



**PLAYWRITING WORKSHOP**  
***Bridging Worlds: Between Night & Day***  
**March 21, 2009**

**Co-Sponsors:**

The Women's Studies Program and Ph.D. English Program at CUNY Graduate Center

**Featuring:**

Gindy Bindy, Radha Blank, Leila Cohan, Emily Hawe, Erica Silberman and Josleen Wilson

**Special Guest Stars:**

Melanie Maria Goodreaux and Katori Hall

**Credits:**

Annette Tomei and the French Culinary Institute  
Dramatists Play Service Inc.  
Poets & Writers  
Teen Ink

**Pre-Workshop**

- 11:00-11:15           Arrival and sign-in  
11:15-12:00           Mentor & Mentee Pre-Workshop Powwows

**Workshop Session I**

- 12:00-12:30           Icebreaker: *Nightmare at the Improv*  
12:30-12:50           Intro: *The Art of Playwriting*  
12:50-1:30            Exercise 1: *Deep Dark Character Development*  
1:30-1:55             Lunch Break

**Workshop Session II**

- 1:55-2:10            Community Announcements & Stretch  
2:10-3:05            Exercise 2: *Building Scenes Night and Day*  
3:05-4:00            Craft Talk: *With Playwrights Melanie Maria and Katori*  
4:00-4:15            Warm Fuzzies: *Curtain Call*

**ICEBREAKER: NIGHTMARE AT THE IMPROV**

Playwriting is about characters wanting and doing things in circumstances of your imagining. One great way to make discoveries is through improvisation.

Before getting on stage, brainstorm a few ideas to help set the scene.

**First, write down three settings:**

Examples: a Girls Write Now reading; your apartment; Antarctica

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Next, think of three different characters (who may or may not be likely to be in these settings):**

Examples: a journalist; a werewolf; your best friend's mom

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**And, write down three different problems these characters may encounter:**

Examples: the food is poisoned; can't find grandma; swarm of killer bees circling overhead

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now it's time to give life to these settings, characters, and problems. That's right, get on your feet...let the games begin!

## **INTRO: THE ART OF PLAYWRITING**

### **Part A: Characters + Setting + Problem = A Play!**

The **setting** refers to where the play or scene takes place. This could be a living room, park bench, coffee shop, or the moon. Unlike in film, the setting has to be recreated on a stage. Some sets are very realistic while others are suggested with lighting and/or minimal objects. With some creativity on behalf of the playwright and the set designer, the sky's the limit.

**Characters** are the people in your play. The characters interact through dialogue and action in the setting you selected.

The **problem** is what the characters have to deal with in the play or scene. Think of it as an obstacle that the character(s) has to overcome in order to get what he or she wants or needs. The problem can be something as small as one character wanting to get milk from the fridge and another character interrupting her on the way to the kitchen or as big as one character trying to kill the other. Longer plays often contain a large problem that the character works to overcome during the entire play by solving smaller problems along the way.

Let's look at how these ingredients come together to make a scene. In the following scene from Sarah Ruhl's play *Clean House*, Lane talks to her housekeeper Matilda. Play close attention to how the playwright tells us about the setting, characters, and problem and how these three things work together to create a scene.

EXCERPT FROM CLEAN HOUSE, BY SARAH RUHL

SCENE 5

(Lane enters. Matilde is looking out the window.)

LANE

Are you all right?

MATILDE

Yes.

LANE

Would you please clean the bathroom when you get a chance?

MATILDE

Yes.

LANE

Soon?

MATILDE

Yes.

(Matilde looks at Lane.)

LANE

The house is very dirty.

(Matilde is silent)

This is difficult for me. I don't like to order people around. I've never had a live-in maid.

(Matilde is silent)

Matilde--what did you do in your country before you came to the United States?

MATILDE

I was a student. I studied humor. You know--jokes.

LANE

I'm being serious.

MATILDE

I'm being serious too. My parents were the funniest people in Brazil. And then they died.

LANE

I'm sorry. That must be very difficult.

MATILDE

I was the third funniest person in my family. Then my parents died, making me the first funniest. There was no one left to laugh at my jokes, so I left.

LANE

That's very interesting. I don't--always--understand the arts. Listen. Matilde. I understand that you have a life, an emotional life--and that you are also my cleaning lady. If I met you at--say--a party--and you said, I am from a small village in Brazil, and my parents were comedians, I would say, that's very interesting. You sound like an interesting woman.

But life is about context.

And I have met you in the context of my house, where I have hired you to clean. And I don't want an interesting person to clean my house. I just want my house--cleaned.

(Lane is on the verge of tears.)

MATILDE

(with compassion)

Is something wrong?

LANE

No, it's just that--I don't like giving orders in my own home. It makes me--uncomfortable. I want you to do all the things I want you to do without my having to tell you.

MATILDE

Do you tell the nurses at the hospital what to do?

LANE

Yes.

MATILDE

Then pretend I am your nurse.

LANE

Okay.

Nurse--would you polish the silver, please?

MATILDE

A doctor does not say: Nurse--would you polish the silver, please? A doctor says: Nurse--polish the silver!

MATILDE

Yes, Doctor.

(Matilde gets out the silver polish and begins polishing. Lane watches her for a moment, then exits.)

## **Part B: The Power of Dialogue**

As you saw from the scene from *Clean House*, the playwright has two tools to communicate with: dialogue and stage directions (telling the actors what to do). Now we are going to take a look at what makes great dialogue. You can practice writing stage directions in one of the take home exercises.

Read the following dialogue examples and jot down some notes about what you think of the dialogue.

### **Dialogue Sample 1**

Clare

Hello Vicky. How are you? You're looking nice today. It's a nice day out, isn't it? Today I'm going to go to the grocery store. I need to buy steak and potatoes for dinner tonight with my cousins. They're visiting from Ohio. I better hurry if I'm going to get home before they arrive!

