



Start writing plays

Starting out in playwriting

Narrator:

On this, you'll hear a number of writers talking about how they go about writing plays for the stage. They'll offer you the benefit of their experience and suggest tips about dialogue, character, story and plot. So, what comes first? Is it an idea, a character, a theme? Bryony Lavery.

Bryony Lavery:

It's impossible to say. What actually happens is I start collecting all those three things, and I physically collect them. I suddenly find that I've been clipping stuff out of newspapers, and I suddenly have a pile on one of my many piles in my work room, and I suddenly find that all my work is starting to be focused, and all my reading is something to do with preparing for the moment when I suddenly think 'Ah, that is how to start the play.' So it might be a location, it might be a theme, and it might be two characters meeting, or it might even vaguely be an issue. But it's not... a character doesn't always come first, or it might even be an image. I remember having an image of a woman's mouth with really red lipstick, applied slightly off centre, and it took me ages before that became part of a character, which became part of a story. You see, how that started was I was watching footage of the family of Moors murderer's victims and I kept noticing that their expression was very similar, whoever it was talking, and the way they were about their experience was also very much the same, even in different ages and different genders, and it was frozen. And then one of the people on it said 'If Myra Hindley came out, or if Ian Brady came out, I'm a forgiving man, but I couldn't forgive that.' And I thought, 'Well, if you're a forgiving man, you have to forgive that.' And then Frozen became a play about trying to thaw those frozen little faces into either forgiveness or into a way of moving on from that state which seemed to me so horrendous for them.

Narrator:

Finding something to develop into a fully fledged idea can be a painful and tentative process. Alan Ayckbourn.

Alan Ayckbourn:

The agonising happens months before, really. It's building a case to write the play in my own mind, you know. Am I ready to write this, is the world ready for it? And then that awful moment of jumping into the water and saying 'I'm going with it, I'm going with it, I'm going, I'm going to swim for the other shore, and I may drown half way across.' And in which case, you really are lost because there's no lifeline. It's that first establishment of a thin strand, however tenuous, between one bank and the other, which you have to establish before you begin to build it up with character and you strengthen it completely.

Narrator:

And even a prolific writer such as Ayckbourn can still suffer the doubt as well as the exhilaration of those early steps.

Alan Ayckbourn:

I finish a play, the last play. One is then completely empty. There's an awful feeling of being 'un-pregnant', which for me is never very healthy, and sometimes this lasts for some weeks, and then you pray that you haven't written your last. And then one morning, a tiny, tiny germ of an idea will possibly arrive, well it does arrive, I hardly dare breathe because I'm not quite sure, but it gives me a tingle of excitement. But I always am a great believer that more than one idea needs to congregate. You can't make babies on one idea, so we then wait and see what happens, and usually, something else will join it if we're lucky. Maybe it's a

character, maybe it's a setting, maybe it's something that complements the idea and says 'Yes, that's a great idea to write a play about, 'the notion of leadership', yeah, what a good idea!' But we've got to put it somewhere and then, wow, we could put it on a cabin cruiser on a river, that's going to be fun. And those two ideas will suddenly gel, and make for me a way forward. And that process will go backwards and forwards, and I always compare it to a small boy with a marble, or something. Put it away in my pocket, and take it out and polish it occasionally, I would look at it and it's grown a bit bigger, hopefully.

Narrator:

Helen Blakeman.

Helen Blakeman:

Usually I get some sort of idea, a general notion, and that idea can come from many, many things. I can start just thinking about one thing, like something I've seen on the news, or an article that I've read, or a book that I've written, and the ideas that I usually really want to write about – they stick. I'll go to bed and I'm thinking about them, and I get up in the morning and I'm still thinking about them. The ones that don't work are the ones where I get up in the morning and I think 'What on earth was I thinking about writing about that for?' So I usually have this overwhelming sense of I really want to write a play about... and that 'about' can be a girl who's troubled and I'll know no more than that, or it can be about female aggression, or it can be about the dock dispute. The characters and situation usually follow for me. Probably the characters and situation in a way go hand in hand, because characters are characters and you will only find that person in that one place. Most of it is just thought, for a good while, and it will be thought while, you know, I'm watching TV or while I'm washing up. It will just be thought, and that will be when I'm working on other things at the same time. I know the characters inside-out before I give them lines. Again, that will first of all be through thinking about them and getting to know them and thinking about what it is about these characters that just won't go away and why I like them and why they are so interesting that I need to write about. 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.

Narrator:

Tanika Gupta.

Tanika Gupta:

I think what comes first for me is always story, actually. I always have an idea of a story that I want to tell before I sit down and do anything, however vague it is. It might just be I want to write about two sisters, and their relationship when one of them ends up in prison, and that could be as little an idea I have but I always start the story and the I kind of 'build around it'. I think, to start with, when you first start writing, you always end up writing autobiographical stuff because that's what you know the best, and certainly when plays work the best it's when they're going to the emotional heart of something. And when you start writing, that's where you go – you go to your own experience, which is quite important. But I think the more you write, the more, well I mean, how much more of a life can you have to keep writing about? I certainly have a very boring life, I'm not sure that I want to keep writing about it, so you do end up inventing more and more and imagining more and more, which is actually much more fun at the end of the day because it's about using your imagination and being able to write about anything. So, for example, as an Asian woman, why should I only ever write about Asian women? I should be able to write about anything. And the same goes vice versa. Although having said that, you need to research your subject, I think. If you are going to write about, I don't know, a marine biologist, you need to know everything there is to know about marine biology. You do have to research it, but that doesn't necessarily mean you have to have a personal understanding of it.

