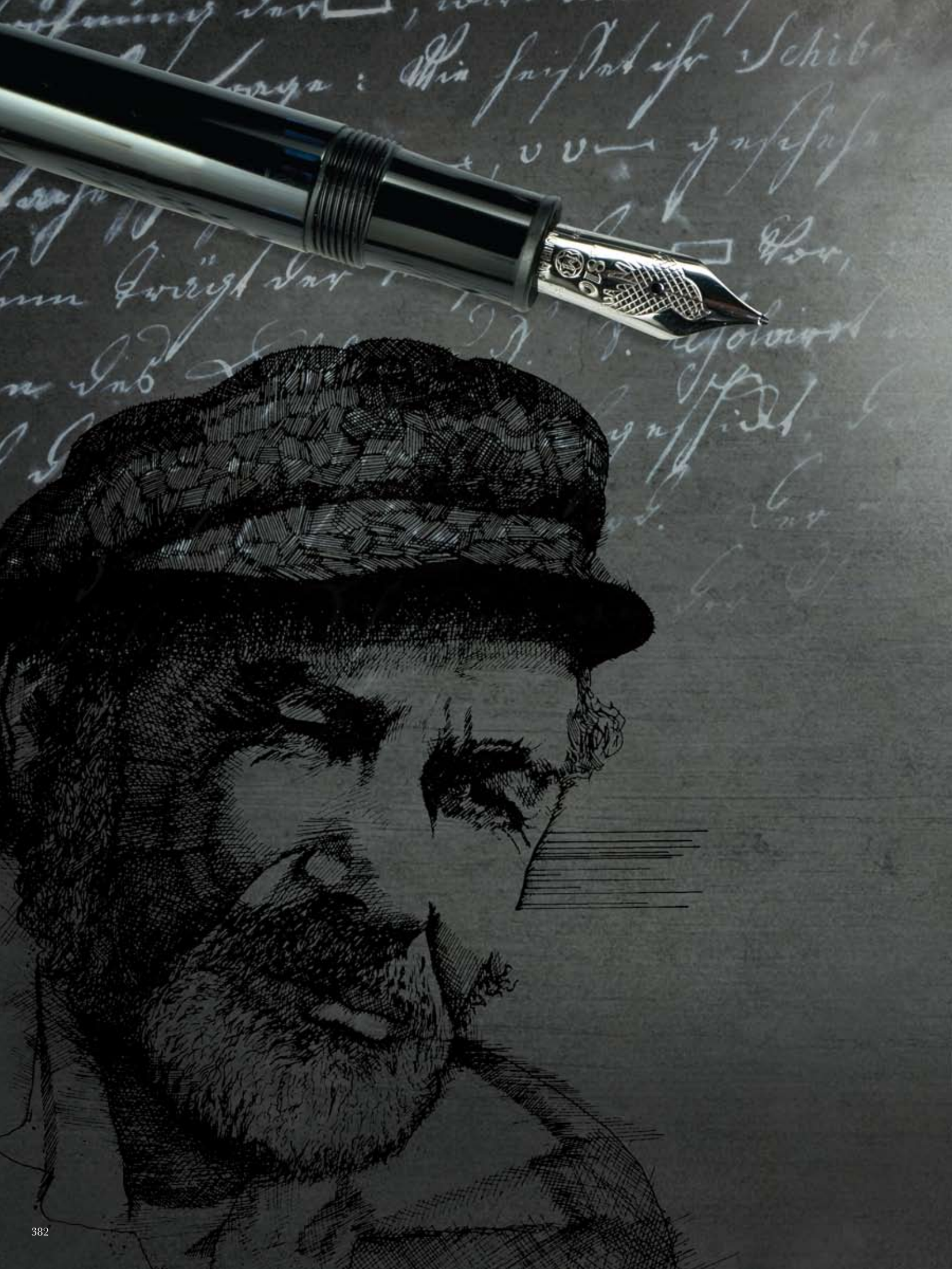


Experiencing The Arts

Exploring art forms and artistic techniques

Playwriting

"Remember! The word is playwright – W-R-I-G-H-T – like wheelwright. A play is not so much written as wrought. It's designed and built and shaped; it's carved out …"

– Garson Kanin, writer and director

A Short History of Playwriting

The act of crafting and sharing stories with others through drama dates back at least as far as the ancient Greeks, but is probably an even older form of expression. Sometimes a story is improvised and performed on the spot, and other times it is carefully crafted into a play by a playwright to entertain and/or reveal certain insights. Both forms of drama have become an important part of Newfoundland and Labrador culture.

Fig. 1 ***Burgeo Mummers*** **by EJ Wareham (1997)**

The earliest recorded skits in Newfoundland and Labrador were performed in outport kitchens and parlours. Some of these were probably the first European plays introduced to the New World from England and Scotland. They survived into the twentieth century as scraps of verses called "the rhymes." The rhymes were associated with the tradition of visiting neighbours during the 12 days of Christmas, disguised with pillow cases, dresses, and shawls, and other odd clothing. The visitors were called "mummers" and, although much of the original form of "the rhymes" died out, "mummering" or "jannying" continued long after it was banned in 1861.

Fuelled by excessive alcohol consumption, along with religious and political tensions, violence was a frequent outcome. This led to the legal abolishment in June 1861 of mummering festivities throughout Newfoundland.