Vicky

Hello Clare. I am well. Yes, it is a nice day out. That's so nice that you're cooking dinner for your cousins. I also have to go to the grocery store. We're out of milk and eggs. Well, you better hurry if you're going to make it in time! Have a good visit with your cousins!

### **Dialogue Sample 2**

Clare

I'm feeling sad today.

Vicky

You are? Why?

Clare

My dog died and I miss her so much. It's just so hard, you know. I just really miss her. One minute she's here, the next she's not and I'm so so sad. I can't stop crying. I cried all day yesterday and all last night. And I don't want to go outside or do anything except cry. I'm so depressed. I don't know if I'll ever get over this.

How would you rewrite these scenes? Read the following revisions of the dialogue samples from the previous page. What do you notice?

**Dialogue Sample 1 -- REVISED**

CLARE

Vicky! I'm so glad you're home. I need to borrow some steaks and potatoes.

VICKY

I don't have any steaks or potatoes.

CLARE

I know you do, I saw you at the grocery store the other day buying some.

VICKY

Are you calling me a liar?

**Dialogue Sample 2 -- REVISED**

CLARE enters. She carries a leash with a collar. She picks up a dog bowl and throws it in the trash. VICKY enters and hugs her. Clare starts to sob uncontrollably in Vicky's arms.

*In this revision, we have replaced the dialogue with stage directions. Sometimes, you might find that your characters don't need to speak in a scene. It's important to remember that you have stage directions to use as a tool in addition to dialogue. You might have noticed that sometimes in playwriting, less is more!*

## **Elements of Dialogue**

- **Motivation:** Why are your characters talking to each other? What do you need the audience to learn from their interaction?
- **Conflict:** Good dialogue often comes out of the problem of the scene. When one character wants something and the other character doesn't want to give her what she wants, we have conflict. Dialogue that comes out of a conflict is often the most compelling.
- ***In Medias Res:*** Unlike in real life, pleasantries such as "how are you" are often boring on stage. Remember, you don't always have to start a scene when the characters first enter or meet. Experiment with starting a scene midway through.
- **Showing, not telling:** Make the audience do some work! You don't always have to hit us over the head with what you are trying to say. How can a character show us that she's sad instead of telling us that she's sad?
- **Silence:** Do you always need dialogue? What can you show through the character's actions or behaviors instead of dialogue.

**EXERCISE 1: DEEP DARK CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT****Part A: Getting to Know Your Character**

As in fiction, it is important to know your characters well in playwriting. Characters in a play are just like us—they have wants, needs, fears, and problems. They have lives that they have lived before the play began and often their past affects how they behave. Just like us, no two characters are alike.

Before you start to write, it is helpful to spend some time developing your character(s). Once you can really see and hear this person that you have created, writing the play will be a breeze.

While you are writing your play, you might find that you discover new things about your character or that you want to change something about him or her. That's great! The following exercise is intended to give you a head start, but don't be afraid to revise it as you write.

Fill out the following for your main character. Make your character as real as possible by exploring both her or his light side and dark side – and all the other sides in between. Later, you might want to do the same for other characters in your play.

