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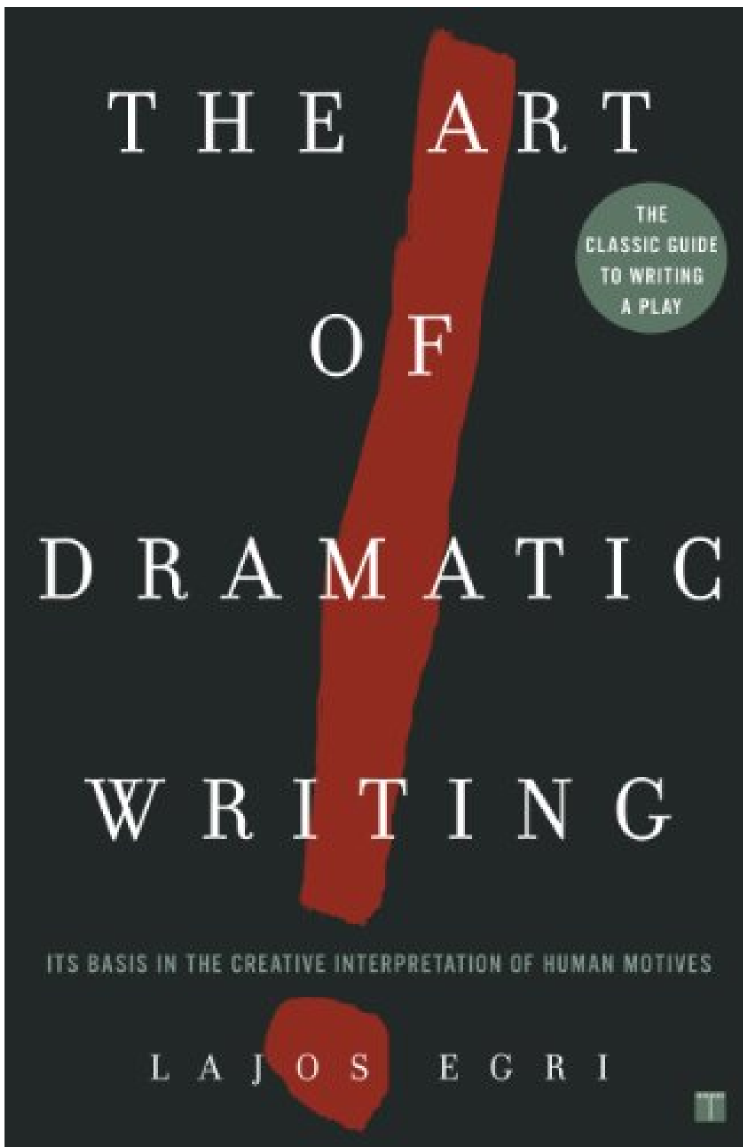
The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives (English Edition)



Par Lajos Egri
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Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #139486 dans eBooksPubli le: 1972-02-15Sorti le: 1972-02-15Format: Ebook Kindle

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Par Lajos Egri : The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives (English Edition):

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAmid the hundreds of "how-to" books that have appeared in recent years, there have been very few which attempted to analyze the mysteries of play-construction. This book does that -- and its principles are so valid that they apply equally well to the short story, novel and screenplay.Lajos Egri examines a play from the inside out, starting with the heart of any drama: its characters. For it is people --

their private natures and their inter-relationships -- that move a story and give it life. All good dramatic writing depends upon an understanding of human motives. Why do people act as they do? What forces transform a coward into a hero, a hero into a coward? What is it that Romeo does early in Shakespeare's play that makes his later suicide seem inevitable? Why must Nora leave her husband at the end of A Doll's House?These are a few of the fascinating problems which Egri analyzes. He shows how it is essential for the author to have a basic premise -- a thesis, demonstrated in terms of human behavior -- and to develop his dramatic conflict on the basis of that behavior. Premise, character, conflict: this is Egri's ABC. His book is a direct, jargon-free approach to the problem of achieving truth in a literary creation.ExtraitChapter IPREMISEA man sits in his workshop, busy with an invention of wheels and springs. You ask him what the gadget is, what it is meant to do. He looks at you confidingly and whispers: "I really don't know."Another man rushes down the street, panting for breath. You intercept him and ask where he is going. He gasps: "How should I know where I'm going? I am on my way."Your reaction -- and ours, and the world's -- is that these two men are a little mad. Every sensible invention must have a purpose, every planned sprint a destination.Yet, fantastic as it seems, this simple necessity has not made itself felt to any extent in the theater. Reams of paper bear miles of writing -- all of it without any point at all. There is much feverish activity, a great deal of get-up-and-go, but no one seems to know where he is going.Everything has a purpose, or premise. Every second of our life has its own premise, whether or not we are conscious of it at the time. That premise may be as simple as breathing or as complex as a vital emotional decision, but it is always there.We may not succeed in proving each tiny premise, but that in no way alters the fact that there was one we meant to prove. Our attempt to cross the room may be impeded by an unobserved footstool, but our premise existed nevertheless.The premise of each second contributes to the premise of the minute of which it is part, just as each minute gives its bit of life to the hour, and the hour to the day. And so, at the end, there is a premise for every life.Webster's International Dictionary says:Premise: a proposition antecedently supposed or proved; a basis of argument. A proposition stated or assumed as leading to a conclusion.Others, especially men of the theater, have had different words for the same thing: theme, thesis, root idea, central idea, goal, aim, driving force, subject, purpose, plan, plot, basic emotion.For our own use we choose the word "premise" because it contains all the elements the other words try to express and because it is less subject to misinterpretation.Ferdinand Brunetire demands a "goal" in the play to start with. This is premise.John Howard Lawson: "The root-idea is the beginning of the process." He means premise.Professor Brander Matthews: "A play needs to have a theme." It must be the premise.Professor George Pierce Baker, quoting Dumas the Younger: "How can you tell what road to take unless you know where you are going?" The premise will show you the road.They all mean one thing: you must have a premise for your play.Let us examine a few plays and see whether they have premises.Romeo and JulietThe play starts with a deadly feud between two families, the Capulets and the Montagues. The Montagues have a son, Romeo, and the Capulets a daughter, Juliet. The youngsters' love for each other is so great that they forget the traditional hate between their two families. Juliet's parents try to force her to marry Count Paris, and, unwilling to do this, she goes to the good friar, her friend, for advice. He tells her to take a strong sleeping draught on the eve of her wedding which will make her seemingly dead for forty-two hours. Juliet follows his advice. Everyone thinks her dead. This starts the onrushing tragedy for the two lovers. Romeo, believing Juliet really dead, drinks poison and dies beside her. When Juliet awakens and finds Romeo dead, without hesitation she decides to unite with him in death.This play obviously deals with love. But there are many kinds of love. No doubt this was a great love, since the two lovers not only defied family tradition and hate, but threw away life to unite in death. The premise, then, as we see it is: "Great love defies even death."King LearThe King's trust in his two daughters is grievously misplaced. They strip him of all his authority, degrade him, and he dies insane, a broken, humiliated old man.Lear trusts his oldest daughters implicitly. Because he believes their glittering words, he is destroyed.A vain man believes flattery and trusts those who flatter him. But those who flatter cannot be trusted, and those who believe the flatterers are courting disaster.It seems, then, that "Blind trust leads to destruction" is the premise of this play.MacbethMacbeth and Lady Macbeth, in their ruthless ambition to achieve their goal, decide to kill King Duncan. Then, to strengthen himself in his position, Macbeth hires assassins to kill Banquo, whom he fears. Later, he is forced to commit still more murders in order to entrench himself more securely in the position he has reached through murder. Finally, the nobles and his own subjects become so aroused that they rise against him, and Macbeth perishes as he lived -- by the sword. Lady Macbeth dies of haunting fear.What can be the premise of this play? The question is, what is the motivating force? No doubt it is ambition. What

