

How Writers Write Fiction 2015

FAREWELL CLASS • Video Transcript

>> Welcome back. We've come to the end of our sessions, and as a way of saying "bon voyage," we'd like to give you one last craft talk from the Israeli playwright Boaz Gaon. He'll be talking about his ten commandments of craft and body, basically just a summary of inspirational recommendations that can hopefully help you as you continue forward.

>> Boaz is an alum of the International Writing Program. He's had six plays produced on the stage, including: Danziger, Argentina, Return to Haifa, and Dress Rehearsal. He's also the author of the novel Gymax's Yellow Bus and of two TV series, The Prosecutor and Prisoner Milo. He teaches dramatic writing at Minshar College of Arts, oversees drama development for HSCC TV, and shares the Gaon Center for the Study of Ladino culture at Ben-Gurion University. He has also long been involved in Israel-Palestinian peace organizations and initiatives. Enjoy.

>> So hi, my name is Boaz Gaon. I'm a playwright from Israel, and I'm going to talk to you about ten commandments about craft and body. Ten Commandments 'cause I'm Jewish, so we might as well give an homage to the place I'm coming from.

So number 1 is mirror. What I want you to do is stand up, and stand in front of a mirror. What you see in front of you is a body, and that body can't be changed. I mean, you think that it's unique, you think that it's maybe changeable. but it's a result of previous histories. And just like your body, that's who you are as a writer and as a person. You cannot be taller, you cannot be shorter. What you are is what you are.

There was one guy who tried to reinvent himself; his name was Richard III. It ended very badly. Everyone got killed. You should read that play by Shakespeare. So what I want you to do is, as you're looking at your body, become comfortable with the fact that that's not gonna change in the near future. And that's the beauty of yourself as a writer because people want to know who you are and what is unique about you. And just as your body, this cannot be reshaped. This is what you have, and that's what you have to work with.

The second is train. Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian playwright that I sort of adapted several of his works. And in a good book by Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, he talks about how Ibsen uses a drill, a writing exercise called the train. And the train says that basically when you think of a character, it's like sitting in a train and then somebody comes in and sits in front of you.

So first you see his physical size, and then you see sort of little eccentricities that are uniquely his. And then you see him sort of reacting to things that are going on outside the window. And then he's waiting for someone. And maybe then he gets a phone call.

So this line of you getting introduced to someone that you don't know is sort of how you get introduced to a character that you've just invented. So try to look at their body. Try to understand how that body is unique, just like your body is unique. Try and think what does the body say, and how does it behave according to the situation in which the character is in. That's number 2, train.



Number 3 is hunger. When you're hungry you basically cannot think of anything else. I don't know if you've felt that. But if you really need to eat, there's like a hole in your soul, and that hole needs to be filled even with things that are very bad for you, which is usually what happens to heroes.

But the hero needs to be hungry. When you write and you try to tell the story of that character, you really will need to understand what is he hungry for? And what isn't he sort of satisfied enough with? And just like being hungry with a body, just like the feeling that you get in the body when you're hungry, the hero won't stop. He will not stop until he eats something, contains something, consumes something that will give him a sense of relief. And that's basically what propels the story forward. And that's what you need to think about.

Number 4 is knife. One of the books that I would like to recommend to you is a little book about running by David Mamet. It's called *Three Uses of the Knife*. *Three Uses of the Knife* is a quote from Stanislavsky, who was a famous director, Russian director, who famously first directed the works of Anton Chekhov. And he said, he has a famous lesson, sentence, that says, a knife can have three uses. It can have more, but Stanislavsky decided to pick three.

One, the knife can be used to cut bread. Two, the knife can be used to spread butter on the bread for someone that that person really loves. And three, that knife can be used to stab in the heart of his loved one who betrayed him. And that sort of sentence or descriptions gives Stanislavsky the ability to talk about action, how in the end the things that you put in the story are devoid of importance and devoid of meaning until someone takes those things and make use with them to satisfy a hunger or to satisfy something that is dramatically going on in the story.

So think about those knives, and maybe it's not a knife. Maybe it's something innocent as an envelope or a piece of chocolate or a cup of coffee, but somebody is gonna take that cup of coffee and splash it in the face of someone.

Number 5 is wall. There is no story without a wall. The wall is called in dramatic writing the antagonist. The antagonist is the guy who is coming in front of the hero, and the hero is so hungry and so needs something, and the antagonist is telling him, "You will not eat. And if you do want to eat, you will have to bypass me. You have to climb over me, and I will do anything that I can to prevent you from doing that. Just like in a dance, the hero will take a left, I will take a left; the hero will take a right, I will follow you wherever you go to the end of the Earth. I will go after you, and I will prevent you from getting what you need to get."

That's the antagonist, that is the wall. And the bigger the wall, the higher the wall, the greater the story because the hero will have to exert himself and put more and more effort in in order to successfully reach the place that he needs to get to.

Number 6 is heart. Listen, your heart is like, I will say, your heart is like a bowl. And by that I mean that it needs to contain emotion as you write. It needs to contain difficult things that you went through as a person. You need to contain emotions that are difficult to everyone to process. You need to contain love. You need to contain hatred. You need to contain pain. And if that heart is not, that heart which I am using in metaphor as a bowl, is not solid then things will pour through the cracks. And there will be people who will try to crack your heart. There will be people who will try to find ways in which your heart will not be solid. And then things will drip, and you will find it

difficult to contain the emotions that are needed in order to write a good, dramatic story, be it a novel, a play, or short story, etc. So, what I want you to do is protect that bowl.

