

PLAYWRITING WORKSHOP

WITH DAVID A. MILLER

REMOTE EDITION

Over the course of the year David A. Miller is creating five ten-minute plays inspired by Danville, PA—past, present, future, and imagined. He would love for *students* to be part of the process. Students can get involved by participating in this remote playwriting workshop, then sending the plays to your teacher to send on to David or ask that a family member send it directly to David for feedback at theatricalscenes@gmail.com.

1. WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS FOR A GREAT PLAY?

We have been creating plays for a long time and we have been thinking about what makes a great play for just as long. More than 2,000 years ago in Ancient Greece (where Western theatre as we know it began) the philosopher Aristotle gathered his many thoughts about these ingredients in the *Poetics*. Aristotle wrote, “Every Tragedy must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song.” For our workshop, we will consider the “top three” ingredients: Plot, Character, and Thought.

You can’t have a good story without a good **Plot**. And one of the key ingredients in the plot of a play is conflict. There is usually a main character (**the protagonist**) who wants something desperately (**objective**). They do things to get what they want (**actions**) and these actions drive the story. The things and the people that stand in their way (**obstacles**) make the plot compelling to us. Usually there is one primary opposing force (**the antagonist**).

PLOT

CHARACTER

THOUGHT

The play should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. In this structure the protagonist’s pursues what they want, there are complications in their trying to get it, and ultimately they get it or are forced to give up trying.

Aristotle recognized that in the best plays, the main **Character** acts in “probable” ways. In other words, the actions that a character takes should make sense for who they are and what they want. They should continue to pursue their objective. Their problems should be solved by the actions that they choose or the actions that they avoid. Their problems should not be solved by an outside force says Aristotle. And they should be characters that we can root for.

There are two parts to the concept of **Thought**: First, the characters come to decisions in ways that make sense. Second, the “message” of the play is clear. What does the protagonist learn in the play? What does the audience learn by watching the play?

⇒ To read a translation of the *Poetics*, visit <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>

2. HOW DO WE LOOK FOR THE GREAT PLAY INGREDIENTS IN A PLAY?

Search for Plot, Character, and Thought in the short play *Bobby and the Birdcage* by David A. Miller (which is included in this packet). Read the play, out loud with a friend or family member if possible, and answer the following questions:

- ⇒ What do each of the characters want (objective)?
- ⇒ What gets in the way (obstacles) of getting what they want?
- ⇒ How do we learn about who the characters are? How does the playwright describe them? What do they say and do that reveals who they are?
- ⇒ What is the lesson of the play?

3. WHAT IS CREATIVE RESEARCH?

A playwright often behaves like a detective when investigating aspects of a person, place, or event to create the backstory for their play. Playwrights sometimes choose to dramatize historical events or may use events happening around them as inspiration for their plays. Some use events and people from their own lives. Others use sheer imagination to create their plays.

Arthur Miller used the Salem Witch Trials as the setting for his play *The Crucible*. William Shakespeare used the Danish history books from the 12th Century as inspiration for *Hamlet*. In *The Mountaintop*, playwright Katori Hall imagines what it was like to be with civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. right after delivering one of his most memorable speeches in 1968.

For Theatrical Scenes from Danville, PA, we are writing plays inspired by Danville. There is a lot to learn about Danville. The best place to start is doing some creative research inspired by your own interests. What are you find interesting about Danville? What are you curious to find out about?

When you look around you, you will find a great deal to investigate. Who is Thomas Beaver (of the Thomas Beaver Free Library)? Why is Danville named Danville? When was it founded and why? What is significant about the T-Rail? When was Geisinger hospital created? There are a tremendous number of questions to guide you in your creative research.