kind of ambition? Ruthless, since it is drenched in blood. Macbeth's downfall was foreshadowed in the very method by which he achieved his ambition. So, as we see, the premise for Macbeth is: "Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction."OthelloOthello finds Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's lodging. It had been taken there by Iago for the very purpose of making him jealous. Othello therefore kills Desdemona and plunges a dagger into his own heart.Here the leading motivation is jealousy. No matter what caused this green-eyed monster to raise its ugly head, the important thing is that jealousy is the motivating force in this play, and since Othello kills not only Desdemona but himself as well, the premise, as we see it, is: "Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its love."Ghosts, BY IBSENThe basic idea is heredity. The play grew out of a Biblical quotation which is the premise: "The sins of the fathers are visited on the children." Every word uttered, every move made, every conflict in the play, comes about because of this premise.Dead End, BY SIDNEY KINGSLEYHere the author obviously wants to show and prove that "Poverty encourages crime." He does.Sweet Bird of Youth, BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMSA ruthless young man who yearns for fame as an actor makes love to the daughter of a rich man; she contracts a venereal disease. The young man finds an aging actress who supports him in exchange for love-making. His downfall comes when he is castrated by a mob driven by the girl's father. For this play the premise is: "Ruthless ambition leads to destruction."Juno and the Paycock, BY SEAN O'CASEYCaptain Boyle, a shiftless, boastful drinker, is told that a rich relative died and left him a large sum of money, which will shortly be paid to him. Immediately Boyle and his wife, Juno, prepare themselves for a life of ease: they borrow money from neighbors on the strength of the coming inheritance, buy gaudy furniture, and Boyle spends large sums on drink. It later develops that the inheritance will never come to them, because the will was worded vaguely. The angry creditors descend on them and strip the house. Woe piles on woe: Boyle's daughter, having been seduced, is about to have a baby; his son is killed, and his wife and daughter leave him. At the end, Boyle has nothing left; he has hit bottom.Premise: "Shiftlessness leads to ruin."Shadow and Substance, BY PAUL VINCENT CARROLLThomas Skeritt, canon in a small Irish community, refuses to admit that his servant, Bridget, has really seen visions of Saint Bridget, her patron saint. Thinking her mentally deranged, he tries to send her away on a vacation and, above all, refuses to perform a miracle which, according to the servant, Saint Bridget requests of him. In trying to rescue a school-master from an angry crowd, Bridget is killed, and the canon loses his pride before the girl's pure, simple faith.Premise: "Faith conquers pride."We are not sure that the author of Juno and the Paycock knew that his premise was "Shiftlessness leads to ruin." The son's death, for instance, has nothing to do with the main concept of the drama. Sean O'Casey has excellent character studies, but the second act stands still because he had only a nebulous idea to start his play with. That is why he missed writing a truly great play.Shadow and Substance, on the other hand, has two premises. In the first two acts and the first three quarters of the last act, the premise is: "Intelligence conquers superstition." At the end, suddenly and without warning, "intelligence" of the premise changes to "faith," and "superstition" to "pride." The canon -- the pivotal character -- changes like a chameleon into something he was not a few moments before. The play becomes muddled in consequence.Every good play must have a well-formulated premise. There may be more than one way to phrase the premise, but, however it is phrased, the thought must be the same.Playwrights usually get an idea, or are struck by an unusual situation, and decide to write a play around it.The question is whether that idea, or that situation, provides sufficient basis for a play. Our answer is no, although we are aware that out of a thousand playwrights, nine hundred and ninety-nine start this way.No idea, and no situation, was ever strong enough to carry you through to its logical conclusion without a clear-cut premise.If you have no such premise, you may modify, elaborate, vary your original idea or situation, or even lead yourself into another situation, but you will not know where you are going. You will flounder, rack your brain to invent further situations to round out your play. You may find these situations -- and you will still be without a play.You must have a premise -- a premise which will lead you unmistakably to the goal your play hopes to reach.Moses L. Malevinsky says in The Science of Playwrighting:Emotion, or the elements in or of an emotion, constitute the basic things in life. Emotion is life. Life is emotion. Therefore emotion is drama. Drama is emotion.No emotion ever made, or ever will make, a good play if we do not know what kind of forces set emotion going. Emotion, to be sure, is as necessary to a play as barking to a dog.Mr. Malevinsky's contention is that if you accept his basic principle, emotion, your problem is solved. He gives you a list of basic emotions -- desire, fear, pity, love, hate -- any one of which, he says, is a sound base for your play. Perhaps. But it will never help you to write a good play, because it designates no goal. Love, hate, any basic emotion, is merely an emotion. It may revolve around itself, destroying, building -- and getting nowhere.It may be that an emotion does find itself a goal and surprises even the author. But this

is an accident and far too uncertain to offer the young playwright as a method. Our aim is to eliminate chance and accident. Our aim is to point a road on which anyone who can write may travel and eventually find himself with a sure approach to drama. So, the very first thing you must have is a premise. And it must be a premise worded so that anyone can understand it as the author intended it to be understood. An unclear premise is as bad as no premise at all.The author using a badly worded, false, or badly constructed premise finds himself filling space and time with pointless dialogue -- even action -- and not getting anywhere near the proof of his premise. Why? Because he has no direction.Let us suppose that we want to write a play about a frugal character. Shall we make fun of him? Shall we make him ridiculous, or tragic? We don't know, yet. We have only an idea, which is to depict a frugal man. Let us pursue the idea further. Is it wise to be frugal? To a degree, yes. But we do not want to write about a man who is moderate, who is prudent, who wisely saves for a rainy day. Such a man is not frugal; he is farsighted. We are looking for a man who is so frugal he denies himself bare necessities. His insane frugality is such that he loses more in the end than he gains. We now have the premise for our play: "Frugality leads to waste."The above premise -- for that matter, every good premise -- is composed of three parts, each of which is essential to a good play. Let us examine "Frugality leads to waste." The first part of this premise suggests character -- a frugal character. The second part, "leads to," suggests conflict, and the third part, "waste," suggests the end of the play.Let us see if this is so. "Frugality leads to waste." The premise suggests a frugal person who, in his eagerness to save his money, refuses to pay his taxes. This act necessarily