

# When Shakespeare said Marvelastic!

## How to Write Your Own Class Play

by Rick Tan



my chalk drawing of the childhood home of Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, love, and inspiration

## Foreword

You have stumbled upon a reference guide that I wish I had when I began the process of writing my first play six years ago. This is just a guide. It is a brief discourse into creating your play from scratch. This guide can be useful to anyone who is considering adding "playwright" to their skill set!

My play-writing experience came out of my Waldorf teaching in middle school. Before that, I had no formal training in how to write a play, and what I learned about how to do it I learned as I wrote the plays!

If you have toyed with the idea of writing your own play, read on and enjoy!

Best wishes,  
Rick Tan

# Introduction

The Waldorf curriculum is rich with biographies and events from the Ancient Civilizations to the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution. How can a teacher bring it all to life? A class play.

I gotta warn you - in a Waldorf curricular calendar, there is actually only tidbits of space devoted to practice, produce, and perform a school play. So, knowing you are going to be pressed for time, what I am about to tell you is going to sound rather inane, or insane: write a class play!

"Marvelastic!" Shakespeare agrees.

If you are a Waldorf grades teacher, you are bound to do a class play. You will most likely do the traditional play that your class performs year after year. This is fine, it works, it gets the job the done.

But you are a Waldorf teacher: you are SO beyond simply getting the job done. You are supposed to be a teacher AND an artist, author, composer, lyricist, poet, scientist, and philosopher. Let's add playwright to your host of talents!

## Why Write a Play

Why write a play? Here are the Top Ten benefits of writing your own class play:

### **TOP TEN REASONS TO WRITE A CLASS PLAY**

**A cast of characters that perfectly matches the number of students you have**

**Characters that align with the personalities of your students**

**Characters and stories that meet the students' pedagogical development**

**Biographies your students love become the characters they get to be**

**Stories your students enjoy are relived...with poetic license**

**Creative fulfillment and professional growth are rolled into one**

**Challenges yourself and expands your skill set**

**Combines your imagination, inspiration, and intuition...and humor**

**An opportunity to innovate and challenge the status quo**

**Your head does not stop thinking of your students during winter break so you might as well write a class play for them!**

# Aristotle's Six Essential Elements of Drama

If any of the benefits of writing a class play has piqued your interest, then it would be good to know Aristotle's Six Essential Elements of Drama.

## ARISTOTLE'S SIX ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

**Theme:** the meaning, message, main idea of the play

**Plot:** the sequence of events of the story performed on stage

**Characters:** the people of the story played by the actors

**Dialogue:** the words spoken/sung by the actors

**Rhythm:** the delivery of the actors

**Spectacle:** the audience's visual experience (stage set, costumes, props)

Developed over 2000 years ago, it has since undergone some variation and certainly each element can be detailed out. However, it does offer a solid framework, and even allows us to define what drama is: a story performed on stage.

While true that Waldorf is all about the children's experience of "process", the class play is where the "product" - the performance - is an essential part of the experience. It is where the teacher's and students' hard work and teamwork pay dividends, it is where the audience (usually parents, other students, and faculty) becomes one with the spirit of the story, where pride and pedagogy get front row seats!



on the set of A Hunch about Munch - some of my eighth grade students left to right as Andrew Carnegie, Henry Frick, Dr. Watson, and Sherlock Holmes posing with my painting of "The Scream"

# Writing the Play

In guiding you towards writing your class play, I will call on Aristotle's Essential Elements of Drama to organize the task at hand, beginning with theme.

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## Theme

A theme is the meaning, the message, the main idea of a dramatic work. There are themes embedded into every aspect of the grades curriculum that you can draw from. You will never run out of ideas for a class play!

In seventh grade, we studied the Renaissance and Age of Discovery. It was all about exploration and expansion. It was about the individuals who were inspired to do something new and creative, and the paths they took to become legendary historical figures.

I found the theme I wanted to work with for a class play - the making of a legend! Like the appeal of movies about how a superhero gets his or her powers, I became fascinated with a story that would explore the making of one of history's greatest superhero playwrights: William Shakespeare!

How did Shakespeare get his super wordsmithing strength? Where did he come from? How did he rise to power? What inspired him to write 37 plays and 154 sonnets? These were all questions I wanted our class play called Star Cross'd to try to answer, with the theme being how we become who we are, legend or not.

