

“If I give you a tool kit, I’m not telling you what a house should look like; I’m just telling you how to build the house”

A Conversation with David Ball

David Ball is the author of Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays. Since its publication in 1983, this 100-page book has sold more than 130,000 copies, has been used in countless theatre courses and by theater and film professionals around the country, and has become the go-to book for teaching script analysis. Next year marks the 35th anniversary of the book’s publication, and SIU Press is publishing a special 35th anniversary edition to celebrate.

Why did you write this book?

I saw that some of the best theater students did not know how to read a script they were working with. They read it the way they would read a novel, so all their great acting, directing, design, and playwriting skills were wasted. The same was true of many theater and film professionals: they too did not understand the script.

It’s like a chef in the kitchen not knowing where the ingredients are or are what they are for. A good chef understands every ingredient and how each one goes with every other one. So *Backwards and Forwards* is simply about how to see what’s actually in the script. It’s not a theory, not a secret way to look at plays. It’s simply saying, “Here’s what’s in the script. Make sure you see it and use it.” If you don’t, stay away from the stage and off the screen.

Why did you call the book *Backwards and Forwards*?

The title refers to two of the book’s techniques. “Forwards” is a method good playwrights use to hold audience attention and drive the play, well, forward. Backwards is the ultimate analysis technique: tracking the script’s events from the end back to the beginning.

Most drama literature classes consist of professors telling you their interpretations of plays. That practice is useful when the professor is good. But not even the best professor can do a legitimate interpretation without knowing how the play is crafted. And without knowing, you cannot stage it as well as you ought to.

What audience or audiences did you have in mind while writing *Backwards and Forwards*? Has it found a wider audience than you anticipated?

The book is for anybody who does theater or narrative film, anybody who goes to the theater, anybody who reads scripts, anyone who writes movie or play scripts, anyone who designs or directs or produces. That’s a broad audience. It’s by far the most heavily used text analysis book out there and has been since it was published. That’s because it’s for all those kinds of people.

Why did you choose Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the example script?

Most people are familiar with the play, and if they’re not they need to be. It’s textured and difficult enough to be a challenge, and many important things in *Hamlet* are almost always incorrectly interpreted. One example is the belief that “to be or not to be” is a soliloquy when in fact Hamlet knows he’s being spied on so he’s saying what he wants the spies to hear, not what he really feels or thinks.

You don't realize that detail unless you understand how the play was made—the structure of the play. Once you do, there's no way around it.

What to you is the primary purpose of play reading and analysis?

I'm not sure I would call it play analysis. The word *playwright* literally means "a person who makes plays." It's not "playwrite," it's "playwright," like a shipwright, like someone who makes and builds things. The book shows the reader the way to find out how the play is made. You have to start there, or the rest is futile. This structure is because plays have a requirement that no other form of literature has: to keep the audience wanting to pay unbroken attention. As an audience member, you can't put a play on stage down and come back to it later. Either you're interested or you start thinking about something else—or you walk out.

Can the method of play analysis you describe in *Backwards and Forwards* be used for all genres of plays? Are there limitations to this method?

Experimental plays pop up from time to time, and there are periods when people are writing in unusual kinds of structures (or nonstructures). *Backwards and Forwards* will help with these, even if only to show you what they have *not* done, so you know what you as playwright, performer, director, or designer have to somehow make up for to hold the audience's attention. For example, if someone writes a play with no "forwards" in it and forwards are the only things you know that hold the audience in their seats, what can you do instead to keep them there? That's a solvable problem, but only if you see what's missing, what has to be made up for. *Backwards and Forwards* shows you what's missing, so you can better work with even the least conventional kinds of plays.

But nearly all scripts of every kind—from the earliest Greek tragedies to today's TV and cinema—are built with the ingredients written about in *Backwards and Forwards*. They're a constant that have been there all the way through dramatic literature.

If you had to choose one thing from this book as being the most beneficial to readers, what do you think it would be?

You can't pick just one part. The book isn't a bag of tricks on how to read plays. It's like a symphony—every part works together.

For more than thirty years, people have made *Backwards and Forwards* one of the best-selling theater books and film books. And because it links the craft of a play to the play as literature, it's often at the top of the best-selling books on literary analysis. What makes it timeless and so attractive?

There's nothing more useful than tools, and this is the only book on script analysis that confines itself to tools. If I give you a tool kit, I'm not telling you what a house should look like; I'm just telling you how to build a house. And having a tool kit is always the first step not only in building houses but also in creating or reading scripts.

And there's this: the book is brief—96 pages. Explaining the building blocks takes no more than that. And in the practical world of teaching, students and professionals are far more likely to read, fully absorb, and master 96 practical, concise, and clear pages than they are to read other books less considerate of the reader's time.

Is there a particular impact you hope the book has had?

Theater is something you *do*, not merely read. When you're sloppy and uninformed about how to read a script, you're disrespecting and cheating yourself, the playwright, and the audience. If you have useful and effective ways to understand a script you will be far more likely to give the audience something that makes it worth their coming and sitting there for two or three hours, and paying for babysitters and parking. You have to understand why the writer wrote the script as she or he did. That's what *Backwards and Forwards* teaches.

Holding the audience in their seats, by which I mean holding their attention and their interest, is the single most important thing you must do in staging a play. If you do not understand such things as what I call a "forwards," or how one scene informs and drives a scene that follows, or the relationship between the actor and the skeleton of a character in the script, then you cannot maximize audience attention and interest. Result: needlessly weak theater.