evokes a counteraction -- conflict -- from the state, and the frugal person is forced to pay triple the original amount."Frugality," then, suggests character; "leads to" suggests conflict; "waste" suggests the end of the play.A good premise is a thumbnail synopsis of your play.Here are a few other premises:Bitterness leads to false gaiety.Foolish generosity leads to poverty.Honesty defeats duplicity.Heedlessness destroys friendship.Ill-temper leads to isolation.Materialism conquers mysticism.Prudishness leads to frustration.Bragging leads to humiliation.pardConfusion leads to frustration.Craftiness digs its own grave.Dishonesty leads to exposure.Dissipation leads to self-destruction.Egotism leads to loss of friends.Extravagance leads to destitution.Fickleness leads to loss of self-esteem.Although these are only flat statements, they contain all that is required of a well-constructed premise: character, conflict, and conclusion. What is wrong, then? What is missing?The author's conviction is missing. Until he takes sides, there is no play. Only when he champions one side of the issue does the premise spring to life. Does egotism lead to loss of friends? Which side will you take? We, the readers or spectators of your play, do not necessarily agree with your conviction. Through your play you must therefore prove to us the validity of your contention.QUESTION: I am a bit confused. Do you mean to tell me that without a clear-cut premise I can't start to write a play?ANSWER: Of course you can. There are many ways to find your premise. Here is one.If you notice enough peculiarities in your Aunt Clara or Uncle Joshua, for instance, you may feel they possess excellent material for a play, but you will probably not think of a premise immediately. They are exciting characters, so you study their behavior, watch every step they make. You decide that Aunt Clara, though a religious fanatic, is a busybody, a gossip. She butts into everybody's affairs. Perhaps you know of several couples who separated because of Aunt Clara's malicious interference. You still have no premise. You have no idea yet what makes this woman do what she does. Why does Aunt Clara take such devilish joy in making a lot of trouble for innocent people?Since you intend to write a play about her because her character fascinates you, you'll try to discover as much as possible about her past and present. The moment you start on your fact-finding journey, whether you know it or not, you have taken the first step toward finding a premise. The premise is the motivating power behind everything we do. So you will ask questions of your relatives and of your parents about the past conduct of Aunt Clara. You may be shocked to learn that this religious fanatic in her youth was not exactly moral. She sowed her wild oats promiscuously. A woman committed suicide when Aunt Clara alienated her husband's affections and later married him. But, as usually happens in such cases, the shadow of the dead woman haunted them until the man disappeared. She loved this man madly and saw in this desertion the finger of God. She became a religious fanatic. She made a resolution to spend her remaining years doing penance. She started to reform everyone she came in contact with. She interfered with people's lives. She spied on innocent lovers who hid in dark corners whispering sweet nothings. She exhorted them for their sinful thoughts and actions. In short, she became a menace to the community.The author who wants to write this play still has no premise. No matter. The story of Aunt Clara's life slowly takes shape nevertheless. There are still many loose ends to which the playwright can return later, when he has found his premise. The question to ask right now is: what will be the end of this woman? Can she go on the rest of her life interfering with and actually crippling

people's lives? Of course not. But since Aunt Clara is still alive and going strong on her self-appointed crusade, the author has to determine what will be the end of her, not in reality, but in the play.Actually, Aunt Clara might live to be a hundred and die in an accident or in bed, peacefully. Will that help the play? Positively not. Accident would be an outside factor which is not inherent in the play. Sickness and peaceful death, ditto. Her death -- if death it will be -- must spring from her actions. A man or woman whose life she wrecked might take vengeance on her and send her back to her Maker. In her overzealousness she might overstep all bounds, go against the Church itself, and be excommunicated. Or she might find herself in such compromising circumstances that only suicide could extricate her.Whichever of these three possible ends is chosen, the premise will suggest itself: "Extremity (whichever it is) leads to destruction." Now you know the beginning and the end of your play. She was promiscuous to start with, this promiscuity caused a suicide, and she lost the one person she ever really loved. This tragedy brought about her slow but persistent transformation into a religious fanatic. Her fanaticism wrecked lives, and in turn her life was taken.No, you don't have to start your play with a premise. You can start with a character or an incident, or even a simple thought. This thought or incident grows, and the story slowly unfolds itself. You have time to find your premise in the mass of your material later. The important thing is to find it.QUESTION: Can I use a premise, let us say, "Great love defies even death," without being accused of plagiarism?ANSWER: You can use it with safety. Although the seed is the same as that of Romeo and Juliet, the play will be different. You never have seen, and never will see, two exactly similar oak trees. The shape of a tree, its height and strength, will be determined by the place and the surroundings where the seeds happen to fall and germinate. No two dramatists think or write alike. Ten thousand playwrights can take the same premise, as they have done since Shakespeare, and not one play will resemble the other except in the premise. Your knowledge, your understanding of human nature, and your imagination will take care of that.QUESTION; IS it possible to write one play on two premises?ANSWER: It is possible, but it will not be a good play. Can you go in two different directions at the same time? The dramatist has a big enough job on his hands to prove one premise, let alone two or three. A play with more than one premise is necessarily confused.The Philadelphia Story, by Philip Barry, is one of this type. The first premise in this play is: "Sacrifice on both sides is necessary for a successful marriage." The second premise is: "Money, or the lack of it, is not solely responsible for a man's character."Another play of this kind is Skylark, by Samson Raphaelson. The premises are: "A wealthy woman needs an anchor in life" and "A man who loves his wile will make sacrifices for her."Not only do these plays have two premises, but the premises are inactive and badly stated.Good acting, excellent production, and clever dialogue may spell success sometimes, but they alone will never make a good play.Don't think that every produced play