**First Name (something that reflects your character's *light* side):** \_\_\_\_\_

Example: *Pink Sparkle*

**Last Name (something that reflects your character's *dark* side):** \_\_\_\_\_

Example: *Demon*

**Age:**

**Height:**

**Weight:**

**General physical description (hair color, ethnicity, athletic, grooming habits):**

**Clothing/style (business clothing, sports gear, Goth, etc.):**

**Profession:**

**Shy or outgoing?**

**Financial state (rich, poor, in the middle)?**

**Where does he or she live? Does she live alone?**

**Who or what is most important to her?**

**Does she have any ticks, habits, quirks?**

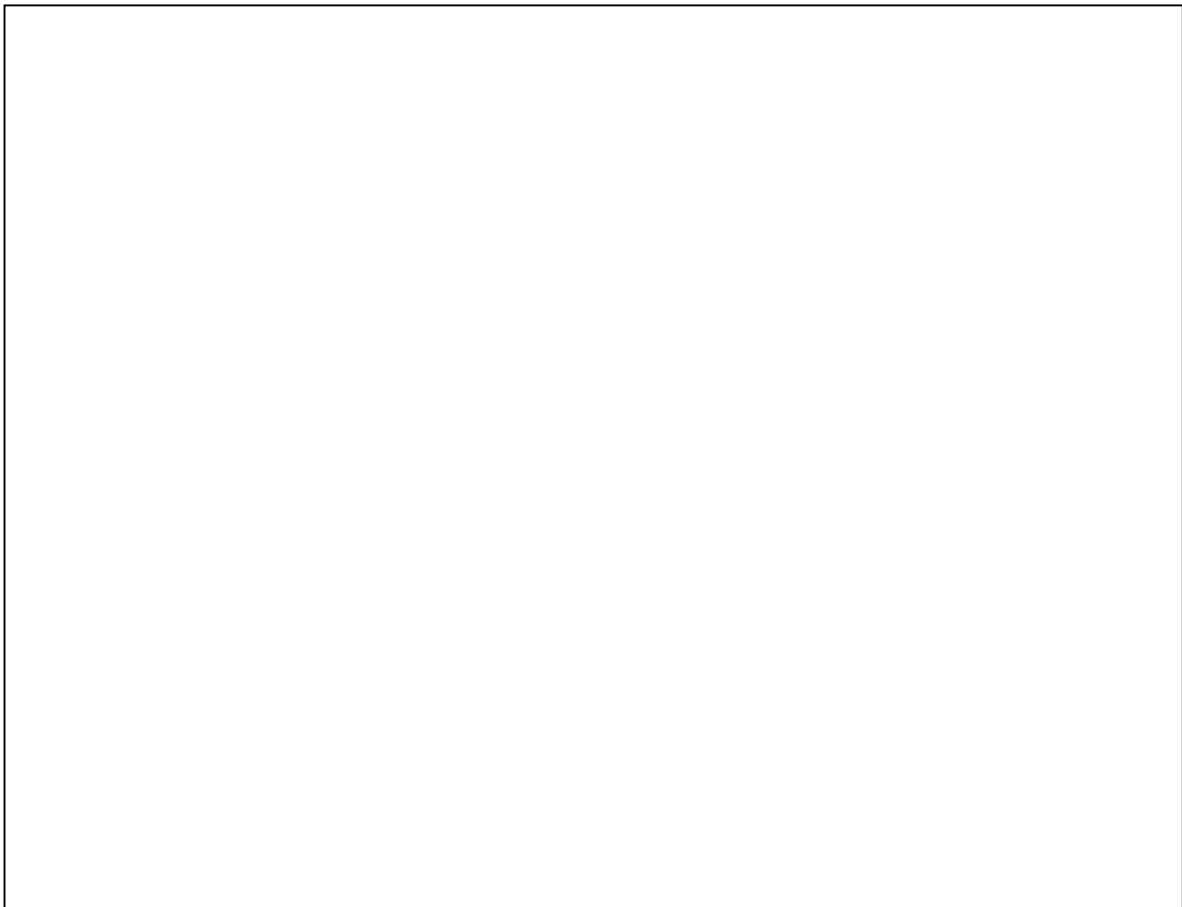
**What does he or she do for fun?**

**What is his or her greatest fear?**

**What is his or her brightest dream?**

**What's his or her darkest secret -- something that she hasn't told anyone before?**

**If you are feeling artistic, draw a sketch of your character.**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for drawing a sketch of a character.

## **Part B: Writing a Scene with a Partner**

For this exercise, you will need a partner. Together, you will write a scene with the characters you each developed in the last exercise.

One of you will write the first line. Then pass the paper to your partner to write the next line. The only rule is that your two characters are the only ones who can talk—that is through the dialogue you write for them. Keep in mind everything you've imagined about your character as you write his/her words. How would who he/she is affect what he/she says?

### **Here's your setting:**

It's midnight and a blackout has hit the city and you're in an elevator that is stuck between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> floors. The elevator is pitch black. No one knows when the electricity will come back on.

### **OR**

Your ship sank in the middle of the ocean and both of you are stranded on a lifeboat with no land in sight. It's unbearably hot and the sun is so bright you can hardly see.



**EXERCISE 2: BUILDING SCENES NIGHT AND DAY****Part A: Writing a Scene of Your Own**

A **scene** is a unit in a play. A scene functions as a mini-story, with a beginning, middle, and end. A scene has its own protagonists. This could be the hero, the antagonist, or some other character depending on the scene's purpose. The scene's protagonist must have a goal (she wants to go out) and face obstacles (her date is first late, then incapacitated).

A scene is comprised of **beats**. A beat is the smallest structural unit of a script and is defined as an exchange of action/reaction. It's a line of dialogue, an action, or a reaction that creates an emotional moment. That emotional moment can change the direction of the action, it can spin the play forward in a whole different direction. For example, a woman dressed for an evening out checks the clock—her date is late. She's annoyed (beat #1). The doorbell rings. Angry, she opens the door (beat #2). Her date tumbles in, bloodied and bruised. Her anger turns to horror and concern (beat #3). As we see from this example, beats are strung together to build a scene.

It is driven by **character**. Characters don't always announce what they need, they're crafty and try to get what they want using different tactics. If your character is in love with your other character, he/she may not say it, but try to find out if the other character feels the same way, or perhaps flirt, or ask the other character to do something with them, or try to make the other character jealous. Characters need to change, they need to reveal something about themselves, they need to discover something about themselves or others.

**Prompt:** Take the character you created in Exercise 1 and put her/him in action with another character. The second character can be your partner's character or a new character you create. Now you will write a two-person scene on your own.

Before you write, pull the following from the bags circulating and incorporate them into your scene:

1. A prop
2. A setting
3. A Virginia Woolf quote



## **Part B: Casting and Sharing**

Within your warm up group from this morning, split into two groups of four or five.

**Step 1:** In your small group, choose one person's scene to read.

**Step 2:** Assign a reader for each of the two characters. Assign a third reader to read the stage directions. The playwright does not read a part but listens carefully to her scene being performed. Playwright, think about how it sounds differently then it did on the page.

**Step 3:** Use the discussion questions below to talk about the scene after it is performed.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What do you think is going to happen next?
- What do you think happened before this scene began?
- What adjectives would you use to describe your characters?
- How did your character go about getting what they want?
- How does your play change according to casting? How does your writing change in rehearsal and performance?

## CRAFT TALK

**Melanie Maria Goodreaux**, is a poet, playwright, actress, director, and native of New Orleans. She is an imaginative dramatist whose work has been featured all across the country. Known for “blending genres, and mixing the real with the surreal,” her works have been performed at Yale University, the Nuyorican Poets Café, Sarah Lawrence College, Wheaton College, St. Michaels College, the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, and the Fondation Cartier in Paris, France. She has been awarded grants by the PEN American Center, Jerome Foundation, and the East Orange-Orange Community Development Corporation for her work. Her plays *Saydee and Deelores*, *Walter. Bullets. and Binoculars*, *Mo’Batz’ Ride*, *Controle’s Predicament*, *Sometimes It’s Very Much About Ownership*, and *Katrina Who?!* have been featured at several theaters in New York City and Los Angeles. Most recently she was published as a part of *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, an exhibition with P.S.1, an affiliate of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Because of her New Orleans heritage, many of her themes and stories are inspired by real New Orleanians and her native city. She enjoys teaching creative writing to children across the boroughs of New York City through Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

