



Creative Writing

Alan Ayckbourn as Director

Derek Neale

As a director, Alan Ayckbourn is acutely aware of the constraints that surround a performance. I asked him if any of these practical concerns affect his approach to writing plays.

Alan Ayckbourn

I need to try and keep the cast sizes down. But I think that's quite a good consideration in that it has a double thing. Yes, economically, managements love five-hander's rather than eight-hander's, and eight-hander's rather than twenty two-hander's, when you probably wouldn't stand a chance in hell of getting it done except, possibly, by one of the big national companies but even then, probably not. The other things are that actually, economy in theatre is a very good concept to embrace. I will often combine the roles in a story so that one character takes the place of two. I say, 'Oh, if Jack is also the bloke who murdered him, then we've got a double role for this person and it's a much more interesting character to play'.

Derek Neale

I was also intrigued about the visual or physical aspects of a play. I asked whether these were the writer's responsibility or whether they should be left to the director or set designer.

Alan Ayckbourn

I think it is important. This is always 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 I always ask the question, 'Is it worth taking the curtain up on that? Is it worth taking up the lights and what am I going to see?' And, in some cases, you can say, Nothing is going to be added from anything that's set around it, 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 they send this to the radio and let them do it, because they can do all that. And we are wasting people's time. I do think that the physical has great bearing on what happens to a play and, I'm going to give a talk later this week actually, called *The Space Between Words* which is really about what happens when people stop talking and maybe say nothing. One of my great, favourites, both in comedy and in drama is displacement anger, when people are extremely angry with their spouse or whatever and proceed to take it out on the wardrobe door because it's something they can deal with and they pull it off its hinges, and it looks, to a third party, like they've gone completely mad but we in the audience know that his wife has just upset him so much that he's had to pull the wardrobe door off rather than her head. (I mean,) you see he goes over and pulls the door off the wardrobe and it looks quite bland on the page but guaranteed if you've set it up right, you get a belting laugh from the audience who do know what's going on. And for a moment, feared he was going to do his wife damage but instead he's chosen the wardrobe, thank God.

Derek Neale

And what about instructions to the actors in situations like this? I wondered about how he treated stage directions and asked him how much you should write in the script.

Alan Ayckbourn

Actors aren't very good on stage directions. And there are some awful ones, I remember some poor juvenile woman who reads 'blushing', you know, brackets, pause, now there's very few people can blush on cue, you know, not a lot of help. And sometimes, there are stage

directions which the author knows what they mean, 'with sorrow in his heart but a sad smile on his lips although all the time knowing that this is the end of their relationship', bracket, is not a lot of help when the word at the end of it is 'Goodbye'. I try and suggest economy. Only when there's something that absolutely needs to be clarified. 'Softly' when an actor might otherwise choose to shout a line which one instinctively feels shouldn't be shouted. I hate capital letters and I hate underlining because it pre-stresses the line for the actor and italics are even worse than that. So one tries to suggest it through the way it's spoken and the situation around it. But practical things like 'He enters with a suitcase which is very heavy' is quite handy rather than getting halfway through the script and then finding 'Oh your suitcase is still here', thinking Oh damn, and the stage manager thinks, Oh, he should have brought a suitcase on with him.

Stage directions are often to do with time elapsing. You believe time has elapsed on stage in away that you don't in real life, I mean, you're quite prepared to watch a couple of characters speaking, as it were, for three minutes together and then, character A saying, 'Oh look, I must go now, I've been here half an hour' and you can sort of believe that. But there is a sort of time that's less than that when the, some part of you says, 'Oh no, you haven't' and also there's another part of you that says 'It seems like it', you know. [Laughs] Which, and somewhere in between, there's a time when half an hour is fine and that's something you can only learn from experience really. Time, elapsed time.

Time speed is interesting because it has the effect, at least, this is my theory that, if real time and what I call foyer time, that is the time outside the auditorium are more or less closely matched, but if your play runs, say, two hours dead, and the characters on stage actually, their existence is seen glimpsed between eight o'clock in the evening and ten o'clock, then you have a sort of one for one, you have real time matching stage time. And this has the effect of close-up lens on a camera really, you are synchronistical breathing with the actors, with the characters as an audience and so everything they do is in your time and it's quite extraordinary if they do turn the page of a book that's in real time. Now, the other end of the extreme is a play which takes place over fifteen years in, say, four scenes and you are, in a sense, moving at a tremendously much faster time and that is the effect of a long range lens on a play; you are looking at it, as it were, from a slight distance and watching a family grow up and disintegrate or whatever, something happens, a person building a business that then later folds or whatever, the real rule is not to mix these because you are one minute breathing in rhythm with the actor and the next minute, you're galloping across and say, 'Good Lord, was that the end of the Hundred Years War already?' And there's quite a shock and you get a sort of time sickness really, Ooh, where are we now? Now, having said that, of course, it's a great rule to be broken and all rules of play-writing, one location, it's very good but, you know, how many good plays are in one location? Not all. Quite a lot aren't. How many plays are in one time? Shakespeare didn't seem to have any time, it moved as it felt like it, and makes very little difference to time although occasionally you think, 'Good' – 'Forty years since I was here as a boy', and you think 'Good heavens. Really?' But mostly, it is a safe rule to say, Decide your time frame early on when you're writing, how short a time can I place this in? Can I tell this story over, apparently twenty four hours? This is obviously a sort of purist thing. Can he and she have lived out that expansive relationship that I need or do I need six months, do I need six years? Once you've made that decision, stick with it. But a time frame I think is a decision to be made by an author quite early on. And as I say I always try and make it the briefest you can but if your story just won't be contained within that time, and sometimes, I, I mean, it just won't. Things have to happen. A person has to grow out of whatever into something else and you do need all that canvas.

The start point's very important, because if you start too early, you're taking hours, you know, waiting for something to happen. You start too late, you then have to bundle up all that pre-information, and that's another great art of play-writing, it's dissembling information, and somehow not making it look as if you're doing it. Nothing worse that give them sort of like the phone directory in the first ten lines of a play, and goodness, I can't remember all these people, and you go through your programme, not in there either because half of them are dead or you know, moved on and not going to be part of the action anyway, so there is a happy medium, where you can actually start the story and you hit the ground running, and the bits you need to know you can weave in. It's telling people salient things that they will

sometimes just register and unimportant things you can tell them once and important things always tell them twice, at least, if you want them to remember them. Because it's quite a lot to remember.