has a clear-cut premise, although there is an idea behind every play. In Night Music, by Clifford Odets, for instance, the premise is: "Young people must face the world with courage." It has an idea, but not an active premise.Another play with an idea, but a confused one, is William Saroyan's The Time of Your Life. The premise, "Life is wonderful," is a sprawling, formless thing, as good as no premise at all.QUESTION: It is hard to determine just what is the basic emotion in a play. Take Romeo and Juliet, for instance. Without hate of the two families, the lovers could have lived happily. Instead of love, it seems to me that hate is the basic emotion in this play.ANSWER: Did hate subdue these youngsters' love for each other? It did not. It spurred them to greater effort. Their love deepened with each adversity. They were willing to give up their name, they dared their family's hatred, and, at the end, gave their life for love. Hatred was vanquished at the end, not their love. Love was on trial by hatred, and love won with flying colors. Love did not grow out of hatred, but despite hatred love flourished. As we see it, the basic emotion of Romeo and Juliet is still love.QUESTION: I still don't know how to determine which is the basic trend or emotion in a play.ANSWER: Let us take another example, then: Ghosts, by Ibsen. The premise of this play is: "The sins of the fathers are visited on the children." Let us see if it is so. Captain Alving sowed his wild oats both before and after his marriage. He died of syphilis contracted during his escapades. He left a son, who inherited this disease from him. Oswald, the son, grew to be imbecilic, and was doomed to die with the merciful help of his own mother. All the other issues of the play, including the love affair with the maid, grew out of the above premise. The premise of the play obviously deals with heredity.Lillian Hellman started work on an idea drawn from one of William Roughead's reports of old Scottish trials. In 1830 or thereabouts, a little Indian girl succeeded in disrupting a British school. Lillian Hellman's first success, The Children's Hour, was based on this situation, reports Robert van Gelder in The New York Times, April 21st, 1941. The interview goes on:"The evolution of Watch on the Rhine," said Miss Hellman, "is quite involved and, I'm afraid, not very interesting. When I was working on The Little Foxes I

hit on the idea -- well, there's a small Midwestern American town, average or perhaps a little more isolated than average, and into that town Europe walks in the form of a titled couple -- a pair of titled Europeans -- pausing on their way to the West Coast. I was quite excited, thought of shelving the foxes to work on it. But when I did get to it I couldn't get it moving. It started all right -- and then stuck."Later I had another idea. What would be the reactions of some sensitive people who had spent much of their lives starving in Europe and found themselves as house guests in the home of some very wealthy Americans? What would they make of all the furious rushing around, the sleeping tablets taken when there is no time to sleep them off, the wonderful dinners ordered and never eaten, and so on and so on....That play didn't work either. I kept worrying at it, and the earlier people, the titled couple, returned continually. It would take all afternoon and probably a lot of tomorrow to trail all the steps that made those two plays into Watch on the Rhine. The titled couple are still in, but as minor characters. The Americans are nice people, and so on. All is changed, but the new play grew out of the other two."A playwright might work on a story for weeks before discovering that he really needs a premise, which will show the destination of his play. Let us trace an idea which will slowly arrive at a premise. Let us assume that you want to write a play about love.What kind of love? Well, it must be a great love, you decide, one that will overcome prejudice, hatred, adversity, one that cannot be bought or bargained with. The audience should be moved to tears at the sacrifice the lovers make for each other, at the sight of love triumphant. This is the idea, and it is not a bad one. But you have no premise, and until you choose one you cannot write your fine play.There is a fairly obvious premise implicit in your idea: "Love defies all." But this is an ambiguous statement. It says too much and therefore says nothing. What is this "all"? You might answer that it is obstacles, but we can still ask: "What obstacles?" And if you say that "Love can move mountains," we are justified in asking what good will that do?In your premise you must designate exactly how great this love is, show exactly what its destination is, and how far it will go.Let us go all the way and show a love so great that it conquers even death. Our premise is clear-cut: "Does love defy even death?" The answer in this case is "Yes." It designates the road the lovers will travel. They will die for love. It is an active premise, so that when you ask what love will defy, it is possible to answer "death," categorically. As a result, you not only know how far your lovers are willing to go; you also have an inkling as to the kind of characters they are, the characters they must be to carry the premise to its logical conclusion.Can this girl be silly, unemotional, scheming? Hardly. Can the boy, or man, be superficial, flighty? Hardly -- unless they are shallow only until they meet. Then the battle would begin, first, against the trivial lives they had been living, then against their families, religions, and all the other motivating factors aligned against them. As they go along they will grow in stature, strength, determination, and, at the end, despite even death -- in death -- they will be united.If you have a clear-cut premise, almost automatically a synopsis unrolls itself. You elaborate on it, providing the minute details, the personal touches.We are taking it for granted that if you choose the above premise," Great love defies even death," you believe in it. You should believe in it, since you are to prove it. You must show conclusively that life is worthless without the loved one. And if you do not sincerely believe that this is so, you will have a very hard time trying to provide the emotional intensity of Nora, in A Doll's House, or of Juliet, in Romeo and Juliet.Did Shakespeare, Molire, and Ibsen believe in their own premises? Almost certainly. But if they did not, their genius was strong enough to feel what they described, to relive their heroes' lives so intensely that they convinced the audience of their sincerity.You, however, should not write anything you do not believe. The premise should be a conviction of your own, so that you may prove it wholeheartedly. Perhaps it is a preposterous premise to me -- it must not be so to you.Although you should never mention your premise in the dialogue of your play, the audience must know what the message is. And whatever it is, you must prove it.We have seen how an idea -- the usual preliminary to a play -- may come to you at any time. And we have seen why it must be turned into a premise. The process of changing an idea into a premise is not a difficult one. You can start to write your play any way -- even haphazardly -- if, at the end, all the necessary parts are in place.It may be that the story is complete in your mind, but you still have no premise. Can you proceed to write your play? You had better not, however finished it seems to you. If jealousy predicated the sad ending, obviously you might have written a play about jealousy. But have you considered where this jealousy sprang from? Was the woman flirtatious? The man inferior? Did a friend of the family force his attentions upon the woman? Was she bored with her husband? Did the husband have mistresses? Did she sell herself to help out her sick husband? Was it just a misunderstanding? And so forth.Every one of these possibilities needs a different premise. For instance: "Promiscuity during marriage leads to jealousy and murder." If you take this as your premise, you'll know what caused jealousy in this particular instance, and that it leads the

