



Start writing plays

The importance of character

Narrator:

For some, character is the most important element in a play. For all writers, character demands a lot of imaginative work. Alan Ayckbourn.

Alan Ayckbourn:

I will sometimes go for a walk with the character, and I will I will do what we're doing now I will interview him, and say - what do you think about the current situation, you know, in the world. And he'll sound off, or she'll sound off, and that's sometimes... it just gives me a speech pattern, and I will improvise them, sometimes improvise them in the shower.

Narrator:

Tanika Gupta talking about her play Sanctuary.

Tanika Gupta:

Sanctuary certainly was about one man for me. It was about the gardener, Kabeer, and about his journey from finding somewhere that he was safe to discovering his dream had fallen apart. I was very conscious of making sure all the way through that his journey was plotted properly.

Narrator:

Ayckbourn again.

Alan Ayckbourn:

Most characters undergo a transformation, and if they haven't, they're less interesting to play. Personally, I like often to mislead an audience, perhaps, but to invite them to make snap judgements about people, who then tend to surprise them.

Narrator:

And what about the characters that aren't seen by the audience, the off-stage characters?

Alan Ayckbourn:

They not only can do a function, which is done off-stage if you like, but they can also put a dimension onto a play. Absurd Person Singular, there's two characters in that, Dick and Lottie Potter, who never appear, are sometimes heard through the open door, and arrive for two of the Christmases out of the three, and all you hear are their ringing laughs all evening, and in a sense, they provide the party that you aren't at, and are increasingly are glad you're not at.

Narrator:

And with some writers, the characters occasionally threaten to take over. David Edgar.

David Edgar:

Proverbially, Harold Pinter, when he started *The Caretaker*, felt that the play was going to end with a violent death, and then when he got to the end, he discovered that the characters he'd created wouldn't do that. And I have huge respect and admiration for that, but I can't do it like that.

Narrator:

And for some writers, character seems to be the lifeblood of the drama. Willy Russell.

Willy Russell:

Once I've got the character, I have usually got the play, I know I've got the play, but I don't know what the play is, necessarily. And if it's one of those plays that is spawned from discovery of a character, as was Shirley Valentine, as was Educating Rita, and what I tend to do is to keep writing in the voice, once I've got the voice, without getting in the way, really. A lot of song writers say this as well, is you've got to be careful, if something happens to you, if a melody happens to you, a set of lyrics happen to you, and I find this with characters, is don't get in the way, just become the conduit, you know. Until you arrive at a certain point in writing, where patently you've got to start making plot decisions, even decisions of theme, you've got to start structuring. And playwriting anyway is a constant attempt to marry what's going on, subconsciously, and consciously, and I think it's a synthesis of those two states that makes for the best writing. I think if either the conscious brain dominates, or the subconscious dominates, on the one hand you can have something that just will not rise, if the conscious brain's in too much control, and if the subconscious is just allowed to have its way, you'll have something that's, you know, part soufflé, part brisket of beef.

Narrator:

Alan Ayckbourn says that every character should have a function. What does he mean?

Alan Ayckbourn:

What I'm really meaning when I say 'Don't ever put a character in without a function' is to make sure that they have something to add to the plot. and what you could say as an acid test is, if you can actually cut one of the characters out of your play, and nothing is lost except a bit of dialogue, then you've obviously written in a redundant character.

Narrator:

David Edgar on the universal function of characters within stories.

David Edgar:

Vladimir Propp took a book of Russian folk tales, I think it was 500 of them, and arbitrarily selected numbers 50 - 150, and sought to find out the story that underlay them. And he discovered that almost all were at least part of the story of the merchant or the king or the father who leaves home or who dies, who leaves behind a prescription, 'Don't eat the apple, don't open the box.' That prescription is broken, some form of evil enters the world. The hero's recruited, the hero goes out, sometimes with a helper, sometimes not. En route to find the villain to rescue the girl, whatever it happens to be, he comes across some strange person who makes him perform a task for which he is given a reward which seems to be nothing but turns out to be the magic steed, or the magic sword, or the ability to talk to animals or any number of other properties which will ultimately allow him time. He then returns home, he's not recognised, often someone is in his place in a great banquet, he has to prove himself to be the person who he claims to be, he gets the girl, and that's the end of the story. And you can recognise in that element the Christian story, you can recognise elements of the Ramayana, you can recognise elements of every great folk tale you've ever heard. And I think that's quite useful.