



## Creative Writing

### *Helen Blakeman and Setting*

#### **Derek Neale**

Helen Blakeman is a young award-winning dramatist who has written for television and theatre. When I met up with her, we talked about her first play, *Caravan*. I was particularly intrigued about how she scripted the Liverpool voices and how she came by the idea of setting the play in a bleak holiday town in north Wales.

#### **Helen Blakeman**

With *Caravan*, when I first conceived of the idea, I knew that 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 that would also 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 had been done so often before and it was the idea of taking them away somehow from their usual environment that really fired up. Although I didn't start with the location, I started with the overall idea for the play but in this particular play, it is integral because in a way, 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 that the setting location has to complement the plot and the themes of the play. And when I say complement, I don't mean it has to go hand in hand, it could be that it's the antithesis of the play or it could be that it turns the play on its head but I think it is integral.

I know the characters inside out before I give them lines. And therefore, by knowing them so well, when you come to write the lines, you know the kind of things that they will naturally say. I suppose, really, the initial stage was trying to figure out how the Liverpool dialect sounds in your head. I'm from Liverpool, I'm very, very familiar with it. And the second stage was then to work out the best possible way to translate that sound to a written word and then, for that written word to be easily translatable back to a spoken word. I didn't write it phonetically, it's not like the opening scene of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, but I suggested the dialect by dropping consonants at the end of words, using colloquialisms to suggest the dialect more than anything, and to suggest the rhythm of speech because quite often, it's the rhythm of speech which will give the hint of the dialect rather than the way the words are written themselves.

I think the workshops (when) the play is at a stage where you're happy with it, that can be really helpful, to get people to read the play, especially out loud because then you hear the rhythm of the speech and you hear that, Oh, maybe that needed to be quicker, or that needed somehow to be slower, it's almost like conducting a piece of music at times which your head isn't always attuned to. You do have to stand up if you're going into rehearsals or if the play is being discussed, you do have to stand up for every word, every nuance, every choice that you have made within that play. And if you're not prepared to do this, then there isn't any point in a rehearsal room. An actor will want to know why their character does that, the reason behind it, there is a discussion that goes on. The same with the director and the same with the crew of, you know, sound people and lighting. You have to know the choices that you've made so therefore if it says, you know, a lighting change or it goes dark or bright sunny day, you have to know the reason why, everything needs a reason, it can't just happen. You need to discuss the characters' actions and reasons and choices with the actors, with the director, with the people who are going to choose the costumes. As I go, I re-draft and I re-draft and I re-draft until I'm happy with it. I've never, ever just started something at point A and finished it at point B, and gone, First draft. It doesn't work like that for me because there

will always be something. You need to know why that full stop is there and why that comma is there, because that influences the way your dialogue is spoke.