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How the Dough Gets Made: Dramatic Writing as Practice-Led Research

by John P. Bray

(Note: This section of *B-Side Bagels* was presented at the 2025 MATC Conference as part of the
Pitch-Your-Play Program)

As a playwright, I engage with practice-led creative research, the process being the research, with the creative output/finished script being a ‘knowledge object,’ as suggested by Dallas J. Baker. In his essay, “Playscripts as Knowledge Objects,” Dallas writes “In many senses, Writing for Performance scholarship has been more about writing for actors than about writing as a distinct creative and research practice, with a few notable exceptions,” and furthermore “few academic journals have published play scripts as research artefacts in their own right, especially not research artefacts that are the result of a practice-led research process.”¹

In the pages that follow, I will include excerpts from my play *B-Side Bagels* (originally titled, *Jukebox Bagels*), which was presented at the 2025 Mid America Theatre Conference in Atlanta as part of the Pitch-Your-Play Program. I will discuss the genesis of the play (practice-led research) and the finished draft (artifact). In sum, I argue playwrights engage in *practice-led creative research*.

In the following scene, Dario, a young recently hired part-time baker and adjunct at a local college, has just had a rough encounter with a Bagel Divider/Former, a machine used to run, cut, and shape dough into bagel-shapes; the shapes are then proofed, refrigerated, and boiled (or steamed) prior to being baked as finished bagels. It is not unlike something that happened to me in my early days of bagel baking. (I held a bagel baking job from 1999 until 2006.) In other words, there is a confession here: I lost a sleeve in a Bagel Divider.

¹ Dallas J Baker, “Play Scripts as Knowledge Objects,” *New Writing* (15.2), Taylor & Francis, 19 Jan. 2018, p. 175. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14790726.2017.1418384 Accessed February 24, 2025.

B-Side Bagels

(LIGHTS UP. We're in the kitchen of a small bagel shop. Truly, a one-person operation. There are a couple of work benches, a dough-running machine – it makes the bagel shapes; we'll learn later that it actually once was used at an independent donut shop that went under – some large, wheeled containers of seeds under the bench, a few racks for proofing; maybe even a rack that goes in the Goliath of an Oven (which may or may not be seen immediately on stage.) Curve around the ceiling suggests the top of an old jukebox. This place looks like it was themed once upon a time. Paintings of Greasers crooning to sexy bagels in pink dresses on the wall. Faded now. DARIO, a part-time college teacher and recent full-time baker, stands center. One sleeve has been ripped from his shirt. He is panic-stricken. In shock. WINDY, a hippie college student presently wearing a fedora sees him. Indicates the shirt.)

WINDY

What happened?

DARIO

After you left, I decided to stay. Just pull an all-nighter. Got the rack ready, ran a white. Started a second one and that...*monster* (points at the machine accusatorily) *ATE MY SLEEVE!*

(WINDY laughs.)

Did you know it could *do that*?

WINDY

No!

DARIO

It did! It ate my damn sleeve – tore it right off.

WINDY

How?

DARIO

I don't know. I mean, the cream cheese whipping thing – whatever you call it – like *that* I could see losing a sleeve with the arm still in it. But *this*?

(WINDY is still laughing.)

It's not funny! I could be dead!

WINDY

You still high?

DARIO

No. I don't think so. You see my lack of sleeve, too, right?

WINDY

So, where is it? Oh, shit, is it still in the machine?

DARIO

Do we have to take it apart?

WINDY

Don't try. Edua will be in in just a second.

DARIO

HE WILL?

WINDY

He's in my car.

DARIO

Oh, shit.

(DARIO goes to the machine, gets down,
looking for his sleeve.)

WINDY

Come on, don't.

DARIO

How long do we have until he gets in?

WINDY

I don't know. He said something about needing a few minutes to get mentally prepared to deal with you.

(DARIO gives her a devastating look.)

He says that about everybody.

DARIO

He searches his feelings to see if that's reassuring. Nope, it isn't. I was actually going to ask him for a favor. One of the colleges I applied to wants me to visit. Down in Lafayette, Louisiana.

WINDY

Really?

DARIO

And it's kind of quick. They asked if I could come down tomorrow. Without thinking I said "yes."

WINDY

That's not a lot of time.

DARIO

Well, he confesses, they actually didn't ask me to come tomorrow they asked when I could be there and I panicked and said I could be there tomorrow.

WINDY

You didn't panic, you were high.

DARIO

I wasn't...

WINDY

We sat out front smoking for an hour. You were high.