As community life became more settled, the churches and school halls became forums for community concerts. These variety concerts were performed by local residents and included songs, dialogues, recitations, and, occasionally, short sketches based

We understand that a Tragedy, the production of a soldier named Watson, belonging to the Royal Veteran Companies in this Garrison, and dedicated to His Excellency the Governor, is likely to be brought out at our Theatre before Lent. Although we have not seen the work we understand that it evinces a consiiderable degree of talent, reflecting, from the sphere in which he moves, great credit upon its author. As His Excellency patronizes the first Representation of the piece, we presume it will be extremely well received.—But more of this anon.

Fig. 2 Play announcement from the *Public Ledger*, Feb. 21, 1843. The play advertised here, *Gentleman Grey or The British Soldier*, was performed in St. John's in April 1843. It may have been the first play written and produced in the colony.

on scripts brought in from the outside world. The first mention of professional actors in the colony was made in a note from Governor Gower in the Colonial Records of 1806. During the nineteenth century, most professional theatre was imported from the United States, Canada, or England, although there was some local theatre performed by military men at the Amateur Theatre in St. John's. It would be 1843 before the first known locally written script, *Gentleman Grey or The British Soldier* by Thomas Watson, would be produced in the city.

Although theatre continued to be popular, especially in St. John's, throughout the last part of the nineteenth century, it was largely restricted to the performances of imported American and British plays. It would be almost another 50 years before there was a record of another locally written play. Following the staging of the Edwardian musical comedy, *The Geisha*, by the organist and choir director for the Roman Catholic cathedral, a well-known local songwriter named Johnny Burke opened *The Topsail Geisha* (c. 1901) in St. John's. Meant to make fun of the imported highbrow culture that dominated St. John's theatre, this hugely popular musical comedy came complete with a chorus of fishermen fanning themselves with dried saltfish.

Fig. 3 A scene from the play *Trial by Jury* in St. John's, c. 1880 Charles Hutton, a popular musical personality in the colony, is standing third from the left.

The birth of a generation of provincial playwrights would have to wait until Grace Butt called a meeting in her home in 1937 and formed The St. John's Players. Grace wanted to introduce the community theatre movement to Newfoundland and Labrador. As a writer, she was also interested in writing scripts about her own culture. This movement was helped by the establishment of the Provincial Drama Festival in 1949, which attracted award-winning performances from the Mokami Players of Happy Valley-Goose Bay and the Nunaksuamiut Players of Nain, as well as amateur theatre groups from the island. The festival became an important venue for Newfoundland and Labrador scriptwriters. Plays by Grace Butt, Ted Russell, Tom Cahill, Michael Cook, and Al Pittman were first performed in festival venues in Grand Falls, Labrador City, Gander, and St. John's.

These scriptwriters were primarily authors and poets. Playwriting was an extension of their writing careers and most wrote their scripts in isolation from the actors who would perform them. While new theatre groups developed around the province throughout the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, most did not generate their own material. This changed in the 1970s when a generation of actors returned to the province from theatre schools and jobs with professional troupes in the United States, Toronto, British Columbia, and London. Based on their experiences from away, these actors promoted the concept of collectively writing plays, based on oral research in local communities. This movement was furthered by the creation of the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company, which was formed by Dudley Cox, Chris Brookes, and Lynn Lunde in 1971.

From this group, Chris Brookes and Lynne Lunde went on to form the Mummers Troupe. This theatrical group's mandate was to collect material in outport communities and write plays that dealt with local controversies. Before each play was written, the actors visited people and taped their stories so that the end product would incorporate Newfoundlanders' and Labradorians' own stories in their own words.

The 1970s was also a time of growth for student-written and performed drama. In 1975, the Department of Education held the Provincial High School Drama

Fig. 4 St. John's Players, c. 1940.
Grace Butt (seated in second row, fifth from left), was instrumental in the birth of Newfoundland theatre.

Fig. 5 The Mummers Troupe final production at the LSPU Hall in St. John's, 1980
This rock/opera show, *Some Slick,* focuses on the false hopes and dangers of the oil boom.

Fig. 6 A scene from *Boneman* performed at the 1992 Provincial High School Drama Festival in Rocky Harbour
This play was performed by the Innuinuit Nukum Mani Shan School, Davis Inlet and Jens Haven Memorial School, Nain.

Festival, which showcased the winning plays from regional student drama festivals*. A year later, a Labrador theatre festival was founded in Happy Valley-Goose Bay by Noreen Heighton and Tim Borlase. The Festival was designed to include all parts of Labrador and was intended to be a forum for creativity whereby students could perform and demonstrate their visual arts, take part in workshops, and share aspects of their culture. The Labrador Creative Arts Festival would quickly expand to include all art forms, but it is still based on a strong dramatic tradition. The commitment of the two founders was to give young Labradorians a way to express their heritage and also influence the future of their communities. The participants in the festival were school-aged children from all across Labrador and the process was collaborative playwriting. The Labrador Creative Arts Festival has continued to flourish to this day. It reaches more than 5000 students annually in more than 15 Labrador communities through original productions by students, workshops with professional artists, exchanges of visual art, and script collection and publication. Several of the original scripts have been remounted. (See page 446 for an excerpt from a student-written play that was performed during this festival.)