**Katori Hall** is a playwright-performer hailing from Memphis, Tennessee. Her award-winning play, *Hoodoo Love* received its world-premiere at the Cherry Lane Theatre November 1, 2007. It was developed under Lynn Nottage as part of the theatre’s 2006 Mentor Project. *Hoodoo Love* received three 2006 AUDELCO nominations (Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, August Wilson Playwright Award), the play winning for Best Supporting Actress. Her other plays include: *Remembrance* (Women’s Project/World Financial Center site-specific work), *Hurt Village* (Classical Theatre of Harlem Future Classics Reading Series, BRIC Studio), *Saturday Night/Sunday Morning*, *The Mountaintop*, and *Freedom Train* (KCACTF 10 minute play national finalist). She is a recipient of numerous awards including the 2007 Fellowship of Southern Writers Bryan Family Award in Drama, 2006 New York Foundation of the Arts Fellowship in Playwriting and Screenwriting, 2006 Royal Court Theatre Residency, 2005 Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award. Recently, she was nominated for the Wendy Wasserstein Prize and the Susan Smith Blackburn Award.

As an actor, her credits include *Law & Order: SVU*, *The President’s Puppets* (The Public), *Growing Up a Slave* (American Place Theatre), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (American Place Theatre), the world premiere of *Amerika* (Theatre de la Jeune Lune/American Repertory Theatre), *Spring Awakening* (Moscow Art Theatre School), *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (Classical Theatre of Harlem), *Schooled* (WOW Café Theatre) and *Black Girl* (Sande Shurin Theatre).

As a journalist, her work has been published in *The Boston Globe*, *Essence*, *Newsweek* and *The Commercial Appeal*. Current writing projects include a Memphis-set drama triptych, an adaptation of *Antigone* for Fluid Motion Theater & Film, a screenplay co-adaptation of Nottage’s *Mud, River, Stone* and a memoir entitled *Oreogirl*.

She graduated from Columbia University in 2003 with a major in African-American Studies and Creative Writing. She was awarded top departmental honors from the university’s Institute for Research in African-American Studies (IRAAS). In 2005, she graduated from the American Repertory Theatre Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University, receiving a Master of Fine Arts in Acting. She now attends the Juilliard School’s Lila Acheson Wallace Playwriting Program. She is a proud member of the Women’s Project Playwrights’ Lab, the Lark Playwrights’ Workshop and the Dramatists Guild.

## Saturday Night/Sunday Morning

by  
Katori Hall

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### Cast (in order of appearance)

7W, 2M (doubling)

Taffy - (late teens) Mabel's disgruntled younger sister, an ugly duckling longing to be a swan, a bit socially inept

Miss Mary - (30 going on 60) the owner of the beauty shop/ boarding house, widow, lost her husband during WWII

Mabel - (early 20s) loose, wild woman searching for adventure in the streets of Memphis, from Chattanooga, Taffy's older sister

Leanne - (early 20s) mockingly nicknamed by the other girls the "beauty queen from Texas" passionately awaits letters from her lover Bobby, who is fighting overseas, her depressed moods cast a black shroud over the otherwise lively beauty shop

Buzz - (mid 20s) a businessman/postman, could not fight in the war because of his bum leg

Dot - (30s-40s) round as a dot, a loyal customer to Miss Mary's Press n' Curl

Jackie- (30s-40s) skinny as a stick, yet another loyal customer. Dot's best friend

Gladys - (early 20s) a church-going girl from Birmingham, Alabama, an aspiring writer

Bobby - (mid 20s-early 30s) the dashing soldier, Leanne's long-lost lover

Curlin Curlin - (30s -40s) the beauty shop competition across the street (her voice can be pre-recorded or the actress playing Leanne can play the role.)

### Setting

Memphis, Tennessee. Miss Mary's Press & Curl, a beauty shop/boarding house for women. The last days of WWII.

NOTE: The text is delivered in the roaring, heightened music of black beauty shop banter. These women use words like tennis balls--insults are served fast and they are skilled at the verbal volley. There are many moments of overlapping, marked by / . The women's voices are often buoyed by an orchestra of beauty shop sounds--sizzling irons, buzzing dryers, humming Coke machines. The set lives and breathes, groans and moans--a character onto itself.

## ACT ONE

### SCENE ONE.

The downstairs parlor of a house. Two cracked red leather salon chairs stake their claim on the squeaky hardwood floors. A stove stands in one corner. A crooked vanity holds what looks like European torture instruments and they are: hot combs, marcel curlers, spiral ring curlers, etc. The crowded vanity also holds tins of pomade and bottles of shampoo and hair grease. An antique mirror stares back. Pictures of white pin-up girls float in its reflection. An ailing Coke machine hums softly beneath the twitter of birds calling the sun up into the sky. The window fills with that crisp blue morning light.

TAFFY sits in one of the parlor chairs. A wooden radio plays hillbilly music in the corner. She's humming along, filing her fingernails on a matchbox in the sweltering heat to the downbeat of a yodel twang and banjo. MISS MARY shuffles down into the shop from the stair case.

MISS MARY

If you don't cut that damn honky music off you betta.

TAFFY

Miss Mary! I can't be missin' my Grand Old Opry. That's the only thang be remindin' me of home.

MISS MARY

Well, yo' country bumpkin tail shoulda stayed in Chattanooga you wanna hear all that woofin'. Sound like a dog that done swallowed his own balls.

TAFFY

Miss Mary, let it be known that this is the late great Jimmie Rodgers and he don't sang like no ball-chokin' dog. He sang like--

MISS MARY.

A dog that done swallowed his own balls! I done been wit' many a' men. I know how it sound like. Ya sister done come in yet?

TAFFY

Do a rooster walk like a gator? Nah. It ain't nothin but nine in the mornin'.

MISS MARY

Mabel know I gets at least ten heads to pull through on Saturdays. My shampoo girl need to be on time. I'm 'bout tired of her comin' in late. She show up late one mo' time. Ya'll can kiss ya'll 20 cent boardin' mark-down goodbye.