promiscuous person to kill or be killed. The premise will suggest the one and only road that you must take. Many premises can deal with jealousy, but in your case there will be only one motivating power which will drive your play to its inevitable conclusion. A promiscuous person will act differently from one who is not promiscuous, or from a woman who sells herself to help keep her husband alive. Although you may have the story set in your mind or even on paper, you cannot necessarily dispense with a clear-cut premise.It is idiotic to go about hunting for a premise, since, as we have pointed out, it should be a conviction of yours. You know what your own convictions are. Look them over. Perhaps you are interested in man and his idiosyncrasies. Take just one of those peculiarities, and you have material for several premises.Remember the fable about the elusive bluebird? A man searched all over the world for the bluebird of happiness, and when he returned home he found it had been there all the time. It is unnecessary to torture your brain, to weary yourself by searching for a premise, when there are so many ready to hand. Anyone who has a few strong convictions is a mine of premises.Suppose you do find a premise in your wanderings. At best it is alien to you. It did not grow from you; it is not part of you. A good premise represents the author.We are taking it for granted that you want to write a fine play, something which will endure. The strange thing is that all plays, including farces, are better when the author feels he has something important to say.Does this hold for so light a form as the crime play? Let us see. You have a brilliant idea for a drama in which someone commits the "perfect crime." You work it out in minutest detail, until you are sure it is thrilling and will hold any audience spellbound. You tell it to your friend, and he is -- bored. You are shocked. What's wrong? Perhaps you'd better get the opinion of others. You do, and receive polite encouragement. But you feel in your marrow that they do not like it. Are they all morons? You begin to doubt your play. You rework it, fixing a little here, a little there -- and go back to your friends. They've heard the darned thing before, so they're honestly bored now. A few go so far as to tell you so. Your heart sinks. You still do not know what is wrong, but you do know that the play is bad. You hate it and try to forget it.Without seeing your play we can tell you what was wrong with it: it had no clear-cut premise. And if there is no clear-cut, active premise, it is more than possible that the characters were not alive. How could they be? They do not know, for instance, why they should commit a perfect crime. Their only reason is your command, and as a result all their performance and all their dialogue are artificial. No one believes what they do or say.You may not believe it, but the characters in a play are supposed to be real people. They are supposed to do things for reasons of their own. If a man is going to commit the perfect crime, he must have a deep-rooted motivation for doing so.Crime is not an end in itself. Even those who commit crime through madness have a reason. Why are they mad? What motivated their sadism, their lust, their hate? The reasons behind the events are what interest us. The daily papers are full of reports of murder, arson, rape. After a while we are honestly nauseated with them. Why should we go to the theater to see them, if not to find out why they were done?A young girl murders her mother. Horrible. But why? What were the steps that led to the murder? The more the dramatist reveals, the better the play. The more you can reveal of the environment, the physiology and the psychology of the murderer, and his or her personal premise, the more successful you will be.Everything in existence is closely related to everything else. You cannot treat any subject as though it were isolated from the rest of life.If the reader accepts our reasoning, he will drop the idea of writing a play about how someone committed a perfect crime, and turn to why someone did.Let us go through the steps of planning a crime play, seeing how the various elements fit together.What shall the crime be? Embezzlement, blackmail, theft, murder? Let us choose murder, and get on to the criminal. Why would he kill? For lust? Money? Revenge? Ambition? To right a wrong? There are so many types of murder that we must answer this question at once. Suppose we choose ambition as the motive behind the murder and see where it leads us.The murderer must reach a position where someone stands in his way. He will try everything to influence the man who stands in his path, he will do anything to win his favor. Perhaps the men become friends, and the murder is averted. But no -- the prospective victim must be adamant, else there will be no murder -- and no play. But why should he be adamant? We don't know, because we don't know our premise.We might stop here for a moment and see how the play would turn out if we continued without a premise. But that is unnecessary. Just a glance at what we have to work with will indicate how flimsy the structure is. A man is going to kill another man who thwarts his ambition. That has been the idea behind hundreds of plays, but it is far too weak to serve as the basis for a synopsis. Let us look more deeply into the elements we have here and find an active premise.The murderer will kill to win his goal. He's not a fine type of man, certainly. Murder is a high price to pay for one's ambition, and it takes a ruthless man to -- That's it! Our killer is ruthless -- blind to everything but his selfish ends.He's a dangerous man, of no benefit to society. Suppose he succeeds in

