

(Q Search for a word or phrase Cancel)

BOOK

(101)

Comedy or drama?

Page 4

... hadn't occurred to you before. **Obvious Rule** No. 1 Never look down on comedy or regard it as the poor cousin of drama. Comedy is an essential part of any play. Without light how can we possibly create shadow? It's like a painter rejecting yellow. Yet...

The initial idea

Page 6

... thing of swan-like beauty. **Obvious Rule** No. 2 Never start a play without an idea. This sounds very obvious but you'll be amazed at the number of would-be writers I've come across who try. They assume, I think, that if they start the journey, maybe an...

Page 7

... as a researcher. Ah, well. **Obvious Rule** No. 3 If you don't have the initial inspiration, put down the pen, put the pencil back in the jar, switch off the computer and go and dig the garden instead. Amongst the group was a young American student who had...

Construction

Page 13

... conveniently as a four-hander. **Obvious Rule** No. 4 Use the minimum number of characters that you need. In modern theatre there is a direct inverse relationship between the size of the cast and the likelihood and frequency of production. This has virtually...

Page 14

... will be moving too fast. **Obvious Rule** No. 5 They need to care about your characters. (So you should too.) An audience that doesn't care stops listening in the end. Indeed, they might even leave the theatre. It's difficult to get everyone to care, and...

Page 20

... into a frightening parallel universe. **Obvious Rule** No. 6 There is no hard and fast rule as to which constructional element comes first. No two plays are the same. As we have seen, Relatively Speaking in a sense was plot-driven, with the characters to...

Time

Page 22

... significance? Author: Pure coincidence, sorry.) **Obvious Rule** No. 7 Choice of time affects the viewpoint of the observer. The more closely stage time equates to real (theatre foyer) time, the closer to the action we appear to get. In a play like Absent...

Page 22

... plot—mostly the latter. **Obvious Rule** No. 8 Generally try not to mix time speeds in a single play. It is confusing to an audience and can lead to a form of travel sickness. However, to paraphrase another Stephen Joseph-ism, once you know the rules, they...

Page 25

... by the use of time. **Obvious Rule** No. 9 If a play can be too simple, it can also be too complicated. If one element is particularly complicated, keep the rest of it simple. TIME FRAME By this I mean the starting and stopping points of the play. It is...

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Time

Page 27

... on what has gone before. **Obvious Rule** No. 10 Never ‘cheat’ an ending to achieve a short-term result. Whatever your choice, make sure the ending treats your characters honourably. Having stuck with your characters truthfully from the start, never be tempted...

Page 27

... have happened. Allied to that: **Obvious Rule** No. 11 Never sell your characters short in order to meet the requirements of a gag or even the plot. A man once approached me to tell me he thought he'd solved the problem of the ending of *Just Between Ourselves*...

Location

Page 30

... set in three different bedrooms. **Obvious Rule** No. 12 Always try to have the audience looking at the same thing at the same moment. A well-designed set will assist this. The problem with composite sets, if you're not careful, is that apart from dividing...

Page 32

... actors' performance of your play. **Obvious Rule** No. 13 Beware of competitive scenic designers, particularly those with a 'concept.' Chances are the concept will be something they developed long before they read your play and now at last they have found...

Page 33

... clearly reads 'Edwin spontaneously combusts'. **Obvious Rule** No. 14 At least fifty per cent of your play is going to be visual. Choice of location is important, though, and it's important you exercise that choice yourself. OUTDOORS OR INDOORS? Don't forget...

Characters

Page 36

... concentrate mainly on characters' functions. **Obvious Rule** No. 15 Remember that your characters are eventually going to be played by actors. I know, but you'd be amazed how many dramatists appear to forget. They write unspeakable lines of interminable...

Page 37

... to have ten of them.) **Obvious Rule** No. 16 Never include a character with no real function. It's expensive and leads to unhappy actors asking plaintively why they're in the scene at all. And it's even more expensive when you're forced to cut their character...

Page 39

... with the characters' inter-reactions. **Obvious Rule** No. 17 Never underestimate your audience. You can afford to be subtle, far subtler than you think. They see and hear much more than you imagine. Most of them pick up most things—always provided your...