TAFFY

You can't be punishin' me for her trifles.

MISS MARY

Taffy....

TAFFY

Hmm?

MISS MARY

I can do anythang I goddamn want. 'Round here I'm the rooster that walk like the gator cause this my nest. I do ya'll lil' girls a favor. Give you a place to lay ya head and a lil' job to boot, but nobody wanna give Miss Mary the respect she so deserves.

Miss Mary begins their Saturday morning ritual. She organizes the constellation of concoctions on the vanity, while Taffy runs over to turn on the stove and places the hot comb on it. She then sits down in the swivel chair.

TAFFY

Oh, Miss Mary, you know Mabel'll be here in a minute.

MISS MARY

Nah, she ain't. Her fast tail runnin' 'round out there all night wit' God knows who do what and when and where they put it in. I done told her 'bout stayin' out late at night. Especially after ten. The only thang opened after ten is legs.

Miss Mary takes the hot comb from the stove, spits on it. It's hot. She rubs it on a towel, then begins to press Taffy's hair.

TAFFY

(Sucking in) Ssssssssssss...She just havin' her fun.

MISS MARY

Since when a married lady be havin' fun like that?

TAFFY

Since ain't no mens around. They all overseas fightin' that Hitler man.

MISS MARY

Well, he done shot hisself, so it'll just be a matter of time. They comin' back.

TAFFY

Yo's didn't.

Miss Mary pulls her hair--hard.

TAFFY (CONT'D)

Ouch, Miss Mary! This fine hair straight garnered from the Indian side of my family.

MISS MARY

Which tribe?

TAFFY

Cherokee.

MISS MARY

Mmmmmhmmmm. If you had some Indian up in you, you wouldn't need this fire.

MABEL, Taffy's sister, waltzes in all dazed and lovely. Her press and curl has turned back into the knaps and curlicues indicative of an all night tussle in the sheets.

MABEL

Good mornin', ladies.

Her stockings are on all wrong, the back seam is twisted around her leg, not going straight up and down. She twirls her pocket book on one red painted fingernail. Striking a pose against the Coke machine, she pats her belly.

MABEL (CONT'D)

I'm hungry. What cha'll done made for me to eat?

MISS MARY

Hell, lookin' like you been cookin' up a storm already in that "kitchen" back there.

Miss Mary points to hair at the nape of Mabel's neck. Mabel twirls the drawn-up dangling locks seductively.

MABEL

Mmmmmhmmmm. I cooked a big hot sausage on the stove last night and almost burnt the house down.

TAFFY

OooooooooOOooo, I'ma tell Mama.

MABEL

Tell her! She told me a lot of thangs, but she never told me Memphis men got some kinda swagger that make ya wanna hollah.

She laughs a robust laugh.

MISS MARY

You know you should be 'shamed a yo'self. Comin' in wit' hair standin' all over yo' head like that. You just want folk to thank you a floozy.

MABEL

Ain't nothin' to be shamed 'bout. One of yo' Saturday mornin' press and curls will smooth / away all the sin.

TAFFY

Sssssssss, well seem like my ears already burnin' in Hell OUUUUUUCH!!

Taffy jumps out of the chair as if she's just caught the Holy Ghost. She runs over to the Coke machine and takes a bottle out, pressing it against her ear.

MISS MARY

Girl, just put some cocoa butter on it!

TAFFY

I ain't gone be able to hear you keep on burnin' my ears like that.

MISS MARY

If you just hold them big ole' ears down, nobody'd be burnin' 'nem. Hell, you got to protect yo prettiest asset--them ears.

Taffy says under her breath:

TAFFY

I'ma go 'cross the street to Curlin' Curlin'! Folk be comin' out her shop slicker than them white girl hair be and *they* ears don't be burnt.

Beat. Miss Mary gives her a steely look.

MISS MARY

You can gone on 'cross the street to that *other* beauty shop if you wanna, but you gone end up paying too much for not much.

Taffy heads toward the door.

MISS MARY (CONT'D)

Come back over here and sit down in this chair!!!

MABEL

Come on now, I'm hungry! Miss Mary you ain't gone fix no shrimp and grits?

MISS MARY

In case you ain't looked out the window lately, this Memphis not New Orleans. Same river, different story. Fo' you eat anythang anyway you need to comb yo' head.

(MORE)

You can't be representin' Miss Mary's Press 'n Curl witcho "kitchen" lookin' a plum mess. Nappy-headed shampoo girls are bad for business.

Taffy and Miss Mary cackle, while Mabel sneers. Their laughter is interrupted by the sound of clomping coming down the stairs.

MISS MARY

Ohhhh, / Lord.....

MABEL

Talkin' bout *I'm* bad for business.

TAFFY

Awww, hell! Sleeping beauty done woke up.

MABEL

More like the beast!

MISS MARY

Shhhhhh! Quit makin' fun of that gal.

TAFFY

It been 4 years. Four? You can't tell me to wait on no maine for / that long.

MISS MARY

SSSSShhhh! You know how she get.

TAFFY

She need to gone on somewhere and find her another maine. Mabel, let her have one of yern.

MABEL

Hell, nah. Then he won't ever come back.

The women freeze as LEANNE, the brown-skinned beauty queen from Texas, sashays into the parlor. She wears a blue satin night gown that slides across her skin. Her body is bootylicious, but her face is eternally sad. She lugubriously walks over to the stove and lights a cigarette. Beat.

MISS MARY

How you doin' this mornin', Leanne?

LEANNE

(Puffing) Same.

TAFFY

Ugggggh.

LEANNE

(Ignoring her). Buzz come yet?

MISS MARY

Nah, you woulda heard a buzz.

LEANNE

Oh. We should tell Buzz to come by more often. Ya'll know how mail be gettin' lost these days.

MISS MARY

Buzz, ain't lost a letter in years. Hell, sometime I wish he would.

