

Key Concepts: Dramatic Structure

The Dramatic Scene

The majority of plays are made up of a sequence of individual scenes, which form a narrative structure. You can think of each scene as a separate unit of action, with a beginning, middle and end.

To earn its place in the overall narrative, every scene needs to have a dramatic function of its own. To do this, it will contain one or more of the following:

An **EVENT** – something happens in the world of the play that affects a major character or characters.

A **REVELATION** – new information is revealed that has consequences for a major character or characters.

A **COMPLICATION** – the plot thickens! Commonly, a character's goal will be blocked, forcing them to take:

A **SIGNIFICANT ACTION** – a decision that will move on the plot, deepen our understanding of character, and raise the dramatic stakes in the story.

Sequence

Arranging scenes into a particular sequence will create the basic structure of a play. Many plays are linear in structure, i.e. the scenes start in the present and move forwards in time, but others may move back and forth between present, past and future.

Betrayal by Harold Pinter is a famous example of a play that starts at the end and works backwards, so the first scene contains the resolution and the final scene contains the beginning of the story.

Key Elements of a Dramatic Scene

- A goal/objective/obstacle for one or more characters
- A negotiation or conflict over that goal
- A treasure – something of value, physical or symbolic, that one or more characters compete over
- A problem, crisis or conflict that gives the audience deeper insight into the characters
- A moment of change for one or more characters
- A change in time and/or place
- A change of atmosphere or mood
- A sense of future action (i.e. what consequences the scene has in the narrative)

Tips

A good question to ask of any individual scene is:

If I took the scene out of my play, would the play fall apart? The answer should hopefully be, yes!

If the answer is no, the scene is probably not contributing enough to the story and may need further development.

Group Exercise



Afterwards, discuss the scene and answer the following questions:

- What is the main action of each scene? What is the scene's dramatic function?
It may help to try and put the action into a sentence based on a subject-verb-object breakdown. e.g. Steve (subject) attempts to reassure (verb) his wife Freya (object) that she'll be OK while he's on his business trip.
- What do we learn in each one about
 - a) plot
 - b) character?

- Why do you think the writer's scenes are so short? What does that contribute to the atmosphere or mood of the play?
e.g. It gives the action a sense of urgency.
- Although the scenes are separate units of action, there is a fluidity to their arrangement (i.e. the way they overlap.) What effect might this have? e.g. It allows the audience to be part of different character realities simultaneously.
- How does the writer's scene structure relate to his subject, theme and style of writing?
- How might the staging of the scenes contribute to the writer's intended themes and issues?

Group Exercise



Earthquakes in London (2010) by Mike Bartlett

An all-pervasive fear of the future and a guilty pleasure in the excesses of the present drive Mike Bartlett's epic rollercoaster of a play from 1968 to 2525 and back again. *Earthquakes in London* is a fast and furious metropolitan crash of people, scenes and decades, as three sisters attempt to navigate their dislocated lives and loves, while their dysfunctional father, a brilliant scientist, predicts global catastrophe.

Read the scene straight through once or twice using volunteers from the group to read the different roles.

Discuss This



Finding material for a scene about real-world concerns is easy – the real skill of the playwright is in shaping the material into a scene with a real dramatic function.



Now watch the interviews with playwrights. <http://bit.ly/1lvZqIk>
Afterwards you can share your thoughts about them with the group.

Get Writing



Watch the Youtube clip about youth unemployment: <http://bit.ly/1qmyLm9>

- With the group, brainstorm how the material could be shaped into a scene.

The key is to start thinking about adding and inventing material to make it more than a situation and turn it into a dramatic unit of action.

- What's your personal connection to the clip? Is it interesting to you? Does it affect you as an audience member and if so, how?
- Can you identify any key actions that could form the basis of a scene?
- Can you put this key action into a subject-verb-object sentence, as before?
- Who are the characters with the most potential to carry a scene?
- What problem, crisis or conflict is set up that could be extended into a scene?

Tips

Try to give the scene a beginning, middle and end. Does the scene build towards a point of climax? Are you giving your characters enough to do, rather than enough to say? Think about what overall effect you want the scene to have on your audience and the energy you want to create on stage.



Find Out More

Links to info about *Earthquakes in London*

<http://bit.ly/SInWGq>

<http://bit.ly/1d5yYAd>

Suggestions For Further Reading

Betrayal by Harold Pinter

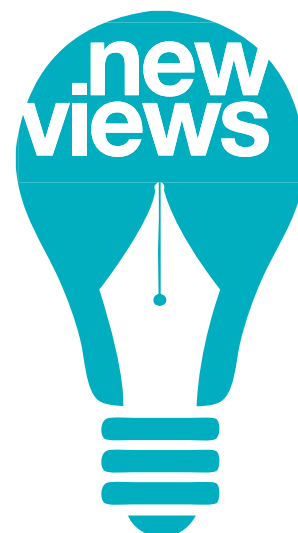
Honeymoon Suite by Richard Bean

Dinner by Moira Buffini

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

Precious Bane by Bryony Lavery

Attempts on Her Life by Martin Crimp



Extension Exercise



Read/listen to the following scene from *Port* by Simon Stephens

***Port* by Simon Stephens**

Produced at the National Theatre in 2013

Stockport, 1988. It's midnight. Racheal, eleven, and Billy, six, wait in the car in agitated excitement.

Their mother is at her wits' end with all their chatter and fighting and dreams of Disneyland. She is about to leave them for good. Their father, drunk in the flat above, has locked the door. It's a pivotal moment, the beginning of a thirteen-year odyssey for two kids, largely abandoned and growing up in the deprived suburban shadows of Manchester, a city that felt itself to be the most exciting in the world. A richly colourful portrait of a town with the everyday writ large, Simon Stephens' *Port* is a celebration of the human spirit as Racheal looks to the future and opts for love and life and for something better.

Listen to the audio clip of the play once or twice and read along with the text.

Group Exercise



This excerpt from *Port* makes up the first half of Scene 3. Discuss what you've read/heard with reference to the following questions:

How would you describe the action of the scene? What gives the scene its potential to be more than just a static conversation?

Is there a 'treasure' in this scene? (symbolic or physical) There may be more than one: make a list if so. How do these things of value help give shape to the scene?

Is there a sense of future action that might lead from this scene, either in the second half or further on in the play?

What might happen in the second half of the scene to bring the action to a climax? See if you can come up with some ideas for new action and events that could change the energy, up the stakes, increase the drama, etc.