about the setting so that it is convincing. The setting is not only about place but also about the situation or prevailing circumstances. Two plays may have action occurring in the same space but we will talk of different settings if, for instance, during preparations of a wedding in time of peace and the other in the atmosphere of a funeral in the midst of a raging war. The public park in a city during the day and the same public park at night are not, necessarily, so to speak, the same place. During the day the public park could be a very safe place and at night it might be so dangerous as to be a no-go zone! Time, therefore, can make a difference with regard to setting.

## 8. DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

When characters speak in a play, they use dramatic dialogue. There is a difference between dramatic dialogue and ordinary conversation. In an ordinary conversation, two speakers may hold the same view and develop it in their conversation. However, in a dramatic dialogue, characters tend not to be in harmony with each other. If they are, there is no motivation carry on with the characters' verbal interaction.

Illustration of a conversation:



Mogaka: Mwikali, let's me buy you a cup of tea.

Mwikali: I will appreciate.

Mogaka: Shall we have it in the cafeteria?

Mwikali: That's fine.

Illustration of a dramatic dialogue:

Mogaka: Mwikali, let's me buy you're a cup of tea.

Mwikali: Thank you but I just had my break-first. I had two cups of tea.

Mogaka: One more won't do you any harm.

Mwikali: How do you arrive at that conclusion?

Mogaka: I know.

Mwikali: How; you are not in my stomach,

Mogaka: I wish I were.

Mwikali: In my stomach?

## 9. TURNS AND TWISTS

The story in a play should not move in a straight line. It should not imitate a stream of water following through a straight pipe. If that happens, it creates monotony thereby diminishing the interest of readers of the play or the audience if the play is on stage. To make the plot unpredictable and, therefore, more interesting, a good playwright introduces turns and twists in the plot. The more and the bigger the turns and twists, the more interesting the plot will be.

Let us take as an example of an accused person who has spent the last five days in the cells. He is brought before a judge or a magistrate and the court rules that he is to be set play on paying condition he pays cash bail of fifty thousand shillings. One of the relatives, the only one with that kind of amount in the bank and he is willing to help agrees to go the bank, withdraw the money and bring it to court for the bail. Other relatives and the accused are happy that the accused will not go back to the cells. On the road between the court of law and the bank, there is an accident that has caused such a bad traffic jam that by the time the relative gets to the bank, it is already past the hour that customers can withdraw money. The accused and the relatives continue waiting at the law court only for the person who was supposed to bring the money to come back empty handed. Contrary to the expectation that the accused would go home, he is sent back to the cells.

## 10. STAKES

“Stakes” is not an easy notion to define. However, it may be described as what a character has to gain or lose from the outcome of the goings-on in a play. For illustration, let us take the two most important characters in the play, that is, the hero/heroine and the villain. The interests and the actions of the hero/heroine in the one hand and those of the villain on the other hand are diametrically opposed. If the villain has his/her way, they gain (or the interests he /she represents gain) and the hero/heroine loses (or the interest they represent loses). If the hero/heroine succeeds in their cause, then the villain loses. The stake of a character in a play is the magnitude or significance of the gain (if the outcome of the conflict goes their way) or the magnitude or significance of the loss (if the conflict ends in favour of the opponent). The level of a character’s intellectual, emotional and physical commitment to the goings-on in a play is determined by the character’s stake in the issue or issues pitting opposite sides against one another.

Stakes in a play do not have to remain constant. As part of the “turns and twists” strategy in scripting, the playwright can, for instance, raise a character’s stake in a play. Let us go back to Illustration 2 where a rich man is held hostage and the gangsters want his family to pay ransom for him to be set free. If the gangster call the family and give an ultimatum such as, “If the ransom is not paid in the next four hours, we will kill the hostage without any further reference to you”, the stake of the family in hostage saga would rise substantially. They are now faced not only with their relative’s uncomfortable situation in the hands of the gangsters but *they could actually lose him* if they do not work harder to secure his release. Faced with the *possibility of a loss of life*, they would have to work more passionately to get him released. By raising the magnitude of the family’s potential loss, in other words, by raising their stake in the kidnap saga, the playwright will have injected new energy and passion into the goings-on in the play.

## 11. EXPOSURE

It is important for a playwright to be exposed. The exposure comes from watching plays; interacting with other playwrights, directors, actors/actresses and theatre technicians; and visiting different theatres to see the opportunities and limitations they present. It does help for a playwright, as they on script, to visualize the actualization of the play on stage. That visualization is not possible unless one is familiar with the designs of theatres.

Travelling within the country and, where possible, to other countries helps one get valuable experience. One should not limit oneself to theatres performing plays only in the languages one speaks. Even when one does not understand the language the cast is using, they can learn aspects of the theatre that are not dependent on verbal language. I have visited many theatres in Kenya and abroad and watched plays in languages such as Kikamba, Kikuyu, Dholuo, Luhya, Kiswahili, English, Gujarat, German, Polish and Chinese. I have found the experience rewarding to me as playwright.

