

(Some of) My Problems as a Dramatist

by [Carl Nelson](#) (March 2023)



New York Movie, Edward Hopper, 1939

I've never enjoyed crowds. You would think this would be a red flag to any aspiring playwright. But the audience is a mob. They're all out there, and they want to fall in love, or they want it jammed to someone – and then cry about the abuse, or both. Then retail it. Knock beers together about it afterwards and toast the delirium and the great time they had. I hauled furniture at one time with Carlos, a short fellow with

shoulders near wide as he was tall. After discharge in San Francisco following the war he told me he isolated himself in a cheap rented room until he had drunk up his discharge pay. Then he had to find work. He began to wrestle professionally. He showed me the scars across his chest from broken chairs and other such. He said wrestling in Texas was by far the worst, but they paid the best – a hundred/night – so he kept going back. Little old women, he said, liked to sit in the ringside seats where they would flip pieces of glass into the ring to draw blood.

Crowds are insane. They're crazy personified. My hopes as a playwright were to promote reason and clear thinking! But right away you can see I wasn't thinking clearly. I should have written technical manuals, where correct actions achieve wanted results. I could have been of real help to people installing their washers or dryers, dishwashers and ovens. I could have helped them to build a stable table or a reasonable flight of stairs. I might have talked them down from a meltdown over a plumbing difficulty, or helped them to organize their garage and/or fix a car and perhaps allay a deepening depression. But instead, I went for the gold ring. Just like Carlos I was attracted to that metaphorical ringside 'Texas' of the Arts – live theatre.

My efforts as a playwright were to examine that territory beyond the Ten Commandments. It is no secret that keeping the Ten Commandments will keep you out of trouble. But what of the territory beyond? It had been my experience that even following the Ten Commandments left a person far short of a problem free life. Either there were more Commandments needed, or we had lost one of the manuals. Or, perhaps, a problem free life just wasn't possible. Certainly it wasn't what the audience came to see. Nobody comes to the theater to see a problem free story. So this wasn't a difficulty. But the problem was much less clear once you'd moved past those principled Ten. "We have met the enemy and he is us," as Pogo

surmised. Or as Falkner intoned, "The only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself." This is the artistic expression for (and equal of) "pulling your hair out". This is where people live in that Land Beyond (the Ten Commandments).

Just writing a full-length play is a Herculean struggle, or rather a Minotaur's lair. You don't go in without a compelling reason – and then you don't quit for the following compelling reason – you have to find your way back out. A novel is a story, but a play is a crossword puzzle. Before beginning the ordeal, all this offal was all packed neatly away in the closet. No more! It's spread out all over the place and is taking control of your life, as if caught in the Lee Strasberg School of Method Acting until you get it all put together, like some do it yourself unconscious individuation kit. Then, when it's done and between two covers, you can walk it around, help it to grow, take it outside, and see if all this calumny can find friends...

You need a problem that eats at you. And as it's chewing, you wander here and there up and down seemingly endless tunnels, where the point is to find the monster you intend to attack, and thence to cut off its head and stride out. People want blood, they want tears. They want to relish the characters, participate in struggles, with a break midway from drinks in the lobby. Imagine fighting and bleeding in Vietnam, while the audience is staging protests back home. Then come back home and have people spit on you because they didn't like how you performed. You fought hard, but no cigar. I always felt that a playwright should get a medal just for being produced. But, it's all about winning. Everyone knows that. The playwright knows that. And if he didn't win, he didn't do his job. He failed. It's harsh. But, in my sights, even if the audience didn't see a win – if the playwright solved his problem, then he was left a step ahead. His load was a bit lighter. He achieves a separate peace.

Nevertheless ...

The interminable is the workaday human being's closest approximation to awe. They go to the theater to not see the problem solved, but to stare into the abyss. Second best is to see the problem avoided.

In fact, they fight the solution tooth and nail in their daily lives. Because humans can't learn. That's what it's all about! Because the solution is not a place where anyone lives, actually. They wouldn't recognize a solution if it bit them. It's undoubtedly the reason Jesus would wander off away from his entourage to sit on a rock. He could produce miracles, but even He couldn't fix stupid. No one can. The playwright can't. Or shouldn't if he carries success. The one essential a playwright has to accomplish is to live in stupid – to literally bathe in it. You're thrashing around in the tarpit they've all come to see. It's slumming for voyeurs, basically. Your successful playwright is a very playful amoral idiot. (And, he brings in the crowds.)

Dark Behemoth

"In the beginning, the artist needs an audience to grow. Once mastery is achieved, the audience needs the artist to enlarge themselves."

In a portion of a play I wrote,
two salesmen grill a newbie
and are so consumed by their quibbling,
they ignore his response.

The scene chewed a few minutes—
like a great ship passing in the dark theater,

leaving me, the playwright to bellow silently,
in the quiet auditorium,
“There is a behemoth passing through your fog,
audience!”
“No one listens!”
It is really a common event, people!

In recompense I remember fondly
a scene from a play I directed,
where the characters became so alive,
they didn't need the audience—
breathing from the slow, glowing center of their
concerns,
while crunching and gnawing the scenery
like two famished lovers.

You knuckleheads, you waffle bottoms
so puffed with your own lives,
take that!

It was a bit like this. I hadn't the heart in conflict with myself, but rather my heart in conflict with theirs. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that a major flaw with the drama I watched was that in Hemingway's words, “They find problems where there aren't any.”

Oh, and besides this ...

