

**DO'S AND DON'T'S FOR THE  
PLAYWRIGHT: A  
MANUAL FOR THE WRITER  
OF PLAYS FOR AMATEURS**

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Do's and Don't's for the Playwright: A Manual for the Writer of Plays for Amateurs by Fanny Cannon

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## FOREWORD

**A** MANUAL of this size can only touch briefly on a few points of a large subject. Nevertheless it is hoped that it will contain many valuable hints not only for the novice in play-writing, but for the more experienced writer desirous of preparing plays for the amateur performer, who is creating a demand all his own.

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## FIRST PART

### IN GENERAL

#### I

In Harry Osborne's very able and comprehensive little manual, "How to Stage a Play," published by T. S. Denison & Company, he says there are four things that go to make up a successful amateur production, and the first of these is the play. I would amend this to say, especially for amateur companies, the first of these is the playwright.

The reason why the dramatist is of peculiar importance where the amateur is concerned will be readily understood. A company of professional players has often lifted a bad play into some semblance of success, certainly of amusement, through skillful portrayal of the various rôles. But, unless trained to an almost professional state by long association in many plays and many public performances, when a company of amateurs attempts a bad play it only becomes worse. And a good play, if it be beyond the powers of the average non-professional, is ruined.

Amateur theatricals have been growing steadily since the war. In fact it might almost be said that the war gave them their greatest impetus. The demand began to come in from cantonments for plays, not only for the townspeople to act for the soldiers, but chiefly for the soldiers to produce and act themselves. Different units of the Young Men's Christian Association and similar organizations took plays



with them to France, and the Overseas Theatre League called for more for its various companies in the A. E. F.

Then, too, those at home in cities and towns remote from New York, Chicago, and other big theatrical centers were not visited as frequently as usual by touring theatrical companies because of war conditions. The cry had gone out to keep up the *morale* of the country. So these various places began to put on their own entertainments, for the Red Cross, for local soldiers' benefits, and so on. It was found to be an excellent community method of reaching one's neighbors, of bringing all sorts of people together, taking them out of themselves during difficult periods; in short, it proved to be a modern and sophisticated equivalent of the old-time dances and pageants on the village green. Universities and schools, churches and hospitals, community houses and prisons have welcomed this healthy method of stimulating interest and awakening certain moral and psychological qualities. Naturally, having learned all this, a good thing is not being given up, now that the war is over; on the contrary, it is more popular than ever.

Therefore, since the business of publishing plays specifically intended for amateur abilities is steadily increasing it becomes necessary for the playwright desirous of meeting this demand to inform himself not only of the usual matters which are an essential part of every dramatist's equipment, but particularly of those which concern the amateur and his abilities and limitations.

There are several exhaustive books by well-known authorities, with which a manual of this size could not attempt to compete. Hence we will not try to

do more than merely touch on the most important features of play-writing in general, as a guide and introduction to further study and practice.

Do not think for one moment that the mere reading, or even study, of any book on play-writing is going to be more than a guide on how to begin. To learn how to write plays, you must write plays, and more plays, then re-write them, not once, but many times. Play-writing is not easy. Do not let any glib writer on the subject deceive you for a moment. Of course, as in all arts, practice and experience will help to bring the necessary knowledge of technique. This knowledge of the way to begin and to end, to plan and to write, finally becomes a part of one's mental processes, and the writing becomes easier, less beset with the many pitfalls into which the novice strays so readily. For every play produced I suppose there are hundreds written. Not all of these are by newcomers. Even the so-called successful playwright not only has failures but also has plays which managers do not accept.

So, do not think to find an infallible method for success in this or any other book, no matter how exhaustive. You will be helped, advised, and guided as far as may be, then you must go forward alone—until you are ready for more advice and guidance and healthy criticism.

## II

One of the first things of which the embryo dramatist must inform himself is what I might term the general geography of the stage. For the amateur actor, this "stage" is often only a space at one end of a parlor, without footlights, platform, scenery,

or curtain, and with only the most necessary accessories of furniture and properties. In fact, experienced players have sometimes given performances under just such conditions, though not in this day, it may be added, as members of a professional troupe, but in some affair staged for charity in which these players happened to be interested personally. The fact of such conditions being possible explains why in the catalogue of the play publisher there are many short plays requiring few characters, little scenery, and so on. Often those in which the scenery is described are so written that it can be dispensed with. In fact, two of the present writer's playlets were written to order for just such occasions, to be acted before women's clubs in hotel parlors, where all of the disadvantages of no dressing-rooms in the wings, no curtain or footlights, nothing but a low platform and the needed chairs, had to be taken into account in the play-writing.

Hence, in informing himself as to the methods of the playwright, the author of plays for amateurs need not feel it necessary to start with long plays requiring scenery and costumes, but can begin by learning to meet the demand for shorter plays which the amateur will find easy to stage and act at short notice and without too much preparation.

Nevertheless, whether the play is short or long, acted in a barn during the summer vacation or in a rented theatre at the height of the season, the "stage" means that part of the room or enclosure on which the performance is given, and its "layout" is the same, as far as directions are concerned, in the manuscript prepared by the author.

A knowledge of the physical stage, therefore, with