**The Provincial High School Drama Festival has continued to this day (2010) and involves hundreds of students annually from every region of the province.*

Exercise One:

Imagine you are working for a group like the Mummers Troupe that writes plays about issues that affect Newfoundlanders' and Labradorians' lifestyles. Pick a current news item impacting people in the province. What point or points about this issue would you choose to highlight? Write a short paragraph to explain how you would cover these points in a skit.

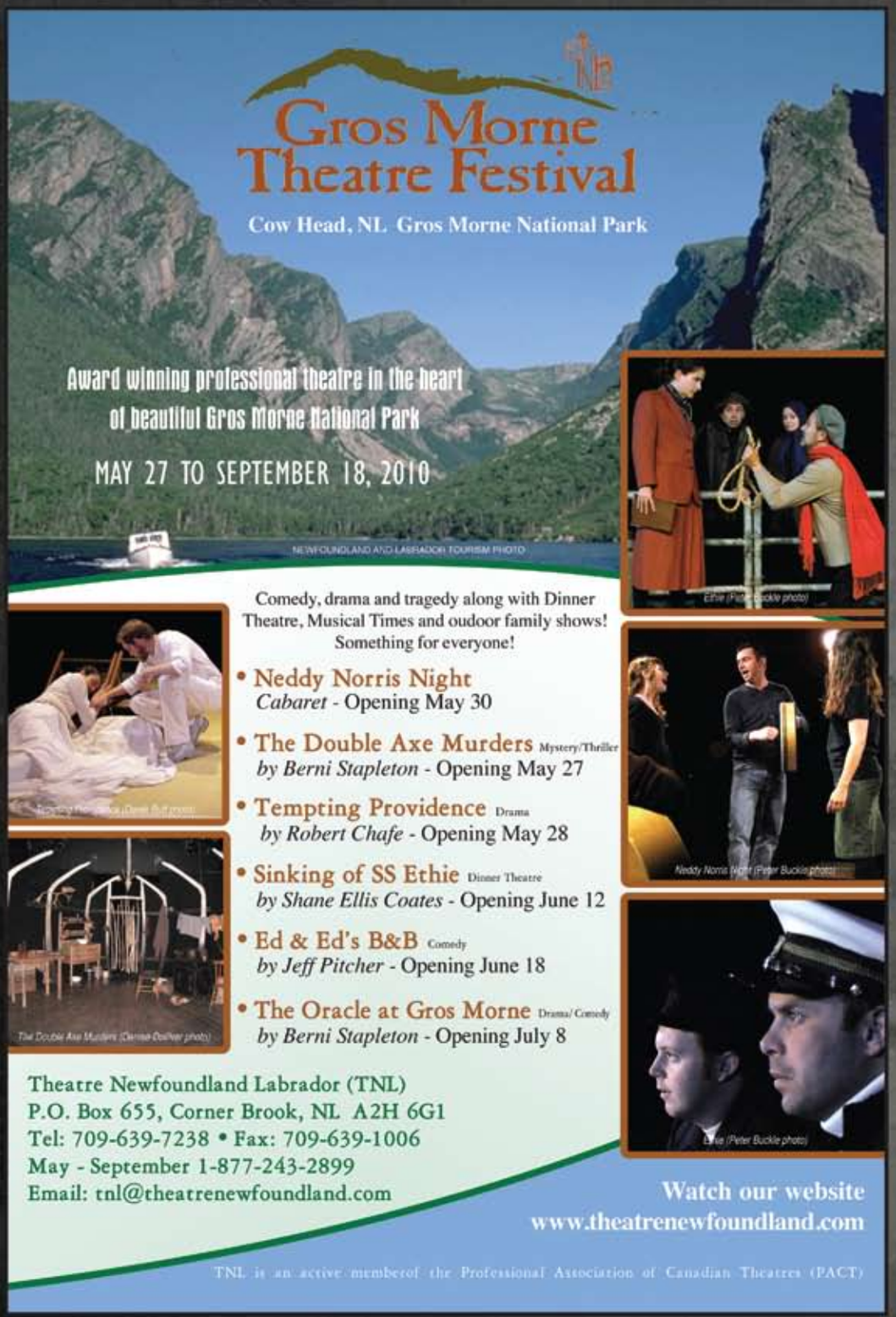


Fig. 7 The Gros Morne Festival features plays centred on Newfoundland and Labrador's history, culture, and stories.

A boost to theatre in western Newfoundland occurred in 1976, when an actor and artistic director from Halifax, Maxim Mazumdar, was invited to adjudicate the Provincial Drama Festival, which was being held in Stephenville that year. Impressed both with the province and the talent he saw, Maxim felt the west coast was ripe for a professional summer theatre festival. In 1979 he returned to found the Provincial Drama Academy and the Stephenville Theatre Festival, which still continues (2010). Although the festival's bread-and-butter is Broadway style musical theatre, it has also staged commissioned work by contemporary Newfoundland and Labrador playwrights.

The effects of this theatre renaissance in the 1970s continues. For instance, one of Maxim Mazumdar's protégées, Jeff Pitcher, went on to found the community-based Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador* in Corner Brook.

Many of the alumni of the Mummers Troupe were also involved in the theatre company CODCO.