DARIO

What have I done?

WINDY

Aren't you already going somewhere else next week?

DARIO

I don't know what I was thinking.

WINDY

You really are afraid of people.

DARIO

I just killed Edua's machine!

(WINDY gets down and looks.)

WINDY

Okay, here...is...this.

(She pulls out and holds up the sleeve.)

You hit the kill switch, so, when that happens there's a reset right...here....

(The machine starts working again.)

See that? Now you don't have to run away to Louisiana. She expects gratitude.

DARIO

He's grateful. Thank you.

My own writing as practice-led creative research has led me to question several issues in the U.S., as well as personal issues that arise with raising a special needs child. For example, my play *Friendly's Fire* (World Premiere: Barter Theatre, 2017) focuses on a soldier with PTSD who has no resources available to him as he shuts out the world, but after an encounter, we are led through a maze in his mind that involves action figures from his youth coming to life, while a close friend stays with him serving as an anchor. Another piece, *Tracks* (which was selected for a reading at the 2025 Lanford Wilson New American Play Festival), considers the economic hardships of rural, upstate New York in the late 1990s after a computer conglomerate (which I call "ICM"), the leading industry in the Hudson Valley, shut down a number of its factories and offices leaving over 7,700 people in unemployed.² At that time, Amtrak had discussed closing off access to the Hudson River on the east side for most of the Valley in order to create a bullet train from New York City to Albany. In my play, a group of youths discuss how they could possibly stop the train. As they do so, manifestations of Hudson Valley and related myths such as "the Headless Horseman," and "Johnny Appleseed" appear, but can only interact with the characters after tragedy strikes. Through the play, we learn that we are all considered myths by those who control the means of economic prosperity.

Over the years I have learned that I am an outside-in writer. I take inspiration for my work from photographs, pieces of music, images from dreams, and paintings.

² Joseph Berger, "Opinion | Mass Layoffs as Agencies Are Gutted - The New York Times," Opinion | mass layoffs as agencies are gutted, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/02/opinion/federal-workers-mass-layoffs.html>. Accessed February 12, 2025.

Initially, I take a brief stream-of-conscious journey to find the play; the journey is not usually very long, and the play does not necessarily incorporate the image fully. The play becomes what playwriting teacher and theorist Paul Castagno would call a collage. In his section on creating character monologues in *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and media in the 21st Century*, Castagno has an exercise that he calls The Portrait Monologue, in which writers are asked to look at images that feature people exuding certain characteristics as a means of creating new ways to flesh out a character.³

B-Side Bagels began as a Portrait Monologue leading into a short sketch I wrote as part of 31Plays in 31Days in 2018, an online event where playwrights are invited to develop works from prompts with the challenge to write and submit one play every day for 31 days. The project creators include playwrights Topher Cusumano, Erika E. Wade, Abigail Taylor-Sansom, Rachel Bublitz, and Tracy Held Potter. As stated on their website, “The 31 Plays in 31 Days Project is a chance for playwrights to push themselves to write a new play every day for the month of August.”

The 31 Plays in 31 Days Project is based on the idea that to become a better writer, you must write. You must write a lot. And you need to practice experimenting with your writing form constantly. The pressure of this goal will allow you to set aside preconceived notions of what you should be writing and how you should be doing it. You will not have time to overanalyze your work, you will just have to write, write, write and be surprised by what comes out of you. You may love your work some days and wonder what happened on others, but by the end of the month, you will have amassed 31 new plays. Instead of

³ Paul Castagno, *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2012), 203.

waiting for the breeze of inspiration to blow your way, you will see that writing is a craft that can be called on at any time.⁴

The notion of needing to write a new play every day is certainly not new, as evidenced by projects such as Suzan Lori-Parks' *365 Days / 365 Plays*. What makes the 31Plays in 31Days approach resonate with me, however, is the notion that we write from one of two prompts—a sentence and a photograph. Writers are invited to follow either one, or to try to write a short play that uses both. For *B-Side Bagels*, I decided to use a photograph of my own: a picture from 1999 when I worked as a bagel baker on weekends at New Paltz Bagel Café (then, New Paltz Hot Bagels). From there, I created a Portrait Monologue.

