



PGC
WOMEN'S
CAUCUS
NEWSLETTER

Reflection Piece:
“28 Plays Later”

By Trudee Romanek



The notice taunted me from the “Opportunities” section of Nightwood Theatre’s newsletter: “Stretch your writing muscles... and write a play every day in February.” Um, what? I read it twice to be sure I hadn’t misunderstood and then, intrigued, I clicked the link.

I’d never heard of *28 Plays Later* or The Literal Challenge group that hosts it. In a nutshell, *28 Plays Later* involves writers receiving an emailed brief or prompt each day and, within 36 hours, submitting a new, complete play of any length. Writers can follow the brief or write some other play instead, as long as it’s new. Participation is free, with donations welcomed.

I’d taken on 24-hour playwriting contests before, but I’d never attempted it two days in a row let alone for four weeks. It seemed impossible to do that and still tend to my freelance gigs, podcast, family, and household stuff. But, said an inner voice, maybe I was making excuses. The prospect of pushing myself did have a crazy sort of appeal. If I didn’t do it, I might miss out on something that could change my whole artistic practice. My famous stubbornness, I reasoned, had the potential to carry me to the end. Besides, there was zero risk, meaning I could bail guiltfree at any time. So, I checked my schedule and took the plunge.

It turns out I’m not the only nut willing to take on such a thing. In this, its eighth year, 964 writers signed up from 41 different countries. Of those writers, 53 were Canadian. Once registered, I worried about life throwing curveballs that might derail me. I mean, it’s a whole month! What excellent training, though, for those times when life does get in the way of making art. I decided to focus my excited anticipation of reaching the end into fuel for doing the work to get there.

I wondered about who (if anyone) to tell. Would daily Facebook posts make me more accountable or just irritate people? I also pulled all of the old, unused prompts I’d accumulated into one file in case I needed inspiration.

And then it was February 1. All those registered were invited to join a Zoom call before the first brief arrived. It gave us a chance to ask questions, share our fears, and just generally feel that we weren’t alone in this. As usual, I felt intimidated meeting the other writers, but they were a friendly, quirky bunch, speaking with, oh, so many accents. We

all signed off shortly before the official start — 10 pm UK time, but 5 pm for those of us in Ontario — and the fun began!

Week 1

The first email encouraged us, throughout the whole challenge, to write about things we might not otherwise tackle; things we maybe wouldn't want to share with anyone. (They promised to merely skim submissions to be sure they met the “complete” criteria, and would delete all submissions once the challenge was over.) The play brief itself offered a lot of options, which mostly boiled down to exploring elements of my life here and now. It also suggested a number of limiting factors to incorporate or ignore. I brainstormed a few topics that had grabbed my attention hard that day and chose one with theatrical potential. Like an eager beaver, I jumped in, freewriting about the idea itself and the ideas it conjured up, then sifting through those to find which ones might lead me further.

Day 1's brief was a gift because it helped me find a new, unconventional way into a play I'd been thinking about writing for a while. Maybe my familiarity with the topic is why I had that

About TLC

The Literal Challenge (TLC) is a small social enterprise based in the UK that supports a growing community of writers from novice to professional. In addition to 28 Plays Later, TLC also runs a thirty-day short-story challenge in June called Like the Prose, and Scriptly Writing, their fourteen-day October screenplay challenge. All three are free, though there are ways to support the work of the dedicated unpaid volunteers who run these events: through donation, the purchase of TLC merchandise, and by registering for the “timed” route rather than the more forgiving “simile” route that I chose. The timed route requires each participant to put an amount of their choosing into a virtual “pot.” From that pot, 25% is used to cover admin fees. Writers on that route who complete the challenge get their contribution back, as well as a portion of the money from those who contributed to the pot but did not complete, in proportion to what each threw in originally. TLC also offers dramaturgical and other services as well as writing residencies in the south of Spain. TheLiteralChallenge.com



The Literal Challenge

first play submitted by 5:30 pm the next day. I wanted to submit each play before the next brief arrived, to minimize the need to juggle two plays at once. It turns out that was a lofty goal.

That first week was one of discovery and I took a few wrong turns before finding my rhythm. I was struck by the new, expansive freedom of writing a play just for me — not because it was marketable or edgy, or for any other reason. I was motivated by entirely different reasons and inspirations than I usually would be. It was so freeing to know that it didn't matter. This level of creativity was something I'd never experienced before.