*Every summer this company holds the popular Gros Morne Theatre Festival in Cow Head.

Like the Mummers Troupe, this group created work collaboratively – but while they sometimes employed satire to comment on society, CODCO's primary goal was to entertain.

Mummers Troupe actors also showed up in Sheila's Brush Theatre Company and Rising Tide Theatre in 1977 and 1978 respectively. Although Rising Tide Theatre started in St. John's, in 1993 Artistic Director Donna Butt introduced theatrical cultural tourism to the town of Trinity by co-writing and staging *The New Founde Lande*. This pageant, which still runs, reenacts the history of Trinity while actors move around the town. Following on the pageant's success, the Summer In the Bight Theatre Festival in Trinity continues to stage scripted plays written predominantly by Newfoundland and Labrador playwrights.

Perhaps the most lasting influence that the Mummer's Troupe left on St. John's theatre was the result of Chris Brookes and Lynn Lunde purchasing the Longshoreman's Protective Union (LSPU) Hall in 1976 and converting it into a theatre. In 1980 the Resource Centre for the Arts was formed and took over the management of the LSPU Hall, which has become the seedbed for much of our provincial theatre.

At the end of the twentieth century another wave of theatre professionals who had spent time working away began to make their mark as playwrights. Some, like Des Walsh, have a more traditional scripted form of writing. Other scriptwriters, like Robert Chafe, work with directors to modify and adapt their scripts in the production phase. The 1990s theatre scene also saw many one-person shows by actors who wrote their own scripts. Today, the works of new graduates from the theatre arts program of Sir Wilfred Grenfell College are beginning to find their way into the province's theatres. Like one of Newfoundland and Labrador's earliest playwrights, Johnny Burke, this new generation of Newfoundland and Labrador writers will find their own way to tell our stories.

Fig. 8 Rising Tide's Seasons in the Bight Festival in Trinity
This festival features *The New Founde Lande* pageant and other plays by Newfoundland and Labrador playwrights.

Experiencing The Arts

To learn more about Robert Chafe's career see page 598.

