



## WORKSHEET TWO: TIME

### Exercise 1:

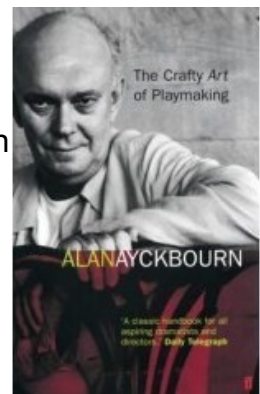
Write a 3-4-page scene in which two characters are under time pressure. This might be from a deadline, an object such as a bomb or train, or someone's imminent arrival. Set the characters up in conflict to each other, with different wants. The details of the scene – setting, time, characters - are up to you.

Nicholas Wright<sup>1</sup> has described stage time as '*a stretchy, rubbery medium, tough as pasta dough. It can shrink, expand, or be rolled into a ball. Past and present can exist side by side (as in Tom Stoppard's Arcadia), or dissolve into a timeless now (Act One of Caryl Churchill's Top Girls).*'

Stage time is complex. It's a crucial element of play structure, and has different propensities from time in film or fiction. Plays have a tendency to cover shorter periods of time than films or novels, since they are naturally suited to handling real-time action scenes. Films and novels can more easily handle an epic sweep. But, as Wright suggests, anything is possible.

Alan Ayckbourn<sup>2</sup> explains that a theatre performance has two time streams running simultaneously:

stage time: the span of events covered within the play  
real time: foyer time



It's possible for these time streams to coincide completely in a 'real-time' play, where the time needed to watch the play equals the time passed by the characters. This structure is relatively rare, because of its limitations. Most plays (and films, and TV) are episodic, made up of key scenes from the story and compressing (usually by omitting) the action in between.

The idea of dramatic 'unity of time' comes from the suggestion in Aristotle's *Poetics* that tragedies typically took place over a 24-hour period – '*a single revolution of the sun*'. Later

1 Nicholas Wright's Masterclass, The Independent (1994)

2 Alan Ayckbourn, The Crafty Art of Playmaking (2002)

### Exercise 2:

Take well-known fairy tale and write down the scenes needed to tell the story on index cards. Work out how much time lapses between each scene. Write two of the scenes. Now change the lapsed time between them (years have passed, or only a few minutes). Rewrite the second scene to reflect this passage of time. Is it necessary for the story to clarify how much time has passed? See if you can think of creative ways to achieve this.

playwrights adopted this as an aesthetic ideal. The thinking was that the closer the play's time frame to real-time events, the more the drama would be heightened.

Even today, when story structures are much more sophisticated (flashbacks, flash forwards, montage, frame narration, simultaneous scenes...), playwrights such as Ayckbourn underline the advantages of compressed time:

*'The question I always ask is: in how **short** a time can I hope to tell my story – both according to the foyer clock and on stage?... I find it dramatically more effective to condense the stage action where possible. To conduct events over the course of a single day or night concentrates the audience's mind far more than meandering through a few decades'.<sup>3</sup>*

### Time bombs:

In Hollywood films, the 'time bomb' technique is common device for building tension. Once you become aware of this, you spot time bombs everywhere – not just literal ticking clocks, but also devices such as missed rendezvous (get me to the church on time), and doors or walls that close inexorably, leaving the hero(ine) only a hair space for retrieving their hat. It's a way of creating a 'crucible' effect that increases the character's drive, and our excitement. It's also a challenge to write without making the device too obvious!

### Time and distance:

The handling of time also has an impact on viewpoint – particularly the emotional distance between characters and the audience. In a long, sustained scene, we are given the chance to follow the characters' emotional shifts moment-by-moment, and may grow to identify with them closely.

Frequent scene-cuts and shorter scenes are more typical of TV writing. The advantages on stage are

### Comparing Genres: Time

**Story time** can be chopped about with flashbacks, speeded up with time jumps or frame narration, or even stretched. These techniques distinguish it from **real time** – the natural, chronological unfolding of events.

Time-bending concepts and terminology are more familiar to us from the world of **film** (timelapse, flashback, montage, slow motion, jump cuts).

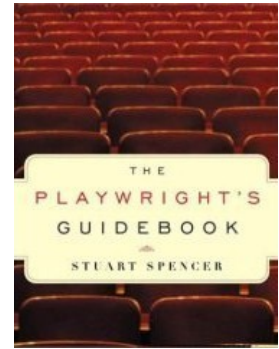
**Fiction** can play about with time very easily and fluidly, eg casual expositional backflips when new characters are introduced. The gap between story time and discourse time (how long it takes to tell the story) is typically much greater in fiction, which can easily span decades in a single page.

Two or more storylines can also be interwoven and unfolded bit by bit. This is very common in screenwriting, where plots are often intercut with subplots.

3 Alan Ayckbourn, *The Craft Art of Playmaking* (2002)

greater pace and refreshed attention, but at the expense of close empathy. We can become highly aware of the mechanics of scene changes (and set changes) and what's essentially a distancing frame.

This distance isn't good or bad – it's just another aesthetic choice that has a bearing on how we connect to the story and the characters. You may want your audience to step back and analyse or judge your characters, rather than empathise. Nicholas Wright points out that Brecht's 'epic' style of theatre, which hops between places and across the years, *'is cool. We're free to watch, to analyse, to keep our distance. The one thing the epic can't very easily achieve is a relentless build-up of emotion.'*<sup>4</sup>



There are many ways to influence the connection between audience and play, but the powerful impact of time structure is often overlooked.

### **Exercise 3:**

Using your complete fairy-tale scenario from Exercise 2, reorder the index cards and see whether you can find an interesting way to tell the story with a different story structure. How does this change the emotional impact of the story?

### **Occasions:**

Stuart Spencer<sup>5</sup> suggests it's useful for playwrights to ask ask: **Why is this night different from all other nights?** He calls this 'the Passover question'. It's a useful way to identify what incites the play – another way of asking: 'when does the story really get going?' For example, in Hamlet, the story opens with news of Hamlet's father's ghost on the loose, and Hamlet on the point of finding this out. An inciting incident might happen just before the start of the play, or just after it's started, but as the motor of the play, it usually comes early on.

One way to create a sense of disturbed normality is to set up a familiar ritual: a party, a game, a meal – and then subvert it. Wright describes Hamlet as *'a succession of disturbed rituals: a wedding announcement spoiled by the prince's depression, a play interrupted half-way through'*. The familiar ritual gives us a short-cut, and lets us quickly see how the characters are deviating from the norm. *'Because, without a context, what we see on the stage is extraordinarily hard to judge. Are we watching a once-in-a-lifetime crisis? Or something the character goes through every day of the week? Is it acceptable behaviour, or does it breach a taboo?'*<sup>6</sup>

### **Further work on time:**

Write a scene where time slows down – perhaps using a passage from fiction as inspiration. How can you achieve this theatrically? Now try speeding up time – conveying a long sweep of history.

Coming up next: character

4 Nicholas Wright's Masterclass, The Independent (1994)

5 Stuart Spencer, The Playwright's Guidebook (2002)

6 Nicholas Wright's Masterclass, The Independent (1994)