



Start writing plays

Developing a play

Narrator:

Here are some different approaches to working practice. Some like to plan more than others. Alan Ayckbourn.

Alan Ayckbourn:

I write the plays once the plan is more-or-less ready, the master plan is set. We have the structure apparently in place all in my head, I have to add, and I have a working knowledge of the characters, a passing acquaintanceship with them, so I know who I'm starting with. So the writing is very fast, it is often days, a few days, four or five days, to get that first draft done. And the first draft is very much an acquaintanceship with the characters. Often their dialogue, their speech patterns, develop during that draft. They don't start that way, and the character that is speaking at the end of the play, on the last pages often, has a completely different speech pattern to the one that started 70 pages earlier. And I will then go back on a second draft, and re-voice the character.

Narrator:

Bryony Lavery.

Bryony Lavery:

Because I'm quite lazy, I don't start writing until I know what the the character says. So as soon as I put a character in a scene, if I've put him or her in the right scene, with the right things to do, and meeting the right number of people, they start behaving appropriately for their character. But I never fully know them, because I'm an intuitive writer. So I get to a stage where I think 'What do they do next?' I never plot the whole story out because surprises occur, and I'm waiting for the surprises to occur.

Narrator:

David Edgar.

David Edgar:

I try and work out roughly what happens in each scene, and I try and check that each scene is a whole scene – in other words, something happens in the scene. I think scenes should be viewed like little plays. I think each scene should contain a project, and some kind of reversal to that project. You know, the structure of a whole play is reflected in each scene.

Narrator:

David Edgar likes to draw up charts.

David Edgar:

My charts consist of A4 pieces of white paper, which I then divide up into roughly the scenes, with a double line down the middle, which is the act breaker, if it's a two act play, which most plays are now, and most plays that I write are. And then I write it with a propelling pencil. Very, very tiny. So I try and get as much as possible onto that one page, and that's the way I do it. Other people, you know, get rolls of wallpaper and get big pencils and sit on the floor and scrawl.

Narrator:

Tanika Gupta participated in a script workshop and noticed an interesting division in the class.

Tanika Gupta:

A lot of the blokes in the group said that they wrote like this, that they actually always planned everything out, whereas most of the women in the room just said 'Oh no, we just start and go. We start with a blank page and just start writing and that's it.' I don't know whether that's particularly true, but it certainly was in that group and it was very interesting, and I think that that's really very much how I write. I just have an idea, a germ of an idea. I don't start with characters – I might have an idea of where to set it but that's it really, and I just go. And it kind of meanders around and is a sort of rambling thing, but once I've got going it usually takes me a couple of weeks to get a first draft down.

Narrator:

The important thing is to find your own method of working, a method with which you feel comfortable. David Edgar.

David Edgar:

I think the order you do these things is your own. I think there are certain things you have to do, but it might well be that you don't structure the play 'til the second draft. It might well be you burn stuff down, and then you sit down and say well, you know, unless you're brilliant enough to complete your play in one draft, you're always going to be discovering the structure as you go along, and you're going to go back and revise it.

Narrator:

How important is genre and influence when you're deciding on the style and type of play you're writing? Here's Bryony Lavery, Tanika Gupta and David Edgar.

Bryony Lavery:

The real test of playwriting is finding out how you write your plays, not how you get your plays like anybody else's. So just find your gods and goddesses of playwriting and use those. So Beckett and Pinter tell me a lot, the way Alan Ayckbourn sets things out. Alan Bennett and Victoria Wood because I relate to those two, all have some things that I've borrowed.

Tanika Gupta:

I do think humour comes out of most tragic moments, and it's also about that whole thing of entertaining an audience, at the end of the day. I'm not talking about doing gags, because I think that most audiences do enjoy having a laugh at the theatre, but that doesn't necessarily mean they just want to sit there and laugh, they want to laugh and cry. So it's always great when you see people coming out of your play crying, which is awful, because you're standing there thinking 'Fantastic! They're crying!' And then you think 'That's awful, I shouldn't!'

David Edgar:

I do think 'What sort of story is this?' 'What sort of genre is this in?' is a good question to ask. It may not be, the answer may be it's a new genre. I mean the answer maybe, actually it isn't a genre, that's what genre basically gives you is a set of expectations. You know in a whodunnit that there is going to be a mystery about who died, and there will be some form of logical outcome. If you know perfectly well who did it from the get go, then it's probably something called a thriller. What I hope we do from time to time is write something that is outside genre, and the reason why that's good is because it means that, by and large, you know pretty quickly, however sophisticated the manipulation of the genre may be, who's the hero, and who's the victim, if not who's the villain. And it's sometimes good, actually, not to know that, and it's sometimes good to start off something that looks like a tragedy if it turns out to be a comedy, or the other way round.

Narrator:

So what is the appeal? Why write for the stage? David Edgar.

David Edgar:

The traditional things that are raised for the theatre, of course, are that you bring people together, that it's more intense, because a large number of people are experiencing something at the same time, and that its basic unit is the human body and the human voice, in real size, and that there's a kind of clarity and simplicity about that which some of the more elaborate media don't possess.

Narrator:

Willy Russell.

Willy Russell:

Trying to deal with the constrictions of the theatre, I find that most liberating, in surmounting the difficulties of finding a convincing way to bring the action before the eye of the audience, which is what you're constantly struggling with in theatre, as opposed to TV or film where the camera is the eye. It can go anywhere. You've got to contrive a way to convincingly bring action before an audience. Shakespeare – he has a character come on saying 'Look, in this play, we're going to have to see thousands of horses and warriors, and we're going to have galleons sailing across... we can't do that, in this little wooden O! But with your imagination, if you, the audience give us our imagination, then we'll see the fields of France, we'll be seasick going over the channel' – which is exactly what theatre is. It is about play, it's the things that kids do. 'Can we do our play for you?' All right, that's the Queen of Sheba, he's Tony Blair, she's Margaret Thatcher, this is Africa, and over there on that carpet is the moon, bang. And they do the play, and it's always fantastically convincing. Whereas you sometimes go to a theatre, you look you look at kind of 19th Century theatre, where the set was everything, where they were trying to create the illusion on stage, and it's often mind-blowingly boring. Because it doesn't say to the audience, 'come, let's play'.

Narrator:

Alan Ayckbourn.

Alan Ayckbourn:

A genuine theatre in the round, it has lots of sort of theoretical objections. Some of the actors have got their backs to you; some of the time I'm on the wrong side of it. But in fact, in the end, it has so many advantages. It allows actors to play to each other, genuinely play to each other, and not as they tend to do in the pros [proscenium] because that's the way it is. Having to share it with the audience – I mean they do share it with the audience – but in a different way in the round.

Narrator:

Willy Russell again.

Willy Russell:

This is one of the wonderful things about theatre. It is live, it's organic, and it doesn't always happen at its best, but when it happens at its best, it is the most spiritual experience of any of the arts. It's the most primal, it's the most religious if you like, and it's certainly the most poetic. Because to write for theatre is to write poetry, it is to refine and refine and refine, and present something in its leanest possible form.