For Castagno, the Portrait Monologue is an example of creating dramatic characters as part of a 'new poetics' that demonstrate the playwrights "emphasis on creating unique theatrical worlds, on surprising or shocking audiences, lifting from a variety of sources (Wikipedia, blogs, transcriptions and so on) or working collectively and in collaborations."⁵ My professor at The New School, James Ryan, studied with the late Maria Irene Fornes whose exercises focused on objects, materials, photographs, and the immediate writing impulse one has after time spent with any of these materials.⁶ In my classes at the University of Georgia, I begin teaching by using photographs students found through basic searches on Google, and have written about these exercises in my textbook, *Inciting Incidents: Creating Your Own Theatre from Page to Performance*.⁷

⁴ Topher Cusumano, Erika E. Wade, Abigail Taylor-Sansom, Rachel Bublitz, and Tracy Held Potter, "WHAT'S THE SCOOP?," *31 Plays 31 Days*, August 26, 2018. Accessed May 2, 2025.

⁵ Paul Castagno, 6.

⁶ James Ryan, Email to the author, August 17, 2018.

⁷ John Patrick Bray, *Inciting Incidents: Creating Your Own Theatre from Page to Performance* | Higher Education, 2018, <https://he.kendallhunt.com/product/inciting-incidents-creating-your-own-theatre-page-performance>, 23-24.

However, with *B-Side Bagels*, I would turn further inward, combining outside-in impulses with a desire to tell a personal story.

Working as a baker was a truly rewarding experience. There was (for a lack of a better word) a ‘Zen’ to waking up before four o’clock in the morning and working with my hands. My weekend hours were usually long—typically fourteen hours on Saturdays and twelve hours on Sundays. I would also bake during the mornings when the regular baker was unavailable. I kept the position through Graduate School and even after graduation. In 2003, I became an adjunct at a local community college and would regularly see students in the morning at the bagel shop prior to class. I left the position in 2006 when I moved to Louisiana, another story for another time.

For *B-Side Bagels*, I began with the photograph (see figure next page). It is November 1999. I am in an apron, a bit heavier than I am now, have awkward sideburns, and have just made a sandwich for myself. There is daylight. An older man in the foreground waits for his order. A friend took this picture of me without my knowledge and presented it to me sometime later. When starting my Portrait Monologue, I looked at this photo and imagined a young man who was an adjunct hoping to move forward with a career as a professor. Young, naïve, and a bit of a self-insert. The other characters were a hodge-podge of people I had met either at the shop or in town. Edua, the name of the owner in the play, is based on the older man in the photo, who looks impatient yet resigned. I imagined what it might have been working for someone who had an unpleasant countenance, impatient, looking at a baker making a sandwich while his own sandwich was still being assembled.



In the continuation of this scene, we see Windy offering to cover Dario, who is still terrified of Edua:

WINDY

Why don't I cover you?

DARIO

Really?

WINDY

Yeah, you're covering Edua in June, you can cover me maybe the week after next.

DARIO

Cool. Great.

WINDY

You still need to tell him, though. He doesn't like surprises. And if I tell him he'll just hate you more.

DARIO

Hate me *more*?

(EDUA enters.)

EDUA

We have crazy people in the parking lot. If one more person says one more thing to me, I'm going to kill them. (Picks up a knife.) I'm going to stab them right through the heart. I'm going to get my little coffee cup and collect the blood, drink it, smear myself with it. And make them watch in horror. Gasping their last....

WINDY

Dario has something to say!

DARIO

No!

WINDY

It's fine. I'll get your coffees!

(She exits. A tense moment.)

EDUA

What?

DARIO

(Beat.) So, I have.... something's happened.

(EDUA clutches the knife.)

DARIO (Contd.)

One of the schools, um. I'm going to visit a school tomorrow. It's in Louisiana I've already booked a red-eye ticket. I'm sorry. Can you cover me tomorrow?

EDUA

Who's working the front?

DARIO

It's this new girl Rachel//

EDUA

//tomorrow.

DARIO

Oh. Windy, I think. She said she could cover the bake, too, but I don't know.

EDUA

(Beat.) Fine.

DARIO

Thanks. I know I'm not putting my best foot forward.

	EDUA
You're not.	
	DARIO
I do need this job.	
	EDUA
Right.	
	DARIO
Is there any way we can be friends.... Eddy?	
	EDUA
Who...?	
	DARIO
Edua!	
	EDUA
...that name...who calls me that name?	
	(He wanders off. WINDY enters with the coffees.)
	WINDY
What happened?	
	DARIO
I called him "Eddy."	
	WINDY
No!	
	(She sets down the coffees and runs off stage. DARIO approaches his sleeve. He holds it up to his shirt.)
	DARIO
I could have lost an arm!	
	(LIGHTS CHANGE.)