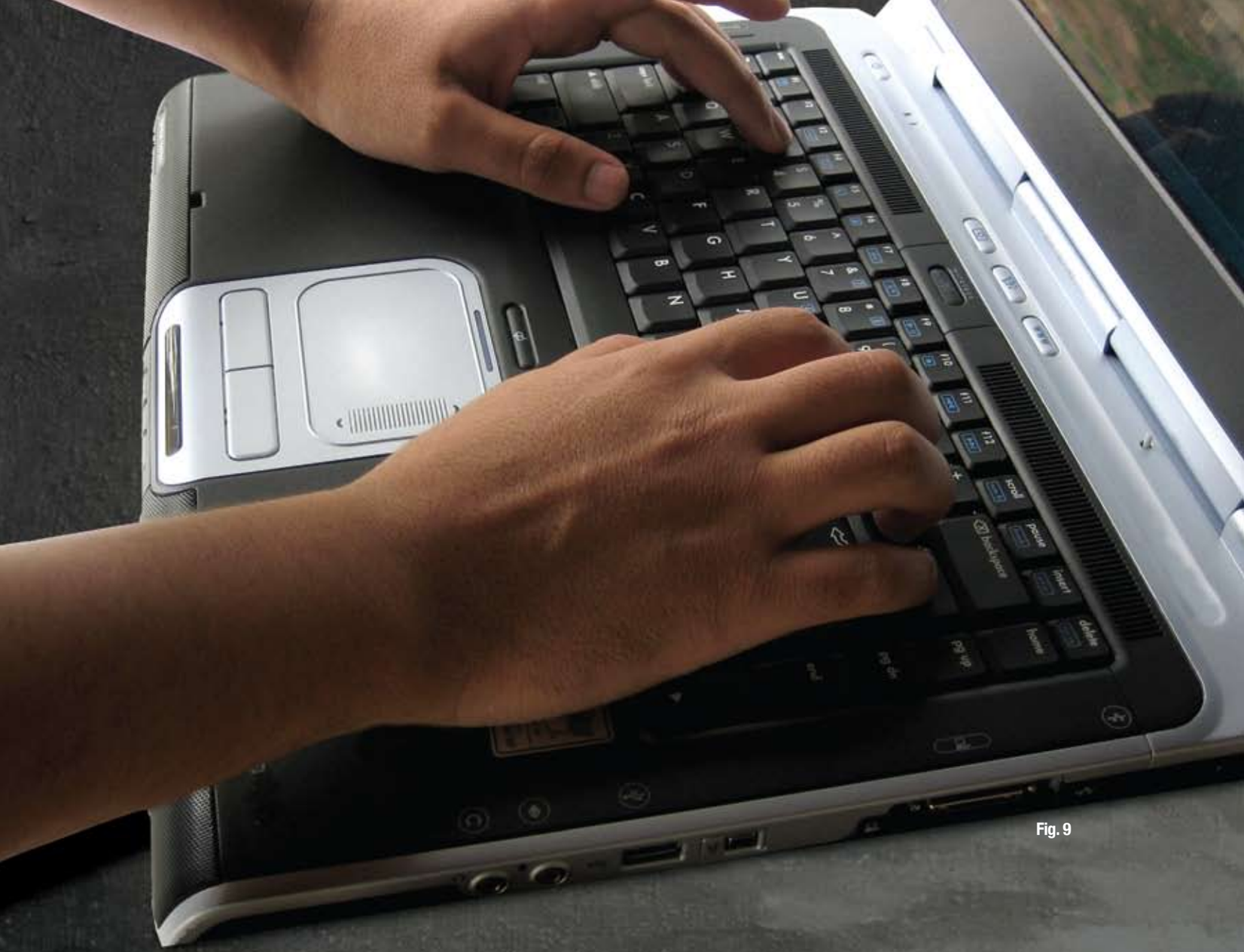


Fig. 9

How to Write a Play

Many would argue that a play offers its audience an immediacy that cannot be found in written fiction. While this makes plays a powerful form of expression, it also means that a playwright faces different challenges than a fiction writer. Playwrights have to tell their stories through dialogue and action, with little narrative. But as Canadian playwright Beth Herst notes, this is an opportunity "to join word and image, word and action, to force language to encounter the three dimensions of the theatrical space."

Over the past few decades, many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have used playwriting as a way to preserve and share our culture and history. In this chapter, you will have the chance to do this, as well. Through a series of exercises, you will be asked to create a scene based on some aspect of the content in this chapter. To help you with this, the following sections will walk you through the general stages of creating a play.* Our advice comes from drama teacher Carol Bolt, who worked with the Labrador Creative Arts Festival for years and wrote the introductory essay to a book of plays, *Who Asked Us Anyway?*, published by the Labrador School Board in 1998.

*These stages can be completed by one individual or collaboratively as a small or large group.

"Playwriting gets into your blood and you can't stop it. At least not until the producers or the public tell you to."

– T. S. Eliot, poet and playwright

THREE GOOD RULES FOR PLAYWRIGHTS:

Rule 1. Write about what you know.
Rule 2. Write about what you care about.
Rule 3. If you really want to say something, don't worry about breaking rules.

I. Brainstorming

If you don't already have an idea for a play, you need to brainstorm until you find one you like. Jot down notes as ideas come to you. These may include thoughts on characters – for example: "This play is about Jack and his three brothers." Other ideas may be about what genre your play will be (for example, murder mystery or historical drama), the plot, or setting.

The material for a play can be pure fiction, inspired by a real event or person, or based on information gathered through interviews or other research. One example of the latter approach is the play *From the Lips of Our People* by Bruce Stagg. In the Author's Note for the play, the playwright says:

"This drama is based on the information and themes contained in a series of extensive interviews conducted on the tip of the Bonavista Peninsula … The detail and dialogue in this interpretation are authentic and some of it is presented verbatim. However, the characters are symbolic of the types of people who were interviewed and the situations are sometimes altered to fit the setting …

… Whereas, I believe, this presentation gives insight into the ways of our people, past and present, it is but a mere snapshot of the rich culture and heritage preserved in the nearly 900 interviews collected."

Fig. 10

Excerpt from *From the Lips of Our People* by Bruce Stagg

In the following excerpt it's easy to see how this material might have grown out of interviews with people who lived the kind of life the playwright is portraying:

Elizabeth: … What kind of chores did you have to do?

Molly: (to audience) Oh, my lard … sure we never stopped.

Elizabeth: (reading) Well, like I said, there was nine of us so we had to help out around the house. Father never believed in us … especially the girls … being out … you know, gallivanting around. As soon as we got out of school, we had work to do.

Molly: (Molly fades in and Elizabeth fades out) … out of school we had work to do. We always kept gardens. We grew all kinds of vegetables … potatoes … cabbage … turnip … carrots … lettuce … stuff like that. It was our job, the girls, to tend to the gardens. Then we had firewood to bring in and splits to clave. We had to go to the well and bring in the water.

Ben: (to audience) She did that long after we were married. And for Molly, the water barrel was always half empty … it was never half full.

Fig. 11

II. Character development

The characters in a play serve as the main means of getting information to your audience about what is happening in the plot. Their actions and dialogue move the story along. So it is essential that your characters are interesting and serve a purpose in the play. Some characters might add comic relief to a story, provide information to the audience about the plot, or highlight certain characteristics in other characters. Others, especially the main character(s), may experience some kind of emotional or mental growth during a play to enable a playwright to make a statement about the human condition or a specific issue.

If part of a character's purpose is to make an emotional connection with the audience, the character needs to give the illusion of being a real person or at least of really being affected by what is happening in the play. As a playwright, it will be easier to create a believable character if you do some character development. That is, you will create a fictional history for your character so you can understand your character's motivations and how he or she would react in a given situation. While all the information you develop about your character may not make it into your play, it will help make your character more multi-dimensional.

To help you know your character inside and out, you need to consider your character's past, his or her personality, emotional state at the time of the play, and what motivates him or her. You may find that "interviewing" your character will help you flesh out some of this information – that is, asking yourself some questions and trying to answer them in character. You can either work alone and write your answers down, or have a friend act as the interviewer so that you answer the questions orally as your character. The answers you give to these questions may change as you come to know your character better.

"Before I write down one word, I have to have the character in my mind through and through. I must penetrate into the last wrinkle of his soul."

