PLAY STRUCTURE: SET-UP, ESCALATION, PAY-OFF

It's important to check and refine your play's structure. Although there are of course exceptions to the rule most ten-minute plays fall within the framework of a traditional "three act" structure often known as Beginning, Middle and End, which I like to call **Set-Up, Escalation and Pay-Off**.

WHAT IS THE SET-UP ?

The beginning of your play, when the lights come up – there may have been incidents before the lights come up but the Set-Up is where the audience joins the story. A play may begin with any number of events, incidents, entrances or exits.

Possible Set-Ups:

A character enters

A stranger arrives

Two strangers meet

A character reveals something about themselves (i.e: "Dad, I'm gay !")

A character wakes up – literally or metaphysically

A bus crashes

A character finds something

The lights come up

WHAT IS AN ESCALATION?

A twist, turn or progression that propels your story in another direction, to another level, raises stakes or intensity as you build towards the climax/end. A play may have any number of escalations or one main escalation around the middle of the play.

Possible escalations:

A character makes a decision on a course of action

Another character enters

A character reveals a secret

The bus the characters are on crashes

A character makes a discovery about themselves, their situation or another character

A character reveals what they really want (i.e. I want you to marry me !)

WHAT IS THE PAY-OFF ?

The end of your play, which satisfactorily resolves the situation you are exploring or ends the story you began telling at the beginning. It may be open ended, neatly tied up, sudden, gentle, dramatic, subtle. A good Pay-Off often leaves the audience wanting more.

Possible Pay-Offs:

A character exits

A decision is made

A character accedes to another character's desires (e.g: Yes, I'll marry you !)

The bus arrives at its destination

The lights go down

A character dies

A character accepts a decision or an event