There are many creative research resources, including online resources and books. Here are just a few:

- ⇒ Montour County Historical Society <https://montourcountyhistoricalsociety.org/>
- ⇒ Bloomsburg University Local Newspapers Collection
<http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/BloomsburgD/default.aspx#panel=home>
- ⇒ “Moments in Time” series by Sis Hause, Thursdays in Danville News (in print or online)
- ⇒ Danville: The Bicentennial History (1991) edited by Robert Phillip Bomboy
- ⇒ Danville: Historical and Biographical Sketches (1881) by D. H. B. Brower

Interviewing people or visiting historic sites are also great resources for creative research. Where else might you look for creative research resources?

4. HOW DOES CREATIVE RESEARCH BECOME A PLAY?

During your creative research, you will discover many ingredients for great plays. You will discover stories (plot and conflict), characters, events, and places that spark your imagination. Take notes on your favorites then transform them into a play!

To get you started, here are a few prompts to guide your creative research and writing:

1

A tour guide gives a tour of Danville but gives all the wrong information and must be corrected by members of their tour. Or, a tour guide who is giving a great tour but the questions from the tourists are so outlandish that they have trouble doing their job. ⇒ *Creative Research*: Download the Walking Tour of Danville from the Danville Business Alliance (<http://visitdanvillepa.org/experience/downloadable-walking-tour/>)

2

Local towns or the wards become characters. They are school kids. They meet in a school yard showdown. Are they picking teams for dodgeball or some other game? Is it a dance off? Or, kids from each of the four wards meet on the corner at which the four wards intersect. They too have a showdown. A battle of the bands, singing songs about their ward? ⇒ *Creative Research*: Research the names and locations of the Four Wards or start your research of the neighboring towns and use your imagination to create the qualities of each of these places as characters.

3

When the Geisinger Hospital was created, Abigail Geisinger “persuaded Harold Leighton Foss to be the first surgeon-in-chief for her hospital.” (Danville The Bicentennial History, p. 109) What was the meeting like between Abigail Geisinger and those who would help her create her hospital, including Dr. Foss? Who was opposed to the creation of the hospital? What other obstacles were in her way? ⇒ *Creative Research*: Read about the creation of the Geisinger Hospital in the pages 109-110 of Danville: The Bicentennial History in this workshop packet.

4

Write a scene in which two or three young people visit the Sitler Hill Cemetery. Why do they visit? What or who do they find? ⇒ *Creative Research*: Learn about the “residents” and history of the Sitler Hill cemetery using the Bloomsburg University Local Newspapers Collection (<https://bit.ly/bu-local-newspapers-collection>)

5

Write a scene in which a young person is visiting The Opera House for the first time. What or who are they going to see? Why are they excited? What gets in their way on their way or once they get there? Do they meet a celebrity of the time period? ⇒ *Creative Research*: Learn about The Opera House: Listen to the Podcast: <https://montourcountyhistoricalsociety.org/2018/11/05/podcast-27the-danville-opera-house/> (or <https://montourcountyhistoricalsociety.org/2018/05/01/a-page-in-danville-history-the-opera-house/>)

5. WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR PLAY ONCE YOU'VE WRITTEN IT?

If you are interested in contributing your ideas to Theatrical Scenes from Danville, PA and/or are interested in getting feedback about your play, send it to your teacher to send on to David or ask a family member to send it directly to playwright David A. Miller at theatricalscenes@gmail.com.

6. WHO IS DAVID A. MILLER?

David is a professional playwright, director, and educator. He is currently Associate Professor of performance for Bloomsburg University's Division of Theatre and Dance. At Bloomsburg David teaches all levels of acting, directing, and playwriting. He directs productions for BU Players, including *Everybody* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, and *The Arsonists* by Max Frisch. He was lead playwright on *Remembered: Theatrical Stories from the Rosemont Cemetery* produced by Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble in fall 2019.

David has worked in Seattle, Washington DC, and New York City, where he lived for more than 15 years. David is a Resident Director with Amphibian Stage Productions in Fort Worth, TX where he has directed more than a dozen productions, including *Gutenberg! The Musical!* which he directed for the third time in summer 2019.