Page 39

... meant to be. I see.' **Obvious Rule** No. 18 Let them know who everyone is. Try and include their name early. 'Hello, Jenny!' is helpful. Or 'Mr Ambassador, how good of you to come,' does the trick as well. Give them as little excuse as possible to look...

Page 40

... will change physically as well. **Obvious Rule** No. 19 Don't let them go off without a reason. Begin to think seriously about the overall movement of your characters. Plot their actions, preferably from start to finish. In *Relatively Speaking*, again, by...

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( Obvious rule

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Characters

... will change physically as well. **Obvious Rule** No. 19 Don't let them go off without a reason. Begin to think seriously about the overall movement of your characters. Plot their actions, preferably from start to finish. In Relatively Speaking, again, by...

Page 41

... the coincidence is not apparent. **Obvious Rule** No. 20 Don't bring them on without a reason. Normally, it's good to know where people have been or are going. Uncle Bernard, offloading his puppet show in Season's Greetings throughout the main scene on stage,...

Page 44

... and to the point. DEVELOPMENT **Obvious Rule** No. 21 Your characters must undergo a journey, too. Not just the plot. Few of us remain the same. Most change over years—or even weeks or, in some cases, days. Where possible, it is always good to allow an audience...

Page 45

... enormous and tragic. DIGGING DEEP **Obvious Rule** No. 22 You can never know too much about your characters before you start. Finally, never draw back from exploring your characters as thoroughly as possible. Even in the lightest play you should have peeled...

Final countdown

Page 47

... been designed, let alone built. **Obvious Rule** No. 23 You can't spend too long on this first phase. It can take at least a year. Dialogue Dialogue, put simply, is characters conveying information verbally—about themselves, about each other, about events....

Dialogue

Page 58

... wearily) Yeah, yeah, yeah ... **Obvious Rule** No. 24 Information gleaned indirectly by an audience is far more effective. Besides getting a good look at both women we also get an idea of the tension that's grown between them. We can hazard a guess that the...

Page 58

... unwittingly reveal themselves to us. **Obvious Rule** No. 25 Important information should always be conveyed at least twice. All the salient facts in that Lynette / Sorrel exchange will be repeated shortly in a future scene, i.e. the father leaving, the...

Page 62

... visit from the doctor, Bill. **Obvious Rule** No. 26 Punctuation can help delivery. Note also the use of punctuation in the speeches. Sometimes the speeches are broken up (quite grammatically incorrectly) in order to give an indication to the actor of the...

Page 64

... of attention from the listener. **Obvious Rule** No. 27 Avoid bracketed directions (when possible). Finally, note the paucity of bracketed indications before the speeches. The two that there are in the scene are both before speeches of Susan's. Susan (rather...

Page 65

... and especially of CAPITAL LETTERS. **Obvious Rule** No. 28 People in general are reluctant to reveal themselves. We touch, towards the end of this section, on the cause of Susan's dissatisfaction. It's initially a very light touch. It needs to be: this is...

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Dialogue

Page 68

... of how it says it. **Obvious Rule** No. 29 Explore the unsaid. If it's clear enough the actor will say it for you. Here's a woman, Vera in Just Between Ourselves, who has lost all her confidence. Notice how she repeats words, how she hesitates. How her punctuation...

Page 69

... said. All thumbs, you know. **Obvious Rule** No. 30 You are as you speak. Obviously what Vera says is important; but almost as much is revealed in the way she says it. Notice the constant use of the word 'really', including, at one stage, a triple 'really'...

Page 73

... to know more about her. **Obvious Rule** No. 31 Unlike in real life, practically everything that gets mentioned in a play has a relevance sooner or later. This is not the first time we've heard about Marcus. He's a good example of an offstage character being...

Page 75

... rewarded. DIALOGUE WITH A PROP **Obvious Rule** No. 32 A well-placed prop can speak volumes sometimes. Sometimes, I find, an inanimate object can serve to trigger deeper, more meaningful events. Earlier in the same play, reference is made in passing to a...

Page 80

... signal 'comedy' in any way. **Obvious Rule** No. 33 The best comedy springs from the utterly serious. Offsetting a highly serious scene with something equally serious but, through unintentional contrast, creating something quite ludicrous, is always effective...

Page 81

... can cancel each other out. **Obvious Rule** No. 34 Two darks can make a light. The next example is another from Season's Greetings. At dawn, Clive has been shot by Uncle Harvey who has mistaken him for a burglar. The others gather, alarmed, and cluster round...