Reading other playwrights' works helps in broadening one's mind with regarding the range of themes and forms open to playwrights. It also helps one to see their weaknesses (I presume we all have shortcomings of one sort or the other) and, therefore, where they could make improvements and/or adjustments in their future works of drama. It is particularly valuable to read works from respectable playwrights to find out what it is in their works that makes them attractive to readers and theatre-goers. It is worthwhile exploring the reasons people enjoy reading or watching plays by authors such as Sophocles, William Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, **Moliere**, Arthur Miller, Henrik Ibsen, Wole Soyinka, Anton Chekov, Oscar Wilde, Federico Garcia Lorca, Synge. Why, one may want to find out, do people consider plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Mother Courage and her Children* unique?

Whereas it clearly advantageous to read works by the big names in drama, it is not wise to ignore works of less known playwrights, that is, when one finally comes across their works. Some playwrights are not much known not because they are poor dramatists but owing to their works not having enjoyed publicity (in one's corner of world) or due to the works belonging to different literary traditions. Until I met Femi Osofisan in Tel Aviv in 1995 and he graciously gave me a copy of practically every play he had published, I had never heard of him. Yet, when I read his works including *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Birthdays are Not for Dying* and *Another Raft*, I came to the conclusion that he is one of Africa's finest dramatists. He compared favourably with other playwrights whose works I had either read or watched on stage including Francis Imbuga, John Ruganda, Babu Oyindo, **Serumaga**, Al-Amin Mazrui, Ebrahim Hussein, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Arthur Fugard. Likewise, until someday, attending a conference at the University of Naples "L'orientale", a youthful Italian scholar of Kiswahili gave me, as a gift, an anthology of plays by Phirandhello, I had never heard of the playwright. And yet, after reading *Six Characters in Search of a Director*, I concluded that, in terms of intellectual depth and display of knowledge of theatre, the play is one of the best I have ever read.

## 12. RESEARCH

Some themes require the playwright to do research to either to acquire new information or to clarify certain matters. The research may take the form of talking to experts on issues relating to their expertise, reading publications relevant to the subject, watching specific programmes on television or listening to particular radio programmes, or travelling to observe reality in a place or places. If one is interested in writing a full length play on, for instance, the ravages of hard drugs on the lives of a drug addict, whereas they may have general information, most likely, they will not have comprehensive and scientifically valid facts on the theme unless one is a trained psychiatrist (or perhaps, clinical psychologist). Consequently, to write a factually valid and convincing play on such an issue, a lay person in psychiatry would do with seeking assistance from a psychiatrist, workers in drug rehabilitation centre(s), families of drug addicts and recovered addicts.

## 13. WRITING

Armed with the synopsis of the intended play, an outline of what should happen in every scene, and list of characters together with their roles and their traits, the playwright may begin the actual writing of the script. However, before that, it is a good idea to have some work plan including when to write, how much to write at any given time and timelines on when to complete different scenes as well as the entire play. That kind of planning is good for personal discipline and self-monitoring. Without the playwright putting in place such benchmarks, the writing could drag on and on without one getting the sense of guilt that should come with lack of discipline and underperformance.

There are different approaches to writing. The writing process may comprise writing systematically from the first scene to the last. However, the playwright could also write a scene of scenes that they find most exciting or about which they feel most passionate. The writing process may also entail doing rough drafts for every scene on coming back to a scene after writing to give it to rework it before moving to the next scene.

As the writing progresses, one may get additional ideas on the play. Such ideas could be on changes with regard to the theme, story, plot, characters or the general structure of the play. Once that happens, one should not be constrained by their preconceived ideas or intentions on what the play was going to be. After scrutiny, the playwright should welcome the new inner voices and utilize them to strengthen their work.

From the second draft onwards, the playwright does not improve the earlier versions merely in terms of thought, grammar and style, characterization and stage instructions. One may also reduce or increase the number of characters; increase, reduce or change the order of scenes; or change the locales of some of the scenes.

#### 14. PLAY-READING AND RE-WRITING

It is useful to organize for play reading to get the feel of the play as well as receive comments from the people involved in the reading. To increase the usefulness of the play-reading, it is important to involve in the activity persons with knowledge in drama and theatre. In the play-reading, one may come across sections of the play where people have challenges in reading. When that happens, one needs to consider whether the challenges are occasioned by the limitations of the person reading or whether, as a matter of fact, the challenges arise from poor scripting. The playwright should ask themselves, for instance, the words or combination of words are unnecessarily too demanding on oral tract. Could it be that the line presenting the challenges has clumsy grammatical structure? Could it be that there is lack of cohesion?

The playwright should go to the play-reading with an open mind. Readers' observations should not be dismissed except after careful consideration. If the observations are pertinent they should be incorporated into the script during post play-reading re-writing. That is also the time to resolve problems that playwright noticed on their own during the play-reading.

## 15. PRE-PUBLICATION PLAY PRODUCTION

Whenever possible, it is advisable to test a script on stage by way of a production before taking it to a potential publisher. Play-reading might not reveal certain shortcomings in the script especially those regarding compliance with technical aspects of theatre. When there is a stage production of a play, such weaknesses reveal themselves and can be resolved before the script finally goes to a publisher for possible publication. For the writer to fully benefit from a stage production of a new play, it is important to attend performances of the play to not only see for themselves how the script renders itself to theatre but also to get comments from the director, the cast as well as members of the production crew. Any of these persons might have worthwhile comments for the playwright that could lead to the improvement of the script. After such a production, it is also important to carefully take note of comments by theatre critics as well as ordinary theatre goers. Taking such comments positively and seriously, especially the negative but valid ones can help the playwright to achieve a better work of art.

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