David received his MFA in Directing from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ and his BA in Theatre Arts, with a focus on Acting & Directing, is from Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA.

⇒ To learn more about David and his work, visit <https://mrdavidamiller.com/>.

7. WHAT IS "THEATRICAL SCENES FROM DANVILLE, PA"?

In Theatrical Scenes from Danville, PA, playwright David A. Miller will create five original 10-minute plays inspired by the history (recent and distant) and people of Danville, PA. The creative process will include research in collaboration with the Montour County Historical Society, interviews with residents of Danville, playwriting workshops with young people, a playwright's writing retreat, and a public performance of staged readings of the original pieces by professional and student actors.

This project is supported in part by the [Pennsylvania Council on the Arts](#), Community Partnerships RC&D Council, Inc.—a partner in the [Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts \(PPA\) program](#), and by the [Bloomsburg University's College of Liberal Arts](#).

⇒ To learn more about the project, visit <http://bit.ly/theatrical-scenes>

BOBBY AND THE BIRDCAGE

by David A. Miller

Submission Draft
January 10, 2010

CHARACTERS

BOBBY, age 7, wears vintage clothing.

MRS. MCKENZIE, Bobby's 1st grade teacher.

TIME AND PLACE

A grade school classroom. The present.

NOTES

Bobby may be played by a young looking adult actor.

(Lights up on Bobby, age 7, holding a vintage birdcage filled with school books and a brown paper sack lunch. He faces front.)

BOBBY

I'm Bobby. This is my Birdcage.

(Lights expand to include Mrs. McKenzie, Bobby's first grade teacher.)

MRS. MCKENZIE

As Bobby's teacher I work hard to nurture Bobby's creativity. Some days this task is more challenging than others. I have many students who walk to the beat of their own drummers. Bobby is no exception. As you can see, he wears a crushed velvet jacket, tie and short pants. We are not a private school, mind you, but Bobby insists on wearing a uniform all the same. His mother told me he prefers to shop at second hand stores. That he prefers clothes from another era.

(Lights shift.)

BOBBY

Hi Mrs. McKenzie.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Bobby. What is that?

BOBBY

This is my birdcage.

MRS. MCKENZIE

I can see that, but why is it at school?

BOBBY

It has my books in it.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Yes, I can see that.

BOBBY

And my lunch.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Yes.

BOBBY

And my pencil case.

Yes—
MRS. MCKENZIE

BOBBY
And my (*sings*) Dreidel Dreidel Dreidel, I made you out of clay.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Bobby where is your backpack?

BOBBY
I don't know.

MRS. MCKENZIE
You don't know.

BOBBY
I couldn't find it.

MRS. MCKENZIE
And how about a grocery bag, a paper bag, one of your mother's purses, anything. Could you not find one of those?

BOBBY
I found my birdcage.

MRS. MCKENZIE
And is it really yours?

BOBBY
Yes.

MRS. MCKENZIE
It doesn't belong to someone else?

BOBBY
No.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Can you tell me what it's called again?

BOBBY
It's my birdcage.

MRS. MCKENZIE
A what-cage?

BOBBY
My birdcage.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Shouldn't there be in a bird in your birdcage?

BOBBY
No.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Why not?

BOBBY
Birds don't belong at school, silly. And also it was getting too crowded in there.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Well now that makes sense.

BOBBY
And birds poop. A lot.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Bobby, you can't have a birdcage in class.

BOBBY
Why?

MRS. MCKENZIE
Birdcages don't belong at school. Just like birds.

BOBBY
Bird cages don't poop.

MRS. MCKENZIE
You're right about that. They just—just don't belong. Bobby, what does belong at school?

BOBBY
My books. My lunch. My pencil case.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Yes. And other children and their books and their lunches and crayons and markers and the alphabet and math—

BOBBY
And my birdcage.