By midweek I'd made myself a short check list of things like stakes, conflict, want versus need, and so on to consider as I developed each idea. That would keep me from going too far down a dead-end road as I explored. By day four, I'd settled into a routine — make notes on the new brief in the evening; then sleep; then morning tea, exercise, and shower; then to my desk to start in on the notes from the previous evening. I was excited to find that the fourth day's brief led to a play that felt half-decent.

Day five brought a set-back. Its prompt was all about form and had nothing to do with content. I read through my file of ideas I'd assembled beforehand, but none fit the format suggestions. Not that I had to meet those, but this challenge was about learning and stretching myself. What would I learn if I just fell back on something familiar, or tried and true? I was stressed, heading to bed with zero ideas for this play, and I lay awake until an idea hit me. It grew, and then grew some more, until it was a fully outlined plot that fit the criteria. I got so paranoid about forgetting it that I got up and wrote it all down. What a thrill it was to wake up the next morning to a full story outline! It still took all day, but by 8 pm, I'd written a 19-page script.

It was while writing this romp that I realized *28 Plays Later* was immersing me in the most enjoyable part of writing — the euphoric moments of miraculous discovery and coalescence that come in crafting a first draft, when pieces fit together, and the whole play takes shape in your mind. And this challenge was letting me experience that every day! To be honest, I was daunted by every brief, but it was remarkable (and so satisfying) how putting in the time in the chair brought a solution, day after day.

Week 2

The euphoria I'd felt the previous week evaporated when I read the prompt for day eight. It asked for a play containing as many random elements as possible, while still being under the playwright's control and having a message. This was something so outside my comfort zone, I found myself really doubting that I could make it work. But... Once again, I forced myself into the chair and just wrote about all the reasons it couldn't work... until it did. It thoroughly kicked my butt, yet it also made me stretch to create the sort of play I never thought I could write.

Stats: 28 Plays Later February 2022

8 – years this challenge has taken place

964 – writers signed up this year

257 – repeat 28 Plays Later writers

425 – writers on the “timed” route

156 – those who completed

539 – writers on the “simile” route

42 – those who completed

41 – countries the writers were from

53 – Canadian participants this year

**7232 – total number of new plays written
in 28 days**

After that one, the focus shifted from form to content for a few days, bringing different challenges. The shift was refreshing, though. Day 13's brief was straightforward — write a play that began with a specific line of dialogue. Simple enough, right? Except this was the line provided: “Hey, Poopy, it's Blake and Col's birthday today and the bomb on the back of the snail isn't finished.” Creating a scenario in which none of that

statement's distinct elements stuck out like a sore thumb was... well, a challenge. One circus and a pair of conjoined twins later, I had a play — a bizarre but complete one. The final day of week two we were prompted to write a play that could be equally enjoyed by hearing, D/deaf, and hard-of-hearing members. I loved that this made me think about what audience experience must be like for those whose hearing is different than mine, and what modifications to a play and its staging could make it better.

All in all, that second week definitely kicked things up a notch. Though the briefs continued to encourage interpretation, the challenges they posed seemed more complex. It did feel good to reach the halfway mark, even knowing I still had to write that same number of plays again.

Week 3

This was, by far, my toughest week. Its prompts were the most specific and the most challenging. Day 15 asked us to write a play whose every line of dialogue was drawn from a vocabulary of just 30 words. This was an entirely different logistical puzzle! The following day's email suggested we create a politically subversive play written so as to allow the playwright to deny its political meaning.

And then came day 17, the one that almost broke me. The brief was crazy hard, consisting of so many extremely specific rules, such as including:

- A cast of four actors playing eight characters, two of which are non-humanoid and not played by the same actor
- Two characters who are always in scenes together but refuse to speak to each other
- One character who always speaks in iambic pentameter
- One actor whose two characters are heartbroken that they can't be together
- Two characters who don't know each other but own a cat together

And there were three times as many more rules as well. The iambic pentameter rule, plus another stating that each line of dialogue must consist of only 2, 13, 31, 55, 73, or 120 words definitely had me tearing my hair out. Oh yes, and every line of dialogue should begin with the last letter of the previous line. The rule-follower in me took over and I became obsessed with meeting every requirement, spending hours planning before starting to write. My 5 pm target passed, and after a late dinner, I forced myself back into the chair at 9:30 pm. Midnight came and went, but I kept on, figuring I was a couple of hours from finishing. Ha! At 11 am the next day — 42 hours and 32 pages later — I finally finished. (Fortunately, the “simile” route allowed me to go beyond the 36-hour limit.) But I'm the one who chose to adhere to all the rules. It seems stubbornness can be a curse as well as a blessing.

