

the beginning of

PLAYWRITING 101: THE ROOFTOP LESSON

a short comedy by Rich Orloff

(**PLAYWRITING 101: THE ROOFTOP LESSON** has been published in Playscripts' anthology **NOTHING SERIOUS.**)

Time: The present.

Place: The rooftop of a large urban building.

Characters: THE JUMPER
THE GOOD SAMARITAN
THE TEACHER

(*Note:* The characters can be of either sex, but the JUMPER and GOOD SAMARITAN should be of the same sex. References are written as if the characters are male, but that can be changed.)

As the play begins, the JUMPER is about to jump off the ledge of the roof.

THE JUMPER

I'm going to jump, and nobody can stop me!

The GOOD SAMARITAN enters quickly.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Don't!!!!

The TEACHER enters and stands to the side. The TEACHER points a clicker at the others and clicks, freezing the action.

THE TEACHER

(addressing the audience:)

A typical dramatic scenario: Two people in conflict – at least one in deep inner conflict – with high stakes, suspense, and affordable cast size. How will this situation play out? That depends, of course, on the level of craft and creativity in that remarkable art form known as playwriting. Let's rewind from the start –

The TEACHER clicks, and the JUMPER and GOOD SAMARITAN return to their places at the top of the play, quickly reversing their initial movements.

THE TEACHER (cont'd)

And see what happens.

The TEACHER clicks again to resume the action: The JUMPER is on the ledge of the roof and is about to jump.

THE JUMPER

I'm going to jump, and nobody can stop me!

The GOOD SAMARITAN enters quickly.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Don't!!!!

THE JUMPER

Okay.

The TEACHER clicks to freeze the action.

THE TEACHER

Not very satisfying, is it? Where's the suspense? Where's the tension? And what audience member will want to pay today's ticket prices for a play whose conflict resolves in 45 seconds? But most importantly, where can you go from here?

The TEACHER clicks to unfreeze the action.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Gee, you could've hurt yourself.

THE JUMPER

Gosh, you're right.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Want to grab a brew?

THE JUMPER

Sure.

The TEACHER clicks to freeze the action.

THE TEACHER

Without intense oppositional desires, more commonly known as "conflict", there is no play. When Nora leaves in A DOLL'S HOUSE, nobody wants her husband to reply –

(upbeat)

"Call when you get work!"

So let's start this scene over –

The TEACHER clicks. The JUMPER and GOOD SAMARITAN rewind to their initial places.

THE TEACHER (cont'd)
– maintaining conflict.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE JUMPER
I'm going to jump, and nobody can stop me!

The GOOD SAMARITAN enters quickly.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Don't!!!!

THE JUMPER
Fuck you!

THE GOOD SAMARITAN
(giving an obscene gesture:)
No, you asshole, fuck you!

The TEACHER clicks and freezes the action.

THE TEACHER
Let's rise above profanity, shall we?
It alienates conservatives and makes liberals
think you're second-rate David Mamet.
(clicks.)
Rewind... And again:
(clicks.)

THE JUMPER
I'm going to jump, and nobody can stop me!

The GOOD SAMARITAN enters quickly.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Don't!!!!

THE JUMPER
Why not?!!!

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER
Oooo, you can just feel the suspense
rising now, can't you?

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Because suicide is a sin!

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER
Big deal. Theater is written by sinners
about sinners for sinners. Nobody goes to
OTHELLO to hear, "Iago, you're so naughty!"
Always let the audience form their own
judgments. Rewind a bit.
(clicks.)
Now let's try a different tack.
(clicks.)

THE JUMPER
Why not?!

THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Because I love you.

THE JUMPER
I didn't know!

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER
I don't care! Let's see if we can find
something less clichéd.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE JUMPER
Why not?!

THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Because if you jump there, you'll land on my
little girl's lemonade stand. And my little girl!

The JUMPER looks over the ledge and moves over two feet.

THE JUMPER
Is this better?

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

Now what have we gained? Be wary of minor obstacles. Unless, of course, you need to fill time. Again.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE JUMPER

Why not?!

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Because life is worth living.

THE JUMPER

Mine isn't!

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

Excellent. We don't just have a plot anymore, we have a theme. Theme, the difference between entertainment and art. No theme, add a car chase and sell it to the movies. But with theme, you have the potential to create something meaningful, something memorable, something college students can write term papers about. So let's rewind a bit and see where this thematically rich drama goes now.

The TEACHER clicks to rewind and clicks again to resume.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Because life is worth living!

THE JUMPER

Mine isn't!

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Gosh. Tell me all about it.

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

Some expositional subtlety, please.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Because life is worth living!

THE JUMPER

Mine isn't!

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Are you sure?

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

Better.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE JUMPER

Yes, I'm sure. I'm broke, I have no friends,
and I see no reason to continue.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

So you're broke and you're friendless.
Why not try Prozac?

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

The popularity and effectiveness of modern
antidepressants is one of the great challenges
of contemporary dramaturgy. We no more
want Willy Loman to solve his problems with
Prozac than we want Stanley and Stella Kowalski
to get air-conditioning. How can today's
playwright deal with today's medicinal
deus ex machinas? Let's see.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE JUMPER

I tried Prozac once, and it made my mouth really dry.

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

Not great, but we'll let it slide.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Let me help you.

THE JUMPER

It's too late.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

No, it's not.

THE JUMPER

You don't understand. I haven't told you the worst.

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

Fictional characters are rarely straightforward.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE JUMPER

You see, until a few weeks ago, I was in love. Deep love. True love. I was involved with two of the most wonderful gals in the world. One was sexy, rich, generous and caring. The other was streetwise, daring and even sexier. Between the two of them, I had everything. Then they found out about each other, and they both dumped me. Not just one, but both.

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

Excellent playwriting. Here's a heartbreaking situation with which we can all identify. Maybe not in the specifics, but in the universal experience of rejection.

The TEACHER clicks again.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

At least you've had two exciting affairs. I haven't gotten laid in a year.

The TEACHER clicks.

THE TEACHER

A superb response. Another situation with which, um, well, we've all had friends who've had that problem.

The TEACHER clicks again.