

We Meet Again? How a Playwright's Knowledge of an Antecedent Genre Made Learning Screenwriting Possible (But Difficult)

Scott Sands

How does one write a play, or a screenplay? Responding to Pankaj Challa's instructional article about writing screenplays in the 2010 *Writing Research Annual*, Scott Sands' play explores, not just the features a writer has to learn in order to successfully engage with a writing task, but how writers make sense of such features when they encounter them in an unfamiliar kind of writing.

In-Venting
a play

AT RISE, PANKAJ is on the couch, typing feverishly at his computer. TONY enters

TONY

Done yet?

PANKAJ

What do you think?

TONY moves behind the couch and leans over PANKAJ's shoulder to see what he's writing

TONY

Nope.

A moment of stasis. Then, TONY walks around the couch and plops down next to PANKAJ

So what's the problem? TONY

What? PANKAJ

Why is it... TONY
gesturing at the computer

...taking so long? PANKAJ
indicating the ceiling

He's never written a screenplay before. TONY

Ah. *A moment of silence*

Isn't that why you're here? PANKAJ

Yes, Tony, that's why I'm here. TONY

Because you wrote a piece about screenwriting. PANKAJ

Mmm hmm. TONY

In the *Writing Research Annual*. PANKAJ

Yes. TONY

So help him out. Show him what to do. PANKAJ

You help him out. You've written screenplays before. TONY

Yes. PANKAJ

And you're a playwright.

TONY

Wrote one of the masterpieces of the American theatre.

PANKAJ

Two of them.

TONY

What?

PANKAJ

Technically, *Angels in America* is two plays—*Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*.

TONY

Oh. Yeah. I guess that's true.

PANKAJ returns to writing. After a moment

TONY

Pankaj?

PANKAJ

Yeah.

TONY

How do you spell “Millennium”?

PANKAJ

For crying out loud, Tony—

TONY

—because I can't remember. Or more precisely, I don't know.

PANKAJ

Oh, great. Here it comes.

TONY

You see, Pankaj, I'm not real.

PANKAJ

Tony...

TONY

Tony Kushner is real.

PANKAJ

Tony...

TONY

Heck, I probably wouldn't mind being him.

Mmm hmm. PANKAJ

But I'm not Tony Kushner. TONY

Really. PANKAJ

I'm a figment of... TONY
jerking his head toward the sky

...his imagination. PANKAJ

So am I, Tony. TONY

Really, I'm just a part of him. PANKAJ

Me too. TONY

I don't know anything he doesn't—what? PANKAJ

I said, "Me too." TONY

You too what? PANKAJ

I'm a figment of... TONY
pointing at the sky

...his imagination, too. TONY

Huh? PANKAJ

I'm not real either. We're both imaginary. TONY

Oh. PANKAJ

Yup. PANKAJ

Wait. TONY

What? PANKAJ

That's not entirely true. TONY

What? No. Tony— PANKAJ

He's met you. He knows you. Hell, he took a class with you. TONY

That's true. PANKAJ

Yup. TONY

Except for one thing. PANKAJ

What's that? TONY

Scott met the real Pankaj. Took a class with the actual Mr. Challa. Doesn't actually know him. In fact, usually sat on the opposite end of the seminar table from him in class, and rarely spoke to him. PANKAJ

But his office was across the hall from yours. TONY

Tony? PANKAJ

Yes? TONY

PANKAJ
at the top of his lungs
I AM NOT THE REAL PANKAJ CHALLA! I'M A FIGMENT, AN IMAGINARY CONSTRUCT. GET THAT THROUGH YOUR HEAD BEFORE MINE EXPLODES!

TONY

rubbing his head

Geez. No need to yell. Now I need an aspirin.

TONY exits into the kitchen. PANKAJ tries to write again. After writing and deleting a few lines, he gives up, picks up the remote, and switches on the TV

AARON

coming from upstairs

Jesus, what the hell is happening down here?

PANKAJ

Nothing.

AARON

Well whatever “nothing” was, it woke me up.

PANKAJ

Something should. Do all writers sleep until noon every day?

AARON

What’s your problem?

PANKAJ points angrily at the ceiling, grabs his laptop, and begins to write again.

AARON

Oh.

AARON sits on the couch. He idly picks up the remote and begins flipping through channels. TONY enters from the kitchen with a carton of orange juice)

TONY

Hey—my favorite show!

AARON

You like *The West Wing*?

TONY

Yeah! Martin Sheen kicks ass!

AARON

Isn’t he like, a hundred years old?

TONY

Why don’t you ask him?

AARON

Ask him? I've never met him.

TONY

Aaron Sorkin has never met Martin Sheen. Right.

PANKAJ angrily slams down the screen of his laptop and puts it aside.

PANKAJ

Tony.

TONY

Yeah?

PANKAJ

Are you the real Tony Kushner?

TONY

We've been through this. I'm a figment. A construct.

PANKAJ

So if you aren't the real Tony Kushner, what makes you think he's the real Aaron Sorkin?

TONY

Oh.