When we studied colonial American history, I tackled the Salem witchcraft trials. The themes I discovered: the power of religion, and the eventual separation of church and state, and the conflict between community and individuality. The play was called Good Village Salem: The Unsung Story, and as the title suggests, it was a musical - you should have heard the Puritan men sing!

### **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR THEME**

Regard theme as the "main idea", don't get too hung up on it being a "message".

Start your research with biographies that resonate with the students.

Continue your research with events that resonate with your students.

If you want a message, best to have universal, human appeal and relevance.

It should be meaningful to the playwright - that's you.

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## Plot

The plot is the sequence of events that unfolds before the audience's eyes, it is the story you are telling through the performance of the actors on stage. I am almost hesitant to say the plot IS the story. To me, the play is like a snapshot that the audience sees, a snippet of a bigger story that precedes the utterance of the first line, and continues on after the curtains fall.

In that regard, the plot should capture the attention of the audience from the start. It should not start like watching the grass grow, it should be more like the UPS guy running across your lawn - see, that would be interesting!

For example, in my eighth grade play A Hunch about Munch, the play opens at Carnegie Mansion in New York with Andrew Carnegie:

### **ANDREW CARNEGIE**

It is precisely a quarter to five, Louise. Where is that flighty Mr. Munch!? How can I unveil a painting when the painting is not here? Do you see a painting on that wall, Louise!?

### **LOUISE CARNEGIE**

I do not, dear.

The audience is immediately brought into the action with the urgency of Carnegie's line, as his unveiling party is minutes away from the arrival of the guests. We also get a glimpse into the dynamic between him and his wife Louise - spoiler alert, don't let her demure exterior fool you, she was the mastermind behind the disappearance of Munch's painting "The Scream" in the play!

The plot should follow general rules of story-telling, with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning introduces characters, setting, and presents the audience with the conflict. The middle shows how the characters deal with the conflict. The end delivers the final show-down, the resolution, the consequences, and we see how the characters fared through all of it.

Keep the plot in chronological sequence. It may be easy in a novel for an author to take us back and forth through time, but that is not so easy with a stage performance!

While your imagination may be limitless, you have to take stage logistics in mind as you create the story of your play. You would not want to have to deal with numerous scene changes. Your play will have Acts and Scenes, but it cannot be so elaborate as to go, for instance, from a barn in Nebraska, to an African jungle, to an orbiting space station, to a pirate ship on the Atlantic, and back to the barn again!

Keep the plot credible and plausible. Even though you may have created a fictional story, especially one based on historical events, our experience demands that the story makes some sense based on expected human behavior.

## PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR PLOT

Give the plot a beginning, middle, and end with standard literary elements of setting, conflict, and resolution.

Have the plot follow a chronological order of events to make it easy for the audience to follow the development of characters and sequence of action.

Make the story plausible in terms of expected norms of human behavior, abilities, and character traits.

Make the story interesting - it should be relevant for the audience so as to connect with the characters and be invested in the outcome.

Think of the play's plot as a snippet of time where the audience has been invited in to experience an exciting moment in the characters' lives.

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## Characters

The theme (main idea) or a plot (the story) is not always the starting point of creating your class play, sometimes it is a character. Take for example my eighth grade play called A Hunch about Munch. That play's seed was not a theme or a plot, it was a character I wanted to write about, Sherlock Gnome - yes, as in the fictional private detective, only that he's a gnome. Over the summer before we started eighth grade, I was locked on Sherlock Gnome. I envisioned my students wearing pointy red hats - I was going to take a stab at a mystery, poke fun at Waldorf, and somehow fold the 19th century Industrial Revolution into the mix!

Realizing I might over-theme the play, I scrapped the gnome angle. Staying in the spirit of the 19th century, I kept Sherlock. And of course, Dr. Watson needed to come along, and Mrs. Hudson, their landlady. Then, there was a specific year I honed in on: 1893, the year that Edvard Munch created "The Scream", the year of the Chicago World's Fair, and Antonin Dvorjak's debut of The New World Symphony.

Suddenly, I had an explosion of characters to populate my play with: Andrew and Louise Carnegie, Edvard Munch, Amelia Bloomer, Mary Cassatt, Philander Knox, and Milton Hershey, to name a few. They were all historical figures who lived around the same time who may or may not have actually spoken to each other, except for in a class play!

