



## **Start writing plays**

*The structure of plays*

### **Narrator:**

Structure is all important. Alan Ayckbourn.

### **Alan Ayckbourn:**

One of the imperatives of writing for stage is structure. Now, structure doesn't necessarily mean a traditional story with a beginning, middle and an end, although it's quite a nice thing to have. It can just mean progression from point A to point B, and that can happen within character. But often it is within situation. You know, situations change from the beginning to the end, and it's very important, I think, to identify this structure before you start covering it over, if you like, with the dialogue. The dialogue, of course, comes once you've identified the characters, and the characters come as a result of the situation or the theme, or the motif that you wish to pursue in your play. And I think to start with dialogue is a very grave mistake. It means you're actually, if you like, using a rather extreme metaphor, you're painting the chassis of a car before you've actually built the engine, you're actually starting the wrong way round.

### **Narrator:**

So, where should a play begin? Alan Ayckbourn again.

### **Alan Ayckbourn:**

The start point's very important, because if you start too early, you're spending hours, waiting for something to happen. If you start too late, you then have to bundle up all that pre-information, and that's another great art of play writing is disassembling information, and somehow, not making it look as if you're doing it.

### **Narrator:**

David Edgar.

### **David Edgar:**

Is the plot and the story going to be different? A story is the events told chronologically, the plot is as they're told in the play. The story of Oedipus Rex starts many, many years before the play begins. Most whodunnits – the plot is the unravelling of the story which has often taken place before the play begins.

### **Narrator:**

There are structural devices which you can use. David Edgar again.

### **David Edgar:**

I do a lot of what I call 'figuring', which in other words is things that you set up, you reiterate, and then you pay off. A very good example of that is in Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George*, where the king has an irritating verbal tick, which is to say 'what what!', and we get very irritated by that, as does his staff, and then when he goes mad, suddenly after a while one of the servants notices that he isn't saying it, and he says, 'I wish he'd say 'what what!', it was really irritating but I miss it'. and of course what Alan Bennett has then is has set up, and obviously, very brilliantly, the clue, that when he says 'what what!' again, he's better, and that's a very obvious example of a piece of figuring. I do that a great deal, and often you find you've done it too often, you know you've over-egged the pudding, you've had too many resonances, too many echoes, it becomes a bit sort of muscle-bound.

### **Narrator:**

And what about the end? Helen Blakeman and Bryony Lavery.

**Helen Blakeman:**

Although I would say that I start at the beginning, as in you know I get a general idea, I will know what I'm working towards, I will know the end. I have heard it say that you show know the end and work backwards. I know the end and work towards it. It just gives me a clearer idea of what I'm working towards because everybody in the play will have to have a journey including the audience. They'll come in, sit down, and they'll watch this play and we'll all work towards the end point.

**Bryony Lavery:**

Well there's a wonderful quote in Keith Johnson's book *Improv*, is that when you tell children stories, they always say, 'Is that the end?' when they know it's the end. And an ending has to be important in the way as that everybody in the theatre must know that we've got to the end, which means that everybody's satisfied. You know, they don't agree with you, but they have to be satisfied and know that our story here is ended.

Narrator:

How important is time to the playwright? Alan Ayckbourn.

**Alan Ayckbourn:**

Time-speed is interesting because it has the effect – at least, this is my theory – that if real time, and what I call 'foyer time', that is the time outside the auditorium are more or less closely matched, that if your play runs say two hours dead, and the characters on stage actually, their existence is glimpsed between eight o'clock in the evening and ten o'clock, then you have, sort of, one-for-one. You have real time matching stage time. Now, the other end of the extreme is a play which takes place over fifteen years in say, four scenes, and you are in a sense moving at a tremendously much faster time, and that is the effect of a long-range lens on a play. You are looking at it, as it were, from a slight distance, and watching a family grow up and disintegrate or whatever, you know. A person building a business that later folds or whatever. Mostly it is a safe rule to say, decide your time frame early on when you're writing - 'How short a time can I place this in? Can I tell this story over 24 hours, can he and she have lived out that expanse of relationship that I need, or do I need six months, do I need six years?' Once you've made that decision, stick with it. But a time frame, I think, is a decision to be made by an author quite early on, and as I say, always try and make it the briefest you can.

Narrator:

And for a different slant on time, here's Bryony Lavery.

**Bryony Lavery:**

I'm quite cavalier about time. I don't very often do 'and then it's the next day'. For example *Frozen* moves between about 20 years. But, I think I'm cavalier about using time is because you can do that on stage, you know you can whiz a hundred years back or, 50 years forward, or show things happening at the same time. What I think the audience is very good at doing is knowing emotionally where they are, or emotionally how much time has passed. I don't think things like three days, two years is terribly important. What is important is the that they know from scene to scene, that something has changed within the ichor of the character.

Narrator:

And time is more than useful in creating tension. David Edgar.

**David Edgar:**

The extraordinary trick of putting some kind of clock on a scene, which is some sort of element of urgency. Gore Vidal was asked 'Is it possible to write a dramatic scene in which two people discuss truth, beauty and the nature of art? And the answer is yes, if they're in a railway carriage, and one of them knows that there's a bomb under the seat.' That somehow there is this magical fact that as soon as someone comes in and says, even something as anodyne as 'Aunt Amy is coming round', it gives a kind of sense of urgency to the scene.

Narrator:

Time can also help you structure your play. Helen Blakeman.

**Helen Blakeman:**

I think it's really important because it can actually influence the form of the play, so you could form the play around time. For instance, if it was a play about the year in a life of a schoolchild, for instance, it could be in three terms. You know, they could be your three acts. Or time could be used to create tension if people are, you know, running against time for a reason. Or it could be used to push the plot or story on. In Caravan, it takes place over a couple of years and so each scene we get has moved on you know a few months, or six months after the other one, and although this isn't immediately told to the audience, they pick up on the fact that time has progressed and therefore the situation has progressed within that family.