Page 87

... 'Who the hell are you?' **Obvious Rule** No. 35 Tell them all they need to know. Normally, with that type of confusion, it only works when the audience is let in on both sides of the misunderstanding. If they don't know what's going on they tend to sulk...

Page 90

... help. DIALOGUE TO ASSIST PACE **Obvious Rule** No. 36 Good dialogue creates its own inbuilt pace and variety. Obviously, short, sharp exchanges between characters tend to help speed things up. In The Revengers' Comedies, for example, there is a section...

Page 92

... in your own time ... **Obvious Rule** No. 37 An actor can only go as fast as the dialogue will allow them. The best time to think (and to breathe), as any good actor will tell you, is whilst the other character is still speaking. BUT—and this is where the...

Tidying up

Page 95

... script are generally swiftly fixable. **Obvious Rule** No. 38 Don't be afraid to throw it all away. Or as my late great agent Peggy Ramsay once said, 'If you believe you have talent then be generous with it.' Not profligate, you understand, but generous....

Page 95

... and standardise the earlier pages. **Obvious Rule** No. 39 Read it aloud if you can. Sometimes I find it pays to read the script as if you were the actor—that is to say, concentrating on a single character and keeping in that voice for the whole of

(Q) Obvious rule

X) Cancel

Tidying up

The producer

Page 105

... for an early reaction, etc. **Obvious Rule** No. 40 Never say yes unless you're certain. The first instinct of course is always to say yes, yes, yes, please without even reading it. Saying no might be a sure-fire guarantee of never getting a call from that...

Page 107

... be in all these events. **Obvious Rule** No. 41 Come cheap if you have to. But don't come malleable. They'll have you for breakfast. A commercial producer will be regarding you as a. cheap and b. malleable. At best—for let's be charitable, too—they will...

Page 108

... been knocking around for ever? **Obvious Rule** No. 42 New plays rarely build reputations. A word here about old versus new plays. Remember that as a general rule, if you want to carve your name as a director, never accept new plays. Stick to classics. Unless,...

The author

Page 110

... maintain morale among the team. **Obvious Rule** No. 43 Beware of the writer-director. A worst-case scenario is that you are unlucky enough to come up against the would-be or indeed, heaven forbid, established writer-director. In which case my advice would...

Page 112

... in it and jumped ashore. **Obvious Rule** No. 44 Get the script right first. Meet the author, then, and talk. Talk a lot. As much as it takes. But let it be known that you are the one who will be doing the talking during rehearsals. When an actor creeps...

Page 112

... advance. It helps to remember: **Obvious Rule** No. 45 All writers overwrite (including Shakespeare). CUTTING Cut in advance. And then have the whole script retyped. If you don't it will come back to haunt you later, I promise. Actor: 'Of course, you see,...

Stars

Page 114

... the Test match at Lord's. **Obvious Rule** No. 46 Never cast a celebrity. Have nothing to do with these overnight one-minute wonders. They will tire of the magic of the theatre after three days, once they realise what hard work it is compared to sports,...

Page 115

... billing Laurence (Richard III) Olivier. **Obvious Rule** No. 47 Every star brings baggage. Stars are actors who have a particular personal relationship with their public. Their fans come to see them and not primarily the play. Indeed, some of these fans...

Page 117

... survived. It's a tough business. **Obvious Rule** No. 48 Stars eat authors for breakfast. Most important, try and protect the new author from the star. If the author is to be likened to a lost dog in Kansas then the star is the Wicked Witch of the East....

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 Obvious rule

 Cancel

Stars

Set designers

Page 118

... the director instead of them. **Obvious Rule** No. 49 Beware of the Concept. Don't be talked into anything you feel instinctively you'll regret later. If you must have a concept (God save us from that word) then let the concept be something that's worked...

Page 119

... know the choice is there. **Obvious Rule** No. 50 Nobody reads the same script. Remember that designers often read plays in a totally different way from anyone else; but then each member of the team will approach it slightly differently. Everyone will tend...

Costume designers

Page 120

... especially with a period play. **Obvious Rule** No. 51 Beware the manic-depressive costume designer. What should you look for here? Well, apart from the ability to design costumes that are right for your play (you think I'm joking?), a costume designer should...