escaping the consequences of his crime? Suppose he attains a position of responsibility? Think of the harm he might do! Why, he might continue his ruthless path indefinitely, never knowing anything but success! But could he? Is it possible for a man of ruthless ambition to succeed completely? It is not. Ruthlessness, like hate, carries the seeds of its own destruction. Splendid! Then we have the premise: "Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction."We know now that our killer will commit a murder as perfect as possible, but that he will be destroyed at the end by his ambition. It opens up unlimited possibilities.We know our ruthless killer. There is more to know, of course. The understanding of a character is not as simple as this, as we shall show in our chapter on character. But it is our premise which has given us the outstanding traits of our main character."Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction" is the premise of Shakespeare's Macbeth, as we pointed out before.There are as many ways to arrive at a premise as there are playwrights -- more, since most playwrights use more than one method.Let us take another example.Suppose a dramatist, on his way home one night, sees a group of youngsters attack a passer-by. He is outraged. Boys of sixteen, eighteen, twenty -- and hardened criminals! He is so impressed that he decides to write a play on juvenile delinquency. But he realizes that the subject is endless. What exact phase shall he deal with? Holdup, he decides. It was a holdup which so impressed him, and he trusts it will affect an audience the same way.The kids are stupid, the dramatist reflects. If they are caught their lives are over. They will be sentenced to from twenty years to life imprisonment for robbery. What fools! "I'll bet," he thinks further, "that their victim had very little money on him. They were risking their lives for nothing!"Yes, yes, it's a good idea for a play, and he starts to work on it. But the story refuses to grow. After all, you can't write three acts about a holdup. The playwright storms, bewildered by his inability to write a play on what he is sure is a fine idea.A holdup is a holdup. Nothing new. The unusual angle might be the youth of the criminals. But why should such youngsters steal? Perhaps their parents don't give a thought to them. Perhaps their fathers are drunk, wrapped up in their own problems. But why should they be? Why should they turn to drink and neglect their children? There are so many boys like this -- not all their fathers can be habitual drunkards, men without any love for their children. Well, they may be men who have lost their authority over their children. They may be very poor, unable to support their children. Why don't they look for work? Oh, yes, the depression. There is no work, and these kids have lived their lives on the street. Poverty, neglect, and dirt are all they have known. These things are powerful motivation toward crime.And it is not only the boys in this one slum section. Thousands of boys, all over the country, poverty-ridden, turn to crime as a way out. Poverty has pushed them, encouraged them, to become criminals. That's it! "Poverty encourages crime!" We have our premise, and the dramatist has his.He looks around for a locality in which to set his drama. He remembers his own childhood, or something he has seen, or a newspaper clipping. At any rate, he thinks of various localities which might well encourage crime. He studies the people, the houses, the influences, the reason for the poverty abounding. He investigates what the city has done about these conditions.Then he turns to the boys. Are they really stupid? Or have neglect, illness, near-starvation made them so? He decides to concentrate on one character -- the one who will help him write the story. He finds him: a nice kid, sixteen years old, with a sister. The father has disappeared, leaving behind the two kids and a sick wife. He could not find a job, became disgusted with life in general, and left home. His wife died soon after. The girl of eighteen insisted she could look after her brother. She loved him, and it was unthinkable to live without him. She'd work. An orphan asylum could have taken Johnny, of course, but then "Poverty encourages crime" would be senseless as a premise. So Johnny prowls the streets while his sister works in a factory.Johnny has his own philosophy about everything. Other children look to their teachers and parents for guidance. These teach: be obedient, be honest. Johnny knows from his own experience that this is all bunk. If he obeys the law he will go hungry many a day. So he has his own premise: "If you're smart enough you can get away with anything." He has seen it proved time and again. He has stolen things and got away with it. Against Johnny stands the law, whose premise is: "You can't get away with it," or "Crime doesn't pay."Johnny has his own heroes, too. Guys who got away with it. He is sure they can outsmart any cop. There is Jack Colley, a local boy, for instance. He came from this very neighborhood. All the cops in the nation were chasing him, and he made fools of them. He's tops.To know Johnny as you should, find out about his background, his education, ambition, hero worship, inspiration, friends. Then the premise will cover him and millions of other kids perfectly.If you see only that Johnny is a roughneck, and you don't know why, then you will need, and find, another premise, perhaps: "The lack of a strong police force encourages criminals." Of course, the question arises as to whether this is true. An ignorant person might say yes. But you will have to explain why millionaires' sons do not go out and steal bread, like Johnny. If there were more police, would poverty and

misery diminish in proportion? Experience says no. Then "Poverty encourages crime" is a truer, more practical premise.It is the premise of Dead End, by Sidney Kingsley.You must decide just how you are going to treat your premise. Will you indict society? Will you show poverty and a way out of poverty? Kingsley decided to show poverty only and let the audience draw its own conclusions. If you wish to add anything to what Kingsley said, make a subpremise which will enlarge the original one. Enlarge it again, if necessary, so that it will fit your case perfectly. If in the process you find your premise untenable because you have changed your mind as to what you wished to say, formulate a new premise and discard the old."Is society responsible for poverty?" Whichever side you take, you must prove it. Of course, this play will differ from Kingsley's. You can formulate any number of premises -- "poverty," "love," "hate" -- choosing the one that satisfies you most.You can arrive at your premise in any one of a great many ways. You may start with an idea which you at once convert to a premise, or you may develop a situation first and see that it has potentialities which need only the right premise to give them meaning and suggest an end.Emotion can dictate many premises, but you must elaborate them before they can express the dramatist's idea. Test this with an emotion: jealousy. Jealousy feeds on the sensations generated by an inferiority complex. Jealousy, as such, cannot be a premise, because it designates no goal for the characters. Would it be better if we put it thus: "Jealousy destroys"? No, although we now know what action it takes. Let us go further: "Jealousy destroys itself." Now there is a goal. We know, and the dramatist knows, that the play will continue until jealousy has destroyed itself. The author may