– Henrik Ibsen, playwright

Fig. 12

Here are some possible questions that you could "ask" your character:

1. Where and when were you born?
2. What do you look like? How do you dress? Are you happy with your appearance?
3. Describe the members of your family.
4. What makes you angry? What happens when you get mad?
5. What are you most proud of in your life?
6. Describe the time you were most frightened.
7. What makes you happy?
8. What do you want from life?
9. What song would be your theme music?
10. What is your favourite food?

When you are answering as your character, take some time to find your character's "voice." In this context "voice" means the way the character speaks. A good rule of thumb is to be as honest to your own voice as possible. How would you say something? Listen to the people in your community. How do they speak? If your character's voice is authentic, it will help make the play appear honest and original.

Fig. 13

Excerpt from *From the Lips of Our People* by Bruce Stagg

Notice how, in the following excerpt, the playwright is able to tell us many personal details about the character Elizabeth and reveal much of her personality in a short monologue:

…She slowly folds the letter and wipes a tear from her eye. She looks up and sees the audience.

Elizabeth: Oh my, I didn't know I had company. (She appears embarrassed, dabs at her eyes and composes herself.) And strangers too … my, we don't see a lot of strangers … so nice of you to drop in. And, may I be so nosey as to ask where it is you good people are from? (She waits for and entices a response. She ad-libs depending on the response.) The mainland, that's where my son and his family are living. I was just dropping them a note. They're up there in Fort McMurray – I s'pose you wouldn't happen to know … (She catches herself and brushes off the notion with a wave of her hand.) No, of course you don't. How silly of me! It's just that I miss them so much. I've been tryin' to persuade Reg to move up there to be closer to them. I know I'd find it hard to move because I lived here all my life. I was born in Catalina, you see, and moved over here to Bonavista when I married Reg. But, now that his poor mother has passed on … there's no reason …

Exercise Two:

Using the idea for a skit you developed in Exercise One, make a list of the characters that would appear in your skit. Pick one and, working with a partner, do a mock interview of your character. You can use the questions above and/or create your own.

Fig. 14 Settings don't have to be elaborate to be effective as shown here in these scenes from the Rising Tide Theatre's plays (above) *Daddy, What's a Train?* and (right) *Play Me Home*.

III. Setting

Part of writing a play is developing the setting(s) where your characters are going to interact. A playwright needs to know where each piece of the play's action is going to take place and figure out if and how the environment is going to impact the characters and the plot. In most plays, the plot is moved along by the characters' dialogue and actions, and setting is used to convey messages to the audience about mood and atmosphere.

Don't let concerns about staging limit what settings you choose to use in your play. Plays are created in your audience's imagination and often lighting and simple props like basic furniture can be enough to suggest a setting. When planning your setting, think about where and when the action is taking place. Then consider what sound and lighting effects and props are needed to get the sense of this place across to your audience. Some plays also use backdrop scenery, but this is certainly not always necessary. When you decide on what is required to create the setting, you need to provide simple stage instructions in your script to guide those who intend to perform your play.

The following is an example of some simple, but effective, stage directions concerning the setting for the play *From the Lips of our People*:

At curtain rise the stage is dark. From the darkness an accordion or fiddle wails traditional Newfoundland music. A cold blue light slowly rises, only enough to identify a graveyard setting. Three grave markers are barely visible in the eerie light. One of the markers is faded and leans ominously forward; the second is also faded, but smaller than the others. The third marker gives the appearance of being new.

Among the markers there is movement … quick … barely detectible to the eye. Voices bray out above the music.

IV. Scenes

When developing a play, it is important to think about its overall structure. Some plays are divided into acts and these may have an intermission between them. Acts are then divided into scenes. To help you determine what makes up a scene, you may find it useful to follow the rules for dramatic unity in a scene that were created by the Greek philosopher Aristotle almost 2400 years ago:

1. Unity of Time: While the play can jump backward and forward in time, each individual scene should be in one time period. When you change time periods you are changing scenes.
2. Unity of Place: Likewise a change of setting indicates a change of scene. Each scene should take place in one location.
3. Unity of Action: Each scene should be focused on one action. Each scene should contain a conflict or problem. The characters in the scene want something, but there's an obstacle to overcome. There should be a reason for having each character in a scene.

To find the focus of a scene, think about the characters that appear in it. What does each character want? What are their motivations? What obstacles are they running into? What can they do to achieve their goal? Then consider what happens at that point in the story that moves the characters closer to or farther away from their goals.

Although scenes are a useful way to move the action of a play forward, it is important that scene changes are smooth and quick and don't interrupt the play's flow. It is not always necessary (or possible) to pull a curtain closed at the end of each scene. Other ways to indicate a scene change include: dimming the lights, music or sound breaks, freezing action, or change of props – which can be moved by the actors themselves as part of the scene.