The plot (this is historical fiction) revolved around Edvard Munch's "The Scream", which was commissioned by Andrew Carnegie. During one of his lavish parties, the painting is stolen, and Sherlock Holmes is called to solve the mystery.

To me, the characters drive the entire class play. Through them, the themes are revealed, the plot is moved along, and all the other aspects of the play (the spectacle) come to life!

In the play, make at least one character be a dynamic character. By this I mean that the character should experience some growth or change usually out of the interactions and conflicts in the plot. The audience becomes drawn into the story with dynamic characters because we can all identify with the process of growth.

### **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR CHARACTER**

**Fictional or not, create a synopsis of each of the characters (their biographies will inform you of how they ought to talk, act, react, and interact on stage).**

**Fictional or not, make characters believable, not contrived.**

**Give characters unique personalities, back stories, and room to grow.**

**Decide on your protagonist(s), antagonist(s), and supporting characters.**

**Since it is a grades play, make characters appropriate (stay away from racial stereotyping and characters who abuse drugs and alcohol).**

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## **Dialogue**

Dialogue distinguishes the story-telling format of a play. Whether a play for screen or stage, the story is told almost entirely through conversations and interactions between characters. The playwright writes the story as a script. There isn't one way to write a script but there are a few key features that allow the playwright, director, and actors to be on the same page, literally!

In organizing the script, the playwright may organize major sections of the play by using "acts", which often are designated with Roman numerals, like Act IV. Within each act, there may be a collection of "scenes", designated with Arabic numerals, like Scene 2. Acts and scenes are the script's vehicle to signal major sections of the plot. While an audience may recognize the shift from one act or scene to another, acts and scenes are primarily for the performers, which include the director, actors, stage crew, etc.

The script may also include short descriptions of the particular scene, such as Act III, Scene 4: The Courtroom, Tuesday, Late Afternoon.

The script will typically also include brief direction when the playwright believes it particularly key to the plot. These are often in italic.

And finally, the character speaking and what the character says make up the bulk of the play. Here is an excerpt from Star Cross'd with all the aforementioned elements:

## **ACT II, SCENE 1: MASTER OF REVELS OFFICE**

**Burbages visit Sir Tilney, and William Shakespeare arrives in London.**

### **OFFICE CLERK**

Master Tilney, James Burbage and his son Richard Burbage are here for their appointment.

### **SIR EDMUND TILNEY**

*(Impatiently)* Do let them in and be quick about it!

### **OFFICE CLERK**

Right away, sir! *(Turning to the Burbages)*  
This way, please, gentlemen.

### **JAMES BURBAGE**

Good morrow, Sir Tilney, how fares the Master of Revels?

### **SIR EDMUND TILNEY**

I will let you know after this meeting has concluded.  
What have the Chamberlain's Men been plotting lately?

### **RICHARD BURBAGE**

Plotting? Have we built a reputation for slandering God, Queen and Country?  
We have but a short, modest play for the Revels. *(Hands a manuscript to Tilney)*  
I assure you: nothing blasphemous, treasonous, or seditious.

### **SIR EDMUND TILNEY**

As the Queen's censor, I am tasked with checking  
Every line, and everything in between the lines  
Of every play and poem and ballad that comes before the Queen.  
I have said this before, Burbages, I don't trust your reassurances!

What about the content of the dialogue? This is the fun part of writing your play - you get to put words in people's mouths, literally! Did Shakespeare ever really say "marvelastic"? Perhaps not - but as I developed his character, I knew that he must have been quite the wordsmith and invented words and phrases, so I invented a few words he uttered in our play.

Thank goodness for Internet - as I wrote my character's lines, I often did searches into the character, into related events, into definitions of things the character might refer to so what that character says is rooted to something real that is outside of my own experience to be convincing (for instance, a had a woodland gnome in one of my plays refer to the yarrow plant as *Achillea millefolium* - which I figured made sense since gnomes are nature experts - the actress who played the gnome, by the way, was seven years old and she delivered the scientific name so expertly!)



## **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIALOGUE (THE SCRIPT)**

Refer to your character's synopsis - your description of the character will help you write dialogue that is in keeping with who that character is.

Give the characters unique speaking traits or word phrasing that distinguishes that character from others (for instance, maybe the police chief will often say, "We do things by the book!").

If the character is a historical figure, you have an opportunity to add famous quotes by that person or obscure little-known facts about that person's life.