build on it as he chooses, saying, perhaps, "Jealousy destroys not only itself but the object of its love."We hope the reader recognizes the difference between the last two premises. The variations are endless, and with each new variation the premise of the play is changed. But whenever you change your premise, you will have to go back to the beginning and rewrite your synopsis in terms of the new premise. If you start out with one premise and switch to another, the play will suffer. No one can build a play on two premises, or a house on two foundations.Tartuffe, by Molire, offers a good example of how a play grows out of a premise. (See synopsis and analysis on page 274.)The premise of Tartuffe is: "He who digs a pit for others falls into it himself."The play opens with Mme Pernelle upbraiding her son's youthful second wife, Elmire, and her grandson and granddaughter because they are not showing proper respect for Tartuffe. Tartuffe was taken into the house by her son, Orgon. Tartuffe is obviously a scoundrel masquerading as a holy man. Tartuffe's real objective is to have an illicit love affair with Orgon's wife and to take possession of his fortune. His piousness has captured Orgon's heart, and he now believes in Tartuffe as if he were the Saviour incarnate. But let's go back to the very beginning of the play.The author's objective is to establish the first part of the premise as quickly as possible. Mme Pernelle is speaking:MME. P.: [To Damis, her grandson] If Tartuffe thinks anything sinful you can depend upon it that sinful it is. He is seeking to lead you all on the road to heaven, if you would but follow him.DAMIS: I'll travel no road in his company!MME P.: That is not only foolish but a wicked thing to say. Your father both loves and trusts him, which should surely dispose you to do likewise.DAMIS: Neither Father nor anyone else could induce me to love him or trust him! I loathe the fellow and all his ways, and I should lie ii I said I did not. And if he tries to domineer over me again, I'll break his head for him.DORINE: [The maid] Truly, Madame, it is not to be borne that an unknown person who came here penniless and in rags should take it on himself to upset everything and rule over the whole house.MME P.: I did not ask for your opinion. [To the others] It would be well for this household if he did rule over it.(This is the first hint of what is actually going to happen later, when Orgon entrusts him with his fortune.)DORINE: You may think him a saint, Madame, but to my mind he's a good deal more like a hypocrite.DAMIS: I'll be sworn he is.MME P.: Hold your malicious tongues, both of you --! I know you all dislike him -- and why? Because he sees your faults and has the courage to tell you of them.DORINE: He does more than that. He is seeking to prevent Madame from entertaining any company at all. Why should he rave and thunder at her as he does for receiving an ordinary caller? Where's the harm in it? It's my belief that it's all because he's jealous of her!(Yes, he is jealous, as we'll find out later. Molire takes good care to motivate everything beforehand.)ELMIRE: Dorine, that is nonsense!MME P.: It's worse than nonsense. Think what you've dared to hint, girl, and be properly ashamed of yourself! [To the others] It is not dear Tartuffe alone who disapproves of your excessive love of company -- it's the whole neighborhood.My son never did a wiser thing in his life than bringing worthy Tartuffe into this house, for if anyone can recall wandering sheep to the fold, it is he. And if you are wise in time you will heed his warnings that all your visiting, your routs, your balls are so many subtle devices of the Evil One for your soul's destruction.ELMIRE: Why, Mother? For the pleasure we take in such gatherings is innocent enough.If you reread the premise, you will notice that someone -- in this case, Tartuffe -- will ensnare innocent,

believing persons -- Orgon and his mother -- with his hypocritical pretension of saintliness. This will enable him later to take possession of Orgon's fortune and make the lovely Elmire his mistress -- if he succeeds.In the very beginning of the play we feel that this happy family is threatened with dire disaster. We didn't get a glimpse of Orgon yet, only of his mother taking up the cudgel for the pseudo saint. Can it be true that a man in his senses, an ex-army officer, believes in another man so implicitly that he may give him a chance to play havoc with his family? If he does believe so much in Tartuffe, the author established the first part of his premise explicitly.We have witnessed, then, how tartuffe, with subtle methods, and with the help of Orgon, his intended victim, is digging a pit for Orgon. Will he fall into it? We don't know yet. But our interest is aroused. Let us see whether Orgon's faith in Tartuffe is as firm as his mother wants us to believe.Orgon has just arrived home from a three-day journey. He meets his second wife's brother, Clante.CLANTE: I heard you were expected shortly, and waited in the hope of seeing you.ORGAN: That was kind. But you must pardon me if, before we talk, I ask a question or two of Dorine here. [To Dorine] Has all gone well during my absence?DORINE: Not altogether, Monsieur. Madame was taken with the fever the day before yesterday and suffered terribly from pains in her head.ORGAN: Did she so? And Tartuffe?DORINE: Oh, he's prodigiously well -- bursting with health.ORGON: Poor dear fellow!DORINE: At supper that evening Madame was so ill that she could not touch a morsel.ORGON: Ah -- and Tartuffe?DORINE: He could manage no more than a brace of partridges and half a hashed leg of mutton.ORGON: Poor dear fellow!DORINE: Madame could get no sleep all that night, and we had to sit up with her till daybreak.ORGON: Indeed. And Tartuffe?DORINE: Oh, he went straight from the table to his bed, where, to judge by the sounds, he slept on sweetly till the morning was well advanced.ORGON: Poor dear fellow!DORINE: But at last we persuaded Madame to let herself be bled, which gave her relief at once.ORGON: Good! And Tartuffe?DORINE: He bore up bravely, and at breakfast next morning drank four cups of red wine to replace what Madame had lost.ORGON: Poor dear fellow!DORINE: So all is now well with both of them, Monsieur, and, with your leave, I will now go and let Madame know you are returned.ORGON: Do so, Dorine.DORINE: [As she reaches arch at back] I will not fail to tell her how concerned you were to hear of her illness, Monsieur. [She goes off]ORGON: [To Clante] I could almost think she meant some impertinence by that.CLANTE: And if she did, my dear Orgon, is there not some excuse for her? Great heavens, man, how can you be so infatuated with this Tartuffe? What do you see in him that makes you indifferent to all others?Obviously Orgon can't see the pit Tartuffe is digging for him. Molire unmistakably established his premise in the first third of the play.Tartuffe has dug a pit; will Orgon fall into it? We don't know -- and we're not supposed to know -- until the end of the play.Needless to say, the same principles govern a short story, novel, movie, or radio play.Let us take Guy de Maupassant's short