

***How Plays Work* by David Edgar,**

Reader's Report

Nick Parsons, 14 August, 2009.

David Edgar is a significant playwright and as such clearly has a powerful understanding of how stage drama is created. And there is a great deal in the book that a working playwright will find useful. Edgar's advice about the use of ceremonies and social convention, the use of location and how it can affect the meaning of a scene, how to expand time or create a ticking clock are all small epiphanies. You read them and have an 'Ah, of course' moment.

He also comes up with some nice rules, such as the principle that one should be able to summarise the action of a scene (or indeed a whole play) as a two-part sentence expressing an opposition: 'A woman sets out to discover if her husband is cheating on her, but pays a price for the discovery', or (I'm inventing now) 'Despite his parents' opposition, David leaves home'. He describes four elements necessary for any scene: programme, context, action and situation. The first three boil down to the things that must be achieved by the scene to fulfil its function within the play, the position of the scene in the context of the story such that it answers questions posed by the previous scene and poses questions for the next, and the oppositional sentence outlines above. Situation is broken down further into 'location, setting, milieu, business and format'. These are self-explanatory, except for 'format' which is Edgar's way of describing the social context of the scene: whether it's a formal ceremony like a wedding or funeral, an informal ceremony like a dinner party, or a purely private moment between two intimate characters. Each of these have their social rules, and in observing or breaking these rules the characters can create much of the meaning of the scene.

His erudition is also impressive. He backs up each point with detailed examples, sometimes from half a dozen plays. There's enough gold there to make it worth the read for any playwright.