If your play is set in a particular time period or place, research literature to get an idea of how people may have spoken.

Avoid using a unique word used by one character, that then shows up again a few lines later by another character - this would make it obvious that their speech was written by someone, thus revealing to the audience that a playwright was at work.

Allow characters to speak about things that give the audience a peek into their own backstories - the occasional tangential line adds realism and depth to the play, as long as it does not derail the plot.

Create dialogue that resembles real conversation between people, and then occasionally have them break out into soliloquy if fitting.

Have the characters refer to each other by name, especially at the start so the audience knows who they are, and then sparingly to be authentic speech.

As you write the dialogue, read it to yourself out loud or have someone in your household read with you - this will give you a good sense of how much dialogue can be said within a minute, or five, or fifteen - which then will give you an estimate of how long your play will eventually be.

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## **Rhythm**

Aristotle may have had all sorts of ideas around the idea of rhythm of a play, but in essence, it is about the delivery of the actors' dialogue, which also of course touches on the plot itself. The audience is there to be entertained, bottom line. Parents of the children acting on the stage are excited and nervous for their own children and would be happy to see them utter a few words on stage, whether delivered perfectly or not, but the truth is, as an audience member, I want to see a good show!

A good rhythm and flow to the play can be very satisfying to the audience (and performers). Rhythm is tied to dialogue, so your writing will determine rhythm as much as how the actors deliver their lines. Even in a play tackling serious content like the Salem witch trials, levity and humor can be added without it being contrived. Entire scenes can switch back and forth that will allow the audience to process dramatic moments in between comical relief.

Pacing is another way that rhythm can be explained. Some scenes can have fast-paced banter, giving a feeling of urgency or excitement, then some scenes can have drawn-out lines to slow down the momentum. Or the plot can be a series of problems that the characters try to solve, creating a rhythm that builds and climaxes and releases.

While rhythm does not specifically refer to music, I am taking the opportunity to talk about music here. In looking back at the plays I had written, there was always at least one song. In my musical Good Village Salem: The Unsung Story, I had seven original songs! I've used the songs as a way to create rhythm in the play, often giving a time of reflection and/or entertainment to the story.

### **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR RHYTHM**

**Grab the audience quickly and set the tone of the play.**

**Build the plot gradually.**

**Add pops of humor or use an entire scene for comic relief.**

**Mix it up with delivery - the play will get seriously boring if the character's lines are all the same length and tone throughout.**

**Throw in a song or two that is relevant to the story - it's just fun for a class play!**

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## **Spectacle**

I said it before, the characters drive the play. Spectacle, the physical elements such as stage scenery, costumes, and props, are secondary and support the actors. A school play is not a big budget production - you can't expect to build a 10,000 gallon pool to recreate the Tiber River on stage, but a blue silk borrowed from kindergarten might suffice. Don't get hung up on costumes and a host of props.

Be deliberately minimalist and let the actors take center stage. For our Shakespearean play Star Cross'd I wanted to recreate the timberframe and plaster construction of the Globe Theater in England. Instead of building with wood slats, which I originally thought I would use, I found painter's rolls of 5-inch wide brown masking paper and taped them to the existing walls of the multifunction room to resemble exposed timberframing. It looked pretty cool and worked to give my students a level of authenticity. It was an inexpensive and time-friendly solution.

Spend time and money with the things that will give the highest yield. For A Hunch about Munch, the single most important prop was a framed painting of "The Scream". I painted one on a plywood board and built a frame. The backdrop of the entire play was simply a white wall.

### **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR SPECTACLE**

Be resourceful when obtaining costumes and props.

Be minimalist with the stage scenery.

Focus on the most important, high impact props.

Recruit parents if needed.