LEANNE

(Radical outburst) Ya'll know I just needs my mail. I just needs to get my mail that's all! That's all that's all!

TAFFY

Ain't no need gettin' yo' panties in a / pinch.

MISS MARY

The only thang that be comin' is bills and you don't want them!

Leanne sashays over to the window and sits, as if she's waiting on something. The light finds her sadness beautiful. She bursts into tears. SILENCE

MABEL

Jesus wept.

MISS MARY

It been the same thang for the past, what it been...uhm...

TAFFY

Four goddamn years.

LEANNE

(Sniffing) He promised he'd write me letters.

MABEL

Hell, if he wrotecha, you wouldn't be able to read 'em no how.

LEANNE

Neither woulju, dummy!

Taffy snickers, Mabel pinches her sister.

MISS MARY

You should go out wit' Taffy or Mabel.

LEANNE

Taffy?

Leanne looks her up and down.

LEANNE (CONT'D)

She ugly.

TAFFY

Don't make me come up out this chair. Hold me back, Miss Mary! Hold me back!

MISS MARY

Ya'll gone get along betta than this. What the rules?

She points to a sign that says:

ALL

"Boarders shall not bitch!"

MISS MARY

That's right! We all in the know, now. Every time ya'll pitch a fit and hoop and holler, I'ma raise ya' board. Raise it! Raise it! Raise it! I ain't a liar, baby.

There is a distinctive rhythmic buzz at the door.

MABEL

Ohhhh! Get ready! Get ready!

BUZZ (O.S.)

Ya'll decent!

ALL

Gettin' there...

The women run around like chickens with their heads cut off trying to "pretty" themselves, except, of course, Leanne. Taffy brushes down her wooly eyebrows. Mabel puts on lipstick. Miss Mary pulls down the collar on her shirt a bit. Leanne just sits staring out the window. Enter BUZZ, the postman who is the only man in town--of note anyway. He ignores all the others and goes straight to the reigning beauty queen. He gets down on bended knee.

**TAKE HOME EXERCISES**

1. Adapt an excerpt of your own writing (fiction, memoir, poetry) and transform it into a scene from a play. To learn how to format your writing like a play, see Appendix A.
- 0.
2. Set the scene and write stage directions for a scene from your own home with yourself as the main character: getting up in the morning, or eating dinner at night. What's special about this day or night? You can find examples of stage directions in Appendix B.
3. Spy on people! Take a notepad to a coffee shop, bookstore, subway or anywhere else with lots of people and record a conversation that you overhear. Now take a look at what you wrote down. What do you notice about the way people talk?
4. Write your own version of Joy and Radha's play from Girls Write Now Day based on an acceptance speech you'd give and a conversation you'd have with your former self. Read Joy and Radha's piece in Appendix C.
5. The stories of great plays are told and retold, with each playwright putting their own spin on the story. Rewrite a scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* so that it takes place in your own life. The full play is available on Google Books (<http://books.google.com>).
6. Cast a reading of your scene from Exercise 2. What's it like watching other people interpret your words? Is there anything you need to clarify, sharpen? Then re-cast the scene with different readers, and see how it changes.
7. Finish the play you started at today's Playwriting Workshop, then submit it to one of the contests or sites listed in Appendix D for teen playwrights. Also, see Appendix D for additional resources on playwriting.

## APPENDIX A: STANDARD SCRIPT FORMAT FOR STAGEPLAYS

### FORMATTING A PLAY:

#### SCENE 1

(ERICA enters the room and crosses to CRAIG, who works at a desk. She taps him on the shoulder and Craig jumps with a start.)

ERICA

Would you mind telling me what the proper format is for plays?

CRAIG

(hyperventilating)

Oh my God!! Don't do that. I'm in the middle of working on a very important scene in my new play.

ERICA

(shaking her head)

Jeez! It was a simple question.

(Erica leaves and Craig goes back to playing computer games.)

Lights fade to black. End of play.)

#### Note on format:

My margins are in an inch from the page on each side. The stage directions are in parenthesis from the center of the page to the right margin. Character names are centered and capitalized. Character's dialogue is indented from both margins and any "minor stage directions" are indented another inch in from where the dialogue starts.

## APPENDIX B: EXAMPLES OF STAGE DIRECTIONS

Stage directions can take many forms, from the incredibly brief to the hyper-detailed. Below are just a few examples of how playwrights can set the scene.

### Example 1:

“Thursday evening.

A seedily furnished rooming house room.

A bed, a reclining chair, a wooden chair, some other stuff, but not much else.

Booth, a black man in his early 30s practices his three-card monte scam on the classic setup:

3 playing cards and the cardboard playing board atop two mismatched milk crates.

His moves and accompanying patter are, for the most part, studied and awkward.”

-Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*

### Example 2:

“Low bright sun, Verandah, Flagpole with Union Jack, The Family – CLIVE, BETTY, EDWARD, VICTORIA, MAUD, ELLEN, JOSHUA.”

-Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*

### Example 3:

“SCENE: A room in the Wright-Dobie School for girls, a converted farm-house eighteen miles from the town of Lancet. It is a comfortable, unpretentious room used as an afternoon study-room and at all other times as the living-room.

A large door Left Center faces the audience. There is a single door Right. Against both back walls are bookcases. A large desk is at Right; a table, two sofas, and eight or ten chairs.

It is early in an afternoon in April.

AT RISE: MRS. LILY MORTAR is sitting in a large chair Right Center, with her head back and her eyes closed. She is a plump, florid woman of forty-five with obviously touched-up hair. Her clothes are too fancy for a class-room.

Seven girls, from twelve to fourteen years old, are informally grouped on chairs and sofa. Six of them are sewing with no great amount of industry on pieces of white material. One of the others, EVELYN MUNN, is using her scissors to trim the hair of ROSALIE, who sits, nervously, in front of her. She has ROSALIE’s head bent back at an awkward angle and is enjoying herself. The eighth girl, PEGGY ROGERS, is sitting in a higher chair than the others. She is reading aloud from a book. She is bored and she reads in a singsong, tired voice.”

