



Creative Writing

Adaptation and Breakdowns

Derek Neale

David Edgar is often billed as a political playwright. He's written state of the nation plays such as *Destiny*, state of Europe plays such as *Pentecost*, and has also written for film, radio and television. He holds traditional views about dramatic story-telling and I began by asking him why he describes himself as an Aristotelian.

David Edgar

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, argued that action was primary. 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, and indeed, I think, now people don't feel that they have to set a play in one place and indeed, plays set in real time are quite rare, but I think, in terms of action, what Aristotle meant by that was an over-arching 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* is a man sets out to find the author of a crime in order to save the city 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. I think that's the starting point for most drama is to find that action, once you've got that, then you know what you're doing.

Derek Neale

As well as his original plays, David Edgar has also written dramatic adaptations of novels such as *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as well as adapting autobiographies. He told me of how he went about adapting existing stories.

David Edgar

Factual stuff is difficult, I mean, we've all sensed in the theatre or in the cinema or on television, something which has been kind of overwhelmed by its research. And I think the rules that you set yourself about simplification and conflation are often difficult and, to a certain extent, are a matter of trial and error. But I think it's always good to start out with a theory and to start out to say I'm not going to change people's names, I'm not going to attribute, or I am going to attribute things to other people; it's very hard to think of a story in which you wouldn't want, on occasions, to represent an exchange of letters as a physical meeting, or to represent a telephone call as a physical meeting, all that kind of adaptation of reality seems to me perfectly legitimate. I think, again, it comes back to the truth that you want to tell and I always try and think about what I think the meaning of the work is before you then sit down and think, 'Well, how am I going to dramatise this?' so you've always got that to kind of hang on to.

I think there are different problems with different sorts of adaptation and often, the problem is the author of the original work. The easiest thing to do, if I may say so, is to adapt a Dickens novel or indeed a Robert Louis Stevenson novella, both of which I've done, when the author is conveniently dead. I've adapted two autobiographies which contained their own problems in which I had agreements with the authors which I felt was right to make those agreements and that constrained me in certain ways and I've also adapted a work of history which also had an author with whom also I had to do a certain amount of negotiation. I have a way of breaking down the book in note form, it used to be in handwriting, now it's on the computer so I take a lot of notes with a lot of page references so I use the search feature on my computer a lot in order to find my way about it. I also use a mechanism which my software has to sort things which means I can sort things by subject so, one of the things I was referring to was an

adaptation of Gitta Sereny's biography of Albert Speer and you know, I wanted, on occasions, to read through all of the instances in which Speer had re-written his own history so I had a section called Re-writing History which I would then press a button which would put everything into alphabetical order which meant I had all of those things together and could read them and I could also, you know, bring together everything about Hitler or about Speer's wife or about other characters so that it was, as it were, a way of using the computer to create a card index which was very useful and I think certainly creative use of the computer has transformed my being able to marshal a great deal more research material than I used to use and I wish I'd had one when I did the earlier adaptations.

Derek Neale

David Edgar is a notorious planner, filling in the details of the story before he starts to write dialogue. I wondered how his scenes evolved during the drafting process.

David Edgar

I try and work out roughly what happens in each scene. And I try and check that each scene is a whole scene, in other words, something happens in the scene, I think scenes should be viewed like little plays, I think each scene should contain a project and some kind of reversal to that project. Again, I think it's a boring scene in which I decide to have lunch, I have lunch and that's the end of the scene. I think it's much better if I decide to have lunch and end up going for a long walk. You know, the structure of a whole play is reflected in each scene. I think you need to have made some decisions. You need to have decided this is in real time or this is going to be in lots of different places. If you find your scenes getting shorter, there is probably a problem.

One other common pitfall is people haven't really decided the sort of basics of a scene. When does it start? The dinner party scene, is it at 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; there are certain things you can't say in front of other people or certain things you can only say in front of other people. I think that the pitfalls are not to have taken the decision, I do a lot of what I call figuring, things that you set up, you reiterate and then you pay off. A very good example of that is in Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George* where the king has an irritating verbal tic which is to say 'What what?' And we get very irritated by that, as does his staff and then, when he goes mad, suddenly, after a while, one of the servants notices that he isn't saying it and he says 'I wish he'd say "What?"', it was really irritating but I miss it'. And of course, what Alan Bennett has set up, obviously very brilliantly, the clue that when he says 'What what?' again, he's better. And that's a very obvious example of a piece of figuring. I do that a great deal and often you find you've done it too often, you add too many resonances, too many echoes, it becomes a bit sort of muscle-bound so it might go through and say, well, which one of these really lands? and I re-write a lot during rehearsals, I keep tinkering and you need to train your instinct and make it like any other muscle and make it so it works automatically so when you are running round the track and you're not thinking about your muscles, they're working for you.

One of the most difficult things is to teach dialogue because it's something that people don't realise is something, I mean, what people think dialogue is normal speech. And it isn't. And if you actually ever tape normal speech, you'll realise that. And bad dialogue is, you can't necessarily describe it but you know what it is when you see it. Is dialogue that is not invested with dramatic energy, there is something in the dialogue which is slightly heightened and slightly draws attention to itself. A trick you can do is to slightly over-repeat. I give a number of examples when I'm teaching of pieces of dialogue which use the same word or the same sets of words, just slightly more, not very much, slightly more than you would in real life to make a point. There's a scene from Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* in which a woman is being interviewed and she's lying and so what she's doing which we often do when we're nervous is she's repeating a word from the question in the answer, and I think that there are nineteen exchanges and she repeats a word, I think, fifteen times in fifteen of those exchanges so she doesn't do it every time, but she probably does it more than you would in normal life and that kind of draws attention to it. That's one example of dramatic technique that is universal. Another would be the extraordinary dramatic trick of putting some kind of clock on the scene which is some sort of element of urgency. Gore Vidal was asked, Is it

possible to write a dramatic scene in which two people discuss truth, beauty and the nature of art? And the answer Yes, if they're in a railway carriage and one of them knows that there's a bomb under the seat. As soon as someone comes in and says, even something as anodyne as 'Aunt Amy is coming round', it gives a kind of sense of urgency to the scene and the number of scenes which have honking horns from outside, people shouting, the entirety of the last act of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* is 'If we don't go now we'll miss the train'. It's not an act about missing the train, it's not about hurrying, it's an act about love, it's an act about ownership, it's an act about loss, it's an act about the most profound human experiences. It's ultimately an act about death but actually, it's given its energy by the fact that what people are doing is trying to get out of there because otherwise they're going to miss the train.