story, The Diamond Necklace, and try to find the premise in it.Mathilda, a young, daydreaming, vain woman borrowed a diamond necklace from a wealthy schoolmate to wear to a ball. She lost the necklace. Afraid to face the humiliating consequences she and her husband mortgage their inheritance and borrow money to buy a replica of the lost necklace. They work for ten long weary years to repay their debt. They become coarse, work-worn, ugly and old. Then they discover that the original lost necklace had been made of paste.What is the premise of this immortal story? We think it started with her daydreaming. A daydreamer is not necessarily a bad person. Daydreams are usually an escape from reality; -- a reality which the dreamer has no courage to face. Daydreams are a substitute for action. Great minds are dreamers too, but they translate their dreams into reality. Nikola Tesla, for instance, was the greatest electrical wizard who ever lived. He was a great dreamer, but he was a great doer too.Mathilda was a good-natured but idle dreamer. Her dreams led her exactly nowhere, until tragedy befell her.We must examine her character. She lived in imaginary luxury in a fairy castle where she was a queen. Naturally she had a great deal of pride and couldn't humiliate herself by admitting to her friend that she was unable to afford the price of the lost necklace. Death was preferable to that. She had to buy a new necklace even though she and her husband had to work the rest of their lives for it. They did. She became a drudge because of her vanity and false pride; inherent characteristics which were the result of her daydreaming. Her husband worked along with her because of his love for her. The premise: "Escape from reality leads to a day of reckoning."Let us find the premise in A Lion Is in the Street, a novel by Adria Locke Langley.Even in early youth Hank Martin was determined to be the greatest of men. He peddled pins, ribbons, cosmetics, with the idea of ingratiating himself with people to use them later on. He did use them; so well that he became governor of his state. Then he plundered the people until the multitude rose up against him. He died a violent death.Obviously the premise of this novel is: "Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction."Now for Pride of the Marines, a motion picture from a

story by Albert Maltz.This is the story of Al Schmid, wounded marine who became blind in the war. At the rehabilitation hospital they cannot induce him to go home to his fiance. He feels that he is useless to her now. He was brought home by a ruse; his sweetheart convinces him that she still wants him and that, although blind he can still hold a job. He gets a job and they plan to get married. Although the doctors have given up hope of his regaining his eyesight, he does begin to see a little.Premise: "Sacrificial love conquers hopelessness."The pity of this otherwise promising motion picture is that Al Schmid and, for that matter, the other characters too, never find out what they were fighting for, and why Al lost his eyesight, even at the very end of the picture. Such knowledge would have deepened the story considerably.Earth and High Heaven, a novel by Gwethalynn Graham, is the story of a wealthy Gentile Canadian girl who falls in love with a Jewish lawyer. Her father refuses to accept the young man and does everything in his power to break up the romance because of the man's religion. Father and daughter had been devoted to each other. The girl must choose between her father or the man she loves. She decides to marry her sweetheart, thereby breaking off relations with her family.Premise: "Intolerance leads to isolation."Not all of these examples are of high literary value, but they all have a clearly defined premise and this is a necessity in all good writing. Without it, it is impossible to know your characters. A premise has to contain; character, conflict and resolution. It is impossible to know all this without a clear-cut premise.One more thing should be remembered. No one premise is necessarily a universal truth. Poverty doesn't always lead to crime, but if you've chosen this premise, it does in your case. The same principle governs all premises.The premise is the conception, the beginning of a play. The premise is a seed and it grows into a plant that was contained in the original seed; nothing more, nothing less. The premise should not stand out like a sore thumb, turning the characters into puppets and the conflicting forces into a mechanical set-up. In a well-constructed play or story, it is impossible to denote just where premise ends and story or character begins.Rodin, the great French sculptor, had just finished the statue of Honor de Balzac. The figure wore a long robe with long loose sleeves. The hands were folded in front.Rodin stepped back, exhausted but triumphant, and eyed his work with satisfaction. It was a masterpiece!Like any artist, he needed someone to share his happiness. Although it was four o'clock in the morning, he hastened to wake up one of his students.The master rushed ahead with mounting excitement and watched the young man's reaction.The student's eyes slowly focused upon the hands."Wonderful!" he cried. "What hands....Master, I've never seen such marvelous hands before!"Rodin's face darkened. A moment later Rodin swept out of his studio again. A short while later he returned with another student in tow.The reaction was almost the same. As Rodin watched eagerly, the pupil's gaze fastened on the hands of the statue and stayed there."Master," the student said reverently, "only a God could have created such hands. They are alive!"Apparently Rodin had expected something else, for once more he was off, now in a frenzy. When he returned he was dragging another bewildered student with him."Those hands...those hands..." the new arrival exclaimed, in the same reverent tone as the others, "if you had never done anything else, Master, those hands would make you immortal!"Something must have snapped in Rodin, for with a dismayed cry he ran to a corner of the studio and grabbed a fearful looking axe. He advanced toward the statue with the apparent intention of smashing it to bits.Horror stricken, his students threw themselves upon him, but in his madness he shook them off with superhuman strength. He rushed to the statue and with one well aimed blow, chopped off the magnificent hands.Then he turned to his stupefied pupils, his eyes blazing."Fools!" he cried. "I was forced to destroy these hands because they had a life of their own. They didn't belong to the rest of the composition. Remember this, and remember it well: no part is more important than the whole!"And that's why the statue of Balzac stands in Paris, without hands. The long loose sleeves of the robe appear to cover the hands, but in reality Rodin chopped them off because they seemed to be more important than the whole figure.Neither the premise nor any other part of a play has a separate life of its own. All must blend into an harmonious whole.Copyright 1946, 1960 by Lajos EgriRevue de presseMoss Hart I found Lajos Egri's book enormously interesting -- one of the best I have ever read.