-Lillian Hellman, *The Children’s Hour*

## **APPENDIX C: COURAGE FINDS YOU**

### **COURAGE FINDS YOU**

**By Joy Smith and Radha Blank, GWN mentee and mentor**

A woman, FEMALE, 35 begins a speech.

FEMALE

Thank you. Thank you. It is an honor to be here. I would first like to thank...my family for always believing and supporting me and encouraging me to dream big. I'd then like to thank my colleagues for working so hard at supporting this dream....then I'd like to thank-

She stops herself.

FEMALE

I'd like to thank- Oh GOD! Who am I kidding!? This is crazy! Insane! What am I doing here? *But she's a woman. Who does she think she is? She can never get the job done. Is she crazy? Maybe... maybe I am. What am I doing? I...I don't know.*

Just then a GIRL, 15 appears.

FEMALE

Yes? Can I help you?

The Girl just stares at her.

FEMALE

I said, can I help you?

GIRL

Can you?

FEMALE

Wait. How did you get in here?

GIRL

Oh. I've been here a while. You just didn't notice me.

FEMALE

But how did you-

Female notices that the Girl holds a picture of her in her hands.

She motions her over.

Girl hands her the picture.

FEMALE

Okay. Who should I make this out to?

GIRL

To "Jimmy".

FEMALE

Jimmy?

GIRL

It's not for me.

Female begins to write.

FEMALE

"To Jimmy..."

GIRL

"Look who's on top now, Lame-O! Your life SUCKS!"

FEMALE

Umm....

GIRL

Trust me...that works. (beat) Jimmy used to always tease me. Everyday, I'd walk by and he'd stick out his foot and trip me.

FEMALE

He probably had a crush on you.

GIRL

Some crush! He would trip me EVERYDAY! Pull my hair, spit on me (off Female's look) Oh yeah! He'd knocked me down, tease me....a real creep. Then he's throw dirt on me... He made third grade a living nightmare..(Female hears this)...Even had a nickname for me...

GIRL/FEMALE

Dumbo.

FEMALE

That's funny....that's what I was called....by

GIRL

Jimmy.

FEMALE

Excuse me?

GIRL

Jimmy. (beat) It's me.

FEMALE

Who?

GIRL

You! It's us...I mean...I'm you...you're me....!

FEMALE

WHAT!?! (she looks at Girl deeply. Maybe she sees a similarity) Oh God! (she then changes her mind) No. That's not possible. (looking around) I think you should leave. SECURITY!

Female starts out and away from her.

GIRL

You have a...no, WE have a scar right above OUR knee. It's shaped like a coke bottle. From where JIMMY kicked us, remember?

FEMALE

Why did...HOW did-

GIRL

Because....to remind you....(beat) Not just about Jimmy....but....well....do you remember Sophomore year?

GIRL/FEMALE

Sojourner Truth Academy.

GIRL

We wanted it soooo bad. It wasn't there but we....YOU created it, almost on your own.

FEMALE

What?

GIRL

The Debate Team. You practically started by yourself. And we became champs, remember?

FEMALE

But I was just a kid.

GIRL

Excuse me?

FEMALE

I was full of so much...full of all this...

GIRL

Courage.

FEMALE

What's your point?

GIRL

My point is...you did it. Did something crazy, challenging and if you could do it then....

FEMALE

This is different! I am all grown up now! It's a crazy world and this is serious. This isn't a game. It's scary.

GIRL

Yeah but so was Jimmy. He was big and intimidating and loud and EVERYONE was scared of him, including you until you got sick and tired of being badgered and kicked-

FEMALE

And pushed and beat upon!

GIRL

Right! You stood up to him when no one else would. Never laid a hand on him. Nope. You used your words to make him feel like crap. You made him cry all the way home to his momma....!

GIRL/FEMALE

You stubborn-born-too-soon-lopsided-brain-having-overgrown-ape-smelling-two-bit-carnival-act!

FEMALE

Yeah, I did...WE did, didn't we? I was sooo unafraid after that. Couldn't tell me nothing!

GIRL

What happened?

FEMALE

Everything. Pressure. Work. School. Loss. Heartache. Life!

GIRL

Sound like excuses to me. (beat) Jimmy couldn't tell you nothing then. They can't tell you nothing now. There's ALWAYS gonna be doubters....bullies....

FEMALE

I get it.

GIRL

Good because Law & Order is starting....

She starts to leave.

FEMALE

Hey Kid....

GIRL

Yeah?

FEMALE

Thanks...thanks for everything.

GIRL

Hey, I didn't do anything WE wouldn't do. (beat) except for maybe cut my hair! What were you thinking?

Female has no answer. With that, Girl leaves.

Female gains her composure.

FEMALE

And I'd like to thank my staff whose immeasurable support has created a path. But my biggest thanks goes to you, the voters, who were ready to take a chance and keep the legacy of change growing in this country....and so it is with great pride, that I accept my parties nomination for the office of President of the United States of America.

Yeah..that ought to do it.

**APPENDIX D: PLAYWRITING CONTESTS AND RESOURCES****Playwriting Programs****The 52<sup>nd</sup> Street Project**

Matches kids (age 9 to 19) of Hell's Kitchen in NYC with professional theater artists to create original theater. Even if you don't live in Hell's Kitchen, visit their web site at [www.52project.org](http://www.52project.org)

**Young Playwrights Inc and Teatro Stage Fest**

Offers free playwriting workshops for high school writers. The next workshop will be on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1-4 p.m. For more information and to register, visit <http://teatrostagefest.org/young-playwrights.html>.