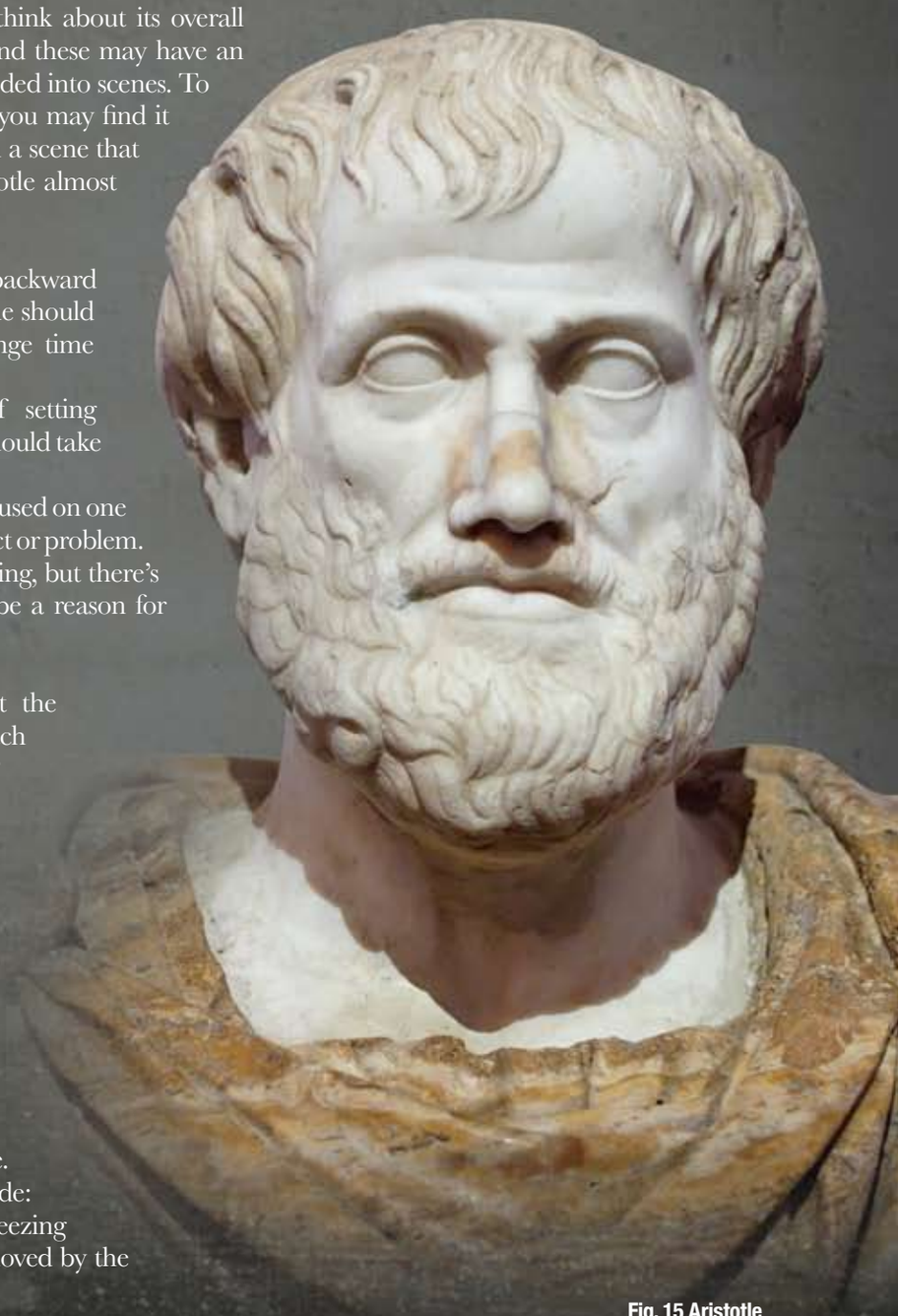


Fig. 15 Aristotle

Exercise Three:

Again using the idea for a skit you developed in Exercises One and Two, jot down some notes on what could be done to create a setting. Include instructions on sound, lighting, props, and (if needed) the backdrop scenery.

Fig. 16

V. The Final Curtain

Sometimes the trickiest thing about writing a play is coming up with an ending that allows you to get the point of your play across, and leaves the audience with a sense of closure. Aristotle said that a dramatic story has two possible outcomes: reversal and recognition. Reversal is when a character begins one way (poor, ignorant, popular, powerful …) and ends the play in a totally different situation (rich, wise, lonely, weak …). Recognition refers to an internal growth in the character. In the course of the play, he or she experiences or understands something that changes his or her life.

To some degree, the genre of your play may dictate the structure of your ending. For instance, the action in most murder mysteries builds up until the end and climaxes with a revelation of "who done it." A more serious play may have its climax nearer the middle, so that the repercussion of the climax can be explored in a thoughtful manner. Some plays end with an original song or an epilogue by a narrator. Other methods of ending a play include tying up loose ends, a quick surprise ending, or a return to the beginning.

After you've written your ending, read it again to ensure you've answered all the questions that your play's plot raised in the beginning. If you've left something unanswered, it should be for a specific reason – such as leaving your audience with something to mull over. If the purpose of your play is to make a certain point or statement to your audience, make sure your ending supports this. Your play's ending will be the last thing the audience takes away with them, so it should be memorable.

After you've written your ending, read it again to ensure you've answered all the questions that your play's plot raised in the beginning.

Fig. 17

Excerpt from *From the Lips of Our People* by Bruce Stagg

Throughout this play, one of the main characters, Reginald, has been struggling with the question of whether to resettle or not. His dilemma comes to a resolution on the last page, and he lets his audience know his decision with his parting words.

… Ben and Molly begin to exit. They stop and turn back to the audience.

