



## **Creative Writing**

### *Developing the Idea*

#### **Derek Neale**

Alan Ayckbourn is one of the most prolific and widely performed stage writers in Britain with over seventy plays to his name. He is well-known for writing his scripts at the last possible moment after developing the idea over a period of time. I began by asking him about this, and about how he plans his plays.

#### **Alan Ayckbourn**

I think one of the things that's been said about my work, and often you have to listen to other people to learn about what you're writing – it's very difficult sometimes to be objective about your own work – is that most of my ideas for stage are in fact films. I often use as a starting point – and I wasn't really aware of this until somebody pointed it out – I often use a filmic idea and translate it into stage terms and there are several examples of that in my work. You can go back to a play like *Bedroom Farce* which is in fact three different little sets on the same stage, and one of the things it employs is cross-cutting. But cross-cutting on film is nothing very original or new but when you see it on stage, it becomes quite novel and I think I've been responsible for this, translating a lot of filmic normalities into, if you like, stage abnormalities.

The planning of the play is usually a mystical nine months. Nine months is a good sort of average. I finish a play, the last play. One is then completely empty, it'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 when it does arrive, and I hardly dare breathe because I'm not quite sure but it gives me a tingle of excitement. But I'm 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, it's something that complements the idea and says, Yeah, that's a great idea to write a play about the notion of leadership, yeah, what a good idea. But you'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 can always compare it to a small boy with a marble or something, I can 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.

#### **Derek Neale**

But having polished the marble, how is an idea then developed? I asked him about structure and at what point the dialogue gets written.

#### **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, 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, you're painting the chassis of a car before you've actually built the engine, you know, you're actually starting the wrong way round. 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, weeks later, I find I've gone to a completely different destination but normally, that is not the case with the very early plays, I've always storyboarded them like they do in movies, you know, actually drawn, 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. And, partly, this is because dialogue for me is the fun bit, it's the bit when the characters find their voices, I know what they're going to say, roughly. And I know their attitudes and their internal thinking's but it's when their voices start to come out, and often those voices are quite bland to start with, they're quite anodyne, Jack speaks very much like Jill, but as I go on with the play, I will begin to clearly hear voices coming out. Jack develops a slight stammer or talks in more staccato sentences but this happens once you give him his voice, her voice. I find this has to happen when you are, in a sense, familiar with the workings of the characters. It carries a lot of responsibility, dialogue, because, of course, it's also what you don't say but that's another chapter. Good dialogue, for me, is of course, primarily, the purveyor of character, attitudes which the speaker might be unaware of, betraying a prejudice in the use and choice of words, it's the choice of words, is very important. One of the things I say about with dialogue is, once you know the play, you should be able to put your hand along the left hand column, if you write, providing you put the characters' names down that side, and you should be able to identify the characters from the way in which they speak, the shape of how they speak, with sentences over three words, obviously, but for any substantial speech, you should be able to say, Ah, that is so and so, I know that because that's the rhythm of their speech. So it's the window to the soul, if you like. And of course, it is also the primary key for the actor to unlock the character for themselves when they come to interpret it. And it should be speak able. I mean, that sounds obvious but some dialogue is literally quite un-speak able, you can see actors, their tongues glued to the roof of their mouth trying to get all the words out. And it has nothing much to do with all the things you were taught at school. I once said, rather rudely, I think, that an actor wouldn't know a semi-colon if he met one, it doesn't mean anything, it just seems to be an obstruction between two words; most of my sentences are full-stops really. I full-stop think full-stop. Occasionally just because. That's. The way. You musically. Want. The speech written. Commas are useful – dashes and dots are lovely. It's dialogue that's speak able. It's never really meant to be read. It's always meant to be heard. So you're looking at, if you like, musical notation. Some of the best dialogue is quite terse and un-beautiful. If you're writing for the clarinet, it's nice to know, basically, how many octaves you can play with it, and what's the top and bottom note of it. And then you can possibly challenge it slightly with how it's played. With an actor, it's the same. Actors can do an awful lot with very few words. As long as they know what the words in between are, the spaces in between are. I mean, that's the art, of course, in writing a few words which say an awful lot. And allow the actor, that's a phrase I sometimes use is, Leave the actor space to act. And there's, often though, they're so busy talking, and trying to get through the material, I think they should have a chance. I think the thing always to remind people of, and it's so obvious, you are writing for actors. You're not writing to be read. You're writing to be heard and seen. I think it's understanding the instrument for which you're working is very, very important. And, what can happen between actors is not just what one actor can say but in a love scene, what can be said between that phrase and the other character interpreting that phrase and realising what has been said, realising that he's in fact said he loves her but he's said it in such an oblique way she's taken a second or two to work out what he meant. And that's always beautiful when it's left hovering in the space between two actors. And, it's difficult because you have to have a certain confidence in the people you're writing for and I think, thing to say is Trust your actors and don't, for goodness' sake then, having made that pause, say 'What do you really think of me?' Pause 'I think I might dot dot dot' says quite a lot but if you then write the in the pause, 'He thinks for a moment and his eyes go up to the ceiling and he...' you don't need all that, you just let the actor do it.

And when you're writing in English, certainly in the areas I write in, people aren't awfully explicit about their inner feelings, I mean, they do hide them, partly from fear of being hurt and partly because they don't know how to express them anyway. Whether they be anger or love or disappointment and so on, people are, certainly in my world anyway, they're often very anxious not to impose feelings on people because it's rather bad form really, sort of crying in

the middle of the road, you know, ought to go home and do it. And it's sometimes, it's a very interesting language to write in for that reason, you know, if you put a tape recorder on a party for instance, a group of people altogether, and what is amazing, if you play it back later is how very few people manage to finish a sentence, partly because other people cut in on them, to finish it for them or because they've guessed the end and therefore want to move it forward, I think good dialogue is also about variety. Sometimes, and this is some technique, of course, goes right back to Shakespeare and probably beyond that, you know, the short, sharp, sudden exchange of a few words between people can suddenly accelerate a scene forward. Whereas a long, sadly, more carefully thought out soliloquy can have the effect of slowing quite often, all these things are part of dialogue writing and can also gently indicate the pace of the scene if it's written right.

And the placing of words. One of the interesting things that always fascinated me is the Germans put their verbs at the end of their sentences, it's very difficult, sometimes, I think, to translate my plays because sometimes the joke is in the noun. [Laughs] You know, the noun's gone before the verb. English is wonderful for that, in that it is sort of almost infinitely flexible.