No. MRS. MCKENZIE

It carries my books. BOBBY

What if another student is allergic to birds? MRS. MCKENZIE

But their not 'lergic. BOBBY

How do you know? MRS. MCKENZIE

This isn't a bird. It's my birdcage. BOBBY

But it may have feathers and food and feces— MRS. MCKENZIE

BOBBY
(to the class) IS ANYONE IN HERE 'LERGIC TO BIRD CAGES? *(Beat.)* I didn't think so.

Bobby, where is the bird? MRS. MCKENZIE

Patrick? BOBBY

Is your bird named Patrick? MRS. MCKENZIE

Yes. BOBBY

Then yes, where is Patrick? MRS. MCKENZIE

He's safe. BOBBY

How is he safe? MRS. MCKENZIE

BOBBY
Because of the glass, silly.

MRS. MCKENZIE
The windows?

BOBBY
Yes?

MRS. MCKENZIE
In your bedroom?

BOBBY
No.

MRS. MCKENZIE
In your living room?

BOBBY
No.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Kitchen?

BOBBY
No.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Family room?

BOBBY
No

MRS. MCKENZIE
Den?

BOBBY
No.

MRS. MCKENZIE
Guest Room?

BOBBY
No.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Where then?

(Bobby points out the window.)

MRS. MCKENZIE

This window? He's in this room?

BOBBY

No, silly. Parking lot. He's waiting for me till after school.

MRS. MCKENZIE

That does not seem like a safe place for Patrick to be with so many cars driving around.

BOBBY

He's in a car silly.

MRS. MCKENZIE

What?

BOBBY

I found one that had a little bit of an open window and it was just big enough for Patrick to fit in, so I told him that he was going to stay in the car till after school but that I was going to come back for him and when I did he should come back to the window and I would help him out. He was nervous.

MRS. MCKENZIE

How do you know that?

BOBBY

He pooped right away.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Which car?

BOBBY

The green one.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Which green one?

BOBBY

The kinda long but kinda short one.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Bobby can you see the car from this window?

BOBBY

Yes.

MRS. MCKENZIE

Which green one?

BOBBY

The green one next to the red one.

MRS. MCKENZIE

The Subaru Forester? The one that Mrs. McKenzie saved for so long to buy. The one with new cloth upholstery she takes such good care of every time she drives it... Class. Mrs. McKenzie will be back in one moment, she is going to send Mr. Dillen in to watch you for...a while. Bobby. I will deal with you when I return.

(She exits.)

BOBBY

(to class) This is my Birdcage.

(Blackout.)

A wealthy, childless widow, Abigail Geisinger might have been content to sit in a rocking chair, querulously demanding attention from servants. But that was not her nature. She was a woman of strong character, aware of the world around her, and she ultimately wanted to use her resources to memorialize her husband. During the 38 years between her husband's death and 1912, when she began actively to plan the memorial that would become the Geisinger health care system, she lived much to herself, entertaining from time to time a relative or two or, occasionally, making trips to Atlantic City, to Philadelphia, to Ohio – once even to Europe. In view of her wealth, her lifestyle was a modest one, free of ostentation.

In the summer of 1912 Abigail Geisinger bought the William H. Magill property, a six-acre site on the boundary between the borough of Danville and neighboring Mahoning Township. To that she added, through a second purchase, another seven acres, for a total price of \$10,000. She hoped to build, within a year and at a cost of \$100,000, a modern hospital large enough for 60 patients. A resident surgeon and several trained nurses would staff it. A \$500,000 endowment would maintain it.

"Make my hospital right, make it the best," was her uncompromising demand. Through a Danville man who had become an eminent Philadelphia physician, Dr. George Montgomery Baldy, she persuaded Dr. Harold Leighton Foss to be the first surgeon-in-chief of her hospital. Fifty-five years her junior, he had been born in the year that her husband had died. Dr. Foss shared her vision, her drive and her enthusiasm. He had trained at the Mayo Clinic – one of the first group practices ever established – and he believed in the advantages of that new style of medical practice. Mrs. Geisinger agreed with him.

