



Further: Revising a New Play

Did you know the first version of the Woody Guthrie classic “This Land is Your Land” went “This land is your land, this land is my land, from California to Staten Island”? Guthrie changed “Staten Island” to “New York Island,” and now it’s part of one of the most famous choruses in American music. The small shift allowed the coast-to-coast geography implied to be familiar to more people who may not have heard of “Staten Island,” but had definitely heard of “New York.” It also gained the song all the vivid connotations of New York City.



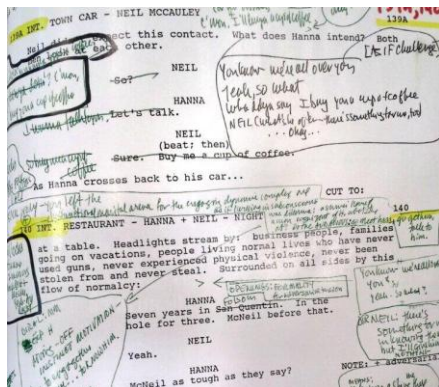
When I teach college writers, I stress that revision is where the real work of writing happens. Unless you’re a painstaking perfectionist, a first draft is not terribly hard to get out. Yes, it requires some time and thought, but logic, word choice, economy -- these things need not be obsessed over. Anne Lamott may have said it best in her well-loved essay “Shitty First Drafts”: “Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere.”

The downside or perhaps the Apollonian side to the Apollo/Dionysus duality of the writing process, is that when you revise, you do have to be exacting about word choice, you do have to think carefully about the logic of your story or argument, and you do have to economize with your words, choosing very carefully what is essential and what is tangential or redundant. You have to work both at the systemic and the granular levels.

When I set out to write my play *Apostates, PA*, I told friends who asked me about it that I knew I could write the play. I already had a one-act about the historical figure at the heart of the play, Benjamin Lay, completed. I had done a lot of research on and thought a lot about this figure. And I had passionate feelings about the subject at the heart of the contemporary story in the play: anti-critical race theory legislation. Let’s say, I knew I could write a shitty first draft. What I didn’t know for sure is whether I could write a good subsequent draft.

One of the challenges of playwriting is that the playwright really needs to hear their first draft out loud to recognize what is working and what is not. However, sharing a rough first draft out loud and asking others to give their time to reading it doesn't feel *great*. After our first Zoom read through, which we didn't complete because the play was so bloated with talk, I felt like apologizing to everyone who took part. I know that I was being overly sensitive, but still. It was tough not to catastrophize and think I had failed.

My first draft included long discussions about ideas that didn't tie directly to the story. One character was too much of an archetypal villain to be believable. Another character was fully superfluous. A third character needed to be more sympathetic for audiences to care about her and her boyfriend's relationship.



I stepped back and regrouped. I realized it wouldn't be hard to simply cut all the overly talky parts of the script, and I did a merciless pruning revision. I also addressed the issues with the characters that had come up in the reading and clarified some plot points.

After that work, I had a draft that I felt a little more confident about. After a table read (actors sitting around a table doing a cold read) of that draft, I felt like I had a decent play and could let go of catastrophizing. Instead of pondering failure, I was able to feel a sense of confidence that through further revision I could make the play good.

I sent the play to four people and asked for their feedback. One of those people was my playwriting professor from my MFA program at Brandeis 20 years ago. He had always been on the tough side, and that was exactly what I needed.

His feedback offered enough understanding and appreciation to affirm my sense that the script was decent. But it also offered careful criticism from the perspective of an accomplished dramatist with a finely tuned ear for dialogue. As I read his notes in the margins of the script, my excitement grew. His insights struck me as spot-on. I agreed with them, they'd just been somewhat out of my field of vision. I couldn't wait to revise in response to what he wrote.

If I had spent the last 20 years since leaving my MFA program, focusing on nothing but play writing, perhaps there would be a lesser gap between my first draft and that good draft I'm aiming to achieve. But while I've kept writing plays here and there, I also developed a career in higher education, got a PhD in English, got married, had three children and started a full-time

teaching job. When I watched the movie *Tick Tick Boom* about the creator of the musical *Rent*, I watched his journey with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I felt jealousy for the singular focus he was able to give to his process of creation, but on the other, satisfaction. I had not been willing to sacrifice everything else for my writing. The emotional roller coaster of creation would have been too intense if I had not pursued other dreams and found security in my personal life. Now in my 40s with so many aspects of my life decided, I feel I can ride that roller coaster with some perspective, helping ensure I do reach the finish line.

I think for anyone with aspirations to do something great whether it's in athletics, the arts, science or politics, the right orientation is "How far can I go this time?" Life puts up roadblocks to our efforts to get farther. This means sometimes we slow down or stop all together. Sometimes we wander into the wrong territory and receive a smack down. But if we can keep asking the question, "How far can I go?" and trust that the general answer is always "further than where I am now," then the dream stays alive. Revision is where we work, with faith and grit, to make that "further" happen.



A good metaphor for the revision process might be rock climbing. It can be tricky. One can slip and backslide. Progress can be very slow and painstaking. But every once in a while, one needs to cast one's eyes up to the mountain top. One needs to imagine sitting in the theater, in the black out after the closing scene, a crowd erupting in applause.

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