

**Chris Mead. *Wondrous Strange: Seven Brief Thoughts on New Plays*.
Sydney: Currency Press, 2022. 176 pages.
AUS\$29.99.
ISBN: 9781760627539 (Paperback).**

In this short Currency title, a collection of seven essays or “thoughts” on playmaking, Chris Mead states in his introduction that he is offering a ruminative alternative to “how-to” playwriting guides that err toward the reductive, the formulaic, and the conservative. “The following essays,” he explains, “are an attempt to chart a course between the chaos of competing theories and divergent practices, and oversimplifications of some how-to guides” (xiv).

With this in mind, I ploughed into the book with some relish, keen to see what stylistic approaches or dramaturgical insights Mead has to offer me as both playwright and teacher of neophyte (undergraduate), and early career, and established (postgraduate) playwrights and dramaturgs. He has one of the best brains in the business, and one-on-one conversations with him are always erudite and illuminating. I’ve found him to be one of those theatrical minds whose offers to crack open a text in development tend toward distilled nuggets of wisdom rather than screeds or pages of notes. Conversations with colleagues who’ve worked more formally with him in a dramaturgical relationship than I have confirm this sense. He’ll offer the two or three essentials that really break things open for you. The structure of this book mirrors that distilled wisdom-insight model.

There were a couple of initial wobbles for me in the framing of this as a guidebook. I wasn’t sure which of the two roles, playwright or teacher, the work was aimed at as I ventured into the first essay or two. “Bear with me,” he exhorts at the end of his introductory essay, “Please stay curious.”

Thought One, “The rules: What’s a playwright to do?” is one of the two essays in the book I will slip straight into my undergrad playwriting and dramaturgy course. It offers a historical overview, as most of the essays do in relation to their key focal topic—in this case an overview of those who’ve attempted to offer theoretical approaches or rules-based formulae to narrative structure for the stage. He ranges from Aristotle to Freytag to post-dramatic rule-breaker of Aristotelian orthodoxy, Hans-Thies Lehmann, concluding ultimately that there are “rules” out there if you want them, but we’re well advised to distrust them. Aristotle’s causal chain of narrative events, Mead avers, was “never intended as a how-to guide” (7) and whilst Freytag converted Aristotle’s structural arc into an influential rise-and-fall pyramid in the 1800s that the screen industry in particular is still very much wedded to, there is more gold to strike in a skilful—a knowledgeable—repudiation of these “rules” than a slavish adherence to them. I’ve found that students in my playwriting classes who come from screen backgrounds are those most inclined to demand formulaic approaches to writing for the stage from me. I offer them Aristotle and Freytag, but then challenge them to depart from them at will, and this essay offers similar advice in a much more fully scaffolded context that will assist me greatly in the classroom.

The other essay I’ll add to my reading lists without hesitation is Thought Five, “Dramaturgy: An ample margin.” It’s a useful synthesis of the rise of dramaturgy from its advent with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s 1767 employment at the Hamburg theatre and his inculcation as company critic, curator and all-round assigner of grand ideals and vision to the development of a new, nationalist German theatre. Scholarly books on dramaturgy, its history and its contemporary proliferation abound (Mary Luckhurst, Katelin Transcenyi, Cathy Turner, and Synne Berndt are names that spring immediately to mind in this regard), but this essay condenses the history of dramaturgy as a discrete discipline in a pithy manner, framing it within

Mead's own observed, practical experience of it having "come in from the margins" over the past 30 years. There is an entertaining anecdote describing the disdain with which Mead's British mentors viewed dramaturgy in the late 1990s, with one (unnamed) artistic director referring to it as "that German virus" (73). For students new to the term, Mead's extended description of the role is gold. "As it has been articulated to me," he suggests,

a dramaturg is: Unnecessary; a meddler; historically invisible; a writer and researcher, often of essays, but for context only; a stooge, flunky or bouncer for the management; a luxury; someone there just to take out the trash; an institutional traffic light (mostly amber, tending red); Stalin's blue editing pencil; a nutty professor; mere marginalia; Pandarus, Pangloss and Polonius rolled into one pompous mess; a keeper of the stone tablets; a bureaucrat; a dark magus, practicing only behind closed doors; or a word technician. (84–85)

He also offers more concrete indications of what the role of the formal company or freelance dramaturg can expect to include:

producer, festival director, programmer, curator of experiences across and through an institution, writer of programming and marketing material, researcher, stage manager, in-house critic, literary manager, leader of Q&As, workshop scribe, somatic witness, cultural advisor, dialogue partner, outside eye, new play and playwright development specialist, [and, quoting Bojana Kunst] "mentor, friend, compass, memory, fellow traveller, mediator, psychologist." (86–87)

This is as robust a round-up of two-hour seminar discussions I hold with new students as I'm likely to find anywhere, and I will deploy it with gratitude accordingly.

Others of the essays are less clearly pitched at pedagogy or classroom teaching and might offer more service to experienced, postgraduate writing students. These include several of the "thoughts" that follow the structure of the two I have outlined in detail here: they begin with a provocation or germinating thought, then offer a historical overview of their nominated area of focus before concluding that there are no rules, really; no hard-and-fast approaches to what makes a play good or "gooder" (Thought Two); what classical structures underpin narrative and story (Thought Three); or how to approach character (Thought Four). They call on the playwright to resist rule-based simplicity and ruminate a bit more deeply on what it is that the individual idea requires. Thought Four examines the purpose of psychology and argues compellingly for the centrality of character—and of the central protagonist's psychological journey—as sitting at the heart of a play, the post-dramatic turn notwithstanding, before concluding again with a caveat against an overreliance on formula and certainty: "Rather than accepting normative behaviours, we must learn to embrace 'character' as stress, contradiction and opportunity. Such fault lines, zones and traces are the places of drama, thresholds of friction, dissonance, and ingenuity" (71). This provocation spoke to me in constructive, challenging ways. The exhortation is, as ever, to strive for the unexpected, the uneasy and the unpredictable whilst making some endeavour to at least know the "rules" you're being urged to break.

The book concludes with two more elliptical, philosophical essays that didn't engage me as directly, I have to confess, as those that preceded them, though they do offer food for thought in the "hey—did you know that . . .?" mode. Thought Six examines the links between storytelling and neuroscience, offering some emerging scientific rumination on what seeing plays and reading novels can do to our plastic brain—to make us see and appreciate complexity, for example. For those neoliberal economists needing a justification for the value and function

of the arts beyond “mere” aesthetic pleasure, or maybe for on-side arts education policymakers there’s an argument in favour of storytelling’s capacity to build empathy and effect social change on offer here. Thought Seven offers a personal, abstract rumination on clouds and their value to Mead as a metaphor for “fathoming dynamic change over time” (121)—a reminder that the artform is ever-changing and rightfully resistant to those theories and formulae that, as Mead warned in his introduction, are not going to provide deft or definitive how-to recipes.

“Embrace the complexity” is the last note Mead leaves us with, and this idiosyncratic book offers a range of entry points into doing exactly that.

Stephen Carleton, University of Queensland