Dr. Foss had been working north of the Arctic Circle, in Alaska, where he had developed the rugged individualism that would characterize his life. He had operated a one-man local hospital where he was his own nurse, anesthetist, and pharmacist. He recalled walking once "on a great expanse of white ice, frozen as far as the eye can see," to help the native people and prospectors who depended on him for their care.

When he arrived in Danville, Foss met first with the hospital's architect, then with the building committee, and finally with Mrs. Geisinger. From the beginning she wanted something more than a community hospital – she wanted to offer people in rural areas specialized services usually available only in major cities. Together Mrs. Geisinger, Foss and the architect, John H. Brugler, designed a hospital "... as perfectly planned and completely equipped as money and scientific ingenuity could provide."

For a town the size of Danville it was truly remarkable. As Danville's newspaper, the *Morning News*, observed on June 4, 1914:

The great portico . . . is the best and most imposing specimen of classical architecture in this section. . . . The massive fluted columns, the entablature and the wide stairway of dressed granite, 13 steps in height, leading

1900-1925



Abigail A. Geisinger



George F. Geisinger



Mrs. Abigail Geisinger's lawn at her Center Street home had beautiful shrubs, trees, and was very well maintained. A greenhouse is shown at the rear of the yard by the carriage house.

to the ground strike the eye of the visitor as he approaches the building with wonderful effect.

Lewis Heddens, a Danville boy in a cloth cap, stood near Mrs. Geisinger when she broke ground for her hospital in 1913. Seventy years later he would recall that she had wanted the columns to resemble those of the Mahoning Presbyterian Church on Ferry Street, where she worshipped all her life.

The completion of the George F. Geisinger Memorial Hospital in September 1915 was timely. It opened on September 12, 1915, twelve days ahead of its scheduled dedication to handle a typhoid fever outbreak that wracked the town. The opening was so precipitous and the epidemic so widespread that a parade and dedication ceremonies had to be cancelled. An old photograph shows a deserted Mill Street hung with banners the day of the scheduled parade.

The new hospital had large, airy wards where no one was denied treatment for lack of money. For those with the means it offered semiprivate and private rooms, some with bath, at a cost of between \$2 and \$4 a day. An operating room afforded sterile conditions for surgery. Troublesome adenoids and tonsils could be removed; broken bones could be repaired; and goiter, a thyroid disease that was then unusually common in central Pennsylvania, could be treated.

On September 29, seventeen days after the hospital's opening, Dr. Foss had his first surgical case, acute appendicitis. Surgery would be the mainstay of the hospital for many years, and Dr. Foss' skill as a surgeon, particularly as a goiter specialist, would spread quickly, bringing many patients to him.

In March 1916, the Philadelphia and Reading Railway would acknowledge Foss's surgical skill by appointing him its surgeon. By June, he was able to show that a growing number of patients from far and wide were coming to Geisinger for surgery – from Sunbury, Mountain Grove, Shamokin, Milton, Strawberry Ridge, Scranton, New York City, Bellefonte, and Excelsior. By September he could add Rupert, Johnson City, Berwick, Catawissa, Turbotville, Bloomsburg, Exchange, Selinsgrove, Muncy, McEwensville, Hughesville, Northumberland, State College, Springfield, and Lewisburg. In the hospital's first year patients came from 52 towns. By 1920, they would come from 156.⁵

On his way home from Alaska in 1912, Dr. Foss had visited the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, an experience that, he later acknowledged, changed his life and his ideas about the practice of medicine. While the Geisinger Hospital was under construction, between 1913 and 1915, he had returned to Minnesota and had become first assistant, or chief surgical resident to the legendary Dr. Will Mayo. Of that time, Dr. Foss would later say:

In the short two years I was associated with Dr. Will, I learned to respect and revere him as I have no other man except, it might be, my father. To me he is the

(5) *Ibid.*