PANKAJ

None of us are real. We're all constructs.

AARON

So why are we here?

PANKAJ picks up the laptop.

PANKAJ

This is why we're here.

TONY

Yeah! You're writing a screenplay!

PANKAJ

We're writing a screenplay. All of us. Together.

AARON

Actually, isn't...

indicating the ceiling

...he writing a screenplay?

PANKAJ

Yes, he's writing a screenplay. And we're helping him.

AARON

Okay. But you just said that we're imaginary. And isn't it his imagination doing the imagining?

PANKAJ

Yes.

TONY

to AARON

Wait—I think I know what you're saying. If we're part of his imagination, then nobody's helping him do anything. He's doing it all by himself.

AARON

Exactly.

TONY

Uh oh.

AARON

What?

TONY

The Myth of the Individual.

PANKAJ

Not this again.

AARON

Individuality is not a myth.

TONY

That's not what I mean.

PANKAJ

rising and crossing to the kitchen

Now I need an aspirin.

PANKAJ exits into the kitchen

TONY

The Myth of the Individual is a concept I wrote about back in the '90s.

AARON

You wrote about it?

TONY

Yeah, yeah, you know what I mean.

PANKAJ

offstage

Ask him what the Myth of the Individual is. That'll be fun.

AARON

Okay, I'll bite. What exactly is the Myth of the Individual? Indiana Jones' next adventure?

TONY

Ha. The Myth of the Individual is the belief that people stand on their own, having original thoughts, accomplishing individual goals, and generally, being islands unto themselves.

AARON

So...?

TONY

So Scott isn't writing this thing himself.

AARON

He isn't?

PANKAJ

entering from the kitchen with a bottle of aspirin.

Nope. We're helping him.

AARON

But we're figments of his imagination.

TONY

We are.

AARON

So isn't he helping himself? I mean if we're not us, but we're him, and we're helping him, isn't he just...talking to himself?

TONY

Sort of.

AARON

My head hurts.

PANKAJ tosses AARON the bottle of aspirin. AARON opens it, upends the bottle over his mouth, and chews the several aspirin that make their way into his mouth

Whoa. Easy there.

TONY

Don't worry. This isn't really happening.

PANKAJ
to TONY

Where do ideas come from?

AARON
to AARON

You're kidding me.

PANKAJ

No he's not.

TONY

Just humor me.

AARON

I know you don't want me to say individual genius.

PANKAJ

He's on to you, Tony.

TONY
to PANKAJ

Shut it.

to AARON

So what do I want you to say?

AARON

I don't know.

TONY

Yes you do.

AARON
exasperated

That creativity is a collaborative process.

TONY

And is it?

AARON

What kind of a question is that?

PANKAJ

Get to the point, Tony.

TONY

Come on, Aaron. Is creativity a collaborative process?

PANKAJ

to TONY, indicating AARON

Wow. I actually think he might hit you.

AARON

No! Creativity is an individual trait! Three movies and three TV series, and I still gotta put up with this?

mockingly

Theatre is a collaborative endeavor, you can't have a play without actors and technical staff, everyone is influenced by other people...yadda yadda yadda.

picking up the laptop and opening it

At the end of the day, someone's actually gotta do the creating.

AARON begins to type furiously. After a few moments of nothing but AARON typing

PANKAJ

Hey Aaron.

AARON

barely under control

What?

PANKAJ

How did you learn to use that computer?

AARON

Oh crap, not you, too.

PANKAJ

Did you invent the computer?

AARON

What is wrong with you? No, I didn't invent the computer!

TONY

So how did you know how to use one?

AARON

I did what anybody does when they get a computer. I opened it up, messed around with it, tried to figure out what various buttons did, where to plug stuff in...

TONY

Okay. But how did you know where to start?

AARON

What?

TONY

You got a computer. You opened it up, and you didn't eat it. You didn't use it as a coaster. You didn't introduce it to your parents and then take it to a movie.

PANKAJ

He gets the point, Tony.

AARON

Actually, I have no clue what you're talking about.

TONY

Yes you do.

AARON

Wanna bet?

PANKAJ

The first time you saw a computer. The very first time. You knew without having to be told that there were certain things you should do to it...

TONY

...like plug it in...

PANKAJ

...and certain things you shouldn't do to it...

TONY

...like stick it in the freezer next to the hamburger.

PANKAJ

Tony...

TONY

What? It's true, isn't it?

AARON

Yeah, I did know that. But everybody knows that.

TONY

But how? How did you know where to start?

AARON

I just did. Without thinking about it.

PANKAJ

There's more to it than that.

AARON

I know, but...

TONY

Don't tell me that it takes an act of individual genius to operate a computer.

PANKAJ

I don't know. Just the other day, I figured out how to add page numbers in Microsoft Word. I felt pretty smart then.

AARON has picked up the laptop, and is turning it around, examining every surface carefully

TONY

to PANKAJ

Are you for real?

PANKAJ

You know I'm not.

AARON

The keyboard...

TONY

to PANKAJ

Shut up, you.

