

STORY, STRUCTURE,  
AND THE WORKINGS OF THE SCENE

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“Screenplays are structure,” William Goldman, author of *The Princess Bride* and *All the President’s Men* said:

“That’s all they are. They are not art, they are carpentry.”



Goldman’s modesty aside, he has a point, one that was echoed when Preston Sturges called theatre “a form of architecture.” I call attention this, not to diminish the art of dramatic writing, but rather to understand how it works, and to clarify the director’s relationship to its texts.

Like an architect's work product, screenplays and plays are blueprints. They are roadmaps to events that must be made to happen. Another writer, Richard Nelson said, "Unlike a novel or a story, a play is basically a series of notations *for something else*. It is not an end in itself. It is the notations for the *production* of the play." The italics are mine and are meant to highlight the director's role. We are responsible for making "something else" happen. That is what production is about – the unlocking of the events of the play or screenplay. Those events are written in a code called "structure."

## **Structure**

Structure is the unseen scaffold that supports an outer surface. You see a house; now imagine it without a frame. It can't exist. It wouldn't stand. Just as bones and joints are the skeletal structure on which our flesh is hung, there is an unseen frame that supports the outer surface of a story. This structural framework is present, but not apparent in a writer's design. It's the director's job to unpack it, assemble its elements, and join them to make the story stand.



## **Structural Elements**

Dramatic stories are told in *acts*. The acts, in turn, are made up of *scenes*. The scenes themselves divide into *beats*, which, in turn, are comprised of *moments*. These are the structural elements that form the armature of a story.

The acts and scenes are the larger units, specified in the text. The beats and moments are not indicated.

Moments and beats are invisible. Like gravity, or the current in an ocean, they are present, but not defined. They can be felt, however, detected by their influence on events. The director identifies moments and beats by *scene study*, and activates them through *scene work* with actors.

### **Scene Study**

Scene study begins with the reading of the script. Directors read with an eye, an ear, and nose for structure. Scene study is the stripping of layers, the peeling of an onion revealing the dynamic that lies beneath a surface. It is the seeing of things that are there, but are hidden. Studying a scene we read for purpose and feel for patterns.

## Scene Work

Scene work is the process of trial and error we undertake with actors in rehearsal. It's an exploration, a probing of intention and behavior. In scene study we formed impressions and developed theories. In scene work we test them. Some hold up, others do not, but point us in fresh directions. Some are dead ends; others lead to breakthroughs. Trial and error - the scientific method. Physicist and Nobel laureate Richard Feynman said, "It doesn't matter how beautiful your theory is; it doesn't matter how smart you are. If it doesn't agree with experiment, it's wrong." Scene work is investigation and experimentation.

## The Scene

"The scene," as David Mamet proclaimed, "is the correct unit of study." If you can master its workings, all the other aspects of directorial art will fall into place.

A scene is a dramatic encounter - a meeting in which action is taken, and something happens. "Encounter" has a neutral connotation in English, but in its derivation from the French *encontre*, we recognize the Latin root *contra*, meaning "against". An encounter is a meeting, yes, but the word

itself evinces the conflict inevitable in the meeting of individuals with competing agendas.

“Two truths coming together and changing each other,” is how actor and teacher, Nina Foch defined a scene.

Change is the thing that happens in a scene. Change, occurring as the result of conflict, moves a story forward. The scene is the unit of change that drives story. Our job as directors is to ensure that forward motion by making change happen.

As I write the words “forward motion” I think of American football. In that game, progress is measured in touchdowns scored. Most touchdowns are not accomplished by spectacular runs or long pass receptions. Instead they are the product of a succession of first downs. The quarterback’s job is to lead the team in accomplishing a series of first downs, culminating in a final downing of the ball in the opponent’s end zone. The director’s job is similar. We guide our team to accomplishing the event of a scene, which is the change that launches us into the next scene. This new scene, like a new set of football downs – moves us closer to the goal of the story.

Change does not happen all at once; it’s the result of a cumulative process. A flood may seem sudden, but the storm that caused it is comprised of a multitude of raindrops. The director creates change by attending to the raindrops. In a scene those raindrops are the moments.

## **Moments**

Scenes are not made up of words, but of atomic particles we call moments. Stories are many moments engaged in a chain reaction.

## **Beats**

“Beat” may be the most loosely, imprecisely used, and baffling word in the lexicon of directing and acting. I will try to address this at greater length later. For now let us say that, just as atoms combine to form molecules, moments arrange themselves into units called beats.

A beat occurs at a decisive moment. A beat is a joint or inflection point, a turning in a scene’s progress toward an event.

## **The Event**

The term “event” is reserved for the culminating beat of the scene – the beat that is so decisive it causes a change that propels the action toward a new scene.

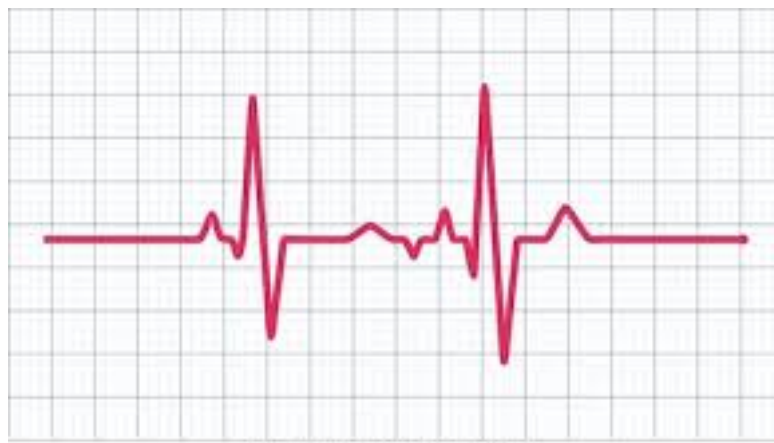
We will take up moments, beats and the event, in greater detail. For now suffice it to say that directors approach scenes with these elements in mind.

## **Story Movement**

Story movement is not man made. It has its roots in the natural order, a realm beyond human ingenuity. The rising and falling action of stories mirror the ebb and flow of life. . Story movement is cyclical and repetitive. The back and forth of this progress follows life’s rhythms, just as the swell and crash of waves mirrors the ocean floor unseen below.

A story starts with the statement of a goal. The action rises toward that goal until a conflict develops which causes a temporary failure. And so the hero tries again, and again, and so on, until a conclusion of these efforts reaches a meaningful conclusion.

That is the structure, the movement pattern, the shape of all stories. Progress and regress – one step forward and two steps back, two steps forward and one step back. This pattern could be mapped by a sine curve, like an EKG that describes the beating of a heart.



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## The Shape of Stories - Russian Dolls



The shape of an act is identical to the shape of a story. An act is a mini-story inside the greater story. The same can be said of the scene, which is a mini-story inside an act. Beats are mini-scenes tucked within scenes.

Acts nest inside stories. Scenes nest in acts. Beats nest in scenes. They are designed to nestle inside one another like Russian Dolls.

Directors read scripts, study scenes and rehearse actors with these shapes and structures in mind.

In order to tell a story a director must tell an act. In order to tell an act a director must tell a scene. In order to tell a scene a director must tell a beat. In order to tell a beat a director must first tell a moment.



The director identifies the mechanisms embedded in the structure of the script and sets them in motion one moment at a time, one scene at a time. The process begins with the analysis we call scene study, and continues with the investigation known as scene work.. These are the essential focus of our work and we will explore them in coming chapters because, to give Mamet the last word on the subject, “If you understand the scene, you understand the play or movie.”