Elizabeth: Oh, Reg, what beautiful memories. Poor mother has passed on … there's no reason …

Ben: *(to audience)* Goodbye … it was nice meeting you.

Molly: *(to audience)* Please come and see us again.

Ben: *We'll not be goin' anywhere … (They exit by fading into the darkness.)*

Reginald: *Do you know what, Elizabeth? We have beautiful memories too.*

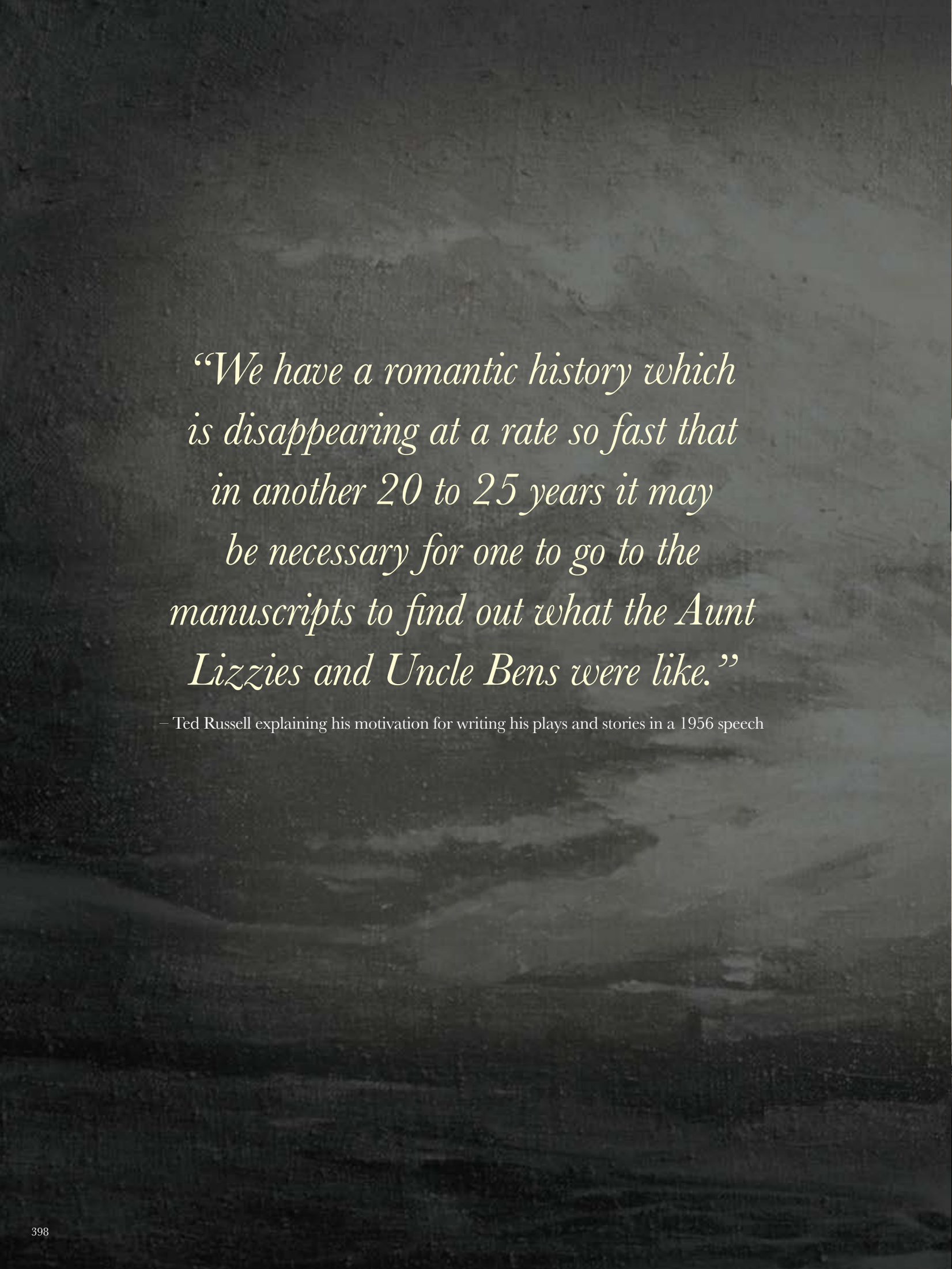
Elizabeth: I know.

Reginald: *(They embrace and Reginald stares at Elizabeth.) Thank you … thank you, Elizabeth. (They kiss.)*

Elizabeth: *(suddenly breaking the kiss)* Oh, my! The kettle … I forgot the kettle … I bet 'tis burned on black by now. (She runs off; Reginald turns to the audience and shrugs his shoulders.) You'll have to excuse Elizabeth; she's a little preoccupied lately, but please come and see us again … we'll not be going, anywhere. *(He taps on the wall and freezes. The lights fade out to darkness.)*

Exercise Four:

Using the idea for a skit you developed in Exercise One, work in a small group and devise a skit with your characters. Return to the class and act out your skit.



"We have a romantic history which is disappearing at a rate so fast that in another 20 to 25 years it may be necessary for one to go to the manuscripts to find out what the Aunt Lizzies and Uncle Bens were like."

– Ted Russell explaining his motivation for writing his plays and stories in a 1956 speech