AARON

The keyboard is like a typewriter. It has all the same keys...

PANKAJ

Make me.

TONY

You asked for it.

TONY grapples with PANKAJ, and the two begin to wrestle

AARON

...and the monitor, it's...well it's a monitor. But it's a lot like a TV screen, or a window. You look at stuff through a TV screen...

TONY
to PANKAJ

Ow! No hair-pulling!

AARON

...you look at stuff through a window...

PANKAJ
to AARON

Hey, Mike Tyson—no biting!

AARON

...and you look at stuff through a monitor.

TONY

Whoa—you did not just try to pick my nose!

AARON

Guys...

PANKAJ

I give up! I give up! Lemme go!

AARON

Guys...

TONY

I win!

AARON

Guys!

TONY

Geez, what is it with you two and yelling? I'm right here.

AARON

I've figured it out.

PANKAJ

Figured what out?

AARON

How to operate a computer.

TONY

Took you that long, did it?

PANKAJ

Shut up, Tony.

to AARON

What'd you find out, Aaron?

AARON

I knew how to use a computer because I'd seen every part of it somewhere else. The keyboard isn't all that different from the typewriter my Dad used when I was a kid. The monitor is like a TV screen, or a window. What else are you going to do but look at it?

TONY

Lick it?

PANKAJ

Tony! That's gross!

TONY

What? That's what my cat does.

PANKAJ

Your cat likes to chase cars on the freeway. Does that mean you're going to run down I-55 after the next Chevy you see?

AARON

Guys!

PANKAJ

Oh. Sorry. Continue.

AARON

I'm done.

TONY

Aww, c'mon Aaron...

AARON

No, I mean my explanation is done. I figured out how to use a computer by comparing all of the parts to things I already had experience with. Sure, they weren't the same, but they weren't that different, either.

TONY

Wait a minute—are you telling me that you intuited how to use a computer?

AARON

No. Well, sort of. Computers are designed to make sense. I sort of trusted in that.

TONY

Oh crap.

PANKAJ

What?

TONY

It's only a half step from intuition to creative genius. To the Myth of the Individual.

AARON

No it isn't.

TONY

It isn't?

AARON

Design is collaborative.

PANKAJ

Really?

AARON

Yeah. People design things so that using those things make sense to someone else.

TONY

Audience awareness.

AARON

Yeah. Among other things.

PANKAJ

Hold on—how's this going to help Scott?

AARON

It already has.

PANKAJ

Um...it has?

TONY

Screenplays are designed to make sense. And so are plays.

PANKAJ

But they aren't the same thing.

AARON

No. But since Scott has written a play, he has an idea where to start.

PANKAJ

Okay.

TONY

You OK, Pankaj?

PANKAJ

Scott doesn't need me anymore.

AARON

Sure he does.

TONY

He read your example in the *Writing Research Annual*.

PANKAJ

That's it? All he has to do is read an example I wrote, and he can write a screenplay?

AARON

He knows where your office is.

PANKAJ

Oh, so he really needs the real me, is that what you're saying?

TONY

Pankaj...

PANKAJ

Don't "Pankaj" me! What the heck am I here for if Scott doesn't need me?

AARON

He does need you. He needs to write.

TONY

And read. And research.

AARON

And part of that research is talking to you.

TONY

And reading what you've written.

AARON

And writing plays.

TONY

And reading plays.

PANKAJ

And watching plays, and playing around, and talking and reading and doing, blah blah blah. I get it.

TONY

Do you?

PANKAJ

What the hell kind of question is that?

AARON

Pankaj, why are you here? I mean, what made Scott imagine you in the first place?

PANKAJ

He wanted to write a screenplay. Thought it would be easy.

TONY

And he was wrong.

PANKAJ

Well...yeah. But he saw my article in the *Annual*. And he read it.

AARON

And that got him thinking.

TONY

And here you are.

PANKAJ

Here I am.

AARON

He's trying to write a screenplay. And failing.

TONY

crossing to pick up the laptop

And each time he fails, he tries something new.

AARON

Reads another screenplay.

TONY

Reads another play. Talks to people.

AARON

Writes. Watches movies. And gets better.

PANKAJ

So he's just practicing?

AARON

No, he's trying.

And failing. TONY

And trying. AARON

And failing again. TONY

And you... AARON

TONY
handing PANKAJ the laptop
...are the questions he asks in between the trying.

This is weird. PANKAJ

Yeah. It is. AARON

But it isn't entirely unfamiliar to you. TONY

No, it's not. PANKAJ

So start there. AARON

And we'll help. TONY
PANKAJ sits down, opens the laptop, and begins to type, with AARON and TONY watching intently. Blackout.



Scott Sands is a doctoral student in English Studies at ISU with research and teaching interests in writing center work, writing and tutoring pedagogy, metacognition, creative writing, and assessment. He loves texts that call attention to themselves as artifacts, including especially the work of Charlie Kaufman and Tony Kushner. As a teacher, scholar, and person, Scott values three things above all else: confidence, persistence, and reciprocity.