The lighting designer

Page 122

... blowing your budget to ribbons. **Obvious Rule** No. 52 Beware the tin briefcase. Beware what my lighting-designer friend Mick Hughes terms the boys with the tin briefcases. Their eyes throughout are on their PC screens or the lighting positions, but seldom...

The sound designer

Page 124

... written in incomprehensible pidgin English. **Obvious Rule** No. 53 Never appoint a sound designer unless you intend to use them. My advice here is to avoid complex recorded sound as much as possible, unless you yourself really understand it or are totally...

Casting

Page 126

... is to cast the play. **Obvious Rule** No. 54 Casting is everything. It is my view that this process is the single most important action or series of actions you will make on a production. Most things are reversible, but if you have the wrong actor, however...

Page 127

... to slow down a cheetah. **Obvious Rule** No. 55 Trust your first instincts. If they read or audition for you, tend to trust your first impressions. Nonetheless, still spend time talking to them if they seem possibly what you're looking for. Look at them...

Page 127

... too old for the parts. **Obvious Rule** No. 56 A refusal should never offend. Expect to be turned down by actors. Richard Eyre once described the right to say no as the actor's only real power. Once most of them accept the job they're at the mercy of all...

Page 128

Combined Ayckbourn “Obvious Rules” from his book “The Crafty Art of Playmaking”

Obvious rule

X Cancel

Casting

Page 128

... and it won't work now. **Obvious Rule** No. 57 Never try to be over-persuasive. Others, like coy lovers, will ask to meet and be convinced. Personally, I would advise against anyone—director, writer or producer—ever going down this path. Only go with the...

Auditions

Page 129

... tiring, but are absolutely essential. **Obvious Rule** No. 58 Never leave auditions to someone else. You should even, in West End or Broadway shows, be there to cast the understudies. They are, after all, going to be part of your company, albeit junior members...

Page 132

... of all-sex appeal. **Obvious Rule** No. 59 People may be equal but they're also different. We are paddling in the shallows of political correctness here, and although in the eyes of God I'm sure we're all equally desirable creatures, in the eyes of our fellow...

Page 132

... final word on the ‘how’. **Obvious Rule** No. 60 When you're casting, don't try and get clever. I once sat in with a director who was casting Romeo and Juliet. He hit upon the idea of getting all his potential Romeos to read Juliet's role—in order to ‘bring...

Page 133

... try and sleep on it. **Obvious Rule** No. 61 There's always someone else somewhere. Finally, if you don't see anyone that really fires you, start all over again and prepare to see a load of fresh people. There is almost certainly some unknown out there who...

Before the first rehearsal

Page 134

... to while away the time? **Obvious Rule** No. 62 Plan in advance. Personally, I like to make schedules. Some directors hate this idea and prefer to treat the rehearsal process as a freewheeling event where each day dictates its own agenda. This has its attractions....

The first day

Page 137

... remember that time is finite. **Obvious Rule** No. 63 Take the plunge. It is understandable perhaps, given my own role as author/ director, that I prefer, particularly when working on my own plays, to employ the sudden shock method. That is to say, we get...

Page 138

... built to accommodate such observers. **Obvious Rule** No. 64 Get it on its feet. The first read-through completed, in the next session I like to start moving the play around physically, albeit with the actors still with script in hand. I term this a second...

Page 139

... after the first ‘stagger through’.) **Obvious Rule** No. 65 Get an early ‘global’ view. By the first weekend, we will have what I term a ‘global’ view of the play. More importantly, each actor will have some idea, however sketchy, of the journey they will...

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Obvious rule

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The first day

Page 139

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Exploration

Page 141

... Rosemary (tearfully) Oh, lovely ... **Obvious Rule** No. 66 Always be prepared to lose a laugh to keep the truth. There could be a tendency for the actors, sensing they are in what is essentially a comedy, to seek to lighten that section. There aren't, let's...

Early days

Page 142

... in private. DISCOVERING YOUR CAST **Obvious Rule** No. 67 No two actors work in quite the same way. Actors, of course, all come with different approaches and it is impossible to generalise about how to deal with them. Some exude confidence when in reality...

Page 143

... the rest of the cast. **Obvious Rule** No. 68 If an actor's approach works for them, don't try to fix it. Try to accommodate it. There are actors who work from the outside in. They need to be able to see themselves—the shoes, their hairstyle, their walk...