Thankfully, the next day's task was to write as short a play as possible. After that marathon, it offered the perfect reprieve. Day 19's task, however, was to choose an existing, original musical and write it as a straight play, which is how I learned that

selecting one's favourite musical isn't necessarily the best choice when that musical is complicated. I didn't submit my whopping 45-page straight-play version of *Next to Normal* until 1 pm the day after it was due. Ugh. Clearly, I needed to simplify if I was going to get through this.

Day 20 asked for a Género Chico musical, described as a type of Spanish Zarzuela inspired by Offenbach's funny, slightly vulgar operettas, involving traditional characters and lots of innuendo. My three-character musical came in at 13 pages and included only two songs. My best work? Probably not, but it was complete, fun, and in before deadline, getting me back on track. The next day's submission, an opera libretto based on current events, was equally enjoyable to write. Advancing my story solely through sung lyrics was surprisingly satisfying.

Week 4 – Almost there!

Play 22, assigned on 02/02/2022, was an homage to the date itself, encouraging us to fully explore the number 2. At first, it felt almost too open, but eventually, as always, an idea came. The writing went quickly and I submitted by 6:30 pm. I realized then that I couldn't fall behind over the remaining days. There'd be no submission grace period after the final deadline passed. But I found the following day's challenge a real struggle. From a morale perspective, this was probably my lowest day. The plot I came up with felt amateur, the characters cardboard, the dialogue unrealistic, and the resolution pat. But I wrote it anyway until it was complete. Play 24 was to incorporate lots of social media. With Russian-invasion headlines swirling, I found it hard to focus on writing — and wondered even if I should. But that butt-in-chair mantra came through again. I ended up with a solid, ten-page, two-hander. I think involving facts from the current world crisis helped. Day 25 for the second time gave me a chance to write a play from an idea I'd had in my head for a while. I got it submitted just after midnight, pleased that it had the bones of something I'll work on further. Watching Factory Theatre's *The Year of the Rat* earlier that evening, I'd realized I hadn't yet written a solo play. So, guess what my Day-26 play was! Then for Day 27, I fell asleep with three Ukrainian resistance fighters in my head. On waking I realized my developing plot was too involved. So, I drilled down and wrote about its moment of greatest conflict in a succinct two-page two-hander that felt effective, complete, and moving.

Conclusion

The final brief asked us to consider “there and then,” rather than here and now. But should my “then” be past or future? That question led to a bucketful of personal discovery. The resulting play, in memoir style, is my most personal of the bunch. The whole challenge, and this final day in particular, had inspired a ton of self-reflection. What better note to end on? I’d learned so much,

about genres and lesser-known forms of dramatic writing, but also about myself, my writing habits, and what I was capable of when I made the time and set my mind to it. Until February, I’d focused on my very small number of existing plays, thinking each new one would require vast open periods of time. Now, I know otherwise. This challenge took me unexpected places. It vastly expanded my viewpoint, had me writing madly and quickly, creating things from thoughts as they occurred. The range of topics and forms I covered astounded me. And I ended up with 28 new short scripts, 14 of which feel viable.

Was it worth a month of doing very little other than eating, sleeping, and writing? You better believe it! Come February, if you’re looking for a way to jumpstart your creativity, do not hesitate. Jump in with both feet.

Trudeau’s 28 Plays Later Results

- 28 plays, a total of 381 pages, written
- Length ranged from 2 to 45 pages
- 100 primary characters created, average of 3.5 per play
- Globally set from Sumatra to Beijing, Istanbul to Kyiv
- Locations: a police station, prison, café, skating arena, circus, television studio, retirement home, the void of space, and more
- Styles: traditional plus reality TV, memoir, filmic, improvised, musical, opera, monologue, and more
- Protagonists: 20 female, 2 male, 1 nonbinary, 1 trans, 4 m/f equally
- Scripts worth pursuing further: 14!

Trudee Romanek (she/her) - Trudee is a PGC member whose recent playwriting credits include the World War II drama, *Bright Daybreak*, which was selected as part of Lunchbox Theatre's 2021 Festival of New Canadian Works. Her comedy, *"I" on the Prize*, will be featured in this June's Simcoe County Theatre Festival, and Barrie's Theatre by the Bay recently commissioned Trudee to write a historical play for their 2023 season.

