



## Start writing plays

### *Politics and the stage*

#### **Narrator:**

Are plays always political? Here's Bryony Lavery, Tanika Gupta and David Edgar.

#### **Bryony Lavery:**

I don't think plays are about issues, criticisms of plays are about issues. Plays are about telling a human story, which usually holds the working out of an enormous human dilemma, if it's a cracking play.

#### **Tanika Gupta:**

I think that you have to have something to say and you have to be passionate enough about it to write a whole play, and whether it be something very small like, you know, mothers should treat their children well, or, well actually that's a very big thing, but something, however small it is, you have to be passionate about it, and actually it's all politics.

#### **David Edgar:**

I think all plays have messages. I think, you know, a Feydeau farce has a view of the world, and I think certainly a West End farce, or a West End musical, Chippendales certainly has a view of the world. And I guess the difference with a political play is that it's overt and conscious, but I don't see the line between the two as being as fixed. I see nothing wrong with saying, as Dickens did in many of his particularly early novels, I'm writing this because there is a wrong to be righted. I think you need dramatic skills to make that message dramatic.

#### **Narrator:**

The Director and the Designer have to work out between them how the play looks, but how important is it for the playwright to think about the location and set? Helen Blakeman talking about her play Caravan.

#### **Helen Blakeman:**

When I first conceived of the idea, I knew it had to be set in some sort of domestic arena. I also wanted the setting of the play to be somehow claustrophobic. I first of all envisaged some sort of holiday environment, because there's never an easy escape on holiday – you're away from home, it's not easy really just to leave and I thought that would be a good reason for the whole family and extended family within Caravan to be present. I did think about the idea of setting it in the usual domestic living room situation, but from the very first instance of thinking that I wasn't happy with it. It didn't inspire me, it'd been done so often before and it was the idea of taking them away, somehow, from their usual environment that really fired up. At first I thought about setting it in some sort holiday camp, sort of chalet, and then the idea of a caravan park came to me. The caravan also becomes an extra character within the play, it goes on a journey itself, although not physical. It changes its ownership and it changes its interior. I think the set and location has to complement the plot and the themes of the play, and when I say 'complement' I don't mean it goes hand-in-hand. It could be that it's the antithesis of the play or it could you know that it turns the play on its head. But I think it is integral.

#### **Narrator:**

Alan Ayckbourn.

#### **Alan Ayckbourn:**

I think it is important, this is one of the things I always stress to new writers, is to take responsibility for the visual. It is not enough to have a written text, however well written, if you

cannot also indicate, you don't have to solve it, indicate what the accompanying visual thing is likely to be. And then I always ask the question, is it worth, you know, taking the curtain up on that? Is it worth taking out the lights and, what am I going to see? And in some cases you can say I'm... nothing's going to be added from anything, that's set around it you know, yes we have two armchairs, and X will sit down and Y will sit opposite them, and there's no reason for them to move at all. In which case, why don't we send this to the radio, and let them do it, because, they can they can do all that, and we are wasting, in a way wasting people's time. Lighting, and sound are two pretty well instant scenic effects. You know, you can change in a split second, a scene from a garden to a prison with a with a light change and a sound affect.

**Narrator:**

But what about the things that the audience can't see? Tanika Gupta talking about her play Sanctuary.

**Tanika Gupta:**

In terms of off-stage settings, I mean you have to create the world beyond your play anyway, because you can only stay in one particular space on the stage, you have to know what the world outside is. I think that's very important, and that's what's so great with things that, like sound effects and characters that never appear on stage, because you have to build up your world; it can't just be the six characters on the stage, you have to have a life beyond. So I think that's very important, but I mean with Sanctuary, I had a very definite image of a particular graveyard in Kensal Green which has a huge wall and trees that kind of overhang from the street, but you're always aware that there's massive traffic going on over there and graffiti being daubed on the walls outside and fights going on and kids coming from school, I mean you can hear it even when you're in the graveyard, so it is that world outside which is very important I think.

**Narrator:**

How much do you have to imagine where a play is set? How much do you picture the way it's staged? Willy Russell.

**Willy Russell:**

If I'm writing a play, let's say it's a play that's set in a kind of through lounge of a working class house in Liverpool, da-da-da-da, I will be in that house as I'm writing. So the door to the kitchen that a character goes through, it will be, in my mind it will be a real kitchen, with all the real things that would be in there, you know. I don't think that this is an artificial thing happening on a stage, it's a real thing happening in a real house. If I'm writing something like, the play about The Beatles, or Blood Brothers, I will advertise to the audience, I will flag up, the theatricality of it. The fact that we are pretending to be in one place, but we can't provide all these different sets, but instead of trying to con an audience, I will find a way within the play of saying, we all know we're in a theatre aren't we?