Page 144

... their character's feelings and emotions. **Obvious Rule** No. 69 Sometimes you need to fake it. That approach may be fine for the movies but any stage actor will tell you that in a week of eight performances it just isn't humanly possible to feel it every...

Page 145

... Encourage it but keep clear. **Obvious Rule** No. 70 Acting is risk taking. Encourage it. It is important to build trust. Rehearsals are about people—often total strangers—being persuaded to take risks in order to discover how to play the part. This means...

Page 145

... make the final choice together. **Obvious Rule** No. 71 A choice made by the actor is worth five imposed by the director. If in doubt that it is genuinely going to be a joint choice, always let it be the actor's choice and not yours. If they feel you have...

Page 146

... the tried and trusted cliché. **Obvious Rule** No. 72 Cast imaginatively when possible. If they're worth their salt—and if you've got a rehearsal room full of people who genuinely work on forty-one B performances then you've only yourself to blame—they will...

As you proceed

Page 147

... ready for the technical rehearsal. **Obvious Rule** No. 73 There's a right time to say the right thing. There is another sort of timing, though, which is just as important. Simply, it's sensing when to give the actor help, information or criticism at just...

Page 147

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 Obvious rule

 Cancel

As you proceed

... them, a little each day. **Obvious Rule** No. 74 Avoid head-on confrontations whenever possible. If you meet head-on over something—say a small piece of business that the actor is wedded to but you secretly loathe—allow them right of way. Let them keep it...

Page 148

... who's the last to notice? **Obvious Rule** No. 75 Let the audience know where the ball is. This contact or non-contact is important. Mostly it will be instinctive. A well-written scene will tell you when and when not to establish eye contact, but occasionally...

Page 149

... dictates where the audience looks. **Obvious Rule** No. 76 Keep your distance on stage except when fighting or fornicating. Similarly with proximity. Encourage, where possible, distance between actors, especially on open stages—first, this widens the angle...

Notes

Page 149

... obliged to look down. Notes **Obvious Rule** No. 77 Don't be afraid occasionally to say nothing. (Provided you don't make a habit of it.) Never give a note for the sake of it. It takes a lot of bottle to say to an actor, I have nothing to say to you today...

Page 150

... this temptation at all costs. **Obvious Rule** No. 78 Acknowledge that there are some relationships that are non-beneficial for both of you. You can't win them all. Nothing is irreversible, though; sometimes you may find yourself drastically altering and...

Page 151

... you, the director, to regulate. **Obvious Rule** No. 79 It helps to be a bit of an actor yourself. Often there's a need for diplomacy and bridge-building if potential differences develop between individual actors. Whatever you do, don't let them try to draw...

Page 152

... join in the stone throwing. **Obvious Rule** No. 80 Try never to make people look or feel stupid. You'll lose their trust. Sometimes though, privately, all an actor really wants is to discuss something they feel silly bringing up in front of the others....

Page 152

... silly about bringing up anything. **Obvious Rule** No. 81 A lot of acting is purely instinctive. Respect that. A lot of actors these days are highly educated, but there are still some who left school early and ever since have carried a slight inferiority...

Page 153

... regard these as ‘trigger’ images. **Obvious Rule** No. 82 Try not to demonstrate too much. It's a great temptation. Whenever possible, always allow the actor to dictate the running. As they work with you more and grow to trust you, they will be prepared...

Comedy

Page 154

... Discourage this at all costs. **Obvious Rule** No. 83 When directing comedy, don't whatever you do lose your nerve. I have seen cases where not just individual actors but an entire production appears to have panicked and abandoned all sense of truth. This...

Page 154

... encouraged the actors into excesses. **Obvious Rule** No. 84 Trust the script. Presumably you liked it enough at the read-

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Notes

Comedy

Page 154

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Page 154

... encouraged the actors into excesses. **Obvious Rule** No. 84 Trust the script. Presumably you liked it enough at the read-through, or why are you doing it? When directing my own work, as I've indicated, I make it a rule never to talk about the laughs and...

Page 154

... for it second time around. **Obvious Rule** No. 85 Concentrate on the truth of the scene. Let the comedy take care of itself. Besides, the plain fact is that in theatre, no two audiences are ever quite the same. Sometimes they vary so much that it's difficult...