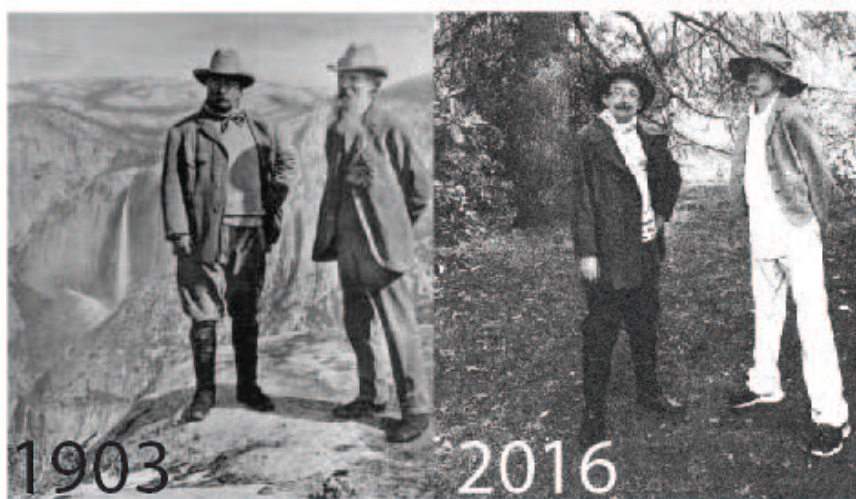
Recruit school musicians to add ambience.

## Practice and Performance

With writing the play, you will have accomplished the hardest part! Now you get to reveal your play to the students, practice it, and perform it.

I hope that I have inspired you to write your own class play. Shakespeare would be proud.

"Marvelastic!"



I recreated the original photo that served as inspiration for my play The Range of Light which we performed outdoors

# Getting Started

So it is winter break, and you are committed and excited about writing your own class play! You brainstorm on a theme, you develop an initial idea for the plot, you create a character or two, and you sit down at the laptop about to write....and nothing happens. It's daunting, starting.

So here are my final bits of advice to getting you started:

## **STEPS TO GETTING STARTED**

**Create a file folder titled Class Play.**

**Create a document called Class Play Notes.**

**In that document, write down a line or two about the main idea of the play.**

**Write a synopsis of one or two characters.**

**Create an interesting setting that the play opens to.**

**Label it ACT I, SCENE I.**

**Have one of your characters actually say something, anything.**

**Now have another character say something back, anything.**

**You will realize the power and freedom you have.**

**Delete the lines you wrote and try it again with more intent.**

**Build up the dialogue.**

**Add more characters as inspiration hits and start thinking of who among your students will play the various parts.**

**Write synopses for every new character you think of.**

**Keep going, do not be discouraged.**

**Channel your inner Shakespeare.**

**Don't just get started, now keep your eye on the finish line.**

**Write, write, write.**

**Get past the hump.**

**Set your sights on the final scene.**

**Write the last line and type THE END!**

# Synopses of Plays

Here are synopses of plays mentioned in this guide.

## Star Cross'd

1593 London. The Bard of Avon William Shakespeare rises to fame when he arrives in London and joins the Chamberlain's Men as a playwright and actor. In this play, Shakespeare, inspired by his love for his wife Anne Hathaway, and the secret love affair between Bess Morton and Sir Walter Raleigh, writes Romeo and Juliet to be performed for Queen Elizabeth I. This play allows the performance of excerpts from Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, while it gives the audience a peek into the mind of William Shakespeare.

## Good Village Salem: The Unsung Story

1692 Salem, Massachusetts. Amidst the gloom of winter, the Puritan town of Salem is shaken by accusations of witchcraft. The rigid religious beliefs of a community are pitted against the free-thinking spirit of individuality. The laws of the Church are intertwined with the laws of the Commonwealth. The townspeople are faced with questioning their own morality and faith in this musical courtroom drama.

## A Hunch about Munch

1893 New York. Captain of Industry Andrew Carnegie demonstrates his wealth with a commissioned painting by Edvard Munch. When it goes missing at the unveiling party, Andrew and his wife Louise recruit the services of the famed detective consultant Sherlock Holmes. A host of historical figures such as Mary Cassatt, Albert Einstein, and Milton Hershey congregate on stage in this classic whodunit thriller set at the height of women's rights and the industrial revolution.

## The Range of Light

1903 Yosemite. President Theodore Roosevelt camped in the Yosemite Valley wilderness with naturalist John Muir. During the visit, John Muir convinced the President to incorporate areas of wilderness into what we now know as the Yosemite National Park. In our version of this historical event, the two are joined by Jeanne Carr, a botanist and mentor of Muir's, Ansel Adams, Harriet Monroe, and four woodland gnomes.

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Dr. Tan is a Waldorf-trained teacher and is co-founder of Syrendell where he is a homeschool teacher, consultant, and workshop leader. He holds an MD and a BA in biological sciences. He is an artist, musician, and playwright! He has four children and lives in Davis, CA.