

well made play

From "The Cambridge Guide to Theatre"

A translation of the French *pièce bien faite*, the well made play was first codified by [Eugène Scribe](#) (1791-1861). Since he (with assorted collaborators) wrote some 400 plays, he had little time for such frivolities as theory. By the mid-19th century, when the term came into common use, it was already derogatory, and yet its formulae have moulded some 150 years of Western drama.

The well made play is skilfully crafted to arouse suspense. An outgrowth of the comedy of intrigue, its action is propelled through a concatenation of causally related events. Beginning with a detailed, faintly disguised exposition, it gathers momentum through complications and crises, with each act closing on a climactic curtain. A series of perils for the protagonist leads to the revelation of a secret in an obligatory scene - named and analysed by the French critic [Francisque Sarcey](#) some half-century after Scribe codified the practice. The well made play then closes swiftly in a logical and plausible resolution, which implicitly accepts the ethic of the audience, even when the author's spokesman, the *raisonneur*, does not baldly voice it. Technically, the well made play thrives on fortuitous entrances and exits, mistaken identity and quid pro quo.

Scribe's structural influence is everywhere evident in 19th-century France - in [Sardou](#), [Augier](#), [Dumas fils](#), [Labiche](#), [Feydeau](#) - and in those **copyright**-free days, the formula swiftly crossed the English Channel and is seen in plays by [Bulwer Lytton](#), [Tom Taylor](#) and [T.W. Robertson](#), not to mention [Henry James](#) and [Henrik Ibsen](#). Even [Shaw](#), who fulminated against 'Sardoodledom', manipulated the formula in both his Pleasant and his Unpleasant Plays, and its carpentry has been learned by craftsmen as various as [Lillian Hellman](#), [Terence Rattigan](#), [Jean Anouilh](#) and Harvey Fierstein. Shaw's dismissal of the obligatory scene has been widely quoted: 'Once this scene was invented, nothing remained for the author to do except to prepare for it in a first act, and to use up its backwash in a third.' Yet that 'nothing' took considerable doing on the part of playwrights. [RC](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Cambridge Guide to Theatre, © Cambridge University Press 2000

Persistent URL to this entry: http://www.credoreference.com/entry/cupthea/well_made_play

APA

[well made play](#). (2000). In *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Retrieved from http://www.credoreference.com/entry/cupthea/well_made_play

Chicago

The Cambridge Guide to Theatre, s.v. "[well made play](#)," accessed May 17, 2012, http://www.credoreference.com/entry/cupthea/well_made_play

Harvard

'[well made play](#)' 2000, in *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, viewed 17 May 2012, <from http://www.credoreference.com/entry/cupthea/well_made_play>

MLA

"[well made play](#)." *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. *Credo Reference*. Web. 17 May 2012.