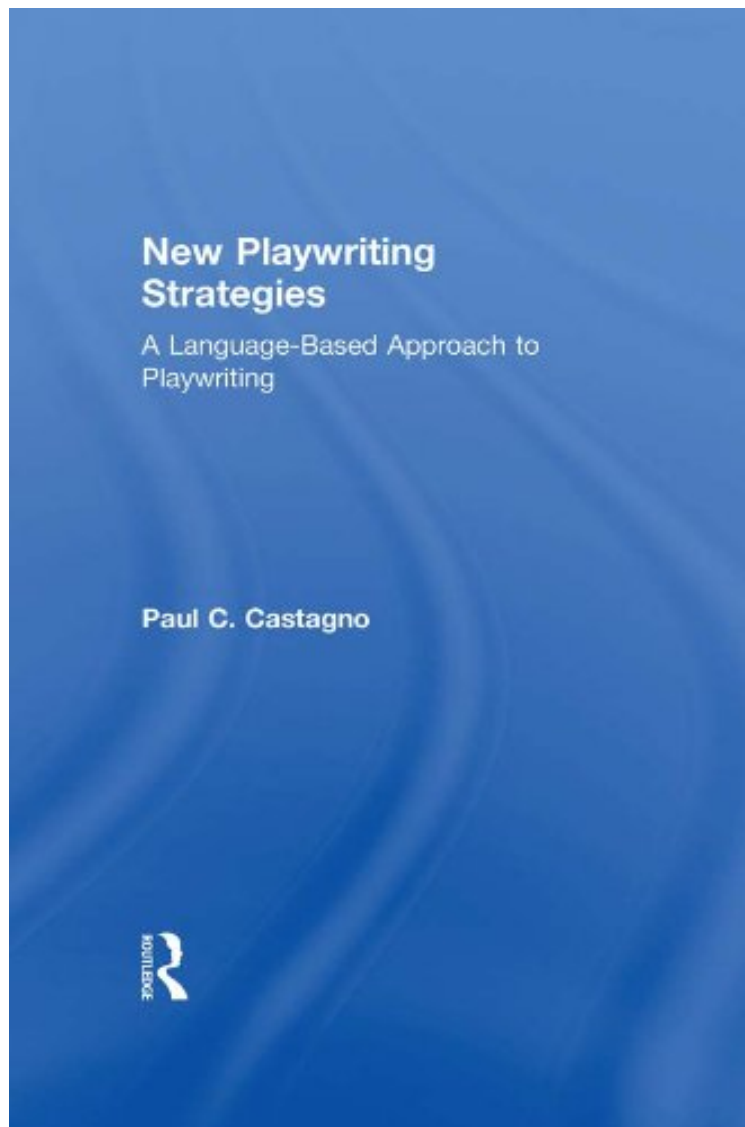


(Library ebook) New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting (Theatre Arts Book)

## New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting (Theatre Arts Book)

*Paul C. Castagno*

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**Paul C. Castagno : New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting (Theatre Arts Book)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting (Theatre Arts Book):

30 of 33 people found the following review helpful. A necessary but mediocre bookBy Matthew CheneyI have completely mixed feelings about this book. Part of me wants to celebrate anyone who brings more attention to writers

such as Mac Wellman, Len Jenkin, and Suzan-Lori Parks -- some of the most exciting playwrights in America -- but another part of me is deeply uncomfortable with the clunky, jargon-filled sentences and often obtuse ideas herein. The best element of this book is the exercises sprinkled through each chapter. In fact, it's tempting to say: Get the book for the exercises, read nothing else. They won't make you a great playwright, but they will get you thinking about the possibilities of the theatre in ways that no other handbook will. There are some good ideas within the text itself, too, but there are far more ideas which are either unnecessarily "academic" or so reductive as to be humorous. Castagno doesn't seem to understand that the theatre is a fundamentally pragmatic art form -- he ends up trying to explain far too many things which are self-evident if you don't view them through the distorting lens of postmodern literary and cultural theory. Why do Jenkin and Wellman, for instance, use various levels of language? Not because they're trying to prove a theory of Bakhtin's, but rather because it's fun. Anyone who has seen a good production of a Len Jenkin play knows that it is first and foremost a lot of fun. Castagno is like an analyzer of comedy who is more interested in trying to explain how jokes work than in simply enjoying that they do. The fundamental premise of the book is, in many ways, false. These are not new strategies -- most are variations on ancient strategies, and the most radical can be traced back to the early modernists (Gertrude Stein's plays are more radical than any mentioned in the book) -- the plays mentioned are, rather, new manifestations of strategies which have been around for quite a while. The idea that the writers discussed are the theatrical version of the Language Poets is also flawed -- though Wellman and others certainly value language and use it in a different way from more traditional playwrights, there are so many other elements to even the most basic theatrical production that "language playwrights" is a misnomer. For someone who proclaims to know so much about "new" strategies, Castagno seems amazingly ignorant of a lot of current theatre -- the playwrights he discusses are all ones he apparently met at a conference. For a book such as this to ignore the techniques of writers like David Greenspan and Erik Ehn, to mention only two, is a tremendous shortcoming. Another problem is Castagno's strong desire to apparently create rules and guidelines for what is or isn't "new", which leads him to miss the most interesting thing about contemporary theatre: the grey areas. Writers use whatever techniques meet their needs, and this has led "traditional" writers to try various innovative techniques and writers known as "experimental" to write plays which are more or less traditional. In his haste to label and box the works he discusses, Castagno frequently simplifies magnificently complex writings. At the moment, this is the only book which really looks at playwrighting from a perspective other than the tired and cliched tenets of what Mac Wellman calls "geezer theatre". I hope that more books for playwrights will explore innovative writing techniques with a bit more subtlety and nuance than this book achieves, but for the moment this is all there is. With any luck, some actual playwrights will soon decide to publish their own books. Perhaps the best thing to do right now is not to read this book, but rather to read the plays themselves.

