

What purpose does the opening scene serve in this play as a whole?

C: The scene creates a mood or a tension that captures the audience's attention immediately.

"Topdog/Underdog" by Suzan-Lori Parks is a modern play taking place "here" and "now" about two brothers with tragic life stories. Lincoln, the older one of the brothers and the one that Parks identifies as the topdog used to be a successful three-card monte player until his partner got shot, after which Lincoln gave up cards and found a legitimate job instead. Booth, the younger of the two brothers and the one identified as underdog by Parks wishes to be like his older brother, but because of his lack of skill, his only income, and all his food and clothes come from shoplifting. Suzan-Lori Parks chooses to open the play with Booth's monologue and the demonstration of his poor skills when it comes to playing three-card monte, and then go on to introduce the character of Lincoln and jump straight into the action. This opening scene creates a specific mood full of tension that captures the audience's attention immediately.

The very first thing a reader or an audience member will notice are the stage directions. On the way the stage is set together with the stage business if a character is present – aspects which Parks uses effectively to draw in the audience from the very beginning. Firstly, the listing of items that can be found in the room: "A bed, a reclining chair, a small wooden chair, some other stuff but not much else." immediately catches attention of the audience for several reasons: the room clearly belongs to somebody from a poor background as there isn't a bathroom, kitchen, or any other facilities that the general audience is used to. This fact sparks an emotional response in the audience, whether it is a feeling of disgust or sympathy for the brothers. Secondly, the description of Booth's moves as "studied and awkward" especially together with the later mention of Lincoln "[standing] right behind Booth" without Booth's awareness of Lincoln's presence suggests the relationship between those two characters, and already creates a tense mood.