

HOW TO QUIT WRITING (FOR THE THEATER)

Written by

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Approx. 10 minutes

In a workshop, a writer shares his most authentic, ambitious project yet.

## CAST

Frederica - workshop leader

Barry - naysayer

Meadow - yay sayer

Betty - feminist

Charlie - trying to quit

## SITTING AROUND A TABLE

FREDERICA

Welcome back fellow artists to this new season of our theater writers workshop. I trust you've been industrious during our time apart and have returned with some fresh new work for us to review together. It's always exciting when we take that next step to share our work with our fellow scribes. Who would like to begin?

She looks around the table, but there are no takers.

FREDERICA (CONT'D)

How about you Barry? As I recall you were already deep into a project last year, but didn't feel quite ready to share it yet. Are you now?

BARRY

No.

FREDERICA

You're not into the play or you're not into sharing?

BARRY

Neither.

FREDERICA

It's going to be difficult to give you feedback without having something to respond to, can you tell us the name of the play?

It's called Them.

BARRY

And what is it about?

FREDERICA

I'd rather not say.

BARRY

Since all we've got to go on is the name of Barry's play, how does everybody feel about it?

FREDERICA

I like it.

MEADOW

And what do you like about it?

FREDERICA

I don't know, I just kind of like it.

MEADOW

As a woman, I feel excluded by that title.

BETTY

Good.

BARRY

Your title is actually the first line of your work, So it's got a big job to do. This title "Them" seems a bit abrupt and as Betty pointed out, it doesn't let us in on much.

FREDERICA

Good.

BARRY

Does anybody have any ideas about how we can help Barry do more with his title?

FREDERICA

Well, maybe if we could read the play, we'd have a better idea what Barry's trying to say.

CHARLIE

Never.

BARRY

It could be like Them and Other People Too.

MEADOW

BETTY

How about Men and the Rest of Us, Who Really Don't Count in This Patriarchal Culture, Where What You're Born with Between Your Legs is the Single Defining Factor Determining Your Station in Life.

MEADOW

I like it.

FREDERICA

How about Them and Us. It's bold but concise, just adding a little extra pinch of drama. After all, this is the theater. What about you Betty, what have you brought us to dig our sharpened talons into?

BETTY

I'm working on a project based on the letters of Susan Sontag.

BARRY

God.

FREDERICA

Ah yes, the epistolary form, in which the narrative is driven by the exchange of letters which tell a story in and of themselves. Would you like to read us a scene?

BETTY

I haven't actually written anything yet.

CHARLIE

Aren't the letters already written, so all you have to do is arrange them?

FREDERICA

Are you having trouble defining the arc of your story? The character of your narrator? The tone of your time?

BETTY

No, I think it's just innate gender biases knitted into the very fabric of our culture that are blocking me from expressing myself.

BARRY

Something in society is working.

FREDERICA

Has anybody actually written anything to share here with your fellow theater writers? Meadow?

MEADOW

I'm kind of in the same place as Betty.

FREDERICA

Charlie?

CHARLIE

Yes, I've started a one act play.

FREDERICA

OK, tell us about it.

CHARLIE

You remember how last season you told us to reflect on our protagonist's motivation.

FREDERICA

Certainly. Desire is character. A great teacher of mine once said that, and I've studied with some of the best.

CHARLIE

Well I did that.

BETTY

(to Barry)

A man who's actually capable of reflection.

FREDERICA

Yes, the author as character, and what did you discover?

CHARLIE

What I discovered was boredom.

BARRY

Amen.

FREDERICA

What are you talking about?

CHARLIE

I've been writing for years and I never seem to get anywhere with it at all, and I realize that what I really want to do with my free time is to ride my mountain bike.

FREDERICA

Exercise is a great way to get the creative juices flowing. Do we have a title?

CHARLIE

It's called How to Quit Writing open parenthesis, For the Theater, close parentheses.

FREDERICA

A script about writing, Charlie how very post modern meta of you.

MEADOW

I like it.

BARRY

Trendy.

CHARLIE

I'm trying to write my way out of writing, and probably help some other writers out there while I'm at it.

Frederica stands up.

FREDERICA

I feel like we could all use an energy boost right about now -- why don't we all stand up and do some exercises to get our energy flowing.

They all stand up except for Barry. Betty nudges him hard. He stands up too.

FREDERICA (CONT'D)

A great teacher of mine once said that writing is breathing and breathing is writing, so let's all start by closing our eyes and breathing.

CHARLIE

You mean in addition to the breathing we're already doing?

FREDERICA

Are your eyes closed Charlie?

CHARLIE

I opened them to ask the question.