Although this sequence is several scenes in, this is the first scene that I wrote—a short, not really with an ending, for 31Plays in 31Days. The scene was a continuation of

the Portrait Monologue, which is lost to time (and by time, I mean an old, defunct laptop).

After writing this short sketch, I put the play aside. The play continued to haunt me, as it was unusual. Most of my work is less direct autobiography and more a mix of images, sounds, songs, and concerns from my working-class community. When the call for plays for Pitch-Your-Play was sent, *B-Side Bagels* immediately came to mind. I spent the early Autumn of 2024 revisiting old photographs, and remembering the smells, the music (there was *constantly* music in the back), and the fears that we all shared during uncertain economic times. Indeed, the real-life bagel shop owner had been one of the many laid-off IBM workers who quickly had to pivot into a new career.

I took several scenes to The Greenhouse Ensemble's Writer's Group, a NYC-based Off-Off Broadway theatre company without walls, of which I am a member. The group meets online and features members from all over the country. It was through these sessions I discovered the play was a comedy and completed a working draft.

Our rehearsal process for the Pitch-Your-Play showcase was collaborative and great fun. Our director, Alex Stahl (who had just received her MFA in Directing from Baylor University), encouraged collaboration among the performers. Patrick Mark Saunders played Dario, a self-insert who had expectations for himself, but was attempting to operate in an academic world that operated beyond his grasp; Emmy Panzica-Piontek as Windy, a perpetual college student who is obsessed with mushrooms; and Richard Sautter as Edua, the one-time manager now owner of the bagel shop. As each actor presented an impulse, an adjustment would be made to the script or to the timing. This section, for example, was revised based on the interactions between the performers:

Scene Seven

(EDUA works on a rack. WINDY enters.)

Hey...what are you?
WINDY

I said I'd cover him.
EDUA

Oh. I told him I would.
WINDY

(Long pause. EDUA keeps working.)

Do you think he'll get it?

Get what?
EDUA

You know. PhD program.
WINDY

(EDUA shrugs. The pause continues...oh so tense.)

So, um. Could you imagine...going for a PhD?

No.
EDUA

Me, neither.
WINDY

You get paid a lot, though. If you're a teacher. Summers off, I think.
EDUA

Don't have to be back here.
WINDY

It's always cold.
EDUA

WINDY

Always.

(Long pause.)

I don't have to do coffee for an hour. Isn't that.... great?

(She walks over to the radio and turns it up. It's a song like The Police's "Every Breath You Take." She dances. EDUA ignores her. He manages to grow even quieter. He works a little more sharply, as if he means the dough violence. She watches him a bit.)

Do you want to get high?

(He ignores her.)

Do you want a drink?

(He ignores her.)

Is there anything you want?

(He ignores her. He exits to the office. She stops dancing. She lights a joint. She waits.)

Married men suck.

(LIGHTS CHANGE.)

This last scene, which concluded the section that was presented for Pitch-Your-Play, was inspired by something else entirely: there was a 'townie' who used to come into the shop. He suggested that he and I should take a hike near one of my favorite spots near Esopus, New York. I was twenty-three and loved a good hike. When I joined him, I could tell something was off. It turns out the man, who was lovely, had dissociative personality disorder. To be clear, I never felt in danger, and we got along well. But, when his personalities (for a lack of a better term) 'changed,' I recognized that I was in uncharted territory. During our hike, my acquaintance (under his new-to-me identity)

insisted we take our shirts off and howl in the woods. It was a surprising amount of unexpected fun. When he returned to his core identity, he asked me if everything was okay. I assured him it was. We spent more time together, shirts on, sitting by a pond while he regained his energy. We met again a few times, but I have not seen him in at least twenty years.

For my purposes, I decided to use that moment to give Edua further shape. Edua owns a bagel shop, is not truly good with people, is having some kind of affair with Windy (Emotional? Physical? Both?) and has hired someone that he truly cannot stand. I imagined a character that was almost inured to disappointment. Almost.

Scene Eight

(LIGHTS CHANGE. A song such as “Bad Reputation” by Reverend Horton Heat plays. LIGHTS UP. DARIO is scraping out the cream cheese mixing bowl. WINDY sits up on a bench eating a bagel.)

DARIO

And the weather was like sixty degrees. Can you imagine? Sixty degrees. In *January*.

WINDY

God, that sounds amazing.

DARIO

Summers get hot, though. So. There's that. (Feeling her out a little.) But I think I'll probably want to come back during the summer. You know. To visit.

WINDY

(Not really paying attention.) Yeah.

