



Creative Writing

Alan Ayckbourn on Redrafting

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The first draft is very much an acquaintanceship with the characters and, as I say, often their dialogue, their speech patterns develop during that draft. They don't start that way. And, the character who is speaking at the end of the play, on the last page is often, has a completely different speech pattern to the one that started, you know, seventy pages earlier. And I will then go back on a second draft and re-voice the character, sometimes re-plot, not very often because the plotting usually has been well marked out. Plays are artifice to a certain extent. If you have a scene in which a bookshelf is going to fall down, say, as in *Things We Do For Love*, it's a very useful if you've referred to the bookcase in advance, I'm always more pleased if I can have incorporated that. And people's brains register; the audience at the beginning of the play, we've heard about that bookcase before. We've heard about that bookcase again in Act Two, you know. And then they forget it because nobody seems to mention the bookcase and then, at a moment towards the end of the play, the bookcase collapses at a tremendously dramatic moment, and there's a sort of Eureka from the audience, I'm glad I hung on to the bookcase at the back of my brain because that's what it's there for, so that all that goes on and sometimes you retro plot that, you have to say, Now I've got the bookcase, I actually better build it into the first few pages so we don't come to it completely by surprise. But the second draft is often very much more just going back and re-voicing the characters. And I will sometimes do what I think an actor would do when they're reading the script, and I'll go through as one of the characters and just follow her, his role through in their voice. It's often pruning rather than adding and sometimes re-shaping, and saying, No, no, no, that's much too forceful for her, she'd never say it that way, she would say it, she'd say the same thing but she'd be much more snide about it and much more furtive in making her views felt. Like, I will sometimes go for a walk with the character and I will do what we're doing now, I will interview him, say, what do you, what do you think about the current situation in the world? And he'll sound off, or she'll sound off, and that's sometimes gives me a speech pattern and I will improvise and sometimes improvise them in the shower. So a little extra I give to actors occasionally and it's, it's the same, recognise where your character is in the landscape of this play. And most plays, unless they're two-hander's, have foreground figures, i.e., leading characters – Hamlet – and then, sort of middle ground figures who are important but not quite so important and background figures who are important in their way, although obviously quite small in the role of things, but each has to be approached by the actor in a different way and the art of small part playing, if you can use that phrase is very important, and the art of small-part writing is very important, in that you have to use, like a good painter, you look at it carefully and it seems to be full of people, and then you see that the background figures are actually quite economically drawn, with just enough lines to give them a shape and a personality of some sort but by no means as many lines as it were, as the foreground figures. But the development of them, it depends on the character, I mean, what you could say, as an acid test is if you can actually cut one of the characters out of your play and nothing is lost, except a bit of dialogue, then you've obviously written a redundant character. Most characters undergo a transformation, and if they haven't, they're less interesting to play. Personally, I like often to mislead an audience, perhaps, but to invite them to make snap judgments about people who then tend, to surprise them. Take *Man of the Moment*, there's an obvious charmer in there, who's a man called Vic, and Vic is a media success. His past life, Vic the Lad, he was a loveable old bank robber who went to jail for twelve years but he's come out and he's charmed the media, he's charmed the British public and he's now a popular figure. And on the other side is a man who's ostensibly the good man, a bank clerk called Douglas who is irredeemably boring and mundane and ordinary and in a way, a figure of fun and completely pales when standing next to the tanned, handsome, fun-loving figure of Vic. But as the play proceeds, we begin to see more and more of Vic,

particularly as the alcohol starts to flow and mainly we're seeing Vic get uglier and uglier. At the same time, Douglas, whom we had sort of dismissed, we'd laughed at, had fun with but really didn't think much of him as a chap, we suddenly realise there's an inner strength in him that perhaps we didn't see, he becomes suddenly, far more preferable as a person, if you were ever in need and it's great fun to write villains and they are attractive even to writers [laughs] you know, particularly to writers, and it's the old Othello problem when you come to play them, getting the straight guy, the Othello up to speed because he, in a sense, is the good man, and they're much more difficult because, the devil does have, in many cases, the best tunes.

I think characters often are best written when there is a front to them and then, as we spend the evening with them, we begin to see more and discover more and the artist, to allow people to discover, not to present. Off-stage characters are very good for drama, they not only can do a function which is done off-stage if you like, but they can also put a dimension on to a play. Absurd Person Singular is two characters in that, Dick and Lottie Potter who never appear, are sometimes heard through the open door and arrive for two of the Christmases out of the three and all you hear are their ringing laughs all evening, in a sense, they provide the party that you aren't at. And increasingly are glad you're not.