FREDERICA

Close those eyes, Charlie. And we are breathing. We are breathing in the green energy of the universe that is "yes" energy and we are breathing out the red energy of the universe that is "no" energy. We are breathing in the "yes" and out the "no". In with the yes and out with the no.

Barry chokes.

## FREDERICA (CONT'D)

Now let's visualize our creativity expanding without end like the universe itself. Imagine you are a speck of interstellar dust moving freely through space, blowing in the solar wind past planets and their moons, spinning, floating, orbiting then moving on, no gravity pulling you down, as time and space expand and contract around you like ocean waves, just unlimited space whispering it's soothing song of eternity in your ear ...

She whirls and spins away from the table.

BETTY

I think we're losing her.

MEADOW

I like it.

BARRY

Shut up.

CHARLIE

Brings her back to the table.

Frederica? Frederica?

FREDERICA

Huh? What? What's going on?

BETTY

You really got into that visualization.

FREDERICA

(trying to compose herself)

Theater is a journey ...

BETTY

(to Charlie)

So what's this play actually about?

CHARLIE

It's about a writer who really wants to do something else with his free time, like mountain bike riding, but every time he's about to quit, someone comes along and talks him out of it, or he gets a mildly positive line in an otherwise cold impersonal rejection note, or an actor blurts out a totally insincere 'it was fabulous' the way they do, just enough to get him back on the artistic treadmill again. But finally, this time, he says, no more, and gets up from his computer and rides away.

BETTY

It's different. How's the writing going?

CHARLIE

Slow.

FREDERICA

Perhaps we can help. Give us the title again?

CHARLIE

How to Quit Writing open parenthesis For the Theater close parenthesis.

FREDERICA

Tell us more about these parenthesis.

CHARLIE

I'm thinking about making this a series, like those Chicken Soup books ... like How to Quit Writing Fiction, How to Quit Writing Screenplays. How to Quit Writing Memoir. There's a lot of writers out there who need help.

BETTY

It's ambitious.

MEADOW

I like it.

Barry jumps at her across the table.

BARRY

I'm going to throttle you.

Betty has to restrain him.

BETTY

What's the matter, you can't handle a woman who speaks her mind?

BARRY

(composing himself)

She has no mind.

FREDERICA

I'm wondering ... I'm wondering if this piece wouldn't work better if we re-directed it ever so slightly ... to give it a little context ... at least at the beginning ...

.CHARLIE

What are you saying?

FREDERICA

What if this piece opened with a scene about how the writer first started on their journey?

BETTY

The gender bias the writer faced and was determined to overcome.

BARRY

The absolute bleakness of existence that could only be accurately articulated by an utterly blank page.

CHARLIE

But I'm not interested in any of that.

FREDERICA

Good, perfect, so why *did* you start writing?

CHARLIE

I was left alone a lot as a child, and I often spent those solitary hours drowning out ant holes with a hose or pouring lighter fluid in them and igniting them.

BARRY

Not again.

FREDERICA

Drowning and igniting -- those are some very powerful images, Charlie. What else? Keep going, Charlie, keep digging!

CHARLIE

But I want to *stop* digging.

FREDERICA

Who are your artistic forbearers?

CHARLIE

My what?

FREDERICA

What playwrights inspired you? Shaw? Miller? O'Neill, The immortal bard himself?

BETTY

All men.

CHARLIE

Arthur Miller, I guess. Ever since we did the *Crucible* in high school, but ...

BARRY

(interrupting)

A flawed, fundamentally saccharin work.

FREDERICA

A major milestone in your journey -- you *must* include it.

CHARLIE

But this isn't what my play is about.

FREDERICA

It's *exactly* what your play is about.

BETTY

Do you really want to quit writing? Your short play last year had some lovely moments in it?

CHARLIE

'The Anthill'? You really liked it?

BETTY

Well ... yes, before the lighter fluid splashed into the audience.

CHARLIE

The script note called for a light misting.

BETTY

I still remember the way you described the parents' station-wagon pulling away, leaving you sitting alone in the driveway.

CHARLIE

"Like an immigrant left on the dock"-- you remember that?

BETTY

That's the line.

MEADOW

I ...

BARRY

(interrupting)

Don't!

CHARLIE

But why didn't you tell me you liked it?

BETTY

I'm sorry, I thought you knew -- you got a standing ovation.

CHARLIE

I thought it was for the fire department.

FREDERICA

It was a triumph for the entire ensemble.

BARRY

What about How to Quit Writing, it's the first authentic thing you've ever come up with.

CHARLIE

I can't quit now -- I feel like I'm just finding my voice!

END OF PLAY