**Eugene O'Neill Young Playwrights Conference**

Open to writers between 12 and 18 years old. The deadline pass for this year, but check this out for future years. If your play is selected, you will spend a weekend at the renowned O'Neill Theater Center workshopping your play. <http://www.theoneill.org/ypf.asp>

**Playwriting Competitions****2010 Young Playwrights Inc. National Playwriting Competition**

Original plays only. Style, subject, and length are up to you. Your play will be read and evaluated in writing by a theater professional; selected writers will attend the Young Playwrights Conference to work with some of this country's most exciting theater artists.

Mail plays, postmarked on or before January 2, 2010, to: Young Playwrights Inc. YPC Post Office Box 5134 New York NY 10185

Young Playwrights was founded by Stephen Sondheim Check out their web site for competitions, productions, books, and tips on playwriting. [www.youngplaywrights.org](http://www.youngplaywrights.org)

**The Blank Theatre Company's Young Playwrights Festival**

This is a nationwide forum dedicated to developing and producing original plays and musicals by playwrights 19 years of age and younger. This year's deadline was on March 16, but there's always next year. Check out their web site at [www.youngplaywrights.com](http://www.youngplaywrights.com).

**Maxim Mazumdar New Play Competition**

The Alleyway Theatre, Buffalo, NY

The competition is open to anyone, of any age and citizenship. You can submit in 2 categories:

Full-Length Play or musical not less than 90 minutes, any style.

One-Act: Play or musical, less than 20 minutes, any style.

The winning full-length will receive its premiere production at Alleyway Theatre in Buffalo, NY. The winning one-act will receive its premiere in the annual Buffalo Quickies festival. Prizes are awarded. For more details: <http://alleyway.com/playwrights/>

Or submit to: Literary Manager, Alleyway Theatre, 1 Curtain Up Alley, Buffalo, NY 14202-1911

**New South Young Playwrights Festival (Atlanta, GA)**

High school and college students from any state can submit One Act plays. 20 young playwrights will be selected to participate in the Festival's free week-long residency at the Horizon Theatre that consists of workshops, seminars, and a reading of their works by professional actors. Submitting playwrights MUST be able to come to Atlanta June 2—6, 2009. For details go to [www.horizontheatre.com](http://www.horizontheatre.com).

**Young Playwrights Latino Challenge**

Deadline: April 8, 2009

Open to all NYC high school students. At least one of the main characters must be Latino and the play can be written in English, Spanish or both. \$500 1<sup>st</sup> Prize, \$250 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize. <http://teatrostagefest.org/young-playwrights.html>

## Websites

### **American Association of Community Theatre**

[www.aact.org](http://www.aact.org)

Resources for high school playwrights. Lists local, state, and regional theaters that accept submissions from teens and preteens.

### **Children's Creative Theater**

<http://library.thinkquest.org/5291/index.html>

Tips, games, and exercises to get ideas for plays and skits, and learn the skills every young playwright needs.

### **Cyberteens Zeen**

[www.cyberteens.com](http://www.cyberteens.com)

Art, poetry, fiction and nonfiction by teens – submit your own work.

### **Dramatists Play Service, Inc.**

[www.dramatists.com](http://www.dramatists.com)

Lots of good information about publishing your play, competitions, and more.

### **En Avant Playwrights**

<http://enavantplaywrights.yuku.com>

En Avant Playwrights is a collaborative of playwrights in the NYC area. Their bulletin board is open to anyone with internet access. Playwright Kathleen Warnock keeps up the free bulletin board. Kathleen posts current opportunities to submit 10-minute plays and other short plays, one-acts, and full lengths; staged readings, contests, and more.

### **International Centre for Women Playwrights**

[www.womenplaywrights.org](http://www.womenplaywrights.org)

Check out their links to practically everything a playwright needs.

### **The Loop**

A free bi-monthly newsletter for playwrights with articles about playwriting and listings of production opportunities, contests, and seminars.

[http://www.garygarrison.com/loop\\_index.htm](http://www.garygarrison.com/loop_index.htm)

### **The National Alliance for Musical Theatre**

<http://namt.org>

Festivals, competitions and submission opportunities for musical theatre.

### **The Playwrights Center**

<http://www.pwcenter.org/opportunities.php>

Contains information on contests, theaters, publication and submission opportunities.

### **Playwriting Opportunities**

<http://www.playwritingopportunities.com/>

Opportunities and contests for teen playwrights.

### **TeatroStageFest**

<http://www.teatrostagefest.org/home.html>

Offers free playwriting workshops and sponsors the Latino International Theater festival in New York, and also a yearly contest for young playwrights.

### **Young Playwrights, Inc.**

<http://www.youngplaywrights.org/>

Young Playwrights, founded by Stephen Sondheim, is the only professional theater company in the US devoted solely to the work of writers aged 18 or younger. Their web site is loaded with useful information.

### **Publish Your Play**

#### **The Claremont Review**

This magazine is looking to publish first class poetry, short stories and short plays by young adult writers (aged 13-19). Check out the submission rules at: <http://www.theclaremontreview.ca>

### **Books you will enjoy**

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#### **The Art of Dramatic Writing**

by Lajos Egri (The best how-to book EVER!!!)

#### **The Best New Plays of (2008 and after)**

By Lawrence Harbison (a great resource of what new work is being produced)

#### **Dramatists Sourcebook**

By Theater Communications Group

Consortium Book Sales & Dist

#### **The Playwright's Workbook**

Jean-Claude van Itallie.

Everything you need to know about writing your play.

#### **Screenwriter's and Playwright's Market 2009**

Chuck Sambuchino

#### **The Student's Guide to Playwriting Opportunities, 3rd Ed.**

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#### **Creating Your Own Monologue**

Glenn Laterman St. Martin's Press

#### **Characters in Action: Playwriting the Easy Way**

Marshall Cassady Meriwether Publishing, Limited

**WARM FUZZIES: *CURTAIN CALL***

If you were writing a play about your experience here at the GWN playwriting workshop today, what would the last line be right before the curtain drops and lights go out?