DARIO

Things okay while I was gone?

WINDY

Yeah. Normal.

DARIO

Good. (Beat.) So, now I just wait to find out if I got in. There are a couple more places I'm waiting to hear from. So. We'll see. There's a couple of places that have a later deadline. I think this school, though, wants to make sure they get the best.

WINDY

And that's what they're getting if they get you.

DARIO

Aw.

WINDY

And you get to do what you love!

DARIO

You're getting to do what you love, too!

WINDY

Yeah. You know when I first started college, I thought I'd do music therapy. I play guitar.

DARIO

I didn't know that.

WINDY

Even had a part time gig. Music therapy. A couple of times I performed for people in hospice. The last gig I had there was this woman. She had cancer. And she wanted me to do that Alan Jackson song, "Not a Political Man." I hate that song. It's like what's wrong with the country. He says, um, "I don't know the difference between Iraq and Iran." And I'm like "I don't know, look at a map, Alan. Or take like fourth grade, what do you call it."

DARIO

Cartography//

WINDY

//Geography. Cartography? Really, in fourth grade?

DARIO

No, I mean –

WINDY

No wonder you're going for a PhD, nerd.

DARIO

He basks in his own pretention.

WINDY

So, like this woman she's dying, and this could be like the last song she hears, and it's just so...sad. You know? If I was dying, I'd want my last song to be either...The Sex Pistols version of "My Way" or...Cher's "Believe."

DARIO

?

WINDY

Fuck you, it's a good song.

DARIO

Okay.

WINDY

What's the last thing you want to hear?

DARIO

Jesus. I don't know. Maybe. Something by Tom Waits. Or Philip Glass. (Beat.) Pretentious.

WINDY

Yep.

DARIO

Do you...do you want to have another day like we had? Before I left?

(WINDY blushes. She looks down.)

I mean, we don't have to...

(Looks at bench. He's botching it. He knows he's botching it.)

I just...I enjoyed hanging out with you. That's all.

WINDY

So, you just want to hang out?

DARIO

Yeah. That's all.

WINDY

Okay. Just to hang out.

DARIO

I know.

We're both sort of seeing someone, so.	WINDY
I'm...not.	DARIO
Oh.	WINDY
Yeah. I don't know. I thought it would be okay to be single now. So, I could just, you know. Just hang out.	DARIO
Right. Just hang out. Was it hard?	WINDY
Is anything ever easy?	DARIO
Right.	WINDY
But that's not why I'm asking//	DARIO
//no, of course not!	WINDY
//I just appreciated//	DARIO
//right//	WINDY
//I just wanted to//	DARIO
//hang out.	WINDY
//just hang out, right. Hang out.	DARIO
Cool. Yes, that's. Yes.	WINDY

(He smiles. She smiles.)

Gotta get back.

(She starts towards the front.)

DARIO

“Heart of Gold.”

(She turns.)

Not the Neil Young song, the David Johansen song. Buster Poindexter. “You think I’m a whore, but I got a heart of gold.” That one. It moves me. It’s like what “Crimson and Clover” does for some folks. It’s like the perfect End Credits song.

WINDY

End credits song. Huh. I like that.

(She exits. A moment. EDUA enters. He is shirtless. DARIO continues wiping out the giant cream cheese mixing bowl.)

EDUA

Today, we are men.

DARIO

We’re what when?

EDUA

It has been decided. Today, we are men!

DARIO

Okay...you okay?

EDUA

Look me in the eyes. Look at me in the eyes. I need you to dance right now. DANCE!

(Turns on the radio.)

THIS WILL BE OUR TRIBAL SONG!

(It’s a song like Tina Charles’s “I Love to Love.”)

EDUA (Contd.)

NOT THIS. NOT THIS.

(Turns the station.)

THIS!

(It's a song like Guns and Roses "Paradise City.")

DANCE!

(They do. *End of Excerpt.*)

As we face yet another economically uncertain time, *B-Side Bagels*—a comedy that is a blend of outside/in and inside/out approaches—feels incredibly relevant. The political and economic world operates outside of our collective grasp but shapes the way we view ourselves and our notions of home. Moreover, and key to this study, is that the finished script is a creative artifact (that is, an art object), the result of practice-led excavation, exploration, and discovery, built from existing exercises and collaboration with other artists. It is my hope that we continue to see the act of writing plays as the creation of something to preserve, something valuable forged via a process of practice-led research. While playwriting studies are established in England and Australia, my hope is that this personal essay (and others like it) will help open the conversation in the U.S.

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