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Page to Stage: A Roadmap to Comedic Playwriting

Sydney Weiss

Washington University in St. Louis

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Sydney Weiss

Page to Stage: A Roadmap to Comedic Playwriting

In high school, I was a theatre kid, and to be candid, I never took theatre very seriously. I was once kicked out of a musical number for doing the Macarena when (I thought) my director was not looking. I showed up late to rehearsal, McDonald's french fries in tow, as I was convinced the cast *needed* to celebrate Friday Fry-Day. My best memories were made playing Milky White, the cow in *Into the Woods*, and I would crawl across the stage in my fat suit (complete with plush udders). Mind you, I am not a flippant person. In most settings, I would not be considered the "class clown." Still, I am endlessly amused by the idea of using the stage as a medium for comedy. In addition to theatre, I have been obsessed with writing for as long as I can remember. Throughout my house, I have notebooks crammed with poems and stories, some with smudged pen, as my hand zipped across pages to chronicle my pressing thoughts. As I have grown and matured, so have my aspirations. A theatre kid and lover of everything funny, I long to write full-length comedic plays. In selecting books to bring with me on my journey from Cincinnati to St. Louis, I noticed a running theme: all of the books I chose were formative to my (ongoing) journey to become a comedic playwright.

I did not always have the confidence to begin huge writing projects. I needed to be encouraged to write, and I received helpful and honest—albeit harsh—notes from Stephen King in his forthright memoir *On Writing*. I absorbed everything I read and heard from English teachers, but I still did not see a literary career for myself. It all changed sophomore year of high school when I was gifted my playwriting bible: American playwright Sarah Ruhl's *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms,*

Children, and Theater. I read it for the first (and second and third) time in one sitting. Ruhl asks thought-provoking questions like what *really* is the purpose of a play's title, and are playwrights insane for writing dialogue that came from various voices in their head? She intersperses her profound essays between accounts of taking her children to get lice removed. I am astounded by how she balances her unglamorous role as a mother with her glamorous life as a New York City playwright. She proves that if she can find time to be an esteemed playwright, anyone can, so I have no excuses. I realized that I, a busy student, would never "have time" to write, I had to *make* time. Furthermore, Ruhl proved to me that no matter what path I choose in life, be it a prestigious career, motherhood, or most likely somewhere in between, I will always have writing.

Now I knew I wanted to write, but I could not copy jokes and comedic plots from playwrights like Ruhl, as I hear this is called "plagiarism." I needed to develop my sense of humor in a way that would transfer onto a page, so to get into the funny zone, I picked up books like Jerry Seinfeld's *Seinlanguage* and Bo Burnham's *Egghead: Or You Can't Survive on Ideas Alone*. Books written by comedians are seldom cited as literary genius, but they provided me with comedic relief and more examples of written comedy. Specifically, Seinfeld's observational comedy helped me further understand the value in making jokes relatable to an audience, as if they are "in" on it. This is a tool I utilize to the best of my ability. Seinfeld and Burnham, along with countless other comedians, taught me that I needed to find my own comedic style in addition to standing on the shoulders of giants.

Next on my journey, I took a deep dive into popular plays, beginning with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. After spending ten minutes per page dissecting the dense language, I finally

understood the jokes and burst into laughter, feeling the Bard's punny comedy transcend centuries. I shifted to more contemporary works and landed on my favorite comedic playwright Neil Simon. While some people binge-watch *The Bachelor*, I raced through *Rumors*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Lost in Yonkers*. I was enamored with Simon's farcical plots and quick wit. Simon's words are lost if not performed with perfect comedic timing, so I soaked in the rhythm of his text in the hopes of mastering my comedic timing. Closely married to Simon's work is *Noises Off* by Michael Frayn. Frayn's slapstick farce taught me to dream big. *Noises Off* is a play in three acts that requires a two-story, rotating set. Through Frayn, I realized plays can still have the extravagant production of a full-out musical even without musical numbers.

In acting class, I was even more aloof than usual, as my director could not peel me away from his metal cabinet of plays. I read comedies perfect for high schools, like *Almost, Maine* and *She Kills Monsters*. Naturally, I added more and more of my favorite plays to my ever-growing collection. As I became an expert in large ensemble casts and PG humor, I mimicked these trends in my writing. I began to write plays that were accessible to the people I knew best: my friends from acting class. I even had the opportunity to direct my one-act play at a small festival at my high school.

My bookshelf now looks like the play section in a library sans Dewey Decimal labels. As the empty space on my shelf diminishes, I always leave a thin sliver of a section for a small collection of unbound books. These are printed pages, some stapled, others fastened with prongs in plastic folders. These are shorter, and the author may lack some technical skill, but with each new addition, she gets a little bit better. The characters mirror people in her own life—the settings, places she has been. The jokes are ones she tried out on the Uber driver then scribbled in her

notebook, murmuring under her breath, "Damn, that was a good one." And forgive my immodesty, but they remain my favorite books.