Another problem I had with the theater was that the same bluff, overbearing, willful characters who dominated life also dominated the stage. And I resented this. What was the point of all this effort, if it was to only gift them the spotlight once again? How could the meek lead? Must the loudest only be heard? This was something I hoped to explore. In fact, to do so, I envisioned founding what I called The Quiet Theater.

"...clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most precious ally." Samuel Beckett

The Quiet Theatre is a reading and production group devoted to the pursuit of the best on-stage quiet moment, who, each Spring, produce the Showcase of Quiet Moments. They create and produce theatrical works whose drive is to place presence and calm in the forefront where they can be observed, examined and enjoyed.

The Quiet Theatre is NOT intended to be "the too-precious-for-words theatre," nor "the too-boring-for words theatre," nor "the nothing-ever-happens here theatre," nor "the we-are-all-disciples of Beckett-here-theatre." Nor is The Quiet Theatre intended to be a place where the actors never shout, guns are never fired, or the characters never fight, or where conflict never occurs. Rather, The Quiet Theatre is intended to be a theatre in which drama and conflict form the backdrop, rather than the foreground. Our hope would be to understand and to build quiet moments on stage; moments pregnant with energy and thought ... but quiet; moments every bit as compelling to watch as all the loud, whiz-bang carnival of emotion and event theatre often is.

But what of all these problems? They were grumbles, artistic kerfuffles, "farts caught sideways" as my friend on the docks would have said. They were the little shivering boy dipping his toe into the water. Because theater is always and everywhere taking the leap. It's sink or swim. In fact, this was what was written on the back of a blue Tommy Bahama shirt

the wife gave me to wear opening nights.

I'm 73 now and of the belief that life is far too complex to grasp more than a finger nail's worth, so success is mostly wanting to do something so much you try. You try and try and try and see what happens. That is life best led. You do this, and the doors to life's success will part – or not.

So it is with the theater.

Success is rare in all fields. We're middling at most things and more often than not we fail. But it's not all bad news. Say you intuit that your success lies to the west. You head out but don't find it. So you head out the next day, but try bearing five degrees more to the north. You might have seen a bit of seaweed off that direction floating in the water and adjust. We can adjust. As, I believe it was Neil Simon who said, "Playwriting is mostly re-writing."

And as a theater colleague said to me several times, "your first drafts aren't very good. They hardly make sense. But you're the best re-writer I've ever seen."

You get involved. You make some friends. You tear your hair out trying to please everyone by creating a "hit". With some luck, you get what I got. No income, but several scenes you remember with affection that really worked in production, and one play that was outright popular, but went nowhere in further productions.

What I really got were some friends, a healthy dose of audience and a full dipping in the pleasure of raw crowds.

It's the Other Allures Which Make Fringe

Theatre Work

The critics never got it
and so could not enlighten a reader.
Because they were ambitious young scribes
and attacked each production
as if it were an audition for the big leagues.
As if they so archly disparaged a Winchell's donut,
they would be plucked from their tawdry rag
and whisked to New York City, the Big Apple,
where to pen a critical review of
the Chez Mirabelle's newest duck glaze.

While the pleasures of a Winchell's donut
are gobbled right up, without critical intercession—
along with the rising, crisp dawn,
the smell of frying dough, coffee,
the bleary people ... the two percent cream,
the car that dies in the parking lot
and the fellow with jumper cables
wiping his nose. Along with the racing sheet left
with the losing horses marked,
and that enormous talent in statuesque flesh there ...
What in the world is she murmuring?

Something happens to a person and one day they wake up and have had enough. Writing poetry and essays since these times has come as a relief. I joined a poetry group after moving to my current backwater surrounds and the leader asked me after a reading of several of my scribbles. "Who is your audience? Who are you writing for?"

"I didn't think poetry had an audience." I grinned.

"Get out of here," she laughed.

I stayed.

What's audience, other than the current Coin of the Realm? My goodness, in my estimation there's good reason comments are not published to the most widely read columns out there. You need only read those fairly widely consumed pieces whose comments are published to wonder: Are we all living on the same planet? We walk about and speak with people without any actual idea of how they are receiving it. We assume that they are like us, have our experiences and educational background and that we are communicating. But they might be off across some other unplowed fields upon your utterance of the first word. We may all generally agree on the meanings of various words, but the connotations we give them wander all over the map. It's like yelling at the sea. Sure, it yells back. But what is it saying? And how much of it refers to something you said? Sure, maybe you provoked something. But what?

I also enjoy writing small essays, such as this. It's like trying to describe, account for, and elude a small cloud of gnats I might have encountered on a neighborhood walk. I get pleasure from it. And if I can attach a couple small correlative poems, it's a win.

It's my Quiet Theatre, I would suppose.

Playwright's Lament

Every artist has a theory for why their success plateaus.

I subscribe to the Big Bang Theory.

First there's this Big Bang!

And then my audience is moving away from me
at incredible speeds
on all fronts

even distancing themselves from one another
in a sort of pandemic of repulsion—
as if to soap themselves liberally.

Not to stigmatize my efforts,
but there's a case to be made that I might have
alienated
or perhaps, at least, ruined for some people
a small sector of this fragile frisson'
which is live theater.
Atomizing the collective.
Destroying, or at least, undermining
what there once was of a common bond.
Rending its fabric—
which, I'll admit,
I should have washed on delicate—
until I am some "lone voice crying in the wilderness,"
musing "across the surface of the deep."

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Carl Nelson has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled *Become Remarkable*. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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