Narrator:

Some might say this preference for starting with story, rather than character or location say, has classical roots. David Edgar.

David Edgar:

I think you have to start with the story, and you have to start with the plot. Aristotle proverbially set up the three unities of drama as being time, place and action. And time and place are pretty obvious, but I think in terms of action, what Aristotle meant by that was an overarching description of the meaning of the story which you can express in a sentence. And I think most actions can be expressed in a sentence that contains an action, followed by the word 'but', followed by something else. So Oedipus Rex, in order to save the city, a man sets out to find the author of a crime, and discovers that he is the author himself. Hamlet – a man sets out to avenge his father, but finds he can't do it because of love for his mother.

Narrator:

How do you overcome the blank page or screen? How do you get started? Is there a normal way of working? Bryony Lavery.

Bryony Lavery:

It works like this. I will avoid it, I spend a lot of time thinking, and I treat myself as my workforce. And if I go up to my desk and I'm feeling a real sponge-brain, I say 'I think the worker needs a day off, she's really not going to do any good work at the moment.' So I just take time off. But because it's always cooking, I do other things. I do diversionary tactics.

Narrator:

David Edgar.

David Edgar:

I have an infinity of ways of putting off actually writing. I'm a research writer, I do a lot of research. I find the research process is very, very useful as a way of processing and having ideas, and I write things in little red notebooks if I don't have my computer, and if I have my computer, I type things in constantly. Sooner or later I will sit down and I will chart out the play, and if it's a two act stage play I've got some idea about what happens in the middle. I've got some idea about how many scenes it is. I start taking decisions. I've already, I hope, got to a point where I know what kind of kind of story it is, what sort of genre it's in.

Narrator:

There is no one part of the play that is the best place to begin. It's important to find your own method. Alan Ayckbourn.

Alan Ayckbourn:

I always try and build the play, I always have, a strong sense of where I'm going. Have had, always. Sometimes that journey will change. I have started out with plays, and I'm quite certain, this is how it finishes, and then to my surprise, you know, some days or weeks later I find I've gone to a completely different destination. But normally that is not the case. With the very early play I've always storyboarded them, like they do in movies, you know. In the early ones, I remember frame by frame. This is what happens, Jack meets Jill, they talk, Jill leaves, Jill's mother comes in, admonishes Jack, you know, and so on, and each little brick is put in place before I start with the dialogue.

Narrator:

Use the tools you feel most comfortable using. Here's Tanika Gupta and Helen Blakeman.

Tanika Gupta:

I like using a pen and paper when I'm first scribbling down ideas, partly because I've always been obsessed with pens. But when it gets down to actually starting to write I use a computer and partly that's because I change stuff around so much, even whilst I'm writing, you know. I'll write one scene and then the next day I'll come back to that scene and re-write it. I might just wipe the whole thing out or just use three lines from it, or I might just fiddle around with it a bit and it's much easier to do that on a computer. So yes, eventually, that's what I do use.

Helen Blakeman:

I will initially start out all notes, just written in longhand in a book, and then would probably start to type up those notes to get them into a more understandable and more logical way, in order for me to go back and look at them, because when you're forming notes they can be

just a train of thought at times, so I'll then probably put them into some sort of note form, which could be all about the subject of the play. Then I'd sort of write about each character, perhaps write about the setting, where I'd see that, usually with quite a lot of detail if that's what I need it to be. I may then go on to write what I'd call a 'treatment' of the play which, after getting a general idea of what the form of the play would be and working out, you know, what scene is what, then I'd maybe write a synopsis, if you like, of each scene. And that will help me before I sit down to actually write the scene, to know what the ingredients of that scene is. I know who's in it when they come in, when they go out and what they take with them or bring on with them, and what happens.

Narrator:

And don't forget to play! Bryony Lavery.

Bryony Lavery:

It's one of the most exciting things in the world! I really enjoy writing because, I think what I do is, I'm a playwright, so I set myself something to 'play' with. So I set up puzzles, to keep myself excited and interested, and because I write quickly, what happens is adrenalin builds. So by the time I'm really in the centre of a play, I'm high as a kite. It's the cheapest drug. It's wonderful.

Narrator:

What advice would writers give to anyone setting out to write a play? There are certainly things to relish. Bryony Lavery.

Bryony Lavery:

Excite yourself – sounds rude doesn't it! What we do is, it's called a 'play' and it's somehow setting yourself a gorgeous three-dimensional chess problem, and so to play with with everything you can do on stage.

Narrator:

But there are pitfalls to watch out for, too. David Edgar.

David Edgar:

If you find your scenes getting shorter, there is probably a problem. One common pitfall is people haven't really decided the sort of basics of a scene – when does it start, you know. The dinner party scene – is it in the middle of the first course, is it over cocktails, is it over coffee? They haven't decided which would be affected by that decision, who's on. You know there are certain things you can't say in front of other people, there are certain things you can only say in front of other people. I think the pitfalls are not to have taken the decisions.

Narrator:

Everyone might have their own method, but there are certain things all fledgling playwrights should do. Tanika Gupta.

Tanika Gupta:

I would say the most important thing to do is to go and see as many plays as you can, and to read as many plays as you can, because first of all you get a lot of ideas that you can steal! Or copy, or whatever, but also it's just very, very enjoyable to go and see plays, and I think that you have to know that that's what you want to do because you may start going to see plays and think, 'Well I'd much rather write a film' or, you know, 'This is too slow for me'. And I know that's often happened to people where they've never been to see a play and they've suddenly decided they're going to write a play.

Narrator:

Willy Russell.

Willy Russell:

Follow your passion, and learn from everything that is around you.