8 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Useful but Slanted  
By Kevin L. Nienstiel  
Okay, let's clarify the title. "New Playwriting Strategies" does not mean "New Strategies for Playwriting." It means strategies for what author Paul C. Castagno calls "New Playwriting." What an awful name. Like "New Math," "New Left," and "New Jersey," it's a title that will quickly age and become its own worst parody. Unfortunately, the techniques described in this book risk following the same path. Castagno starts with an overview of the philosophy of the Russian Formalist critics, and goes into how the writings of the playwrights he profiles have supported this philosophy. Then he tells the reader to imitate this pattern. This is putting the cart before the horse--criticism follows literature, not vice versa. An author seeking to emulate a critic's view of what literature should be is bound to create a ho-hum piece. The author also spends a lot of time on an armload of technical terms introduced early in the book. I fear for this kind of by-the-numbers writing, as it will inevitably produce a dispirited final product. And why must the same narrow handful of playwrights get the nod for use as examples? Len Jenkin and Mac Wellman in particular keep coming up often. What's the deal with this near-religious fervor for such a small number of writers? On the other hand, the book is broken up with a few useful exercises, which shift the emphasis from the theories Castagno wants to propound, into the arena of practice. Most of the exercises won't produce anything that will actually be useful in your play, but they'll help you cultivate a creative mindset outside the commercial realism favored by too many. The strategies in this book aren't actually new. Many were used by classical greats like Shakespeare and Sophocles, and they enjoyed a renewed popularity in the 20th century, due in part to the late writings of August Strindberg. However, they're not widely used in America, and perhaps this book will give some of them the better airing they deserve. You'll have to work around Castagno's demeaning attitude to playwrights who don't use the techniques he espouses. His condescension to realism, to integrated characters, and to linear narrative are almost self-parodying. Many good playwrights pick and choose, sometimes going more realistic and sometimes less, and that includes many of the playwrights Castagno favors in this book. This is not the best possible book on the playwriting techniques described herein. However, it's the only one out there right now. Most of the playwrights who use the style Castagno describes eschew writing books of theory, so it may be a while before a better book comes out. Until then, using this book with a clear head and careful hand will help break down the walls that may surround you as they surround most of us.

9 of 11 people found the following review helpful. An important new approach to playwriting  
By David A. Crespy  
For those who are interested in exploring the technique of the language playwrights, Len Jenkin, Mac Wellman, Constance Congdon, Suzan Lori-Parks, and Eric Overmeyer, Paul Castagno's book offers a hands-on, informative approach that

is useful to working playwrights and to dramaturgs who work with new forms of playwriting. Prof. Castagno bases his technique on important theoretical approaches (using the ideas of thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Russian Formalists) that inform the work of these new playwrights. I am currently using this book in my graduate seminar in playwriting, and my students are using the language-based model that Castagno has developed to create some very interesting and exciting new plays. One of the more interesting aspects of the book is Castagno's expertise in the field of commedia, which he brilliantly ties into the post-modern formalist technique of writers like Len Jenkin, who subvert archetypal characters and stage figures in their plays. In a field that is dominated by cookie-cutter "how-to-write-your-play" texts, *New Playwriting Strategies* offers a refreshing, subversive, and exciting new approach to writing plays. For those who are interested in adding more dramaturgical tools to their dramatic technique, I highly recommend this text.

*New Playwriting Strategies* offers a fresh and dynamic approach to playwriting that will be welcomed by teachers and aspiring playwrights alike.

"Unique in its genre...goes far beyond [a] useful study...recommended enthusiastically....."-Choice, April 2002  
"*New Playwriting Strategies* is a lively dramaturgical gesture that not only blows cobwebs off the existing contemporary notions of what constitutes a stageplay, but also chronicles the seismic shift in playwriting over the past two decades in the United States. This language-based approach to playwriting offers a rigorous collection of writing exercises that will challenge playwrights at a formative and advanced stage to discover new creative strategies and forms for theatrical expression.."-Mark Bly, Chair of the Playwriting Program, Yale School of Drama  
"The new school of playwriting needs a new poetics, and Paul Castagno provides it in *New Playwriting Strategies*, a text that is lucid, intelligent, and, above all, practical. He offers an insightful analysis of the work of today's most inventive dramatists, creates a critical vocabulary to illuminate their work, and provides clear and fun exercises. Truly an indispensable book--not just for playwrights, but directors, designers, and critics, as well."-David Rush, author of *Police Deaf Near Far* and *Head of Playwriting*, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale  
About the Author Paul C. Castagno is Professor of Theatre at UNC-Wilmington where he served as founding chair of the Department of Theatre. He formerly served as Director and Head of M.A. Programs of the School of Theater at Ohio University, and headed the MFA Playwriting/Dramaturgy Programs at University of Alabama. He teaches playwriting, dramatic literature and directs, and has published books and/or articles on playwriting and commedia dell'arte.