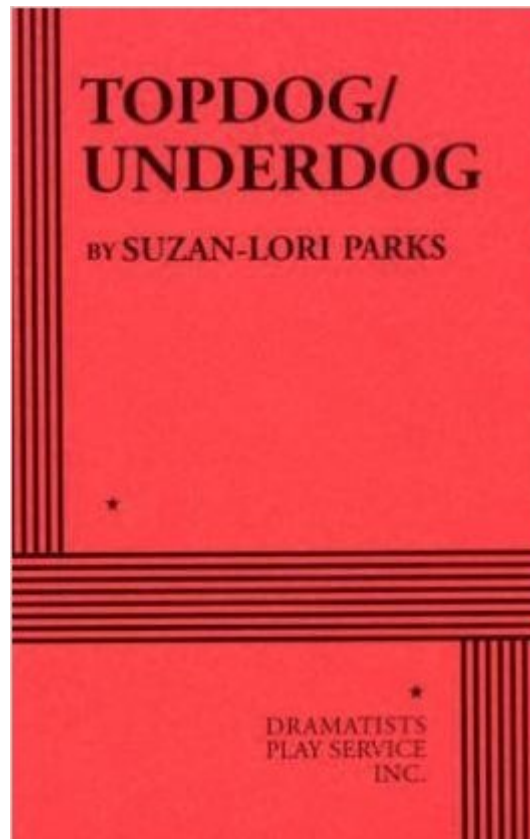


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# Topdog/Underdog - Acting Edition



## Synopsis

A darkly comic fable of brotherly love and family identity is Suzan-Lori Parks latest riff on the way we are defined by history. The play tells the story of Lincoln and Booth, two brothers whose names were given to them as a joke, foretelling a lifetime of sibling rivalry and resentment. Haunted by the past, the brothers are forced to confront the shattering reality of their future. Suzan-Lori Parks is the author of numerous plays, including *In the Blood* and *Venus*. She is currently head of the A.S.K. Theater Projects Writing for Performance Program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia.

--This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Since there are a lot of negative reviews here, I thought I'd throw in my two cents. I just got around to reading the play, which I was sad to have missed on Broadway. But if you're thinking of reading it this late in the game, you probably did too. I recommend it. The topdog is older brother Lincoln, a card hustler who quit the streets for a legit job as a Lincoln impersonator. His (underdog) brother is Booth, a petty thief with ambitions to become as good at three card monte as his older bro. What plays out between the brothers is classic stage drama, tiny eruptions of sublimated hatred leading to one big volcanic moment. If you choose to read them not as characters, but as symbols of African-American manhood, or American history or whatever -- and this is tempting to do when dealing with Parks -- then the play probably won't pack the visceral wallop that it intends. As someone who has studied playwriting, I find it a very clean, well-structured story, other than some

moments of awkward exposition. Parks' dialogue is hip and muscular, and I would have loved to see it performed by the likes of Jeffrey Wright and Mos Def. It's stylized and you either like it or you don't. If you haven't read or seen any Parks, I recommend giving this one a try. Clearly it isn't everyone's style, but it deserves respect for craftsmanship if nothing else. Sustaining a two character play ain't easy. 4/5 stars.

Saw this play last night at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Yes, it's obvious where the story was going. (Parks didn't choose the character names by accident.) What's impressive was that you could feel the audience willing the action not to happen. I'm sorry, but that's great theater. I wanted to savor the language some more, so I logged on to purchase a copy. I was shocked when I read the customer reviews. I couldn't disagree more with the naysayers. Obviously, a person's reaction to art is subjective, but three points must be made: Theater is meant to be seen, not read. From minute one, the audience was with this play. Booth's pathetic attempts at practicing Three Card Monte were hilarious. Then to later witness Lincoln's smooth as silk moves told you all you needed to know about these brothers. And I don't use the word "brothers" in the colloquial sense -- which brings me to point number two. These are two black men, not all black men. Is Hamlet about all Danish people? (I'm not saying "Topdog" is Shakespeare, merely illustrating a point.) Unfortunately, since there are so few plays by African Americans that get mainstream attention, the impulse is to attach a lot more meaning than the playwrights perhaps intended. My third point is that many people seem to feel that if dialogue isn't written in the Queen's English, it's somehow not artful. Parks did an amazing job. She took two marginalized human beings and showed that there is poetry in their lives. Perhaps that's what's behind some of the negative reactions. These are people you avoid in real life. Why would you want to spend two hours in a theater listening to what they have to say? That being said, anyone with a sibling can relate to this play. It'll make you think twice the next time you feel the need to elevate yourself at their expense. Topdog is what theater should be -- exciting, provocative, funny, tragic. Yes, it deserved the Pulitzer.

In a recent interview, Suzan-Lori Parks said she wrote plays when characters tugged on her sleeve and told her they wanted her to write for them. She went on to say that Topdog/Underdog, which had just been awarded the Pulitzer for drama, came to her as a "gift" in three days of work. After reading this play, I must agree that it's a product of Divine inspiration. Topdog/Underdog gives voice to two brothers, Lincoln and Booth, as they posture and play and explore the dynamics of being the younger and the older, the experienced and the eager, the resigned and the motivated. It's a

stunning meditation on race and family and class ... made all the more stunning as it pours forth from two down-and-out, plain-spoken, African-American men, characters Parks herself has been criticized for writing about. What these critics have failed to realize is that by giving voice to these marginalized, unsympathetic characters, she has tapped into the darker, less acceptable side in each of us. It's a beautifully crafted work that deserves a far greater audience.

Suzan-Lori Parks' Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Topdog Underdog*, shows the strength of Parks' ability to write convincing dialogue, to develop memorable characters and in the process to create something of a meaningful nature. Certainly this two-man play contains black male stereotypes that are uncomfortable to deal with, however this seems to be the point. While the reader hopes that Lincoln and Booth are caricatures, or at the very least are only representative of an extinct past, the fact is these two men could easily exist in modern day society, and probably do. Parks adds a large dose of irony to their lives: their names, their family, their occupations (or lack of), their girlfriends (or lack of), that gives the play a dark comedy feel. Beyond the immediate action, Parks has managed to take the reader further, creating a symbolic and meaningful statement in a worldly sense. It is interesting that because this play is written by a black woman it is considered to be a statement on black society. The work, when read and reread, takes on multifaceted meanings in the world of the reader, of any color, and while the surface level of introspection seems to hint at the stereotypical perpetuation of black men making bad choices and keeping themselves in the fringes of society, these two "brothers" truly represent "everyman," who battle with each other in a continued "sibling rivalry," attempting to distance themselves from their past, maintain control over their future and to control their own and each other's lives. Literature, as reflection of life, has shown us the error of our ways time and time again and Parks reminds us that human nature is inescapable and that we are our worst enemy. (Note: This review is based on reading the play. I have not seen the play performed)

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