Later days

Page 155

... of legitimate humour. Later days **Obvious Rule** No. 86 Run-throughs are helpful. As the rehearsal period draws to a close, plan to run sections of the play as often as possible: whole scenes, then whole acts and finally the whole play. A performer, particularly...

Page 156

... in place. FRATERNISING: A FOOTNOTE **Obvious Rule** No. 87 If you can't hold your liquor, never drink with actors. A small warning. There is always a temptation if the rehearsals are going well to want to become 'one of the lads'. Actors, especially younger...

The DSM

Page 157

... at the top. The DSM **Obvious Rule** No. 88 A good DSM is like gold. I have left one of the most important elements of a successful rehearsal period till last. The DSM (Deputy Stage Manager), especially in smaller-scale repertory theatres like the Stephen...

Page 158

... someone has to do it. **Obvious Rule** No. 89 Be prepared. The DSM is often the production's lifeline to the outside world and keeps the rest of the team informed as to production changes and updates. A rehearsal report is issued each day: 'The dining table...

Technicals

Page 158

... can save your life. Technicals **Obvious Rule** No. 90 The technical rehearsal is no time for surprises. Try and sort out as many of the technical matters as you possibly can before the technical rehearsal. Bludgeon your designer or production manager into...

Page 159

... given accurate rehearsal props. SOUND **Obvious Rule** No. 91 Introduce the sound as early as you can. Make friends with the sound people. Lighting must necessarily wait till the technical, but sound you can hear in advance and can even, if you have the...

Combined Ayckbourn “Obvious Rules” from his book “The Crafty Art of Playmaking”

The screenshot shows a search interface with a search bar containing 'Obvious rule'. Below the search bar, there are three main sections: 'Technicals', 'Previews', and 'Press night'. Each section contains a list of 'Obvious Rule' entries with their corresponding page numbers and brief descriptions.

Technicals

- Page 159
... given accurate rehearsal props. **SOUND Obvious Rule** No. 91 Introduce the sound as early as you can. Make friends with the sound people. Lighting must necessarily wait till the technical, but sound you can hear in advance and can even, if you have the....
- Page 160
... terrible if you do. **LIGHTING Obvious Rule** No. 92 Try and give a clear brief to the lighting designer. Make sure your lighting designer not only sees the run but that you talk through the whole play with them. Don't tell them how to do their job (they...)
- Page 160
... equipment to cover all contingencies. **Obvious Rule** No. 93 Do anything to make the transition from rehearsal room to the stage as gentle as possible. If you can get your actors near the stage for a quick run-through of the play prior to the tech, however...
- Page 161
... roughly going to be saying. **Obvious Rule** No. 94 Never be tempted to start re-rehearsing scenes during a technical. There are dozens of very expensive technical people and stage crew out there. To stop suddenly for an ad hoc rehearsal results in everyone...
- Page 162
... is still your faithful DSM. **Obvious Rule** No. 95 Pray your DSM is up to the job. Now, from their perch in the prompt corner or control box, their role changes. They will direct all systems via cue lights or spoken commands. If they are doing their job...
- Page 162
... to know you still care. **Obvious Rule** No. 96 Don't stop unless you have to. When the technical is under way, if nothing appears to be going wrong, let it run. There may be snags going on backstage, but if nobody calls a halt these might all be taken in...

Previews

- Page 164
... days in the rehearsal room. **Obvious Rule** No. 97 The first preview changes everything. If you are lucky your next time through the play will be the first preview. If you are unlucky, your first performance will also be your so-called press night. If you...
- Page 166
... the event. That's their job. **Obvious Rule** No. 98 Keep the company together. Arrange to meet regularly during the afternoons of previews even if there doesn't appear to be much to say and even if it's only for an hour. Often, the actors will have concerns...
- Page 166
... to you to arrange that. **Obvious Rule** No. 99 Encourage the actors to keep their innocence. It's about this time too, especially with comedy, that I find myself exhorting the company to keep their innocence. I liken the audience to kerb-crawlers cruising...

Press night

- Page 168
... part of me. Press night **Obvious Rule** No. 100 With critics you sometimes get more than you deserve, you sometimes get less than you deserve. You never ever get what you deserve. Theatre puts itself through an ordeal known as the press night, when as many...