Number 7 is flesh. One of the things that I really like about *Breaking Bad*, which you might have seen and I have, Vince Gilligan, when he went into it (he was the creator of *Breaking Bad*), he said, we tried to think of scenes that will sort of burn in the memory, in the brains of the people who watch it. So not only to push the story forward, but do it in a way, if you remember Gus Fring losing half of his face, that's kind of the images that he was talking about. So try and think of images within the story that even independently of the story arc are sort of so strong and so unique and eccentric that they will sort of be burned into the flesh of the reader or the viewer as he goes on with his life.

Number 8 is medium. This is really important. You need to choose the medium that you will be most comfortable in. If you're thinking of going through the stage and working with theater like I do, then it's all about entrance and exits. And like in life, as in theater, this is the most tantalizing stuff and the most fateful, when someone comes in, when someone leaves, nothing is the same again. And that is basically what you're gonna work with as a dramatist, as a playwright.

If you're a novelist, sure entrances and exits are very important. Something the hero forgot about suddenly reappears in his life, and that propels some dramatic action, but it's not so physical. And there's a lot of room for describing the shape of a tree, sorry for ditching novelists here, and sort of going into the long descriptions of how a leaf looks.

In stage, it's all about the body. Things move; things need to come in and come out. And if this is what you're about, if you are really tantalized by characters and people coming into situations and then having things change and changing people that were there before, then the stage might be the place for you.

Number 9 is money. So, money is important, but it's only important if it's gonna help you write. And if it's not gonna help you write and this is just gonna be more money in order to do other things than producing great dramatic writing, then it will hurt your writing. It will destroy your writing because something in that writing will stop being as efficient as it needs to be. And writing is very efficient. You will meet an editor; he will cut you to pieces. He will cut your heart out. He will leave all the things that you don't like. And he will be right because we fall in love with things that are superfluous, things that we don't really need, like lots of money.

And the last thing is body. We talked about three uses of the knife. We talked about how knives can be used to spread butter and express love but also to kill and be stabbed in the heart, but there's also an issue of a body of work. In the end we live in this world. Our lives are very short and very brief and what remains after us is that body of work, is the things that we write, the things that we leave behind, the things that we create.

So what I would recommend for you to do is read. Read bodies of work of people who are no longer with us, but that has remained. Read *Three Uses of the Knife*, read *Poetics* by Aristotle, or learn it, because it's a difficult book. Read Nabokov about Russian literature. Read Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams' autobiographies that are beautiful, and yes, including the romance between Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe. It's all there.

And remain hungry, remain envious of these people who have left these amazing bodies of work behind them because in the end that's the only thing that remains. Thank you for listening.

>> We hope you enjoyed that video. We thought to conclude things, we'd take some time to just discuss how a writer sustains the writing life. For me personally, I'm emerging, as they call it. And one thing that I've found to be very restorative for me is to put things in perspective. Jane Smiley, she did a craft talk when I was in Iowa at the workshop about how, particularly if you were a novelist, you are the tortoise. You are not the hare.

So it's about knowing what sort of art that you are creating and understanding that you might see people next to you who seem to be kind of shooting forward and having publications and having things happening quicker. But if you've set yourself on a trajectory, like I want to write this book, I don't want to have these small things, I want to write this thing that's 360 pages, then that's going to mean a little bit more delayed gratification, if gratification, for you, is publication. And if you are a short story writer, there's a different sort of trajectory there as well, and there's a different kind of way that you need to protect your self image. Really it's about not comparing yourself to other people. If that's one thing I can impart, it's that everyone's journey is different. And the beauty of it is a journey; it's just like a narrative. The beauty is how did you get there.

>> Yeah, and it seems to me that the most important thing about that journey is not to abandon hope. That day by day you try to write a few words or a sentence. I love what the wonderful novelist and short story writer Richard Bausch said recently on Facebook, when you're working on a story visit it everyday, even if you just wanna see how it's doing. That's a way of staying engaged with it.

And then doing those things that make it possible to keep writing: read deeply, take care of yourself, be kind to yourself when the writing doesn't go well, remembering that at the end of the day, all that really matters is whether you took a shot at it or not. And if you have, then it's probably been a good day.

>> And I would add to support other writers. I've loved being part of a writing community. I think that there's a lot of be gained from it in your neighborhood, whether that's through a community center, your library. I think that being in fellowship with other people who love words as much as you do and who, of course, usually love reading as much as you do is just one way to feel that you're moving forward and that you're sort of sustaining your interest in words.

>> One of the best things that can happen in a creative writing workshop anywhere, whether it's in a coffee shop, or at a university, or in a large open online course such as this one, is that you will find kindred spirits. And they can become more important to you in the long run of your writing life even than your teachers because they are the ones that you will share your work with who will spur you to write better things, who will say to you, read this writer. And you can do the same for them.

It is a community.

We hope you found one here, and we look forward to seeing you again at another MOOC from the International Writing Program.

>> Thank you for spending time with us.

>> Onward.